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Everyday Life with Dooyeweerd

by Andrew Basden

Introduction

WE LIVE IN AN ocean of meaningfulness.¹ According to Dooyeweerd, not only is everything around us meaningful, but meaningfulness is what enables us, and everything around us, to exist and function at all. This meaningfulness is diverse, and he identified and studied fifteen ways in which it is possible to be meaningful—to be spheres of meaningfulness. Dooyeweerd called them *aspects*. Aspects are also modes of being and modes of functioning and give answers to “Why?”

Nearly everything in our everyday lives exhibits nearly every aspect. Take *having breakfast*, for example. (Refer to the list of aspects in Table 1 below and in the next chapter.) The main reason for having breakfast is *biotic*—sustenance—but very important also is the sense of taste, which is meaningful in the *psychical* aspect, and enjoyment of food, which is meaningful in the *aesthetic* aspect. I might make up my muesli or cook my food, which is a *formative* aspect of breakfast. I think about which food to have: an *analytical* aspect. Chewing food is a *physical* aspect. There is the social aspect of sharing the meal together, along with another *aesthetic* aspect of enjoying the company (or not!). Conversation occurs, which is a *lingual* aspect, and so is listening to the radio (which is what I do at breakfast). I limit what I eat, because I have

1. This chapter is written in a less philosophical style, to reflect its topic.

limited time or money, which are *economic* aspects of breakfast. I try to do justice to my food and to others present, and also to my day ahead by eating sufficient; doing justice is a *juridical* aspect. I might offer others the last piece of toast, which is a minor example of the *ethical* aspect of self-giving love. This is because I believe courtesy is important; believing is *pistic*—the faith aspect. The three mathematical aspects, *quantitative*, *spatial* and *kinematic*, occur several ways for food, people or other things—for example, number of cups of tea, their placement, and movement of cup to mouth.

This is shown in Figure 1, where the lines from the aspects point to where they are mentioned above.

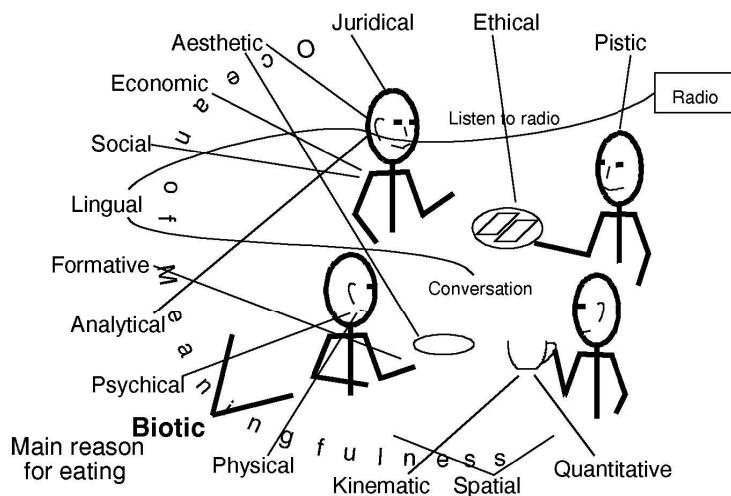


Figure 1. Aspects of eating breakfast

It might surprise us to find so many aspects of such a mundane activity as having breakfast. Breakfast is never “just” eating; it is all these aspects simultaneously; all Dooyeweerd’s fifteen aspects are there, and in myriad other ways not mentioned above. We can find these aspects in almost every situation, from mundane ones

to situations of national and global importance. Suppose you are in a group that is deciding strategy to tackle climate change: even there most of the aspects mentioned above can be found, though appearing in different ways. All we do and all we are is meaningful in all aspects together, simultaneously, and in coherence—a state that Dooyeweerd called “coherence of meaning.”²

Dooyeweerd emphasized meaningfulness as a foundation of all temporal reality (“Creation”), which sets him apart from most philosophers and makes his philosophical ideas useful in practical ways.³

Knowing something of Dooyeweerd’s aspects can help us in our lives, in at least four ways. Knowing aspects can:

- Help us separate things out - as I did with breakfast.
- Help us understand things more deeply and “listen” more attentively.
- Help us see what might be missing: hidden issues.
- Offer guidance, because each aspect comes with norms to guide us.

Let us look at each of these in turn.

