BOOK REVIEWS


This book is a nice example of how philosophical reflection in a particular domain of application — in this case the philosophy of technology — can have implications for more general philosophical reflections. This is not entirely new. In the field of epistemology, reflections on the nature of technological knowledge gave rise to new questions concerning the traditional debate about the ‘justified true belief’ account for knowledge (in addition to the many questions that had already been raised). This shows that domains like the philosophy of technology are not merely the application of general philosophy. This holds for ethics as well. In fact, one could question the validity of the term ‘applied ethics’ when it comes to the ethics related to, e.g., medical and technological issues. New technological developments like nanotechnology can cause confusion between traditional boundaries between categories that guided us in judging developments ethically. Traditionally, health was good and illness was bad. But what if nanomedicine blurs those boundaries and creates an elaborate intermediate area ‘potential illness’? Human life traditionally was more worthy to be protected than artificial life (as was, for instance, expressed in Asimov’s famous three laws for robots). But what happens when nanotechnology starts blurring that boundary by creating cyborg life? These examples can be multiplied by others. In summary: reflections in the philosophy and ethics of technology may cause us to reconsider ideas that have been developed in general philosophy. This is exactly what Basden’s book does for Dooyeweerd’s philosophy.

A second merit of this book is that it illustrates that analytical philosophy can have practical implications. Usually, we tend of think of analytical philosophy as the type of philosophy that provides a theoretical underpinning of a practice that was already developed and that need not be changed because the underpinning merely justifies it. In Basden’s book we find several examples of critique on existing practices in Information Technology because his conceptual framework shows inadequate ways of thinking and acting in this domain. Even more, the framework provides options for alternatives that can improve current practice. Perhaps this is something most analytical philosophers do not see as a purpose of their work and perhaps also they would deny that Dooyeweerd’s philosophy can be called analytical. To a certain extent that is true. Dooyeweerd is certainly not the kind of philosopher that today we would see as such. Still, I believe that several of his contributions to philosophy at least have an analytical flavor in that they try to clarify terms and conceptualize phenomena so that proper discussions about the type of questions that Continental philosophers tend to pose can take place. I hasten to apologies for the use of these terms (analytical and Continental philosophy) as their inadequacy is well documented by now. Nevertheless, most philosophers do acknowledge a certain
dichotomy between two different ways of philosophizing that perhaps need to be given new names (analytical versus critical perhaps?).

One could wonder what audience Basden had in mind when he wrote his book. In a way it was a bold risk the publisher took when this book was published. It takes a very specific readership to appreciate it, namely one that has a sound philosophical background and at the same time is well acquainted with the technical terminology and concepts in information technology. My estimation is that this target group is fairly small. Therefore I sincerely hope that philosophers with a more general interest in technology will have the courage to read it and take for granted that perhaps they will miss the meaning of a detail here and there, and that information technology specialists will realize that philosophical reflections do hate the potential of being ‘useful’ in a practical sense and take for granted that they may miss a philosophical subtlety here and there. Both groups will find themselves rewarded for their effort, as Basden clearly has something to offer: a thorough conceptual analysis of information technology based on Dooyeweerd’s philosophical frameworks and both theoretical (philosophical) and practical implications to come with that.

I hope this has made readers curious to learn what this book is about. Let us therefore now turn to the content of the book. A one-chapter introduction about the purpose of the book is followed by three main sections. In Section I a general introduction to Dooyeweerd’s philosophy is presented. Section II contains the analysis of computers and other information systems, using this philosophy. Section III has one chapter in which some overall conclusions are drawn and recommendations for future work are given. All of this is preceded by a Preface with five vignettes that illustrate how practical experiences in the author’s career brought him to the need to reflect philosophically on his work in information technology. Looking for a proper theoretical account for such issues as the diversity of meaningful reality modeled in computers, everyday normative diversity and repercussions of computer use, the multi-level nature of computers, and the experience of a religious root in information technology with many of those that practice it, he did not find one until Dooyeweerd’s philosophy crossed his path. The relevance of having such accounts is made clear in Chapter 1. In this chapter, Basden shows the importance of the field of information technology, both in terms of money involved and in terms of impact on our lives. Basden then identifies five main issues related to information technology that are in need of a theoretical framework: the human use of computers, the nature of computers, information systems development, information technology resources, and information technology as ecology (that is, as part of our living and working environment). This, in fact, is the overture to Section II, as each of these five issues forms the core of a chapter in that section.

Section I has two chapters. In Chapter 2 Basden offers a survey of the most important elements in Dooyeweerd’s philosophy. This will be all familiar to those who are acquainted with Dooyeweerd and his writings. At several places writings on Dooyeweerd by Roy Clouser, Henk Geertsema and others are used to make clear what Dooyeweerd meant by the terms he used. Thus, we see the