

The Dilemma for Christian Philosophical Thought and the Critical Character of the Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee.

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This still youthful philosophical school which introduces itself as the "wijsbegeerte der wetsidee" sets forth its basic thesis in terms that place it in a markedly antithetical position over against thinking that holds to the traditional attitude. This basic thesis can be summarized thus: theoretical philosophical thought is, *in its own domain*, self-insufficient.

The above italicized words make all the difference because they clearly and unmistakably signify a radical break with the basic idea of modern humanistic thought as well as the traditional synthetic standpoint of any halfway Christian philosophy.

For as long as this self-insufficiency of theoretical thinking is merely taken to mean the inability of such thinking on its own to uncover the full meaning of the cosmos and human personality, and the unfathomable depths of God's Being and the mysteries of grace of the Christian religion, even then we can still hold on to the postulate that our thinking has an *immanent* self-sufficiency. Indeed, on such terms we might well endeavour to find a more or less harmonious synthesis between that which "natural reason" can effectively teach us on its own and the supra-reasonable mysteries of the Christian religion unveiled by a "supra-natural revelation". [4] But it is only the recognition of the self-insufficiency of theoretical thinking *in its own arena* which brings about the radical revolution in the conception of philosophy, whereby any reconciliation with the traditional standpoint is ruled out.

The second basic thesis of the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee is that the traditional conception of the immanent thought-autonomy betrays a lack of critical self-reflection in philosophical thinking. In other words, this conception does not sufficiently account for the conditions by which real philosophical thinking *is possible*.

By this second basic thesis the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee affects the philosophical ground of the thesis of immanent thought-autonomy. By so doing, it opens the proper philosophical discussion with the adherents of the immanence standpoint. And by rightful claim it expects a serious philosophical defense from this serious philosophical attack.

For those who accept the point of departure of the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee, it is of utmost importance to distinguish sharply between the *transcendent* and the *immanent* plane of positioning. As long as one chooses the plane of transcendent position, a simple *dismissal* of the new attitude of thought will suffice for the adherents of the immanence-standpoint. The most we can then expect is a confrontation of the diverse positions, in itself instructive, no doubt, but in which immanence-philosophy can reserve the right to bring its new Christian opponent into line for interfering with "questions of faith" in a strictly theoretical debate.

However, what counts as soon as we enter the plane of immanence, is no longer a mere confrontation of diverse positions, but the *justification of the immanence-standpoint* as a supposedly *purely theoretical standpoint*. In other words, what is at stake then, is the justification of the traditional idea of the immanent autonomy of thinking itself. For the presence of immanence-philosophy to be the *only possible philosophical* standpoint is solely based on its supposedly purely theoretical character.

[5]I do not mean a simple turning of the tables, as if now the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee would claim a sort of monopoly in philosophical thinking by denying immanence philosophy its *theoretical character*. By doing so it would relapse in the attitude of thought which it attacks with all possible force. Rather, such exclusive claim results from the conception that real philosophy is only possible on the basis of the immanent autonomy of thinking.

The wijsbegeerte der wetsidee has from the start entered into philosophical discussion with its opponent, and has thereby fully recognized the theoretical character of immanence-philosophy implicitly.¹[1] It only disputes that immanence-philosophy's *starting point* is purely theoretical and religiously unprejudiced. As a consequence it attacks the possibility of a religiously neutral scientific philosophy. It demands from all philosophy as such that it be truly, and not just nominally, critically-transcendental. That is to say, it demands from its opponents too that in their philosophical thinking they account for both the immanent boundaries, as well as for the transcendent presupposita, which are the universally valid conditions on which real philosophical thinking is *only possible*.

Thinking in a real critical transcendental way means, in the full sense of the word, to think *through unto the limits*. This forbids that the thinker starts from a presupposition, which in its true purport remains *hidden* for him, and which *preoccupies* him without a philosophical account of its true nature. Such hidden presuppositions are brought to light by the radically transcendental attitude of thought. Such is demanded by the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee, if necessary in a ruthlessly critical way.

In this regard the new way of thinking is the declared enemy of every *philosophical dogmatism*, which hides itself behind traditional [6] postulates, and which becomes *more dogmatical* in the measure in which it calls itself *more critical*. For this is the true nature of the dogmatic attitude of thought, not that it issues from supra-theoretical presuppositions - for, as we will see, this is what *everybody* does who wants to do philosophy -, but dogmatical it is when the thinker starts from presupposita *without giving an account of them*. In this way, the traditional distinction which was inaugurated by Kant, between the *critical* and the *dogmatic* attitude of thought, is given a new and definite meaning.

