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Zuidervaart, Lambert. "Dooyeweerd's Conception of Truth: Exposition and Critique." In *Philosophia Reformata* 73 (2008): 170-189.

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August 20th, 2014.

DOOYEWEERD'S CONCEPTION OF TRUTH:  
EXPOSITION AND CRITIQUE

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A transformed idea of truth is central to the project of reformational philosophy. This essay lays groundwork for such an idea by proposing a critical retrieval of Herman Dooyeweerd's conception of truth. First it summarizes relevant passages in Dooyeweerd's *New Critique*. Then it demonstrates several problems in his conception: he misconstrues religious truth, misconceives its relation to theoretical truth, and overlooks central questions of epistemology and truth theory. By addressing these problems, reformational philosophers can find new ways to think about truth that retain the holism, normativity, and radicalness of Dooyeweerd's conception.

[T]he decisive blow against the idea of religiously neutral philosophy must be delivered on the field of the problem of truth... The postulate of neutrality always stands and falls with an idea of truth that takes theoretical truth to be self-sufficient.

Herman Dooyeweerd<sup>1</sup>

A transformed idea of truth is central to the project of reformational philosophy. If, as Dooyeweerd claims, the postulate of religiously neutral philosophy depends upon the purported self-sufficiency of theoretical truth, then reformational attempts to free scholarship from "immanence philosophy," without returning to "Christian synthesis thinking," will stand and fall with an idea of truth that does *not* take theoretical truth to be self-sufficient. Surprisingly little progress has occurred on this idea beyond Dooyeweerd's own efforts and Vollenhoven's insistence on "the necessity of a Christian logic" (1932). Yet considerable headway has been made on the postulate of religious neutrality and the structure of theoretical thought. Now reformational philosophers need to rearticulate the insights into "truth" formulated by Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, and their generation, while building on subsequent contributions about religious neutrality and theoretical thought.

That is why "truth" has become my primary research project. Inspired over the years by Hendrik Hart's work on epistemology,<sup>2</sup> and by the genial insights of my *Doktorväter* Calvin Seerveld and Johan van der Hoeven, I have begun to reexamine the philosophical idea of truth. The project has two stages. The first stage, already published, concerns the contentious concept of "artistic truth"

<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, NC 2: 565, WW 2: 498; translation modified. In-text citations from volume 2 list the page numbers from NC and then from WW as follows: 565/498. Where NC renders an equivalent passage in WW, I occasionally use square brackets to indicate nuances in Dutch not caught in NC. I also silently modify translated passages, usually to render them in more idiomatic English.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Hart (1979), which addresses both ontological and epistemological issues pertaining to "truth."

(Zuidervaart 2004b). The second stage, on which I am currently at work, will present a comprehensive idea of truth, for which the concept of artistic truth provides one articulation. As I hope to show, this project takes seriously Dooyeweerd's conception of truth. The current essay summarizes his reflections on "truth" in *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* and explains where I agree and disagree.<sup>3</sup> A subsequent essay will indicate how my preliminary account of truth addresses problems in Dooyeweerd's reflections.

## 1. *Horizontal truth*

Opposing any attempt to isolate "theoretical truth" from the "religious fullness of meaning," Dooyeweerd insists on the "perspectival structure of truth." This means that any particular truth claim, and any type of truth, will derive its truth character from its location within layered and interlinked horizons of human experience and vis-à-vis "transcendent Truth."<sup>4</sup> After Nietzsche, however, subjectivistic connotations often accrue to the terms "perspective" and "perspectival." So I prefer the term "horizontal" and often substitute it for Dooyeweerd's "perspectival" (*perspectivisch*).

### 1.1 Synthesis and intuition

The notion of truth's horizontal character responds to what Dooyeweerd identifies as the central problem of theoretical knowledge, namely, to explain how the "intermodal synthesis of meaning" is possible.<sup>5</sup> His solution has two parts. First, he distinguishes and relates three types of epistemic coherence. Second, he claims that all three types are made possible by and informed by a radical unity that exceeds all three.

The three types of epistemic coherence are "meaning-systasis" (*zin-systase*), "logical synthesis" (*logische synthese*), and "intermodal meaning-synthesis" (*intermodale zin-synthesis*). *Meaning-systasis* is not a type of synthesis, strictly speaking. Rather it is the pre-synthetic coherence that makes possible the integral and full-bodied experience people ordinarily have when they are not engaged in theoretical inquiry. Dooyeweerd insists that ordinary meaning-systasis has "cosmological priority" over theoretical intermodal synthesis. In fact, anyone who ignores this priority "cannot even properly pose the [problem of knowledge]" (429/359). *Logical synthesis*, the second type of epistemic coherence, occurs within both ordinary experience and theoretical inquiry. It has to do

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<sup>3</sup> I provide a more extensive exposition and critique in the longer paper from which the two essays derive — see Zuidervaart (2008).

<sup>4</sup> My summary follows Dooyeweerd's use of the term "truth," capitalizing it when it refers to "absolute" or "transcendent" Truth, and not capitalizing in other uses, even when the text of NC does not consistently follow this pattern. When I present my own account of truth, however, I do not capitalize "truth" in any usages.

<sup>5</sup> NC often hyphenates the terms "inter-modal" and "transcendental-theoretical," but not always. I have dropped the hyphens, also in quoted passages where they occur. NC's hyphens in "law-side," "subject-side," "object-side," and "world-order" are retained in direct quotations. Otherwise these terms appear without hyphens.

with the logical unity we achieve among distinct concepts and judgments, always in relation to a logical object side.

Unlike meaning-systasis and logical synthesis, *intermodal* synthesis occurs only in theoretical contexts. Although it is made possible by both meaning-systasis and logical synthesis, it is made necessary by the peculiar structure of theoretical thought. For in theoretical inquiry we must abstract the various aspects of experience and reality from their systatic coherence and make explicit distinctions among them, such that the logical aspect virtually stands over against nonlogical aspects. In Dooyeweerd's terms, theoretical thought is uniquely characterized by this "Gegenstand relation" between logical and nonlogical aspects and by the problem of intermodal synthesis.

The cosmological priority of ordinary meaning-systasis and the operation of logical synthesis in all thought do not solve the central problem of theoretical knowledge. To secure intermodal synthesis requires deeper transmodal connections. Dooyeweerd finds these deeper connections in two locations: theoretical intuition and cosmological self-consciousness.

