

The Influence of Philosophy on Kuyper's Theology

By Dr. W. Young

The influence of philosophy on Kuyper's theology is most explicitly developed in his three volume Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid. The Encyclopedia of Theology is itself presented as a branch of philosophy, in that it treats of the connection of theology with the other sciences, and of the sub divisions of theology with one another. The discussion of science in the 2nd volume (translated into English, pp 56-227) contains Kuyper's Epistemology and philosophy of science.

That Kuyper's philosophical views were largely influenced by German Idealism is not merely the impression of a reader, but the acknowledgment of the writer of the Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology in Vol. I, ¶ 10 entitled "Victory of the Organic Idea", he states, "But it is only by Fichte's radical formulations in the domain of the Wissenschaftslehre that the independent character of Encyclopedia entered into the sense of our times. Encyclopedia was changed into a philosophical conception; and when animated by this thought Schelling published his Vorlesungen uber die Methode des Academischen--Studiums and Tittmann and Beneke in like manner displaced the mechanical interpretation of the study by the organic, the process but awaited the intellectual powers of a Hegel to give us the first Encyclopedia in the highest sense, if not of all, at least of philosophical sciences." (p. 20 E.T.) Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology, N.Y., Scribners, 1898.

In the detailed history of theological encyclopedia, the final period is that of modern (Nieuwere) philosophy; beginning with Kant, and under the heading of direct influence of the modern philosophy are included the names of Schleiermacher, Schelling, and Hegel. In Schelling's speculative impetus Kuyper finds "an unmistakable gain for orthodox theology", although Schelling estranged his closest followers from genuine historic Christianity. Vol. I 378 F. (Dutch Ed.) Wormser, Amsterdam. 1894

The influence of German Idealism expresses itself in the pervasive employment of the notion of organism, and the repetitious use of the words "organic" and "organism", especially in the treatment of the nature of Encyclopedia (¶s 9, 10, 21) and of the conception of science (¶s 38, 39, 52, 54). Notwithstanding the prominence of the notion, there does not appear to be a definition of the term. The reader is left to examine the use or uses of the words "organic" and "organism" in a variety of contexts. That these words are used by way of a biological analogy appears from the examples of the flower present in the seed and the infant seeking the mother's breast." (¶ 13)

The point of comparison would seem to be a priority of the whole to its parts by which the relation of the parts to one another is determined. The organic character of biology may be contrasted with the mechanical character of physics in which an object is viewed as an aggregate of its parts. While Kuyper uses botany as an example of the threefold organic nature of science, he contends that all science has the organic character. "The first according to the relation of phenomena, the second according to the relation of our thoughts, and the third according to the relation of the several ends at which our studies aim." ¶ 21. More than this; these three organic relations must be organically interrelated. In this one paragraph of two pages, twenty-seven occurrences of "organism" and "organic" occur. A different meaning of "organic" may occur in Kuyper's discussion of one-sidedness in the definition of theology. Admitting elements of truth in other theologies may not stand loosely alongside one's own, but must be included organically in one's own, since "in spite of their relative right and complementary value these other theologies interpret the essence of theology one-sidedly and understand it wrongly." ¶ 30. If there has not been a shift in the meaning of the term "organic", at least the application in this case, gives rise to the question whether the word is fruitfully applied to the understanding of science in general and of theology in particular.

A further nuance in the notion of organism appears when Kuyper speaks of "that uncertainty at the boundaries which is the mark of all organic division." Here appears to be an indication that the term does not have a well defined fixed meaning. An additional complication appears on the same page 191 in the mention of "the historic track marked out by practice" as opposed to "a speculative scheme, in which the organic-genetic relations of the sciences are fitted to another last." Previously under the heading of the organic division of scientific study, ¶ 52 we read, "It is not to dissect an imaginary organism of science, but it must take as its starting-point the body of science as it actually and historically presents itself." (p. 186). The organic theme is here clearly bound up with a historical approach to the subject matter rather than a strictly logical analysis. This is qualified, to be sure, by the concession that "the pursuit of science for its own sake is the ideal which must never be abandoned" (p. 188). The question remains, however, whether the ideal has not in fact been abandoned by the practice. The orientation of scientific theory to history is reminiscent of the method of Hegel. Kuyper, it may be noted, does view logic in the practical need of life as "connected with the organic motive of science itself" (p. 185).

