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God's 'Normal' and Philosophy

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Is there anything at all that is normal? We live in a world fundamentally torn apart, because we ourselves are fundamentally torn apart. The Gospel calls this 'death'. Yet creation still exists, works and makes us work. How is that possible, how does that happen?

Because Jesus Christ has risen, the New Life. Death no longer has power over Him.

Everything has been called into being by the Word, by this Word. We cannot look back behind this Word. We have come to know Who this Word was and is in the resurrection glory, which the Father has given Him. He who *dwelt* among us.

Only in this direction can God's 'normal' be seen.

Living and thinking

The work of philosophers is 'thinking'. But we already know that we cannot find out what is 'normal' by thinking. After all, thinking proceeds within the framework of life, it goes its way as only one sector of it. Is that course 'normal'? How could thinking judge its own 'normal', let alone 'normal' for the whole of life?

If we ask a scholar about his method, he would then proceed to explain that his task subjects to analysis one abstracted field, lifted out of the whole. He has a life's calling in thinking, in a science chosen by him which follows the path of analysis and abstraction. He would then have to know from what he abstracts by thinking, what he analyses.

We cannot get behind what is "normal" through thinking, [35] but because our task is thinking, we must still know in which normal direction we must express that thinking. We must know that direction for every part of our lives. The question 'What is normal?' therefore addresses the normal direction that I must know for

my thinking. Thus, also as well again for the specific science which each of us practise.

Then the question, “What is normal?” can thus not remain as the concern of a field of science: within science it is a philosophical problem, because we were confronted with it there everywhere within science. Yet even “philosophical thinking” can give no answer. It can bring us no further than to the door, on which we must knock if we want an answer. But if I then have received the answer, if I know the normal direction, then I will have to know how to work with it in life – and therefore also in science. This is all the more pressing today, just where science in particular pretends to be able to, to be allowed to, and therefore to want to decide about *everything*. Now that it even pretends to hold no abstractions, and to have sole rights to *reality*.

The first appearance of reformational philosophy

Life such as it is now, for us twentieth-century people, has not fallen out of the sky. Neither has science: it has its history. Everyone knows and understands this, except Western science itself, especially since the previous century. It believes in the always 'present thinking', which, like a camera on a tripod, takes snapshots of the 'factuality' in front of the lens - snapshots that, as in a film, give the illusion of movement, of events, of history. However, the camera itself stands fixed, positioned outside that movement. From that point the story begins and ends, and the person behind the camera remains completely out of the picture. This “present thinking” can itself at most focus somewhat more sharply, [36] reflecting and correcting itself, but it remains holding the first and last word for itself.

How has science become so uncritical and pretentious in our Western mind, especially in this West that was once Christianized, and thus could have known that history is the history of life, and not a result of thought? Among the ancient Jews, for example, we find this 'present thinking', if at all, then in historical perspective, as among the scribes and lawyers we know from the New Testament, and who turned the words of the living God into lifeless 'scholasticism'.

Life, with the scholarship come to development within it, has not fallen from the sky for us: it always stands in a tradition. Reformational philosophy, which has arisen over the last fifty years, has also seen this. And now that the *Foundation for Special Chairs for Calvinistic Philosophy* which proceeds from that basis, is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, it is good to recall its conversation with and in that tradition, with the question as its starting point who or what in life, and therefore also in scholarship, decides with regard to the 'normal' *direction*.

At home and abroad heirs of different Western thought traditions stand all around in theology, natural sciences *cum annexis*, and other sciences lying in between them, above all those in the fields of law, politics and economics. And each and every one of them took their fixed support and starting point in the exclusive reliability of systematized human thought. Various thinkers had already warned against this in the nineteenth century: people such as Kierkegaard (who emphasised the subjective existence of the *thinker*) and Marx (philosophers have interpreted the world, but the point is to change the world); in the Netherlands, and especially for our Christian circles, Abraham Kuyper. But that this raised questions concerning the privileged position of thought, and pointed to another core, remained misunderstood or was ignored: people fitted Nietzsche, [37] Kierkegaard, Kuyper into their own frame of thought.