Aspects Help Us Separate Things Out

Every aspect contributes to our everyday experience, our day-to-day living, when we are just getting on with things rather than thinking abstractly. This is what Dooyeweerd called the “pre-theoretical attitude of thought” as distinct from the “theoretical atti-

2. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique*, I, 4.

3. For a philosophical account of Dooyeweerd’s understanding of meaning, see Basden, “Dooyeweerd’s Understanding of Meaning (1): Some Main Themes,” and Basden and Joneidy, “Dooyeweerd’s Understanding of Meaning (2): Some Implications”; see also Chapters 3 and 4 of Basden, *Foundations and Practice of Research*.

tude”, in which we abstract and isolate aspects. Abstraction is what happens in research, which is the topic of the next chapter.

In between pre-theoretical and full theoretical attitudes lies what Clouser calls low-level abstraction, in which we are aware of the different aspects of things, without isolating them.⁴ This is what we did above, in separating out the different aspects of having breakfast.

Each of Dooyeweerd's fifteen aspects gives a different class of issues that we can separate out conceptually and think about. For example, we noticed the difference between taste of food and enjoying the taste—food's *psychical* and *aesthetic* aspects. We also noticed two aesthetic aspects of breakfast: enjoying food and conversation. In fact, each aspect is manifested in several ways in our lives, which, for the *aesthetic* aspect, include enjoyment, harmony (as in music), poetic allusion, fun, humor, leisure, art, sport, and so on.⁵ The *aesthetic* aspect is what differentiates both sport and art from “mere” technical achievement or skill, which are meaningful in the *formative* aspect, along with such things as plans, aims, goals, making, constructing, techniques, technology and history.⁶ Sport and art depend on such things, but cannot be reduced to them; this is known as “inter-aspect dependency.” Likewise, things like love, goodness, generosity, mercy, forgiveness, which are meaningful in the *ethical* aspect, cannot be reduced to, but depend on, law, rights, responsibility, and other things meaningful in the *juridical* aspect.⁷

Being aware of such aspectual differences can help us describe things—especially complex things—more meaningfully to others, so that different issues need not be confused and communications can become clearer. Dooyeweerd believed that the aspects are

4. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*.

5. Basden, *Foundations and Practice of Research*, 201.

6. *Ibid.*, 194.

7. *Ibid.*, 203, 205.

common to all people, cultures and eras of history, at least in their most fundamental meanings, which Dooyeweerd called “meaning kernels.” So they make basic understanding and communication between people possible in the first place. (Note: No kernel meaning can be fully expressed in words, so Dooyeweerd often used several names for each.)

It is when we recognize this variety of meaning in things that we begin to understand them more clearly and fully—our second point.

Aspects Help Us Understand and Assess Things More Deeply

By clearly understanding the meaning kernel of each aspect and the ways it can be manifested in life, we can gain deeper insights. Each aspect offers different kinds of laws that enable things to operate in multiple ways. Insight comes from understanding these and how each depends on others.

For example, when I hear something I disagree with, such as on breakfast radio, maybe even violently because of culture-war boundaries, I can see the workings of the pistic/faith aspect in my and their strong responses, and can see how that impacted our thinking and language (analytical, lingual functioning). So I can give myself different language and judge more dispassionately—and even acknowledge some validity in what they say. So I can offer the “soft answer” that “turns away wrath.”

I find that understanding aspect kernel meanings helps me more truly listen to people and situations. A friend was telling me about his financial and social problems and physical disabilities, and the unfairness of local government response to his needs. I could see these as separate aspects (economic, social, physical and juridical aspects), and so could listen meaningfully as he spoke about each. We tried to rectify some of these in ways meaningful in these aspects. However, I could also feel undertones of unforgiving attitude and lack of dignity. Some might assume these are

caused by his various problems, but, recognizing them as of different aspects, the *ethical* and *pistic* aspects, I could see that these might exacerbate his problems, rather than only being caused by them. This is why our rectification attempts had not worked well. He needed love and dignity, and to love and to believe in return, not just have us solve economic, social, physical and legal problems.

Understanding of aspects provides a basis for making wider and wiser judgments and making them more clearly understood.

Aspects Reveal Hidden Things

Understanding aspects makes one more sensitive to hidden issues and those that are overlooked or taken for granted.