"Theoretical intuition" gives Dooyeweerd a way to connect theoretical abstraction with that from which abstraction is made. Theoretical thought typically abstracts from the continuity of cosmic time that pervades and sustains all experience. Yet the act of theoretical abstraction cannot itself occur in abstraction. Rather, our thought's logical function, which we oppose to nonlogical functions, remains "embedded in cosmic time itself." This embedding occurs through intuition. Intuition is the "temporal bottom layer" (*tijdelijke dieptelaag*) whereby logical thought remains "in continuous temporal contact with all the other modal functions [that] our selfhood can claim in time *as its own*" (473/408). Insofar as this connecting of logical and nonlogical functions specifically supports our achieving intermodal synthesis, it can be called "theoretical intuition." Theoretical intuition is the meaning-connecting and meaning-distinguishing insight at work in theoretical thought (479/414). As a precondition whose "continual temporal character" exceeds the grasp of theoretical thought, theoretical intuition "cannot be theoretically isolated" (473/408). Theorists cannot grasp it in a concept or category. They can only approximate it in a transcendental idea, through which theoretical thought, led by faith, rediscovers itself in cosmic time.

Theoretical intuition does not rest with making transmodal connections, however. It pushes toward cosmological self-consciousness and, in "intuitive reflection [*beinning*]" (479/414), refers beyond itself to the "religious root" of all knowing: "In the transcendental temporal direction of theoretical intuition, our selfhood becomes *cosmologically conscious of itself* in the temporal coherence and diversity of all its modal functions." The selfhood thereby becomes aware of itself as "the religious root" of all knowing, a root that "transcends" all of the self's "temporal acts and modal functions" (473/408).

## 1.2 Horizon of experience

This capacity for intuitive, reflective, and cosmological self-consciousness is crucial for freeing epistemology from the postulate of religious neutrality. Nevertheless, Dooyeweerd believes there is something right about Kant's epistemological notion of "the *a priori*," about its predecessor in Aristotle's metaphysical notion of "'the universal' as the ... 'ground of being' of individual things," and about Husserl and Scheler's phenomenological notion of essential possibilities. What such notions indicate, but misconstrue, is the multilayered "horizon of human experience" (543-7/475-8).

To account for this horizon, Dooyeweerd initially distinguishes between a "structural" and a "subjective" a priori complex or, more simply, between "the structural and the subjective a priori" (548/478). The structural a priori is a multilayered horizon of human experience that "has the character of a law." Cosmological rather than epistemological, it amounts to "the *a priori meaning-structure of our cosmos itself*" that "is given in the Divine order of ... creation [*goddelijke scheppingsorde*]" (548/478-9). The subjective a priori, by contrast, is epistemological rather than cosmological. It is "*the subjective a priori insight*" into the structural horizon of human experience. Necessarily "enclosed within" this structural horizon and "determined and delimited" by it, such insight, unlike the structural horizon itself, "can be *true* or *false* in an epistemological sense." Contra Kant and Husserl, however, subjective a priori insight "can never be the self-sufficient foundation [*grond*] of truth" (548/478).

When Dooyeweerd describes the various components to the horizon of human experience, he begins with the transcendent and necessary religious horizon as both a structural and a subjective a priori. It is *structural* in the sense that God's central law — to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves<sup>6</sup> — holds for all human experience and makes it possible. The religious a priori is *subjective* in the sense that, being "at bottom religiously determined," all human experience proceeds in one of two directions: either toward God or away from God and toward some creaturely substitute (552/482).

The other four components are the cosmic temporal, modal, synthetic, and plastic horizons. In their ontological scope, they can be depicted as successively smaller concentric circles, all of them encompassed by the transcendent religious horizon (560/491-2). But in their accessibility to ordinary experience, they could be portrayed in reverse sequence as a narrowing funnel, from the largest and plastic horizon, which lies near the surface of ordinary experience, to the religious horizon, which "belongs implicitly to human experience" and "is only made explicit in ... transcendental and in ... radical religious self-reflection" (NC 2: 550).

Whereas the religious horizon is *transcendent*, cosmic time is the *transcendental* horizon of human experience. All of human experience, like the cosmos to which it belongs, is held together in a "temporal meaning-coherence," in accordance with God's "order" for creation (*scheppingsordinantie*) (552/482). Such

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<sup>6</sup> Although Dooyeweerd does not specify the religious law's content in this context, other passages indicate that he has the call to love in mind. See especially NC 2: 140-63.

temporality becomes manifest in the other three horizons. The modal horizon is the coherence and diversity of modal aspects that provide an a priori structure for all human experience, both theoretical and pre-theoretical (553-4/483-4). The next horizon is specific to “theoretical experience.” It is the inter-modal meaning-synthesis whose structure governs all theoretical knowledge. Correlated with this structural a priori is theoretical insight into it. Properly acquired only via transcendental self-reflection, such insight is “the *subjective-fallible a priori* of all epistemology” (554/484-5). Finally there is the a priori plastic horizon of human experience — the entire latticework of “structural principles” that govern different types of entities, events, and societal relationships. The plastic horizon is a priori in the sense that “it *determines* the experience of the variable individuality of things and alone *makes it possible*” (559/490). It is with reference to this account of horizontal components that Dooyeweerd distinguishes between religious and theoretical truth.

### 1.3 Religious truth

Dooyeweerd’s account of experiential horizons implies that “religious” or “transcendent” or “absolute” Truth has priority over all other expressions of truth. It has priority, not as one *type* of truth that has greater importance than other types of truth, but rather as the very *fulness* of Truth without which no true knowledge of any sort would be possible. Well aware of the potential objection that his approach makes “epistemology end in a Christian sermon or in a dogmatic [assertion],” Dooyeweerd forthrightly embraces the scandal of the cross. We “cannot attain ... true self-knowledge [*waarachtige zelf-kennis*],” or true knowledge of the created world either, he says, “without true knowledge of God, which cannot be gained outside of the divine revelation in Christ” (562/494). Both scripture and John Calvin provide this insight, and both “synthesis philosophy” and “immanence philosophy” have lost sight of it. The inclusion and dependence of all true knowledge, including theoretical truth, vis-à-vis the true knowledge of God “is the only purely Biblical view [of knowledge] and the alpha and omega of any truly Christian epistemology” (561/492).