But it was precisely reformational philosophy that made it clear that Kuyper had indicated a different *central point* of reflection than thinking.

With this, reformational philosophy had provisionally found a basis from which to proceed to the attack. If there is a central point that transcends thinking – central because it is the centre of everything in life – then a break with 'thinking' as a fixed point must be made. A first requirement was to reject the nature-grace scheme in all its forms, as it had continued to dominate theology and attempts at Christian scientific practice. Typical of the nature-grace scheme (also called the 'nature-supernatural' scheme) is a division between the supposed 'generally human' and the 'specifically Christian', here in mutual accommodation (e.g. in Roman Catholic Thomism), there in mutual tension (as in 'dialectical theology'), but always determined by both sides. And furthermore, the break with 'thinking' as a fixed point sharply placed the contrast with humanism, which stands or falls with this thinking as a fixed point.

It is not enough to make critical comments on the content of humanistic assertions, now included in a broader framework as 'general-natural'. The content could not be the primary target; it is a question of the point *out of which* people operate, namely the exclusive universal validity of thinking, regardless of how critically praised. The 'Self-criticism' of thinking, as provided by Immanuel Kant, is also not enough, according to reformational philosophy: self-criticism must be pushed so far that I, thinking, see that thinking is not an independent activity, and therefore know that I have to account for what precedes science. In other words; self-criticism must penetrate to the question: where do the outflows of life come from, including thinking, which is after all an activity of life? [38]

Course of our discussion

Reformational philosophy was thus engaged in reflection about the *history* of western life, and had discovered in that, how “thinking” had not only tried to dominate this life but had also kept the judgment about its *own* position and development entirely to itself. Our philosophy denies this right to thinking: thinking cannot establish its own position, cannot go back behind itself. Could then the thinking arising out of reformational philosophy establish *its* own position?

She initially tried to do this against the background of the figure of the so-called theoretical 'Gegenstand-relation', which seemed to be generally recognized at that time, but in fact had been adopted and elaborated by the (neo-)Kantians from Descartes. Those who are familiar with the writings of Prof. Dooyeweerd from the thirties will remember how the question of the 'Archimedean point' played a dominant role in this connection.

Theoretical thinking, it was said, is completely different in structure from the everyday attitude of thinking. An element of reality to be investigated is placed *in abstracto* over against the activity of thinking. That is to say, as far as possible detached from the connections and interweavings with which it is embedded in reality and in which we experience it in daily life. The element to be investigated is then the so-called 'Gegenstand' of theoretical activity, and as such one pole of the 'Gegenstand-relation' – the other pole is, of course, the other element: 'thinking'. The intention is, out of the contrast of elements thinking comes to a synthesis of these poles and so to the acquisition of the desired knowledge.

The question then is, *from where* is the synthesis between the poles, thus separated, obtained in order to achieve the desired 'knowing'. Contemporary philosophy tacitly assumed that this effect emanated from the one pole, which was after all called 'thinking'. However, ... how can the one element 'thinking', itself also abstract, merge with the other abstract element 'Gegenstand' in such a way that the *living* person arrives at knowledge? This can only be thought possible if I tacitly identify the living person with his thinking. In opposition to this error that had dominated the Western tradition, reformational philosophy pointed to Kuyper's trenchant remark in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, that thinking, together with everything that is thought about, belongs to the “out-flows” of life. Further, that insight into this, and also into the place and functioning of thinking, can only be obtained from that focal point from which all of life radiates.

This specific problem, which played an important part in the rise of reformational philosophy, presented itself to her as a question within the 'theory of knowledge'. This led to the attempt to enter into discussion with contemporary philosophy from an epistemological perspective. The *question remained* whether it could also be solved *epistemologically*.

Shifting of the fronts

Outside the sphere of epistemology, science had meanwhile continued in all sorts of ways, and reformational philosophy had also shown an important harvest in its construction of structures. But apart from contact on points with, for example, Thomistic philosophy, there was not much to be found of understanding for the meaning of our philosophy within a 'community of thought'. That cannot and should not surprise us, especially when we pay attention to the direction that Western thought has taken since then.