The discussion of the relation of science to history presupposes the discussion of the conception of science in Division II, Chapter I. The influence

of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is particularly evident in this section. First, a distinction is made between the subject and object of scientific knowledge. "The subject of science", it is said, "cannot be this man or that, but must be mankind at large, or, if you please, the human consciousness." (p. 63). While Kuyper gives a theistic turn to this conception by finding divine providence in directing scientific progress, yet Kant's doctrine of the transcendental subject as universal rather than individual is at the root of Kuyper's organic view of the subject of science. In the object of science the basic distinction is made between the elements and their relations. In the footnote, p. 75, the elements are said to correspond to our capacity to form representations, and the relations to our capacity to think. Kant's distinction between percepts arising from sensation and concepts from the categories of the understanding is clearly at work.

In his article, Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer, *Philosophia Reformata*, 1939, 193-232, Dooyeweerd strangely writes, "In his conception with reference to the subject of knowledge, Kuyper has already abandoned the standpoint of the Kantian doctrine of knowledge" (p. 221). While Kant's subject may be an abstraction, it is not individual but universal; likewise Kuyper's organic conception may be open to the criticism that it too is a construction to which nothing corresponds in reality. In fact, the assumption of progress in the history of science is highly questionable, especially in view of Kuyper's further doctrine of the antithesis in science.

When it comes to the distinction between elements and relations in the object Dooyeweerd is sharply critical. Not only does he object to the "traditional subject-object scheme" when Kuyper makes the whole cosmos the 'object' of theoretical knowing, but he takes issue particularly with the contrast between elements and relations in the object. Its origin is seen in modern epistemology since Locke, and its further development in Hume and Kant. While there is an explanation of relations by Hume in terms of psychological association and by Kant of a priori logic, by Kuyper and his colleague J. Woltjer an objective turn was given in terms of a realism of ideas. From his assumption that logic is merely a sphere of human thinking following psychology in order and dependent on it, Dooyeweerd dogmatically objects to the historic conception of Christian thought from Augustine to H. Bavinck, that the divine Logos has placed the ideas in all that which is created (op. cit., p. 221). Thus Kuyper's most outstanding successor and critic pontificates. "Instead of setting the problem of knowledge upon another foundation, by orientation to the religious basic conception of Calvinism, whereby as a matter of course the self-consciousness and the structure of human experience should be conceived altogether otherwise, they both (i.e. Kuyper and Woltjer

<w. y.>) avail themselves of the metaphysical logos doctrine in order to avoid the Kantian Subjectivism.” (op. cit. p. 223) Calvinists believing that the Logos who was in the beginning with God, also was God, by whom all things were made, may find it difficult to accept Dooyeweerd’s criticism of Kuyper at this point, however they may question other points in the Kuyperian theory of science.

Kuyper’s most important contribution to the theory of knowledge is his treatment of the noetic effects of sin upon science and the resulting antithesis of naturalistic science and science rooted in regeneration. Some of the finest passages in Kuyper’s work are found in this discussion. Eight aspects of the formal working of sin on our consciousness, moral motives from self-interest and the essentially sinful influences of the fall are all delineated in their destructive consequences for science. “The chiefest harm is the view, worked by sin, in those data, which were at our command, for obtaining the knowledge of God, and thus for forming the conception of the whole.” (p. 112).

An important qualification of this darkening of the understanding is that we have not “lost the capacity of thinking logically, for as far as the impulse of its law of life is concerned, the logica has not been impaired by sin”. (p. 110) It is not only that the laws of logic have not been altered, but that while the energy of thought has been weakened and sin leads us to reason fallaciously, yet man as man is able to correct mistakes in reasoning. In his exposition of the two kinds of science, naturalistic and Christian, Kuyper explicitly asserts, “There is but one logic, and not two.” (p. 159) This should keep us from identifying Kuyper’s conception of the antithesis in science with developments of his successors who have argued for the necessity of a Christian Logic (Vollenhoven), or have denied that the Christian and the non-Christian have the Law of non-contradiction in common. (Van Til)

The expression “two kinds of science” is linguistically objectionable, for it has misled many into extremes which Kuyper guarded against. He admits a unity of science, in as much as the effort and activity of both regenerate and unregenerate scientists bear the same character; “they are both impelled by the same purpose; both devote their strength to the same kind of labor; and this kind of labor is in each case called the prosecution of science.” (p. 155). But their activities run in opposite directions, because they have different starting-points, and their results are in many respects contrary to one another.

