

A New Critique of the Cosmonomic Philosophy

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Paper 2: Cosmonomic Epistemology

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9. The Heart of Psychology

A main theme of Herman Dooyeweerd's cosmonomic philosophy is that each individual has a presuppositional commitment guided by a "ground-motive." This commitment is *religious* in nature and expresses itself in myriad ways. Diller says:

"Dooyeweerd sees every theoretical enterprise—be it economics, aesthetics or even mathematics—as having philosophical presuppositions; and every philosophical system has religious presuppositions. Underlying every system of philosophy there's a *religious ground-motive*."¹

Ronald H. Nash also believed that a main thesis of the cosmonomic

philosophy is that "scientific and philosophic systems of thought are dependent upon and conditioned by religious or pre-theoretical presuppositions."² In his dissertation on the cosmonomic philosophy, Yong-Joon Choi says that Dooyeweerd "conceived of the religious ground motive as the basic motivational factor both in thought and in culture."³

¹ Antoni Diller, "Hermann Dooyeweerd—A Profile of his Thought," *Spectrum*, Vol. 22, 1990.

² Ronald Nash, *Dooyeweerd and the Amsterdam Philosophy*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1962, p. 19.

³ Yong-Joon Choi, Introduction, Section 8 & Chapter 1.3.63ff.; Dissertation at Andrew

Baden's website *The Dooyeweerd Pages*, [2000], 2002, cf., for links, see bibliography below.

The concept of presuppositional commitment is used in the sense of registering an emotional *allegiance* to someone or something. A person's commitment in the cosmological sense is not the same as the set of beliefs that make up a worldview. As an example, one's faith in God is not identical with the propositions contained in the Apostle's Creed or Westminster Confession of Faith. Rather, such creeds *direct* faith. As many would understand it, creeds refer to a system of intellectual content, i.e., a set of *beliefs*. The concept of commitment, however, refers to a psychological state of mind—*believings*—and Dooyeweerd's use of the term ground *motive* is rather unmistakably psychological.

The notion of a ground motive seems to be functioning somewhat like a Freudian drive. Freud's claim was that humans are guided in much of their behavior by unconscious desires. The Freudian *id* is supposed to represent an unconscious, primal source of

motivation especially in terms of gratification of wants, and it combines with the ego and super-ego to produce human personality.

In his study of Freud, Rushdoony remarked that the Freudian notions of *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego* are related to the "old Adam" of Christian theology and the "mind" and "conscience" of traditional philosophy and ethics. He acknowledged, however, that such concepts are thoroughly naturalized in Freud's thought.⁴ In addition, Hodges actually compared philosophy with psychoanalysis, although he acknowledged important differences.⁵

(As an aside, it should be noted that while Freud's therapeutic efforts were pioneering, he made many errors of interpretation—some of them quite ludicrous—and he very nearly killed psychoanalysis in the process of inventing it. One of his basic errors was the use of data sets that did not distinguish mental states from

neurological symptoms, e.g., psychological trauma from [say] epilepsy.⁶ Interestingly, despite Storr's positive tone in his analysis of Freud, he is not entirely lacking in criticism of Freud.⁷)

In Dooyeweerd's view, each of us has a ground motive. This ground motive determines how we will behave or think about anything, and is either under the influence of the grace of God or the apostate condition of fallen man.⁸ Ground motives also extend beyond the individual to communities and whole epochs (Greece, Middle Ages, Modern Age). As with the Freudian *id*, human personality is at least partly a *product* of these ground motives. Diller even makes a reference to the "spirit of psychoanalysis" in relation to Dooyeweerd's views on the subject.

James Sire also comments: "More fundamental than any worldview that can be delineated by ideas and propositions is the religious or faith

⁴ R. J. Rushdoony, *Freud*, Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, [1965], 2006, Kindle edition, Chapter 5.

⁵ H. A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction*, London: Kegan et al., 1944, p. 106.

⁶ See for example, Sigmund Freud, "Studies on Hysteria," *Freud, Complete Works*, compiled by Ivan Smith, 2011. See also, Thomas S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness*, New York: Harper Collins e-books, [1961], 2011.

⁷ Anthony Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, UK: Oxford University Press, [1989], 2001.

