

BRIEF COMMENTS ON STAFLEU'S PROPOSAL
FOR A NEW POLITICAL ASPECT

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In “On the character of social communities; the state and the public domain” [*Philosophia Reformata* 69(2):125-39, 2004] Dick Stafleu has suggested that the social aspect as currently constituted under Dooyeweerd, covers two distinct things:

- companionship
- authority and discipline,

and that the latter should become a new aspect, the *political*, placed after the economic and before the juridical. (Stafleu seems to have dispensed with the aesthetic aspect that currently lies between those two aspects, largely taking Seerveld's line that it should be redefined and placed earlier; see footnote 9 on p.130) I would like to briefly suggest some issues that need to be discussed and resolved before his suggestion is adopted.

I have long felt the tension between the two parts of Dooyeweerd's version of the social aspect that Stafleu refers to — companionship and authority — and I think Stafleu is right to open up discussion about it. But I am not happy that his proposal either is necessary or solves the problem. Moreover, I can also understand something of Dooyeweerd's own thinking as he kept the two together.

1. *Stafleu's proposal*

Companionship is, says Stafleu, the basis for such social groupings as ‘all German speaking people’ and ‘all Christian believers’. Authority and discipline are what characterise organized communities (‘associations’), of which the state is the main example he discusses, and demands a separate aspect, which he names the political. He explains the motivating thrust for making his proposal for a separate political aspect in the abstract to the paper: “The view that organized social communities or associations differ from unorganized communities by having a kind of government or management exerting authority over the community appears almost obvious. Nevertheless it contradicts Dooyeweerd's view, distinguishing organized communities from natural communities because of their being founded in the technical relation frame (or modal aspect)”. To develop the ideas, he argues in turn that (as the headings in his paper show) “associations have a dual character”, “the principle of sphere sovereignty is the primary characteristic of an association”, “the analysis of associations requires the recognition of the political relation frame”, “the political relation frame is irreducible to the economical one”, “the political

relation frame is irreducible to that of justice". He then gives some application, noting, in particular, that the state is of a special type.

Stafleu's main aim is to argue that a political aspect is irreducible to the juridical aspect (sections 5-8) (contra Dooyeweerd) and the economic aspect (section 4). While I have some sympathy with this, my main concern is the impact his proposal has on the social aspect, with which he concerns himself in sections 1-3.

My sympathy with his suggestion that political should be separated from juridical in particular arises because it helps us understand, for example why it is that [p.133-4] "A state ceases to exist (for instance after a revolution or an invasion) if its government can no longer maintain public order, even if that government is just." He also draws our attention to the difference between state and public domain, citizen and client, community and intersubjective network, for which I find Dooyeweerd's treatment slightly unsatisfactory. However, in the end, I find Stafleu's arguments unconvincing. Much of his argument is against legalism rather than against Dooyeweerd's view as such, and he seems to assume that war and conquering is a normative (rather than anti-normative) activity (e.g. p.133), which I find questionable (though he does discuss this in section 8). Likewise, I find his argument that his political aspect is irreducible to the economic unconvincing, because he defines the economic aspect in terms of exchange rather than as Dooyeweerd did, in terms of frugality, and thus this part of his argument depends on the reader accepting his view of the economic aspect (which this reader certainly does not).

Stafleu makes an interesting proposal of relating such things as authority, discipline, organisation, management, policy and decision-making to his political aspect, which requires serious consideration. Nevertheless, I still prefer to see discipline as juridical ('what is due'), organisation as formative, management as economic, policy as juridical, decision-making (the will) as formative, and authority as of various aspectual kinds, as social if it means esteem and deference, economic if management and juridical in the state. It seems (from his footnote 9 on p.130) that Stafleu is about to offer a suite of aspects different from those offered by Dooyeweerd, and I look forward to commenting on it when it appears because I happen to find Dooyeweerd's view of what the aspects are fits life well as I experience it.