A further important qualification is that “the entire empiric investigation of the things that are perceptible to our senses (simple or reinforced) has nothing to do with the radical difference which separates the two groups”. (p. 157) Thus “in the elementary part of these studies there is a common realm in which the difference between view - and starting-point does not enforce itself”. (p. 158)

Even in the spiritual sciences a common realm presents itself, although Kuyper is well aware that more acute conflicts arise here than in the natural sciences. Of major importance is the acknowledgment that “the formal process of thought has not been attacked by sin and for this reason palingenesis works no change in this mental task. There is but one logic and not two”. (p. 159)

Notwithstanding such commendable concessions, the expression ‘two kinds of science’ not only leads to an exaggerated antithesis of Christian - versus non-Christian science, but makes a leap from the basic Christian truth that regeneration issues in two opposed groups of people to the thesis that there are two correspondingly opposed forms of science. The fact that regeneration results not only in the conflict between believers and unbelievers but also in the conflict between flesh and spirit within the believer, should be taken more seriously than in this theory. Christian workers in the sciences, in view of the reality of indwelling sin, often accept and defend theories inconsistent with revealed truth as Behaviorism in psychology. The real opposition in science is best not formulated in terms of regeneration, but rather of conformity to the revelation of God’s word.

In view of the influence of German Idealism on Kuypers’ general outlook it is plausible to regard the elevation of what is termed the Antithesis into a dominant category of Christian thought and practice, as having its background in the celebrated triad (erroneously equated with Hegel’s dialectic) of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. I am inclined to see in the prominence of the Antithesis principle in the view of science as well as in other matters, more than a faint echo of the Humanist conception of culture. When the Antithesis is balanced by the Kuyperian doctrine of Common Grace, there emerges a synthesis between Calvinism and the modern man-centered view, masquerading under the slogan ‘the Christian life - and world-view’. Kuyper himself has in his Stone Lectures on Calvinism, Het Calvinisme, Hoeveker and Wormser, Amsterdam. 1898, Eng. translation, Lectures on Calvinism. Associated Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI sketched an impressive picture. His successors, lacking his characteristic genius, have drawn consequences that bring to light the futility of the attempt to combine Calvinism and modern culture even under the mask of accentuating the antithesis.

The consequences of Kuyper’s philosophical views for his theology appear both in the general view of theology, worked out in detail in the Encyclopedia, Vol. 2 Division 3 and in his treatment of particular doctrines especially Common Grace and the Covenant. Familiarity with the old Reformed Theologians is evident, and they are referred to with respect. Yet there is a tendency to reinterpret their doctrines, as in the distinction of

Archetypal and Ectypal Theology. Kuyper makes the theological distinction of God's knowledge of himself and our knowledge of God, to be a special case of a distinction as to knowledge in general. (p. 253). Clearly, general epistemology underlies the theological distinction.

The attitude toward natural theology is one matter in which Kuyper parts company with the common position of earlier Reformed as well as other theologians. He complains of what he calls "the mechanical placing side by side of natural and revealed theology" (p.258). He goes on to assert, "you place it as a second revelation mechanically alongside of the first; and lapse again into the irreligious, intellectualistic interpretation of revelation". (p. 260) The appeal made to God's final end in revelation is irrelevant to the legitimacy of the distinction between general and special revelation. The basic root of the complaint is the organic ideology.

Kuyper's discussion of the relation between natural and revealed theology exhibits some curious features. On the one hand he appears to overestimate natural theology at the expense of special revelation. In natural theology the knowledge of God is said to be imparted in the normal way; revealed theology supplies it to fallen man in an abnormal way. "At present nature stands temporarily over against grace; but in the end, in glorified nature, there will be no more question of grace." (p. 369) Kuyper appears to think of grace as only restoring us to the knowledge of God which Adam had, although he explicitly denies this (p. 370). He gives no evidence that this charge is a misunderstanding. He sets his view against that of orthodox theology. If he means the Reformed Theology of the seventeenth century he gives no proof. The Reformation is strangely charged with having neglected eschatology sorely (p. 371), but is also said to have fostered more accurate ideas (p. 372) Only the "later rationalistic supranaturalists" are explicitly mentioned as juxtaposing or coordinating nature and scripture as the principle(s) of our knowledge of God. (p. 374) Whether these alone are meant by the "later dogmatici" is not clear.

