

The Contemporary Challenge to Christian Scholarship

Prof D F M Strauss

Synopsis

Initially the possibilities of understanding (“reason”) astonished human-kind to such an extent that it was soon deified. By briefly following some contours in the development which lead to the enthroning of rationality its inherent self-insufficiency is highlighted. The rationalism of modernism, which reached a certain climax in the thought of Immanuel Kant (who brought law and religion to the court of reason), was eventually uprooted by historicism and the linguistic turn. The developments within the domain of philosophy of science opened the way for the awareness that the rationalist holds on to the *faith in reason* which in itself is not rational (Popper speaks about an irrational faith in reason). The discovery of the inherent limitations of formal (axiomatic) mathematical systems, from a slightly different angle, added weight to the insight that “rationality” ought to be assigned a much more modest place within the fabric of human potentialities. Gödel's proof concerning the fundamental *incompleteness* of axiomatic systems prompted Weyl to acknowledge *evidence* as an indispensable presupposition of rationality. An overview of different trends of thought in the various academic disciplines underscores the actual commitment entailed in rationality, which also surfaced in different ways through the emergence of historicism and postmodernism. Yet, although historicity and linguisticity co-condition *being human*, they are not the *sole* conditions embracing human existence. Against this background an assessment is given of the position of Christian scholarship within the context of this intellectual climate, aimed at a reversal of the initial problem: the challenge of Christian scholarship – through numerous *new* and *constructive insights* – to the academic world.

“Science” and “Rationality”

Within the English speaking world the word “science” acquired a very narrow meaning, restricted to physics as a scholarly discipline – particularly owing to the influence of the modern philosophical trend known as

positivism. The German academic history, by contrast, employed the term “Wissenschaft” – the translational equivalent of “science” – in a much broader sense, not only encompassing the *other natural sciences* but also including the so-called *humanities* (Geisteswissenschaften) within the domain of *science*. Nonetheless the positivistic legacy shares in an overestimation of the intellectual abilities of human beings which stretches back to Greek antiquity.

Although already within Greek culture itself it was realized that the Pythagorean claim that *everything is number* is mistaken, Cassirer is justified in his assessment that *rational knowledge* is founded upon the meaning of number. Rationality is intimately linked with *logical argumentation* – a skill that also flourished within Greek scholarship – it is indeed one of the lasting contributions of Greek culture to Western civilization. Yet, already in ancient Greece the *appreciation* of rationality turned into an *adoration* of it, that is, into a *deification* of rationality. It was even viewed as a guide to life – the kind of rationalism which tempted Thomas Aquinas to claim that *sin* did not radically affect human reason, but only “wounded” it.

Early modern humanism explored new possibilities through the newly developing natural sciences, especially mathematics and physics. The Renaissance gave rise to the modern motive of rational autonomy and unlimited freedom – human beings were considered to function as a law unto themselves, capable of controlling the universe through natural scientific reflection. Both Husserl and Dooyeweerd aptly speak about the humanistic *science-ideal* (Husserl, 1954:119; Dooyeweerd, 1997-I, Part Two).

Perhaps the modern historical process in which human understanding was reified and deified reached its zenith in the thought of Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787²) he carries through the ultimate rationalistic enthronement of human reason.

Recent discussions of the “Enlightenment project” are well aware of the fact that Kant, in his *deconstruction* of the “elevated” position of faith, already was “postmodern.” Kant aimed at dismissing “illusionary knowledge” within the tribunal of a *critique of pure reason* in “accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws” (1781, A:xi). Particularly instructive is the footnote in this section of the introduction to the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR, A:12) where one reads:

“Our age is the genuine age of criticism to which everything should be subjected. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may want to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim sincere respect

which reason only confers to that which has been able to sustain the scrutiny of free and open examination” (Kant, 1781. A:xii).

The emerging acknowledgement of the self-insufficiency of human rationality

In spite of the apparent neutrality and universality of the basic claims of Kant's epistemological stance, his entire *Critique of Pure Reason* actually is fully in the grip of the tension between the science-ideal and the personality-ideal. The humanistic personality-ideal *required* the restriction of the science-ideal to sensory phenomena in order to leave open a domain for the (practical) freedom of the *human person* considered as a *thing-in-itself* (cf. CPR, B566 ff.). When Nietzsche paved the way for many important developments in the 20th century – amongst others what is currently referred to as “postmodernism” – he commences with a “deconstruction” of this Enlightenment belief that *truth*, (scientific) *knowledge* and *rationality* are *supreme*. Hollinger remarks that this idea of the Enlightenment, carried to its extreme, “destroys what is most important in life,” and then says: “Indeed, what is most important and valuable may not be 'provable' by science. Science itself may rest on faith” (1994:8).

