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COSMIC TIME:

A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT IN HERMAN DOOYEWEERD

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Now that the English translation of *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955) by Professor Herman Dooyeweerd of the Free University of Amsterdam has begun to appear, a more wide-spread discussion of his views is bound to take place in evangelical circles. Pierre Marcel in France and Professor Cornelius Van Til in America, and others as well, have received Dooyeweerd's philosophy with hearty applause. At the same time, the two volumes now translated (I – 566 pp. II – 598 pp. \$36.00 the set of 4 vols) make rather difficult reading, and the author in the Preface encourages and warns us to proceed slowly and to work step by step. This paper will consider one of the first steps, the problem of time.

Dooyeweerd says:

The intent of philosophy is to give us a theoretical insight into the coherence of our temporal world as an intermodal coherence of meaning It is a temporal coherence Within this temporal coherence reality displays a great diversity of modal aspects [such as] the aspects of number, space, motion, energy the economic, aesthetic, jural, moral, and faith aspects All these modal aspects are interwoven with one another in a cosmic order of time (1-24).

Since a few pages later Dooyeweerd says that “the idea of cosmic time constitutes the basis of the philosophical theory of reality in this book” and “by virtue of its integral character it may be called new” (28), it follows that this new and basic concept should be examined with care.

In order to define cosmic time he begins by asserting that “time-order is necessarily related to factual duration” (24). On the surface this seems too obvious to need mention. The duration of a plant, a planet, or a nation is surely related to the order of past, present, and future hours and years. But out of this hardly surprising remark Dooyeweerd gets the definition of his basic concept – cosmic time. “Only this indissoluble correlation of order and duration can be called cosmic time” (24). This is repeated and clarified.

Time in its cosmic sense has a cosmological and factual side. Its cosmological side is the temporal order of succession of simultaneity. The factual side is the factual duration, which differs with various individualities (28).

Concerning this definition of cosmic time two points must be made. First, it will be necessary to observe whether Dooyeweerd's use of the phrase cosmic time invariably conforms to this definition, or whether he alerts the sense so that the concept becomes ambiguous.

Second, we must ask whether or not the words of the definition convey a definite meaning. Are the two sentences, the obvious remark and the definition proper, sufficient and complete? That is to say, if time-order is one kind of time and time-duration another kind of time, and if neither time itself, nor order, nor duration is anywhere defined, has any specific meaning been determined for a third kind of time, cosmic time? Or again, if we evade the very difficult problem of defining time, and plunge boldly into talking about order and duration, is it clear that a relation between the two is in any sense time? A rose bush may live several years. Is the relation between this duration and the "time-order" (the succession of moments?) properly called time? One would naturally be inclined to think that the time order itself is time, the duration being a part of time, and the relation of the part to the whole not time at all. If these confusions are to be found in the basic concept of Dooyeweerd's philosophy, it will be difficult to find much meaning in the sequel.

Part of the sequel is this. Dooyeweerd offers some criticism of the theories of time of the Ionians, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, Kant, Einstein, and Bergson. In all these theories it strikes him again and again that time has been unwittingly identified with one of its modal aspects. "Consequently," he concludes, "the opposition between rationalistic and irrationalistic conceptions has lost its foundation for us" (28). In view of the defective character of his definition, however, this conclusion lacks adequate premises.

No further criticism need be made of the immediately following sub-title: "All structures of temporal reality are structures of cosmic time" (29). If cosmic time is indeed time, it is pure tautology to say that all temporal reality is temporal. The trouble lies precisely in the concept of cosmic time. Or, better, there is no concept of cosmic time.

We can form a theoretical concept of the separate modal aspects of time. But time itself, in all its embracing meaning can never be comprehended in a concept, because the former alone [the aspects, or time itself; which?] makes the concept possible (30).

Time of course has caused philosophers no end of trouble. Besides the old Eleatic dilemmas, Plato had no satisfactory view of time, St. Augustine was visibly embarrassed, and Aristotle and Aquinas cannot be accepted with much enthusiasm. Small wonder therefore that Bergson gave up in despair and adopted an irrationalism. However, to admit an irrationalism in one place prevents its exclusion anywhere else. Now, Kant too denied that time is a concept, and so is superficially comparable with Dooyeweerd. But, Kant said positively that time is an intuition; and even if one does not care to follow Kant, one must recognize at least that Kant as spoken more definitely and more understandably than Dooyeweerd.

Difficult as a theory of time admittedly is, one may still be able to state what time is not. If anything is clear, it should be that logical order is not to be identified with temporal order. Yet Dooyeweerd identifies them. At least he says,

The logical order of simultaneity and of prius and posterius is as much a modal aspect of the integral order of time as the physical Therefore it is meaningless to set the logical prius and posterius in opposition to the temporal before and after (30).

Physical motion may well be a modal aspect of temporal order, but that logical order cannot be temporal is supported by the following consideration. A given plant must begin with the germination of the seed and can bloom only afterward: it never blooms first and germinates afterward. But a syllogism can be stated either with its premise first or with its conclusion first, without detriment to its validity.

