

Reformational Philosophy after Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven

Lambert Zuidervaart, April 7, 2006

Let me begin my remarks by quoting from one of the essays that prompts our discussion today. J. Glenn Friesen concludes his article “Dooyeweerd versus Vollenhoven” as follows: “Reformational philosophy may choose to follow Dooyeweerd. Or it may follow Vollenhoven. But it cannot purport to follow both philosophers. It may of course decide to reject both and to strike out in some entirely new direction.”¹ I want to propose that these are bad options. Reformational philosophy should not follow Dooyeweerd. It also should not follow Vollenhoven. And if it were to “reject both” and “strike out in some entirely new direction,” it could no longer pretend to be reformational.

1. Critical Retrieval

I have two reasons to say “following” and “rejecting” are bad options. One has to do with the character of an intellectual tradition. The other has to do with the meaning of philosophical critique. On the first topic, I submit that living and lively intellectual traditions do not thrive on discipleship, or on repeating the master’s words, or on keeping the tradition pure from contamination. If “following” Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven only means accepting and spreading their doctrines, or restating their positions in more contemporary language, or defending their ideas from corruption, then following them, paradoxically, will kill their contributions. Jürgen Habermas’s comment about ethnic cultures applies to intellectual traditions as well: “Cultures survive only if they draw the strength to transform themselves from criticism and secession.”² Yet to transform through criticism is not to reject the founding figures and texts of a tradition and to head in an “entirely new direction” either. Rather it requires coming to terms with the generative challenges of one’s own tradition.

My second reason to refuse the choice between “following” and “rejecting” concerns the meaning of philosophical critique. Now there *is* a style of doing philosophy that simply repeats what the masters have said. Some critics of continental philosophy might accuse its worst practitioners of doing exactly this. Let me call it the sycophantic style. This style turns

1 J. Glenn Friesen, “Dooyeweerd versus Vollenhoven: The Religious Dialectic within Reformational Philosophy,” *Philosophia Reformata* 70 (2005): 102-32; quote from p. 132.

2 Jürgen Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, by Charles Taylor et al., ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 132.

the “big figures” into sacred gurus, and the covey of commentators into uncritical acolytes. Others might accuse the worst practitioners of analytic philosophy of just the opposite tendency: always on the attack, seldom accepting what other philosophers have said as truly worthwhile, and never letting on how much one has learned from those whom one attacks. Let me call this the idiopathic idiom. It turns every potential contribution into grist for the critic’s own logic-chopping mill. Like Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, I believe that both the sycophantic style and the idiopathic idiom are incompatible with genuine philosophical critique. Because genuine philosophical critique is central in coming to terms with one’s own philosophical tradition, neither uncritical acolytes nor logic-chopping millers are likely to address the generative challenges of reformational philosophy as they are found in Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.

Instead I recommend what I call a “critical retrieval” of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. This is the project of acknowledging valid objections and, in light of such objections, providing a redemptive critique of their philosophies. It is not enough, in my view, simply to defend Dooyeweerd or Vollenhoven against misinterpretations, to reject inadequate criticisms, and to promote the concerns and claims their critics neglect. One also needs to address legitimate criticisms of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven and to suggest viable alternatives. Otherwise the retrieval of their projects will not be a fully critical retrieval. Accordingly, reformational philosophy today should take up such criticisms. It should show where these are valid or invalid, and then offer alternatives that, while inspired by the first generation of reformational philosophy, also avoid its problems. Through such critical retrieval, we can propose new directions for reformational philosophy *after* Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. This philosophy will be “after” them in a triple sense: being indebted to them, it will “come after” them, but only by “going after” their loyal critics.

We are fortunate that Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven were their own best critics: best, not in the sense that they sparred successfully and frequently in public, but rather that their differences mattered and they knew that they mattered. Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven knew very well the contours of the land they surveyed and the significance of variations between the maps they drew. But they never lost sight of the fact that they were philosophical pioneers from a shared confessional tradition who could accomplish more in concert than in conflict. Because of this, one can find in their differences, as articulated in their own reticent words, the generative challenges of reformational philosophy as an intellectual tradition. Let me discuss one such challenge by considering how they themselves attempt a genuine philosophical critique.

