
Pro Rege

Volume 8 | Number 3

Article 3

March 1980

Hearing and Doing: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner (Book Review)

Nick Van Til
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

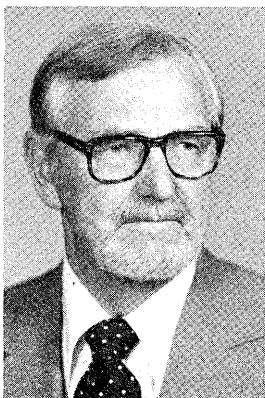
Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1980) "Hearing and Doing: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 8: No. 3, 13 - 18.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol8/iss3/3

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Hearing and Doing: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner

Nick Van Til
Professor of Philosophy



Mr. Van Til received his A.B. from Calvin College. Subsequent to military service in World War II he spent a semester at Westminster Theological Seminary in the study of Apologetics. Thereafter he received M.A. degrees from the University of Michigan in both history and philosophy and followed further graduate studies in philosophy at Michigan State University. Mr. Van Til is a charter member of the Dordt College faculty and is chairman of the Theology-Philosophy Department.

As the title indicates, this book is a collection of essays. There are sixteen. The purpose is to display scholarship while working out the implications of the Dooyeweerdian tradition as it was first funneled to the writers through the capacious and creative mind of H. Evan Runner, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College. I believe that the title *Hearing and Doing* wants to suggest that the participants are not only hearers of the Word but also doers of the Word as it comes from the Scriptures, as interpreted by Runner.

These writings celebrate Professor Runner's sixtieth birthday and twenty-five years of teaching at Calvin College. As with most Festschriften, it is not

devoted to one theme but contains what, I presume, can be considered the latest and best scholarship of the contributors. For that reason I am choosing a few of the essays which I think are of widest interest to the Reformed community of scholarship generally. I do so because of space limitations. There is no attempt to choose on the basis of excellence.

In the first essay, "Struggle for a New Direction," Hank Hart proposes that those who come out of the Reformed tradition, as formulated by what he now calls the Dooyeweerdian tradition, will have something to offer by way of replacement for all the apostate claims of Fascism, Communism and

positivism. Hart asks, "If positivism and totalitarianism reinforce one another, may there be a form of scholarship that serves the cause of the gospel?" (p. 11).

Hart wants us to assume that the question is a rhetorical one and the obvious answer runs as follows:

The following points seem to me to merit our attention specifically. One is that in this tradition, work has been done on the relation between, on the one hand, the necessarily total claim of any ultimate convictions over all that seems to be governed by such a claim and, on the other hand, the need for recognizing that such a claim can in fact never expect to play a totalitarian role within the society of those who clearly exhibit a plurality of convictions. . . .

In addition, this tradition has reflected fruitfully on the possibility of fundamental convictional invariance while yet maintaining a critical openness towards one's own basic position. Consequently, a contribution can be made to the debate on the relation between truly rejectionable (sic) dogmatism, on the one hand, and self-critical maintenance of the fundamental position, on the other, without sacrificing the bearing of such an irreducible plurality on the common task of science (p. 12).

I think that Hart is saying that the Dooyeweerdian tradition can offer a real alternative to the totalitarian claims of apostate secular philosophies for those in the Christian community, without itself becoming totalitarian within that

community. Earlier on Hart suggested that it was not the failure of early *Dooyeweerdians* to leave room for plurality which caused unfavorable reaction. Hart writes:

European attempts to come to grips with the threatening situation in academia and in society at large, such as existentialism and phenomenology went unheeded [in the Reformed community in North America] as irrelevant (!) and inexact. (The fate of Herman Dooyeweerd in Reformed Christian circles is not unrelated to this; the main barrier was not that his followers proclaimed their approach to be the only one but that they challenged a tradition which had entrenched itself as the only one possible.) (p. 8)

There may be some who would argue that the persistence of the parvenus of cosmonomia affected the early resistance to Dooyeweerd as much as the first-blush peculiarity of the cosmonomic principles.¹ But in any case, all will welcome the change of attitude whereby those of the Dooyeweerdian tradition no longer "expect to play a totalitarian role within the society of those who clearly exhibit a plurality of convictions."

