

UNDERSTANDING DOOYEWEERD BETTER THAN HE
UNDERSTOOD HIMSELF

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Ernst Cassirer (1946, 140) once observed: “In the history of ideas it is by no means unusual that a thinker develops a theory, the full purport and significance of which is still hidden to himself.” Cassirer was echoing no less a personage than Kant himself. Kant had written long before: “... it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in ordinary conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him better than he has understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention.”² May we take our lead from Kant here? May we understand Dooyeweerd better than he understood himself, even to the point of attributing to him a view or views that would appear to be “in opposition to his own intention”?

It may sound a little strange, but something of this sort seems to have been underway among Dooyeweerd interpreters for quite some time. Many have started from the assumption that Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven held to essentially the same position. Now, since there were some widely acknowledged differences, something would have to yield, and what often yielded was Dooyeweerd. It was thought that in essence Dooyeweerd was saying what Vollenhoven had also been saying. One could therefore allow for an error in Dooyeweerd here or there — perhaps even a “contradiction” — while continuing to hold him in high esteem.

Now, this business of “*Besserverstehen*” (understanding a past philosophical author better than he has understood himself) is not without pitfalls. Emil Fackenheim (1982, 64) has observed: “The claim to understand an author better than he understands himself is always dubious, may serve as an excuse for careless reading, and was vulgarized in the extreme by nineteenth-century historicism.” A question well worth exploring is whether Fackenheim’s warning is applicable to Dooyeweerd studies. Have members of the reformational tradition made things too easy for themselves by applying “*Besserverstehen*” to Dooyeweerd?

Before I try to answer this question, I should indicate that I do not condemn or dismiss “*Besserverstehen*” in all circumstances. I would argue methodologically that one has a choice, namely, between (i) declaring that not all written statements made by the thinker being studied can be taken at face value because of such-and-such an error that has been detected in his writings, in which case one would use him mainly as a base or foundation for future philosophical work;

¹ This article was submitted 21 June 2008. The author, professor of philosophy at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada, died 4 July 2008.

² *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith translation, A314/B370.

and (ii) declaring that the error is inconsequential and does not take away from the essence of the philosophical position of the thinker being studied.

How would one choose between these two possibilities? It seems to me that much would depend — in the case of a philosopher who was deceased — on the conclusions one had reached concerning the state of the text, that is to say, the degree of precision and purity to be found in the major writings of the philosopher in question. Can he be trusted to have given — always and in all contexts — a pure and fair expression of what he really thought and meant to say? Or was he, to some significant degree, careless in composition?

José Ferrater Mora (1912-91), commenting on the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), has made a valuable observation that sharpens this issue for us:

Many philosophers are not reliable expositors of their own thought; critics and teachers must mediate between them and those who try to understand what the philosopher intended to say. Some philosophers, on the other hand, are their own best expositors. This must not be construed as a reflection on the merits or defects of philosophers; both groups include major philosophers as well as minor ones. Ortega was a philosopher who could present his thoughts better than anyone else. It is still possible, not to say desirable, to talk about Ortega's philosophy: summarize, scrutinize, and criticize it. But it is difficult to present it to a reader, and in particular to the "cultivated general reader," in a better garb than the one the author himself gave it. ("Introduction" to Ortega's book *The Modern Theme*, New York: Harper, 1961.)

If there is truth to this observation, it makes sense to ask: how do things stand with Dooyeweerd? Can we trust his own exposition of his thought? Or are his writings in need of textual correction, to the point that we might begin to distinguish between the pure philosophy of Dooyeweerd and the imperfect attempts to express that philosophy in writings which we attribute to him? (I dare use the word "attribute" here because the clumsy efforts at translation that have sometimes been made leave us wondering to what extent certain texts with Dooyeweerd's name on them can be judged to be genuine Dooyeweerd.)

Over the years of my association with the translation project undertaken by the Dooyeweerd Centre at Redeemer University College, I have been acquainted with many instances that indicate that Dooyeweerd was far from scrupulous when it came to finalizing a manuscript to the point that it could be passed on for typesetting. In particular, stories abound about the strange procedures and circumstances that led to the final English text of the *New Critique*. Dooyeweerd might have said to himself that it would be best if he put this material (that is, the second edition of his magnum opus) in the very best shape he could manage in his primary language (Dutch) and leave it to others to produce versions in English and perhaps other languages as well, but instead he dared to wade into the translation process himself, thus incurring some of the blame for the sad state of the English text which has no Dutch text behind it in many key sections. (Not everything in the *New Critique* is a translation of material that appeared in the Dutch first edition.) In addition, I would point to Paul Otto's (2005) observations concerning the various versions of *In the Twilight of Western*

Thought. But the main text that ought to concern us in this regard is Dooyeweerd's magnum opus.

