

ANALYTICAL AND REFORMATIONAL PHILOSOPHY  
Critical reflections regarding R. van Woudenberg's  
meditation on 'aspects' and 'functions'

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In a recent issue of this journal René van Woudenberg meditated “on the question what ‘aspects’ and ‘functions’, within the bounds of CP (= Calvinistic Philosophy HGG)<sup>1</sup>, are supposed to be.”<sup>2</sup> This meditation demands a reaction. The purpose of this paper is to “shed ... at least some light on the question which ... of the two is the more intelligible and useful notion”. Its aim is “not to discuss any theory *about* modal aspects ... but to establish what the phenomena *are* that such theories are *about*.”(1) I believe that the paper does not succeed in its goal.

My response is divided in two parts. First I will discuss some of the arguments that Van Woudenberg uses in his analysis of the possible ways to understand both ‘aspects’ and ‘functions’. In this part I will try to show that the arguments used do not achieve what the paper aims at. In a second part I will discuss some deeper issues that are at stake. Here I will argue that it is not possible to understand the idea of ‘aspects’ or ‘functions’ apart from the philosophical paradigm of which it is a part. In fact, I will try to show that Van Woudenberg’s analysis depends upon a theoretical conception that is basically different from that of reformational philosophy as conceived by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. Ultimately, what might be at stake is the question how Christians should pursue philosophy. Is it possible to translate the basic concepts of reformational philosophy into those of mainstream analytical philosophy without the former losing their critical intent?

I *Specific arguments*

Van Woudenberg gives several arguments to show that ‘aspect’ is “quite a problematic category in CP’s ontological discourse” (13). I will discuss most of them and attempt to show that they do not justify the conclusion which he draws. I will also compare ‘aspect’ and ‘function’ and point to possible differences as to their meaning.

1. Aspects, functions and properties

Van Woudenberg’s paper ends with a conclusion and a suggestion. The conclusion: ‘function’ can be given a decent sense, but it appears to be hard to

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<sup>1</sup> I will speak of reformational philosophy instead, as that is the name that has become common parlance.

<sup>2</sup> René van Woudenberg, ‘Aspects’ and ‘functions’ of individual things. *Philosophia Reformata* 68 (2003), 1-13. Numbers within the text are references to this article.

do the same in relation to ‘aspect’. The suggestion: use ‘properties’ for functions that are intrinsic to things and reserve functions for what indeed are functions of things in everyday language: the different ways they can be made use of (13).

Because of the aim of the paper the question should be asked: has Van Woudenberg succeeded in establishing the phenomena that are intended by the theories about aspects or functions? Leaving aside the difference between aspects and functions for the moment, it is clear that in reformational philosophy both aspects and functions are limited to a certain number (about fifteen) and that they are irreducible to one another. ‘Aspects’ and ‘functions’ as used in reformational philosophy point to a basic diversity in reality. Therefore they are characterised as ‘modal’.<sup>3</sup> Could the same be said of ‘properties’? What would it mean to say: there are about fifteen modal properties? Besides, both ‘aspects’ and ‘functions’ taken in their specific sense of referring to a basic diversity in reality all have the same character. All modal functions, except one, can be taken as either subject or object function, or, using Clouser’s terms, in an active or passive sense. Does Van Woudenberg suggest applying this distinction to properties also? Would this relate to his suggestion to reserve function for the use, which can be made of things over against properties that are intrinsic?

There is a way to relate ‘aspects’ (or ‘functions?’) to ‘properties’. Roy Clouser speaks of ‘kinds of properties’ in relation to the various fields of scientific research. Evidently these ‘kinds’ of properties refer to the different aspects (or functions) as are distinguished within reformational philosophy.<sup>4</sup> ‘Aspects’ as ‘modal aspects’ indeed are not properties in the usual sense. But neither are ‘functions’ as ‘modal functions’.<sup>5</sup> In terms of properties they relate to specific kinds of properties. These kinds are basic in the following sense: there is a limited number of them; they are not arbitrarily chosen but refer to a basic diversity within reality; they are mutually irreducible; and they display an inner coherence (retroceptions and anticipations).

## 2. Aspects and sides

One of the possible routes Van Woudenberg discusses to clarify the notion of aspect is by comparing it to ‘side’, which, of course, is an expression that is often used as a synonym for aspect.<sup>6</sup> According to him this cannot work (3).

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of ‘modal’ will be discussed later in this paper. It should not be taken in the sense related to modal logic. It refers to ‘modes of being’ or, more precise in relation to Dooyeweerd, ‘modes of meaning’.

<sup>4</sup> See Roy A. Clouser, *The myth of religious neutrality. An essay on the hidden role of religious belief in theories*. Notre Dame 1991: University of Notre Dame Press. Clouser defines aspects as ‘kinds of properties and laws’ (p. 56-57).

<sup>5</sup> Actually, this shows in Van Woudenberg’s paper where he uses properties (plural) for function: ‘physical function’ connects with ‘physical properties’ (10).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. H. Dooyeweerd, *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*. Volumes I-III. Amsterdam 1935-1936: Paris (referred to as WdW I-III), I 5f. In fact ‘zin-zijden’ (‘meaning-sides’ or ‘sides of meaning’) expresses very adequately what Dooyeweerd has in mind, cf. WdW I 473. See also Calvin G. Seerveld, Dooyeweerd’s legacy for aesthetics: modal law theory. In C.T. McIntire, editor, *The*

But the argument given is very peculiar. ‘Sides’ he takes as sides of a diamond. And modal aspect cannot mean ‘side’ in this sense because ‘all things cannot have a physical side’ in the sense that a diamond has sides.

Van Woudenberg wants to argue that the different modal aspects cannot be understood in the sense that a physical object has many sides. And this is certainly correct. But the argument presupposes that the term ‘sides’ as explanation for aspects should be used in the same sense as sides of a diamond. But why should this be the case? Is ‘side’ always to be used in the literal sense as in ‘sides of a diamond’? In a conflict between two people we can take ‘sides’. We might even say that there are different ‘sides’ to the issue at stake.

We could construct a similar argument in relation to the terms ‘bear’ and ‘bearer’ which are used by Van Woudenberg for the individual thing that has properties (1, 6, 8). What does he mean by ‘bear’ and ‘bearer’? Let us compare the statements:

- (1) This pillar bears half of the weight of the roof.
- (2) This pillar is the bearer of much of the weight of the second story.

with

- (3) This pillar bears the property of weighing 50 kilos
- (4) This pillar is the bearer of the property of weighing 50 kilos.

Do ‘bear’ and ‘bearer’ have the same meaning in (3) and (4) as in (1) and (2)? Evidently, ‘bear’ and ‘bearer’ cannot have the same meaning in relation to carrying weight and in relation to having a property. Does that mean that the notion of ‘bear’ and ‘bearer’ is meaningless in relation to having properties? The notion of ‘bear’ and ‘bearer’ in relation to properties seems to be unproblematic for Van Woudenberg. In the second part of this paper I will discuss the question to which extent this might be the case.

It is true that an explanation of ‘aspects’ by ‘sides’ is not much of an answer to the question what ‘modal aspect’ means in a philosophical sense. Yet the comparison of aspects with sides of a diamond in a literal sense suggests that the expression ‘sides’ as a synonym for ‘aspects’ is inappropriate. This certainly is unwarranted. Therefore, the argument is confusing rather than elucidating.