⁸ Dooyeweerd, 1969, 1: 61.

orientation of the heart.”⁹ Sire recognizes that for Dooyeweerd, the concept of commitment guided by a “ground motive” is primarily psychological rather than intellectual:

“There are only two basic commitments, leading to two basic conditions of life: ‘man converted to God’ and ‘man averted from God.’ The commitment one makes is ‘decisive for all life and thought.’ From the former comes the Christian worldview not so much as a matter of theoretical thought expressed in propositions but as a deeply rooted commitment of the heart.”¹⁰

In sum, it is not propositional content so much as deep psychology that describes Dooyeweerd’s view of ground motives and commitment.

The *id* in Freudianism is something we are supposedly born with as part of our biological make-up, and the ground motive in Dooyeweerd’s thought is said to be something we inherited at creation. As noted, because of original sin the ground motive either splits off into idolatry, or through grace leads men to

worship the true God in Jesus Christ. It functions as a primal motivation for everything people believe and do in life.

In terms of Dooyeweerd’s history of philosophy, the ground-motive of fallen man breaks up into three ground motives (Greek form-matter, Mediaeval nature-grace, Modern nature-freedom). For redeemed man, there is only one ground motive, that of creation, fall, and redemption. Sire continues:

“As Dooyeweerd understands them, worldviews are not philosophic systems; rather they are *pretheoretical* commitments and are in direct contact not so much with the mind as with the ‘heart,’ with experience, with life as lived. The converted have a Christian worldview. The unconverted have a worldview as well. But the Christian’s worldview derives from a regenerated heart and the non-Christian’s worldview from a radically sinful heart.”¹¹

A worldview, whether Christian or non-Christian, is a result of primal motivations stemming from the “heart” rather than from the philosophical

intellect. One should note that a worldview in Dooyeweerd’s sense is not itself a ground motive but it *has* a ground motive. A ground motive provides *direction* but not content for a worldview. Dooyeweerd says:

“[I]t is entirely wrong to see in Christian philosophy only a philosophically elaborated life- and world-view. To do so would be a fundamental misunderstanding of the true relationships. The Divine Word-revelation gives the Christian as little a detailed life- and world-view as a Christian philosophy, yet *it gives to both simply their direction...*”¹²

As a creed gives direction to personal faith, so the “Divine Word-revelation” gives direction to each Christian. The “Divine Word-revelation” is not the Bible, nor a creed drawn from the Bible. It is not entirely clear what Dooyeweerd means by it, but it is easy to see that it has an ontological status and might simply refer to the power of God. Some theologians even critically referred to it as the “power-word” concept (the Word

⁹ James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015, p. 35.

¹⁰ Sire, 2015, p. 35.

¹¹ Sire, 2015, pp. 35-36.

¹² Dooyeweerd, 1969, 1:61; emphasis added.

as dynamic power) vis-à-vis the “text-word” concept (the Bible as written).¹³

In any case, the ground motive is not a source of intellectual content but instead a psychological and social condition that functions in a teleological, directing manner. It motivates the Christian or non-Christian to build a worldview and philosophy, but does not provide any detailed thought-content for them.

10. Dooyeweerd Contra Van Til

The cosmomic emphasis on ground motives as devoid of intellectual content caught the attention of philosopher Cornelius Van Til. In a *festschrift* dedicated to Van Til, Dooyeweerd took issue with some criticisms of his philosophy by Van Til.¹⁴ In re-reading this forty four-year old *contretemptis*, it seems evident that Dooyeweerd and Van Til were often simply two ships passing in the night. Dooyeweerd accused Van Til of being a rationalist and Van Til accused Dooyeweerd of

abandoning a truly Reformational philosophy.

Dooyeweerd affirmed in his contribution that he wanted to develop a critical philosophy that could be a “way of communication between a really reformatory Christian philosophy and philosophical schools holding...to the supposed autonomy of theoretical thought.”¹⁵ He did not say what he meant by the term “communication” but presumably it meant opening an ecumenical dialogue of some sort between Christian philosophers and non-Christian philosophers. This task was essentially *therapeutic*. It involved “laying bare the central influence of the different religious, basic motives upon the philosophical trends of thought.”¹⁶

Philosophical therapy was not the same as apologetics, the defense of Christianity. In addition, philosophical therapy was not a “dogmatic” method but was to be performed as a “transcendental” method. The former

would be where the Bible is placed in direct conflict with various philosophical or scientific ideas. The transcendental method, however, uses an indirect, regressive method much like psychoanalysis. The latter, as Leo Strauss once observed, is about explaining the *known* (mental problems, bizarre desires, etc.) from the *unknown* (the unconscious, repressed trauma, etc.). Similarly, the transcendental method is all about starting with the known and discovering hitherto unknown preconditions for its existence. In terms of transcendental therapy, the main confrontation is not between a set of known beliefs versus another set of known beliefs, but rather a confrontation between two opposing, and up to now, unknown ground motives—two religious *ids*, so to speak.¹⁷ In the cosmomic philosophy, man’s “innate religious impulse” reflects an Augustinian “restless longing” which either seeks communion with God or turns away from God into apostasy.¹⁸ The main purpose of