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century the great German philosopher, Edmund Husserl kept the Humanistic science-ideal alive in an altered sense. He no longer adhered to the classical mathematical science-ideal, expressed in the idea of a *mathesis universalis*. He advanced in stead his own *transcendental phenomenology*. The early development of modern Humanism is characterized by him as a *mistaken* rationalism (he talks about “*einem sich verirrenden Rationalismus*” – Husserl, 1954:337). He holds on the conviction that Western civilization carries with it the birth-mark of *rationality*. Europe is *born* through the *spirit of philosophy* and can only be *reborn* by it:

“The crisis of European existence faces only two options: the decline of Europe in a process alienating itself from its own rational meaning of life, in barbarism and in the decay into hostility towards the human spirit, or the rebirth of Europe through spirit of philosophy, accomplished in a heroism of reason that will finally conquer naturalism” (Husserl, 1954:347-348).

Nonetheless, at the end of his life Husserl with sadness had to witness the increasing influence of *irrationalistic* trends, amongst them that of his own student, Martin Heidegger, who published his influential work *Sein und Zeit* in the *Yearbook for Phenomenology* (1927). At his seventieth birthday Husserl declared that he wanted to do for philosophy what Karl Weierstrass did for mathematics – in line with the gist of his 1911 article in the first number of the new Journal *Logos: Die Philosophie als strenge*

Wissenschaft (Philosophy as an exact science). But in the end, shortly before he died in 1938, the *reality* of irrationalism overwhelmed him. He declared: “The ideal of philosophy as an exact science, yes, apodictically exact science – this dream never materialized” (“Die Philosophie als strenge, ja apodiktisch strenge Wissenschaft, der Traum ist ausgeträumt” – Husserl, 1954:508).

More or less at the same time Karl Popper already launched his severe and radical criticism of positivism – striking at the heart of the notion of rationality. He accused positivism of not being critical enough, of defending the position of an *uncritical rationalism*. Similar to Husserl's idea of “*einem sich verirrenden Rationalismus*” he actually also distinguishes between a mistaken uncritical rationalism (positivism) and a *sound rationalism*, his own so-called *critical rationalism*. Popper saw that positivism was uncritical by not realizing that its faith in the rationality of human reason was not rational itself! Therefore he fittingly speaks about “an irrational faith in reason” (Popper, 1966-I:231 ff.).

One should not forget that the nineteenth century largely struggled with the historicity of reality pertinently emphasized by various post-Kantian thinkers, amongst whom Niebuhr, Von Ranke, Schelling, Fichte (in his fourth phase) and Hegel to a certain extent occupied a prominent place. Dilthey eventually succeeded to transcend to inescapable correlation between universality and individuality through the turn to language and lingual understanding (hermeneutics). Consequently, the early decades of the 20th century witnessed the hegemony of historicism and hermeneutics, a combined power that made it impossible for any serious philosopher to defend an a-historical and interpretation-free access to “universal truths or universality.”

Of course this did not mean that the old rationalism was a fully conquered enemy! Particularly within the natural sciences and the “empirical” subdivisions of the social sciences it continued to exert the sentiments of the old rationalistic natural science-ideal. These practices still naively continued the classical plea of Kant, who declared that he had to delimit science in order to make room for faith (“Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum glauben Platz zu bekommen” – CPR, B:xxx). During the later 19th century Haeckel reverted this Kantian position with his view that science commences where faith terminates.¹ This division of “science” and “faith” was a *direct outcome* of the *dualistic* world-view of modern Humanism which was torn apart by the conflicting convictions of the

¹ Haeckel is best known for his Darwinian thesis that ontogeny is a recapitulation of phylogeny – cf. Hemleben, 1964:76 ff. Yet, Overhage convincingly showed that this entire theory is mistaken (Overhage, 1959).

science-ideal and the ideal of a free and autonomous personality. This legacy is still reflected in the 20th century when Wittgenstein remarks that there are only two deities: the world and my independent I (“Es gibt zwei Gottheiten: die Welt und meine unabhängige Ich” – Notebooks 1914-1916: 74,15).