Now, Dooyeweerd notices this fact and gives a very lame reply. In what is apparently an effort to make the temporal order of the syllogism irreversible he asserts that “it is not to be doubted that it [the syllogism] does so [proceeds from premise to conclusion] when we draw a syllogistic inference in theoretical logical form (30). Naturally! But all this means is that when we state the premises first, we state the conclusion last. This triviality is no answer to the fact that the validity of the syllogism does not depend on the temporal order of our stating it, and that we can state it in some other order. We can even state one premise, then the conclusion, and finally the second premise. The logical order remains the same in all these different temporal orders. Therefore the two orders are not to be identified. Conversely, although a syllogism can be temporally rearranged, the growth and blooming of a plant cannot.

Dooyeweerd continues by making geometry and arithmetic aspects of time. Space, he says, is not supratemporal because it exists simultaneously. We shall not here raise the question of what space is, though a definition of space ought to precede the conclusion that space is a mode of time. But when Dooyeweerd makes arithmetic a mode of time, he can at least appeal to the authority of Kant. He can and he does. A contrary view “would even spell a regress in the face of the view of Kant, who made number originate from a schematizing of the logical category of quantity in time” (32).

Aside from the fact that it is strange to appeal to Kant as an authority in the construction of a Christian philosophy, the point to which the appeal is made enmeshes us in difficulty. Kant's connection between arithmetic and time is puzzling. In one place he states that arithmetic is the science of time as geometry is the science of space; but far from carrying through with such a definite statement, in every other reference he speaks more vaguely. One may note that the numbers of arithmetic are discontinuous, while time is a continuum. Perhaps a better case could be made out for calculus. In any case, Dooyeweerd is open to criticism in making arithmetic and geometry aspects of time on the ground that space exists simultaneously. The fact that something exists in time does not make it a mode of time.

Something more easily grasped comes next. Dooyeweerd asserts that, however it might be with space and number, man transcends temporal coherence (24). The religious center of human existence transcends time (31), though the central sphere of human existence is dynamic. Out of this the dramatic conflict between the City of God and the earthly city takes its issue in history.

“We can even call it the central sphere of occurrence, for that which occurs cannot be distinguished too sharply from the historical aspect of cosmic time, which is only one of its temporal modalities of meaning” (32).

Is this assertion intelligible? First, let us omit the word cosmic. Then the statement would say that the sphere of occurrences or even the occurrences themselves must be sharply distinguished from history. It is difficult to know what this could mean. Second, let us replace the word cosmic and refer back to the definition. Cosmic time is the relationship between time order and time duration. This *relationship* has a historical aspect. Occurrence then are to be sharply distinguished from the historical relationship between time order and time succession. This latter and fuller expression seems no more intelligible than the former. If that which occurs is not historical, what can history be?

To this point the criticism of Dooyeweerd's views has moved within the sphere of conventional philosophical analysis; but the following quotation suggests a question that is more properly called theological. Dooyeweerd writes:

To be sure, cosmic time has its limiting aspect in faith and there is a temporal order and duration in the special meaning of the latter. The modal meaning of faith, as we shall see in the second volume, is by its nature related to divine revelation. In this eschatological aspect of time faith grasps [grasps?] the "eschaton" and, in general, that which is or happens beyond the limits of cosmic time. In this special sense are to be understood the "days of creation," the initial words of the book of Genesis, the order in which regeneration precedes conversion etc. Theology will always need this limiting aspect of time in which the cosmic temporal order is indissolubly connected with the revealed supratemporal realm. However, I cannot agree with the tendency of some modern Christian theologians, who identify the eschatological aspect of time with the historical and reject the supra-temporal central sphere of human existence and of divine revelation (33).

Here Dooyeweerd teaches that in the sphere of faith time takes on a special meaning. There is an eschatological aspect of time which grasps that which happens *beyond the limits of cosmic time*. As an example of what happens beyond the limits of cosmic time, he mentions the creative days of Genesis. The eschatological aspect of time cannot be identified with historical time.

Now, in view of the neo-orthodox antithesis between time and eternity, in view of paradox and supra-temporal contemporaneity, and in view of the reduction of the Biblical events to symbols and myths, Dooyeweerd's language is disturbing. Perhaps in the volumes yet to be published, he will strongly emphasize the verbal inerrancy of the Scriptures. Surely it is to be hoped that he will not neglect this subject. But until he stresses verbal inspiration, and possibly afterward too, one must ask what is really meant by denying that the first chapter of Genesis is historical. If any part of the Bible events are beyond the limits of cosmic time – that is to say, in the light of the analysis in the first part of this paper, if some events did not occur in time – how does one decide which of the Biblical accounts are historical and which are not? If the six days of creation are not temporal, is the serpent's temptations of Eve historical? And is the crucifixion historical? What is the criterion by which one may distinguish an event that really occurred in time from some revelational, supra-temporal symbol?

Dooyeweerd, though he may not intend the same meaning, uses some of the language of the neo-orthodox. And one wonders whether it is possible on his construction to maintain the factual truth of Biblical history.

Thus, we may conclude that both theologically and philosophically Dooyeweerd's view of time in its present form is, at very least, inadequate.