¹³ Norman Shephard, “The Doctrine of Scripture in the Dooyeweerdian Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea,” *The Christian Reformed Outlook*, 21:2,3, Part 1, February, 1971, Part 2, March 1971. Also, John Frame, “The Word of God in the Cosmomic Philosophy,” *The*

Presbyterian Guardian, 41:8,9, Part 1, October 1971, Part 2, November 1972.

¹⁴ E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions On the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, Nutley, New

Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1977, pp. 74ff.

¹⁵ Geehan, 1977, p. 74.

¹⁶ Geehan, 1977, p. 76.

¹⁷ Geehan, 1977, p. 77.

¹⁸ Geehan, 1977, p. 78.

transcendental philosophy is to uncover these ultimate religious impulses behind all philosophical schools, thus paving the way for philosophical *catharsis*. This meant purging philosophers of their unstated assumptions, thus allowing for genuine dialogue across philosophical systems.

A problem arises in that before the necessary conditions of possibility can be analyzed, a factual situation must be discovered that provides a basis for such analysis. Dooyeweerd called these factual situations “states of affairs” and believed many states of affairs had to be discovered before a sufficient number existed for the purpose of transcendental analysis. On the basis of already known states of affairs, fifteen modal spheres could be described. As more states of affairs were delineated, even more modal spheres could be added.

11. Van Til Contra Dooyeweerd

In contrast to Dooyeweerd’s approach, Van Til said the “states of affairs” are what the Bible says they are. This had the effect of denying the basis of Dooyeweerd’s modal spheres as well as the transcendental method. Van Til probably meant that states of affairs are

not independent from God’s creation and providence. They are not part of an irrational universe and thus should not be interpreted in terms of a non-Christian philosophy of fact or of history. Instead, they should be interpreted as part of the ultimate ontological order that is described in the Bible.

It is rather doubtful that Dooyeweerd would deny this. He might have asked whether the Bible even speaks of “states of affairs” since it speaks mainly of salvation rather than of science or philosophy. This shows again how far apart Van Til and Dooyeweerd were sailing in this debate. Van Til argued that all the law spheres and states of affairs are what the Bible says they are, and therefore the Bible’s authority should not be confined to or imprisoned within a “faith” sphere. In contrast, Dooyeweerd wanted to begin with the states of affairs before the question of the authority of the Bible could be considered.

Van Til was for many years a professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary. He developed what is known as “presuppositional” apologetics which is contrasted with

“evidentialist” apologetics. Reflecting on Dooyeweerd’s criticisms, Van Til took up the laborious task of rereading the *New Critique* with its “sharpening” of the three ways of transcendental critique, and took it to be a subtle evidentialist argument which he had always rejected.

Dooyeweerd’s stated goal was to improve the conversation between Christian and non-Christian thinkers by means of *clarification*. This required him to advocate a form of *methodological* autonomy. In doing philosophy (or ontology) the Christian philosopher could not make a direct appeal to the Bible. The teachings of the Bible were contained in one of the modal spheres—the faith sphere—and to use them to construct a philosophy would be to absolutize the faith sphere.

Dooyeweerd claimed that past attempts to absolutize the faith sphere led to terrible things in history such as the persecution of Galileo by churchmen who argued that his astronomical ideas contradicted the Bible (even though in fact they only contradicted Aristotle’s conception of the world). Of course, the concept of methodological autonomy is only an *ideal*. One of Dooyeweerd’s

main criticisms of non-Christian philosophy is that it claims to be methodologically neutral, but that it fails to live up to that neutrality ideal. All too often, those who were the loudest in claiming to be autonomous or independent of pre-determinations, were the most biased of all.

Van Til, however, thought an appeal to methodological autonomy in effect amounted to an advocacy of *philosophical* autonomy. Philosophical autonomy goes far and above methodological autonomy and claims that man is independent because there is no God above to check his autonomous decisions. Was this what Dooyeweerd was advocating? The notion of methodological autonomy merely holds that in doing philosophy one cannot appeal *directly* to the Bible or to any other non-philosophical source.