During the second half of the twentieth century a world literature emerged within the domain of philosophy of science, mainly induced by the work of Thomas Kuhn on the structure of scientific revolutions. Even more fundamental than the acknowledgement of the inevitability of a theoretical frame of reference (“paradigm”/disciplinary matrix”) is the realization entailed in Popper's critical rationalism: an ultimate commitment lies at the foundation of theoretical constructs. One of the leading figures in the circles of the recent philosophy of science is Stegmüller who did not hesitate to emphasize this depth dimension of theoretical reflection. In reaction to the mentioned attempt of Kant to delimit science in order to make room for faith, Stegmüller says: “One does not have to restrict knowledge in order to make room for faith. Much rather one already has to believe in something to be able to speak about knowing and science at all” (“Man muss nicht das Wissen beseitigen, um den Glauben Platz zu machen. Vielmehr muss man bereits etwas glauben, um überhaupt von Wissen und Wissenschaft reden zu können” – Stegmüller, 1969:33).

Stegmüller links this insight with his assessment of the implications of *evidence*. One can believe in evidence or one cannot believe in it, but this belief or unbelief cannot acquire a more basic foundation. It is a primordial decision preceding rationality which has to be taken in every single case where something has to be known. (“An Einsicht kann man glauben oder nicht glauben, man kann diesen Glauben oder Unglauben aber nicht weiter begründen, ... Es ist eine 'vorrationalale Urentscheidung', die hier getroffen werden muss, und zwar in jeden einzelnen Falle, wo etwas anerkannt werden soll” – Stegmüller, 1969:169).

The classical rationalistic science-ideal permeated the thought of the foremost mathematician of the 20th century, David Hilbert, to such an extent that he believed (!) that it will be possible to *demonstrate* that mathematics is consistent, that is, that from a set of axioms which do not contradict each other valid inferences cannot lead to any contradictions. When he received honorary citizenship of Königsberg (also the birthplace of Immanuel Kant) in 1930, he concluded his presentation with the hopeful words (subsequently engraved on his tombstone after he died in 1943): “Wir müssen wissen, wir werden wissen” (“We must know and we will know”). However, a year later a young mathematician, Kurt Gödel, at the age of 25, published an astonishing article about formally undecidable

propositions in the *Principia Mathematica* (Russell & Whitehead) and related systems. Gödel proved that it is impossible to mirror a proof of the consistency of *arithmetic* in terms of the *axioms of arithmetic*. In explaining Gödel's argument, Nagel and Newman write: "... it follows that the consistency of arithmetic cannot be established by an argument that can be represented in the formal arithmetical calculus" (Nagel and Newman, 1971:86). In order to prove the *consistency* of deductions inferred from certain axioms one cannot use the method that is questioned. Gödel accomplished this result by showing how to construct an arithmetical formula G which stands for the meta-mathematical statement: "The formula G is not demonstrable," and then succeeded in showing that G is both *true* and formally *undecidable* (Nagel and Newman, 85-86). Moreover, he demonstrated that arithmetic is essentially incomplete: "even if additional axioms were assumed so that the true formula G could be formally derived from the augmented set, another true but formally undecidable formula could be constructed" (Nagel and Newman, 1971:86). The implication of Gödel's proof is that every axiomatic mathematical system employing the potential infinite is incomplete and therefore in need of an understanding that transcends the *formalism* of the system itself.

After the death of Hilbert his brilliant student, Hermann Weyl, wrote an article about the mathematical work of David Hilbert (1944) in which he remarked: "It must have been hard on Hilbert, the axiomatist, to acknowledge that the insight of consistency is rather to be attained by intuitive reasoning which is based on *evidence* (I am italicizing – DFMS) and not on axioms" (cf. Weyl, 1970:269).

This background explains the critical position taken by Morris Kline in his work: *Mathematics, the Loss of Certainty* (1980).