### 3. ‘Aspects’ and ‘functions’: Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven

In his paper Van Woudenberg relates the use of ‘aspects’ to Dooyeweerd and of ‘functions’ to Vollenhoven. This is not correct. Dooyeweerd also speaks of functions. He even seems to have a preference for ‘functions’ in relation to individual things.<sup>7</sup> ‘Aspects’, then, are taken in a wider sense: aspects of our cosmos (NC I 3), of cosmic reality (NC I 4), of the temporal world (NC I 4), of

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*legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd*. Lanham 1985: University Press of America, 41-80, p.47.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. Volumes I-IV. Translated by David H. Freeman and H. de Jongste. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia 1953-1958: Paris/ Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (referred to in the text as NC I-IV), I 4, 552f; III 53ff.

reality (NC II 3). Individual things have functions in the modal aspects (NC III 55 ff.). Dooyeweerd does not try to be consistent in this respect, though. Proper use of words and reasons of style might be (part of) the explanation.<sup>8</sup>

But there is a difference between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. To my knowledge Vollenhoven does not apply the terminological distinction between aspect and function. In fact, the difference seems to be more than just a difference in terminology. For Dooyeweerd the different modal aspects are the result of “the splitting up of the totality of meaning, *in time*” into a meaning diversity (NC II 7, cf. NC I 4ff.). And they also have an *a priori* meaning in the sense that they are a necessary condition for the existence of individual things. They have a transcendental meaning (cf. NC II 548 ff.). This is different from Vollenhoven. It should be emphasised, though, that also for Dooyeweerd ‘aspects’ never should be taken as existing independently of their realisation in individual things (e.g. NC III 78) and that for Vollenhoven ‘functions’ of things are always dependent on the law as given by God.

So it seems that Van Woudenberg makes a point by opposing ‘function’ in the Vollenhovian sense to ‘aspect’ in the sense of Dooyeweerd. Yet, the argument that he uses against the plausibility of a modal aspect as something in which an individual thing has a function does apply to the use of ‘function’ by Vollenhoven as well. Van Woudenberg’s argument is that having a function in all modal aspects would imply that all modal aspects are a necessary condition for the existence of e.g. a stone or a tree. And according to him stones and trees might have an objective function in the moral aspect but the moral aspect could not be a necessary condition for the existence of a stone or a tree (6-7). But Vollenhoven too maintains that all things have all modal functions either as subject or as object.<sup>9</sup> Of course, an object function requires the corresponding subject function for its realisation. But still as an object function it does characterise the stone or tree in its full existence. I wonder whether Van Woudenberg would actually deny this. Could a tree or a stone exist without the possibility to be an object of moral meaning? Is this possibility not a condition for the actual existence of a tree or a stone?<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Aspect and viewpoint

There is another argument Van Woudenberg uses against the idea of individual things having functions in the modal aspects. It appears to him that aspects taken in this way become viewpoints from which things are seen. In this context he refers to neo-Kantianism and its notion of concepts. Concepts in

<sup>8</sup> Cf. NC I 5. Here Dooyeweerd speaks both of the ego as having functions in the different aspects and of “the different aspects of my temporal existence”. See also his *Encyclopedia of the Science of Law. Volume I Introduction. (The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd. Series A, Volume 8)* Translated by Robert H. Knudsen and edited by Alan M. Cameron. Lewiston 2002: The Edwin Mellen Press, 13ff.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, *Isagogè Philosophiae*. Amsterdam: Theja, 41. See also his *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie der Wijsbegeerte*. Amsterdam 1933: Paris, 35f.

<sup>10</sup> I understand from personal conversation that Van Woudenberg would agree with this point.

this view from the ultimate framework from which reality is understood. Different families of concepts like physical and economical become different viewpoints from which reality is seen and from which specific properties are ascribed to individual things. The point he wants to make is that aspects cannot be at the same time aspects of individual things as such and viewpoints from which they are seen (7).

Now this might be the case as far as neo-Kantianism is concerned, but does this critique apply to Dooyeweerd? In the first place it should be noted that when Dooyeweerd discusses the criteria for modal aspects he explicitly contends that, although the criteria might have a theoretical nature, this does not mean that they are purely epistemological. On the contrary, they are based in the cosmic order (NC II 6). The modal aspects are for Dooyeweerd certainly aspects of human experience, but being such does not at all contradict their being given as real. The modal aspects are the determining and necessary conditions for individual things and they determine at the same time the possibility of human experience (NC II 6). Dooyeweerd explicitly contrasts his position from neo-Kantianism.

But what about Van Woudenberg's argument that aspects cannot be viewpoints from which we look at things and at the same time aspects of the things themselves, because in the former sense we ascribe properties to things which is an anti-realist position while the latter position is a realist one (7)? This argument is convincing only if one already assumes a Neo-Kantian position, which certainly is not necessarily the case. It is quite possible that we have to choose a specific position to be able to observe certain properties of things. Imagine a large object with different colours at different sides. We need then different points of view from where we can see the different colours. The different properties the object has cannot be seen from one viewpoint. As such it is quite possible that aspects of things correspond with aspects of our experience. In fact, otherwise it would be hard to explain that we can have real experience of things as they exist.

##### 5. Aspects and families

Does having a certain aspect mean to be subject to the laws of that aspect? This is another route that Van Woudenberg pursues in his meditative itinerary to understand what an aspect is. The route is illustrated with physical laws. All things have all aspects. So they all do have a physical aspect. Are they all subject to physical laws? What about families? Do the laws of physics apply to families? For Van Woudenberg it is clear that this does not make sense. So having an aspect cannot mean to be subject to the laws of that aspect (4-5).

What about this argument? To start with, the dilemma that Van Woudenberg formulates is not exhaustive. For him it is either that some physical law applies to families or that having a physical aspect does not imply to be subject to physical laws. The first he does not see as a possibility, the second requires another explanation of what an aspect is. Indeed, within the context of reformational philosophy it is not possible to separate the different modal

aspects from the laws that are part of it. To have a function in a modal aspect implies to be subject to the laws of that aspect. There is another possibility, though. Possibly, a family is not an individual thing. In that case it does not need to have all the aspects. Actually, this is the position taken by Henk Hart in his *Understanding our world. An integral ontology*<sup>11</sup>. In his view human relationships, even if organised in an institutional form like a family or a government, cannot be functors (technical for individual things that have functions) because they have no subject functions in the first four 'functional levels' (his term for aspects).<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Chaplin does not go as far as Hart. He still takes societal structures as 'functors', but agrees that it is rather artificial to ascribe all the modal aspects to them.<sup>13</sup> At least, then, Van Woudenberg should have considered the possibility that a family is not an individual thing in the sense that it functions in or has all the modal aspects.

But there is more to be said. Dooyeweerd himself explicitly discusses the functions of a family in all the modal aspects in his elaborate analysis of a family as a societal structure (NC III 289ff.). Two things should be mentioned. First, Dooyeweerd explicitly distinguishes between the structure of a thing and the structure of a human community or communal whole. He restricts the use of 'things' to what has subject functions only up to the psychic aspect. So inorganic things, plants and animals belong to this category. Human communities have subject functions also in the later aspects. And then he adds what seems to me as of special importance: "a communal whole ... can only be realised in a more or less durable social coherence of typical human acts and typical modes of human behaviour which are determined and unified by the inner structure of individuality proper to this community" (NC III 198).<sup>14</sup> So it is clear that Dooyeweerd would never apply modal functions to a family or any societal structure apart from the members of that family or societal structure. It is because their behaviour takes on a specific nature within specific societal structures that he ascribes to these societal wholes structures of individuality.

The other point to be mentioned is that, when Dooyeweerd discusses the modal functions a family has in the pre-logical aspects, he is not concerned with general modal laws but he tries to show how these functions have a typical expression in the case of the family. The biotic aspect has a typical function because the family members have a specific 'blood-relationship'. One could also point to the specific genetic relationship between parents and children. This distinguishes a family from all other kinds of human communities (NC III 300f.). This biotic relationship is not possible without its physical-chemical foundation (NC III 301).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lanham 1984: University Press of America.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.* 284.

