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The Philosophy of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd* (a reply to Mr. D. Jellema, Ph. D.)

J. P. A. Mekkes

IN the April, May, and October, 1954 issues of the *Calvin Forum,* Dirk Jellema, Ph. D., of the University of West Virginia (History Department) has attempted a judgment of the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee.* He wished to do this from an historical point of view, for he excuses himself in the beginning of his presentation by saying: "This treatment is dictated first by the fact that our professional training has been in the history of ideas rather than in formal philosophy; and second by the fact that we do not have sufficient time available to attempt the formal analysis of VAD which should some day be done by trained philosophers."

Speaking from this historical point of view, he expresses astonishment that Rev. J. M. Spier, one of the adherents of the W.d.W., should have asserted that before the appearance of this philosophy, no Christian philosopher has ever really subjected himself to the Word of God. Further, from this historical point of view, he believes that different critics from the most divergent Dutch "gereformeerd" circles support his view.

Dr Jellema complains that Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd (VAD) have never repudiated Rev. Spier, and so he attributes to them what he finds condemnable in Spier. Especially condemnable is our underevaluation of the truths in previous philosophies.

However, aside from this objection to Spier, and while appreciating VAD's philosophical labor, Dr Jellema has one insurmountable objection to the pretensions of the W.d.W.: their view that every synthesis with a non-Christian philosophy is unacceptable and their belief that they themselves have avoided such a synthesis.

If we may permit ourselves one criticism before entering into the material proper of Jellema's article, it is this: after honestly recognizing one's own limitations in "formal" or "systematic" training, it would have been more prudent to be careful in drawing "formal" or "systematical" conclusions from one's historical study.

In place of Jellema's "formal" (systematic is meant) we should prefer to use the term "principial," that is, based on principle. For the time being we will gladly use his word.

The necessity of being more careful should have occurred to Dr Jellema in note 18 of his first article. Here, after presenting Vollenhoven's division of philosophical periods into 1) ignorance of the Word-Revelation, 2) synthesis between Christian and Greek philosophy, and 3) breaking up of synthesis, he comments that "such superficial classifications are useful as generalities, but if used for more than that, they become misleading."

We readily understand that a historian of philosophy would want a more fully developed division, but then we are surprised by precisely contrary criticism in notes 14 and 16 of the same article where he reproaches Vollenhoven of going too far. How can a Historian fit these two criticisms together? (a)

Yet, it could be that for those, who from other considerations than only interesting historical ones busy themselves with philosophical problems from a Christian viewpoint, what Jellema calls "superficial" appears to penetrate to the depths of human consciousness. In any case, a more "systematic" (formal?) orientation would certainly have been useful for Dr Jellema's intention.

That a bit more systematization could have helped him is evident when in the beginning of his second article he poses a *question* and, before beginning the investigation, follows it immediately with his desired answer: "our conclusion will be that the philosophy of VAD is a synthesis of Calvinism and Phenomenology, a post-Neo-Kantian contemporary philosophy of German origin."

This hastiness is not limited just to the choice of an unfortunate example in style; when Jellema historically and controversially pronounces judgment over the deepest ground of the W.d.W. he does it in a, from a systematical point of view, certainly inadmissable manner.

"Since the core of VAD's system of philosophy is the notion of the fourteen law-spheres or structural levels of the cosmos, and thus a core which lies in the field of ontology, we shall consider the Phenomenologist who has been most interested in the field of ontology: Nicolai Hartmann." Then Dr Jellema describes Hartmann's "Schichtenbau."

The "Schichtenbau" (structural levels) is of course nothing exceptional and certainly not an original discovery by Hartmann (not even with *regard to* the W.d.W. which developed its ontological studies about the same time.) The entire investigation focused by the nineteenth century upon the

* Prof. Jellema's answer appears in the form of footnote comments found at the end of this article. These comments are indicated by small letters appearing in parentheses throughout the text.

foundations of the cultural sciences bumped into the continuous ordered bases in the kosmos. If the historian in Dr Jellema had been more alert here he would not have so emphatically presented Hartmann and Feiblemann as a new discovery. There are also many others. (b)

However what *is* exceptional is that Dr Jellema finds "the *core* of VAD's system of philosophy" in the "structural levels of the cosmos," and then in note 7 of his second article he concludes: "It is this matter of dependence of the higher spheres on the lower which leads VAD into difficulty on the doctrine of the soul; for the soul (and angels) live in the spiritual-rational sphere, but are not bound by the laws affecting matter. Hence also VAD's attempt to escape this difficulty by denying the traditional notion of the soul as a meta-physical substance, and branding such a notion as synthesis-philosophy."

