Chapter 2

Roots of the Normative Practice Approach:
The Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the philosophy of Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), whose systematic philosophy has informed and inspired the initial formulations of the normative practice approach. Central concepts like mode, aspect, entity, meaning, heart, and ground motive will be discussed. The relevance of these concepts for the normative practice approach will be pointed out.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the philosophical background of the Normative Practice Approach (NPA) and, more particularly, its roots in the systematic philosophy of the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. His work is not well-known and needs a more extensive introduction, since it has been important for the initial formulations of the NPA. This chapter will especially draw on Dooyeweerd’s idea that norms are intrinsic, i.e., ‘structurally given’, and the idea that all human activity is ultimately rooted in existential, ultimate concerns. The chapter will highlight the connections between Dooyeweerd’s philosophy and early formulations of the NPA (for similar attempts, cf. Mouv & Griffioen 1993; Verkerk 2004; Chaplin 2011; Verkerk et al. 2016). In the next chapter Jan Hoogland will focus on other philosophical and sociological sources for the NPA and give a general description of this approach.

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Who was Dooyeweerd and what were his most important ideas? Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) was one of the founders of what has become known as reformational (or ‘neo-Calvinist’) philosophy. He developed his philosophy in the interbellum, in an intellectual climate which was characterized by uncertainty, deep divides between philosophical traditions, and the presentiment of decline of Western culture. Dooyeweerd studied law and philosophy. He had a brief career in public administration before he became secretary of the Abraham Kuyper Foundation, a precursor of the scientific institute of one of the Christian political parties in the Netherlands before World War II. From 1926 until his retirement in 1965 he was professor of philosophy and history of law at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

He wrote extensively and had an almost encyclopedic knowledge not only of philosophy and the history of philosophy (especially Neo-Kantianism and ancient philosophy), but also of the sciences of his time, esp. mathematics, physics, biology, law, and social and political sciences. Most of his ideas in systematic philosophy were developed and refined in the interaction with the sciences (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958).

For the understanding of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy it is useful to keep in mind that it is built up around two main themes: (1) the distinction between different modal aspects (or ways of functioning); and (2) the idea that all human activity is rooted in what he calls the ‘heart’ and which he denotes as ‘concentration point’ within our existence out of which our ultimate concerns originate.

In the following sections, we discuss first the theory of modal aspects, then the theory of entities or ‘individuality structures’ (which informed the development of the NPA), subsequently the concepts of law and cosmic order, next the idea of heart and, finally, what Dooyeweerd saw as the fundamental flaw of Western philosophy and science: its absolutization of the theoretical attitude of thought.

MODAL ASPECTS

Dooyeweerd tells in an interview that idea of modal diversity came as a flash during a walk in the dunes somewhere around 1921 when he was overwhelmed by the astonishing diversity and the incredible coherence in the way things exist and are functioning (van Dunné et al. 1977, 37). Everything exists in different ways, ways that are both distinguishable and interconnected in our ordinary experience of the world. A flower, for instance, exists in a spatial, in a physical and in a biotic way: it occupies a certain space, it has physical properties (such as mass), and it functions as a biotic entity, because it grows, blossoms, and reproduces. Flowers may also exist in other spheres or aspects, for instance in the economic or the aesthetic aspect.
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