On the other hand, justice is hardly done to natural theology, when it is asserted, "At no single point of the way is there place therefore for a support derived from demonstration or reasoning." (p. 365) The criticism of earlier Reformed Theologians for making natural and revealed theology two disciplines goes along with the rejection of apologetic argument first for doctrines of natural religion and then for Christianity. The matter is prejudiced by the question "Is the natural Principium able to summon the Special Principium before its tribunal?"

(¶ 71) The question is not one of subordinating revealed to natural theology or of denying that faith in Christ is the result of the regenerating work of the

Spirit of God. It is not the latter psychological issue, but the logical question of sound systematic argument for the truth of theism in general and Christianity in particular.

Not only is natural theology removed from its position as a preamble to revealed theology, but revealed theology itself is transformed. It is claimed that “confusion has sprung from the almost exclusively soteriological interpretation of the knowledge of God”. (p. 281) The only escape from the alleged consequences is when “special revelation is no longer viewed as directed soteriologically to individual man”. (p. 282) To avoid the evident inconsistency with his emphasis on the noetic effects of sin and grace, Kuyper states, “ By this we do not deny the soteriological aim of special revelation, but merely assert that salvation of the individual soul is not its rule.” (p. 283) The conception is tied up with the fiction of a collective notion of the subject of knowledge. We read of “the general ego of believing humanity” (ibid), “the general understanding” (p. 290), “our consciousness (personal as well as general)” (p. 291), “the human consciousness as such” (ibid). In all this we have a view of theology and its history that had its focus in man, notwithstanding the emphasis on the glory of God as the final end. A special consequence is boldly drawn “God does not love individual persons but the world”. (p. 297). The relation to the inflated notion of organism is expressly stated, “there is no organism in hell but an aggregate. In the realm of glory, on the other hand, there is no aggregate but the ‘body of Christ’.” (p. 298) This minimizing of the individual gives rise to a tension in Kuyper’s thought.

Kuyper’s notion of “common grace” is integrated into his view of Ectypal theology (p. 279), and unwarrantably read into Calvin’s use of the image of the spectacles (p. 309). The claim that Ectypal theology still remains in and for the sinner thanks to common grace arises from Kuyper’s confusion of the providential preservation of fallen man with the work of common grace. It may be remarked that while Kuyper’s “common grace” presupposes total depravity, when it is unfolded as in the impressive three volume work, Gemeene Gratie, Hoeveker and Wormer, Amsterdam. 1902 - 4, the workings of depravity fade into secondary significance. This resembles Jacobi’s criticism of Kant’s thing in itself, that without it one cannot enter into the system which when developed has no place for it. In his Stone Lectures, Kuyper objects to speaking of the virtues of unbelievers as “splendid vices” (p. 74), and from “common grace” draws the inference that this confession...” places the Christian in a quite different position over against life”, while he is not unaware of “the peril of coming very near a reaction in favor of a one-sided love for these secular stories” (p. 75 f)

The organic conception likewise affects the doctrine of the covenant of

God with man, issuing in an exaggeration that can be called Hyper-Covenantism. Historic Reformed covenant Theology has been frankly oriented to the salvation of elect individuals, whether the covenant of grace has been identified with the covenant of redemption or distinguished from it as its administration in time. We have observed that Kuyper regards election as not primarily the choice of individuals to salvation, but rather of the church, and ultimately of humanity in his sense. It is not that he denies the fact of individual election, but that the individual is subordinated to the corporate body. This perspective may be seen to account for his doctrine of Presumptive Regeneration. The outlook is akin to the ritualistic doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration in minimizing the significance of the individual and has much the same consequences in practice, although Kuyper views the elect infant as regenerated before and not by baptism. Here too Kuyper's followers have drawn consequences destructive of experimental religion, which ought not to be ascribed to their master. The attempt to modify historic Calvinism by incorporating modern elements has shown itself historically to be untenable.