What is particularly remarkable in Stegmüller's assessment of these basic issues, is his reversal of the traditional opposition of *faith* and *reason*. Whereas the rationalistic tradition will contend that *rationality* is linked with a kind of *certainty* which does not require faith while *faith* is associated with what is doubtful, Stegmüller states: "in science one believes, in religion one knows (or: claims to know)" ("in der Wissenschaft wird geglaubt, in der Religion weiss man (oder: behauptet man, zu wissen)" (Stegmüller, 1969:212).

This also explains his final verdict: "Some kind of absolute knowledge must exist; without it we are not at all able to start" (Stegmüller, 1969:194) ("Irgendein absolutes Wissen muß es geben; ohne dieses könnten wir überhaupt nicht beginnen" ; "Absolute Evidenz müssen wir

schon `haben', d.h. wir müssen an sie bereits glauben, ... – Stegmüller, 1969:194).

“Committed reason”

The superficiality of the assertion that human understanding and rationality ought to be seen as a mere *neutral* and “objective” instrument is radically challenged with the course of events sketched above. The mere fact that rationality itself is subject to alternative and conflicting evaluations is just the tip of the ice-berg. It took the originality and creativity of the Dutch scholar Herman Dooyeweerd to expand the issue in two directions.

- (i) With regard to the tradition of Christian thinking, mainly identified with theological reflection, he emphasized that the idea of Christian scholarship springs from the Christian world- and life-view and not from science itself. Moreover, the biblical starting-point of the reformation touches the core of being human, and therefore it should give direction to all walks of life, *including* the domain of all the academic disciplines.
- (ii) In connection with the nature and history of the various disciplines he pointed out that the radically diverging trends found within each of them testifies to the fact that in addition to alternative views of reality more-than-rational, to be sure, indeed supra-rational motives were operative within them.

It should come as a surprise to some scholars that a person who kept a considerable critical distance to Dooyeweerd's philosophy throughout his academic career, such as Van Peursen, a number of years ago said that Dooyeweerd's philosophy today is more relevant than ever and that many books written within the domain of philosophy of science should not have been written had the authors first read what Dooyeweerd wrote (cf. Van Peursen, 1995:79-94)!

Since the twenties of the previous century Dooyeweerd, well ahead of his time, articulated a radically new critique of the *dogma* of (i.e., the *faith in*) the autonomy of *human reason* – eventually causing him to use it as the title of his *magnum opus: A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (1953-1958, fourth edition 1997). Through penetrating analyses of the dialectical tensions inherent in Greek, Medieval and modern Humanistic thought he at the same time highlighted the fact that their conceptions of rationality part ways as an effect of supra-theoretical *ultimate commitments* giving *direction* to their respective views.

In general the new approach to philosophy and the disciplines advanced by Dooyeweerd entails that a philosophic view of reality underlies all scholarly academic reflection. Two additional considerations confirm this

conclusion: (a) the mentioned fact that the history of the disciplines displays this foundational relation, and (b) the most fundamental questions of the various disciplines reveal overlapping and shared basic issues, such as (i) unity and diversity; (ii) universality and individuality; (iii) uniqueness and (inter-)connectedness (i.e., the coherence of irreducibles/the quest for a basic denominator); (iv) constancy and dynamics and the distinction between *concept* and *idea*. Without entering into a more detailed account of it, it is important to know that philosophical orientations caused diverging trend within all the disciplines, mathematics and physics not excepted.

The idea of Christian scholarship indeed originated within the context of a serious confrontation with these different trends within philosophy and the special sciences. It should therefore not be surprising that within this tradition alternative views emerged. Consequently, it is rather strange that Kroeze had to state the obvious fact that “one cannot speak of *the* christian philosophy of science, but that there are various theories and philosophies” (Kroeze, 2001:645).

An assessment of the challenge to Christian scholarship entailed in historicism and postmodernity

Dooyeweerd is well aware of the spiritual climate within which he initiated his new philosophical approach in the twenties of the previous century – a time during which historicism was at its peak (Dilthey, Spengler, Troeltsch) and during which the first rudimentary beginnings of what became known as postmodernism entered the scene (Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger already accentuated facets nowadays attributed to postmodernism).

