

# Dooyeweerd's Understanding of Meaning (1)

## *Some Main Themes*

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## Abstract

Meaning is very important in Dooyeweerd's Reformational philosophy. This essay seeks to examine what Dooyeweerd wrote about meaning and how he used it in mapping out the various domains of his philosophy. A distinction is drawn between different types of meaning, and it seems that what Dooyeweerd intended was a meaningfulness that exists prior to being, which surrounds and pervades us and is not limited to humans. The aims of the article are to paint a systematic picture of Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning and suggest some ways in which it might be developed further by Reformational philosophers. This essay is intended, however, to be of wider interest than just to Reformational discourse, especially in conjunction with its companion paper, which discusses how Dooyeweerd's understanding can be useful in the sciences and practice.

## Keywords

meaning – meaningfulness – Herman Dooyeweerd – philosophy of meaning – modal aspects

## 1 Introduction

*"Meaning is the being of all that has been created, and the nature even of our selfhood,"* wrote Herman Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:4) as one of the most famous of his sayings. Right at the start of his magnum opus, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Dooyeweerd made meaning central in his philosophy. That the words *meaning*, *meaningful*, etc., occur 3,077 times—674 times in volume 1,

2,070 times in volume 2, and 333 times in volume 3—shows how important the notion of meaning was to Dooyeweerd.

### 1.1 *The Importance of Meaning*

As Van der Hoeven (1978) explained in a tribute to Dooyeweerd, this has enormous significance for philosophy and its application, which has either ignored meaning, treated it as too sacred to be critically studied, or reduced it to subjective attribution.

It may be that, for Dooyeweerd, *meaning* is almost a synonym for *reality* (Dooyeweerd 1999, appendix). Yet Dooyeweerd did not adequately discuss what he meant by *meaning*, and neither has subsequent Reformational philosophy. The index entry on *meaning* in the fourth volume of *A New Critique* is comparatively meagre. This suggests that Dooyeweerd was using the concept of meaning in an intuitive manner, and was taking meaning for granted. It may be that the notion can only be fully understood intuitively (Van der Hoeven 1978), but if Dooyeweerd's philosophy is to be employed in mainstream discourses, as he urged in *A New Critique* (1984, 1:viii), then his novel idea of meaning needs and deserves clear elaboration and discussion.

Though Dooyeweerd discussed meaning as early as 1923 (Henderson 1994, 105), it is his maturer understanding in *A New Critique* that we investigate, in hope of seeing in which direction he was heading as he matured and, thus, how our understanding might develop beyond his in future. In a section headed "A more detailed explanation of our conception of meaning" (1984, 2:30–32), Dooyeweerd made some of his understanding of meaning explicit, but this covers only one of the themes discussed in this article. That section clarifies specific misunderstandings that had arisen in the Reformational community, but it does not provide full understanding of Dooyeweerd's conception of meaning as he actually employed it throughout his work.

The purpose of this article is to (a) demonstrate that meaning is more important in Dooyeweerd's philosophy than hitherto recognised; (b) offer a systematic understanding of the roles that meaning plays therein; and (c) suggest some development or extensions of Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning that require philosophic attention. A companion article (Basden and Joneidy, forthcoming 2019) discusses some implications of Dooyeweerd's view of meaning for everyday experience and for science.

Section 2 discusses the diversity and coherence of meaning and its relation to pre-theoretical experience and introduces Dooyeweerd's notion of aspects. Section 3 discusses the nature of meaning as referring and dependency on an origin of meaning. Section 4 discusses how meaning is the foundation of

being, functioning, law, and normativity. Section 5 discusses the a priori nature of meaning, and section 6 discusses the role meaning plays in theoretical thought and ground-motives. Section 7 discusses how aspects may be delineated, and section 8 draws conclusions. Most sections may be read in any order. The order is that in which topics are introduced by Dooyeweerd in the first few pages of his *New Critique*.

I found Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning useful in several areas of life and science, which led me to explore it. Accordingly, my understanding of it is influenced by how I found it valuable in practice. I trust these articles will be of interest to a wide readership.

## 1.2 Meanings of Meaning

It is surprising how seldom the word *meaning* occurs in the indexes of philosophy books, as though it is not a topic of much interest—not even in Merleau-Ponty's (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, even though the word appears throughout his text. In his text, *meaning* seems to refer to more than one thing. Indeed, throughout philosophy, and in everyday life, the word *meaning* seems to mean at least five different things. It is not the purpose of this article to argue fully for these five (there may be more); their differentiation here is merely to assist clarity.

- *Signification-meaning*, the meaning carried by words, phrases, etc. In very many cases, this is what philosophy refers to when it uses the term *meaning* and is studied in the sciences of semiotics and linguistics and in the linguistic turn in philosophy. The latter, however, has wandered into other types of meaning.
- *Interpretation-meaning*, the meaning we assign when we interpret something—e.g., when we take a group of scattered feathers to mean a bird was killed. This is very similar to Merleau-Ponty's *perception meaning*, in which a perceiving subject perceives an object, such as a dot, and interprets it as the pupil of an eye, the top of the letter *i*, the end of a sentence, and so on.
- *Attribution-meaning*, the meaning we attribute to things, such as the vase my grandmother gave me. Like interpretation-meaning, attribution-meaning need not be signified (it may be pre-symbolic), but whereas interpretation-meaning is sensitive to the perceived object, attribution-meaning comes more from the subject—anything my grandmother gave me might have the same attribution-meaning to me. Attribution-meaning is often linked to utility or purpose.
- *Life-meaning*, as in “What is the meaning of my life?” The meaning of life has been discussed in philosophy since before Aristotle, and is usually treated as the question “which final ends a person ought to realize in order to have a

life that matters" (Metz 2013). Usually, *matters* refers to one of life's aspects, such as goodness, health, happiness, or virtue.

- *Meaningfulness*, the idea that things are meaningful whether or not we signify, interpret, or attribute, and whether or not a human life is involved. Meaningfulness applies to all temporal reality (e.g., animals, habitats, planets). In everyday language, words like *value*, *importance*, and *significance* are often used to denote or connote meaningfulness. For example, in "reality has a value in itself that is independent of its usefulness for humankind," Jochemsen (2006, 98) is referring to meaningfulness.

The first three types of meanings emanate from the functioning of a subject. The fourth is centred on the subject, but expresses a belief that there is something meaningful beyond the subject (sometimes this "beyond" is assumed to mean *intersubjectivity*). The fifth, meaningfulness, transcends subjectivity—and, in Dooyeweerd's philosophy, objectivity and intersubjectivity too. Though the distinction and relationship between these five is not discussed here, a suggestion is made later that the first four can be rooted in meaningfulness if we employ Dooyeweerd's ideas, and that life-meaning presupposes meaningfulness.

What will be claimed and demonstrated throughout this article is that when Dooyeweerd used the word *meaning* he was usually referring to *meaningfulness*. Meaningfulness is the type of meaning least discussed by philosophers (and many wish to deny it). This may be one reason why Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning might be a major contribution to philosophy. It is meaningfulness that provides a philosophical basis for environmental responsibility.

