

Spiritual Convergence, Philosophical Differences:
Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd
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In the on-going tradition of Christian philosophical reflection Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd play a significant role. As a grateful heir, I see my calling not as preserver but as a member of a community intent on remaining faithful to its Scriptural dynamic. In view of the constantly changing world, philosophically and otherwise, such fidelity calls for continual reforming. In terms of our present topic, it is important to remember that no tradition is ever monolithic, nor should it be. Indeed, in spite of significant differences and varying emphases between Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, we need, I suggest, to keep boldly in focus the deep spiritual affinity of their views. Moreover, I have to come to the conviction (particularly inspired by my interactions with Bob Sweetman) that we would do well in our efforts to develop a biblically attuned philosophy to emphasize that philosophy is, for people of faith, first of all a spiritual exercise in which we would expect and welcome differing systematic constellations and emphases in our shared desire to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. In other words, in my view, we do not need to choose between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. Rather, in our efforts to continue the tradition non-identically, it behooves us to come to a better and deeper understanding of how and why a common undertaking to philosophize in the Spirit of Christ led two Dutch Calvinists to develop in various ways differing conceptualities and diverging positions. Such understanding could, in turn, help us to better understand and respect differing emphases and perspectives among ourselves. Both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven set out from a faith-nourished desire to keep God and creation in intimate connection while honouring their difference. They are one in their conviction that the covenantal connection between God and creation cannot be talked about in terms of similarity and difference. On the one hand, they are afraid that talk of the being of God and the being of humans treats God and humans (even if only analogically) as two species of an abstract over-arching Being. On the other hand, they oppose understanding the God/creation relation purely out of their difference. Philosophically, this translates into an attempt to avoid both monisms and dualisms. But what then? [Parenthetically, I think that this struggle is still very much apropos. Indeed, that is why some of us find talk of

panentheism (if not taken as a metaphysical system) as a rather intriguing way to re-think conceptually the fundamental relationality of creation.] At the same time, since their philosophical sympathies and personal sensitivities and predilections differed, they worked out their shared convictions in rather diverging ways. This means, I suggest, that the differences between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven are not “quite” as “contradictory” as Glenn Friesen argues. They do not, it strikes me, so much disagree on “almost every key point,” as have a different philosophic take on many points from a shared faith.

The different-take or perspective has to do, as I read it, with the fact that Dooyeweerd is more of a transcendently-focused philosopher than Vollenhoven. Whereas Dooyeweerd emphasized the transcendental direction in a grand Platonizing manner with its emphasis on grand structures, totalities, wholes and parts, Vollenhoven is more taken, in an Aristotelian manner, with individual things in the foundational direction of time.

At the same time, in counterpoint to his emphasis on the dynamic transcendental reference of the creation to the Origin, Dooyeweerd’s cosmology has a more “structural” bent: there is a fixed universal order to the creation that is continually being realized in diverse ways. Likewise, in counterpoint to his beginning with individual things, structures and distinctions between them, Vollenhoven shows a predilection for a “genetic” cosmology with little fixed structure and a more dynamic ever-changing normativity. Let us together look at a number of differences in terms of the diverging-takes.

1. *Being*

Both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven are intent, as mentioned above, to avoid talking of both God and humans in terms of *Being*. But they work out their common conviction in differing ways. Dooyeweerd talks of the “being” of God and describes “meaning” as the “being” of the creation. In contrast, for Vollenhoven, only the cosmos has “beings”, and God is beyond being.

Since Vollenhoven has geneticistic sympathies, talking of creaturely “beings” is not to come dangerously close to holding a substance-theory in which things exist in themselves (as it would for structuralist Dooyeweerd). Further, since, for a genetic thinker creaturely being is always on the move, dynamic, changing, Vollenhoven does not need to say that the structured temporal cosmos is restless. In fact, he doesn’t like to use that language because talk of the restlessness of creation (so I intuit) can easily and misleadingly be read as a conflation of a good and a fallen creation.

2. *Place of the Law*

In an effort to develop a different way of conceptualizing the relation of God and creation, both Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd emphasize the Law. For Vollenhoven God puts the law to the cosmos. For Dooyeweerd there is a law-side to the cosmos. However, Vollenhoven recognizes lawful regularities in the cosmos and Dooyeweerd talks of positivized laws. Moreover, Dooyeweerd also talks of a “central law” which is beyond cosmic structural law.

