

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam objects and their stories

1925-1930: Philosophy of the Concept of Law: the start of a philosophical tradition



H. Dooyeweerd, *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (1935-1936),
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam University Library
Collection

Two consecutive appointments in 1926 were to have a major impact on the development of philosophy at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. On 15 October of that year, [Herman Dooyeweerd](#) accepted a professorship at the Faculty of Law, while [Dick Vollenhoven](#) did the same on 26 October at the Faculty of Arts & Philosophy. The philosophy resulting from the discourse between the two men came to be known as '[Calvinist philosophy](#)' or – after the title of Dooyeweerd's key work – *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (Philosophy of the Concept of Law). René van Woudenberg explores this philosophical reflection on science that has become embedded in VU's DNA.

By Ab Flipse

Dooyeweerd later elaborated on the ideas in this ambitious three-volume work published in 1935-36 under the title *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (1953-58). This philosophy would remain the dominant school of thought at VU Amsterdam for several decades, and was introduced to many of its students,

since most degree programmes included an introductory lecture on the subject.

We should point out that not everyone was equally enthusiastic: whereas Dooyeweerd's lectures were praised for their clarity, his publications were sometimes considered to be impenetrable due to their distinctive jargon. While kindred spirits subsequently expanded on his work, his originality was far more widely appreciated. At his farewell in 1964, G.E. Langemeijer, chairman of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences' literary department, wrote: 'Dooyeweerd is the most original philosopher the Netherlands has ever produced, and that even includes [Spinoza](#).'

In any case, the philosophy represented an original interpretation of the ideals that inspired the creation of VU and are still embedded in our DNA to this day.

The VU reflection on science in research and education

By René van Woudenberg

[Abraham Kuyper](#) believed in a positive mutual dependency between faith and science rather than a conflict between the two. This view, which was shared by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, was crucial to the founding of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The popularly held notion that faith and science are at war with one other and that science will eventually overcome all faith was foreign to them, and they even went so far as to repeatedly argue its inaccuracy.

Among other ideas, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven developed the 'theory of modal aspects'. According to this theory, reality comprises a diverse range of 'aspects', including a numerical aspect, a spatial aspect, a physical aspect, an economic aspect and a legal aspect. The various sciences each focus on one aspect of the world: algebra examines the numerical aspect, geometry the spatial aspect, economics the economic aspect and so on. The various sciences thus have a certain degree of autonomy from one other. The theory thus implies that the entirety of our reality cannot be known through any one science, sounding a clarion call for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity.

Philosophical reflections on the nature of the sciences and their interrelation, potential and limitations have always been important here at VU. This is reflected in the fact that every VU student takes a compulsory course in 'philosophical education'. In addition to the aforementioned reflections, these lectures also explore the ethical aspects of science and academic integrity. In the spirit of Dooyeweerd, this acknowledges the

difference between merely adhering to proper scientific practice and having an adequate vision on science as a whole.

VU's genuine appreciation of these more general and philosophical questions about science is also demonstrated by our successful [A Broader Mind](#) programme, in which numerous students and lecturers voluntarily collaborate on questions of science, values and what it means to live a good life.

In keeping with VU's DNA, these subjects are explored through both research and education. The [Simon Stevin Centre](#) conducts research on the history of science, changing perceptions of science and scientific method, and the social and cultural significance of science. The [Abraham Kuyper Centrum for Science and the Big Questions](#) explores the relationship between science and the Big Questions. (Does science actually erode our belief in free will, morality and religion, as sometimes is claimed?)

Ab Flipse is university historian at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; [René van Woudenberg](#) is professor of Epistemology and Metaphysics at the same university, and serves as director of the Abraham Kuyper Centre for Science and the Big Questions.

For an overview of the stories highlighted in this exhibition, see: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam objects and their stories | 140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#)