This means that Dooyeweerd’s own conception of truth relies very heavily on his account of religious Truth and of its relation to theoretical and pre-theoretical truth. His initial account (560-5/491-7) goes like this. The religious horizon encompasses all the others and radiates [*heen-straaft*] through all of human experience. Yet this horizon — the religious root of human existence — is not self-sufficient. Rather, it exists only in relation to its divine origin (560/492). All of human knowing (*kennisactiviteit*) is directed either toward “the absolute Truth” or toward “the spirit of falsehood,” thanks to “the transcendent religious subjective *a priori* of ... cosmic self-consciousness.” We know (*weten*) temporal reality in its relationship to the structure of human selfhood as a religious community (*religieuze verbands-structuur*), in which individuals participate (562/494).

Not only is such knowledge structurally possible but also, in knowledge about God (*in de kennis omtrent God*) from God's revelation, we actually and worshipfully (*aanbiddend*) understand "the absolute Truth," albeit in mortal weakness and limitation. Such knowledge is primarily "enstatic" rather than synthetic, pre-theoretical rather than theoretical, and thus in a strict sense not theological either. "[T]rue knowledge of God and of ourselves" concerns "the horizon of human experience." It rests upon a childlike and trusting acceptance, "with our full personality and with all our heart," of divine revelation in the "indissoluble unity" of both its "transcendent-religious" and its "cosmic-immanent" meaning. In order for such knowledge to occur, the entire person must be turned around (*omkeering*) in a life-giving (*levend-making*) restoration of the horizon of our experience. This restoration makes it possible again to understand reality "in the light of Truth" (562-3/494-5).

Dooyeweerd gives two reasons why a lengthy discussion of *religious* truth is important for his account of *theoretical* truth. On the one hand, it helps him address the failure of modern immanence philosophers, when opposing relativism and skepticism, to provide a sufficiently robust conception of truth. On the other hand, his idea of religious truth helps fill a gap in Christian philosophy, namely, the lack of its own "*Christian idea of truth*" — i.e., an idea "really ... fed by its Christian religious root" and not simply borrowed from either Greek metaphysics or modern immanence philosophy (565-6/498). Dooyeweerd, by contrast, calls for an "inner penetration" of Christian philosophy by Christian religion.

#### 1.4 Standing in the Truth

Although Dooyeweerd does not abandon Kant and Husserl's search for "the *a priori* structure [*zin-structuur*] of truth," then, he accords truth the same horizontal or perspectival character as the horizon of experience. Hence the only proper approach to truth will take its departure not from the "absolutized ... theoretical-synthetical horizon" but from the "transcendent, religious fulness of Truth." This point of departure "does not concern an abstract theoretical function of thought. It [concerns] our full *selfhood*, ... the *heart* of the whole of human existence, consequently also the [heart] of our theoretical thought" (571/504).

So the fulness of Truth is not first of all something to be understood but to stand within. It is to be lived and experienced by "standing in the Truth." For Dooyeweerd, to stand in the Truth is to participate (*deelhebben*) "in the fulness of meaning [*zin-volheid*] of the cosmos in Christ." To stand in the Truth is to take hold of (*aangrijpen*) God's revelation with all of one's heart, and thereby to break free from "the prejudices of immanence philosophy" concerning the horizon of human experience and no longer to overestimate the roles of theory and science in human life (564/496-7).

The "hearted" character of Truth, if I may call it that, is so crucial that Dooyeweerd devotes several paragraphs to showing how this emphasis both accords with scripture and aims to transform scientific inquiry from top to

bottom. The primary link with scripture lies in the notion of “standing in the Truth.” Derived from biblical interpretation, the phrase suggests the dependability, certainty, and trustworthiness that “truth” means in the Bible. The selfhood’s standing in the Truth, by whole-heartedly accepting God’s revelation, is the primary prerequisite for thought’s having a “truthful *a priori* attitude [*apriorische ware instelling*].” Such acceptance occurs through faith, as a complete confidence or trust (*vertrouwen*) in the dependability (*vastheid*) of God’s word. This does not rule out either the noetic effects of sin or the discovery of relatively true insights by non-Christian thinkers. Yet it does suggest that all “relative truths” can be true “only ... in the *fulness* of [Truth], revealed by God in Christ.” They become untrue when “absolutized into a ‘truth in itself.’” The challenge for Christian scholarship is to let this radical and holistic idea of truth “permeate scientific thought from root to crown,” rather than resting content with “an edifying confession of faith” that does not disturb “the immanent course of scientific investigation” (572/504-5).

### 1.5 Theoretical truth

Only after insisting on our whole-heartedly “standing in the Truth” does Dooyeweerd present two general ideas of theoretical truth and two more specific criteria. The two ideas correlate, more or less, with the temporal and the synthetic horizons of experience, and the two criteria with the modal and plastic horizons. All involve an accordance (*overeenstemming*) between the subject side and the law side of such horizons.<sup>7</sup> Dooyeweerd labels the two general ideas “transcendental truth” and “transcendental theoretical truth” (573/506). The more specific criteria pertain to transcendental theoretical truth (579-80/513-15).

In implied opposition to Aquinas, Dooyeweerd says that transcendental truth cannot be an “*adequatio intellectus et rei*.” Rather, we should define it as an accordance between “subjective *a priori* knowledge” and “*a priori* structural laws of human experience.” This knowledge is “enclosed [*omsloten*] by the temporal horizon” and is “expressed in *a priori* judgments.” So too, the laws of experience occur “within this temporal horizon,” in openness (*ontslotenheid*), on both law side and subject side, to “the light of the transcendent Truth in Christ” (573/506).<sup>8</sup> To arrive at transcendental truth, our subjective knowing (*kennisactiviteit*) must be in a “normative relation” with the “*a priori* structural laws” that obtain for it. Even this relation “is *not self-sufficient*,” however. It must be open to transcendent Truth. The philosopher’s heart must be gripped by divine Truth, which discloses (*ontsluiten*) and liberates the transcendental horizon of our experience (573-4/507-8).

<sup>7</sup> NC renders “overeenstemming” either as “accordance” or as “correspondence.” Dooyeweerd is not discussing the relation between proposition and fact that correspondence theories of truth emphasize but an alignment between subject side and law side. Hence I use “accordance” and not “correspondence” where WW uses the term “overeenstemming.”