Dr Jellema is an historian, and historians like to look for similarities. He observes a likeness between Hartmann and the W.d.W. An historian also, because he is an historian, hangs on to tradition, and therefore Jellema gladly *dictates*: "the soul lives in the spiritual-rational sphere." (c)

But the method of historical study as Jellema conceives it will never give insight into what forms "the core" of a "system." And such a method can echo "the soul lives in the spiritual-rational sphere," but it certainly cannot prove it.

There is a bit more to the matter, than the looking at systems as historical objects, and as soon as anybody takes the trouble to look deeper into history he will be wise enough not to write: "hence VAD's attempt to escape. . . ."

Nevertheless, Dr Jellema boldly presumes that further study will show up more likenesses and influences. And he calmly concludes that we of the W.d.W. are involved in the synthesis of Christian faith and phenomenology á la Husserl and Nicolai Hartmann, just as Stoker's philosophy of the creation-concept is a synthesis with Scheler. Now Dr Jellema does *not* disapprove of this; but what he does disapprove of is that the W.d.W. tries to deny it and presents itself as a purely Christian philosophy.

At the end of his second article he draws the final conclusion, which his last article just embroiders: "The philosophy of VAD then, must be regarded, it seems to me, as an attempt, and an able one, at synthesizing Christian *theology* and phenomenology. The synthesis is sometimes awkward; the two don't always fit; and it is noteworthy, and somewhat alarming, that when this happens (as in the case of the traditional Christian view of the soul), VAD try to change the doctrine rather than change the philosophy." (my italics)

We hope later to say more about this last article (October, 1954). But first, we believe that we have sufficiently reiterated the opinion of Dr Jellema, although already accompanied by criticism (we should wish to call it "formal" criticism) in order to lay down our position in the discussion.

It centers on "the core" and the "escape." It will probably be difficult to discuss a systematic (formal?) question with this "historian."

He writes somewhere that followers of the W.d.W. are finished with criticism by just naming a few names. Fortunately he also mentions Prof. Dooyeweerd's English publications, where the reader can read for himself that Dooyeweerd calls for an immanent critique of the deepest foundations of philosophical systems—a critique which so many have neglected. Such investigation has this purpose: that in spite of mutual differences we may learn to *understand* each other and at any rate maintain a *community* of thought. As historian Dr Jellema has passed these "systematic" questions by as trifles. (d) In his own criticism he does not scruple to do what he reproaches in the followers of the W.d.W.: he wants to support his insight with tradition by hauling in a few names with a Dutch Gereformeerd sound.

He himself explains that as an historian he has not had time to carry out a careful investigation of the bases. And that is why particularly he has not grasped how "the core" of VAD lies in the thesis *that human theoretical thought does not have the power in itself to give us insight into truth, but that it must be imbued from top to bottom by the basic motils [sic] of the Holy Scriptures, the proclamation of the universal Mediator and Saviour.* (e)

Dr Jellema has not understood this and that is why he so readily thinks he discovers a synthesis between Christian *theology* and phenomenology in the W.d.W.

For him truth has to come from philosophy or from theology (or perhaps from both together), but in any case from theoretical thinking. Remember: "the soul lives in the spiritual-rational sphere."

Jellema is certain of this. He has read it in so many heathen and Christian philosophers, yes, in "gereformeerd" Dutchmen; historical tradition appears to him generally to appeal to it, and—most important—this presupposition lies hidden at the bottom of all the world's scientific undertakings. What could a man of science do if he could no longer count on this theoretical thinking as the trustworthy discoverer of scientific truth?!