Two important trends came into being. The one that was most closely connected with the sphere of transcendental criticism just described was that of the philosophy of existence and being, especially that of the famous Martin Heidegger. Heidegger believed that he had to finally take leave of every fixed point. In its place he proposed the idea of the movement of 'Being' that is above all human control. [40] This movement of Being turns towards and away, reveals and conceals itself as it pleases. The philosopher has to pay attention to this disposition of Being (*Andenken*). The question then of course remains how Heidegger was able to look behind the disposition of Being in such a way, that precisely he got to read the story of our never being able to look behind it. He saves himself (so to speak) by declaring that he has encountered it: Being reveals this to us precisely now; Heidegger has met it with "das jetzt nötige Denken" [the present necessary thinking]. So, yet another meeting (albeit one arranged by Being) in 'present' thinking.

Yet, despite himself, Heidegger pointed to the superior power at work in the unfolding of creation in its (*non*-autonomous) history'

The other important trend is that of positivistic pragmatism, the twentieth-century pseudo-revelation which as 'concealed philosophy' lies hidden in the special sciences. It is the philosophy that today tries to show us what should be called 'normal'. It has apparently turned its back on epistemology, following Hegel's saying that one only learns to swim in water, and has exchanged it for methodology with, in retrospect, 'philosophy of Science'.

Knowing is learned from 'doing', as it is first of all said. This is in itself very true. But 'doing' cannot avoid the question we had already posed, that of the direction taken. Which is the direction I should go in? Around me is the wide horizon. Is it, as in nature, only the limits of sight, or does it want to draw my attention to more? Positivist pragmatism has made a choice here. Heidegger did not have to say so threateningly that I will one day disappear. As long as I am there, with others under the same conditions, it is simply a matter of getting as far as possible with my thinking. I have devised my operational methods for that. And the first thing I

then have to deal with is my 'natural' existence. After all, even that thinking, from which I expect everything, still depends [41] on my physiologically researchable thinking apparatus. But at the same time as this dependence, the science of 'natural' existence has fortunately penetrated so systematically and therefore so far into this 'maintenance' that I can only wish to see it expanded for the purpose of organizing our society.

This desire *dominates* Western science. While it is non-scientific it works along structural-philosophical lines, that is to say with philosophical pretensions to general validity. Western science today justifies itself (self-criticism is no longer an issue) in positivistic pragmatist philosophy. As philosophy it enters our schools of higher education, but it sticks its dangerous sting precisely in those special sciences that fall outside the domain of the natural sciences.

It calls "normal" that which was constructed by it in accordance with the image of natural scientific mathematical method as correct. After all, we have already come so far with that method, and a steering mechanism is built into that method. Yes, but that method without which thinking cannot exist is conceived in thought. According to which method? On the horizontal plane it directs its march towards a goal shrouded in mist, under the guarantee of the universal effectiveness of its methodologism.

Power and truth

If today these philosophies, which cannot prove their choice of origin along philosophical lines, nevertheless maintain their philosophical word as the first and last, then there is no longer any question of scientific discussion, but of a *power struggle*. We now know that the 'scientific' West no longer has any deeper interest in reflection. That is why we do not expect too much from a previously hoped for thought-contact.

In the meantime, this does not relieve us of any responsibility. [42] For it is to the Truth, and there alone, that we must answer. When Pilate asked: What is truth? the Son of man did not answer, because the adequate answer was coming in a way that was completely incomprehensible to the world, and Pilate simply had to fulfil his role in the execution of it. It is not the Truth that has to answer to us, but the other way around.

Truth. The first and last Word. This is the Word that made everything, and in which is Life and therefore Light.

The philosophy of this world, wandering in the mist of the horizontal plane, has not wanted to notice the glow from behind the horizon, and has always wanted to

pronounce this first-last word itself. It has done this in ignorance (the ancients); half-knowingly (the church fathers and scholasticism); in less than conscious freedom reaction (old humanism and the Enlightenment); and finally in the full revolt of positivism, pragmatism, and Marxism. In our time this revolution achieved its deepest point in official ecclesiastical so-called 'global Christianity'. In what this world considers normal, this 'Christianity' sees its modern supernatural-nature motif under the basic name of 'nature'.