<sup>13</sup> See Jonathan Chaplin, Dooyeweerd's notion of societal structural principles. *Philosophia Reformata* 60 (1995), 21 (text and footnote 3).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. NC III 298: "When we say that a community has its own sphere of feeling, thought, etc., its own temporal sphere of action, we cannot mean anything else than the life of feeling, thought, etc., and the sphere of action of human beings, in a particular temporal unity of societal relationships."

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Stafleu's suggestion, Van Woudenberg mentions in his paper (p.5): the DNA molecule as the vehicle of genetic information.

It is not the place here to go into the analysis of a family or other societal structures in terms of modal aspects. But it is important to notice that the basic question for Dooyeweerd is whether in all the modal functions of an individuality structure the typical nature of that structure comes to expression. As to societal structures this means that the typical nature of human behaviour as determined by these societal structures is expressed in all the modal aspects. The parts are not just numerical elements of a whole but they are seen as typically qualified as to their behaviour by the specific nature of the whole that integrates them into a specific unity. To analyse a societal structure like the family in Dooyeweerdian terms means to ask in which way this societal structure expresses its typical nature as a unified whole in all modal aspects as far as human behaviour that is characterised by it is concerned.

For now I will leave aside the question whether a family functions within all the modal aspects.<sup>16</sup> It is a question not easy to answer. But certainly the example of a family cannot be used as an argument against the idea that the meaning of a modal aspect (and of a modal function as well) is connected to the laws that pertain to that aspect.

#### 6. Provisional conclusion

Van Woudenberg's conclusion that 'aspect' is "quite a problematic category in CP's ontological discourse" because it cannot be given a decent sense (13) is not warranted by the arguments presented. He does not convincingly show that to the several meanings connected with 'modal aspect' that he finds improper a 'decent sense' cannot be given. Individual things do have functions in modal aspects, which means that the laws of those aspects apply to them.<sup>17</sup> 'Modal aspects' and 'modal functions' refer to the same basic diversity in our experience of reality, which is not just a subjective conceptualisation but a given of reality itself. Besides, he exaggerates the difference between Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, although there is indeed an important difference, which goes beyond a difference in terminology.

## II *Background issues*

In the first part of my critical reflections regarding Van Woudenberg's meditation on 'aspects' and 'functions' I have discussed specific arguments proposed

<sup>16</sup> One question that needs to be answered is whether the human act-structure has functions in all the modal aspects apart from the other structures (the physical-chemical, the biotic and the sensitive/psychic) which are enkaptically bound within the human body as a structural whole. For Dooyeweerd relates the societal structure to the human act-structure. Besides, as the human act-structure is nothing apart from those other structures, one may well ask whether the life of a family and of any societal structure, if taken in its concrete existence and operations, can be seen apart from its dwelling place, its means of operation and moving around, etc. Cf. NC III 192.

<sup>17</sup> Here I like to remind of the different ways individual things might relate to different modal laws as Stafleu often has observed. Modal laws are directly applying to subject functions in the corresponding aspects and indirectly to the object functions in those aspects. In the latter case these laws apply via the subject functions the object functions correspond to.

to refute some suggestions about what an aspect could be. In this part I will discuss some wider issues that in my opinion are implied in his analysis. The basic question I want to ask is whether the approach Van Woudenberg applies in his meditation is suited to produce a real understanding of what a modal aspect within reformational philosophy is about.

In the beginning of his paper he contends that he shall not discuss any theory about modal aspects but wants to establish what the phenomena are that such theories are about (1). Yet, at several points he refers to the thesis that all individual things have all the aspects (3, 4, 6). Is this not itself at least part of the theory about aspects? On the other hand he introduces the ideas of 'bearer', 'substance' (1f) and properties (13) as unproblematic notions. So I get the impression that what Van Woudenberg actually is doing is trying to understand the notion of aspect in terms of what is common in mainstream analytical philosophy. This as such is a laudable undertaking.<sup>18</sup> If reformational philosophy will have some impact in contemporary philosophical discussions it must use a language that will be understood. At the same time we must be aware of what is involved in such a discussion. Is it just a matter of concepts and specific theories that can be studied on the basis of specific statements or is more involved? In this part I will indicate some of the issues that are at stake in a discussion between reformational philosophy and contemporary analytical philosophy. I will discuss three issues and apply them to the understanding of the concept of modal aspects: 1. the method of philosophical analysis; 2. the idea of an individual thing; 3. meaning and being. All of them appear clearly in Van Woudenberg's meditation on 'aspects' and 'functions'.

### 1. Philosophical method

Van Woudenberg calls his paper a meditation. So maybe we should not expect too precise a philosophical method. Yet it is surprising that claiming to establish what the phenomena are that theories concerning aspects are about, he limits himself to the use of the words 'aspect' and 'function' and to the question whether some explanation could be consistent with specific theories about them in reformational philosophy. There is no attempt to point to human experience and relate this to what is meant by modal aspects. In fact there is hardly any reference to actual use of the term by reformational philosophers. Just two kinds of adherents or versions of CP are introduced: the one in line with Dooyeweerd, the other with Vollenhoven. On one side there is an appeal to ordinary language, language as used in everyday life. On the other side the criterion of consistency is applied: is a potential interpretation compatible with particular theories? For this reason some theory about aspects is introduced. Otherwise the criterion could not be applied. So in order to understand phenomena of human experience an appeal is made to the use of language in combination with the criterion of logical consistency. Hardly any reference is made to human experience as such.

<sup>18</sup> It is very much what Henk Hart, *op. cit.*, attempts to do. *Cf.* also Roy Clouser, *op. cit.*

This approach seems to be typical for at least some versions of contemporary analytical philosophy. For example, it is remarkable that in Plantinga's elaborate studies on warrant and proper function<sup>19</sup> there is hardly any reference to contemporary scientific research in cognitive psychology and neurophysiology. This is all the more remarkable because Plantinga emphasises the proper functioning of our epistemic faculties.<sup>20</sup> Even the chapter on Perception in *Warrant and Proper Function* does not refer to contemporary scientific research. What Plantinga analyses is the concept of warrant. And it seems that this can be done completely apart from empirical research concerning cognition. In a similar way Van Woudenberg is musing about 'aspects' and 'functions' without any direct reference to human experience.<sup>21</sup>

I will not deny the significance of this approach. It certainly can be important to analyse the use of words, especially within a scientific context, and to test whether there is logical consistency. But this method has its limitations too. In relation to empirical scientific research and its wider interpretation it might be shown that logical inconsistencies occur or that unwarranted conclusions are drawn, but this will not lead to the development of a philosophical framework for the interpretation of these results. At the same time such a wider philosophical framework will inevitably be presupposed, because otherwise within a theoretical context logical consistency between ideas and theories could not be analysed anyway.

Actually, this point can be illustrated in the case of 'aspects'. Van Woudenberg tries to understand the meaning of 'modal aspect' from the use of the word as such. It can be conceded that the word 'aspect' does not lead to a proper understanding of what is meant by modal aspect. The word as such suggests something external, especially because of its visual connotations, irrespective whether it points to something real, as sides of a diamond, or refers to subjective viewpoints. Modal aspects imply something else. They refer to something much more intrinsic, especially in the case of Dooyeweerd. Modal aspects are 'modes of being' which make possible and determine the specific nature of kinds of individual things. This, of course, implies some understanding of being,<sup>22</sup> but by itself it might explain why an analysis that starts with the common use of the word 'aspect' does not lead to a proper understanding. A philosophical conception is involved, apart from which real understanding will not be achieved. At the same time, Van Woudenberg himself also assumes, as indicated above, some philosophical conceptual scheme, a theoretical framework that is related to contemporary analytical philosophy.

