

# The Consistent Problem-Historical Method of Philosophical Historiography

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When one goes walking in a beautiful indigenous forest, one would be very confused by all the species of birds to be found there—unless one were to have available *Prozesky's A field guide to the birds of Southern Africa*, or *Roberts' birds of South Africa*. Similarly one would be unable to identify all the various trees without lugging along Coates Palgrave's huge tome *Trees of Southern Africa*.

The history of Western philosophy often makes one think of a dense forest with a rich variety of flora. To follow a footpath at whim or at random will profit one little. One needs a good guide in order not to get lost hopelessly.

The right method might well help one to find the right way out. The intention of this article is to deal with one such method, viz., the consistent problem-historical, of which Dirk Fiendrik Theodoor Vollenhoven (1892-1978) of the Free University of Amsterdam was the initiator. Seeing that not all philosophers in the audience are au fait with the method, and seeing that there are scientists other than philosophers in the audience as well, I will try to present the method, which is often complex and difficult to understand, in terms as simple as are compatible with the spirit of the method. The main outlines will be presented, while finer detail will be left out of consideration.

Those of you who are familiar with the method must please be forgiving if, in the course of the popularizing of the presentation, it should begin to seem as if the hands are Vollenhoven's but the voice that of somebody completely different!

In order to underline or foreground the special quality of the method, I am going to compare it from time to time with other methods of philosophical historiography.

## ***By Way Of Introduction***

### **A. Why a history of philosophy?**

Before going into a consideration of *how* one should study the history of philosophy, there is a need to look at another pressing problem:

Why should we deal with the history of philosophy? If it is not worthwhile to remain involved in, then the question as to how also obtrudes. What one expects to find in the history of philosophy is also a co-determinant of one's method.

Let us try to determine, briefly, whether it is not in fact a waste of time to involve oneself in the history of philosophy.

Many people regard the history of something that is in the past as merely belonging to the past. (History has been described as being what Macbeth has called life: "...a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing...".) The study of history is thus seen by some as being as relevant as digging over the debris of the past. Why don't we rather leave the old

philosophers in peace? The answer to that is very simple: It is because they will not leave us in peace.

As a tree cannot free itself of the soil in which it is growing, or as man cannot ever extricate himself from his ancestry, because he carries within himself hereditary factors which determine his being, as one cannot extricate oneself from one's past history. Bilderdijk has rightly observed that the present is caught up in the past.

None of us can start at the very beginning--that privilege belonged to Adam and Eve alone. Each of us starts with a particular background, a certain tradition, an idiosyncratic personal history. Even somebody who rebels against his heritage still lives by it--and he needs it as a springboard to get on.

If, then, we cannot be freed from the history of philosophy because it will not let us go, what purpose is to be found for an involvement in it?

I would like to mention two good reasons only:

In the first place man stands confronted by the mystery of his being and of the world as a whole. He has to find answers to fundamental questions such as: Who am I, and who is God? What is my relationship to God? What are the yardsticks by which I live? What is good, and what is evil? How can I find true knowledge and wisdom on which I can trust and build? What is the sense, what is the justification for my existence?

These are the most profound and troubling questions that man can wrestle with. But at the same time the answers determine one's whole life. The history of philosophy tells us how the greatest minds in history have grappled with these fundamental issues and how they found answers to them. Not all their answers can be regarded as final solutions, even though many of them thought so at the time. Their struggles, however, were not in vain. To listen to their accounts of these struggles however, provides some sort of schooling for us in our own quest for answers.

In the second place one can see further and wider if one knows the history of philosophy. One then becomes like a toddler sitting on his father's shoulders. By sitting on the shoulders of the giants of human intellect, one can broaden one's own perspectives and vision. One does not live any more in the present, surrounded by the fashionable philosophy of the day. One can compare and sift, and arrive at a more accurate vision. This prevents one landing in a cul-de-sac, philosophically speaking. This also helps one to evade some of the pitfalls that one's predecessors have fallen into.

But I can already hear you asking whether philosophy is mere speculation, theoretical reflection, abstract intellectual games intended for the study? Does it really have any relevance for daily life?

The division between theory and practice implied by your question does not, in reality, exist. Scientific--and philosophical--views can have deadly implications and results. Some views in, for example modern philosophy, psychology, biology and political philosophy can, if they are lethal concepts, kill people. If these concepts originate, on the other hand, in the light of the Word of God, they can become a means of promoting peace.

Behind the machine gun there is a pen, impelled by the revolutionary convictions of men. Views do not remain static, as they infiltrate, and march throughout history. The Bible rightly

maintains that man's struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual and evil powers. And this spiritual battle is waged in the field of philosophy with the greatest fervour.

Our conclusion? Knowledge of the history of philosophy is not only worth while, it is almost indispensable. It is essential for anyone who does not want to go through life with blinkers on.

But—can a Christian philosopher also learn something from a heathen philosopher?