The difficulties begin with the title. It was published in Dutch as *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (The Philosophy of the Law-Idea). Two decades later a translation of sorts appeared, but with a different title: *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. By that time Dooyeweerd was no longer so enamoured of the phrase "philosophy of the law-idea" (his preferred translation of the Dutch phrase was "philosophy of the cosmonomic idea").³ This fact should already give us pause.

Had Dooyeweerd's thought "developed" in the intervening years? Yes, quite distinctly, in the minds of many who have studied him intensively. But there is no general agreement on stages in his development, or on the issues that served as turning points, or on the terminological shifts that might provide clues to such changes. And Dooyeweerd himself was of little help in this regard. It seemed that he wanted to salvage his past writings, so to speak, by avoiding the suggestion that they were not worth studying since he had subsequently changed his mind on this or that major point. He did not provide us with an intellectual autobiography in which these matters could have been straightened out. His observations about these matters in later years were few and far between.

Now, all of this is not unusual. Earlier in my life I made an intensive study of the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and concluded that he can only be understood properly if one assigns his writings to one of three periods and recognizes that he occupied three distinct positions in succession (Plantinga 1980). Why did Dilthey not admit this openly? We can only speculate. A division into two or more periods as essential for understanding a particular text is often the work of a commentator or a historian of philosophy. The separation between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) is a remarkable exception to this trend: no one need languish in the dark when it comes to the two major periods in Wittgenstein's philosophical career. There was even an absence from professional philosophical life to mark the transition from the one period to the other.

Now, back to the term "philosophy of the law-idea." René van Woudenberg (2003) notes that Vollenhoven never used the term "philosophy of the law-idea" to refer to his own philosophy. Yet the term is used routinely to refer to the alleged common position in philosophy said to have been developed jointly by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. Now, I maintain that there was no common position, but I will let this matter go for the moment. What needs to be demonstrated is that many members of the reformational movement have claimed that there was — and is — while some have used the phrase "philosophy of the law-idea" to name that common position.

Albert M. Wolters places Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven "on a par" with one another and also with H.G. Stoker. In a survey of a series of Free University professors in various departments and disciplines who concerned themselves with a Christian approach to philosophy, he eventually gets to Vollenhoven. Wolters (1983, 119) then observes: "Vollenhoven's brother-in-law, Herman

³ See *New Critique*, Volume 1, p. 93.

Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), was professor of jurisprudence at the Free University from 1926 to 1965, and worked together with Vollenhoven on the development of a Calvinistic philosophy.” As for the “common philosophy” claim, Wolters writes: “During the decade of the 1920s, the two elaborated together the basic outline of their common philosophy, widely known as the ‘philosophy of the cosmonomic idea’”⁴

Karel Kuypers (1931, 3), a student of Vollenhoven, declared in his doctoral dissertation that he was working with a “wetenschapstheorie” (theory regarding science) which “... my promotor, Prof. Dr. D.H.Th. Vollenhoven has developed, in collaboration with Prof. Dr. H. Dooyeweerd, as the basis and point of departure for his philosophical thinking” About twenty years later we have Hendrik van Riessen (1952, 73) speaking of “the Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven school of philosophy.” When we move ahead a few more decades and consult Egbert Schuurman’s (1980, 3, 370) dissertation, we find him talking about the “Amsterdam school of reformational philosophy, which has also been called the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea.” He then adds by way of explanation: “I refer here to a school of philosophy developed at the Free University in Amsterdam in the 1930s by Professors D.H.Th. Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd.” In the second edition of Al Wolters’ book *Creation Regained* (2005, 119) we read that the book was intended as an introduction to the philosophy of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. Now, reformationals in the know would be aware that Wolters is a thinker standing on the *Vollenhoven* side of the Dooyeweerd/Vollenhoven divide; even so, when Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey (1999, 295, 516) make favorable mention of *Creation Regained*, they tell us in a footnote: “The following discussion relies heavily on Wolters, who in turn popularized Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd.” It seems there is hardly a distinction to be made between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, just as though their ideas cannot be disentangled. Sometimes the name “philosophy of the law-idea” (or cosmonomic idea) even refers specifically to Vollenhoven. Consider how F.H. von Meyenfeldt (1951, 52, 54, 62) uses this phrase to name Vollenhoven’s philosophy.