The first thing our philosophy has to say against such philosophy is that the 'wisdom of this world' is foolishness. This does not mean that it does not, despite itself, reveal many wise things. But philosophy can only do this if it remains in its place and does not - even if this is vehemently denied - take the place of revelation. We ourselves must also be the first to guard against this in our philosophy. It remains philosophy, that is to say, it precedes the special sciences and attempts, in a way that is understandable to the special sciences, to show what the direction is for it in interpreting God's creation. In this we distinguish between a general interpretation of creation and the interpretation for a specific area, the latter in an [43] encyclopaedia of the special sciences. Here we place philosophy in a creaturely, that is in this case a scientifically philosophical manner, against the pseudo-revelation of self-sufficient 'science'. This, as we have said, is a matter of *direction*.

We speak of 'direction' when movement, dynamics, and order is at issue. Order in this case is *temporal* order. Order of direction is order of *time*.

There are those who, within this context, watch with fear the development of the computer, which seems to make everything possible horizontally. Their philosophers have already said that the lifeless computer began its advance with the appearance of the clock. The clock that indicates only one, horizontal, order of time, and is nothing other than the pointer of the time of death. And in this they are right, as long as no other rudder is at our disposal than the old ship's rudder of, albeit extremely perfect, *thinking*. For what is the time of directional choice, according to this doctrine, other than the period assigned to human beings by the material movement of their body cells? What is there other than a visionless horizontal plane? If there is no other direction, what interest still drives me to sail and fight on the sea of life?

The deepest was also in this practice of science, which time can see nothing other than as clock-time, ringing death, the Western person driven through something totally other than by science and thinking. Then they are only instruments in hands of his varied and organised passion for power; technical, social, economic, political. Therefore, he considers life still worth the trouble, and he contents himself with the historical rudder in his horizonless existence.

Yet, nature is stronger than doctrine For nevertheless, time draws the trajectory of *history* in which there is indeed a battle for life and death in the deep sense to which we referred at the beginning At the deepest level, even in this practice of science, which cannot see time other than as clock-time, ringing death, the Western person is driven by something completely different than science and thought. These are only instruments in the hands of his varied and organised drive for power; technical, social, economic, political. That is why he still considers life worth living and is content with the horizontal rudder in his horizonless existence.

That is why he examines the 'facts' in nature and society, to know how they are and work, in order to proceed accordingly. For only that is 'normal'. We must derive 'ought' from 'is'.

[44]

You will recall the Comte-Marx dispute, positivism versus dialectical materialism. Auguste Comte, the 'father' of positivism, stated that, as in nature, one should also investigate in society how everything actually works, abandoning all old-fashioned theories. In contrast, Marx pointed out that this would of course mean the continuation of what actually exists, in this case the capitalist-liberal ideology and practice. It is not about 'knowing', but about changing. Marx is thus not simply content with the horizontal temporal direction for knowing. Knowing must be directed towards *normative* improvement. 'Normal' is not *actual* but must become so in this world. Seen in this light, to be human is therefore not 'nature'; but must rise above it. But in the struggle of thought and the practice that will soon follow, he sees no other horizon than that of material existence, and will soon enter the sea of the tyranny of the party-elite through the downward-opened hatches of his life-ship in order to drown humanity in materialistic death.

Comte has reduced human society to a natural existence; his method denies every norm above that. Marx wants to escape from industrial slavery, but above the horizontal plane of productive forces he knows only dialectics with and of the production relations, where the class struggle is set as normative. The whole is materialistically enclosed, imprisoned in the natural substrate. Is this normal? The answer is and remains given by *power*.

In the present-day 'Frankfurt School' we see these things pointed out with great sobriety. But from Descartes, via Kant and Hegel to the most modern positivism and pragmatism, it strikes us that, when speaking of 'knowing', knowing by 'doing', we all remain stuck in the age-old equation of knowing with theoretical thinking that has been perfected as far as possible. In other words: [45] only the abstract can lead us to concreteness. Parmenides' statement that Being is the Being of Thinking is still with us: thinking presents us with the facts, and we must stick to

them. The abstractions of the horizontal plane of thought, under either a theological or scientific basic denominator, are supposed to set the course for our *life-ship*.

