BOOK REVIEWS


Can elements from Dooyeweerd’s philosophy be detached from their origin and inserted into a method for system development that does not necessarily have the same starting points as that philosophy? That, in the end, is the question that is addressed in Birgitta Bergvall-Käreborn’s doctoral thesis, which she successfully defended at Luleå University of Technology. A question that is very relevant for all those that seek for possibilities to contribute to current scientific developments by drawing from the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. For if it appears that the answer to the question stated above is a clear ‘no’, all these efforts may be in vain. The only alternative for Dooyeweerdians would then be to isolate themselves from the rest of the scientific world. Bergvall-Käreborn’s thesis suggests a different direction.

The form of the thesis is different from the usual one, although it can be found more often in current academic practice: it is a set of previous publications, introduced and given coherence by a cover paper. In this paper the main lines that are developed in the course of the collected papers, are made explicit. The aim of her work is to try to enrich Soft Systems Methodology, an existing method for developing both technological and social systems and with which in particular the name of Peter Checkland is associated, by inserting into that method Dooyeweerd’s notions of the (fifteen) modal spheres and the qualifying function. The way she does that is very much in accordance with SSM, as can be read from the figure that depicts her research methodology (figure 4 on page 37). That immediately raises a methodological question: can one assess a (modified) methodology by using the same methodology as a guideline for the assessment at the same time? That is certainly not to be taken for granted in all cases, but in this particular situation it may not cause major problems thanks to the fact that the methodology in question is not very special at the level at which it is used here.

According to figure 1 on page 10, the heart of SSM is to start with a real-world situation, to develop relevant models of purposeful action that improve that situation, and then to compare those models with the real-world situation in order to determine the appropriate action. Those actions will change the real-world situation and the new situation may give rise to new issues of concern and the development of new models, etcetera. Anyone familiar with systems thinking will note that a crucial element is missing in this description, namely the norms that are used in the comparison. A thermostat (a simple system with feedback) will not work properly if no reference temperature is set. Without that reference there is no norm to determine whether or not the heating element is to be switched on (or off). Careful reading of Bergvall-Käreborn’s thesis suggests that this is exactly where she wants to improve SSM. Although a more detailed description of SSM reveals that norms are present and identified as efficacy, efficiency, effectiveness, ethics and elegance, Dooyeweerd’s modal analysis of reality has a lot more to offer than that.

It would not do justice to SSM to suggest that only the ‘five Es’ mentioned above, are involved. As Bergvall-Käreborn describes there is also CATWOE: customers, actors, transformations, Weltanschauung (‘world visions’), Owners and Environmental constraints. This list indicates the broad scope of SSM, which distinguishes it from Hard Systems Thinking (HST) that takes a narrower, engineering-oriented view. Yet, as Bergvall-Käreborn argues, there are limitations in SSM that can be alleviated by using elements of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy. Two major weaknesses she mentions are: it is difficult to break away from tradition when using SSM, and also it is difficult to
appreciate the quality and consequences of SSM outcomes. Bergvall-Käreborn’s remedy, the use of Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects and his notion of qualifying function, is based on the considerations that the wide variety of modal aspects will help designers to see things that can easily be overlooked in SSM and thus explore new paths. Furthermore, the qualifying function helps designers to focus on what is essential for the system and thus to get a better insight into its qualities. By exploring different possibilities for qualifying functions that can be attributed to a system, new insights can be gained that can stimulate unexpected applications of the system.

In her research study Bergvall-Käreborn works in three cycles to find out if this theoretical claim can be put into practice. In the first cycle, which consists of theoretical analysis, she finds out that the modal aspects particularly enhance SSM with respect to social and political factors. In the second cycle, the analysis of a past project about conditions for young people in a municipality in the north inland of Sweden, she uses the modalities to get a rich picture, richer than the one SSM without the use of the modalities would have yielded, of what was important in that case. In the third cycle Bergvall-Käreborn took part in a project aimed at creating new work opportunities in a municipality in Sweden and used the notion of qualifying function to discuss the possible function for that system and to show how different visions on the qualifying function of the system can be related to different visions on desirable transformations. The overall impression of Bergvall-Käreborn’s research outcomes is that the effort to enrich SSM by integrating the concepts of modalities and qualifying functions was successful. The use of those concepts according to Bergvall-Käreborn has resulted in fuller pictures of the various aspects involved in the design of systems than SSM ‘sec’ would have yielded.

This, though, does not mean that Bergvall-Käreborn claims an ideal fit between Dooyeweerd’s concepts and SSM. In her reflection on the research study she even indicates some fundamental differences between Dooyeweerd’s philosophy and SSM. The most important one is that according to her the first is based on ‘the assumption of an ordered reality governed by pre-created structures and laws that are timeless, culturally independent and often equally applicable to both natural and social phenomena’ (page 53 of the thesis). SSM, on the contrary, is based on the assumption that social reality is constantly changing and that the rules according to which this is done are not given but depend on the context in which they are applied. This difference for Bergvall-Käreborn is a reason to explore the possibility of paradigm incommensurability, a notion originally defined by Thomas Kuhn and criticized ever since its inception. Bergvall-Käreborn point out that several authors have stated that in most cases efforts to combine elements of different paradigms are not faced with insurmountable incommensurability problems.

Maybe the approaches of SSM and Dooyeweerd are not as contradictory as Bergvall-Käreborn suggests. How else could Hendrik van Riessen develop his philosophy of technology by using Dooyeweerd’s philosophy as a starting point? In his dissertation he has explicitly dealt with design as a process of changing reality, and in doing so he has used Dooyeweerd’s philosophy. Van Riessen’s work equally makes clear that Dooyeweerd’s philosophy does not necessarily force one to give each modal aspect an equal weight in the considerations on technological developments. In that respect Andrew Basden’s Shalom hypothesis (see www.basden.u-net.com/Dooy/shalom.html) that the success of a product means that justice has been done to all modal aspects may need to be modified in that a product may well be successful if a number of crucial aspects (crucial in the particular context in question) have been done justice. That could suffice in our broken world in which perfection (i.e. functioning well in each and every aspect) can not be expected. It is clear that Bergvall-Käreborn had no opportunity to read Van Riessen on these issues, and she can hardly be blamed for that because, to the best of my knowledge, Van Riessen’s publications are not available in English translation. Perhaps the fact that such