3. *Heart and Supra-temporality*

It is in regard to the notion of supra-temporality that the differences between Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd are perhaps most acute. But even here, I don't think we should overplay the difference. For both Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd the “hearted-ness” of being human is central. Both confess that out of the heart are the issues of life. For Vollenhoven, the heart is the temporal pre-functional concentration-point of human existence reaching out to God. For Dooyeweerd, the heart needs to be supra-temporal (but not super-temporal, although NC II, 472: “the transcendent super-temporal I-ness or selfhood”) to capture its concentric directedness to God.

Since the issue of supra-temporality is perhaps the basic conceptual difference, and since Glenn Friesen has recently argued that for Dooyeweerd the idea of the surpratemporal heart is “the key of knowledge,” I think it important that we stay with this issue for a little while. At the same time, I want immediately to own that my predilections on this point are clearly Vollenhovian. Dooyeweerd talks of “that which is or happens beyond the limits of cosmic time,” in what he terms the “supra-temporal central sphere of human existence” (NC I, 33). He maintains that the fullness of meaning “is not actually given and cannot be actually given in time, though all temporal meaning refers beyond itself to its supra-temporal fulfillment” (NC I, 106). In my understanding the problem is not that Dooyeweerd emphasizes the transcendental character of reality in terms of which everything in time refers to that which is beyond time. That for me is the mysterious nature of being creaturely. The whole creation in all its parts and ways is charged by/with its connection with God: life, including the life of trees, stars, and animals, is religion. My problem is that Dooyeweerd creates an extra realm within created reality above time that, in effect, not only ends up in duplication, but sets up a dynamic which can easily lead to an under-evaluation of our empirical, embodied existence. Once posited, the supra-temporal realm has its own structure, with its own occurrences. “For *that which occurs* cannot be distinguished too sharply from the *historical aspect* of cosmic time.” In it the battle “between the *civitas Dei* (city of God) and the *civitas terrena* (earthly city) takes its *issue* in the history of the world”. (NC

I,32). Thus, for Dooyeweerd there is the “supra-temporal fulfillment”(NC I,106) of history. But what, I confess, can it mean that creaturely happening takes place outside of cosmic time, issuing into time, and receiving fulfillment from above? Did not the Word, in the fullness of time, become flesh and dwell among us, like us in every way, yet without sin? Dooyeweerd is not unaware of the difficulty and tries to account for it. “Adam’s fall into sin and Christ’s incarnation, although both concern the root of the entire cosmos [and thus would occur in the “central sphere of occurrence”], also signify historical turning-points of all-deciding importance in the history of the world” (NC II, 295). The give-away word for me is “also.” For me it is crucial that the fullness of meaning of Christ’s birth, life and death is precisely not to be sought above time, but as the fullness and fulfillment of time in time. A supra-temporal sphere of the heart seems unnecessary if time itself is transcendental in nature. At one point (NC I, 31) Dooyeweerd argues that the “temporal horizon of human existence . . . nowhere provides a point of contact for an idea of the absolute, unless it be related apriori to the supra-temporal.” The idea that there must be a point above finite time in creation for the infinite to make contact—a version of the Greek metaphysical like knows like—fails, let me suggest, to take with full seriousness the charged nature of creation: all things are of God, through God, and unto God. In other words, if creation is life-with-God, than God does not need a special sphere of supra-temporal occurrence to make contact. To live and breathe in our multi-moded comings and goings is to be in flow (or out of flow) with the Spirit.

A suggestion Laying out the differences between Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd in terms of their respective tendencies to be “genetic” or “structural” thinkers makes me wonder out loud if what has sometimes in our circles been referred to as left and right wing Dooyeweerdians is more adequately—and thus more helpfully— described as differences between “genetic” and “structural” thinkers. Whereas a structuralist requires a unity of essence to ground identity, a geneticist locates identity in an entity’s unfolding trajectory through time. Consequently a reformational structuralist has the intuition (fear?) that reformational geneticists are, shall we say, too “loosey-goosey,” while a reformational geneticist has the intuition (fear?) that reformational structuralists are, shall we say, too “rigid.” Could it be—it is certainly my hope—that progress can be made towards greater mutuality both in understanding and appreciation if we would begin to own, and discuss, our predilections, hopes and fears? Meanwhile, as we discuss, we can perhaps be further comforted by the irony that whereas Vollenhoven was a genetic thinker, he

personally had an obsession with rigid classification (which makes him rather boring reading), while Dooyweerd, although a structural thinker, personally had a wonderful flair for telling a grand story. Let the discussion begin.