They shall indeed teach us much; how our highest actual experience does not hang together with logical order and physical constellation. Also, in methodological special science we must press through with what the "Philosophy of the Law-Idea" has called the modal retrocipations within the individuality-structure of all our acts. But this serves us only if we do *not* let the hatches fall open beneath us. For nature stands available for humans, not the other way around. We are called to direct the opening up of the creature. Therefore, we must allow Light from above shine in and penetrate also into that which we cannot direct normatively.

The normal direction

What must we then do?

To combat method with method leaves us on the same plane as our opponent. We do not despise method as such. We too have a method - albeit a very provisional one - at our service to judge theirs: that of philosophical transcendental criticism. It must lead us, not to an entrance, but to *the* exit, that is to say, to the "door" named earlier, where we have to knock for the beginning of an answer, an answer to the question of *the* truth. But what matters is finally discovering that which does not come into view on the horizontal plane, the *horizon itself*. In order to be able to orient ourselves in truth.

The lie of positivism is this, that it elevates its methodologism to an integral norm: 'scientific method is the [46] way to truth'. And this methodologism is open to every power that wants to seize this instrument.

Not by thinking, but by experiencing, by acting and suffering, we know. The love that determines the meaning and happiness of our existence, we do not get to know by thinking about it, but by loving (or, negatively, hating), and this from our earliest years. We experience, and consciously distinguishing is also an indispensable aspect of this experiencing. This has nothing to do with theory or scholarship. They can be concerned with it, however; they then remain tied to becoming intellectually conscious, starting with discriminating intuition and leading to abstraction, disjunction, and analysis. This is how it goes in all areas, and this is the serving task of scholarship. Thinking' *in actu* does not thereby isolate itself, because its own experience takes place in specific concrete thought acts, bound to the same order of time and choice of direction as *all* acts.

For those who have consulted academic research, there then comes the most difficult, namely the responsible and highly concrete task, to lead its abstract results back to serviceability in life, that is to say, to question them in the direction of their origin. Thus, the abstract must be reabsorbed into the actual.

The opposite path is followed by positivism, which wants to impose scientific ('laboratory') methods on nature as the only general means of knowledge. In this way it leads the living back to the static spatial and numerical relations of our natural substrate, instead of the other way round according to the given order of creation. The supposedly analogous development of these methods in the models used by the so-called human or social sciences then hides that which is precisely what everything depends on in its 'black box', in this case a symbol of deliberate, rebellious ignorance. In contrast to this we state: science is an auxiliary service to the thinking of our life practice, and indeed to making conscious the choices that we must make in the responsible [47] opening-up of creation. So, once again: What is 'Normal'?

Lift your eyes to the horizon! Only on the horizon can you gain height. There is another dimension of time than that indicated by the 'lifeless-clock'. Its direction, moreover, is the opposite of that of the contemporary 'scientific' doctrine of faith. We may not neglect any of the rooms of our life-ship, not even the lowest, for they contain precious baggage; but do not let the sea to spill in there, the sea of *unbelieving* theories, to speak with Groen van Prinsterer.

We cannot and may not detach ourselves from the earth, but where a true horizon becomes visible, we cannot be satisfied with the horizontal rudder of science or theology. In order to orient ourselves on the horizon, we will have to rise above the spell of Western horizontalism - unlocking all our modal anticipations. For from *above* comes the Origin of all norms, which we can only bring forth from the revelation of creation in an experience of religious struggle. It also applies to *faith* itself, which wants to seek these norms, that it may not remain in its retrospective view of its serving thinking and feeling ('retroicipating'); it would mean suffocating in theologism or pietism. Then it closes off our life, instead of opening it up.

To believe means to look forward. To look forward above all the mist of wisdom and knowledge, to catch sight of the horizon - and more than the horizon.

It may be that then from the shore a question rings in our poor, searching, wondering ears; children, have you nothing to eat? ... And my recognising heart answers: it is the Lord ...!

The meaning of creation, its history and truth: 'that I may know Him and the *power* of His *resurrection* ...'.