<sup>19</sup> See especially Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*. New York/ Oxford 1993: Oxford University Press.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* 4f.

<sup>21</sup> Van Woudenberg follows a completely different route in his introduction to reformational philosophy. See R. van Woudenberg, *Gelovend Denken. Inleiding tot een christelijke filosofie (Believing thought. Introduction to a Christian philosophy)*. Amsterdam/ Kampen 1992: Buyten & Schipperheijn/ Kok, chapter 3.

<sup>22</sup> The 3d section of this part will deal with this. I like to add here, that the explanation of modal aspects as kinds of properties and laws has some limitations as well. 'Kinds' of properties raises the question: what sort of kinds? Again, the philosophical conception as a whole is needed to answer this question.

From the beginning reformational philosophy has been characterised by a different approach. I will mention two points: 1. its relation to the empirical sciences; 2. the emphasis on philosophical conceptions.

Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd started to work on the project of a specific Christian philosophy to build a foundation on which also a Christian approach in the empirical sciences would become possible. For that reason they have been very open to these sciences. Especially Dooyeweerd always has tried to integrate the results of empirical scientific research in his philosophical analysis. Actually, here lies the background of the idea of aspect or function. It is developed in relation to the specific fields of the different sciences.<sup>23</sup> Modal aspect or modal function concerns a basic functional coherence that can be observed in reality and that characterises the field of a specific science.

In this respect reformational philosophy connects with the turn the empirical sciences took at the beginning of modern times. In stead of the Aristotelian emphasis on essential properties as the basis for explanation of empirical data scientists looked for regularities in behaviour that could be explained with the help of natural laws formulated in a mathematical way.<sup>24</sup> In this way the same laws of gravity could explain very different phenomena like the falling of an apple, the tides and the motion of the moon. This emphasis on 'functional' coherence is characteristic for the idea of modal aspect and modal function in reformational philosophy. For this reason it is a theoretical notion that cannot be explained by referring just to ordinary language. Of course there is some relationship between the daily use of 'aspect' and 'function' and its theoretical meaning but the specific use in the context of reformational philosophy presupposes its abstract nature. Yet, the diversity of modal aspects is not completely foreign to daily experience. The modal aspects in their typical nature are implicitly experienced in our dealing with the concrete reality we live in. In the same way the diversity of the different sciences like physics, biology, psychology, economics *etc.* is not foreign to our daily experience.<sup>25</sup>

The second point is related to this. Reformational philosophy is developed on the basis of the conviction that a Christian approach in the sciences requires a philosophical conception from a Christian perspective. Different sciences always imply a theoretical view of reality as a whole, if only because of the claims of scientific knowledge and the understanding of the relationship between the different sciences. At the same time this theoretical conception of reality as a whole will always betray the influence of a religious or basic conviction. Therefore, especially Dooyeweerd put a lot of effort in the analysis of the inner relationship between religious conviction and philosophical and scientific analysis.

<sup>23</sup> See *e.g.* Johan Stellingwerff, *D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978). Reformator der Wijsbegeerte*. Baarn 1992: Ten Have, 51ff., Herman Dooyeweerd, *Encyclopedia of the Science of Law. Volume I Introduction*. Translated by R.H. Knudsen and edited by A.M. Cameron. Lewiston 2002: The Edwin Mellen Press, 11ff., and also R.D. Hendersen, *Illuminating law. The construction of Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophy 1918-1928*. Dissertation Free University Amsterdam, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> See *e.g.* M.D. Stafleu, The idea of natural law. *Phil. Ref* 64 (1999), 88-104.

<sup>25</sup> This becomes more difficult in relation to sciences like biophysics, biochemistry *etc.*

On the basis of this approach reformational philosophy was able to provide in principle a philosophical framework for interpreting the results of the empirical sciences. It also has proven to be fruitful for social and political practice because of its theory of the state and other societal structures. Its method is not primarily linguistic and logical analysis but the study of reality as it is given in human experience both in everyday life and through scientific research. It is empirical in this sense. At the same time it tries to understand the basic order that makes reality and our experience possible. This is the reason why Dooyeweerd speaks of *a priori* and transcendental. Its approach is basically to have an open mind for reality and human experience itself and not just to concentrate on logic and language, while at the same time acknowledging the impact of religious convictions. In this way it tries to do justice to reality as God's creation.

The approach Van Woudenberg follows in his meditation on 'aspects' and 'functions' not only disregards the relationship of reformational philosophy to the empirical sciences and human experience in its totality but also ignores the importance of a philosophical conception as a whole in which philosophical theories and concepts do function. His approach suggests that philosophical analysis can be restricted to specific concepts and statements without paying proper attention to a wider theoretical framework. I hope to have shown that this method does not work for the attempt to elucidate what is meant by modal aspect in reformational philosophy. It is a theoretical term that presupposes a theoretical context for its understanding. In the next two sections I will elaborate on this theoretical context by exploring other differences between mainstream analytical and reformational philosophy, differences that are related to deep convictions about reality and that influence what could be understood by aspects and functions.

## 2. Individual things

At two places in his paper Van Woudenberg relates reformational philosophy to the terminology of mainstream analytical philosophy. Early in his meditation he refers to 'bundle theories' and 'substance theories' in relation to individual things (1). Later he applies the distinction between intrinsic and relational properties to subject and object functions (11 ff.). In this section I will discuss the former, the latter will be dealt with in the next.

Van Woudenberg seems to hesitate whether Dooyeweerd's theory of individual things is a version of the 'substance theory' or the 'bundle theory' (1-2). The former assumes that there is a 'bearer', or a substratum that has the properties and is not itself a property. The other urges that an individual thing is just a 'bundle of properties'. He does not consider, though, a third possibility: Dooyeweerd's theory of individual things being neither of these. Dooyeweerd himself has emphatically rejected the idea of substance in relation to individual things (*cf. e.g.* NC III 3 ff.), but he also states explicitly that 'a thing is more than the sum of its individualised modal functions' (NC III 63, *cf.* 65, 75). I will come back to Dooyeweerd's view later on. First I want to discuss the alternative of 'bundle theory' and 'substance theory' itself.

The main point in discussion is which theory can best account for the individuality of concrete things.<sup>26</sup> An important problem for the ‘bundle theory’<sup>27</sup> is that it cannot exclude the ‘identity of indiscernibles’, *i.e.* it cannot allow for the possibility of two objects sharing all their properties and yet being numerically different and therefore two distinct individual things. This is impossible for the bundle theory because things are determined by their properties. So if the properties are all shared it must be the same thing. This conclusion is supposed to be evidently false.<sup>28</sup> The substance theory should be able to solve this problem because it assumes besides the properties a bearer of these properties which is a unique particular. If all the properties are the same there might still be two objects because of the substances as the unique particulars that are the bearers of the properties.

It appears, though, that this alternative has its own problems. Different versions of the substance theory have been proposed. Yet each of them carries its own difficulties. Let us look at three of them.

First there is the bare substratum theory. It assumes next to the properties a bare particular that functions as the bearer of the properties but has no properties itself. In this way it is supposed to be able to account for the unique individuality of a thing. But this clearly is a strange position. At one side the bare particular indeed should be distinct from all properties because it ‘bears’ them and as such should not be a property itself. What ‘bears’ is supposed to be different from what is ‘borne’. Yet as the ‘bearer’ it does have specific functions. So how can it be that as the ‘bearer’ of properties it is not characterised by at least some properties itself in addition to the properties of which it is the bearer? So the idea of a ‘bare substratum’ contains serious problems.