In the Netherlands Calvinism was one of the dominant spiritual forces in society. It proceeded under the influence of reformed theology and the idea of “reformed principles.” But Dooyeweerd did not feel at home with the phrase “our reformed principles” as it was employed within reformed circles by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the 20th centuries, because he realized that it was burdened with *scholastic* and *biblicistic* undertones. His aim was to erect a truly Christian philosophy in a the sense of an encompassing theory of reality in its unity and diversity, a philosophy proceeding from the acknowledgement of God as Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer and therefore taking the *unity* and *goodness* of creation serious – without confusing the *directional antithesis* between good and bad (redemption and sin) with particular *domains* within creation. If the basic questions of all the disciplines are *philosophical* in na-

ture, then the reformation of the disciplines should start with the reformation of *philosophy* itself.

Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and the growing group of their co-workers did not deny the immensely rich tradition of philosophical thought in the West. They were well aware of the numberless ties that linked their new approach to problems an insights of past and contemporary generations.

The rise of historicism at the beginning of the 19th century apparently poses an on-going threat to any notion of universality and constancy. Yet, the very notion of *historicity* inherently affirms its own universality, for it applies to *everything* whatsoever. When the turn to language entered the scene a century later, in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century with its emphasis on the inevitability of interpretation, culminating in the (postmodern) statement that *everything is interpretation*, the implied relativism still did not succeed in escaping from an implicit *universal claim*. *Linguisticity*, just as *historicity*, is supposed to hold universally – for *every instance* of human functioning wherever.

The merit of historicism and postmodernism is therefore actually found in what these two positions intend to *deny*: the acknowledgement of the universal (conditioning) role of *historicity* and *linguisticity*! The shortcoming contained in their position is that they do not sufficiently realize that there are equally important and undeniable *other* functional (or: modal) conditions embracing human existence.¹

The universality of every modal/functional condition of reality, that is, every aspect of creation, should not be challenged as such. I am not aware of any such challenge that is not a victim of the *vicious circle principle*: every rejection of universality inescapably assumes universality. What should be rejected is the absolutization of universality in all variants of rationalism (cf. Strauss, 1998), because conceptual knowledge (always proceedings on the basis of universal features) is not the *only kind* of knowledge. The human awareness of unique occurrences and contingent events transcend the limitations of universality but it does not exceed the boundaries of knowledge. Concept-transcending knowledge constitutes the

1 This is the positive side in the argumentation of Kroeze about a “credible philosophy of science within a christian paradigm” which has to “explain the role of not only religion in science, but also of culture, politics, gender and education, to name but a few” (Kroeze, 2001, 649). The negative side is that she did not show an insight into the difference between the modal functional and the central sense of religion in Dooyeweerd’s thought. The latter draws a sharp distinction “between the *subjective function*, the *principium*, the *content*, the *direction* and the root of belief” (Dooyeweerd, 1997-II:298). When Dooyeweerd speaks about ground-motives he has the *root* of all the issues of human life in mind, not merely the faith or certitudinal function of being human.

other side of the coin (absolutized by irrationalism in an equally one-sided way) and therefore unbreakable coheres with conceptual knowledge.

Remark: The ill-founded critique of Kroeze

It is unfortunate that Kroeze, in her mentioned article of 2001, constructed an inaccurate and principally wrong image of Dooyeweerd's philosophy, inspired by the idea that "science, truth and theory are all human products or constructs" (Kroeze, 2001:651 – with a reference to the postmodern legal philosophy of S.L. Winter). The idea of an Archimedian point does not imply that Dooyeweerd holds that reality has to be studied from *outside* creation. This misunderstanding generated another one: Kroeze thinks that science "cannot study reality (or an aspect of reality) from within reality – this inevitably leads to a distortion of reality" (Kroeze, 2001:643). Although I have articulated a fundamental immanent criticism of Dooyeweerd's notion of the Gegenstand-relation (cf. Strauss, 1984), it must be said that for Dooyeweerd scientific knowledge is invariably bound to the horizon of modal aspects and individuality-structures. What leads to a distortion of reality is the absolutization of an aspect of creation.

Furthermore she accuses Dooyeweerd of upholding "essentialist pretensions of absolute categories (modalities) and characteristics ('sinkern!)" (Kroeze, 2001:652). According to Dooyeweerd no single modality within creation can be absolute – for then it will lose its *meaning* – a *meaning* that on the one hand can only come to expression in its coherence with all other aspects but on the other precludes the absolutization of anyone of them. The meaning-nuclei are not "characteristics" next to the modalities, but constitute there *core meaning*! As a legal scholar Kroeze may reconsider her premature and unfounded conclusions once she has had the opportunity to read through the Encyclopedia of the Science of Law which is currently in the process of being published by the Dooyeweerd Centre in Canada.