<sup>8</sup> The entire definition of transcendental truth occurs in italics in Dooyeweerd’s text.

Whereas accordance between a priori knowledge and a priori structural laws defines transcendental truth in general, the accordance peculiar to “transcendental theoretical truth” occurs between “the subjective *a priori* meaning-synthesis” and “the modal structure [*zin-structuur*]” of the intended *Gegenstand*. The subjective synthesis becomes actual (*actueel*) in a priori “theoretical insight” and receives expression in a priori “theoretical judgments.” Moreover, the *Gegenstand* occurs within a universal (*abzijdig*) and temporal “intermodal coherence” that depends on Truth’s “transcendent fulness of meaning [*zinvolheid*]” (575/509).<sup>9</sup> This definition provides the criterion of transcendental theoretical truth at work in Dooyeweerd’s general modal theory. Each academic discipline must strive for an accordance between its meaning-synthesis and the relevant modal structures, he says, within the temporal coherence of experience, and “in relation to the religious fulness of Truth” (576-7/510-11). Nor does transcendental ignorance provide an excuse: every theoretical insight, whether a posteriori or a priori, must justify (*rechtvaardigen*) its claim to relative truth before “the forum of the Divine world-order” — even though one cannot have true philosophical insight into this order if one does not stand “in the full religious Truth of Divine Word-Revelation” (577/511).

Next Dooyeweerd takes up the possible objection that his account makes “the structure of theoretical truth” dependent on subjective insight into it. He replies that although subjective insight does not determine or govern the structure of theoretical truth, such insight is necessary in order to discover this structure. Then he indirectly repeats a suggestion made before: that his own account is not only in accord with the divine order of creation but also made possible by his own “religious standing in the Truth” (578/512).

Dooyeweerd offers two criteria that “*a priori* theoretical insight” must meet to be in accord with the divine world order.<sup>10</sup> The first criterion pertains primarily to the modal horizon. It is the principle of excluding antinomies, to which Dooyeweerd always refers with the Latin phrase *principium exclusae antinomiae*. Antinomies arise, he says, when theoretical thought violates modal sphere sovereignty and intermodal coherence. The *logical* principle of non-contradiction is simply a dependent aspect of this “*cosmological* criterion” (579/513). To be justified, theories must avoid antinomies.<sup>11</sup> The second criterion pertains primarily to the plastic horizon. Dooyeweerd does not give this criterion a title. Perhaps we can call it “the principle of respecting individuality”: theoretical thought should account for, and neither misconstrue nor ignore, the structures of individuality as these are “*given* in naïve experience” (579/514).<sup>12</sup>

Not even the findings of empirical scientific research are exempt from these two principles or from the general requirements of transcendental theoretical truth. For transcendental truth encompasses and makes possible factual truths. Ultimately, it is only because of the divine world order, which obtains for both

<sup>9</sup> Again, Dooyeweerd’s definition of transcendental theoretical truth occurs in italics.

<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, and contrary to Dooyeweerd’s own formulation, these are not criteria of transcendental theoretical *truth*. They are criteria of transcendental theoretical *justification*.

<sup>11</sup> For a lengthier discussion of this principle, see NC 2: 36-49, WW 2: 34-47.

<sup>12</sup> For an elaboration of this principle, see NC 3: 3-52, WW 3: 1-32.

theoretical and pre-theoretical experience, that science can theoretically disclose (*ontsluiten*) reality and thereby “discover [*onthullen*] relative theoretical truths” (582/517-18).

To summarize: Dooyeweerd holds that religious Truth, which can be attained only by personally standing in the Truth, encompasses and makes possible all theoretical truth. So too, theoretical truth, which involves an accordance between subjective knowledge and the structural horizon of experience, encompasses and makes possible all so-called empirical truth in the academic disciplines. The two criteria according to which purported theoretical insights must be justified are the avoiding of antinomies and the respecting of individuality. In other words, religious Truth and its attainment are the *sine qua non* for theoretical truth. This raises the question whether Dooyeweerd’s account puts authentically Christian scholarship in a privileged position, and whether it devalues the insights of scholarship that is not Christianly faith-oriented. Dooyeweerd readily acknowledges that other philosophers will likely find his account of truth scandalous. Whether the reason for this is the “scandal of the cross” remains to be seen.

## 2. *Critical retrieval*

The question whether Dooyeweerd privileges Christian scholarship arises from the center of his project, namely, to deliver a “decisive blow against the idea of religiously neutral philosophy” (565/498). As we have noted, his entire account of theoretical truth relies very heavily on his account of religious truth. Moreover, Dooyeweerd’s way of connecting religious and theoretical truth elicited many of the objections and reservations he met, not only from the neoKantians and phenomenologists of his day but also from reformational colleagues and successors.

That is why Dooyeweerd’s conception of truth deserves and requires a critical retrieval. By this I mean the project of either raising or acknowledging valid objections and, in light of such objections, providing a redemptive critique of his contribution. It is not enough, in my view, simply to defend Dooyeweerd against misinterpretations, to reject inadequate criticisms, and to promote the concerns and claims his critics neglect. One must also address legitimate criticisms of Dooyeweerd and suggest viable alternatives.

To begin a critical retrieval of Dooyeweerd’s conception of truth, let me first identify the claims through which he has made an important contribution to philosophical truth theory. There are at least nine such claims:

1. That truth is “perspectival” or “horizontal” in character.
2. That the distinct horizons of truth are interlinked and point beyond themselves to the “fulness of truth.”
3. That an adequate philosophical account of truth must distinguish and relate a “subject side” and a “law side.”
4. That disclosure and truth, although not identical, are intimately connected.

5. That theoretical truth has an important place in human life but is not decisive in our meeting the requirements of truth.
6. That traditional notions of "*adequatio*" and modern notions of "correspondence" are inadequate ways to characterize both truth in its fullness and theoretical truth.
7. That propositional truth requires logical "objectivity" or, in my own terms, predicative availability and predicative self-disclosure.
8. That "standing in the truth" is crucial for acquiring insight into the "nature" of truth (although, I would argue, it is not a guarantee).
9. That a reformational theory of truth must take seriously scriptural notions of truth, including Jesus' description of himself as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14.6, NRSV).