I turn now from textual matters to questions of philosophical personnel. Important to assessing the relationship between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven is the fact that Vollenhoven enjoyed the lion’s share of the attention of the philosophy students at the Free University. Dooyeweerd, we must remember, taught in the faculty of law, whereas Vollenhoven was the mainstay of what North Americans would consider the philosophy department. Therefore, when we survey the ranks of the reformational philosophers, we see that a great many of them were trained intensively by Vollenhoven himself or by a student of Vollenhoven. Remarkably, these philosophers seem always to manifest great respect for the thought and writings of Dooyeweerd. But to what extent are

⁴ See his introductory comments to his revised translation of Jan Veenhof’s “Nature and Grace in Bavinck”, which corresponds to a section of Veenhof’s book *Revelatie en Inspiratie*. The translation was published in *Pro Rege*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (June 2006), pp. 11ff, and is also available from Dordt College Press as a separate monograph.

they tempted to interpret Dooyeweerd in terms of categories and definitions derived from Vollenhoven? Therein lies the rub.

In the North American setting, H. Evan Runner (1916-2002) played a key role in these developments through his influential Groen Club at Calvin College and his long teaching career (1951-1981) in Calvin College's philosophy department. What was Runner's approach to these matters? His colleague Richard Mouw (1989, 102) informs us:

... Professor Evan Runner of Calvin College ... chose not to emphasize the philosophical differences that existed between "reformational" thinkers in the Netherlands. While philosophers of the Free University were openly discussing important disagreements between Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, Mekkes, Van Riessen, and the like, Runner stressed to students the consensus elements among these thinkers, downplaying differences and nuances.

During my student days as a philosophy major under Runner, I and a number of my classmates assumed and believed that there was a great deal of Dooyeweerd in what Runner was teaching us: he even had us reading 150 pages of the *New Critique* while we were just getting our feet wet in philosophy! In more recent years I have looked back at my extensive notes taken in his introduction to philosophy course, and it is now clear that Vollenhoven had much more to do with what Runner taught than I realized at the time. I have posted my notes on Runner's course so that others can compare and draw their own conclusions.⁵

The only major reformational figure in North America who was trained directly under Dooyeweerd rather than Vollenhoven was Bernard Zylstra (1934-86), who was called away from this earth when it seemed to us that he was still badly needed here, his work unfinished. He has not been able to participate in the more recent Dooyeweerd *versus* Vollenhoven discussions. In the light of all these facts, then, it should not surprise us that an informal *Besserverstehen* tradition has sprung up, in which Dooyeweerd is read through lenses ground out of Vollenhovian quartz.

The purpose of this special issue of *Philosophia Reformata* is not to consider whether a *Besserverstehen* approach to Dooyeweerd can claim any validity (I maintain that it can) but to ask whether there is any merit to the approach to Dooyeweerd taken recently by J. Glenn Friesen, who has composed his "95 theses" (printed elsewhere in this issue) and who has placed before us the claim that Dooyeweerd's thinking does not only resemble that of Franz von Baader (1765-1841) but stands in a line of influence in which Baader is a major link. Friesen's approach is far removed from the *Besserverstehen* mentality; rather, it is so geared to what Dooyeweerd actually wrote that it is reminiscent of what some people call "prooftexting." Yet "prooftexting" is not quite the term to be used here; it would be better to emphasize that Friesen is a strong believer in the *unity* of Dooyeweerd's thought.

⁵ See www.plantinga.ca.

Friesen sees no reason to suppose that Dooyeweerd fell into this or that error in developing his philosophical ideas and writing them out. I will brand this conviction (no philosophical errors need be grudgingly accepted when one is studying Dooyeweerd) as point 1 in my reduced version of the Friesen thesis which I am presenting in this essay. Point 2 is that it would be helpful — even if only on methodological grounds — to dismiss Vollenhoven from one’s mind while reading Dooyeweerd. What would someone who knew nothing whatsoever about Vollenhoven and his talented philosophical offspring make of what Dooyeweerd had written? Friesen’s point 3, as I understand him, is that Dooyeweerd can well be understood as standing in a tradition sometimes called “Christian theosophy.” The writers in this tradition were also known to Kuyper. Recent research has brought more of these connections to our awareness. Friesen would be pleased to see us directing our attention to the works mentioned in the note that follows here.⁶

An obvious objection to point 3 is that Dooyeweerd himself gave us no encouragement in terms of reading him along such lines. Here I can speak from experience. In my one and only personal encounter with Dooyeweerd, I asked him whether he had been influenced by existentialism, phenomenology and neo-Kantianism. He answered very defensively and stressed the Biblical (I don’t believe he meant this term in the usual sense) origins of his philosophy. Had I been prescient enough to ask him about Baader and Christian theosophy and such matters, I believe I would have gotten a similar response. Clearly, Dooyeweerd was very guarded and private about such matters. Why?