Precisely this silent presupposition VAD attack. (f)

If Dr Jellema had taken the trouble to compare his lists of "levels" of Feiblemann with that of VAD, he would have at least discovered a striking difference in the placing of the logical "level."[1] With all deference, I should like to ask him to take a look at our critique of Nicolai Hartmann (*Beteekenis van het subject in de moderne waardephilosophie*, Univ. Pers, Leiden, 1949). Then he shall not be able to deny the conclusion that there is precisely the opposite of a synthesis between Hartmann and us. (g)

That the soul does *not* live in the earthly recognizable "spiritual-rational sphere" (how does Dr J.

"know" about the angels?) rests neither on a theological nor on a philosophical nor on any other theoretical propositions of VAD. For them and for us it is not an "escape" but a pretheoretical *faith* dogma. We *believe*, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, that only God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ is sovereign, and that before Him the *created* logical thinking is to be counted *as nothing*. (h)

We *believe* that His grace has rescued us from the power of the beclouding deification of reason and that we must express this especially in our scientific practice.

That is why we place such strict demands on scientific criticism.

That is why we also take account of the elements of truth which the ages of philosophy *had* to see, since these elements rooted in God's truth. We object to just this in the non-Christian philosophy: she has not recognized God as creator, Who is to be praised eternally, and that she *therefore* repeatedly had to fall into errors. To clarify this we present to the interested reader the following passage which may be found on page 117 f. of Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (the American edition of his *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*, I.): (i)

"By adopting an antithetic attitude against the entire immanence-philosophy in its evolution from Greek thought to the latest time, is not, for an authentically Christian philosophy, all connection with historical development of philosophic thought cut off? That is to say, does not the latter place itself outside this historical development? If this were really so, then at once the sentence of doom would be pronounced over the attempt undertaken in this work at a *reformation* of philosophic thought from the Christian point of view. Reformation is not creation out of nothing.

"But if an appeal is made to the Idea of the "philosophia perennis," one should know what is to be understood by it. Philosophic thought as such stands in an inner relationship with historical development, postulated by our very philosophical basis Idea, and no thinker whatever can withdraw himself from this historical evolution. Our transcendental ground-Idea itself requires the recognition of the "philosophia perennis" in this sense and rejects the proud illusion that any thinker whatever could begin as it were with a clean slate and disassociate himself from the development of an age-old process of philosophical reflection. Only let not the postulate of the "philosophia perennis" be turned against the religious ground-motive of philosophy with the intention of involving it (and not only the variable *forms* given to it) in historical relativity.

"For he who does so, will necessarily fall into a historical relativism with respect to truth, as it is encountered in Dilthey's philosophy of the life- and world-views or, in still more striking manner, in the case of an Oswald Spengler.

"Whoever takes the pains to penetrate into the philosophic system developed in this work, will soon discover how it is wedded to the historical development of philosophic and scientific thought with a thousand ties, so far as its immanent philosophic content is concerned, even though we can nowhere *follow* the immanence-philosophy.

"The elaboration of our philosophy of the cosmonomic Idea is thus necessarily bound to historical development. Insight into the wealth of meaning of the cosmic order may grow, even through the work of schools of thought against which our own is set in an irreconcilable antithesis. Nevertheless, the *religious starting point*, and consequently the whole direction which philosophic though acquires thereby by means of its threefold transcendental ground-Idea, remains consistent. *This starting point may no longer be abandoned by any single phase of Christian philosophic thought, if it is not to fall back into a scholastic standpoint of accommodation which has proved to be fatal to the idea of a philosophia christiana reformata.* (k)

"Every serious philosophic school contributes to the development of human thought to a certain extent, and no single one can credit itself with the monopoly in this respect."

We sincerely hope that as soon as Dr Jellema reads this, "name-calling" will no longer satisfy him for historically referring to this or that. We sincerely hope that he will take the trouble to penetrate more "systematically" (formally?) into the bases of the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* and other philosophies.