So the question this article addresses is, what is meaningfulness as Dooyeweerd understood it?<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Everyday Experience and the Diversity and Coherence of Meaning

If I consider reality as it is given in the naïve pre-theoretical experience, and then confront it with a theoretical analysis through which reality appears to split up into various modal aspects then the first thing that

1 Regarding terminology, as far as possible, the five terms will be used instead of *meaning*, which will be used only generically, where the five types are not differentiated, and in text or phrases from Dooyeweerd (such as meaning-kernel and coherence of meaning) and others. The first four types may properly be called *meanings* rather than *meaning* when they refer to specific subjects.

strikes me, is the original *indissoluble interrelation* among these aspects.... A[n] indissoluble inner coherence binds the numerical to the spatial aspect, the latter to the aspect of mathematical movement, the aspect of movement to that of physical energy, which i[t]self is the necessary basis of the aspect of organic life. The aspect of organic life has an inner connection with that of psychical feeling, the latter refers in its logical anticipation (the feeling of logical correctness or incorrectness) to the analytical-logical aspect. This in turn is connected with the historical, the linguistic, the aspect of social intercourse, the economic, the aesthetic, the jural, the moral aspects and that of faith.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 1:3

In these first words of Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, we find four ideas in quick succession: (1) start with pre-theoretical experience; (2) then add theoretical analysis to separate things out; (3) we find diverse aspects; (4) the diversity deeply coheres.

## 2.1 *Everyday, Pre-theoretical Experience and Attitude*

Dooyeweerd used the terms *pre-theoretical* and *naïve* frequently. In some places, *pre-theoretical* is applied to attitude of thought and *naïve* to experience, but sometimes these are reversed and sometimes, as above, they are coupled together. We may reasonably infer that he used them almost interchangeably. I prefer the term *everyday*, since *pre-theoretical* is a specialised term used only in theoretical discourse, *naïve* has negative connotations of “stupid,” and *everyday* is widely used even in mainstream philosophy (e.g., de Certeau 1984; Bourdieu 1977). Where Dooyeweerd uses *everyday*—only rarely in *A New Critique*, of utensils and life (Dooyeweerd 1984, 3:128, 129, 142)—it is obvious he is referring to pre-theoretical experience thereof, and thus uses the term interchangeably with the other two. So, in this article, the three terms will be used interchangeably.

Why did Dooyeweerd start with pre-theoretical experience? It is because he believed that theoretical thought cannot be taken for granted, as it had been in most philosophy, and must be questioned. *Theoretical* must be understood in relation to *pre-theoretical*, rather than the other way around. Dooyeweerd not only treated the everyday (pre-theoretical, naïve) as important but made it the starting point. Throughout his *New Critique*, all human life is seen as pre-theoretical experience, which itself is seen as involving all aspects interwoven with each other in a cohering diversity, in which every aspect is meaningful.

This includes theoretical thought, so that philosophy is treated as a multi-aspectual human activity (cf. Husserl [(1936) 1970] relating sciences to the

lifeworld). Starting with the pre-theoretical attitude, the first things we encounter are diversity and coherence, but these become clear via theoretical analysis.

## 2.2 *Diversity of Meaning*

Dooyeweerd does not discuss diversity explicitly here, but shows it by his list of 15 aspects, which are “modalities of meaning” (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:4)—ways of being meaningful or functioning meaningfully. He seems to take diversity for granted, as a presupposition of the coherence that is his primary concern at this point. So it is left to us to draw together how Dooyeweerd treats diversity of meaning, and much can be learned by considering his discussion of aspects.

In the pre-theoretical attitude, we experience diversity as a superabundance of types of thing—rocks, plants, animals, feelings, thoughts, sciences, techniques, words, computer applications, relationships, sports, music, responsibilities, and so on, and then types within types (e.g., in computer applications: games, social media, browsers, GPS, and stock-control systems). The plethora is unmanageable, especially since new and complex types keep on emerging.

Dooyeweerd took a different approach, suggesting right from the start that the diversity we experience is a diversity of *modalities of meaning (aspects)*, of which there is a relatively manageable number (around 15). It is aspects that make things meaningful in various ways, and types of thing arise from aspects (see sect. 4).

Dooyeweerd gives no clear definition of aspect, which suggests that he used the word in its ordinary sense of “a way of seeing things”—as in architecture, as in eastern or northern aspects of a building.

Several definitions of aspects have been offered. Van Woudenberg (2003) and Hart (1984) define aspects as functions. Clouser (2005) defines aspects as basic kinds of properties and laws. De Raadt (1997) depicts aspects metaphorically as layers of a thing. Dooyeweerd believed his idea of aspects, though best known, was least understood, and Strauss (2009, 391–401) discusses six misunderstandings, including the above. I believe that, though none of the above are sufficient, each contains useful insight, expressing something that emerges from what aspects are. More deeply, “aspects are modes of ‘being’ which make possible and determine the specific nature and kinds of individual things” (Geertsema 2004, 61). Strauss (2009, 398) usefully suggests “determine” should be “co-determine.” None of these, however, seem to treat aspects as modalities of *meaning* in the way Dooyeweerd does.

What Dooyeweerd does tell us about aspects includes the following. Aspects are not the *what* of our experience but the *how* (1984, 1:3n). Aspects are “modal structures of meaning”—see the title of a major section (*ibid.*, 2:55ff.). No aspect is higher (nor more important) than others, but they are ordered, as

earlier and later (a list, not a set). Each aspect is a “modal speciality of meaning” (1:8, 60, 69, etc.), each having a meaning-nucleus or meaning-kernel at its core. Using a spatial metaphor, from these emerge radii, half of which establish links with earlier aspects, half with later aspects (2:75). Thus, Dooyeweerd seemed to see meaning not as distinct points but as circles or spheres that have centres but no hard boundaries. Aspects are not properties of things, but modes in which things can exist and function, and a thing can exist and function in several modes simultaneously.

Dooyeweerd discusses the 15 aspects that he provisionally lists above much later, in the second volume of *A New Critique*, after he has established the philosophical tools with which to do so. Because I wish to refer to various aspects throughout our discussion, readers will need some idea of the kernel meaning of each. Since kernels cannot be precisely signified, various names have been given for some aspects, as follows, of which I will tend to use the first. Several words are supplied with which readers might “triangulate” the meaningfulness of each aspect.