My own proposals concerning truth and artistic truth incorporate all of these claims. Yet I think the way in which Dooyeweerd presents them is internally problematic, with the result that he does not offer an adequate and convincing conception.

Dooyeweerd's conception of truth suffers from two sorts of problems. On the one hand, he exaggerates the role of religious truth and misconceives its relation to theoretical truth. On the other hand, in exaggerating that role, he overlooks central questions of epistemology and truth theory. Let me demonstrate these problems by returning to five topics from my previous exposition — religious truth, horizon of experience, theoretical intuition, theoretical truth, and standing in the truth —, addressing them in that order.

## 2.1 Structuralized religion

Dooyeweerd's conception of truth stands or falls with his account of religious truth. As section 1.3 showed, he treats religion as the transcendent horizon of experience. This treatment does not mesh with Dooyeweerd's own preferred understanding of religion.<sup>13</sup> Whereas in general structural horizons of experience are ontological *conditions* that make human life possible, religion for Dooyeweerd is the all-pervasive *direction* in which human life is oriented or the all-pervasive *spirit* in which it is lived. Although he speaks of religion as a fundamental relationship between human beings and (what they take to be) the origin of creation, this "relationship" differs dramatically from the relationships that make up the temporal, modal, and plastic horizons. In those horizons it makes sense to posit ontological relationships between structures that universally obtain and variable manners of creaturely existence, between a "law side" and a "subject side." But the "relationship" that characterizes religion is of a different order. It is one of divine invitation and human acceptance or

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<sup>13</sup> Here I discuss in greater detail the reasons for a previously published judgment that "Dooyeweerd leaves us with a perplexing, internally conflicted notion of religion that nevertheless serves as the pivot to his transcendental critique" (Zuidervaart 2004a, 81).

rejection, of divine instruction and human learning, of divine guidance and human discovery.<sup>14</sup>

Dooyeweerd suggests this when he says divine truth must grip us (574/507), and we, in response, must take hold of God's revelation with all of our hearts (564/496). At bottom, as Dooyeweerd himself understands, religion is a relation of call and response. In this relation our response becomes a call to the God who calls, and the God who calls responds to our response. In other words, the relationship that characterizes religion is dynamic and dialogical, and it is not of a sort that can be captured in an ontological picture of structure and existence.<sup>15</sup>

Yet this ontological picture is precisely what Dooyeweerd paints when he writes about religion as the transcendent horizon of experience. He describes religion as the root of self-consciousness in which human experience transcends time (540/472-3). He talks about religion as a necessary structural and subjective a priori, a relationship in which God's central law determines, limits, and makes possible all human experience (552/482). He also says that the religious horizon encompasses all the other horizons. In each of these ways Dooyeweerd suggests that religion involves an ontological relationship between structure and existence, just as the other horizons of experience do.

Recognizing, however, that religion is of a different order, he tries to distinguish it from the other horizons by calling it transcendent. So he ends up with a transcendent and supra-temporal horizon that nevertheless encompasses and makes possible all the other horizons, which are immanent and temporal through and through. Dooyeweerd never fully explains how what is transcendent and supra-temporal can encompass and determine that which is immanent and temporal, an omission noted by several of Dooyeweerd's reformational colleagues, including Popma and Vollenhoven. This puzzle is the result, I think, of his compressing into a permanent structure the dynamic and dialogical relationship of divine call and human response, a structuralizing of religion with respect to both its directionality and its genetic unfolding in time. In effect, religion becomes the supratemporal structure that makes all temporal structures possible.<sup>16</sup>

Dooyeweerd's structuralizing of religion has two undesirable consequences for his idea of religious truth: ontologically, religious truth must be both transcendent and immanent but cannot really be either; epistemologically, it must be unique and all-pervasive but cannot be both. As a result, theoretical truth loses its distinctive character and can truly be true only as a manifestation of religious truth. Let me explain.

We have seen that Dooyeweerd gives religious truth priority over all other expressions of truth. It is the very fullness of truth that makes any true

<sup>14</sup> This formulation follows Vollenhoven's Trinitarian distinction among three relationships that God sustains with creation. See "The Unity of Life" (1955) in Vollenhoven (1998).

<sup>15</sup> For insightful comments on the metaphor of hearing and responding, see Geertsema (1992). For a characterization of religion and human existence in terms of call and response, see Olthuis (1993; 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the issues surrounding Dooyeweerd's conceptions of religion and transcendence, see Steen (1983).

knowledge possible. But what does it mean to say that religious truth makes all other truth possible? Two responses are available within Dooyeweerd's conception, one of them ontological and the other epistemological. Ontologically, religious truth is the condition of truth's possibility. Without it all the other horizons, and indeed experience itself, could not exist. Now there is a sense in which this is so: if human beings could not hear God's call and respond, then their lives would lack ultimate direction. Yet that is quite different from describing the structures that make human life possible as *dependent for their possibility* on religious truth. For on the latter formulation God's call to love and human responses turn into a permanent superstructure that lacks both processual and dialogical character. Religious truth becomes both absolute — always already trumping all other expressions of truth — and arbitrary — never changing in the context of the human responses it permeates. Yet it cannot really be absolute, since Dooyeweerd says it depends in turn on God as "Origin." Nor can it be arbitrary, for then it would not be true. So religious truth must be both transcendent and immanent but cannot be either.

Epistemologically, Dooyeweerd describes religious truth as the very fulness of meaning that serves as the "principle and foundation of all true knowledge" (562/494). The law side to this fulness consists of God's revelation. The subject side consists of our worshipful insight into God's revelation and acceptance of it. Because law side and subject side together make up the horizon of religious truth, our ability to experience and understand God's revelation governs the extent to which the fulness of meaning can determine and enable all true knowledge. This may be the deeper reason why Dooyeweerd felt compelled to argue that his account does not make the structure of theoretical truth depend on subjective insight into it (577-8/512-13).

My worry in this context is different but not unrelated. Whereas in all other horizons the correlation between law and subject is primarily ontological, in the religious horizon this is not possible. For, as a good Calvinist, Dooyeweerd recognizes how the fall affects all responses to God's call or, in Dooyeweerd's vocabulary, all abilities to understand and accept the light of God's revelation. Moreover he inflects this recognition antithetically, setting up an unbridgeable epistemic divide between those who, having been turned toward God's revelation, can again understand reality "in the light of Truth" (563/495), and those who, having turned away from God's revelation, can at most come up with "relative truths" that are never, on their own, truly true.