2. Modes of Critique

The project of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven is breathtaking in its scope. They attempted nothing less than to

reexamine the entire tradition of Western philosophy and to develop a comprehensive alternative that resonates with the Good News of Jesus Christ. A central question for both of them is, “How should Christian scholarship position itself with respect to Western philosophical traditions?” They have somewhat different answers. In the early work of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven from the 1920s and 1930s, one finds an emphasis on antithetical critique. Later, especially in Dooyeweerd’s writings from the 1940s and 1950s, one finds this antithetical emphasis incorporated into a more dialogical model, in the form of a transcendental critique. Whereas antithetical critique positions Christian scholarship as distinct from, and significantly opposed to, much of Western philosophy, transcendental critique positions Christian scholarship as calling everyone’s attention to that which makes any scholarship possible.

Actually Vollenhoven’s approach can better be called (anti-)thetical critique, to highlight the fact that he wished to begin with certain theses, to be “thetical.” The most important theses derive from a Calvinist understanding of central themes in scripture. Hence Vollenhoven called for a “scriptural philosophy,” for a philosophy that is in line with scripture. Such a philosophy will work out the philosophical implications of the most fundamental insights that come from God’s “word revelation” and are mediated by a specific (Calvinist) faith tradition.³ At the same time, however, scriptural philosophy must always distinguish itself from traditions of thought in which such insights are lacking. Such distinguishing can be called “(anti-)thetical.” It is still *thetical*, since its own fundamental insights or theses shape its interaction with other traditions, but it is also *anti*-thetical, because the primary concern motivating such interaction is to distinguish one’s own position and tradition from other positions in other traditions.

It is not hard to see how the specter of relativism could haunt (anti-)thetical critique. Correlatively, however, such critique has unusual strengths as a mode of articulating the philosophical implications of a specific tradition, whether it be a

3 In *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy* Vollenhoven emphasizes four principles that are central to Calvin’s thought and a key to doing scriptural philosophy. [See the excerpts in *Dirk H. T. Vollenhoven Reader*, introductions and translations by John H. Kok (manuscript, 1998), pp. 21-65; hereafter cited as VR.] The first is a formal principle, namely, that Holy Scripture is the word of God and has authority for our philosophical work (VR 28). The other three principles are substantial points derived from Calvin’s understanding of what Scripture says (VR 29): (1) God is directly sovereign over all that God has created. (2) Religion is a covenant that God’s word revelation makes known to humankind. (3) After the fall, humans are totally depraved, are subject to death, and are recipients of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Although not identical with Dooyeweerd’s “biblical ground motive” of creation, fall, and redemption, these substantial points clearly overlap Dooyeweerd’s formulation.

faith tradition or some other cultural or social tradition. Moreover, for Vollenhoven the point of establishing differences between the basic themes of “scriptural” and “unscriptural” philosophy is so that Calvinism can *contribute* to the *reformation* of philosophy itself.

Before turning to Dooyeweerd’s approach, let me highlight one other thing. Vollenhoven locates the key to a philosophy’s being unscriptural in its “basic themes”—i.e., in what it actually says as a philosophy, not in its motivation, or the philosopher’s life, or what effects the philosophy may have. Examples of such “basic themes” in Vollenhoven’s historiography are subjectivism and objectivism or nominalism and realism. In other words, Vollenhoven does not confuse the question of content with the question of intent. Nor does he reduce questions of validity to questions of genesis and effects. So too, his objections to synthesis aim at the basic themes of a philosopher’s work, not simply at the philosopher’s presuppositions or intellectual tradition or associations with others.

Where Vollenhoven emphasizes “basic themes,” Dooyeweerd emphasizes “ground motives.” A “ground motive” is a spiritual dynamic that pervades a society and culture and comes to philosophical expression in certain “ground ideas” or “transcendental ideas.” A central point of Dooyeweerd’s “transcendental critique” is that every philosophy is unavoidably in the grip of one ground motive or another. Moreover, only philosophy in the grip of the “biblical ground motive” can be radically Christian.