Real philosophical thinking is not possible without an implicit or explicit positioning with respect to the following preliminary questions. In the first place, what is the relation between theoretical thinking and the full *selfhood* actually at work in that thinking? Secondly, how are both of them related to the temporal cosmos? And third, in which origin, or archè, does thinking come to rest in the sense that there is no theoretical questioning beyond that origin? [2]

This description of the philosophical preliminaries is not arbitrary, but follows from the essential character of philosophical thinking itself. Everyone who accounts for it necessarily encounters these preliminary questions. They are given an answer, explicitly or implicitly, in the *philosophical groundidea*, which directs the course of philosophical thinking from beginning to end. As the totality of the necessary presuppositions it is the transcendental limiting idea of philosophy *par excellence*. We have called it the cosmomic idea.

Philosophical self-reflection on the relation between self and thinking as such is necessarily directed to the transcendental limits of philosophy. For philosophical thinking is different from special science. Each of the latter concerns itself with one of the theoretically distinguished modalities of our cosmos. In the theoretical aspects of number, space, movement, organic life, emotional feeling, logical [7] analysis, historical development, language, social intercourse, economics, aesthetics, law, morality and faith, theoretical thinking directs itself to the diverse modes (modalities) in which temporal reality presents itself to theoretical analysis. Each special science concentrates on the speciality of one such modal aspect. As such it is unable to account for its own possibility.

But philosophical thinking cannot be *concentrated* in such mere "gegenständliche" analysis. There is no possibility for concentration in mere theoretical *opposing* to and of the diverse modal sides of reality. Philosophical thinking necessarily needs to look for its concentration *beyond* or *behind* the diversity of modal aspects. That is its *tendency towards totality*. A philosopher must try to find the reliable point from which he can direct the *theoretical view of totality* over the modal diversity of our cosmos. This reliable point which

necessarily transcends the modal diversity within our temporal cosmos we called the "Archimedean point" of philosophy.

Without such an Archimedean point no philosophy is possible. However, the question is: Can we find it within theoretical thinking itself? Or must it necessarily transcend this thinking? Immanence philosophy, in all its varieties, holds to the first position. The *wijsbegeerte der wetsidee*, taking position upon the Scriptural, fully Christian foundation, holds to the second point of view. It is evident that we are here faced with a radical and comprehensive difference in thinking attitude. The choice of the Archimedean point, from which the thinker directs his philosophical gaze of totality over the cosmos, determines the entire understanding of its structure and of human experience, of the structure of being human, and of the true nature of our selfhood.

From the Christian standpoint the mentioned choice is connected with the meaning of the fall into sin and the redemption in Christ Jesus for the total structure of human existence. It is also related to the question how, *according to the structure of creation itself*, the relation is to be understood between human thought and selfhood on the one hand, and the Creator of all things on the other hand. Thomists have [8]clearly recognized this in their reaction upon the *wijsbegeerte der wetsidee*.^{2[3]}

In humanistic philosophy, ever since its foundation by the French philosopher Descartes, the attempt has been made to find its Archimedean point within the *subjective* activity of thinking. As is well known, Descartes makes philosophical reflection start with a universal methodic doubt concerning everything that is given in our normal experience of the cosmos. After this method of doubt has eliminated all reality outside of thinking itself as a reliable point of departure for philosophy, it finally has to halt in front of the subjective activity of thinking itself. If it would also doubt the latter, it would *renounce* itself as scepticism. In doubting, I *think*. Thus, in the *cogito*, in the "I think", philosophy has to find its final universal starting point. The Archimedean point must be constituted by the "cogito".

However, on closer inspection this "cogito" appears to be a *fundamental problem* rather than a *reliable and univocal point of departure*. For we are immediately confronted by the basic question concerning the relation between the "I" and "theoretical thinking". Theoretical thinking is not possible without the I *who* thinks. Is this "I-ness" enclosed by theoretical thinking, or is it transcendent with respect to its limits? And further: How should we understand this supposed role of the theoretical act of thinking as reliable and unambiguous point of departure for all philosophical inquiry? Is this act of thinking itself a piece of temporal reality? In other words, is it itself enclosed within the diversity of modal aspects of the temporal cosmos? If so, how then can that act of thinking itself contain an Archimedean point, which as such should be *above* the diversity of modal aspects? For (as was said before) in the Archimedean point theoretical thinking should be *concentrated* upon the *totality*, the *deeper unity* of all modal aspects. [9]And finally: Is it possible that philosophy finds the origin (*archè*) of truth and reality in theoretical thinking, in the sense that in its problems it no longer transcends the limits of this activity of thinking, but finds theoretical *rest* in the theoretical act of thinking itself?

