

The Philosophy of D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892 - 1978) –

With Special Reference to his Historiography of Philosophy

Prof. B.J. van der Walt

Samevatting

Die filosofie van D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892 - 1978), met spesiale aandag aan sy filosofiese historiografie

Herman Dooyeweerd (1894 - 1977) en Dirk H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892 - 1978), beide jare lank verbonde aan die Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam, Nederland, is die grondleggers in die vorige eeu van 'n Christelik-reformatoriese filosofie. Eersgenoemde geniet egter groter internasionale bekendheid. 'n Belangrike rede daarvoor is heelwaarskynlik dat Dooyeweerd se hoofwerk (De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee) van die dertigerjare reeds in die vyftigerjare van die vorige eeu (as A new critique of theoretical thought) in Engels vertaal en gepubliseer is en op dié wyse vir 'n breër leserspubliek toeganklik geword het. Behalwe dat Vollenhoven se geskryfte uit druk geraak het, is dit ook nie in die moderne lingua franca vertaal nie en was hulle ontoeganklik vir diegene wat nie Nederlands magtig was nie. Gelukkig is dié situasie nou besig om te verander.

Hierdie artikel wil 'n beskeie bydrae tot die eerherstel van hierdie belangrike Christelike denker – ook in Suid-Afrika – lewer deur die aandag op die volgende te vestig: (1) die literatuur wat veral sedert 1992 (by die herdenking van sy geboorte honderd jaar gelede) oor Vollenhoven se filosofie in die algemeen beskikbaar geword het, en (2) die beskikbare publikasies spesifiek oor sy probleem-historiese metode. (3) Dit word gevolg deur 'n kort, elementêre weergawe van sy probleem-historiese metode van wysgerige historiografie – om as apytwekker vir Suid-Afrikaanse lesers te dien om hulself verder in dié besondere metode te verdiep.

1. Introduction: Revived interest in Vollenhoven's philosophy

Both Herman Dooyeweerd (1894 - 1977) and Dirk H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892 - 1978) are regarded as the Dutch founders of a Christian Reformational Philosophy during the first half of the previous century.¹ Dooyeweerd, however, is internationally the best known of the two. An important reason may be the fact that his *opus magnum* (published in the thirties in Dutch) was translated (already in the fifties) in English as *A new critique of theoretical thought*. Vollenhoven's works went out of print, were not translated into today's *lingua franca* and thus they were not accessible to Christian philosophers who could not read the original Dutch.

Proponents of a Christian approach in philosophy should be grateful that this unfortunate situation is slowly changing since 1992 – the year of the commemoration of Vollenhoven's birth a hundred years ago. Not only are key texts of his *oeuvre* re-published, but they are also translated into English, apart from various introductions by his students (in both Dutch and English) to his philosophy.

In this article the author would like to make a modest contribution in restoring acknowledgement of Vollenhoven's contribution to the Reformational philosophy. It will, firstly, do so by providing information on existing and more recent literature on Vollenhoven's philosophy in general. Secondly, literature on his problem-historical method of philosophical historiography will be reviewed. Thirdly – as an appetiser to encourage South African scholars to get interested – it will give a brief, elementary introduction into Vollenhoven's method of studying the history of philosophy.

2. Material on Vollenhoven and his philosophy in general

Vollenhoven has been known as the historian and his brother-in-law, Dooyeweerd, as the systematic philosopher in the Reformational tradition. The greater part of Vollenhoven's time and energy has indeed been devoted to his study of the history of philosophy. Less well-known is the fact that he has also given – in his own distinctive way – attention to systematic philosophy. Bril, Hart and Klapwijk (in their dedication to the 1973 volume in honour of Vollenhoven) even stated "... the very manner of his approach to history betrays him to be a systematician at heart. For his involvement in the history of philosophy has been primarily for the

1 For details about the development of this philosophy over the past seventy years, cf. Stellingwerff, 2006.

sake of further positive elaboration of systematic insights...” Because his historiography can not be separated from his systematic philosophy and vice versa, it is appropriate for this article to first review some sources about his philosophy in general.