- Quantitative/numeric aspect: makes quantity, amount, countability meaningful
- Spatial aspect: makes continuous extension and simultaneity meaningful
- Kinematic aspect: makes movement meaningful
- Physical aspect: makes energy + mass, causality, and force meaningful
- Organic/biotic aspect: makes life functions and organisms meaningful
- Sensitive/psychic aspect: makes sense, feeling, emotion meaningful
- Analytical/logical aspect: makes distinguishing and conceptualisation meaningful
- Formative/historical/cultural aspect: makes formative power as seen in history, culture, and technology meaningful, as well as planning, achievement, construction, and creation
- Lingual aspect: makes symbolic signification, which enables communication, meaningful
- Social aspect: makes social interaction, togetherness, “we” meaningful
- Economic aspect: makes frugal management of resources meaningful
- Aesthetic aspect: makes harmony, surprise, delight, fun meaningful
- Juridical aspect: makes what is due meaningful, as well as rights, responsibilities, justice
- Ethical/moral aspect: makes self-giving love, including voluntary vulnerability and trust, meaningful
- Pistic/certitudinal/faith aspect: makes beliefs, aspiration, commitment, religion, hope, and the ultimate meaningful

Just as in architecture, where the eastern aspect of a building cannot be derived from the northern aspect, so these aspects of reality cannot be derived from each other: each aspect provides an irreducibly distinct way in which reality can be meaningful. Thus, the organic way of being meaningful cannot be derived from the physical, nor vice versa. So any attempt to treat one as reduced to another can result in deep-seated problems in pre-theoretical experience and category errors in theoretical activity; this is why reductionism is a problem (Clouser 2005). To Dooyeweerd, the inter-aspect distinctions are a deep structure of reality and pertain whether we perceive them or not. However, our *knowledge of* inter-aspect distinctions arises from our perceptions, rationality, history, etc. (see sect. 7.2).

Though we might *experience* the diversity of meaning in the pre-theoretical attitude, it is with theoretical analysis that we can *be aware* of its aspects more precisely and separate them to make a list. All such lists are fallible, as discussed in section 7.

### 2.3 *Coherence of Meaning*

This diversity of meaning is coherent, regardless of whichever type of meaning it is. As with diversity, “this coherence is a coherence of meaning” (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:4) rather than a coherence of things. Dooyeweerd did not systematically explain what he meant by *coherence of meaning*, so we must work it out by reflecting on the uses he puts it to. I will discuss coherence of meaningfulness first and later suggest how other kinds of meanings arise from meaningfulness.

Clues about coherence of meaningfulness may be found in statements like “every aspect refers beyond itself to all the others” (ibid., 1:3) and phrases like “inter-modal coherence of all the aspects of the temporal world” (1:4). Dooyeweerd wrote of a “whole system of modal functions of meaning” (1:5) in which the thinker functions. The word *system* today has unfortunate connotations that rob Dooyeweerd's idea of its dynamism and rich freedom, so it may be better to think of everything functioning in all aspects simultaneously—aspects are not processes but meaningful modes of functioning and being.

As with diversity, coherence is not a product of our thought, but is an “indissoluble interrelation” (1:3) between aspects that is fundamental to the very fabric of temporal reality. It is within this coherence of meaning that we live, act, and experience. Coherence is no arbitrary putting-together but a thing of beauty and harmony that is manifested in several ways, including inter-aspect analogy and inter-aspect dependency, and has been called *shalom* (Basden 2008).

*Inter-aspect analogy* refers to every aspect containing echoes of the meaningfulness of other aspects, within its kernel meaningfulness—for example,



quantitative in analytic (2:79) and spatial (2:85), spatial in kinematic (2:98), kinematic in physical (2:102), aesthetic, economic, and social in juridical (2:135), and so on. These are ontic, and not just seen by us. Inter-aspect analogy refers to an inter-modal coherence of meaning between the aspects (2:55). The presence of analogies within aspects, however, means that reductionisms seem to work for a time (2:331) and have led some to seek a universal science (2:55).

*Inter-aspect dependency* means that functioning in one aspect cannot occur without functioning in earlier aspects and cannot achieve its full meaningfulness without functioning in later aspects; this is discussed in section 4.1.3.

*Shalom* refers to no aspect contradicting any other (2:3), nor working to their detriment. For example, the common assumption that being ethical in business jeopardises business success, thus pitting the ethical aspect against the economic, is mistaken—and history seems to bear out that ethicality correlates with long-term success. To Dooyeweerd, all aspects (spheres of meaningfulness) are equally important—there is no higher or lower, only earlier and later—each contributing something important and necessary to the *shalom* of reality working well as a coherence. See section 4.

Thus, to the question of what meaningfulness is, the first part of our answer can be that meaningfulness is the coherence of all the aspects, of all the ways of being meaningful, which are manageably diverse and all found in everyday experience. The philosophical relationship between coherence and diversity of meaning as experienced via a pre-theoretical attitude is still to be fully explored.

### 3 On the Nature of Meaning: Reference, Dependency, and Origin of Meaning

This universal character of *referring* and *expressing*, which is proper to our entire created cosmos, stamps created reality as *meaning*, in accordance with its dependent non-self-sufficient nature. ...[Meaning] has a *religious root* and a *divine origin*.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 1:4

#### 3.1 *Meaning as Referring and as Dependence on an Origin of Meaning*

Meaning implies referring and expressing. As Van der Hoeven (1978, 133) observed, “reference is necessarily to-something, and expression of-something.” We can readily understand from everyday examples that signification-, interpretation-, attribution-, and life-meaning refer to something. Words and utterances refer to a signified. The pile of feathers refers to an event in which a

bird has been killed. The vase refers to my grandmother and my relationship with her. Concern about the meaning of life reaches for something to which our lives can refer. Meaning "cannot exist by itself," wrote Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:9), "but supposes an ἀρχή, an *origin which creates meaning*. All meaning is *from, through, and to* an origin, which cannot itself be related to a higher ἀρχή." Meaning depends on its creator, and can never be self-sufficient in the sense of standing apart from its creator; hence Dooyeweerd's combining of reference, dependence, and non-self-sufficiency in the excerpt above.

"*Meaning ... constantly points without and beyond itself toward an origin*" (ibid., 1:10). In the case of signification-, interpretation-, and attribution-meanings, the origin that creates meaning is (at first sight) the human subject, but if we are to allow for the possibility of meaningfulness, which transcends human subjectivity, how may we understand *referring* and *origin of meaning*? Dooyeweerd added (1984, 1:4), "this coherence is a coherence of *meaning that refers to a totality*," and this totality is a source of meaning.

With his Christian faith, Dooyeweerd was in a good position to address this philosophical problem. The biblical idea of a creator of all offers one good answer: all creation refers beyond itself to its creator. Continuing the above quotation (ibid., 1:10), "*Meaning ... constantly points without and beyond itself toward an origin, which is itself no longer meaning*. It [i.e., meaningfulness] remains within the bounds of the *relative*. The true *Origin*, on the contrary, is *absolute and selfsufficient!*"

Dooyeweerd seems to use the term *origin of meaning* in two ways, both concerning meaningfulness. In one, the Origin is what Clouser (2005) calls the Divine, on which all creation (non-Divine) depends, and which religion calls God. In the other, as in Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique, origin of meaning is that which is *treated as* absolute and self-sufficient in theoretical thought, that which stops arguments in debates about what is meaningful—what Dooyeweerd called ground-motives. Ground-motives may be seen as an attempt to identify what is most foundationally meaningful, such as determination and freedom in the ground-motive of nature and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:11) sees in the non-self-sufficient nature of meaningfulness the reason for "restlessness" in philosophic thought, always striving

2 Does this mean that only Christians can avail themselves of Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning(fulness)? Not at all! It was because of his Christian faith that Michael Faraday was able to conceive of magnetism as a force; by contrast, materialists were limited to conceive magnetism as exchange of particles by their fear of "spiritual" elements (Russell 2000). Yet today, those without a Christian faith may use magnets and even research magnetism. Similarly, all may benefit from Dooyeweerd's view of meaning. In both Faraday and Dooyeweerd, Christian faith opened up and freed thought and imagination, rather than closing it down.

towards its true, self-sufficient origin. Likewise, the human ego “restlessly seeks its origin in order to understand its own meaning, and in its own meaning the meaning of our entire cosmos” (ibid.). Is that argument more poetic than analytical? A more philosophical version might be found in dissatisfaction with absolutized aspects (Basden 1999), or in Dooyeweerd’s criticism of most existing philosophy that it “sought this origin within the realm of meaning itself” (1984, 1:9).