Sometimes the solution is sought in a substance theory in a narrower sense. Substance, then, is taken in the Aristotelian way as the unified form of an individual thing. It encompasses the so-called essential properties of an individual thing, properties that are necessary for it to be this kind of thing. In a strict sense this substance is not any more the bearer of all the properties of the individual thing. It implies the distinction between substance as the unity of all essential properties and its accidental properties. The latter are not necessary for the thing as it is but could have been different. In this way ‘substance’ is only the bearer of the accidental properties, not of the essential ones, because it is made up of the latter. It appears, though, that the essential properties are those properties something has in common with all other things of the same kind. So the idea of substance does account for a thing to be this particular kind of thing — for example that this almond tree is an almond tree — and as such it accounts for the thing as a unified whole, but it does not account for its individual uniqueness. It accounts for its structural or generic identity as an almond tree, not for its unique identity as this particular almond. To account for this unique identity the accidental properties seem to be

<sup>26</sup> See for the discussion that follows: Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics. A contemporary introduction*. London/ New York 2002 (1998): Routledge, chapter 3 Concrete particulars I: substrata, bundles, substances, 111-138.

<sup>27</sup> If taken in the context of a realist view regarding properties as universals.

<sup>28</sup> See Loux, *op. cit.* 112.

necessary. But if we need all the properties for the unique individuality of a thing, what then is the difference with the bundle theory?

So substance theory is further developed into a theory of unique essences. An individual substance not only has essential properties, which it shares with other things of the same kind; it also has an essence, which is unique to it. This essence consists of the essential properties, which are shared with other things of the same kind, and of properties that are unique for this particular thing. As ‘substance’ it remains different from a bundle of properties, because it is still not identical with all the properties the individual thing has. Yet it is not just what defines a kind of things, because it implies also what is unique for this particular thing.

But here another problem arises. To what kind of property do these properties belong that constitute the unique essence of a thing? Are they accidental, in the sense that they could have been different? How then can they be part of the essence of the thing without which the thing could not be what it is? Or are they essential — what then makes them into a unique property of this particular thing? It could be said that it is essential for somebody that she is the child of these specific parents. But these parents can have more children. Is it the date of birth? But could this not have been different, as sometimes the date of birth is different from what was expected? Is it the moment of conception? But how determinative is the moment of conception for somebody’s unique identity? There seems to be one property at least that is both essential and unique to a person: the person’s identity with herself. But this is a rather peculiar property itself, at least from the viewpoint of a realist view of universals. Because taken in a realist sense somebody’s identity with herself needs to be an instantiation of this property as a universal, existing independently of its particular instantiation. Yet as such the property is dependent on this unique particular which that specific person is, because it is the identity of that person with herself. It seems more natural to say that self-identity is the universal and that each person instantiates that property in a unique way. But then the property itself would not be unique anymore. Self-identity applies to everybody, not just to one unique person.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this short analysis is that substance theory has its own problems in giving an account of the unique identity of people, let alone of things as such.<sup>29</sup>

Let us now look a little closer to Dooyeweerd’s theory of individual things. My short sketch of the problems of both the bundle and the substance theories of

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<sup>29</sup> Van Woudenberg himself seems to apply identity in a strict sense only to human persons. See his *Het mysterie van de identiteit. Een analytisch-wijsgerige studie*. (The mystery of identity. An analytical - philosophical study). Nijmegen 2000: SUN. The core of any substance theory seems to be the idea that identity should exclude anything that could have been different. *I.e.* the identity of things and people is something that does not change, but relates to what remains the same in all changes. Connected to this is that the identity could not have been different. At the same time this identity is not related to particular moments in time. *Cf.* Loux, *op. cit.* Chapter 6: Concrete particulars II: persistence through time. Identity, then, seems to be taken in a strictly logical sense.

individual things was, of course, a simplification. It will not be possible either to do justice to Dooyeweerd's attempt to account for the nature of individual things. In what follows I will mention some points that to me seem characteristic of his approach and make it altogether distinct from those other theories.

In the first place Dooyeweerd wants to take his starting point within concrete experience. According to him we experience the unity of things in relation to all their changes as a unity within time (NC III 4, 29). Therefore in his philosophical theory he does not look for something that is "the absolute point of reference of its different 'accidental properties'" like the "metaphysical identity of a substance" which is itself not temporal (NC III 65). The identity of individual things does not lie in something that does not change itself in the midst of all changes the individual thing undergoes. The identity is itself temporal (NC III 67). This idea of individual identity cannot be grasped in a theoretical concept. Philosophy can "only approach it by means of a transcendental Idea, a limiting concept" (NC III 66; cf. 98). Unity within time cannot be theoretically analysed (NC III 65).

A second point that distinguishes Dooyeweerd's approach is the method he applies. In the traditional approach of substance and attributes, either essential or accidental, one can recognise the linguistic and logical structure of subject and predicate in a sentence or assertion. To begin with, substance or substrate is something that cannot be predicated itself of something else but that to which predicates apply. After this a qualification is needed to prevent that all kinds of things will be seen as substance while in fact they do not stand up to other characteristics, the most prominent of which is that a substance does not change but remains the same within the flow of different accidental properties. The approach of Dooyeweerd is not based on language and logical analysis. In fact he characterises the traditional approach as an absolutisation of theoretical thought. Theory or conceptual logical analysis is taken as the starting point to understand human experience of individual things.<sup>30</sup>

Over against this approach Dooyeweerd tries to give a structural analysis of the individuality of things. To do so he makes use of his theory of modal aspects, as this is for him the only possibility for theoretical analysis. At the same time he realises that abstract modal analysis cannot account for the individuality of things. Modal analysis as such is limited to the distinction of the different functional coherences within which all things of our human experience exist. For that very reason it is insufficient for an analysis of the structures of individuality that are characteristic for our concrete experience. Dooyeweerd explicitly distinguishes the modal dimension of our experience from the plastic horizon of individual things. So modal analysis has to be supplemented by a theory of structures of individuality, which makes use of modal analysis and has a character of its own at the same time. What is typical for structures of individuality is that one or more modal functions have a

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<sup>30</sup> Originally the essence of things is not related to the experience of concrete individuality at all. Only Aristotle starts to confuse the two. But this leads to insoluble problems according to Dooyeweerd (NC III 8ff.).

special place in determining the individual nature of a thing. The qualifying function unites in a typical way all its modal functions, and the same or another function is basic for the individualising of the different aspects (NC III 56ff., 118, cf. NC II 423ff.).

A third characteristic is the distinction between law and subject or lawside and subjectside.<sup>31</sup> Concrete individual things are subject to the laws that pertain to them. Philosophy cannot grasp this concrete individuality. It escapes theoretical analysis. The unique identity of individual things is not an issue for theoretical analysis. In his theory of individual things Dooyeweerd focuses on the lawside of this individuality, the structural unity or identity of individual things.<sup>32</sup> In this respect the structures of individuality that he analyses have a similar function as the Aristotelian substances: they have to account for the specific nature of the kinds of things that makes it possible for them to exist as the individual things that they are and to have identity through time.<sup>33</sup> Yet for Dooyeweerd this is not an essence to be found within the individual things as their core being. It is the law that holds for their being what they are and that makes their existence possible. This law makes individual things possible but as such it does not account for their unique individuality: law and subject both exist in correlation to each other. Laws hold for subjects and subjects exist in relation to the laws that pertain to them.