The reply to that is that we must also understand the heathen's way of thinking because our own times have become so permeated by it. If we do not do that, we should not be able to understand the spirit of our times. Then we should also not be able to bring a message of redemption for our own times because we would not be able to uncover the crises facing us.

One can also learn something from all the great thinkers (Greeks and Romans included). Through the grace of God the lie has not fully captured the world. There are moments of truth, moments of clarity in any philosopher's life. Augustine has told us to do what the Israelites did in the exodus from Egypt: we have to take along the gold and silver (of the Egyptians) to construct a temple for the Lord, but we have to leave behind the idols. We might be critical about this statement by Augustine, yet the image he uses is very useful in pointing out to us that without the thought of the heathens, the unbelievers, we would, philosophically, be poorer.

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In the course of history one giant of the forest after the other has toppled, or been cut off for the sawmill and the factory. But they are still of value. And we have the task to study the various kinds of wood. Each is different. From their colour, texture and (when they are cut up) fragrance this becomes abundantly clear.

In this way we also have to look at the greats in the field of human intellect in the light of their heritage (writings) to determine of what wood they were carved.

For this, however, we need a good method: the history of Western philosophy is old (2,500 years) and complicated!

Possibly you know the story of the Persian shah Zemir. When he started his reign as a young man, he was inquisitive and full of initiative. He gave the learned men in his empire the command to write a history of the philosophies of the entire world.

This was a very time-consuming task, however, and it was 20 years before the Persian Academy could present to Zemir the results of their hard work. Twelve camels groaned under five hundred volumes of history of philosophy!

The shah, however, was too busy to read all this. He gave instructions that the work had to be abbreviated so that he could find time to study it. The philosophers with their heavily-laden camels thus had to turn homeward with an even more difficult task ahead. One finds one aspect important and another stresses a different one. Before they realized it, another twenty years had elapsed before they could cut down the history of the philosophies of the world to one volume. After forty years these intellectuals had become not only greyer but also wiser....

But when they arrived at the palace with the end result of their work, they had to learn that the shah was seriously ill. He would not be able to read their work any more.

The dignified old secretary of the Academy with his long white beard and grey head bent over the bed and whispered to the dying shah: "Majesty, I can sum up the history of the whole of human thought for you in the following few words...."

## **B. Requirements for a method to study the history of philosophy**

NT van der Merwe has already identified seven main characteristics of a basic scientific method. A method presupposes amongst others an aim (for example a survey of and insight in a specific field), careful planning to enable one to reach the goal, execution of the plan by a person (or apparatus controlled by a person) with due consideration of the material that has to be processed, and the means that he has at his disposal. Van der Merwe has also indicated that a method (both scientific and pre-scientific) rests on assumptions or presuppositions and that it can therefore not be neutral.

On the basis of this we set two requirements for a method by means of which the history of philosophy may be studied:

- ❑ *It should truly be built out "in Your light,"* which means that one cannot just use an existing method and graft it onto the Christian way. The light of the Word has to be incorporated in it in such a way that the method should enable us to penetrate to the core of the history of philosophy.
- ❑ It should truly be a philosophical method, by which is meant that it has to fit in with the material which has to be worked with, which is the history of philosophy. A non-philosophical method may not simply be imposed on the field of study.

HG Stoker has already stressed that the method has to tie in with the field of study. To use an image: One does not try to cut down a tree with a razor blade, and equally one does not try shaving with an axe!

Seeing that the field of study of philosophy is a very wide one (the whole of reality) and not a particular facet (as is the case in the subject disciplines), the method would have to be encompassing. And if one method only cannot cover such a field, it has to be supplemented, or it might make use of non-philosophical auxiliary subjects, such as philology, political history, history of art and others.

It is also necessary to keep in mind that in the case of philosophical historiography we have to do with something even more special, viz., philosophical reflection on philosophical reflection! We have to do here with an abstraction in the second degree. For the philosopher the reflection of reality (the primary state of affairs) is already an abstraction. When, with the help of our method of philosophical description we evaluate his thought, this means that it becomes an abstraction of an abstraction?

It is important to determine now already that the consistent problemhistorical method (abbreviated in the following as CPHM) constitutes a method, not necessarily the only method, of philosophical historiography', by means of which selective samples are taken from the rich field of study. The method may therefore not be accused to leaving unexplored certain facets--which it cannot cover, and which it does not pretend to cover. The name of the method clearly indicates its potential and also its limitations.

Let us now test this method by the already-stated double criterion: Is it truly “in His light” (thus scripturally justified), and is it truly philosophical (so that the whole of reality may be encompassed in it) ?

## **1. Is this method scriptural and philosophical?**

Vollenhoven’s method has to be tested by recourse to these two criteria. At the same time I will give an outline explanation of what the method encompasses.