In these three basic questions we immediately recognize the fundamental problems which we identified above as the necessary limiting questions, the prior questions of all philosophy, regardless of its starting point. Descartes was still able to distinguish these questions well: After he chose his Archimedean point in the subjective activity of *mathematical* thinking, he immediately proceeds to the idea of "Origin" or "godhead", understood as immanent to this thinking. This deification of mathematical thinking into an absolute, infinite, independent and self-sufficient *substance*, is to guarantee the absolute ground of truth and certainty for the further immanent course of Descartes' philosophical deductions. Then, the "I" or "selfhood" is conceived by him as a *finite substance*, above all temporal change. Its *essence* (attribute) is sought in *mathematical thinking itself*. This "thinking substance" he identifies with the "soul". All other modal aspects of conscious activity

are conceived by him as mere *modi of mathematical thinking*. Finally, in opposition to the finite "soul" substance, he conceives of the finite substance "body" as *res extensiva*, that is to say, spatially extended substance. In its activity of natural philosophy mathematical thinking directs itself towards this extended substance as its "Gegenstand".

However, since the Scottish philosopher David Hume (following Locke and Berkeley) had subjected this Cartesian concept of substance to a sharp criticism, the foundation of the new humanistic philosophy seemed completely undermined, again *in a supposedly purely theoretical manner*. The "mathematical cogito" appeared unfit to serve as Archimedean point. And it seemed that this had been proven by a "purely theoretical" critique of human knowledge.

But had not Descartes also chosen his Archimedean point in a "purely theoretical self-reflection"? Had not *he too* [10] adopted a purely critical attitude of thought when in a universal methodical scepticism he opposed the attempt to find a reliable ground in sensory appearance, to which he supposed naive experience to cling?

This is true. But Hume has *shifted* the Archimedean point, the point of departure for philosophical enquiry, from *mathematical* to *psychological* thinking. This explains the apparent irrefutableness of his criticism which caused so much trouble for Kant in his transitional period. When we assume, with Hume, that thinking is nowhere able to rise above the limits of sensory-psychic impressions as concerns its ("gegenständliche") content of thought, then Descartes mathematical philosophy stumbles. For then all other modal aspects of temporal experiential reality ultimately find their deeper unity and origin in the psychic aspect of sense. However, the (psychological) groundidea from which Hume starts, is no more *purely theoretical* as is that of Descartes.

In these matters we are primarily concerned with the choice of the Archimedean point. It appears that the supposedly purely-theoretical critique of knowledge is totally dependent upon the stakes at which this Archimedean point is fixed. For there are many possibilities for the fixation of the latter. Ever since irrationalist-historicist conceptions started to dominate philosophy, both Cartesian as well as Humean choices of the Archimedean point appear "uncritical", since either of them supposed that this point could be exempt from historical development. But is there anything in human existence which is above historical development? Is theoretical thinking itself able to choose a standpoint outside of that universal historical dynamics? If not, it seems that the point of departure can only be found in *historical thinking*. This shift of the Archimedean point to historical thinking puts an end to the static character of this point of departure. Historical thinking itself is [11] conceived as taken up in the historical stream of consciousness. The thinker is supposed to be able to theoretically understand history only from a certain phase of development. Instead of the Cartesian "cogito" the historical *vivo, historical experience*, is raised to the level of Archimedean point.

When we consider this carefully, it appears again and again that the supposedly purely-theoretical fixation of the Archimedean point involves a theoretical absolutization which as such, as *absolutization*, cannot be accounted for purely-theoretically. Rather, all such absolutizations, from which the various -isms in philosophy have originated, appear to be necessary consequences from the *primary absolutization* which is hidden in the declaration of independence of theoretical thinking. This is what needs to be clearly discerned!

As such theoretical thought is forever dependent on the analytically separated variety of modal aspects, which it places *opposite* itself as its "Gegenstand". Real *knowledge* can only be attained by that thinking in a synthesis of its own *logical* (analytical) meaning with the meaning of an opposite, *non-logical* modal aspect. Thus, while theoretical thinking by its own inner structure will always be dependent upon a variety of modal aspects, with which it has to join itself in a synthesis, it is never able by itself, apparently, to rise above that confusing variety in order to offer to the thinker a truly *Archimedean* point, in which that diversity is concentrated in a *deeper unity*.