Then the charge in article III (October, 1954) will also disappear, the charge that the W.d.W. breaks the continuity of philosophic thought from a Calvinistic standpoint, which Calvin and Kuyper for instance would have guarded themselves against. (i)

Then Dr Jellema shall acquire appreciation—also historical—for the penetrating critique exercised by Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, each in his own way and in his own field, but also both with unusually universal knowledge. (d) This will be a safer road then continually operating with the shortcomings of VAD's followers on the one hand and listening to obsolete Dutch criticism on the other.

1. The difference in principle with regard to "the levels" between the VAD on the one hand and immanence philosophy on the other is that the latter makes their mutual order and quality entirely dependent upon the choice of the archimedian point in the logical-analytic thinking. (j) Concerning N. Hartmann as an ontological critic, I have dealt with this in the booklet mentioned in the following sentence in the text.

The W.d.W on the other hand has developed her modalities (something completely different from "levels") out of *a faith* in the mutual irreducability of the diversity of our temporal existence and the equal relateness of each modality to the *religious root* of creation. When VAD began to work on this problem, basing their solution on the practical-Calvinistic teaching of sphere sovereignty, N. Hartmann had not yet published his doctrine of "levels." (b)

The Calvinistic teaching of the mutual irreducible modalities is born of the irreconcilable antithesis to the belief in the autonomy of theoretical thought—which believes that it can arbitrarily bring the aspects of reality under a logically determined common denominator. (j)

Dr Jellema rather appreciates the W.d.W.'s attempts, but he too uncritically posits a bond between phenomenology as a *contemporary* philosophical movement and the W.d.W.

In the light of the above quote from Prof. Dooyeweerd over the "philosophia perennis" it is not surprising that phenomenology and existentialism as well as Kant and Plato have significance for us. (l)

Yet, also as an effect of history, our eyes are wide open to the fact that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the principles of phenomenology and the Christian faith.

This should have been clear to Dr Jellema from Prof. Dooyeweerd's leading problem, the "transcendental critique of theoretical thought," which finds its highpoint in the critique of Kant's and Husserl's idea of the transcendental "cogito." (m)

Dr Jellema has paid too much attention to the "levels" and has missed the real "core" of VAD's philosophy, presumably because of Dutch influences.

We certainly realize that today's phenomenology and existentialism have something to say to us. (l) But precisely because of this we want to be very alert against the penetration of that which poisons these modern methods — just as it did in earlier systems: the autonomy of theoretical thought of the creature over against the Creator. We want to keep our eye on this autonomy of theoretical thought in spite of the protective hood of a belief, submissive to scriptural norms, in a separate supernatural sphere. (n)

We ask Dr Jellema to watch with us and at the same time over us on this point, just as we will do for him.

Meanwhile, and this may be viewed as the essence of it all: the question in dispute is the critical question of the archimedian point where *I*, a *thinker* submissive to God's creation-law, can choose a position for the study of scientific problems. Shall I place my greatest trust in my theological or philosophical thinking, or in the living relation to my Creator born out of His Word to me? (o)

The consequence of this choice controls my entire scientific activity. (p) We still have a lot to think through together on this point. But a decided position we cannot avoid, since we who call ourselves Christians know that God will not suffer any other gods beside Him in our heart, any gods who would make the heart a "in the spiritual-rational sphere living soul." We should like to close this article with the expression of the hope that Dr Jellema and the readers of the *Calvin Forum* will together with us reflect seriously on this primary question which forces itself upon the Christian philosopher. This can perhaps bring us to a fruitful cooperation in the interest of our science *and of our faith.* (q)

Answer to Mekkes

Dirk Jellema

(a) Quite simply. V's general classification may be useful, though superficial: his attempts at more detailed classification have been attacked as at best questionable and at worst preposterous.

(b) The idea that there are ordered levels in the cosmos goes back at least to Aristotle. Hartmann's "Schichtenbau" and VAD's "Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee" both emerge from the attempt to escape the apparent impasse reached around 1900 by Neo-Kantianism, and are quite different in degree from the earlier casual interest in the problem. Both Dooyeweerd and Stoker acknowledge their early interest in Phenomenology. Phenomenology (and specifically Hartmann) took up the question of cosmic levels as a basic question before VAD began working on it.