However, it is not particularly useful to argue simply on the basis of our differing beliefs, drawn from our different lives and backgrounds, of what the kernel meanings of aspects are, because to derive the kernel meanings from the lifeworld requires an extensive and sensitive survey of human living throughout diverse cultures and historical periods. In this brief contribution I want to focus, not on disagreement over kernel meanings, but on some of the implications of Stafleu's proposal, especially for the social aspect. And to suggest some issues that need to be addressed before Stafleu's proposal can be accepted or rejected.

2. *Implications for the social aspect*

I have the following reservations about Stafleu's proposed solution, of splitting off a political aspect from the social one and placing it after the economic aspect:

- It leaves the social aspect effectively empty of meaning. The unorganized community such as that of all German speakers is not a matter of companionship but may instead be seen as a set of entities possessing the same property. If this is so, then such sets are defined by the analytic or at most formative aspect, not the social one. As a consequence, it would seem that little useful meaning left in the social aspect.
- If Stafleu wishes to develop his proposal, he must address this and either show what the kernel meaning of the social aspect is or else omit it altogether. To have an aspect for companionship and nothing else — no organisation, for example — seems rather thin when compared with the richness of most other aspects. So we need to be clear what this companionship is, in what way it cannot be reduced to other aspects.
- Moreover, since the aspects form a sequence defined by dependency, Stafleu must explain why it is that the economic aspect especially, the next in the sequence, depends on companionship.
- Also, since each aspect defines a scientific area, a distinct rationality, distinct types of entity, relation, properties, etc., and distinct sets of norms, he must (maybe with our help) define what these are for each of the aspects he proposes — both the new political aspect and the remaining social aspect. To define the scientific area for the political aspect, it is not enough to say 'political science', but he (we) must define such things as the criteria for truth within the meaning of each aspect, the valid types of research questions that may be researched, the research methods that are appropriate, the types of inferences that may be made, and so on, and demonstrate that each of these cannot be reduced to those of any other aspect.
- Stafleu makes authority fundamental to his political aspect. Authority, if I understand his notion aright, implies hierarchy. If this is so, then hierarchy is normative for organized communities and so all 'proper' organized communities will be hierarchical in nature. This implies that organisation that is non-hierarchical (e.g. networks) is anti-normative and will thus be doomed to failure, at least in the longer term. (I confess I do not like this restriction. Whether non-hierarchical organisation is possible as sustainable and normative is still an open question. If hierarchy is normative, then we will discover over decades that attempts at non-hierarchical organisations will always tend to fail. But if we find they can 'work' in the long-term, then we can conclude with reasonable certainty that they are part of the potential God included in his design of the law side (aspects, etc.).) However, at present I would prefer to err on the side of allowing for organised communities that do not necessarily involve authority.

3. *The sufficiency of Dooyeweerd's proposal*

Not only do I find these problems in Stafleu's treatment of the social aspect, but I find that Dooyeweerd's current proposal (at least as I understand it) works well as it is, with perhaps minor adjustments. In particular, I find Dooyeweerd's founding of organised communities on the formative aspect useful.

- Dooyeweerd's founding of organized communities in the technical (formative) aspect is valid because of the element of organization, which is precisely what the kernel meaning of that aspect is: formative power. It is a forming, a shaping, not of physical material but of social relationships. Therefore, one could argue that:
 - All communities possess social relationships (approx. companionship).
 - In organized ones, these have been shaped or formed.

Thus what differentiates organized from unorganized communities is the forming and structuring of the social relationships, rather than authority, which Stafleu suggested (see earlier quote) "appears almost obvious".

- Though Dooyeweerd does indeed include authority in the social aspect, the founding of it on the formative means that authority is not always necessary. Dooyeweerd's view leaves open the possibility that though the shapes of some organized communities might be hierarchical (implying authority), others may have other structures such as networks (implying structure but no authority). Stafleu's proposal for a political aspect cannot allow that possibility because he presupposes authority.

The one adjustment I would make to Dooyeweerd's view is to define social-aspect authority and subordination in terms of esteem and deference rather than something authoritarian; see below.