### 3.2 *On Dooyeweerd’s Biblically Inspired View of Meaningfulness*

Dooyeweerd’s biblically inspired view of meaningfulness has a number of implications, including:

- All creation is meaningful even without reference to humanity; this offers a sound basis for environmental responsibility.
- Yet humanity has a special role as “expression of God’s image” (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:4); Dooyeweerd offers a basis to affirm, critique, and enrich the traditional notion of *imago Dei*.
- As *expression*, rather than *caused effect*, of the divine, creation wears the dignity of responsiveness and responsibility rather than as mere object of divine action.
- Meaning-coherence is assigned by Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:99) to Christ; this, however, seems a theological position of Dooyeweerd and remains obscure from a philosophical perspective.
- It offers a foundation for understanding why the diversity coheres.
- The boundary between creator and creation might not be law, as held by the Reformational tradition (Vollenhoven 2005, 10; Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:57), but meaning.

The earlier suggestion that what Dooyeweerd meant by *meaning* is largely *meaningfulness*, rather than the other types of meaning, may now be seen as reasonable from the effort that Dooyeweerd expended on discussing reference to, and dependence on, an origin of meaning, at the start of his *New Critique* and in his explanation of meaning (Dooyeweerd 1984, 2:30–32).

## 4 **Meaning as Ground of Being and Functioning: The Idea of Law**

*Meaning* is the *being* of all that has been *created* and the nature even of our selfhood.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 1:4

What did Dooyeweerd mean by “meaning is the being”? It is a way of understanding *being* itself—types, functioning, law, normativity, and subject-object relations—that differs radically from the approach taken in most existing philosophy. In *being* Dooyeweerd included discrete entities, “stuff,” situations, and social institutions, both static things and dynamic processes, both material and non-material (such as numbers, ideas, and beauty), and his meaning-based idea of being can cope with all these equally well.

#### 4.1 *Modes of Being*

The third volume of *A New Critique* begins with the need to understand the being of trees and books as such, not just our experience of them. It asks how a tree or book can be the same tree or book despite changes. The rest of the volume is devoted to how these may be understood via meaningfulness and its aspects.

“Meaning is the being” implies that meaning is prior to being. Without it, philosophy must presuppose a being-as-such (thing in itself) which bears meaning as a property and, in the main, being-as-such has been grounded in a notion of substance. Dooyeweerd wanted to understand being without substance, partly because he believed the idea of substance is incompatible with createdness, and partly because he deemed it could not properly understand temporal existence. As Dooyeweerd (1984, 3:108; see also Van der Hoeven 1978) argues, “a bird’s nest is not a ‘thing in itself’, which *has* a specific meaning in the bird’s life. It has *as such* no existence apart from this meaning.” To identify the substance of things like nests *qua* nests always leads to antinomies.

This having “as such no existence apart from this meaning” is obvious for things generated by sentient agents (nests, pens, poems, policies), because we have the luxury of falling back on subject-operated processes that are meaningful in the psychical, lingual, aesthetic, and juridical aspects, respectively. However, Dooyeweerd intended it to apply in every aspect. The pebble exists *qua* pebble because of the physical mode of being, which is a sphere of meaningfulness that includes physico-chemical bonds. Seven exists *qua* seven by the quantitative mode of being, in which seven is forever less than eight and more than six.

Being is not possible prior to modes of being; there is no being that is not a mode of being, a way in which existence is possible. Each “way in which” is an aspect of meaningfulness. Thus, the being of things *is* meaningfulness, and meaningfulness is the mode of being. (A mode is not a property, so one cannot argue that modes of being presuppose being to be modes of.) As I understand Dooyeweerd, it is erroneous to say things *have* or *bear* meaning, as though meaning were a property like height or happiness of a deeper substance on which meaning is borne. Instead, things *are* meaning(fulness).

#### 4.2 *Entities and Types*

How is a pen different from a pebble, a perception, or a partnership? Though meaning is our very existence, and this meaning diversely exhibits a number of modalities (aspects), entities (including events and processes) cannot be determined only by aspects. Aspects at most “co-determine” entities along with something else (Strauss 2009, 398). This something else is what Dooyeweerd called *structures of individuality* or *individuality structures*, and what Clouser (2005) called *type laws*.

Things are meaningful in every aspect, but types differ in the ways in which each aspect is meaningful. The structure of individuality of a type governs this, setting limits on how individuals of the type might vary.

Usually one aspect, the qualifying aspect, most defines a type and its destiny as that type of thing—such as the lingual aspect for a pen. Another, the founding aspect, indicates the coming-into-being of the thing—the formative aspect of manufacture for a pen. Other aspects are important in yet other ways, such as the physical and kinematic aspects for the ink flow of a pen.

Though reminiscent of Platonic Ideas, Dooyeweerd’s structures of individuality are richer in several ways. Founded on meaningfulness, they provide a deeper understanding of types, and they see instances not as deficient copies of an ideal but as valid manifestations of a joyful meaningfulness. They allow for multi-level existence, and change is not problematic but good.

Multi-level existence implies that things do not just exist, but *exist as* some way of being meaningful. Pens exist *qua* pens by reference to the lingual aspect, and *qua* artefact, the formative aspect, and *qua* ink-flowing device, the physical and kinematic aspects.

In Dooyeweerd’s view, “the factual temporal duration of a thing as an individual and identical whole is dependent on the preservation of its structure of individuality” (1984, 3:79). In a short section headed “Reality as a continuous process of realization” (ibid., 3:109), he poetically remarked: “For the reality of a thing is indeed dynamic.... The inner restlessness of meaning, as the mode of being of created reality, reveals itself in the whole temporal world.”

So, a book that is torn remains the same book (ibid., 3:3) because it can still function in its main aspect, the lingual, but it ceases to be a book when it is burned up. Things change type when their meaning changes, which is reflected in a change of structure of individuality. Dooyeweerd’s antique shawl (3:143), originally worn for warmth, has changed to being a wall decoration. It used to function in the psychic aspect of keeping a person warm and the physical aspect of insulation, but now it functions in the aesthetic aspect as a thing of beauty and interest and in the physical aspect by tension in its threads as it hangs.