This antithetical construal has two implications, both of them contrary to Dooyeweerd's own stated intentions. First, it puts a select group of people in a privileged position toward all truth, including religious truth, such that they cannot really learn from others. Second, it undermines his own repeated appeals for dialogue from other philosophers: according to his own account, they do not have access to the true religious knowledge that would make them capable of truly understanding the insights he offers. Both implications become apparent in the passage, quoted earlier, where Dooyeweerd suggests that one cannot have true philosophical insight into the divine world order if one does not stand "in the full religious Truth of Divine Word-Revelation" (577/511).

Unfortunately this suggestion poses a Catch 22 for immanence philosophers, who by definition do not stand in the Truth (see 578/512). They are damned if they do seek accordance with the divine world order and damned if they don't: so long as they are immanence philosophers, they will never stand where they should. The upshot is that, although religious truth must pervade all knowledge, it does not reach the vast majority of people, not to mention the philosophers among them. Alternatively, if it were to pervade all knowledge, then religious truth would lose its disjunctive character as an accordance between worshipful insight and divine revelation. Contrary to Dooyeweerd's intention, religious truth on an antithetical construal cannot be both unique and all-pervasive. This amplifies weaknesses in his conception of theoretical truth, as I shall demonstrate later.

One way to avoid such ontological and epistemological dilemmas would be to abandon Dooyeweerd's construal of religion as a transcendent horizon of experience. That would let one do justice to the categorical difference between the all-pervasive and direction-setting character of religion and the all-encompassing and condition-establishing character of ontological horizons. The religious dynamic of call and response does not set structural conditions for what is possible in human existence. Rather it sets us on, and sustains us along, the open pathways of our lives. Moreover, if religious truth is the "fulness of meaning," it is not the fulness of creational unity and coherence. Rather it is the fulness of humanly responding, ever anew, to God's invitation, instruction, and guidance. This central insight of the reformational tradition needs fully to inform one's conception of truth.

## 2.2 Limited experience

To this point I have simply accepted Dooyeweerd's account, summarized in section 1.2 above, concerning the other horizons of experience and their interconnections. Yet this account, too, is internally problematic, and it reinforces the tensions in his accounts of religious and theoretical truth. On the one hand, Dooyeweerd does not really show how the "structural a priori" in various horizons makes human experience possible. On the other hand, he builds fallibility into the very character of the subjective a priori within each horizon, raising questions about exactly what sort of a priori this is.

The first problem stems in part from Dooyeweerd's portraying the horizons as structural conditions that make other horizons possible. This portrayal distorts the subject side within each horizon, and it makes some horizons subject to other horizons. What he should have said, it seems to me, is that there is one horizon, the temporal horizon, and this horizon makes all human experience possible. The modal and plastic "horizons" are simply different ways in which the temporal horizon obtains. They are not "encompassed" and "determined" by the temporal horizon. Rather they simply are that temporal horizon as it obtains both for how creatures, including human beings, exist and for what distinguishes them from one another in their existence.

Be that as it may, it is problematic to regard as “a priori” the structures that make up the temporal horizon in its modal and individual obtaining. They are not “a priori” in an epistemological sense. They may make *existence* possible, but that by itself tells us little about how *experience* and *knowledge* are possible. One notes here that Dooyeweerd actually says very little about how the structures of the modally and individually inflected temporal horizon make experience and knowledge possible. Instead, he builds a “subjective a priori complex” into the horizons of human experience. And he immediately adds that the subjective a priori is fallible. Epistemologically, however, this move raises new issues. If that which, subjectively, makes human experience possible is fallible, then it would equally, at least in certain respects, seem to make it impossible. To establish whether and when a fallible a priori does make experience possible, a transcendental philosopher would need to appeal to a superior a priori that is not fallible.

This, it appears, is the role Dooyeweerd assigns to the religious a priori, but only as it operates among those who have understood and accepted divine revelation. That brings back the problems already noted concerning religious truth, but with even greater impact. For now it emerges that no subjective a priori in any horizon can genuinely make experience possible if the subject of experience does not respond properly to divine revelation. Because Dooyeweerd construes religious responses in an antithetical manner, the absurd consequence follows that only Christians, or perhaps even only authentic Christians, would subjectively be capable of experience. In other words, religion would trump experience rather than direct and sustain it. We would not have an epistemology but rather a denial of epistemology. The “problem of knowledge” would be “solved” by taking it off the table. This solution would be philosophically scandalous, I admit, but hardly the “scandal of the cross.” Nor do I think it is the result that Dooyeweerd actually had in view.

### 2.3 Self-referential incoherence

If, for the reasons already given, one abandons Dooyeweerd’s claim that religious truth makes all other truth possible, one might regard his idea of theoretical intuition as an alternative account of what makes theoretical truth possible. For Dooyeweerd clearly regards theoretical intuition as a key to solving the central problem of theoretical knowledge, as we saw in section 1.1 above. Theoretical intuition makes possible the “intermodal synthesis of meaning.” Without such a synthesis, in turn, there could be no accordance either between theoretical knowledge and structural laws in general or between a subjective “meaning-synthesis” and the *Gegenstand’s* modal structure in particular. So theoretical intuition makes possible the intermodal synthesis that makes theoretical truth possible.

Despite the initial attractions of such a move, there are two reasons why it will not work. First, Dooyeweerd has no way, other than an appeal to religious self-consciousness, to establish the truth of theoretical intuition. In fact he plainly states that theoretical intuition cannot be grasped theoretically. It

cannot be turned into a modally delimited Gegenstand, nor does it have the abstractive and disjunctive character of theoretical thought. If the truth of theoretical intuition cannot be established theoretically, then it cannot serve as a transcendental condition of theoretical truth. If one did treat it as such a condition, one would land in a vicious circle.