By a “transcendental critique of theoretical thought” Dooyeweerd means “a genuinely critical (i.e., unsparing of any single so-called philosophical axiom) inquiry into the universally valid conditions which make the theoretical attitude possible and which *are demanded by the intrinsic structure of the latter.*”⁴ Dooyeweerd distinguishes a transcendental critique from either a philosophically “immanent” or a theologically “transcendent” critique. An “immanent critique” would stay within someone else’s philosophical position and ask whether it is consistent with its own claims. A “theologically transcendent critique” would evaluate someone else’s philosophical position from outside, asking how that position measures up to what the Bible or church teaching says. By contrast, a transcendental critique examines those “universally valid conditions” which make possible any and every philosophical position, including one’s own position. Without a transcendental critique, a transcendent critique would be “dogmatic ... and ... of no value to philosophy,” Dooyeweerd says (CP 4). It is not clear to me whether he would regard Vollenhoven’s notion of “scriptural philosophy” as tending toward

4 Herman Dooyeweerd, “Christian Philosophy: An Exploration” (1956), in *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd, Series B, Vol. 1 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 1-37; quotation from p. 4. Hereafter cited internally as CP.

transcendent critique and perhaps in danger of becoming “dogmatic.”

In any case, Dooyeweerd’s leading question is whether autonomy is required in order for philosophy to be genuine. His answer is no, autonomy is not required. In fact, autonomy is impossible, and when attempted it undermines genuine philosophy. That is why he talks about the “pretended autonomy” of theoretical thought. But what does “pretended autonomy” mean? *In the Twilight of Western Thought*⁵ formulates this in various ways: as the claim that genuine philosophy and science must be independent of “all religious presuppositions” (IT 3); or that “the ultimate starting-point of philosophy should be found in this thought itself” (IT 4); or that genuine philosophy “lacks any presupposition of a supra-rational character” (IT 5); or that autonomy “is a necessary condition of any true philosophy” (IT 6). (What the claim comes to depends somewhat on which philosophical position is making the claim.) To call the claimed autonomy “pretended” means that, although independence from any religious or supra-rational *presupposita* may be avowed, such independence is not genuine, and the claim made for such independence is not supported by truly critical argumentation.

Elsewhere I have called attention to problems in Dooyeweerd’s transcendental critique.⁶ Yet it is important to see the genius in Dooyeweerd’s approach. His attempt to position the reformational contribution to Western philosophy does not appeal to the content of a certain confessional tradition. Rather it appeals to the structural conditions that make possible any philosophy. Although he is not entirely consistent in how he makes this appeal, and although some of his own successors have challenged it, one has to admire his playing the game the way other philosophers play it, and his challenging them to play at a higher level than they have heretofore.

What is missing in Dooyeweerd’s approach, however, and not sufficiently emphasized in Vollenhoven’s notion of “scriptural philosophy” either, is a proper appreciation of the role of immanent criticism. Without immanent criticism, it becomes too easy to dismiss another philosopher’s position without really understanding the issues at stake or the philosopher’s actual contribution. That is why, in my own work, I have emphasized immanent criticism “with metacritical intent.”⁷

5 Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*, The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd, Series B, Vol. 4 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999). Cited internally as IT.

6 Lambert Zuidervaart, “The Great Turning Point: Religion and Rationality in Dooyeweerd’s Transcendental Critique,” *Faith and Philosophy* 21 (January 2004): 65-89.

7 Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,

So we return to where this brief talk began. I claimed earlier that neither following nor rejecting Dooyeweerd or Vollenhoven is a good option. Now I can say that, given their own differences about modes of critique, and the underlying unity of their commitment to an inner reformation of Western philosophy, the best way to continue what Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven began is to engage in a critical retrieval of their own philosophies, and of the philosophies they would criticize. Neither an (anti-)thetical nor a transcendental stance will suffice. Unfortunately, however, to show why this is so would require the sort of detailed immanent criticism for which my time today also does not suffice.

1991), p. xx. See also my more recent book *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 11-14.