### **1.1. Scriptural?**

Friedrich Ueberweg’s *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* is probably the standard work in the field of history of philosophy. Most of the five volumes have, in the course of the last fifty years, already been reprinted 13 times (in 1953). This work does not only give accurate and detailed information, but also bibliographical information which no other work offers.

How do the authors of this great work (a whole team of academics worked on the last editions) stand with regard to the role of Christendom in philosophy? They all condemn Patristic and Medieval thought, because philosophy at that time was closely intermingled with Biblical material. Bernard Geyer, responsible for volume 2, *Die Patristische und schoZastische Philosophie*, does have another viewpoint (being a Roman Catholic). He sees this as a golden era, because, according to him, a perfect synthesis had been achieved of antique (pagan) philosophy and the Christian faith.

Neither of these points of view can be regarded as being satisfactory: neither the banishment of the Scriptures nor the dilution of the Bible by means of a marriage with concepts alien to biblical truth.

Vollenhoven, however, in his method uses the Bible as a determining touchstone. How does he then, by means of insights gleaned from the Bible, determine the kind of wood used to carve a certain philosopher? He tests each philosophy on no less than three levels.

If you should allow me to work out the image of the various kinds of wood more fully: He looks carefully at the colour of the philosophy, he saws the wood and smells the special fragrance, he planes the wood and touches it in order to bring out the special texture.

#### *1.1.1 The “colour” is the spirit or religious conviction emanating from a particular philosophy*

Vollenhoven asks a direct question of each philosopher: “What have you done with: the Word of God?” (This is not purely a formal question. Vollenhoven does not merely wish to know whether a specific philosopher knew of the Scriptures, but also whether his philosophy has been given shape and content according to the structures of the Scriptures.)

- ❑ *The Greek and Roman philosophers of antiquity* (± 500 BC - 100 AD) say that they did not know the Bible at all.
- ❑ *The Patristic and the Medieval philosophers* (± 200 to ± 1400 AD) say that they could not only listen to the Word of God, because they also had to keep account of the important philosophical heritage of Antiquity. They therefore tried, in their synthetic philosophy, to serve two masters at the same time.

- ❑ *The period of history from Renaissance and Reformation* (± 1500 and after) offers this reply: All these philosophers do not like the spirit of compromise of the Middle-Ages. This is, however, as far as their spirit of uniformity goes. Renaissance man (and all his many followers in Western history) does not like synthesis, because the Christian elements encompassed in it offends him. The Reformers (and their small number of spiritual children) want to get rid of the pagan element in order to be able to listen to the unadulterated Word of God once more.

These three replies, which lay bare the deepest religious bias of philosophers, causes Vollenhoven to divide the history of Western philosophy into three main eras:

- ❑ *the pre-synthetic thought* of Antiquity;
- ❑ *the synthetic thought* of the Fathers and the Middle Ages; and the
- ❑ *anti-synthetic thought* of the periods after that.

In anti-synthetic philosophy he makes a distinction between anti-synthetic left (those who break with the Scriptures) and anti-synthetic right (those who keep in mind the Word).

Because of lack of space I cannot here go into detail about the concept of “synthetic thought” as distinguished from, for example syncretism and eclecticism. (Cf. in this regard my book *Christen en Cultuur*, [1981], pp. 93-94.)

The fairly accepted division of the history of philosophy into Antique, Medieval and Modern philosophy is not very sensible. (Are the Middle Ages merely a middle period, and who determines what is modern?) Vollenhoven not only substitutes this with something that makes more sense, but he also succeeds in doing this in His light! This is the first facet of his method which allows the light of Scripture to plumb the depths of a philosopher’s thought deeply: he is either a pagan (before the coming of Christ), or he is a lukewarm Christian, or a heathen who fully rejects Christ, or a Christian who, in his whole life—also in his philosophy—wants to follow Christ.

To-my mind this division of Vollenhoven is also preferable to that of another father of Calvinist philosophy in the Netherlands, H. Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). As you might know, Dooyeweerd divides Western cultural history and philosophy according to three ground motifs, *viz.*, that of form and matter (the Greeks), nature and grace (the Middle Ages) and nature and freedom or scientific ideal and personality ideal (modern times). The Scriptural ground motif he sees in terms of creation—fall—redemption.

I myself have many difficulties with Dooyeweerd’s four religious ground motifs.

In the first place it is not quite clear what these religious ground motifs precisely constitute. He calls it a spirit or a spiritual impelling force which is creative of community, which totally controls the individual and his view of life and which cannot be subjected to scientific investigation. Somebody has rightly observed that it makes him think a lot of Aristotle’s supra-individual, universal spirit of thought which pervades man’s individual spirit. (This seems to approximate also Heinemann’s “Grundmotive,” Heimsoeth’s “Grossen Themen” and Cassirer’s “Grundtendenze.”)