Finally, a central place in Dooyeweerd's theory of structures of individuality (as in the theory of modal structures) is occupied by his notion of time. The real unity of an individual thing, both as to its lawside and its subject side cannot be accounted for by the modal functions, not even as they are grouped in a typical way because of the qualifying aspect. The identity of an individual thing is rooted in what Dooyeweerd calls "the continuity of cosmic time" (NC III 65). Time for Dooyeweerd is both the cause of the diversity of the modal aspects and the bond in which they find their coherence. It is because all modal aspects find this bond in cosmic time that they can find a unity in concrete individuality. For this very reason there is no discrepancy between on

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<sup>31</sup> To be more precise than Dooyeweerd often is himself: individual things have a lawside and a subjectside. In the latter they express both individuality (uniqueness in comparison with other individual things) and universality (what they have in common with other individual things). So the subjectside of individual things encompasses their lawfulness (existing according to the laws that hold for them). On this basis we can gain insight in the laws they conform to. So things are subject to laws that hold for them in the sense that they both reflect these laws in their lawfulness and at the same time express to a greater or smaller extent an individual uniqueness. This uniqueness is possible on the basis of these laws, remains within the boundaries of them and yet cannot be predicted on the basis of them. Cf. D.F.M. Strauss, 'The order of modal aspects', In: *Contemporary Reflections on the Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd*. Edited by D.F.M. Strauss and Michelle Botting. 2000: The Edwin Mellen Press, p.21, footnote 2.

<sup>32</sup> Therefore the subtitle of volume III of the *New Critique* is: The structures of individuality of temporal reality. Dooyeweerd did never mean to give a theory of individual things in the strict sense, *i.e.* of individual things in their unique identity. Even as an analysis of the structures of individuality it is limited to what can be shown from a philosophical perspective. He does not preclude the importance of the empirical sciences in discovering the structures of individuality that belong to their field.

<sup>33</sup> "In general we can establish that the factual temporal duration of a thing as an individual and identical whole is dependent on the preservation of its structure of individuality" (NC III 79).

one hand the sphere sovereignty of the modal aspects and on the other hand their inner unity within an individual thing (NC III 61). At the same time it is this state of affairs that means a limit for theoretical analysis: time in its continuity cannot be grasped in a theoretical concept (NC III 65f.).

It is clear that especially this latter part of Dooyeweerd's theory will raise its own questions. Yet what I have pointed out should be sufficient to show how much Dooyeweerd's theory of individual things differs from the traditional approach and that it should not be characterised in terms of either a version of the substance theory or of the bundle theory. The assumptions that are made, the questions that are asked, the method that is followed, the concepts that are used, hence the problems that have to be faced, and, in short, the basic view of reality and of philosophy, are all too different to 'translate' his approach easily into terms of mainstream analytical philosophy. To do so would lead to a serious misunderstanding. Both unique and structural identity cannot be taken in a strictly logical sense, as analytical philosophy attempts to do, they should be understood in terms of the correlation of subject and law on the basis of concrete experience.

Moreover, it seems to me that at least on two points Dooyeweerd's theory is closer to our concrete experience of individual things than the analytical approach. 1) The unique identity of individual things is not seen as something that itself is not subject to change in time. One could argue that it is not essential for somebody to be married to this or that person because this could have been different as much as the colour of someone's hair can change. Yet once one is or has been married to some person this bond becomes part of one's unique identity as much as someone's hair having some colour at some specific point in time. It is even possible to identify someone on basis of that. 2) Dooyeweerd's theory takes immediately into account the diversity that we experience between different kinds of things because of its structural approach. 'Being' is not related to some abstract identity that is identical with itself through all changes but to the nature of things as we experience them concretely. Philosophy is an attempt not to reconstruct this 'nature' but to account for it by means of — indeed theoretical — structural analysis.

How does this relate to the understanding of modal aspects? I mention a number of points. 1. There is a difference in basic categories between the traditional and the Dooyeweerdian approach. The first applies as basic categories the distinction between things and properties, whereas the second distinguishes between modal aspects or functions and individuality structures. Of course, there is some relationship between these two kinds of categories. But each implies a different approach.<sup>34</sup> This becomes clear from the other points. 2. Usually, the correlation of things and properties is discussed in terms of particulars and universals. In case properties are understood as universals they need to be instantiated by the particular things. Modal aspects and individuality structures are analysed in the context of the law-subject correlation, which

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<sup>34</sup> Let me add, to avoid misunderstanding, that I do not object against speaking in terms of things and their properties. What is at stake is the question: what are the implications if they are taken as the basic theoretical categories?

should not be identified with universal and particular, although, again, there is some relationship. 3. The basic distinction regarding properties, at least as far as substances are concerned, is between essential and accidental.<sup>35</sup> Modal aspects refer to fundamental modes of being and apply in principle to all created things, either as a subject or as an object function. 4. Thinking in terms of properties and things immediately raises the question about their relationship (*cf.* bundle theory or substance theory in its different forms) and the problem how to account for unique individuality. Modal aspects are an intrinsic element of individuality structures (law-side) and the concrete individual things (subject-side). The latter cannot be grasped theoretically. The former is understood as a typical unity of modal aspects, which is different for different kinds of things. But neither can be understood or defined apart from the modal aspects. 5. Modal aspects, in spite of their theoretical nature, immediately relate to the concrete and basic diversity and coherence in our integral experience of reality. Properties, because of their background in the property — thing distinction, invite to an analysis in just abstract logical and lingual terms. 6. Underneath there is a difference in the understanding of being. This is the subject of the next section.

### 3. Meaning and being

One argument Dooyeweerd presents in his critique of the idea of substance I have not mentioned yet. According to him the idea of substance as an absolute point of reference for accidental attributes implies the idea of ‘being in itself’, existence independent of all other things. This idea of being is supposed to be incompatible with the belief that all that exists apart from God is created and therefore exists in complete dependence upon God (*cf.* NC III 69). This argument prevails in his discussion with Stoker (NC III 62 ff.).

How valid is this argument? It has been argued that the idea of substance does not necessarily imply independence in relation to God. In fact, in the Christian tradition the idea of substance is always related to reality as being created by God. To be a substance implies only a specific independence in relation to other things.<sup>36</sup> In this section I will discuss the nature of independence as connected with the idea of substance in comparison to Dooyeweerd’s idea of meaning as the being of all that has been created (NC I 4). This discussion will show another deep divergence between reformational and mainstream analytical philosophy. First I will concentrate on the understanding of the relationship between what is created and God. Next I will look at the relationship between creatures, especially between human and non-human creation.

Is the idea of substance compatible with the conviction of all things being created? If ‘substance’ were taken just in the sense of a subject that cannot be a

<sup>35</sup> The distinction between intrinsic and relational is discussed in the next section.

<sup>36</sup> *Cf.* Alvin Plantinga, Dooyeweerd on Meaning and Being. *Reformed Journal* 8 (October 1958), 13.

predicate itself and as such is distinct from what can be predicated of other things (although linguistically a predicate itself can be a subject for other predicates too), the answer would have to be affirmative. Yet, what counts as a substance is necessarily delimited also in other ways. Otherwise it would be just a lingual concept.

As I pointed out before, the nature of a substance is determined by means of conceptual analysis based upon specific intuitions. What counts as 'substance' is something that does not change; it is the core being of individual things that remains identical in all its changes. Dooyeweerd relates the idea of substance to the attempt in Greek philosophy to grasp being as such by means of theoretical analysis (NC III 5, 7ff.). The mode of being of a substance is different from that of its *accidentia* or properties. To embrace them in one concept, 'being' has to be taken in an analogical sense, *i.e.* expressing similarity and difference at the same time. In the same way the concept of being is understood "to embrace both God and His creatures, though in a different sense" (NC III 67). The idea of substance appears to imply an understanding of being as such.