If we yet try to fix our Archimedean point in a *purely theoretical* way, there appears to be no other possibility but the theoretical *isolation* of a certain modal cosmic aspect from their temporal diversity, and its absolutization into the basic denominator for all other modal aspects of reality. [12]When we keep in mind that this whole absolutization can only be performed by means of a *subjective theoretical synthesis*, then it becomes understandable how in one case the "cogito" as Archimedean point is identified in the sense of *mathematical* thinking, in another case in the sense of *psychological* thinking, in yet another case as *biological* thinking, and then again as *historical* thinking, etc.

In each case the thinker who chose in this way his Archimedean point in the supposed self-sufficiency of the theoretical act of thinking, identifies the *I-ness* which does the thinking, with the *synthetical act of thought* in which the "I-ness" is active. Regardless of whether he conceives this "I-ness" with Descartes in the metaphysical sense of a self-sufficient *substance*, or with Hume in a so-called *purely-empirical* psychological sense.

In the meantime, on the humanistic immanence standpoint, there appears to be an escape from this vicious circle, namely via the *critical-transcendental* route inaugurated by Kant. This is the idea: Theoretical thinking itself, while synthetically directing itself towards certain modal aspects of reality as its "Gegenstand", can always again become the object of a higher, so-called reflexive act of thought. Everything on which this higher reflexive act of thinking directs itself, becomes necessarily its "Gegenstand". Yet there has to be a *subjective pole* in the "cogito" which itself can no longer in its turn become "Gegenstand", since every "Gegenstand" has, after all, to be *thought* by the I. This subjective pole of thought, on which I can only reflect while thinking in a *self-reflecting* way, is called the "transcendental cogito", the "transcendental subject of thought", the "Bewusstsein überhaupt", etc, etc. It cannot coincide with any special "gegenständliche" act of thinking. Here finally the true Archimedean point within the theoretical activity of thinking seems to be revealed. Again, this is achieved along a "purely-theoretical" way, namely by a simple theoretical self-reflection upon that which as immanent subjective pole of thought is always presupposed in any specific theoretical act of thinking.

However, when we look closer, this so-called [13]"transcendental cogito" too appears to be a *fundamental problem*, rather than a *truly unambiguous and reliable point of departure*. For the whole so-called transcendental subject of thought is nothing but the result of a *theoretical abstraction*, which is performed thinkingly by the I-ness which is doing the thinking. This being the case, this thinking I-ness cannot possibly be an *immanent pole within* thinking itself, for against all attempts to reduce it to a "Gegenstand" of thought as well, it maintains its transcendence above all theoretical thinking.

This full self, which does the thinking, is not only active in theoretical thought, but it functions in all modal aspects of temporal reality as the truly transcendent concentration point of the whole of human temporal existence. By contrast, even in its *transcendental-logical* sense theoretical thinking remains necessarily caught in the temporal diversity of modal aspects.³[4]

But it is in the self that all modal aspects of temporal human existence are supra-modally concentrated. Only that self, rather than a theoretical abstraction like the "transcendental subject of thought", is in a position to give fundamental direction to philosophical thought in the choice of its Archimedean point. It is the same in immanence philosophy. In truth, it is the *self*, the *ego*, which is playing the instrument of philosophical thinking. Only, this player is hidden in immanence philosophy.

It follows that true *self-knowledge* is the primary condition for truly critical philosophical reflection. For the choice of the Archimedean point of philosophy is determined by where that self seeks its reliable ground and origin. Once we have understood this state of affairs, we can only conclude that the idea of the immanent self-sufficiency of theoretical

thinking betrays a lack of veritable critical self-reflection. The choice of the Archimedean point cannot be purely-theoretical, [14]for it is only the *selfhood* of the thinker who is able to make this choice. It is rather a *religious* act, in which theoretical thought is concentrated upon that which by the thinking *self* is accepted as the deeper root and self-sufficient origin of the cosmos.

This self, which in Holy Scripture is called the *heart*, from which are the issues of life, is subject to the religious law of concentration by which it searches restlessly for the origin of itself and of the entire cosmos.[5] *This religious concentration-law prevails even on the immanence standpoint.* This unrest, issuing from the heart, affects philosophical thinking, which in its tendency towards origin and totality necessarily points beyond its immanent limits towards its deeper religious Root and Origin.