It is likely that Dooyeweerd would have answered Van Til by saying the Bible does not present any theories of physics or chemistry, nor is it written in the language of scientists or philosophers. To be sure, the Bible writes about ultimate concerns but only in the language of *laymen*, i.e., the ordinary language of everyday life. It is therefore

a mistake to generate a conflict between the Bible and science or philosophy. Van Til would certainly agree, but his claim that the states of affairs are what the Bible says they are can be misinterpreted if not carefully placed within context.

Dooyeweerd's view would be more in line with the *concordist* doctrine advocated by Galileo, that the book of God in nature and the book of God in the Bible complement rather than contradict each other. With God being the Author of both books, how could they? If they do, then one of the books has been misinterpreted. Whether he would have admitted it or not, Dooyeweerd's methodological autonomy shares a similarity with the Galilean approach, although the two books have now increased to fifteen!

Note that Galilean concordism should not be confused with modern day versions of concordism, which sometimes tend to be *discordist* in character. In modern versions, the book of God in nature is almost always *rightly interpreted* (scientists are always right, i.e., *scientism*) but the book of God in the Bible is nearly always *wrongly interpreted* (by "fundamentalists,"

creationists, et al.). Modern philosophy of science has undermined such complacent assumptions about interpretations. (This topic will be discussed in a subsequent paper.)

Van Til's criticisms of Dooyeweerd were not wholly undeserved. Dooyeweerd often sounds as though he wanted to *justify* Christian belief by way of his cosmological philosophy. It rather seems that this justification comes in the form of what is essentially a pragmatic argument. He appeared to be saying, "Look, I've divided up the world into these modal spheres and I've shown they need an Archimedean ego-point to unify everything and a divine Archè beyond that to complete the coherence. The religion of Christianity is very useful in making sense of all that structural stuff as well as opening up communication between schools, but autonomous philosophies do a poor job of it." I think Van Til would probably see such a procedure as having a whiff of evidentialism about it. He might say that it combines *pietism* (supra-temporal Archimedean heart) with *deism* (Archè).

12. Dooyeweerd contra the Philosophers

Not only did Van Til see remnants of the old evidentialist apologetic in Dooyeweerd, he also saw a subtle *circulus in probando* in Dooyeweerd's three steps of transcendental critique, the three steps that are supposed to make it easier for Christian philosophers to communicate with non-Christian philosophers.

In terms of the first step, Dooyeweerd says we abstract away from the "naïve" life world and subject it to a theoretical analysis. This means dividing everything into various modal spheres while seeing their inner coherence as related to cosmic time.¹⁹ Having posited the existence of non-reducible modal spheres, how does Dooyeweerd propose to communicate with, for instance, the ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides? Parmenides denied change, and yet the modal spheres contain a kinematic or motion sphere. There would then be no further dialogue with a philosopher who advocated blank identity as a solution to the ceaseless change and flux in the world.

And what of old Heraclitus? On his view there is no inner coherence of the modal spheres, because the world is pure plurality and disunity. In effect, Dooyeweerd has already begged the question against both Parmenides and Heraclitus. And just how would Dooyeweerd communicate with Kant? In the cosmomic philosophy, time is the "prism" in which all the modalities cohere, including the logical, but Kant believed time was a mental groove that structures a purely contingent reality. In this case, once again Dooyeweerd would have already begged the question against Kant. No communication could take place.

In terms of the second step, what is the vantage point upon which we reunite all these modal spheres? The cosmomic answer is that our self-hood transcends the modal spheres and is the supra-temporal concentration point that unites all the spheres. Our ego functions in all the spheres so cannot be reduced to any of them. Our self-hood must "climb a tower" so to speak so as to look out upon the modal spheres below, including the logical sphere. Dooyeweerd refers to this vantage point as the "Archimedean point."

In what way does this tower metaphor open up any sort of dialogue with non-Christians? Parmenides would certainly not agree with it. On his view, it is impossible to gain a vantage point in the self in order to view the diversity of the modal aspects. There *is* no diversity of the modal aspects because all diversity is illusion. The only reality is unchanging, non-pluralistic being. On the other hand, Heraclitus might say that there is no Archimedean point or tower to climb in the first place, because all is plurality and there is no unity. Kant would respond negatively as well, because the cosmomic limitation of the transcendental logical ego to the logical sphere rules out his philosophy from the start, for on his view the tower or Archimedean point just is the transcendental logical ego.