The second reason is that Dooyeweerd's idea of theoretical intuition does not actually solve the problem of intermodal synthesis. The problem, we recall, is to explain how it is possible to achieve a synthesis between modal aspects that must stand in opposition when theorizing occurs. According to Dooyeweerd, theoretical intuition keeps our logical and nonlogical functions in continuous temporal contact as our own functions and, in its transcendental direction, propels us toward religious self-consciousness. But the idea of theoretical intuition does not explain how intermodal synthesis can be *achieved*. At most it explains why intermodal synthesis is *not impossible*. It indicates that a prior connection across our functions and across modal aspects is always already in effect when the act of theorizing begins. But this does not explain how a *reconnection* can actually occur once theorists have singled out the relevant Gegenstand. Dooyeweerd's "theoretical intuition" provides a source of discovery, not a source of confirmation. It helps us *discover* modal structures in their intermodal coherence. It cannot serve to *confirm or disconfirm* such discoveries once they have been worked out in theory.

In fact, Dooyeweerd's idea of theoretical intuition names a problem rather than offering a solution. It names a problem in his transcendental critique of theoretical thought. As I have explained elsewhere, the problem is one of self-referential incoherence (Zuidervaart 2004a, 78). Dooyeweerd tries to account theoretically for what he says lies beyond the capacity of theoretical thought to grasp. This is not an incidental problem but lies at the heart of his transcendental critique. To account for the structure to theoretical thought, Dooyeweerd must theorize about that structure. But what is decisive in his account is the unity of modal aspects and the theorizer's radical dependence on an origin, both of which Dooyeweerd says lie beyond any theoretical conceptual grasp. Yet he himself provides a theoretical account of such purportedly supra-theoretical unity and dependence. To circumvent the dilemma of his giving a theoretical account of the supra-theoretical, Dooyeweerd introduces the notion of "critical self-reflection in the concentric direction of theoretical thought to the ego" (NC I: 59). But this notion does not really help. For now the question arises whether his account of such critical self-reflection is itself theoretical, and thus whether he is still doing what he says cannot be done.

The idea of theoretical intuition reinforces this self-referential incoherence. For Dooyeweerd *must* say something theoretically about theoretical intuition, and one of the things he must say theoretically is that it cannot be grasped in theoretical concepts but can only be approximated in an idea. On what basis does he say this? Whence comes his insight into the nature of theoretical intuition? How can his insight be defended in the forum of philosophical debate? It is hard to see how Dooyeweerd could address these legitimate questions without employing theoretical concepts, and not simply theoretical ideas.

I have claimed that Dooyeweerd “must” say theoretical intuition cannot be grasped in theoretical concepts. He must say this because his idea of theoretical intuition provides a bridge across the systematic gap between his insisting on the fulness of religious truth and his acknowledging the distinctive character of theoretical truth. Unless he can bridge this gap, his radical claim for the religious rootedness of theoretical thought, including philosophy, would turn into a mere assertion: his epistemology would “end in a Christian sermon” (562/494). The philosopher in Dooyeweerd does not want this to happen. But I do not think his idea of theoretical intuition actually prevents this. That has consequences for his account of theoretical truth, to which we turn next.

#### 2.4 Tautologous truth

Dooyeweerd’s general conception defines truth as a relationship between human knowledge and divine laws: between worshipful insight and God’s revelation (religious truth), between human knowledge and the divine world order (transcendental truth), and between subjective meaning-synthesis and the Gegenstand’s modal structure within intermodal coherence (transcendental theoretical truth). Although one might think that he has proposed a correspondence theory of truth, Dooyeweerd does not locate the truth-defining relationship between intellect and thing (Aquinas) or between propositional truth bearers and factual states of affairs (modern correspondence theories). Rather the relationship occurs between multidimensional knowledge and God’s laws for reality and human life. Moreover, this relationship is not a correspondence but an accordance (*overeenstemming*). To be true, human knowledge must be in accord with God’s laws — with the religious central law, with the structure of theoretical thought, with modal structures, and with structures of individuality. If anything, Dooyeweerd’s conception is a type of coherence theory, for he emphasizes the truth-making coherence of all claims and insights within the religious fulness of truth.

The strengths of Dooyeweerd’s conception, compared with many alternatives, lie in its holistic and normative character and in its radical refusal to divorce questions of direction from questions of structure. For Dooyeweerd truth is not a neutral topic of technical philosophy. It is a matter of life and death, and philosophy must do justice to this when offering a theoretical definition. Yet these strengths accompany notable weaknesses in the account of theoretical truth presented in section 1.5 above. Let me mention three.

In the first place, Dooyeweerd nowhere elaborates on “accordance.” The notion points to an alignment or concurrence or concordance of the subject side with the law side. In what does this accordance consist? Accordance cannot simply mean the subject side’s *existing* in alignment, concurrence, or concordance with the law side. Rather it must mean something like “having proper insight into” the law side. What does having proper insight come to? It seems equivalent to having true insight. What distinguishes true insight from false? Dooyeweerd’s answer seems to be that true insight is marked by its

accordance with the law side. Unfortunately that leaves us with an unhelpful tautology: accordance is accordance.

Dooyeweerd's two specific criteria aim to provide more content for the notion of theoretical accordance. The principle of avoiding antinomies does not really provide new content, however, since a negative principle leaves open many positive possibilities. And the positive principle of respecting individuality is so broad that any number of conflicting theories could legitimately claim to be doing just that. Yet Dooyeweerd would not say that all of these conflicting theories are true.

Second, in construing truth as an accordance between subject side and law side, Dooyeweerd ignores entirely the question of objectivity. This omission is striking, given both his own account of logical objectivity and prominent worries about objectivity in modern truth theories. Let me get at this issue by calling upon Vollenhoven's lecture notes on epistemology (2005, 108-138). Vollenhoven introduces a tripartite distinction among the activity of coming to know (*het leren kennen*), that which can be known (*het kenbare*), and the content of the knowledge that results (*het resultaat*). All three occur in connection "with the entire cosmos" and "under the law of God" (110). We can have knowledge only if we come to know what is knowable and arrive at some content. With respect to the "cognitive interrelation" in the "analytic [i.e., logical] law-sphere" (111), this implies that we come to know by distinguishing and relating what is knowable and arriving at concepts and judgments.

Clearly much of Vollenhoven's epistemology is compatible with Dooyeweerd's. Yet Vollenhoven's tripartite distinction is either absent or deeply submerged in Dooyeweerd's account of theoretical truth. Whereas Dooyeweerd defines such truth as an accordance between subject side and law side, Vollenhoven points to a crucial relationship *on the subject side*, namely, the interconnections among knowing, the knowable, and the known. Truth in this complex could not simply be an accordance, say, between our activity of knowing and God's knowable law, nor between our concepts or judgments and God's law. It must involve a unique relationship within human knowledge among the epistemic subject's activity, the object toward which this activity is directed, and the results of such activity. Truth pertains not only to our knowing but also to what is knowable and what is known.