If one looks at the content of the various ground motifs, one wonders whether they could all be true spiritual driving forces. Could naturegrace not be seen as a scheme, and creation—fall

—redemption a summary of the contents of the Scriptures? And if the latter should be a resume of the Scriptures, then I am not convinced that it is a correct summary of the revelation of the Scriptures.

In the second place—and this is the most important in the present case—I do not think that it is possible to do justice to more than 2,500 years of philosophical activity with only four religious ground motifs. These years have yielded a rich harvest of material. Many individual philosophies lose their outline in this simplistic scheme—hidden behind the one religious ground motif which is passed onto the many different philosophies covering a long period of time. According to this scheme only Aristotle from Antiquity, Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages and Immanuel Kant in the modern period could be regarded as being of importance. (This is still without looking closely enough at the question as to whether it is justifiable to link, without further ado, Aristotle to the form-matter scheme, Thomas to the nature-grace and Kant to the nature-freedom dialectic!) The doctrine of form and matter was not typical of Greek philosophy, and naturegrace not of the whole of the Middle Ages and the Patristic period or the nature-freedom dialectics of the modern period.

The biggest problem with Dooyeweerd's religious ground motifs, therefore, is that they are inaccurate and do not do justice to the field of investigation. Vollenhoven, while having, it is true, only three periods as opposed to Dooyeweerd's four motifs, makes clearer sense, as we know exactly what he means by it. He is not as vague as Dooyeweerd. These also constitute answers to questions emanating from the Scriptures, and these answers tie in with what happened in reality in the history of philosophy. Apart from that Vollenhoven does not rest, in his division of the history, on three periods. He goes further—as we shall see—so that in the end it is possible to typify each individual philosopher's point of view.

These few questions directed at Dooyeweerd's transcendental-critical method, however, does not mean that I have no appreciation for it. Basically Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd tried to do the same. While the former divides the history of philosophy into basically three periods (four, if we keep in mind that anti-synthetic thought comprises two radically different trends), the latter divides it according to four religious ground motifs. As Vollenhoven does, Dooyeweerd also distinguishes various trends in the history of philosophy—even if Dooyeweerd does not work it all out in such detail. And lastly we find, similar to Vollenhoven's types, with his brother-in-law the idea of a ground idea in each philosopher.

Both these Calvinist thinkers wanted to penetrate to the root of a particular philosophical system in the light of the Scriptures. The fact that each did it in his own way may not lead us into the temptation of playing them off against each other.

### **1.1.2. The “fragrance” of a philosophy is the particular concept of law held by each philosopher**

The Word of God clearly reveals to us that God is there, that He has called creation into being, and that He has subjugated the creation (including man) to various laws. For nature, these laws are imperative, but for man they indicate: they tell him what he ought to do. The central law applicable to man is the commandment of love. This commandment he has to shape to in many fields in an idiosyncratic manner.

Vollenhoven goes further, then. He does not merely ask the formal question, viz., what a particular philosopher's attitude towards the Word had been, but he also asks questions about content with reference to what the Bible reveals to us. It is not that Vollenhoven wishes to judge people unjustly (such as the Greeks who did not know the Bible) but because he is convinced that the light of the Bible only can supply answers to such fundamental questions.

The second question that each philosopher has to ask according to this method is: Where did you seek and find certainty? How did you determine, according to that, what was right or wrong, true or false, ugly or beautiful?

In Greek thought already this question revealed some interesting facets. As pagans the Greeks did not know that God had promulgated the laws to direct all creatures on earth. For that reason they sought laws either inside (within the subjects or in their qualities) or outside the cosmos. Furthermore, they also did not know the commandment of love, and therefore they overstressed the modal laws. In the third place law-was, early on in the history of Greek philosophy, confused with the universal, and made one with it. (Universal-individual is one of the fundamental traits of all created things and not the same as subjugation to the law.)

Vollenhoven mentions three ways of approach: the subjectivist, the objectivist and the realistic.

### **Subjectivists**

They did not distinguish clearly enough between creatures or subjects and the laws, norms or principles which they had to obey. The most deeply rooted reason for this was to be found in the fact that they did not acknowledge God as the Giver of the laws. They did not realize that God, who created everything, would give laws for his subjects. Therefore they could not distinguish between subjects who were and laws which were valid. They thus identified the law with something of the cosmos. The result was inevitably that some part of creation now became its own law.

Initially the subjective laws were still sought in something creaturely outside man. Man, however, soon became (in Greek philosophy, such as among the Sophists) the yardstick for all things (cf. Protagoras of Abdera). Whatever man could think/do, he was allowed to think/do? There was no other guideline from "above."

It is unnecessary to say that subjectivism opens the door ultimately to anarchism and even nihilism by way, initially, of individualism, relativism and pragmatism. Each individual man now has his own "principles" and determines for himself what he regards as true, right, good and beautiful. The certainty and the security that he seeks so urgently the subjectivist could not find--rather he arrived at the opposite.

Of the three views about the law it was subjectivism precisely which eventually (with the Greeks already) gained the upperhand and which still--even if in different forms--dominates Western thought.