The philosophical ground-idea is the foundation of all philosophy. It is nothing but this tendency towards origin and totality expressed in the ultimate theoretical limiting idea. In this limiting idea we reflect thinkingly upon the necessary presuppositions of all philosophical thinking.

By the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ we do not regard the immanence standpoint as a natural preamble for the Christian standpoint of transcendence. Rather it is to be regarded as a radical *apostasy* from the true self and from the true Origin of all things, and thus as a *falling away from the reliable ground and Origin of truth.* The self, which is in need of a reliable ground in its theoretical thinking, has fallen away from its true nature. Finally it *identifies* itself with its thought-abstraction. By doing so, it falls into the diversity of temporal meaning, where it is *dispersed.* Its concentration is now only found back in an *absolutization,* a deification of *something created.*

From Roman Catholic, Thomistic standpoint it has been alleged against the *wijsbegeerte der wetsidee*, that it makes "grace" completely devour "nature", and that thereby [15]it disturbs the basis for a philosophical discussion.

It would be injustice to consider Thomistic philosophy as an immanence philosophy. For the central Thomistic doctrine of "analogia entis" is completely at odds with the humanistic conception of the self-sufficiency of theoretical thinking. So what can be the answer upon this allegation?

I wrote before that Thomistic philosophers have seen well where the fundamental difference is to be sought between its standpoint and that of the radical-Christian *wijsbegeerte der wetsidee.* Indeed, this is the difference in conception of the meaning of sin and redemption in Christ Jesus for the whole of human created nature. The Scriptural conception is that created "human nature" is *concentrated* in the *heart*, rather than in natural *reason.* The heart is the supra-rational religious root of existence. By contrast, the pagan Aristotelian conception taught that the "essence" of human nature is concentrated in the *nous*, the "rational part of the soul", which it interpreted as the substantial form of human existence. These two conceptions do not agree at all. They cannot be reconciled on a Christian synthesis-standpoint in which "rational nature", *taken in the pagan conception,* is elevated unto the substructure for the "supra-natural" in the *Christian sense.*

It is my heart's desire that our Roman fellow Christians would on this cardinal issue arrive at a deeper insight in Scripture's revelation concerning the centre of true human *nature.* For it seems a preliminary condition for a discussion about the relation between "nature" and "grace" (leaving aside the question whether this scheme can be accepted on a Christian standpoint), that we realize what Scripture teaches about human "nature". Of course, the issue here is not the question if rational functions form a part of man's created nature. Rather, the question is, Where do we have to look for the *centre,* the *root,* the *heart* of these functions, and: Can human reason in its immanent activity be independent of this centre?

It was never my intention to mean or to say that Thomistic philosophy as such is immanence philosophy. In the full sense it is a Christian synthesis-philosophy, in which the surely magnificent attempt is made to harmonize the Aristotelian standpoint of immanence with the Christian standpoint of transcendence. In his teaching of the "analogical being" of human reason, [16]Thomas tries to reconcile Scripture's teaching of the image of God in man with the Aristotelian hypostasis of the nous. Indeed human nature is here not considered as self-sufficient *in a transcendent sense*, but merely as an analogy of the self-sufficient divine reason, as participating in the divine reason, in which *ens, verum et bonum* coincide.5[6]

Indeed, from the Scriptural point of view, it should never be denied that God's image is expressed in human thinking, in its created structure, that is. But that is not what the issue is about. The only and exclusive question is this: Should we call theoretical thinking which is fallen away from its true religious root "natural" in any other sense than Scripture does, when it denotes this natural thinking as the *nous tès sarkos*, the "reason of the flesh", that is: *apostate, darkened reason* (Koloss. 2:18)? It is not the contention of the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee that the *structure* of human existence, or that the structure of human thinking would be destroyed by the fall into sin.6[7] Nor that immanence philosophy would not be able to grasp moments of truth. If this were the case, that the created *structure* would have been destroyed, then even *apostate, sinful thinking* would have become impossible. Even this thinking remains, according to its structure: *thinking, and as such rooted religiously*.

But if this is true, the allegation cannot be maintained that on the standpoint of the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee "nature" would be eaten by "grace" and that there would not be any point of connection, any base for discussion with immanence philosophy. After all, it will no longer be possible to ignore the *fact* that the wijsbegeerte der wetsidee is indeed *philosophy*, and that it presents new philosophical problems, which can no longer be shrugged off, neither by a fullfledged, nor by a halfway Christian immanence philosophy, by the ipse-dixetism that philosophy is only possible if the basic idea of the immanent autonomy of thinking is accepted!

Translation: C. van Haefen, 2005