### 4.3 *Functioning, Law, Subject, Object, and Normativity*

Traditionally, Reformational philosophy's discussion of functioning, normativity, and the subject-object relationship follows Dooyeweerd in grounding these in law. Each aspect has laws which are irreducibly distinct from others. Subjectness as agency is located in being subject to aspectual law.<sup>3</sup> Reality comprises a *fact-side* or *subject-object side*, which is all that actually exists and occurs (things, events, etc.), and a *law-side*, which enables the subject-object side to exist and occur. Even so, the word *law*, *lawful*, etc., occurs 500 times less than *meaning* and its cognates.

There is little or no reference to meaning where Dooyeweerd mentions law, however, and Dooyeweerd nowhere adequately discussed how meaning(fulness) relates to law, functioning, subject, object, and normativity; nor is there much discussion of this in existing philosophy. So, I will hazard a guess about how a discussion based on Dooyeweerd might proceed. Some points therein concern functioning, and some, normativity.

- 1 Law presupposes meaningfulness and cannot be understood apart from meaningfulness—"the law derives its fulness of meaning" (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:10), and it is because of *meaning* that law limits the subject (*ibid.*, 1:95).
- 2 The irreducible distinctness of aspect meaning-kernels is what makes aspectual laws irreducible to each other; for example, spatial meaningfulness and law cannot be reduced to quantitative meaningfulness and law, nor vice versa.
- 3 Law is that manifestation of meaningfulness which makes *functioning* (*ibid.*, 1:102–106) possible; meaningfulness without (functional) law is static.
- 4 Law enables everything in creation to act responsively as agent (*subject* functioning) rather than as mere meaningful passive object of the creator.
- 5 Just as entities are multi-aspectual beings, so the functioning of entities is multi-aspectual; entities function in several (all) aspects simultaneously.
- 6 Coherence is manifested differently. Whereas *inter-aspect analogy* expresses coherence of aspectual meaningfulness, *inter-aspect dependency* expresses the coherence of aspectual laws. Meaningful functioning in one aspect depends on that in others, in two directions. In the retrociprocity

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3 Those who are not familiar with Dooyeweerd should note that aspectual law is deeper than humanly constructed laws or norms that guide our lives as *ought*. Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:93) was clear: the entire law, or *nomos*, must not be conceived in juridical terms like *ought*.

or foundational direction, fulfilment of meaningfulness in one aspect cannot usually occur without good functioning in earlier aspects. For example, organic functioning depends on physical functioning, social functioning on lingual. In the anticipatory direction, fulfilment of meaningfulness of one aspect is radically incomplete without the meaningfulness in later aspects. For example, lingual functioning anticipates the social aspect, and without the social the lingual has very limited application.

- 7 Meaningfulness that refers to a creator implies *good*, as the fulfilment of meaningfulness originating in the creator. Meaningfulness defines normativity—good and corresponding evil. Dysfunction or evil is still meaningful (Dooyeweerd 1984, 2:33).
- 8 Meaningfulness gives law-as-obligation its normative force.
- 9 Meaningfulness as good differentiates *progress* from *regress*.
- 10 The coherence that is *shalom* (no contradiction between normativity of different aspects) need not be held as a mere dogma, but may be derived from the coherence of meaningfulness.
- 11 Lastly, meaningfulness frees *subject and object* from the shackles of Cartesianism and Heideggerianism. *Subject* is subject in a certain way, and similarly, *object* is object in a certain way, with each way being an aspect. Entities can be subject and object in different aspects; for example, my pen is a lingual object but a physical subject (subject to laws of fluids) and kinematic subject (flowing of ink). This resonates strongly with Dooyeweerd's view (sect. 4.1) that even physical things are meaningful, regardless of humanity.

These suggestions call for discussion. Nevertheless, we may say that meaningfulness and law are two sides of the same coin, with meaningfulness being deeper. Thus, it was reasonable for Dooyeweerd to call the aspects *law-spheres*; they are also *spheres of meaningfulness*.

#### 4.4 *Targets and Meanings*

This view of functioning lets us understand more clearly the types of meaning outlined in the introduction. Most human functioning in any aspect targets other aspects. For example, when we utter the word *red* we function in the lingual aspect and target the psychic aspect, in which redness is meaningful, and possibly also the juridical aspect for a stop sign. Dooyeweerd did not seem to discuss this notion of aspectual targeting, but occasionally alluded to it or presupposed it—however, I find it useful in information systems research (Basden 2008, 72; 2017, 73). It helps us understand the other types of meaning in terms of meaningfulness, as follows.

*Signification-meaning* involves functioning in the lingual aspect of meaningfulness, targeting another aspect which is its semantic content (e.g., writing *red* or *beauty*). Signification amounts to a “packaging up” of “pieces of meaningfulness” by the originator (speaker, writer) in symbols and thus distinguishing those pieces from the background coherence of meaningfulness. To their originator and to the recipient (hearer, reader), these “pieces” are the signification-meanings. Since the recipient also functions in response to the same spheres of meaningfulness (law-side), mutual understanding is possible in principle.

*Interpretation-meaning* involves functioning in the analytic aspect, targeting other aspect(s)—an analytic “picking out” of pieces of meaningfulness. Thus, the scattered feathers might be interpreted (analytic functioning) as bird kill (targeting a piece of organic meaningfulness) and perhaps also poaching (a piece of formative and juridical meaningfulness).

*Attribution-meaning* is the target meaningfulness of the functioning that is attributing meaning, likewise packaging up pieces of meaningfulness. For example, my grandmother's vase has social and biotic meaningfulness to me (blood relationship) in addition to the aesthetic beauty that others might appreciate. The functioning that is attributing meaning can be formative (purpose), social (when influenced by shared background meaningfulness; life-world), or other aspects.

*Life-meaning* often involves functioning in the ethical aspect of doing good. The target aspect is the type of good done, such as having discovered (analytic target), invented (formative), entertained (aesthetic), or served (ethical). Attribution-meaning and life-meaning are often linked with value, which is accounted for by the normativity of aspects.

Subject-side experience may perhaps be seen as an accretion of myriad pieces of meaningfulness that have been packaged up or picked out in the activities of signification, interpretation, and attribution—different for each person. It is no surprise, therefore, that there are always differences between people about the signification of terms. This is made even more complex by the fact that most targeting involves multiple aspects—e.g., redness as both psychic and juridical (see above). Dooyeweerd (1984, 2:55–74) discusses these differences and what various aspectual terms might imply.

Dooyeweerd did not clearly distinguish such types of meaning, but the above might offer a model of, or a way of understanding, meaning in all its forms. It might underpin Dooyeweerd's (1984, 1:97) claim to disassociate himself from “meaning-idealism,” which presupposes only subjective meanings and denies any idea of meaningfulness. The model needs to be developed more robustly; its key is that meaningfulness is prior not only to being and functioning but also to other types of meaning.



## 5 Prior Meaningfulness

We have been fitted into this coherence of meaning with all our modal functions.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 1:4

To Dooyeweerd, “modal aspects are seen as the *a priori ontic conditions* making possible the many-sided existence of concrete (natural and social) entities” (Strauss 2009, 393). Aspects are modal specialities of meaningfulness. What form does this prior take? Dooyeweerd did not discuss this, but four versions have been discussed in the literature.