### **Objectivists**

They started developing a vision to include another interesting facet of creation, viz., the qualities of concrete things such as colour, sounds, sizes, etc. The qualities of things determined to a large extent what things could do or what could be done with them. Just think to what extent our daily actions are influenced by what we see, smell, hear and feel, or how the artist has to seek for the right materials with the right qualities in order to create the work of art he has visualized.

This has the unfortunate effect then of seducing the objectivist to the point where he seeks firm ground, basic certainties and guidelines for life in these objects. The objects have now

become the laws for the subjects. An object (for example the seductive fragrance of your girl friend's perfume) may well influence your actions, but may never become the norm for your behaviour.

The objectivist too seeks for basic certainties somewhere in creation, so that objectivism, looked at carefully, does not offer any advantage over subjectivism--absolute certainty keeps eluding both.

### ***Realists***

The great philosopher Plato gave a third reply to Vollenhoven's question about law. Because he realized only too well that neither subjectivism nor objectivism offered any definite certainty, he sought the law outside the cosmos. The law a thing (Latin *res*, from which "realism"), which was independent outside creation, and which indicated to us how we should live (in terms of what was true, good and beautiful). (In this way Plato became the first Greek thinker who acknowledged two separate "beings" or modes of being.) We can know these laws by way of our reasoning power.

The great Plato, too, however, missed the point. According to the Scriptures that law is not a "thing," something creaturely either above or behind creation. It is also not independent, apart from God, the Law-giver. Furthermore, it is not just an example to us, found by reason, which we can then follow. No--according to the Scriptures man has to stand in the correct relationship with God in order to know his law, and then one has no option but to tremble before the demand for obedience which God postulates.

As mentioned above, the subjectivist concept of law (both as a result of the emergence of the a-priori theme, which because of lack of space I will not go into here) came out of the struggle triumphantly. This state of affairs has lasted to the present day.

The point of contention which, after the Greeks, gave rise to different philosophical trends centred mainly in irrelevancies, while they all showed similarities in their rejection of objectivism and realism. In this way the struggle between rationalism and irrationalism (or between different types of rationalism) is, in our day, merely a storm in a teacup, an internal fight between factions of the (subjectivist) conquerors--long after the decisive battle has already been fought.

With this division into a large variety of trends Vollenhoven indicated how, as a result of their communal awareness of norms--in spite of differences on other points--there can be a communal bond between philosophers. A trend or a school links together different philosophers into a historical unity. These varying, consecutive trends of thought constitute an important cause for the dynamics of Western philosophical history.

If we should quickly compare this method once again with a few of the other methods of philosophical historiography, then I still think that Vollenhoven brings it somewhat further than the almost purely chronological method of amongst others Diels-Kranz (in *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*), or F. Sassen (in his series on the history of philosophy). The history of philosophy for Vollenhoven is more than a chronological collection of philosophical statements and postulations, because these were made by living people trying to solve important questions centring on life. At the same time these statements were made within a specific--often complex--historical context. For this reason one is not satisfied either by F. Copleston's popular series of volumes: This series mainly gives a survey and not so much a coherent interpretation of the history of philosophy. Although W. Windelband and H.

Heimsoeth, in their on the history of philosophy, try to stress the systematic problems, the influence of political history is clear and their historiography is once more marked partially by a classification according to centuries (that is, chronologically, by approximation). The authors of the last three volumes of the already mentioned *Ueberwegs Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* apply in particular a national-psychological-geographical method. A certain “VBlkerpsychologie” (ethnic psychology) underlies their historiography. According to them the spirit of a nation is of determining importance for its philosophy, so that they allocate separate sections to, for example, the Italians, the Germans, the French, the English and the Spanish. There is, of course, some truth in the idea that different nations adhere to specific philosophical concepts, but this can never be regarded as a watertight division. It is also unscientific to apply a nationalpsychological method to the history of philosophy: the method simply does not suit the field of investigation!

### **1.1.3. The “texture” of thought is the unique way in which each philosopher sees reality**

The way in which each philosopher has given tangible shape to reality can be felt from his philosophy as one feels texture. Vollenhoven has gained a sufficiently clear touch from the various woods to distinguish clearly all the different kinds.

Philosophers are questioners. They do not have the answers to the questions--as is generally assumed. One could rather say that they have the questions for all the answers. There are certain basic questions (as Vollenhoven has discovered) which each philosopher anew sets and then provides answers to!

Such questions include: Where does reality come from? What did it look like originally? Each philosopher is also absorbed by the my sterious relationship between the universal and the individual: How is it that we are all people and yet each remains a unique being? What makes an oak an oak, a syringa a syringa and a peace a peach? Why, then, do we call them all trees?

Throughout the ages man has also wondered about himself. What kind of a “thing” is man precisely? Where does he come from, how has he been assembled (does- he consist of body and soul?), what is the sense of his existence, and what is his destiny? How does he have to live with other men? How does he attain true knowledge? etc., etc.