Have you been in conversations or discussions where you felt something was being missed, but you could not quite make out what? Almost all situations function in all aspects, but most conversations, discussions and analyses cover issues that are meaningful in only a few of the aspects. Awareness of aspects can help reveal what is missing, overlooked, or taken for granted—also hidden agendas or “elephants in the room.” How often, in conversations about feelings or mental states, are juridical, ethical, and pistic issues not mentioned except in passing?

In the past, most economists ignored all but the economic aspect. In recent years, some economists have been considering social and environmental “capital” as partners with economic capital. That is, they want to bring the social and the biotic-physical aspects alongside the economic aspect. The social, biotic and physical aspects have come out of hiding, because problems that are meaningful in them became apparent (e.g., climate crisis). But what about the others? What about attitude (ethical aspect), religion (pistic), or technology (formative)? An awareness of aspects makes us sensitive to aspects that are being overlooked, and it can do so in any field.

Ethical and pistic issues are often overlooked because they lie deep and affect all else, unseen. They constitute what the Bible calls the human heart: our deeper attitudes, aspirations, assumptions, expectations and what we treat as divine.

When we notice an aspect being overlooked in conversation or in public policy, we can gently guide towards the issues meaningful in it.

Aspects Can Guide Us in Life

To Dooyeweerd, most aspects provide norms that, if fulfilled, will contribute to the “health” of any situation or success of any venture. Going against such norms undermines this and causes harm. For example, the lingual aspect allows us to record, communicate, and understand each other, but deceit (lingual dysfunction) undermines these. Depending on how we function in the lingual aspect, good or bad decisions are made, friendships are strengthened or weakened, investments are sound or unsound, and so on (repercussions in the formative, social, and economic aspects respectively). You can think of other examples of good and bad functioning and possible repercussions. In the later aspects, the health and harm take longer to emerge, sometimes decades for the pistic aspect.⁸

Awareness of aspectual normativity can help guide our decisions in life. Table 1 gives examples of good and bad functioning and repercussions in each aspect. (The quantitative to physical aspects offer good but no possibility of dysfunction.)

8. Basden, *Philosophical Frameworks for Understanding Information Systems*, 77.

Table 1. Aspects and their norms, in functioning and repercussions (examples)

Aspect	Functioning	Dysfunction	Repercussions	
			Good	Harmful
Quantitative	Amount as given		Reliable sequence	
Spatial	Simultaneity Continuity		Continuous extension	
Kinematic	Movement		Change (non-stasis)	
Physical	Force, causality		Persistence	
Biotic	Feeding, symbiosis	Starvation, parasitism	Vitality, survival	Disease, extinction
Psychical	Interaction	Insensitivity	Emotional and sensory vitality	Insensitivity
Analytic	Distinction	Conflation	Conceptual clarity	Confusion
Formative	Working, planning, constructing	Laziness, destroying	Achievement, construction	Lost opportunities, destruction
Lingual	Expressing, signification	Deceiving, obfuscating	Information	Misinformation
Social	Relating, befriending	Disdaining, hating	Friendship, achieve more together	Working against each other
Economic	Frugality	Squandering	Prosperity	Waste, poverty
Aesthetic	Harmonizing	Fragmentation, narrowing	Integrity, interest, fun	Conflict, boredom
Juridical	Giving due, responsibility	Irresponsibility	Justice	Injustice
Ethical / Attitudinal	Self-giving love, vulnerability, trust	Selfishness, self-protection	Culture of goodwill	Competitive, harsh culture
Pistic / Faith	Belief, courage, commitment	Idolatry, disloyalty	Hope	Hopelessness Loss of identity
Important note: Dooyeweerd warned that no suite of aspects is ever final. So we must use aspects with due caution. We should not be dogmatic about what aspects there are, what their kernel meanings are, nor how they are manifested above.				

As an exercise, try working out how each of the aspects could contribute to making breakfast successful or unsuccessful.

Conclusion

There is much more that can be said about how Dooyeweerd can help us in daily life, but this shows how awareness of aspects can help us in four ways. Hopefully, this offers you a starting point to begin to understand the breadth and validity of Dooyeweerd's

aspects in all you do, and perhaps begin to see life through the lens of aspects.

One wonderful feature of these aspects, if Dooyeweerd is correct, is that they are better grasped by intuition than by theoretical thought, so they are relatively easy to understand and use in daily life. We found so when interviewing people.⁹

Theoretical thought (research) does have its place, though. This is discussed in the next chapter of this book.

9. Basden, *Foundations and Practice of Research*, 267–270.