4. *Inability to solve the problem*

Finally, I am not convinced that Stafleu's proposal solves the problems he finds in Dooyeweerd's view of the social aspect any more successfully than we might by sticking to Dooyeweerd's ideas. Stafleu expresses the problem as [p.128-9] "Dooyeweerd reduces authority to power, control or command over people ... in my view authority cannot be reduced to power, control or command over people. If some authority has to resort to the exertion of power, it is a ... testimonial of incompetence, only excusable if the relation of authority or discipline is severely disturbed." Obviously, Dooyeweerd's social-aspect 'authority', on its own, cannot guard us against improper coercion. Stafleu uses this to argue that authority should be taken out of the social aspect (into his political one). I too have had concerns that Dooyeweerd's social-aspect authority, being pre-judicial and pre-ethical, might lend validity to harsh, unjust forms of

coercion, and thus largely agree with Stafleu's concern here. But I do not believe that Stafleu's proposal solves the problem.

- First, I cannot see that Stafleu's proposal solves that problem because his political aspect is also pre-judicial and pre-ethical.
- Second, I believe that Dooyeweerd's current proposal already contains a sufficient solution to this problem.

As I understand it, while each aspect possesses its own norms, these are of limited scope and should not be expected to encompass our full-orbed notion of what is right and wrong without bringing in all the other aspects. Dooyeweerd stressed that all the aspects should be taken together. If this is so, then in considering how to function in the social aspect (e.g. by organising a community) we must also consider the juridical and ethical. Thus to argue the need for a new political aspect of authority on these grounds is invalid.

I wonder if Stafleu is expecting too much of a single aspect (Dooyeweerd's version of the social aspect). A single aspect *enables* us to function in a way that has a particular type of meaning, and provides norms related to that meaning. Each aspect thus contributes a different enabling or potential, and, though it might anticipate that of later aspects, it does not provide the enabling provided by those later aspects. Thus the social aspect enables companionship and other human-human relationships and, because it is later than the formative aspect functioning in the social aspect involves (depends foundationally on) functioning in the formative aspect, which is deliberate shaping. Therefore, social functioning includes a form in which relationships are shaped or structured — which is to say, organized communities. The social aspect enables organisations to occur, in which some kind of formative control can be exerted. But it does not, on its own, provide enabling for just or unjust versions of those. It is the juridical aspect that enables such.

Real life associations (concrete, entity-side ones that actually happen) function in all aspects. They are responsible (e.g. ultimately to God) in all aspects for their life as associations, and this responsibility is in all aspects. Therefore associations in which unjust coercion occurs are rightly condemned, but they are condemned under the juridical rather than the social aspect.

5. *Reflection*

I find I have some sympathy with Stafleu's proposal for a political aspect separate from the juridical, but I am concerned about the impact this would have on the social aspect.

I wonder whether the problem that Stafleu rightly highlights in relation to authoritarian control lies more in Dooyeweerd's use of the word 'authority' for the structuring we find in organized communities. The word has strong juridical connotations. I believe we need some word that expresses the type of relationship involved in shaping, forming, getting things done in pursuit of a common goal, and that does not connote (anticipate) the meanings found in

later aspects, whether juridical justice, or economic frugality and management, or any other. We also need a word that does not have negative connotations for social structures, such as 'control' and even 'power' now have. Sadly, I cannot think of a suitable English word.

It is a pity that the main type of association Stafleu refers to, the state, is "exceptional", as he admits, which makes me wonder whether his thinking has been overly influenced by what is exceptional.

Dooyeweerd's suite of aspects must always be seen as unfinished business (see NC, II:556), so Stafleu's proposal for a modification therein is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, Dooyeweerd's suite emerged over many years of sensitive reflection on everyday life and on what others had written over 2,500 years, together with analysis of such things as antinomies. In most cases, his suite 'works' well. Therefore, any suggested alteration must be subjected to intense scrutiny before it can be accepted. I have suggested a few issues that perhaps need to be addressed as part of the scrutiny of Stafleu's proposal.