IN MEMORY OF HERMAN DOOYEWERD:
MEANING, TIME AND LAW

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How to commemorate him in a relatively short paper and for a professionally speaking — somewhat mixed audience? I have opted for an approach in terms of a few words which, I believe, can properly be called key-words. This means, among other things, that the exposition is intended mainly as an attempt at elucidation and personal interpretation, and not so much as strict and elaborate argument.

If my key-words are real keys indeed, then they are supposed to fit and to open three main doors to Dooyeweerd’s work, which, in turn, should make it possible to acquire a perspective — each time a somewhat different one — of the whole. Well, that’s exactly what I want to attempt.

One more introductory comment seems in place. Though each of the three key-terms can be said to indicate a main entrance to the whole of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy and, furthermore, the three are interrelated, the order in which they appear, i.e., are placed by me, is not arbitrary. I expect that our short „promenade” will shed some light on that order. But you may already have noticed that the name under which Dooyeweerd’s philosophy as a whole was initially presented and became known (philosophy of the „law-idea”, or „cosmonomic idea”) is not the first guide to my approach. Even so, I’m not really self-opinionated, for in later years Dooyeweerd himself expressed dissatisfaction with that name, — though not with the basic idea.

But now it’s time to start our brief reconnaissance.

I. „Meaning”

Starting with this key-word, we are very close yet to the start Dooyeweerd himself makes in the opening paragraphs of his New Critique . . . The very first section-heading speaks of „meaning as the mode of being of all that is created”; in the section itself the first thesis reads: „Meaning is the being of all that has been created and the nature

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1 Slightly adapted version of the major paper given for the Dooyeweerd Memorial Colloquium at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., U.S.A., March 7, 1978. I want to acknowledge that in the preparation of this paper I profited from reading the manuscript of two lectures given by Drs. H.G. Geertsema for the „ Studium Generale” of the University of Leiden.
even of our selfhood.” (N.C. I, 4). Most people who have read—or tried to read—Dooyeweerd are familiar with these statements and formulations. However, quite a few of these people also got stuck already there. For although, in the same context, Dooyeweerd offers some clarification by using terms like „referring” and „expressing”, and also qualifies his thesis as an „introductory” one, that, together with one or two other ones, „contain in themselves the entire complex of problems involved in a discussion of the possibility of genuine philosophy” (my italics), he does not do much there by way of terminological elucidation and discussion, or even show much awareness of the unusual twist he gives to that philosophically loaded term „meaning”.

Well, I believe he was aware of that. But I take it that on these introductory pages he was most concerned with bringing into the open what had fundamentally motivated his thought, i.e., with bringing out rightaway the newness and liberating significance of the perspective that had opened up to him,—without undue attention to terminological subtlety. There is something comparable here to the first key-notes presenting the main theme of a musical symphony. Besides, if—as I see it—„meaning” serves as the most basic and most comprehensive philosophical characteristic of (created) reality, then it would be hard, if not senseless, to define it. (Both terms, „basic” and „comprehensive”, should be taken in a dynamic sense. Indeed, „meaning” points precisely to the thoroughly dynamic character of all there is (in and as creation), „time” and „law” included,—though these also are encompassing „categories” in their own right).

At any rate, there is no need to deny that there is an unusual twist in this statement on „meaning”. Not only Anglo-Saxon, but also European philosophers have raised the question „Does meaning make sense?” And I think that our procedure, today and in a paper like this, can and should be somewhat different (without claiming to be able to come up with a definition of „meaning”).

Negatively speaking, the first thing to do is to preclude a possible, for many philosophers even likely, understanding of „meaning” in terms of semantics. It is common practice among philosophers to (regularly) ask the question: „What do you mean?”, namely by that statement, that term, that phrase or expression. Or else: „what does that term, etc., mean?” I do not think that this is an improper use of „meaning”, and further on I will even try to indicate a connection between what Dooyeweerd has in mind and the more specifically semantic use of the term. But a direct understanding of „meaning” in a semantic context would cause misunderstanding.

Positively, we get closer when we think of a usage which is rather ordinary. Expressions like „the meaning of life”, „the meaning of history” and the like are not primarily semantic, but have a wider range. They evoke notions of „goal” and „destination”, and then not as something additional (to „life” or „history”), but as somehow determining and directional. These notions, in turn, appear to be tied up with notions of „origin” and „ground”. Questions about „goal” and „destination” are bound to bring up questions concerning the latter. (The child starting to ask „why”-questions usually covers both sides at once). The picture that arises, then, is that of being-on-the-way, having-been-

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