In terms of the third step of the critique, Dooyeweerd argued that the self-hood cannot give direction to theoretical thought apart from a true or pretended origin, the Archè (Greek ἀρχή). This Archè is religious in character, not in terms of religious *content* (e.g., the Bible, Hindu texts, etc.), but in terms of the existential condition of the ego in

¹⁹ Dooyeweerd, 1969, 1:38.

relation to a true or false ground.²⁰ It is the ontological ground of all thought.

In what way would this open up a line of communication with (say) an atheist or Buddhist? The atheist or Buddhist would not be cornered into accepting the existence of a vanilla-Archè. At least the wary ones would clearly see that Dooyeweerd was setting a trap for them, and that once such an origin for the basic modalities is accepted, it would be shown to be wholly inadequate compared to the Christian Archè. Instead, the atheist and Buddhist will join together and say: “It is better not to play that game in the first place, so we will deny the existence of a featureless Archè, and we will stick to materialism or meditation. Let the religious fanatics have their Archè.”

Van Til’s main point is that in constructing his three steps of transcendental critique to be acceptable to philosophers, Dooyeweerd never got out of the starting gate. This is not to say that the cosmonomic philosophy was wrong in its criticism of non-Christian thought, or that it was wrong to focus on ultimate commitments,

ground ideas, or elaborate ontological classifications. All of these are important themes. The problem, as Van Til saw it, was that Dooyeweerd had surreptitiously incorporated his Christian view of nature, of man, and of God into what was supposed to be a purely descriptive clarification of the philosophical landscape. Accordingly, Van Til summarized this problem in the words of one of his fictional characters:

“Dooyeweerd no doubt thinks that it is his Christian religious beliefs which must be accepted if we are to understand the structural data of this world. But I wish he had said this plainly instead of seeking to weave *his private convictions* into his transcendental method which is *supposed to be acceptable to us as well as to himself*.”²¹

It is hard to disagree with Van Til on this point. To improve communication with philosophers (the advertised goal of Dooyeweerd’s “three ways”), a transcendental method was necessary to uncover prejudicial and biased philosophical assumptions hiding under the guise of the neutrality postulate. These biases helped to undermine good

philosophy and stymied real dialogue among philosophers. And yet for this to be plausible Dooyeweerd’s *own* philosophy had to look objective and appear not to be hiding any biases in the use of the transcendental method. Nevertheless, as Van Til argued, Dooyeweerd managed to weave Christianity into his three-step transcendental method, thus giving Christianity home field advantage.

Non-Christians could be forgiven for questioning how much communication could go on in such circumstances. Under the cosmonomic procedure, the Christian turned out to be just as “biased” as the non-Christian! It would hardly amount to a great advance in Christian philosophy to criticize non-Christian philosophers for doing the same thing Christian philosophers were doing. In this case, the pot was surely right to comment on the color of the kettle.²²

13. States of Affairs

To establish communication, areas of commonality must be found and yet Dooyeweerd’s antithetical approach

²⁰ Dooyeweerd, 1969, 1:58.

²¹ Geehan, 1977, p. 117; emphasis in original.

²²Freeman and Nash make a similar point, cf., Nash, 1962, pp. 86ff.

was to rout out all signs of commonality between Christian and non-Christian philosophy. After that, the only way left to establish communication was the transcendental method, but if Van Til was correct in his analysis, Dooyeweerd loaded it with enough Christian content that it became counterproductive.

In his book *Twilight of Western Thought* Dooyeweerd anticipated some of these criticisms.²³ Did he not develop his transcendental philosophy under the influence of his own starting-point, his religious ground motive? How then could it be objective? And if two philosophies do not share a common starting-point, how can there be any meaningful philosophical discussion?

In terms of the first criticism, David H. Freeman in fact had pointed to self-referential inconsistency as a serious problem for Dooyeweerd's thought. If we adopt proposition *R* that everyone is guided by a religious motive and for that reason cannot be objective; and if (say) Dooyeweerd is guided by a religious motive, then it follows that Dooyeweerd

cannot prove anything objectively, and that would include *R*.²⁴

Of course, the argument assumes that religious motives cannot be conducive to objectivity, but does Dooyeweerd make that assumption? It seems that for Dooyeweerd *recognition* is the more important concern, i.e., being *aware of* one's religious motives. Nevertheless, if the cosmonomic philosophy holds that by definition religious motives interfere with objectivity, then Freeman has provided an inescapable *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophy of the law idea.