In the second essay Bernard Zylstra details the cultural and political philosophy of Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell. Zylstra concludes:

Bell's reaffirmation of liberalism functions as a neoconservatism in the cultural and political developments of the seventies. It is the intellectual parallel of Jimmy Carter's presidency. This neoconservatism is not an

authentic spiritual quest for the normative transcendent sources of political authority, social order, and cultural standards. Neo-conservatism remains confined with the immanent horizon of modernity. Beyond that horizon lies the source of justice and equity, personhood and harmony, loyalty and love (p. 34).

Converted into non-philosophic language, I think we are to understand that it takes more than the born-again status of a president to move neoconservatism out of its secularism. Only a radically biblical renovation of cultural and political theory will bring about such a transformation of basic ideas. And then it will not fit into any of the categories which identify the current isms that are generally espoused as culturally and politically acceptable. I agree.

Skipping over Edward A. Langerak's essay "Freedom: Idea and Ideal," we come to "Towards a Certitudinal Hermeneutic" by James Olthuis. Because there is another "Towards" title two essays later, I am prompted to plead for an end of "Towards" in all future titles. It ought to become passe as a cliché. It represents a kind of inappropriate false modesty. While the author need not claim to have the last word on the subject, I presume that by the time he is willing to go into print he has some confidence that he has something worthwhile to say. In that case, titular disclaimers are unwarranted and unnecessary.

In his approach to hermeneutics, Olthuis properly reminds us that the Bible came to man by way of man. In its reception, as Calvin has also insisted, it can be comprehended only when it is "properly used." "Proper use" then becomes the crux of the hermeneutical

problem. Olthuis suggests that it helps very little to suggest, as does Geoffrey Bromiley, that "The Scripture enjoys full and absolute authority in its own sphere, the sphere of the self-revelation of God" (p. 68). We then have to find the limits of that sphere. Some have followed that cue by suggesting that the Bible should be read in order to ascertain what "it intends to teach concerning salvation." Olthuis then continues:

Granted that the Scriptures are redemptive in nature, content and intention, how does that help spell out and work out their authority for all the diverse areas of life? The important question returns unanswered: How? In what fashion, manner or way? (p. 68)

According to Olthuis, we can solve our hermeneutical problem if we approach the Bible with a proper understanding of what kind of writing it is. Obviously, it does not intend to be scientific. And C.S. Lewis has reminded us that we would miss its message if we read it only as literature even though it contains great poetry. Finally, if one took a grammatical-historical approach, one could still miss the fact that

The Scriptures belong to that category or classification of books that have as their governing focus ultimates or end-questions (p. 71).

I see two difficulties with Olthuis' approach. First, in a very decisive sense there is no class of writings concerning ultimate and end-questions which would include the Bible. It is the only Word. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must

be saved" (Acts 4: 17—NIV).

Second, if we hold that the Bible is in a class of end-question writings along with the Quran, the Upanishads and others, then we expect that its message will be understood by all who approach those writings with Olthuis' new "certitudinal-grammatical-historical" method of exegesis. This creates problems for those who accept the conclusions of Report 44 of the Christian Reformed Synod 1972 which declares that the Bible is a "saving revelation" which must imply that no revelation takes place for the non-responding reader. Romans 1:21, 22 would seem to force the conclusion that the non-Christian stands responsibly before the revelation of God in his creation. I think the same can be said for the Bible, as there is abundant evidence that some read the Bible to their greater condemnation. Perhaps in some other context Olthuis will address himself to some of the unresolved problems which his rendering of certitudinal suggests.