Kroeze's promising statement that the "objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy is outdated" immediately stumbles upon the *subjectivist* conviction quoted above, namely that "science, truth and theory are all human products or constructs" (Kroeze, 2001:651). Although it will lead us away from the focus of our present argumentation, it must be noted that this idea of *construction* historically dates back to the rise of modern *nominalism* during the Renaissance. Nominalism rejected all universal conditions outside the human mind as well as any orderliness evinced by creaturely reality functioning in conformity with (God-given) laws. The extreme rationalistic development of this nominalistic stance, which strikingly already featured in the thought of Hobbes, reached its zenith in the thought of Immanuel

Kant who elevated human understanding to become the a priori law-giver of nature: “Human understanding does not create its laws a priori from nature, but prescribes them to nature” (Kant, 1783, par.36).

It is significant that in the development of Dooyeweerd's philosophy and particularly in the articulation of his theory of the modal aspects, the last one added to the rest was the *historical mode*. It must have happened around 1929/1930. This new insight opened up a much stronger defence against historicism, which Dooyeweerd subsequently accused of having absolutized this cultural-historical mode of reality. All concrete events in principle function in all aspects of reality, with the historical mode just one amongst many others. Since change and dynamics can only be understood on the basis of constancy no single product of human activities could be seen apart from the underlying (universal and constant creational) principles making human activities possible in the first place. The “objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy” can indeed be transcended when two things are done at the same time: (i) acknowledge ontically given starting-points for human action which are not the *product* of human formative actions but their condition, and (ii) give full due to the fact that the God-given starting-points (principles) can only take *effect*, become *valid* through *human intervention*. The process of giving form to pre-positive principles (which are not already universally *valid* for all times and places as it was asserted by humanistic natural conceptions) is sometimes designated as *positivization*.¹

In his penetrating analysis of the relationship between law and history, Dooyeweerd points out that after the emergence of the historical school of Von Savigny two theses seemed to be beyond serious doubt: “(i) that all positive law as such is a historical phenomenon which cannot deny its link with the past, and (ii) that *next to* or *above* this historically developed law there did not exist a second legal system with an eternal and immutable content, capable of being deduced from ‘human nature’ or ‘human reason’ in an *a priori* manner” (Dooyeweerd, 1938:3-4).

Dooyeweerd did not want to deny the *positive fruits* brought by the historical mode of thought, although he did warn against the subtle historicistic bias present in it:

“Naturally I do not deny the significant benefits which the historical way of thinking brought with it for philosophy and the science of law. Similarly, I cannot deny that both of the above formulated statements currently almost serve as incontestable truths whose discovery is considered to be the enduring merit of v. Savigny and

1 Habermas explicitly uses this term, for example where he speaks about “the positivization of law” (Habermas, 1996:71).

his followers. My only claim is that the historical mode of thinking, with its value that can hardly be overestimated, did reveal a dangerous counter side for legal philosophy and that over-stretching its significance did cause confusion in the difficult boundary questions of the science of law and of history. The philosophy of law indeed did not find a satisfactory way out of this confusion” (Dooyeweerd, 1938:4).¹

The acknowledgement of historicity and linguisticity is therefore not a genuine threat to Christian scholarship, but an inspiration and invitation to learn through solidarity and to criticize the distortions which necessarily flow from the one-sidedness of immanentistic trends of thought.

To my mind Van der Walt speaks all too easily about a *crisis* in this connection (Van der Walt, 2001:5). What he portrays as the *crisis* of “big narratives,” the threat to foundational research, and the training of students largely buy into the postmodernist paradigm without exercising any *immanent criticism* upon its own “grand story,” namely that all (!) stories are merely local (the incredulity to all meta-narratives – as Lyotard said). His plea for a constructive interaction with postmodern ideas indeed forms part of the ever-present challenge to Christian scholarship – but it is not unique, because the only way in which Christian scholarship in the past, the present and the future could be *relevant* is by engaging in the dominant trends of the day, by constantly testing the spirits. The argumentation of Van der Walt reverted into the defense to such an extent, that he lost sight of the fact that there are numerous constructive and fruitful scientific insights and distinctions developed within the tradition of Christian scholarship that the dominant contemporary trends – at least if they would seriously interact with these insights and distinctions, would rather themselves experience a threat!