The question, then, should be asked how far the idea of substance presupposes the old tradition of Greek philosophy since Parmenides, which attempts to determine the nature of being by means of logical analysis on the basis of the assumption that thinking and being are correlate. Dooyeweerd has tried to break with this tradition by means of his foundational distinction between the being of God and the meaning of all that is created. This at least implies that basic to our understanding of reality is the relationship between creature and Creator. There is no theoretical concept of being, not even an analogical one, which can be used as a foundation for this relationship. Of course, linguistically there is no problem to speak of the being of God and the being of creatures. The issue is whether this use of language is a sufficient argument to construct a theoretical concept of being that embraces both the Creator and his creatures. Dooyeweerd strongly objects against such a concept, because it would make theoretical analysis ultimate in relation to our understanding of reality in stead of our religious conviction.

The problem at stake can be illustrated by applying the distinction between intrinsic and relational properties to the idea of substance as being created. Van Woudenberg interprets subject and object functions of reformational philosophy in these terms. I will come back to this point in relation to the question whether this can be done properly. What interests me here is how the distinction between intrinsic and relational applies to substance (taken as an individual thing constituted by its essential properties) and attributes (both essential and accidental properties). It is clear that not all intrinsic properties will be essential. Intrinsic properties might change as *e.g.* weight and colour of an individual thing. What about relational properties, could an essential property be relational? Or are all essential properties by definition intrinsic? If the latter is the case what kind of property is it in relation to an individual thing to be created, *i.e.* to be wholly dependent on God for its existence? If it is a relational property and no relational property is essential, being created itself

would not be essential for the existence of an individual thing, even for the human person. From the perspective of biblical belief this could hardly be the case, because, could it be possible for the individual thing to be and yet not be created? Is it not 'essential' for the human person from the biblical perspective to be created in the image of God? If, on the other hand, 'to be created' is taken as an essential property, the question arises whether it is a property like the other essential properties. Is 'to be created' a property next to other properties that make up the nature of the individual substance? Or is it more basic than any of them? But how could this be explained in terms of 'substance' being constituted by all its essential properties? Besides, should 'being created' not even be more basic than 'substance' itself?

So it does not appear to be easy to do justice to individual things, let alone human persons, as being created if the basic categories of being are taken to be substances and properties, both essential and accidental. Therefore, Dooyeweerd may not be far off the point when he argues that the notion of substance contradicts the notion of meaning as the being of all that is created, *i.e.* dependence upon God as basic for all created reality.

The issue of meaning over against (independent) being is also at stake when Van Woudenberg attempts to interpret subject and object functions of reformational philosophy in terms of intrinsic and relational properties (11), the latter being properly called functions (13). In this case it concerns the supposed independence of individual things in relation to one another and especially in relation to "there being human persons" (13).<sup>37</sup> First I will raise some questions with regard to the 'translation' of those terms in reformational philosophy into analytical terminology, terms which, to me at least, seem to be common to both Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. After that I will point to what is peculiar for Dooyeweerd's view.

To begin with, is it clear what should count as an intrinsic property? Van Woudenberg mentions as an example something having the colour green (12). But what exactly does he have in mind? Is it the sensation of the colour green that we have or is it the physical light-waves that touch our retina? According to the modal analysis of reformational philosophy the sensation of green is a subjective experience of a sensitive object function of a green object. The light-waves are of a physical nature but they cannot define the colour as a phenomenon of the senses. Looked at in this way the property of being green seems to be rather relational than intrinsic. If the terminology of subject and object functions is to be translated into intrinsic and relational properties a careful modal analysis of those properties will be required. And it would be well advised to connect this modal analysis with the results of scientific research as it is nowadays available.

But there is a more important question to ask: are subject functions not relational? Both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven have a functional coherence in mind when they speak of modal functions. Hence they distinguish between

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. NC II 11f. for Dooyeweerd about this view.

subject-subject relations<sup>38</sup> and subject-object relations. Do subject functions not imply relations as much as object functions, be it in a different way? Is it possible to have — in Dooyeweerdian terminology — a subject function in any of the modal aspects without being in relation to subject functions of other things within that aspect? Stafleu has developed his theory of modal aspects as a theory of frameworks of relations characterised by the laws that hold for them<sup>39</sup>. Intrinsic property as subject function within reformational philosophy could not mean having a property without being related to properties of other things. All aspects are relations of coherence between things. This applies as much to subject functions as to object functions. It is the modal aspects themselves, because of the laws that constitute them, that relate things to one another, either in subject-subject relations or in subject-object relations.<sup>40</sup>

An issue that relates to this is that of realism and antirealism. Van Woudenberg takes a realist position regarding intrinsic properties and an antirealist position regarding relational properties.<sup>41</sup> The latter are “independent of there being human persons” (13). Would this mean that object functions of individual things are less real than their subject functions? Indeed, to be actualised the former are dependent on subject functions. But does this mean that they are not real as object functions as such? The colour green is a good illustration. Even as an object function it is a real property. The same holds for economic and other object functions. They are real functions of things even though they need a subject function for their actualisation. Here again, ‘being in itself’ obtains a metaphysical meaning. To be dependent upon relations seems to imply being less real in a metaphysical sense than to exist apart from those relations. Of course, it makes sense in relation to physically qualified things to distinguish between their subject functions that function independently from the human higher subject functions and object functions that do not. The point at issue is whether these object functions are less a part of their integral existence than the subject functions. Ultimately the question might be whether the reality of things exists in their independence with regard to other things, including human persons, or in their being dependent upon the order of creation as upheld by God in Christ.

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<sup>38</sup> Although, for some reason, Dooyeweerd does not elaborate on subject-subject relations. Stafleu may be the first who systematically pays attention to them. See e.g. M.D. Stafleu, *De verborgen structuur. Wijsgerige beschouwingen over natuurlijke structuren en hun samenhang* (Hidden structures. Philosophical reflections on natural structures and their coherence). Amsterdam 1989: Buijten & Schipperheijn.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. M.D. Stafleu, Being human in the cosmos. In *Philosophia Reformata* 56 (1991), 104, and especially M.D. Stafleu, *Een wereld vol relaties. Karakter en zin van natuurlijke dingen en processen*. (A world full of relations. Character and meaning of natural things and processes). Amsterdam 2002: Buijten & Schipperheijn.

<sup>40</sup> In this respect there is a relationship between reformational philosophy and realism concerning universals. Although properties themselves as universals are not accorded independent existence, yet they are not seen as just part of particulars. They depend on the laws that pertain to them. Cf. H. Hart, *op. cit.* 3f.

<sup>41</sup> Although related to properties of things realism and antirealism in this context concern the question whether the existence of things is dependent upon their relationship to human persons or if they have an independent existence of their own.

I hope it has become clear why Dooyeweerd takes so much effort to distance himself from the concept of substance. What is at stake is his idea of meaning as the nature of created being over against a theoretical idea of being that abstracts the basic relationship between creatures and Creator.<sup>42</sup> This emphasis on meaning as the nature of all that is created can also be found at the beginning of his discussion of the modal aspects.<sup>43</sup> Here too Dooyeweerd wants to avoid a primarily logical approach. Therefore he emphasises that the criteria for a law-sphere are not of a logical nature, in spite of the fact that they are theoretical. The criterion for a modal aspect is not founded in thought or reasoning but in the cosmic order of the creation (NC II 6). Dooyeweerd's understanding of this order is closely related to his idea of meaning. The order of creation determines the structure of meaning.

This becomes especially clear from his analysis of the structural horizon of human experience, which is identical with that of created earthly reality (NC II 542 ff.). Dooyeweerd distinguishes between four horizons, dimensions or levels (he uses different terms): the central religious dimension, the horizon of cosmic time, the modal horizon and the plastic horizon of concrete individuality (NC II 552 ff.). Together they constitute the perspectival structure of our experience of reality and of created reality itself. As such they also characterise the structure of meaning as Dooyeweerd understands it. A modal aspect is understood as "a functional modality of the religious fullness of meaning". This implies that "the functional structure of meaning ... is indeed nothing but a modal splitting up of the totality of meaning" (NC II 7).