The first is the intersubjectively shared lifeworld which supplies meaningfulness to the activity of social beings and which is presupposed by most thinkers to be constructed solely out of such activity. Such *lifeworld meaningfulness* is prior to individual activity but is not prior to the lifeworld itself. Schutz and Luckmann (1973) argue that the lifeworld-forming activity itself makes several presuppositions. These point to a meaningfulness prior to the lifeworld, which enables the lifeworld to be and occur (I intend to discuss this elsewhere). It is the prior-to-the-lifeworld meaningfulness that concerns us here.

The second is a fixed point of meaningfulness, separate from reality, which pulls reality towards it; examples are parents’ plans for their unborn child and Aristotle’s final cause. The root of Aristotle’s idea is that matter is striving towards form (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:25–26), pulled towards something that is foreign to its nature. Such a view would treat meaningfulness as “foreign” to existence, whereas, to Dooyeweerd, meaningfulness is inherent in existence rather than fundamentally different from it.

Third is Bergson’s (1908, 95) *élan originel*, an initial impetus in a particular direction from which reality developed thereafter. He believed that final cause is too deterministic, and that initial impetus allows more “creativity.” He argued (Bergson [1911] 1998) that the process of evolution is “creative” in the sense of (a) being undefined and (b) producing beings that can direct the harnessing of energy towards free actions of a sensorimotor kind and then eventually towards human intellect and ultimately consciousness.

Both Aristotle and Bergson treat meaningfulness as something temporally separate from reality, as either something only initial and no longer directly or intimately involved, or as something in the distant future as a finality. That Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:25–26) criticised immanence philosophy for treating meaning as separate from reality suggests that he had a different view in mind.

The fourth view of prior meaningfulness, namely, that we “dwell” in meaning, is discussed by Polanyi and Prosch (1975). Meaningfulness surrounds us,

and it is something within which we are comfortable. Tacit knowledge and the “gradient” that drives reality in a particular direction are both accounted for by “indwelling.” This seems closest to what Dooyeweerd had in mind by “fitted into” above (at least in its connotations). However, with Dooyeweerd, the meaningfulness not only surrounds us as something on the outside, but pervades us, constituting our very being: “Their very nature is meaning” (Dooyeweerd 1984, 3:108). Another metaphor suggests itself here, namely, that of an *ocean of meaningfulness*. Just as fish swim and exist in the ocean, and their functioning and existence is enabled by the ocean, and they are constituted, physically, of ocean water and its constituents, so we “swim” and exist in the ocean of meaningfulness which enables all our functioning and of which our very being is constituted, as discussed above. This view of prior meaningfulness as surrounding and pervading us is depicted in figure 1, which contrasts Aristotle's and Bergson's views with Dooyeweerd's view.

The development of reality is not circumscribed in the way Bergson and Aristotle suggest. Since there is no causal link between aspects, this makes unpredictability rich and exciting, directing not just towards an Aristotelean form or a Bergsonian consciousness, but towards a rich panoply of actualized meaningfulness that (from the perspective of those who believe in a creator God) is praise to the creator.

From now on, the word *meaningfulness* will emphasise that meaning surrounds and pervades us. I have found this understanding most useful in my own studies, as will be explained later.

But how may we understand the meaningfulness that surrounds and pervades us and all temporal reality? How may fish understand the ocean within which they exist and live? Their knowledge of it is constituted in their experience of living within it. Similarly, our knowledge of prior, surrounding meaningfulness, in its diversity and coherence, must begin with our experiencing

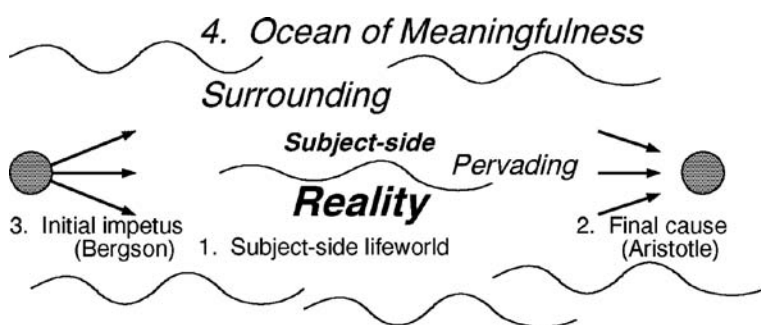


FIGURE 1 Three views of prior meaningfulness

it. By theoretical thought we may obtain a crisper understanding, but that is problematic: is not theoretical thinking itself a way of functioning that is enabled by prior meaningfulness? The next section follows Dooyeweerd's discussion of the relationship between theoretical thought and meaningfulness, and the section after that discusses how the spheres of meaningfulness may be delineated.

## 6 On Meaning and Theoretical Thought

Philosophical thinking is an actual activity; and only at the expense of this very actuality ... can it be abstracted from the thinking self.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 1:5

Every meaningful theoretical concept, every meaningful theoretical judgment, however highly "formalized", pre-supposes the intermodal synthesis and the cosmic systasis of meaning.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 2:464

The centuries-old presumption that rationality was neutral and of absolute authority as a way to knowledge began to break down when questions about meaning and the thinking self arose. For example, Husserl ([1936] 1970) showed how scientific thinking presupposes a lifeworld of shared background meaningfulness. However, Husserl, following Kant, "started from the autonomy of theoretical thinking as an axiom which needs no further justification" (Dooyeweerd 1999, 6). Dooyeweerd made the theoretical attitude of thought into a philosophical problem that needs to be addressed, posing the philosophical question of how theoretical thought is possible and taking pre-theoretical experience as given.

Meaningfulness lies at the root of Dooyeweerd's exploration of this, and it relies on the above themes of pre-theoretical experience, diversity, coherence, and origin of meaning. As the first excerpt above shows, Dooyeweerd placed the human person at the centre of theoretical thought, rather than any mechanical logicizing, and the human person functions in all aspects, all of which influence their thinking. Prior meaningfulness is fundamental to theoretical thought in three ways, one for each of the three transcendental problems of theoretical thought that Dooyeweerd discovered—though Dooyeweerd made this explicit only for the third (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:41, 45, 52). The three transcendental problems are about abstraction of what is meaningful, synthesis of meaningfulness, and origin of meaningfulness, the first two of which are found in the second excerpt above. So the whole edifice of

theoretical thought, both the sciences and philosophy, is shot through with prior meaningfulness.

It may be that it was this willingness to consider meaningfulness explicitly—in contrast to immanence philosophy, which separates meaning from reality (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:25–26)—that enabled Dooyeweerd to provide a transcendental critique of theoretical thought that went deeper than others did. The three ways in which meaningfulness is important in theoretical thinking offers a way to differentiate philosophies and, indirectly, sciences in terms of their view of the world, their harmonizing of rationalities, and what they take to be their origin of meaning. Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:68ff.) called this triple a *transcendental ground-Idea*.

Recognising this opens up the possibility of a genuinely sensitive theoretical understanding of the pre-theoretical attitude and experience, and of the deepening of pre-theoretical by the theoretical rather than obliterating it (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:3). This contrasts with earlier attempts to understand the pre-theoretical experience, which elevate certain aspects thereof.