Space requires that I now pass over most of the remaining essays with little more than a passing reference. In the next essay, Hugh Cook offers a change of pace with "Thoreau and the King James Bible." Arnold De Graff, holding that traditional Christian and secular models present a wrong view of man, works "Towards a New Anthropological Model." Wendy Elgersma Helleman looks into "Augustine's Early Writings on a Liberal Education" and, as most students of Augustine would expect, finds some residual Platonism. Peter Steen, falling in line with a current trend, wants to change the idea of God's involvement in time from one that traditionally was somewhat static to one that is more dynamic. John Van Dyk finds that there is a significant relationship between "The Sentences of Peter

Lombard and Medieval Philosophical Discussion." John Vander Stelt lifts a segment from his doctoral dissertation to present "Archibald Alexander: Inconsistent Empiricism and Theory of Scripture." As it reads, the title may be equivocal. I believe that it wants to indicate that Alexander's empiricism is inconsistent with Scripture and that the empiricism is inconsistent per se.

Continuing, Henry Vander Goot points to the drastic influence which Friedrich Schleiermacher exerted on subsequent Protestant theology. Vander Goot's title is "The Modern Settlement: Religion and Culture in the Early Schleiermacher." In his discussion of "Dilthey's Philosophy of the History of Philosophy," Theodore Plantinga believes that it is Dilthey's conclusion that

What the history of metaphysics offers us is not a series of insights but a series of experiential possibilities through which not only our thought but our entire existence may be enriched and elevated. This is the spirit behind Dilthey's philosophy of the history of philosophy (p. 207).

John Kraay focuses "On Heidegger's Early Kant Interpretation" and Albert M. Wolters "On Vollenhoven's Problem-Historical Method." In his discussion, "Modal Aesthetics: Preliminary Questions with an Opening Hypothesis," Calvin Seerveld indicates that preliminary to the study of art we must ask, What is the "nuclear moment of the 'aesthetic' side of God-made and manmade (sic) things?" Seerveld's "opening hypothesis" (opening in the sense that it opens an understanding of the aesthetic modality) is that the nuclear moment of aesthetics is "allusiveness" (p. 264).

If we are willing to yield to Seerveld's insistence (I am inclined to) that art suggests meaning by way of symbol, then the word "allusiveness" is entirely apt. We could do as Seerveld has done earlier and hold that art is suggestive. But then we would constantly run into the same difficulty which Seerveld did at a Tri-State Teacher's Institute held at Dordt College. One of the auditors was repulsed by the idea that art was "suggestive," taking the word in its popular sexual context. "Nuanceful," as suggested by Lambert Zuidervaat, one of Seerveld's students at the ICS in Toronto, is a designation that also has merit, but it seems to me it does not find its meaning quite as usefully confined to aesthetics as does "allusiveness."

Whether one chooses "suggestive," "nuanceful," or "allusive," I think Seerveld has hit upon the essence of aesthetic quality more exactly than any which one might choose from the long history of aesthetics discussions from Plato to Albert Camus.² Seerveld convincingly rejects beauty as an ancient and favorite qualifying essence of aesthetics. I think he also rightfully rejects harmony, which was Dooyeweerd's choice.

Seerveld has also remodeled his own 1962 formulation of a definition of art. I scarcely have to add that I find it particularly gratifying that the remodeling was carried out according to a suggestion which I offered some years ago. Seerveld had defined art as "the symbolical objectification of certain meanings of a thing." It was my feeling that "thing" had the tendency to materialize the concept so that it might eliminate such elusive realities as a mood which surely can be symbolized, especially through music. Seerveld now substitutes "meaning-realities" for "thing," a change which makes room

for all possibilities. Whereas the change may be considered an improvement, more than that, it points to an openness of approach which has characterized Seerveld's scholarship and it also accents the benefits of communal scholarship.

