Chapter II

Overview of Dooyeweerd’s Philosophy

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the thought of Herman Dooyeweerd, giving a basic overview of the main themes and ways of thinking that are relevant to understanding information systems. More detailed explanation and discussion of specific points of his philosophy will be offered where they are first needed in later chapters, where these basic themes will be used to formulate frameworks for understanding research and practice in several areas of IS. So the reader should not feel required to absorb reams of philosophy before addressing IS issues.

Not all of Dooyeweerd’s thought is explained, only that needed for understanding information systems. But what is provided should be sufficient not only to explain the frameworks developed but also to enable the reader to take this work further. Some links are made to other philosophic thinkers referred to by the IS communities.

For a more complete rendering of Dooyeweerd, see summaries by Kalsbeek (1975), Choi (2000) or Clouser (2005), or see *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Dooyeweerd, 1984), which is Dooyeweerd’s own four-volume *magnum opus*. This was first published in 1953-5, and it extended an earlier similar work published in Dutch (1935) by responding to criticisms thereof. We will also draw upon Dooyeweerd (1979), (1986), and (1999).
2.1 Dooyeweerd’s Approach to Philosophy

Dooyeweerd was unusual as a philosopher. It has been said\(^1\) that Dooyeweerd aimed, not so much to construct a philosophical theory about reality as to “open up the structure of reality so that once we ‘get’ it, we can run with it. He clears away all the things that keep us from seeing it.” In the author’s experience this is exactly what happens, even among those with no knowledge of philosophy. Dooyeweerd’s way of thinking is immensely practical and what at first sight appears complex seems rather to express the complexity that is everyday reality.

Dooyeweerd’s interest was in the whole breadth and depth of reality: in what there is and occurs, in what might become, in how we know, in what we believe and what we have presupposed, in what is right and wrong, in meaning, in humanity, divinity and mundanity, and in everyday experience—all that the branches of philosophy mentioned earlier. For example, IS in use can succeed and fail in many ways for many reasons; Dooyeweerd “clears away” that which stops us taking seriously the diversity of ways in which success and failure occur and the very real and yet subtle difference between success and failure.

Yet this clearing away was not nihilism, nor even an extreme form of subjectivism. Dooyeweerd believed that 2,500 years of theoretical, philosophical, and scientific thinking have obfuscated rather than revealed the structure of reality—from the Greek philosophers, through the medieval periods, through the Reformation, Renaissance and Enlightenment, into the modern period, up to the middle of the twentieth century. Yet he also believed that this obfuscation was mainly inadvertent rather than deliberate, and he respected many thinkers as offering genuine insight. He believed that this whole 2,500-year-old river of thinking itself needed to be properly understood as part of reality.

The root of the problem, he argued, was deep presuppositions at the root of Western thinking, such as the dividing of form from matter (especially in Greek thought), sacred from secular (medieval) and control from freedom (modern). Neither philosophical nor scientific thought is ever neutral nor absolutely true; all is seen through the “lens” of our presuppositions. Dooyeweerd prefigured many “critical” thinkers in IS and management today in admitting they see reality through a particular “lens”, such as Adam et al. (2006). But, being a true philosopher, he always applied his thinking to himself. So he openly declared his own presuppositions, which differed from those of most Western thought, and actively engaged in self-critique and invited the critique of others.

But he did not assume, as most after Kant have done, that all lenses must be deemed equally valid. He undertook a critical examination not only of the various “lenses” on offer but also of what constitutes any lens, the lens that is the theoretical attitude of thought itself, going deeper than either Kant or Husserl did. As a result, there is
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