Dooyeweerd understands created reality as being meaning in a very specific sense. The basic structure of his understanding of meaning is that God the creator is the divine origin, the supratemporal totality of meaning is the expression of the fullness of divine being, and the modal and individual diversity and coherence is within time, the individual being dependent on the modal. Because this is the nature of created being as meaning this diversity and coherence needs to come to expression in all what exists. For that reason there is no radical unity in individual things as such. Their unity is a unity within time, which refers beyond itself to the radical unity of meaning that transcends time. It is only humans that have a radical unity because they are created in the image of God and take part in the supratemporal totality of meaning (NC III 65).

A lot of questions can be (and have been) asked concerning this view<sup>44</sup>. I myself prefer to understand meaning from the perspective of the law — subject relationship, with the corollary of the correlation between normativity and intrinsic quality, rather than in relation to temporal diversity and

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. NC III 74f.

<sup>43</sup> See NC II 6ff.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. e.g. H.G. Geertsema, *Transcendentale openheid. Over het zinkarakter van de werkelijkheid in de wijsbegeerte van H. Dooyeweerd.* (Transcendental openness. Created reality as meaning in the philosophy of H. Dooyeweerd). *Philosophia Reformata* 35 (1970), 25-56, 132-155 (with a summary in English).

supratemporal unity<sup>45</sup>. Yet, the basic importance of the relationship of the creature to the Creator remains. No theoretical concept of being, be it analogical, may be constructed to embrace both the being of God and of creation. Meaning, as the being of all that is created, is characterised by dependence upon the Creator and by a diversity of structures and relationships. These structures and relationships are an expression of meaning. Only in this expression it can be studied with theoretical means. Modal aspects, therefore, indeed are modes of meaning. They point to a diversity of functional coherences between individual things that have a qualitative nature. A theoretical analysis of them should help to disclose the meaning of reality, as given by the Creator and as expressed in a rich diversity of structures and relationships within creation.

Theoretical analysis of reality must not primarily aim at logical unity and diversity, either in a realist or a constructivist sense, or even for purposes of logical clarity. Too easily this leads back to the old correlation between being and thinking as stated by Parmenides. Its primary goal should be to do justice to the richness of empirical reality as created by God. Logical clarity, how important it might be, is not sufficient. Empirical reality should be disclosed — also with the help of theoretical (logical) means. This is our human calling. It is what Dooyeweerd pursues with his analysis of modal aspects and, connected with that, of individuality structures. It explains why the method of reformational philosophy puts so much emphasis on integral human experience and at the same time wants to relate to the empirical sciences.<sup>46</sup> It also underlines why ‘*a priori*’ in Dooyeweerd never means *a priori* in a logical sense as if we ever know something before all experience. For Dooyeweerd ‘*a priori*’ always refers to structures as God-given. In other words, it refers to basic laws or structural principles that make subjective reality possible (cf. NC II 552ff.). Only in this sense there is — also — a logical *a priori*.

### III *Concluding remarks*

I have tried to show why the arguments Van Woudenberg presented for his thesis are not convincing. Neither does his meditation succeed in clarifying the phenomena modal aspects and functions are about. More importantly, he does not sufficiently account for the philosophical approach that is characteristic of reformational philosophy. The concept of a modal aspect, or, for that matter, of a modal function, cannot be understood apart from the philosophical conception as a whole that characterises reformational philosophy.

The real issue at stake, though, might be the nature of Christian philosophy. In which way should reality’s being created — in connection with its being

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. H.G. Geertsema, Dooyeweerd’s transcendental critique: transforming it hermeneutically. In: *Contemporary Reflections on the Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd*. Edited by D.F.M. Strauss and Michelle Botting, Lewiston 2000: The Edwin Mellen Press, 99ff.

<sup>46</sup> I leave out the deep issue of brokenness and evil. Let me just say that disclosure of meaning in the sense I intend does necessarily make sensitive to evil and suffering too and in this way helps understand the meaning of redemption. See my Higher education as service to the King. In: *Critique and Challenge of Christian Higher Education*. Kampen 1987: Kok, 54-78.

broken by evil and placed in the perspective of an overall redemption — be the starting point of all our theorising? Should it be basic to our overall understanding of reality and as such determine a philosophical conception, its basic concepts, theories and problems from the very beginning? This is the conviction of reformational philosophy, as I understand it. Of course, how to pursue this will always be a matter of discussion. Not everybody in reformational philosophy will agree with Dooyeweerd's idea of meaning and the central place it has in his understanding of Christian philosophy.

Van Woudenberg's use of the method and concepts of analytical philosophy seems to suggest that for him Christian convictions could be discussed as separate themes. They need not to determine an overall framework. It seems that for him Christian beliefs make up a source of knowledge of its own, next to other sources, regarding all relevant philosophical subjects, yet they do not provide a starting point for developing a philosophical conception of its own.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, theories and ideas can be discussed without bringing into the discussion the overall theoretical conception from which they are understood.

This does not exclude, though, a religious worldview guiding the pursuit of philosophy. Alvin Plantinga has pointed to two frontiers Christian intellectuals have to face in the present time. The one is "Perennial Naturalism, ... a view according to which there is no God, nature is all there is, and mankind is to be understood as a part of nature." The other he calls 'Enlightenment Humanism' or 'Enlightenment Subjectivism' or 'Anti-realism'. According to this view "it is really we human beings, we men and women, who structure the world, who are responsible for its fundamental outline and lineaments".<sup>48</sup> Van Woudenberg appears to be committed to the same concerns. The second one becomes manifest in the article under discussion. Other publications testify to the first.<sup>49</sup>

The difference, therefore, does not concern religious motivation. The issue is how worldview connects to doing philosophy. To what extent is it possible to apply commonly accepted philosophical concepts and theories to pursue our basic religious concerns? In other words, what does it imply to pursue Christian philosophy or to do philosophy as a Christian? In relation to the two concerns mentioned it is remarkable that in the case of naturalism reformational philosophy seems to be of the same mind. Concerning the issue of realism and anti-realism the situation appears to be more complex. In both

<sup>47</sup> Cf. R. van Woudenberg, Rede, religie en de mogelijkheid van christelijke filosofie (Reason, religion, and the possibility of a Christian philosophy). In: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 57 (1995), 293ff.

<sup>48</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible. In *Christian Scholar's Review*. Special Issue: Creation/ Evolution and Faith. XXI:1 (1991), 16. Cf. also Alvin Plantinga, Christian Philosophy at the End of the 20th Century. In: S. Griffioen and Bert M. Balk, editors, *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century, Assessment and Perspective*. Kampen 1995: Kok, 30-36 and especially Alvin Plantinga, On Christian Scholarship. [www.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/plantinga/OCS.html](http://www.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/plantinga/OCS.html).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. e.g. R. van Woudenberg, Enkele argumenten tegen het naturalisme. (Some arguments against naturalism) In: *Dooyeweerd herdacht. Referaten gehouden op het Dooyeweerd-symposium aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op vrijdag 18 november 1994*. Onder redactie van J. de Bruijn. Amsterdam 1995: VU Uitgeverij, 39-77.

cases, though, the issue of being and meaning might be at stake, and with that, the place that is awarded to logical analysis compared to the acknowledgement of creational order.

I will not pursue this point any further here. I just want to conclude with an observation and a question. It did not appear to be easy to reconcile method and basic concepts of analytical philosophy with the approach of reformational philosophy, especially in its Dooyeweerdian version. Could the reason be that the latter wants to take as the starting point for a theoretical understanding of the world the conviction that reality is created by God?