## 7 On Knowing Spheres of Meaningfulness

The value of an analysis of the different modalities of meaning is this: it reveals the structure of a modality in cosmic time, and compels us to trace the original nuclear meaning-moment.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 2:77

Knowing what aspects (spheres of meaningfulness) there are is useful in both practical action and theoretical analysis. Knowledge of aspects is useful in distinctions, such as practical rules of thumb like people-processes-profits, in understanding the kernel meaningfulness of each, as when we say “You are a true friend” or when we justify the bounds of a science, and in understanding the relationships between aspects. Knowledge of aspects helps to guard against reductionism. More precise knowledge of aspect-kernels is required to diagnose category errors or antinomies, and to address questions regarding where the boundary lies between one aspect and the next, and how we should understand things near the boundaries, such as in physiology or socio-linguistics.

The challenge is, how do we understand the diversity and coherence of meaningfulness that pervades, surrounds, and constitutes us and all we do, including our thinking about it?

Identifying the kernel meanings of aspects and what aspects there are, and exploring each kernel, is what Dooyeweerd called *the special theory of modal spheres*. Unfortunately, he does not seem to have completed this special theory.

Instead, he wrote a *general theory of modal spheres* (in part 1 of the second volume of *A New Critique*) in which he discussed and demonstrated at length the principles by which aspects may be delineated when undertaking a special theory. Formulating a special theory is left to us as we follow these principles.

### 7.1 *Dooyeweerd's Overall Approach to Knowledge of Aspects*

In attempting to know what aspects there are, Dooyeweerd believed that we should respect the diversity of meaningfulness encountered in pre-theoretical experience. Yet we should do so critically, without proliferating aspects unnecessarily. To this end, we may validly employ theoretical thought as long as we recognise its limitations.

Dooyeweerd held that our knowledge of the prior, surrounding meaningfulness (law-side) is first constituted in our intuition of meaning-kernels, such as of quantity (1984, 2:78), movement (*ibid.*, 2:99), or the juridical aspect (2:129), which comes from having experienced meaningfulness by functioning in all aspects—intuition is not restricted to psychical feeling.

Such intuitive knowledge remains tacit, however, until made explicit. It is by analytical (theoretical) functioning that we make intuitive knowledge explicit, distinguishing more sharply between the kernel meaningfulness of different aspects. The problem is that theoretical thought results in a dubious understanding of the meaningfulness in that (a) it necessarily involves “an analytical setting-asunder of ... modal aspects” (1:33), and thus loses understanding of the coherence between them; (b) ambiguity pervades the terms used in discussing meaningfulness (2:57); and (c) the very activity of theoretical thought is itself enabled by prior meaningfulness. This is why “the modal meaning-kernel itself can be grasped only in an immediate intuition and never apart from its structural context of analogies” (2:129).

### 7.2 *Dooyeweerd's Principles for Delineating Aspects*

An examination of volume 2 of *A New Critique* shows that Dooyeweerd's method involves the following principles, though mixed together and not always in this order:

- *Intuition.* Begin with intuition of the aspect-kernel, derived from pre-theoretical experience. Reflect on experience, augmented by insights from other thinkers throughout the ages.
- *Concepts.* Discuss concepts that are meaningful in one aspect but meaningless (or only indirectly meaningful) in others. These can be highlighted by considering subject-object relationships in each aspect.
- *Inter-aspect analogy.* Some concepts that are meaningful in one aspect contain echoes in other aspects. “The special theory of the modal law-spheres

must start with a scrupulously accurate analysis of the modal nuclei of meaning and should point out the non-original character of the modal analogies" (Dooyeweerd 1984, 2:77).

- *Aspectual opening*. Discuss how one aspect opens up fuller meaningfulness of another. This offers insights into the dependency order of aspects.
- *Method of antinomy*. Uncover antinomies that arise when the meaningfulness of one aspect is conflated with or reduced to that of another. "In developing the special theory of the law-spheres, we shall systematically examine the antinomies arising from the theoretical violation of the modal boundaries of meaning" (ibid., 2:46).
- *Expressing the meaningfulness*. The term by which a meaning-kernel is designated "must be able immediately to evoke the intuition of the ultimate irreducible nucleus of the modal aspect of experience concerned" (2:129).

Taking all these principles into account results in a process with multiple interlocking cycles of provisional interpretation involving both intuitive and theoretical thought. For example, while discussing the juridical aspect, Dooyeweerd (ibid.) wrote, "this provisional explanation of the term [*jural*] appeals to a complex of analogical terms. The modal *meaning-kernel* proper is not explained by this circumscription." He continues:

In itself this is not surprising. For in every previous analysis of a modal structure we were confronted with the same state of affairs. It is the very nature of the modal nucleus that it cannot be defined, because every circumscription of its meaning must appeal to this central moment of the aspect-structure concerned.

### 7.3 Dooyeweerd's Discussion of Aspects

To help us, Dooyeweerd (1984, 2:79) put his principles to the test by analyzing some aspects. Starting with the mathematical aspects, Dooyeweerd gave a "preliminary illustration of our method of analyzing the modal structures of meaning" (ibid., 2:93), the intention of which was to "shed light on the true nature and the coherence of the different elements of meaning in contrast with the prevailing rationalistic currents in mathematics."<sup>4</sup>

His illustration, in which he discusses the meaning-kernel of the kinematic aspect (2:93–106), demonstrates the above principles. After discussing various concepts like natural number and types of infinity, Dooyeweerd drew attention to the analogy of movement, in the quantitative aspect found in differential

4 This rationalistic current "renders itself guilty of shifting the meaning of the modal aspects" (Dooyeweerd 1984, 2:452).

calculus, and in the spatial aspect found in the transformation of shapes in projective geometry. However, he did not clearly specify what movement is (the kernel meaningfulness of the kinematic aspect, which can be grasped better by intuition). He used the antinomy of actual-infinity to differentiate the quantitative from the spatial aspect and that of Zeno's paradox to differentiate the spatial from the kinematic aspect. To differentiate the kinematic aspect from the physical, he argued from intuition that movement cannot be reduced to energy and causality nor vice versa, and drew attention to some concepts that are meaningful in the kinematic aspect but not in the physical (such as uniform movement).<sup>5</sup>

Dooyeweerd's discussion of aspects is a magnificent achievement, occupying over 400 pages of volume 2 of *A New Critique*. It shows the thinking of a polymath and metaphilosopher and demonstrates how the insights of other thinkers can be respected without adopting their immanence standpoint.

#### 7.4 *Additional Principles*

Zuidervaart (2016, 100) recasts Dooyeweerd's principles and adds some new ones of a practical nature. When identifying the kernel meaningfulness of an aspect, we should be able to (1) account for ordinary phenomena; (2) solve the major problems arising from isolating an aspect and account for why other solutions are insufficient; (3) strive for a conceptually clear identification of the kernel, and one that is parsimonious; (4) relate it to previous and current scientific investigations; and (5) produce sufficient evidence for it.