A third weakness in Dooyeweerd's account of theoretical truth concerns the character of human knowing. Although he recognizes the general importance of subject/subject relations and mentions the societal embeddedness of human knowledge (594/529), he does not account for the intersubjective character of theoretical knowing. Nor does he emphasize the importance of learning from others in the pursuit of theoretical truth. That, in turn, affects his general conception of truth, which lacks any notion of intersubjective validity. For Dooyeweerd, the validity of our insights and judgments is conferred by divine laws' being in effect and by the epistemic subject's having a proper stance toward these laws. It seems to make no difference how, experientially, one has come to have these insights and judgments, nor does it seem to matter whether others recognize, accept, or reject them. Indeed, theoretical insights, he says,

must be justified before “the forum of the Divine world-order” (577/511) — not, strikingly enough, in response to other theorists and with respect to their concerns.

This idiosyncratic notion of justification — as justification in the court of divine law — simply ignores the intersubjective character of human knowing. It also reinforces a dogmatic potential in Dooyeweerd’s account of religious truth. Because this point is controversial, let me be clear that I do not think Dooyeweerd wanted his account to be dogmatic: as a person and scholar he was admirably open to other people’s perspectives. Nor would dogmatism be consistent with his self-understanding of transcendental critique as “a critical inquiry (respecting no single so-called theoretical axiom) into the *universally valid conditions which alone make theoretical thought possible*” (NC I: 37). Yet the way in which he construes religious truth, theoretical truth, and their interrelation lends support to a dogmatic potential.

## 2.5 Privileged access

In response to my concerns, Dooyeweerd might well reply that what is finally decisive for a conception of truth is whether the one proposing it “stands in the Truth,” a formulation elaborated in section 1.4 above. At one level I can agree with this reply. For if truth is as comprehensive and crucial as both he and I think it to be, then no theorist can step outside it, and how one lives within it matters a great deal for the conception of truth one proposes. Yet Dooyeweerd vitiates his own conception of truth by restricting how and by whom such standing takes place.

With respect to “how,” I note that the image of “standing” is partial at best, and inadequate on its own. It suggests that one has arrived and, having arrived, can stay in a fixed position. Yet the biblical passages to which Dooyeweerd appeals speak not only of *standing* in the truth but also of *walking* in the truth, of *abiding* in Christ’s teaching, and of having the truth *abide in us*.<sup>17</sup> It would seem from scripture itself that truth is not such that one can simply grasp it once and for all. It is to be lived and enacted. To live and enact truth, one needs to learn from and with others, ever anew, what truth requires. This is implied, I think, when Jesus says to his disciples that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14.6, NRSV).

Who are the others from whom one must learn? Are they only those with whom one lives in confessional community — fellow Christians, for example, or fellow humanists? I do not think that sort of restriction is in keeping with truth. For Jesus’ teachings address everyone, not only his disciples, and many have lived out these teachings in ways that put self-identified Christians to shame. Further, if the “light of truth” shines from God’s revelation for humankind, then there is no corner or community that does not live in this light. Or, to use the metaphor I prefer, if God’s invitation, instruction, and guidance address all of humanity — if wisdom calls out “to all that live” (Proverbs 8.4, NRSV) — then everyone will respond, in better and worse ways, to this divine call. To

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, John 8.12-58 and the Second Letter of John.

consider one's own response, or that of one's community, to be intrinsically superior to other responses, without question, is to try to restrict the reach of God's call. It is to say, a priori, that God's truth abides in us but not in them, and to presume that we and not others abide in the truth.

Problematic restrictions on both "how" and "who" plague Dooyeweerd's conception of truth. Yet his insistence on the "hearted" character of truth contains a genial insight. He understands that truth is to be lived, not simply claimed, and that living the truth involves all of what human beings are and do. Nevertheless, our response to God's call is not itself "the truth." At best, our "walking" and "abiding" in the truth, when they occur, bear witness to what truth requires. Rather than suggest, as Dooyeweerd does, that such a "stance" — better, such a way of living — gives someone privileged access to the truth, we should acknowledge that it gives testimony, in partial and flawed ways, to God's invitation, instruction, and guidance. Intrinsic to this way of living, it seems to me, is to welcome the testimony of others. In the theoretical arena this means, among other things, that one tries to learn from others, whatever their religious convictions, and to justify one's claims before the forum of fellow theorists. This is not to say that theorizing is religiously neutral. Rather, theorizing is so religiously freighted that complacency towards one's own religious convictions cannot be tolerated. When religiously laden theorizing is also oriented by a faith tradition, then, along with that tradition, it should offer its insights in a self-critical fashion. For what is needed today, as Ron Kuipers (2002) has argued, is not simply faith, but a critical faith.

### 3. *Conclusion*

I have suggested that Dooyeweerd's conception of truth exaggerates the role of religious truth by turning religion into a permanent transcendent structure. When combined with an antithetical construal of religious insight, his account of religious truth makes moot any dialogue with others. More dramatically still, when combined with the notion of a fallible subjective a priori, his account renders most humans incapable of experience. His notion of theoretical intuition cannot rectify this absurd consequence because it reinforces the self-referential incoherence in his transcendental critique of theoretical thought. So too, by ignoring questions of objectivity and intersubjectivity, Dooyeweerd's general conception of truth as an accordance between knowledge and law ends up being tautologous. Nor is this conception rescued by his insistence on "standing in the Truth." Dooyeweerd's description of this stance displays the same structuralizing tendency and dogmatic potential that beset his account of religious truth. It also reveals the same lack of objectivity and intersubjectivity that weaken his account of theoretical truth.

Thus a serious challenge faces reformational philosophers who would critically retrieve Dooyeweerd's conception of truth. We need to find ways to think about truth that retain the holism, normativity, and radicalness of his conception, but wrest these free from incoherence, structuralism, and potential dogmatism. We need to affirm Dooyeweerd's genuine insights but rearticulate

them in critical dialogue with other philosophers. I shall begin to take up this challenge in a subsequent essay.

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