In the cosmonomic view, the claim to neutrality and independence of thought is actually preventing philosophers from seeing their own basic motives. Recall, the earlier point about cosmonomic philosophy as *therapy*. In furthering the goal of philosophical therapy and catharsis, Dooyeweerd argued that his primary aim was to "lay bare the structural data" of experience and to show that unacknowledged assumptions often clouded them. He says,

"Structural data should be acknowledged, irrespective of their philosophical interpretation."²⁵

Here Dooyeweerd assumes that descriptions of structural data, while not infallible, are at least *objective* and that all schools can have this data *in common*. Analogously, psychiatrists could agree regarding the *symptoms* suffered by a patient but might not agree on what is *causing* those symptoms. In Dooyeweerd's view, once the philosophical therapist has laid bare everyone's pre-theoretical, religious assumptions, then philosophical health can be regained, or at least a way can be opened for the return to philosophical sanity.

Dooyeweerd maintained that we can know factual situations or states of affairs objectively. If he could acknowledge this much, he was actually not as far as he thought from the "scholastic" view that the world can be known by the light of reason. At the least, such a view of the empirical objectivity of states of affairs would go

²³ Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, [1960], 1975, p. 52ff.

²⁴ David H. Freeman, "A New School of Christian Philosophy," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 38, 1958, p. 51.

²⁵ Dooyeweerd, 1975, p. 54.

a long way in saving the cosmomic philosophy from Freeman's *reductio*.

Nash, however, did not believe Dooyeweerd was successful in his answer regarding the problem of self-referential inconsistency.²⁶ Again, the strength of the *reductio* would depend on whether cosmomic philosophy interpreted ground motives as *undermining* objectivity or whether unacknowledged ground motives just made it *harder* to be objective. There is a vast difference between making objectivity impossible and making it difficult.

To the remaining question, Dooyeweerd responded that the common basis between all schools must be:

“...the conviction that any serious philosophical current has to contribute in its own way to the fulfillment of the common philosophical task of mankind.”²⁷

Only in this way can a “barren exclusivistic attitude” be overcome. Here the commonality was not based on facts everyone had in common, nor was it a matter of shared beliefs, or even

unified views about states of affairs. Instead, commonality was to be found in what could be called *social eschatology*.

Dooyeweerd seemed to think that in the future there could be a philosophical version of the United Nations, where each philosophy could contribute to the future betterment of mankind. Granted, he believed that non-Christian philosophies were undermining this *kumbaya* goal, mainly because they did not recognize their own prejudices, but when they do become aware of them, real dialogue can begin and harmony will prevail. Philosophical therapy will have done its work, and mankind will be the better for it.

14. Philosophical Criticism

I think Van Til was right in his argument that Dooyeweerd's own stated goal of ecumenical dialogue is contradicted by his three-step method. On the other hand, if Dooyeweerd failed to establish a real line of communication with non-Christians, what can be said of the cosmomic philosophy purely as a philosophical approach? In other words, what should *Christians* think of Dooyeweerd's philosophy? Would they

find it useful, or would they find it inadequate? What might Dooyeweerd have said in communication or dialogue with his fellow Christians?

This can be answered *first*, by considering whether Dooyeweerd's ideas about ground motives really hold good; and *second*, by taking up the question of whether Dooyeweerd's survey and criticism of non-Christian philosophy is adequate or whether it is superficial. These latter question will be discussed in the following paper, but the former question of the validity of the cosmomic concept of ground motives will be discussed in the next section.

15. Ground Motives

In the previous discussion, it was shown how important ground motives were to the cosmomic philosophy. They function as *id*-like drives that determine worldviews and philosophies. Does this mean Dooyeweerd's concept of ground motives favors irrationality over rationality? There is a real danger here.

It was noted that a ground motive has psychological overtones. One possible way to mitigate the whiff of irrationality

²⁶ Nash, 1962, p. 87.

²⁷ Dooyeweerd, 1975, p. 55.

is to see a ground motive as also involving a social-historical viewpoint. The notion of a social-historical viewpoint is used in a somewhat Hegelian sense in that individuals are molded by their community, which in turn is molded by historical setting, i.e., the “spirit of the age.” The situatedness of persons means that their intellectual and cultural *products* will be in line with their cultural and historical *backgrounds*.