(c) Reformed theology, whether working from Scripture (as Voetius and the others claimed), or under the influence of Aristotelianism (as VAD claim), pictured the soul as a metaphysical substance independent of the laws of space and time. VAD, driven by their notion of levels, picture all created things (including the soul) as subject to the laws governing these levels. This leads them to revise drastically the picture given of the soul by earlier Reformed thinkers. If acceptance of traditional Reformed theology means "dictation," I plead guilty.

(d) Since I specifically mentioned VAD's immanent critique of post-Cartesian philosophy as the most valid part of their system, I am puzzled by these remarks. It should also be said that VAD's immanent critique of pre-Cartesian philosophy is open to grave question.

(e) Mekkes has some point here. The core of VAD's system is, as he says, Christian faith, in a sense: it is the point from which they set out. On the other hand, that is the core of *every* Christian philosophy worthy of the name. The core of VAD's ideas in the sense of the basic difference between VAD's system and other Christian philosophical systems is, however, the notion of "wetsidee" or "Schichtenbau."

(f) Mekkes here does exactly that for which VAD have been attacked by Hepp, Smeenk, and others: he distinguishes sharply between Reformed theology and Biblical faith. It seems to me, rather, that our Reformed theology is based on the Bible, not contrary to it: and that our creeds are based on faith, not on reason: and that our theology is *not* merely theoretical thinking based on reason. If it will make Mekkes happier, however, I would gladly state that I regard VAD as an often unwieldy synthesis between *Biblical faith* and Phenomenology, rather than between theology and Phenomenology.

(g) VAD attack Kuyper and Woltjer for "synthesis-philosophy" because they take over some ideas of Plato—even though they have many criticisms of Plato. By the same token, if VAD criticise some details of Hartmann's *Schichtenbau*, this does not prove that VAD do not have a synthesis-philosophy. "Synthesis-philosophy" indeed implies a *critical* acceptance of something. VAD have a Christian Phenomenology in the same sense that Woltjer had a Christian Platonism.

(h) Assumed here again is that the traditional Reformed view of the angels is based on theology and reason rather than on the Bible. This assumption is one many *Forum* readers would question. Also open to question is the view (similar to Barth's) that logical thinking can tell us *nothing* about God: this is contrary to Calvin.

(i) Dooyeweerd here acknowledges that VAD *are* involved in historical patterns, owe much to immanence-philosophy (i.e., non-Christian philosophy), and regard non-Christian philosophy as of some value. In many other places he seems to have forgotten what he here writes: and many of his disciples (e.g., Spier and Mekkes) do not seem to have read this passage carefully.

(j) The difference would rather seem to be that VAD take a different "Archimedean point" (starting-point) from Hartmann's. The similarity is that both accept *Schichtenbau* and *Wetsidee,* and describe the levels and their rela-

tions in similar terms. Hence, in brief, VAD is a synthesis of Calvinism and Phenomenology. An unkind critic might say that VAD accept Phenomenology and stick God in as an afterthought—I personally would not go that far.

(k) The question might be raised whether VAD are not just as "guilty" of accomodation to non-Christian contemporary philosophy as Aquinas was of accomodation to Greek philosophy. Pious thunderings, whether in Aquinas or in Dooyeweerd, do not answer the question.

(l) Mekkes first says there is not a bond, then admits there is. His idea that even if VAD's *Schichtenbau* and *Wetsidee* has been greatly influenced by Phenomenology there is nevertheless no bond between VAD and contemporary Phenomenology is puzzling.

(m) (1) Mekkes does not seem to understand what "synthesis" means. It does *not* mean an uncritical acceptance of all the ideas of Platonism or Phenomenology or whatever it is the Christian philosopher is trying to synthesize with Christianity. It *does* mean acceptance of many elements of Platonism or Phenomenology, and rejection of those which do conflict with Christianity. VAD have a Christian Phenomenology, in the same sense Woltjer had a Christian Platonism—which VAD denounce as a synthesis-philosophy. (2) If Mekkes would read my articles more carefully, he would find that I praised VAD's critique of post-Kantian philosophy, as he does here: and also that I attacked VAD's critique of pre-Cartesian philosophy as weak.