The only hypothesis that makes much sense to me is that Dooyeweerd had been very badly scarred by the battles of the 1930s. Valentijn Hepp (1879-1950), his theological colleague at the Free University, had become very suspicious of Dooyeweerd and had brought charges against him to the Curatorium (the academic governing body of the university). Vollenhoven was also accused. This chapter in Dooyeweerd’s history is not well known; only recently has the documentary material of the case been made public and rendered into English (it is accessible on Friesen’s website). The climate of opposition and suspicion in the 1930s eventually extended into the church as well (the dominant denomination supporting the Free University was the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, to which both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven adhered). Eventually the Synod of this denomination established a committee to look into the allegedly suspect teachings of Vollenhoven, Klaas Schilder (1890-1952), Antheunis

⁶ 1. My research shows that Kuyper himself acknowledged Baader’s importance. This is found in my article “The Mystical Dooyeweerd Once Again: Kuyper’s Use of Franz von Baader,” *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003).

2. Secondly, the recent doctoral dissertation by Lieuwe Mietus shows how J.H. Gunning, Jr. introduced Kuyper to Baader’s ideas. See Lieuwe Mietus, *Gunning en de theosofie: Een onderzoek naar de receptie van de christelijke theosofie in het werk van J.H. Gunning Jr. van 1863-1876*, (Gorinchem: Narratio, 2006). I reviewed this book in *Philosophia Reformata* 72 (2007), 86-91. I believe that the idea of the supratemporal heart is directly related to this tradition.

3. Third, Dooyeweerd himself made handwritten notations referencing Baader in his books. I refer to this, and also show how Baader influenced Dooyeweerd through Othmar Spann, in my article “Dooyeweerd, Spann, and the Philosophy of Totality,” *Philosophia Reformata* 70 (2005), 2-22.

Janse (1890-1960), and others. Hepp contributed to the furor through a series of brochures.⁷ The church inquiry spilled over to the period of Nazi occupation during World War II and eventuated in the 1944 ouster of Schilder and many others from the denomination. Dooyeweerd himself was not in the line of fire at that point. Together with Vollenhoven, he did what he could to defend Schilder — not so much out of theological agreement as out of concern that proper procedure and the church order were being violated. In short, Schilder was being treated unfairly. All of these events left Dooyeweerd feeling vulnerable.

Within another decade or so, the climate at the Free University had become much more tolerant. Hepp made way for G. C. Berkouwer (1903-96), but Dooyeweerd remained cautious — perhaps even fearful. (It should be remembered that the seemingly broad-minded Berkouwer had presided over the Synod that expelled Schilder.) In an interview not long before his death, Dooyeweerd made known his opinion of theologians in general:

... I have learned something from Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* [*De lof der Zotheid*]. Of course you know it too, it is a fantastic little book! It says that you should really not carry on any polemics with theologians, and for this Erasmus uses a very suggestive image. There was in Greek mythology a lake somewhere, which gave off a terrible smell when you began to stir around in it. Now, he refers to nothing other than the name of that lake, and he says, "It is not desirable to stir up this lake."⁸

As indicated earlier, Dooyeweerd never wrote an autobiographical piece in which he set matters of this sort to right. In the 1960s he did allow his differences with Vollenhoven to come more into the open. But even then he remained restrained. We need to pay attention especially to what he did *not* say when given opportunity to comment on the work of Vollenhoven and the latter's possible contribution to Dooyeweerd's thought.

He had a fine opportunity to tell the world how much Vollenhoven had contributed to the development of what is called the philosophy of the law-idea (or cosmomic idea) when he wrote the Introduction to the Vollenhoven Festschrift (Dooyeweerd 1973). In this piece he twice praised Vollenhoven for his "able" and "outstanding" work as chairman of this and that. About Vollenhoven's contribution to the philosophy that is associated with both their names he had little to say. Instead he reviewed certain dimensions of what he called "the philosophy of the cosmomic idea." At this point a question arises: when Dooyeweerd used this phrase in an essay intended to honor Vollenhoven, did he have in mind the thought of Vollenhoven as inextricably intertwined with his own philosophical ideas? A careful study of pages 11 through 13 of this

⁷ Hepp published a series of four brochures entitled together *Dreigende Deformatie*, which we might translate as "Threatening Deformation" or perhaps "Deformation on the Horizon." In these curious brochures he did not name the thinkers he was criticizing, but it is clear from his quotations that he had Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven in mind. Another of his targets was Klaas Schilder.