Does this require us to adopt historicism? Can people rise above their history and culture? The historicist says no. It is true that sometimes men rise above their social and historical setting. Do they often do that? Unfortunately, no. The fact is, it is easy to agree with Dooyeweerd that men are governed by ground motives because it is all too clear that men are usually governed by their social and historical setting. Philosophers and thinkers have long complained about this, as far back as Socrates, or even as far back as the biblical prophets. For many philosophers, complacency and unreflective acceptance of the status quo seem to be some of the chief evils of mankind.

Dooyeweerd claimed to be opposed to historicism but he nevertheless applied it to the history of philosophy. In historicist fashion, he claimed that the Greeks were governed by a form-matter motive, that Mediaevals were governed by a nature-grace motive, and that Moderns are governed by a nature-freedom motive. In Dooyeweerd’s view, Christianity has the ground motive of creation-fall-redemption. One can object as to whether these are the only ground motives, or even whether they are correctly stated, or whether the notion of being “governed” is too strong (resulting in historicism). It would be hard to deny, however, that men at least *reflect* the reigning paradigms of their time, and certainly if not governed by them are at least greatly influenced by them.

It takes a great deal of thought to rise above one’s setting in life and I think this is why Dooyeweerd stressed the need for philosophical self-examination, almost to the point of being a psychoanalytic procedure. Ground motives need not be irrational in the sense of being purely subjective or purely psychological, but in another sense they may not be altogether

rational either. They *presuppose* background information, those things of culture and history that play a large role in forming the human personality. Dooyeweerd recognized this by making ground motives a matter of communities or epochs, not just of individuals.²⁸

But is the danger of irrationality averted by combining the psychological with the social and historical? Nicholas Wolterstorff questioned the “mono-directional” nature of ground motives, in that such a view leads to “expressivism”—as if science or scholarship in general were *merely* an expression of certain communities or cultures. This sort of thing is usually called historicism but it might be better in this context to call it *culturalism*.

The idea behind culturalism is that scholarship is not a result of interaction with reality and that there is no common ground for different schools of thought. Everyone reflects their own cultural background, which controls all of their attitudes and ways of life. In fact, Wolterstorff rejects this concept of culturalist antithesis and does not believe there are great differences between Christian and non-Christian

²⁸ Dooyeweerd, 1975, p. 33.

scholarship. He concluded that a more complex and articulated account of the role of beliefs is needed.²⁹

As a Calvinist, Dooyeweerd might have noted in response to Wolterstorff that it is no surprise that Christian and non-Christian scholarship would have many if not most things in common. Given that God's *common grace*—emphasized especially by Calvinists—has been operative at least since the Fall, commonality in science and scholarship would be the normal situation. Does the notion of uni-directional, social-historical ground-motives automatically result in Idealist or culturalist implications, with the result of relativizing science or scholarship?

As noted, Dooyeweerd believed that what undermines objectivity is the failure to *recognize* one's ground motive and how it operates in developing a worldview or philosophy. Nevertheless, Wolterstorff raised a valid point. Does

the cosmomic philosophy have a way of avoiding the accusation that its idea of ground motives places irrationality (whether psychological or social) at the heart of its philosophy?

It is not entirely clear why Dooyeweerd felt the need for ground-motives in his philosophy. There is nothing in Husserl about it, nothing in Heidegger or Hartmann, or going back further, nothing in Kuyper or even Calvin (and Calvin's "seed of religion" idea is a theological concept, not a psychological one). Friesen claims it is based on the ideas of the Catholic philosopher Franz von Baader, but Friesen's correlations of Dooyeweerd's views with Baader's are pretty thin and have been extensively criticized.³⁰ One could just as easily reference Schelling as a primary influence on Dooyeweerd since Schelling was a major influence on Baader.³¹

The notion of ground motives may actually stem from the popularity of psychoanalysis during the early part of the twentieth century. Outside of that, the closest anyone approaches to it is Wilhelm Dilthey, whose concept of worldview had affinities with Hegel's historicist ideas and may well have influenced Dooyeweerd (which we will discuss in a subsequent paper).

Another reason for introducing the concept may simply be due to the *tu quoque* method of argumentation. The method of the cosmomic philosophy is to undermine the non-Christian's claim to neutrality or objectivity in his science or philosophy. Instead, it must be shown that the non-Christian too is working in terms of a ground motive, one that is *just as religious and non-rational as the Christian's*. I do not know how much of a burden can be placed on a *tu quoque* argument, but surely the methodological procedure of *cutting off one's nose in order to spite*

²⁹ Cf., Renato Coletto, "Encyclopedia in the Kuyperian Tradition: The Dooyeweerdian Model and Other Suggestions," *Philosophia Reformata*, 2014, Vol. 79, No. 2, p. 106. Coletto offers a "network" model in place of a mono-directional model.