Vollenhoven now asks--in the light of the Scriptures--what each philosopher’s answer to these questions had been. It is impossible for me to give all the answers here--the idea is not, after all, to give a full discussion of the CPHM. Therefore only a few of the “textures” that he discovered will be outlined.

- ❑ As regards the question about origin there are those who have called on myth (the result of fantasies of faith) to explain the origin of reality. These thinkers are regarded as mythologizing. Others have rejected this concept: he calls them non-mythologizing. Within this group. there are also differences: the purely cosmological philosophers wish to evade the question about origins and wish to philosophize only about the cosmos as it exists, while the cosmogeneouscosmological philosophers do not quite disregard the question of development (genesis).
- ❑ As to the question about what the cosmos looked like originally, there are mainly two points of view. The one group of philosophers maintains that it had been a unity, so that the diversity that we observe in the cosmos is purely a matter of secondary nature. The other group feels that the diversity (normally a duality, viz., a transcendental and a non-transcendental one) existed from the beginning. They are thus confronted by the

problem of where the unity of the cosmos came from. Vollenhoven calls the former group monists and the latter group dualists. The basic point of departure of these groups then determines how they will see man: a unity or a duality (of, for example, soul and body)? And if man is to be seen as a duality, what then is the relationship between his higher and his lower component? Here too a whole realm of anthropological theories is offered as possible solutions.

- To the question as to what the relationship between the universal and the individual is, history offers fascinating theories. The CPHM here distinguishes between universalism (which puts the universal first and the individual in the second place), individualism (which does the exact opposite) and partial universalism, which follows a middle road. Among the partial universalists Vollenhoven distinguishes two subtypes, viz., the view which holds to a macro-microcosmos theory, and those which accept the doctrine of form and matter.

Vollenhoven also indicates how philosophers have given incorrect answers to all three of the questions mentioned (origin, original condition and individual-universal) precisely because they did not know the Scriptures or did not wish to acknowledge the Scriptures fully. His own view, gained in the light of the Scriptures, is then not one of the solutions produced by history, but it brings to the fore something quite different. In this respect too it is clear that Vollenhoven does not deal with a method that is bound scripturally in name only.

In conclusion one could say that Vollenhoven has perfected the following means to determine a philosopher's stance through his method:

- *era or period*, which is determined with regard to his attitude to the Word of God;
- *trend*, which is determined with regard to a philosopher's view of law; and
- *type*, which emerges from the philosopher's vision on the *cosmos*.

In inverted order one could say that Vollenhoven's zoom lens lifts out three "levels" of a philosopher in succession. The focus first falls on the specific philosopher's vision of the cosmos (type). Then a deeper facet is brought to light when it is directed at the philosopher's concept of law, that in which he seeks his fastness and security (trend). Because the law is an important link between the creation and the Creator, a deeper level still is reached, viz., the specific philosopher's relationship to God and his Word (era or period).

Our first question (as to whether the CPHM was really constructed in the light of the Scriptures) can therefore be answered affirmatively. We can thus now go on to deal with the second question set at the beginning, viz., as to whether this method does justice to the field of investigation.

## 1.2. Does the CPHM do justice to the history of philosophy?

The requirement set at the outset, was that an alien method should not be imposed on a field of investigation from the outside. Stated in positive terms: there should be agreement, concord, between the nature of the method and the prospective field of study. This is a very important requirement.

A number of people have accused Vollenhoven of raping the history of philosophy by his method. He has also been accused of being guilty of a pigeonhole-type of scheme. He would then, it was said, have gone around like a Sherlock Holmes and arrest every philosopher he encountered, label him and shove him into the cell previously prepared for him. The mesh

imprisoning the philosopher would be woven of type and trend, and the man would be guilty as charged until he had proved the opposite!

I do not believe that such criticism could emanate from people who had the least knowledge of what Vollenhoven was trying to establish.

In the first place he did not formulate his method fully before he turned to the history of philosophy. His method grew gradually on the basis of what he discovered in the history itself. It was as if he first “discovered” his method and then much later wrote about it. (It was only in 1948 that he formally named his method.)

In the second place Vollenhoven was also ever willing to adapt his method, to correct and to make it more encompassing. These continual adaptations were often the cause of great despair among his students, but also clear proof that he did not attempt to force the history of philosophy into a steel corset. By means of his terminology he wished to distinguish small details in the patterns of thought of the various philosophers.

In the third place it is also not true that Vollenhoven tried to pigeonhole philosophers implacably in one of only a few pigeonholes. This is rather true of many of the textbooks of philosophical history which have no more than three or four labels at their disposal. Vollenhoven’s method allows several thousand possibilities! If the CPHM were to be called a prison-house for philosophers, then it is rather a liberal prison-house....