(n) Being interpreted, this means that anyone who agrees with Calvin, Voetius, Kuyper, etc. that there is a separate supernatural sphere is actually supporting the autonomy of human reason. This, if I may use understatement, is open to question.

(o) Mekkes is way off base here. That question is precisely what is *not* at issue with VAD. That statement is *not* something which VAD have discovered after 1500 years of darkness: it is the basis for all varieties of Christian philosophy worthy of the name. Perhaps Aquinas or Augustine or Voetius or Kuyper or Bonaventura or Pascal or Woltjer did not always carry this idea out consistently in their thinking: but this was the basis, the "core," of their thinking. The question is rather this: have VAD been consistent in carrying out this basic belief which they share with so many other philosophers: or have they compromised at least as much as Aquinas did.

(p) Perfectly true. It does *not* drive me to accept VAD, however, since VAD is simply one of several Christian philosophies which starts out from this basic assumption. The question is whether it is as good as or better than or worse than previous attempts at working out a Christian philosophy based on this same starting-point, this "core," this *grond-motief*. Failure to recognize this as the question is a real defect in Mekkes' thinking, and Spier's, and to some extent Dooyeweerd's.

(q) Mekkes misstates the issue. All Calvinistic thinkers *are agreed already* that we must "begin with the living relation to our Creator born out of His Word to us." The question which needs discussion is rather to what extent VAD (and Woltjer, and others) have been able to work out a philosophy based on or at least consistent with this starting point. I agree completely with VAD's Calvinistic starting-point, as I do with, say, Woltjer's starting-point: that is not the point at issue at all. Until Mekkes realizes that it is *not* the point at issue, fruitful discussion will be difficult.

Holland's Struggle Against the Sea

Peter Oppewall

"GOD created the whole world, except for Holland, which was made by the Dutch," is an old French saying. It is easy to see why this saying is popular in the Netherlands, for one-half of the country, containing sixty percent of the population, lies below sea level. This land has been won and maintained by one of the most courageous and tenacious struggles in human history.

This struggle got the attention of the whole world in January, 1953, when high seas, lashed by hurricane winds, crumpled the dikes in the southern part of the land and flooded 8 percent of the whole country, bringing sudden death to 1800 people and leaving in its wake a quarter of a billion dollars damage. The storms and high water of January, 1955, served to remind Holland that she has not yet won the final victory, and that, meanwhile, she must be eternally vigilant.

A new and major chapter in the story of Holland's struggle against the sea may soon be written. The government Delta Commission, a study group appointed to investigate means for preventing similar disasters, has recommended that the government undertake the closing of the mouths of the river estuaries in southern Holland. If this project is undertaken, it will be the most ambitious, the most costly, and possibly the most fruitful of Holland's countermoves against its age-old enemy.

Holland's warfare with the sea began some 2400 years ago. Originally the lowlands were a dumping ground for sand and mud brought down from the highlands of northern and central Europe by the melting glaciers. The Frisians, arriving about 400 B.C., were the first to settle in this soaking wilderness. They roamed over a frontier of 350 miles, but had their headquarters in what is now the province of Friesland. Here they built mounds of earth to protect themselves from the sea. Evidence of about 1500 of these mounds has been found. Their area ranged from five to forty acres, and they sometimes rose to a height of 30 feet above normal sea level. Pliny in 47 A.D. described the Frisians as groups of miserable shipwrecked sailors, marooned on the top of their self-made mounds in the midst of a waste of water: "They try to warm their frozen bowels by burning mud, dug with their hands out of the earth and dried to some extent in the wind more than in the sun, which one hardly ever sees." But by their heroic struggles they proved that it was possible to wring an existence from the lands which at high tide lay below the sea. By moving a total amount of land greater than that which went into the pyramids, they set a precedent which has been followed by Hollanders ever since.

As the Dutch grew in numbers and in knowledge of the ways of the sea, they switched from the essentially defensive measures of the mounds to the offen-