By way of assessment, I would repeat that this work is meant to be a work of scholarship for scholars. It serves that purpose, but I must issue a caveat. Paraphrasing Dante, I would almost have to say, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" if you are not acquainted with the Dooyeweerdian tradition and its jargon. This book carries an index of the names which appear in the text, but a glossary of Dooyeweerdian terms, with a Seerveldian supplement, would be helpful.

Though I think that in the past I have been working with an educated guess, until now I had never seen a definition offered for that bastard word of Amsterdam origin, "problematic(s)," an illegitimate offspring of the noun "problem" and the adjective "problematical." Because the word is regularly used by all those who follow the lead of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, I was pleased to find that Wolters offered a definition of "problematic" in his essay. We have it, then, that "problematic" refers to "the theoretical universe of discourse in terms of which philosophical answers are sought" (p. 254). It seems to be an attempt to Anglicize the word "problematiek" by setting it in the context of the Dutch term "problemstelling."

To go on to an example, one might charge that a Christian has fallen into the trap of false "problematics" when he tries to come to conclusions about the immortality of the soul on the basis of the Greek concept of substance. A correct answer cannot follow when the

question is framed according to pagan concepts of reality. I should add that there may be differences of opinion as to what constitutes a "false problematic," particularly if the judgment depends on one's acceptance of distinct interpretations which are singular to the Dooyeweerdian tradition.³

When one is writing a scholarly work for scholars, it is fair to assume that one's readers will be able to make their way through one or more of the ancient or modern foreign languages. However, frequent use of words from four or five foreign languages in a single essay could be construed as errant pedantry instead of helpful scholarship. For example, what is one to do with Seerveld's *diesidaimonesterous* if there is no Greek scholar around with whom one might consult?

While it is true that the Germanic languages are rich with agglutinations, a stringing together of several words to carry a new overall meaning, to carry that over too generously into English results in a kind of hyperhyphenation. Many of the agglutinations introduced by those who follow Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven seem to be Dutchisms.

Vollenhoven for his part introduces a whole new vocabulary in order to deal with his new classifications and to serve his problem method. Some of his designations turn out to be incompletely transliterated Greek. For example, philosophers quite generally have referred to the concept held by George Berkeley that reality is basically one and that it is of the nature of an idea as psychomonism. Remodeled by Vollenhoven, psychomonism becomes "reduced pneumatological monarchianism" (cf. p. 161). There have been other changes away from general English use. In Amsterdam "scientism" becomes "scientialism." While it is true that a scholar has the right to give terms

stipulated meanings, I would invoke the law of parsimony to bar a needless duplication of terms.

After Seerveld's, the essays end with one on "Counting, Number Concept and Numerosity" by Harry van Dyke. And the book concludes with an interview with Runner conducted by Harry van Dyke and Albert Wolters. It is fascinating reading because it portrays a kind of odyssey. Runner gives an account of his spiritual and philosophic trek from a somewhat narrow evangelical life-view with an Arminian tinge, to one of "hearing and doing" according to the Reformed tradition as it came from Calvin, Kuyper and the twentieth-century Amsterdam school of philosophy. The number and dedication of Runner's proteges are a tribute to his whole-hearted commitment to the new tradition. Not only that, but his ability to inspire support and enthusiasm for that tradition is noteworthy, particularly in the face of general opposition from the rest of the philosophy department at Calvin College. The fact that the essayists for this *Festschrift* are mostly from post-World War II Canadian immigrant stock would seem to indicate that a predisposition for things Dutch seems to facilitate the appropriation of the Amsterdam tradition in philosophy.

In sum, let me welcome you to some challenging reading. It will not be easy, but I think it will be worth your while.

Notes

¹"Cosmonomic" is a kind of Latin equivalent for Dooyeweerd's word "Wetsidee," that is, literally, "law-idea." So his philosophy is called cosmonomic philosophy as more euphonious than law-idea philosophy.

²Cf. Peyton E. Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics: Plato to Camus* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1967).

³Cf. my "The Place and Nature of History as a Scientific Study." *Pro Rege*, 3 (Dec. 1979), p. 2.