Zuidervaart also warns against too readily using intuition to stop debate—Dooyeweerd used intuition as starting point rather than debate stopper. Zuidervaart finds intuition confusing whereas I find it an aid.

I have found it useful to add the following two philosophical considerations when delineating aspects. First, *everyday experience*. Rather than focusing primarily on aspects and their neighbours, take more advantage of the fact that everyday experience is likely to display all aspects very richly intertwined. This expands Zuidervaart's principle of the ordinary and fosters an attitude of sensitive openness to diversity. Second, *good*. Ask about the *good possibility* that each aspect introduces, which previous aspects are not able to offer, and on which later aspects depend. For example, lingual externalization of meanings is good because it enables social functioning.<sup>6</sup> This might overcome a

5 Strauss's (2009) discussion of the kinematic aspect, which makes the rather counter-intuitive suggestion that the kernel meaning of the kinematic is constancy rather than change, relies more heavily on deduction and on the actual thoughts of Plato and other thinkers. I intend to discuss this elsewhere.

6 See my tentative list in section 4.2.

tendency to circular argument (e.g., spatiality is continuous extension, but what is continuous extension?) and makes use of inter-aspect dependency, which can be more precise than inter-aspect analogy.

Taken together, the principles make use of most of the factors discussed above: pre-theoretical experience, diversity, coherence (analogy, dependency), functioning, good, and theoretical thought.

### 7.5 *The End of the Matter*

The delineation of aspect-kernels is important in both theoretical and practical life, but it can never be exact or precise, for two reasons. (1) Since we are not aware of aspects directly, but only as they are expressed via things (including activity, situations) with which we engage, our experience of meaningfulness is never purely of a single aspect but is multiple. (2) No aspect-kernel can ever be fully expressed in words, nor even precisely conceptualized—we can only “triangulate” it from these incomplete conceptualizations. So,

in fact the system of the law-spheres designed by us can never lay claim to material completion. A more penetrating examination may at any time bring new modal aspects of reality to the light not yet perceived before. And the discovery of new law-spheres will always require a revision and further development of our modal analyses. Theoretical thought has never finished its task. Any one who thinks he has devised a philosophical system that can be adopted unchanged by all later generations, shows his absolute lack of insight into the dependence of all theoretical thought on historical development.

DOOYEWEERD 1984, 2:556

“This is still unbroken ground” (2:77) wrote Dooyeweerd in regard to the special theory of modal spheres—a full discussion of the kernel meanings of all known aspects—and it still seems to be. Several Reformational scholars have suggested modifications or additions around specific aspects (e.g., De Raadt 1997; Seerveld 1985; Stafleu 2005), and I (Basden 2011) have tried to clarify the kernel meanings of all together, but these are only partial or initial attempts.

## 8 Conclusion

The topic of meaning has been the Cinderella of philosophy. In Dooyeweerd's thought, meaning pervades all, being mentioned over 3,000 times in *A New Critique*, yet Reformational philosophy has seldom recognised this. Dooyeweerd



took meaning seriously and made it a starting point of his philosophy: all being and functioning arise from, and depend transcendently on, meaning.

What he called *meaning* we have called *meaningfulness* in this article in order to differentiate it from other types of meaning (signification-meaning, interpretation-meaning, attribution-meaning, and life-meaning). This is because these meanings are products of specific types of functioning, which are made possible by meaningfulness.

This article has aimed to clarify and systematize what Dooyeweerd meant by *meaning(fulness)*, taking into account not only what he wrote but also how he used it. A number of major elements of Dooyeweerd's thought have been shown to relate foundationally to meaningfulness:

- Pre-theoretical, everyday experience
- Diversity of meaningfulness (aspects: spheres of meaningfulness)
- Coherence of meaning(fulness): dependency, analogy, and *shalom*
- Understanding of creator-creation relationship as referring and dependence
- Meaningfulness as the ground of being and types
- Good, functioning, and law; progress
- Meaningfulness as a priori, as surrounding and pervading
- Roles of meaningfulness in theoretical thought: world, rationalities, and origin of meaningfulness
- Knowledge of meaningfulness: delineation of aspects

Though separated out here, these topics all interweave each other in real philosophy. Discussion of how self and time relate to meaningfulness is left to later; it would require more space than is available here.

Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning, and especially meaningfulness, might be one of his most important contributions to philosophy. Though this article is only a sketch in need of further development (by someone who has applied Dooyeweerd's philosophy more than studied it), its systematization of Dooyeweerd's thought may yet be of service in three ways.

First, it could stimulate Reformational philosophers to develop Dooyeweerd's idea of meaning more avidly than they have done. Some suggestions have been made that interpret what Dooyeweerd wrote about meaning or advance his thought; they call for critical elaboration. They include:

- Themes in Dooyeweerd's thought that have sometimes been treated separately, such as aspects and ground-motives, may more readily be integrated via the common theme of meaningfulness.
- The relationship between diversity and coherence requires further elaboration.

- The links between meaningfulness and the good have not been adequately discussed, not even by Dooyeweerd. It may be that attaching the idea of good to meaningfulness frees good from requiring evil. The idea of kernel aspectual good can help us differentiate aspects.
- The relationship between meaningfulness and law needs to be elaborated, along with the notion of the good, possibility, functioning, and repercussions. This might provide insights about time.
- As a model of meaning, the several types of meanings may be understood as functioning in meaningfulness, targeting specific “pieces” thereof.
- The prior nature of meaningfulness is more important than hitherto acknowledged, and different kinds of prior have been distinguished, with surrounding and pervading being favoured here.
- What differentiates creation from creator is not law so much as meaningfulness.
- The understanding of creator and, if we take Dooyeweerd's biblical view, of Christ as the coherence of meaningfulness should be elaborated more philosophically.
- Dooyeweerd's contention that intuition extends beyond the psychical aspect may now be given more shape.
- Dooyeweerd's principles for how to delineate aspects may be augmented by others.
- With this understanding of meaningfulness, a special theory of modal spheres can now be developed.

In discussing these suggestions, account should be taken not only of what Dooyeweerd *wrote* about meaning (as in Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:4, 2:30–32), but especially of how he *used* the notion.

Second, this article offers Reformational thinkers specific points of contact between Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning and those understandings found in mainstream philosophy. It is intended that a paper will be written which reviews how philosophy has discussed meaning and compares it with Dooyeweerd's ideas around the themes developed here. The link between Dooyeweerd and the linguistic turn should especially be discussed since some have suggested Dooyeweerd was too influenced by it. I have shown, however, how Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning(fulness) need not derive from signification-meaning, which interests the linguistic turn, but rather from createdness and that it takes a form not yet recognised therein.

Third, this article might stimulate the use of Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning. Some implications thereof are discussed in the companion paper (Basden and Joneidy, forthcoming 2019) for everyday experience, scientific theory, scientific methodology, and philosophical underpinnings.

As Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:vii) himself emphasised, efforts should now be made to apply his philosophy in most of the various fields. In many fields, from mathematics and quantum mechanics through psychology to the social sciences, thinkers are waking up to the issue of meaning. The time might now be right to recommend and explore Dooyeweerd's understanding of meaning with cautious confidence.<sup>7</sup>

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