The field of investigation is not merely a philosophy, but the history of all the philosophies in conjunction. In philosophy one deals with the basic problems that each philosopher wrestles with anew, but never fully chews. One could say that the ever-recurring problems point at the constant. As opposed to this the history of philosophy, as every other history, is characterized by the dynamic, the ever-changing. As a result of the quest for security (especially in terms of norm or law), which never comes to rest, the history of philosophy remains ever in motion.

Vollenhoven thus wishes to do justice to the field of investigation by giving attention to both the problematic and the historical. (This explains the name of the method.) Stress purely on history is not sufficient. On the other hand history will disintegrate into small fragments when only the philosophical issues are lifted out.

The stress on the close link between the two facets of the history of philosophy ensures that the philosophical historiographer sees the problems as they originate, or as they developed in the course of history. This prevents, for example, that one should anachronistically superimpose one’s own problems on another era and refer to Socrates as an existentialist.

Vollenhoven is not the first to use a problem-historical approach. It is probable that two neo-Kantians, W. Hartman (1882-1950) and R. Höningwald (1875-1947) had an influence on him in this regard. The earlier mentioned W. Windelband also pleaded for a “problemgeschichtliche Anordnung” in his well-known *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie*. The most important thing in the history of philosophy for him is to be found in the “Hauptprobleme” and “Hauptrichtungen.” As we have already seen, Windelband is not consistent in this: the influence of the political history and a division of philosophy in centuries also play a role in his historiography.

This also leads to Vollenhoven’s method being called the consistent problem-historical method. One or the other form of problem-historical approach is quite popular today. Vollenhoven’s special merit lies in the fact that, decades ago already, he revealed philosophical problems, consistently, in their historical context.

For the sake of interest the following still: According to A. Wolters there has been a gradual shift from stress on the systematic problems seen against their historical background to stress on the treatment of history in systematic terms. According to him Vollenhoven even laid more stress on history in the development of his method.

We can therefore reply affirmatively to the question as to whether the CPHM does justice to the field of investigation. This does not mean, in the least that it is the only possible method or that it is perfect. Each method has its inherent limitations and weaknesses. (There is not only method in each person's madness, but each method has its own madness too!) Should we, however, compare the CPHM with all the methods used at present in this field, then it becomes clear that many of the limitations of the other methods have been eliminated in this method.



- ❑ Philosophers D and E, while they do differ as to the type of philosophy that they hold to (the “texture” in the terms used earlier) are probably related in terms of era because they have been placed in the same trend (the “fragrance” of their philosophy is the same).
- ❑ Philosopher E was a dynamic thinker. He did not keep to the same point of view all his life. First he changed from a monistic (E1) to a dualistic concept (E2). Then he maintained his dualism, but a changed vision on the law put him into a new trend (E3)
- ❑ Philosophers F and G agree strongly as to the “texture” of their philosophies, but the “colour” (religious bias) differs in both cases. F has broken with the Word of God, and G wants to use the Word in his philosophy as the absolute truth. Although philosopher G’s attitude is right, he does not yet think radically in biblical terms. The texture of his philosophy also still has to be reformed in the light of the Scriptures.
- ❑ Philosopher H is truly a reformatory thinker. (For that reason he stands totally outside the scheme.) The colour, the fragrance and the texture of his philosophy are clearly determined by the Word of God.

### **3. Arguments For And Against the CPHM**

As is the case with any method this method too has its limitations and its strong points. I am not going to repeat here the objections that have already been aired in the course of the paper, such as for example the old objection that Vollenhoven imposes his own preconceived ideas of- history on the material.

#### **3.1. Objections against**

As far as possible I will try to respond to the objections--which of course does not mean that the objections are not sometimes valid, pointing out real weaknesses in the method.

- ❑ The method does not represent the biographical details concerning a philosopher. It is true that this information is not given in Vollenhoven’s SchematischeKaarten, but there is nothing to prevent one from giving this material in a textbook on the history of philosophy (together with the other results yielded by the method).
- ❑ The method does not allow the philosopher himself to be clearly outlined—he disappears behind the cloud of his abstract philosophical conception. This method is not in the first place concerned with the philosophers as people but with their patterns of thought. If a philosopher’s personality were to be of especial interest in a true understanding of his thought, then some attention can be given to this aspect separately.
- ❑ The true influence of important philosophers can not be indicated by means of this method—the dwarfs stand on the same line as the giants from the history of human thought. This is once again true if one were to identify the method with the schematic charts of Vollenhoven. Experts of this method, however, know that Vollenhoven’s consistent method (problem and historical) succeeds in showing the immense influence of great philosophers through the ages. And the so-called dwarfs are not included in his charts

without reason—they are included because they have also contributed in an important way to the history of Western philosophy.

- ❑ The method is very selective and leaves out of consideration various important philosophical concepts which are discussed by other writers on the history of philosophy.

This is true, but each method is “selective.” Here we have the problem as to whether one method could be found to cover and exploit the entire field.