³⁰ John G. Friesen, "The Mystical Dooyeweerd: The Relation of His Thought to Franze von

Baader," *Ars Disputandi* 3 (1), 2003. For discussion and criticism, see Daniel F. M. Strauss, "Intellectual Influences Upon the Reformational Philosophy of Dooyeweerd," *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 2004; also Theodore Plantinga, "Understanding Dooyeweerd Better Than He Understood Himself," *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 74, No.

2, 2009; in the same issue see also Henk G. Geertsema, "Comments on Friesen's 95 Theses on Human Dooyeweerd," and Gerrit Glas, "Is Dooyeweerd a Panentheist? – Comments on Friesen's '95 Theses on Herman Dooyeweerd.'" ³¹ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, New York: Doubleday, [1965], 1994, Vol. 7, Ch. 7, pp. 145ff.

one's face is not the best way, in a logical sense, to go forward.³²

Dooyeweerd's idea that ground motives are produced either by the Word-revelation of God in the supra-temporal, supra-rational heart, or by the apostate direction of fallen man, is actually more of a theological concept than a philosophical concept. It is unlikely that any non-Christian would accept it and surely the introduction of a theological or quasi-theological idea right at the start breaks off all communication between believing and non-believing philosophies, precisely the point made by the "Thomists" whom Dooyeweerd frequently criticized.

Even if one accepts an underlying ontological cause for the ground motives, why should they be treated in a deterministic manner, as if no one had a choice whether to be controlled by a ground motive or not? Do we even have the correct ground motives? Dooyeweerd only lists four, but what if there are twenty or one hundred? Moreover, why describe ground motives in the cosmonomic way? Why should we think that Greek philosophers were

dominated by a "form-matter" motive? One would think a "unity-plurality" motive was stronger than any other, with Parmenides and Heraclitus being the prime examples.

Why should we think that St. Thomas and other Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages were attempting to "synthesize" Christianity with pagan ideas? Weren't they rather attempting to "communicate" with non-Christians? Additionally, most scholars of the Mediaeval period would point to the "realism-nominalism" controversy as more important than any other issue.

Finally, is it true that the Modern Age is dominated by a conflict between science and freedom? There are no other important conflicts in our day? Do scientists even spend any time thinking about these things? One could surmise, based on contemporary media reports, that the conflicts in our day are primarily political and religious rather than philosophical. Whether good or bad, hardly anyone pays attention to philosophical disputes these days.

Dooyeweerd might claim that ground motives can be conducive to objectivity, but this would need more demonstration than is provided. The only thing that may mitigate the element of irrationality in the cosmonomic philosophy is Dooyeweerd's realist idea that the states of affairs can be objectively interpreted by everyone. In any case, if factual situations can be objectively interpreted in spite of ground motives, then there is really no need to give such a prominent place to a supra-rational "heart" or to a noumenal Archè. The objectivity of states of affairs means one can just skip the psychologism of the pietistic "heart" or the historicism of the social-historical ground motive.

Lastly, it is not clear that the concept of a ground motive is actually consistent with the teachings of the book of *Genesis*. In the cosmonomic philosophy, the ground motive seems to be functioning as a dynamic and irrational force that opens up a potential for a mysterious darkness in human personality. Is such a view consistent with the biblical teaching of a *good* creation? In Christian theology, Adam was created as an *innocent* creature, not

³² For a discussion and critique of "commitment" philosophies, see William W.

Bartley, *Retreat to Commitment*, New York: Knopf, 1962.

as a *neutral* creature waiting to be filled up with good or bad.

According to the book of *Genesis* Adam was created in the image of God, and for that reason his personality would also analogically reflect the Personality of God. If Dooyeweerd is right that man has a “motive” that comes before

rational thought, then that would also be true of God due to the *imago Dei*. However, the notion that God’s motives could be prior to his rationality is a nominalist view of God, and it could be said that the cosmonomic concept of a ground-motive is also nominalist. For that reason alone, the notion of ground

motives should be questioned as possibly antinomic.

The next paper will discuss the issue of superficiality in cosmonomic criticisms of non-Christian philosophy, focusing especially on John Locke, the Social Contract, and the Enlightenment.

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