⁸ The interview was published in *Acht civilisten in burger*, ed. J.M. van Dunné, P. Boeles and A.J. Heerma van Voss (Zwolle: W.E.J. Tjeenk Willink, 1977), p. 56; I have quoted from Glenn Friesen's English translation at www.members.shaw.ca/hermandooyeweerd.

Introduction makes it clear that he did not: at one point he referred to what Vollenhoven wrote in one of his books and contrasted it with “the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea.” Obviously he did not believe that this term should be applied to the thought of both of them taken together. The key sentence begins as follows: “Although these groundmotives were approached and delineated [by Vollenhoven in his book *Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte*] in a manner differing from that of the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea in its transcendental critique of theoretical thought”

In his Foreword to the first volume of the *New Critique*, Dooyeweerd had also passed up an opportunity to acknowledge how much Vollenhoven had contributed to the new philosophy. He dealt with the matter in a single sentence in which he communicated two facts: first, that Vollenhoven came to his side, and second, that Vollenhoven’s name came to be joined with his (Dooyeweerd’s). This sentence, which must be considered in terms of what it does *not* say, reads as follows: “I am also very thankful that from the outset I found at my side my colleague Dr. VOLLENHOVEN, professor of Philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, whose name has been inseparably joined to my own.” Indeed, their names were joined — but justly so?

Much is made of the alleged collaboration between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven — then good friends and also brothers-in-law — Vollenhoven was married to Dooyeweerd’s sister — before they both became Free University professors. Evan Runner told his students at Calvin College that Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven were essentially of one mind — indeed, that they had created the philosophy of the law-idea as a joint project. He wrote: “The Philosophy of the law idea is, in its specific details, the product of decades of the most heart-searching reflection on the part of two men”⁹ He also passed on the familiar story about how the two men worked out the outlines of the new philosophy before their appointment as professors at the Free University (they were both appointed in 1926). He wrote:

When, in May 1921, Vollenhoven returned from his studies in Leipzig, and received a call to a pastorate in the Hague, where the Kuyper Foundation was located, the two men had much opportunity to talk together, particularly in the spring of 1922. It was at this time that the first outlines of the subsequent *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*, the name that was given to Dooyeweerd’s philosophical work, began to take shape in the minds of both men.”¹⁰

Many years after Runner wrote these words, Dooyeweerd offered us a somewhat different account of what went on in those days. We find it in an interview he gave about two years before his death. He declared:

I lived in The Hague, and in summer when the weather was good, I would often take a walk in the evening among the dunes. During one such walk in

⁹ In his review of Dooyeweerd’s *Transcendental Problems*, forthcoming in the collection of shorter writings by Runner that is to be published by Paideia Press.

¹⁰ In his article on Dooyeweerd, written just after his death in 1977 and published in *The Banner* in 1977 and available online at www.isi.salford.ac.uk/dooy/ext/runner.on.dooy.html.

the dunes, I obtained the inspiration that the various ways that we experience, which are related to various aspects of reality, are modal in character and that there must exist a structure of the modal aspects in which their mutual coherence is reflected. The discovery of what I have called “the modal aspects of our horizon of experience” was my starting point¹¹

The fact that Vollenhoven suffered some sort of breakdown during this period and was not available for discussion for many months should also be borne in mind.

As I come to the end of these reflections, I must address the central question: is there some plausibility in the Friesen thesis? Does it require our careful attention? Should further research be undertaken to test its main claims? To each of these questions I would answer yes.

My personal efforts over several decades to make use of Dooyeweerd in my own teaching of philosophy have been hampered by my long-standing assumption that Dooyeweerd’s thinking was essentially in line with that of Vollenhoven. I have surrendered that assumption in more recent years, mainly because of the influence of Friesen’s writings. But I have not thereby come to reject the *Besserverstehen* approach altogether; as I indicated above, I believe it can enjoy legitimacy.

The choice between the two approaches is complicated by the fact of the acrimony that exists between Friesen, as the proponent of one approach, and D. F. M. Strauss, the chief proponent of the *Besserverstehen* approach. These two men, both enthusiastic students of Dooyeweerd, have never met. As a friend of both, I have talked and corresponded with each one about the rift with the other but have not managed to get them into actual conversation or a personal meeting. (It should be noted that Strauss lives in South Africa, and Friesen in western Canada). As I contemplate the possible road ahead, I believe such a meeting, grounded in mutual respect, is essential to advancing the cause of Dooyeweerd studies in the years to come.

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¹¹ See the interview mentioned in footnote 6. It is significant that Dooyeweerd made no mention of Vollenhoven here or anywhere else in this interview.

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