- ❑ The development of movements, the reasons for the changeover from one trend to another, are not given.

Vollenhoven did (in, for example, his *Kort Overzicht*) pay attention to this “struggle of the intellects.”

- ❑ Are there not more similarities (and more differences) between philosophers than merely the conceptual (type) and historical (trend)?

That might well be possible. To my mind, however, these are the two most important ones.

- ❑ The method is fleshless and bloodless—merely offers the skeleton of a philosophy. This is true, but if it were to offer more, certain strong points (such as, for example, the broad survey that it offers) will have to be sacrificed.

- ❑ The method is difficult to comprehend fully.

Usually the reference in this respect is to Vollenhoven’s compact style and terminology. He does not, however, introduce a new terminology purely for the sake of the terminology, but in order to be able to distinguish more clearly. A truly scientific terminology should not strive merely to be popular. Scientific accuracy prevents Vollenhoven from—as many textbooks in the history of philosophy—using terms such as “the Greek vision of the world,” “the Medieval ground motif,” “modern Anthropology” or the “concept of Aristotle,” seeing that Aristotle did not have one concept only but a whole long and complex philosophical development, which can only be described by means of accurate terminology.

Each method, after all, has its own terminology. This, if you like, scientific “jargon” is the “shorthand” by which scientists communicate.

- ❑ The method is time-consuming and therefore not very useful.

This is true. Vollenhoven worked with it and on it his whole life long. One does not, however, gain anything which is worthwhile, especially in the field of philosophy, in one day. Digging--in history too--demands sweat and devotion. Most of us, however, do not have to know the whole of history in detail or to write books about it. The method is also useful in the analysis of only one thinker or one trend.

### 3.2. Arguments for

In the foregoing this method was compared again and again with various acceptance historiographical methods.. From that it has already emerged that we have to do here with a special method.

- ❑ I do not have to stress again that it is *the only truly reformatory biblically-founded method* which we have so far. Most reformational thinkers so far have been interested more in the construction of their own system than in the history of other viewpoints.
- ❑ I have also pointed out already that this method--as far as I can judge—*does not wilfully force the history of philosophy into a preconceived restrictive scheme.*
- ❑ It also offers a useful overview of the whole of Western philosophy. (The danger exists that in this field, as in others, one can after a while get to the point of not seeing the wood for the trees.)
- ❑ • Apart from the *unity* of the history of philosophy it, also allows one to see the great diversity. (Not only the wood but every individual tree has to have the right amount of attention.)
- ❑ At the same time it offers insight into the *main outlines* (colour, fragrance and texture) of each philosopher's thoughts.
- ❑ It has *an eye for the development of specific thinkers* and disposes of the apparatus to be able to describe the development. That for which in the past Vollenhoven was ridiculed, viz., that in various thinkers he often indicated a (often complicated) course of development and thus change of concept, would seem today to have been one of his great strengths, and proof of the fact that in this as in other things he was far ahead of his time.
- ❑ It is possible, by means of this method, to *indicate clearly the differences or relations between various philosophers.*
- ❑ At the same time the method lends itself to *indicating precisely where and how philosophers* have influenced each other.
- ❑ The method has not been newly developed. It has been tried out in practice and *has already yielded some surprising results.*
- ❑ The possibility of the *application of the method in other fields* than the purely philosophically historical is not excluded. Theology (and especially the history of dogma) is an obvious example. Method adaptation or transfer from one field to another is no sin--as long as the method is suitably adapted for the new field that it has to be used in.

A very important factor which in the past rendered this method unpopular among especially young students of philosophy was perhaps to be found in the fact that it was in a pedagogically unsound manner. Therefore it is of the greatest importance that this method should be offered in a simple and comprehensible manner--not as the only method but still as one of the few truly Scriptural methods. This paper has been a modest effort in this direction.

#### **4. In Conclusion**

The perceptive eye and appreciative hand of the expert can also make us sensitive to the great variety of "species of wood" from the history of philosophy. Each has its own colour, fragrance, and texture--a special character. Some are rough-grained, some are fine-grained.

Some are dry while others have their own oil. In some one can discern the rings of growth very clearly, in others not so clearly.

Vollenhoven was such an expert, who could see from precisely what kind of wood a philosopher could have been carved. His method brings us to the core of many “trees” in the history of philosophy.

D H Th. Vollenhoven—one of our *philosophiae calviniae patres*—left us a precious heritage in his CPHM which has not been noticed enough. It can be used fruitfully and also offers many possibilities which can be exploited more fully.

Without this method Calvinist philosophy would definitely have been poorer.

## **Selected List Of Literature On The Consistent Problem-Historical Method**

This bibliography is not exhaustive. In these publications, however, you should find sufficient references to more literature. I have tried to mention not only writings by Vollenhoven but also publications by like-minded thinkers who have thought about the method or who have used it.

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