What is really at stake?

To be engaged in Christian scholarship does not entail a self-elevation of *fallible, provisional and historically situated interpretations*. Only when Christian scholars are aware of their ties with all facets of the culture and society in which they live can they contribute to a radical scripturally informed *critique* of the *distortions* and *derailments* present within that very culture and society. To be sure, this critique ought to start with *immanent*

¹ The distinction between the historical and the jural modalities makes it possible to differentiate between norm-conformative and antinormative elements present in the same course of events: “The counter revolutionary, who not only rejects principles of revolution but who wants to accomplish in a completely lawful way the restoration of dead elements of the ancien régime, as such does not act unlawfully or in an immoral way, but proceeds in violation of the *normative principle of historical developmental continuity*” (Dooyeweerd, 1938:37).

criticism. But on top of that it is imperative to be engaged in a constructive development and elaboration of a *systematic alternative*. If this is not done, nothing will be gained and the calling to contribute in a scholarly way to the restored paradise order of *shalom* and *obedience* through serious (though in principle redeemed but in practice fallible) scholarly work, will fade and shrink into insignificance.

When it comes to the inner reformation of philosophy and the disciplines there is simply no substitute for a knowledgeable involvement in the special sciences as well, guided by the necessity of an indispensable hypothetical theoretical view of reality, informed by the central motive of creation, fall and redemption. A good example of the kind of interaction we have in mind is found in the argumentation of Van Niekerk for the partnership between legal science and legal philosophy (Van Niekerk, 1992).

Reverting the argument: the challenge of Christian scholarship to the academic world of our day

The drastic changes which entered the scene of scholarship during the twentieth century by themselves already challenged the dogma of the autonomy of reason (theoretical thought) and with it the rationalistic claim to neutrality. However, the tradition of reformational philosophy and Christian scholarship has offered more than merely observing these developments and disclosing the inner antinomies within the various trends of thought operative within philosophy and the various disciplines. It has truly contributed fascinating *new insights* literally pertaining to every facet of the academic world and every respectable special science currently accepted within the encyclopedic diversity of cohering disciplines.

Van der Walt is quite correct and to the point when contrasts the respective rejectionable rationalistic and irrationalistic stances of modernity and postmodernity (Van der Walt, 2001:3), but when he concludes his article with a discussion of the contours of a strategy for the reformational practice of science in the context of the new intellectual climate, the *generality* of his remarks (guidelines to deal with the “crisis” and guidelines directing the “teaching of students”) prevent him from coming to a positive assessment of the *theoretical articulation* of Christian scholarship.

Consider for a moment the historically unique theory of modal aspects developed by Dooyeweerd. Except for many very brief and superficial reactions to this theory during the 20th century (similar to the one of Kroeze mentioned above), truly penetrating and constructive criticisms (such as that of Van Peursen published in 1960 – compare Dooyeweerd's 1961 response to it) are very scarce. There are at least *ten* different criteria appli-

cable to the identification of a modal aspect (cf. Strauss, 2000:3-4). A constructive interaction with this theory will not only have to assess these criteria, but in addition should also engage in an attempt to account for the phenomena which the theory of modal aspects aims to explain. The primary demand for fruitful academic interaction is always *immanent criticism*. Once this has been exercised the challenge is to formulate an alternative theory which is not burdened by the same antinomies or contradictions. Only at this point will it be possible to make the kind of headway which is precluded if a theoretical discussion breaks down in the mere explanation of conflicting theoretical positions. The same applies to the theory of the individuality-structures of reality.

Of course there is always a danger that academics are tempted to work in an uncritical way within a specific philosophical tradition. The appropriation of any philosophical tradition therefore requires both a sense of *solidarity* and one of *critical distance*. However, as Van Niekerk aptly remarks, this danger could be avoided if one takes a stand on the *shoulders* of intellectual giants in stead of in their *shadows* (Van Niekerk, 1992: 488).

Concluding remark

Alternative approaches within the reformational tradition itself have to assess the significance and fruitfulness of their respective positions for the special sciences. In this respect it is a mere matter of fact that the philosophy of Vollenhoven and Stoker are both overshadowed by that of Dooyeweerd.

Literature

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