2.1 Bibliographies of Vollenhoven’s publications

During his long career Vollenhoven has published much. A first requirement to research his contribution has been to ascertain what he wrote, when and where it was published. Groen (1961), Bril (1973), Petersen & Derksen (1976) and Bril, Derksen & Kok (1979) did important groundwork in providing researchers with lists of Vollenhoven’s publications.

2.2 Bibliographical contributions

Kok (1992) clarified Vollenhoven’s early development and philosophical insights prior to 1926 (when he became professor of Philosophy at the Free University in Amsterdam). In the same year Stellingwerff (1992) enriched the Reformational community with a bibliography on Vollenhoven. This book enables contemporary readers to know more about the life and times of Vollenhoven and in this way also helps to understand his philosophy.

2.3 Publications in honour of Vollenhoven

At two occasions Vollenhoven was honoured with “Festschrifts”. The first (cf. Zuidema, 1951) was published at the occasion of his 25th year as professor at the Free University. The second volume (cf. Bril, Hart & Klapwijk, 1973) appeared in commemoration of his 80th birthday. Both these volumes contain valuable material for Vollenhoven-research.

2.4 Re-publications and translations of Vollenhoven’s systematic philosophy

Tol (in Tol & Bril, 1992: 13 - 214) has rendered an important service when he selected for re-publication ten key articles in which Vollenhoven explains his viewpoint on different systematic issues. In each of the ten chapters Tol starts with an own introduction, followed by the text from Vollenhoven and concludes with additional explanatory notes.

The most recent contribution is by Kok (2005) who translated Vollenhoven’s brief exposition of his systematic viewpoints in *Isagôge philosophiae* (Introduction to philosophy) of 1945 (reprinted 1967). In his

forward Tol (cf. Kok, 2005: iii-xxxii) informs the reader about key elements of Vollenhoven's systematic philosophy (ontology). While this work does not adequately represent the later development of Vollenhoven's ideas, it nevertheless touches on the central themes of his thought. Therefore: "No serious study of Vollenhoven can afford to ignore this text" (p. iii).

As stated above, Vollenhoven is especially remembered for his distinctive contribution to the study of the history of philosophy. It is therefore important to be aware of the material available for research on this particular aspect of his work as a Christian philosopher.

3. The basic sources on Vollenhoven's problem-historical method, their re-publication and application by his students

Firstly, the main original sources for the study of Vollenhoven's method will be mentioned. Secondly, information will be provided about their recent re-publication. It will, thirdly, be followed by the works of his students, either explaining or applying his method of historiography.

3.1 Vollenhoven's own explanation and application of the problem-historical method

The following four original sources are indispensable for a study of this method: (1) Vollenhoven (1956) first *applied* his method in an introductory course for students in which he gave a survey of the history of Western thought. (2) In only one article he (cf. Vollenhoven, 1961) *explained* his method. (3) A year later (cf. Vollenhoven, 1962) his *Schematische Kaarten* (schematic maps) appeared. From a bird's-eye view it provided a *survey* of the philosophical conceptions and their interrelatedness of Western philosophers from antiquity to the 20th century. (4) Finally, from 1959 to 1964 Vollenhoven became a contributor to the fifth edition of the *Oosthoek's Encyclopedie*, responsible for religion and philosophy. In this capacity he wrote articles on many of the major Western philosophers and philosophical problems. It provided the opportunity to *add more "flesh"* (detail) to his very brief discussion of different philosophers in his study guide for students (of 1956) as well as his "skeleton" survey of conceptions (of 1962).

These four publications complement each other and should be studied together to get a full picture of Vollenhoven's method. In summary it consists of two basic lines. On the one hand it gives the types of philosophy (the ontological differences and similarities); on the other hand

the successive time-currents (climates of opinion), which moulded, modified and revitalised the ontological conceptions. Also a thinker's dependency on his predecessors, the interrelation with his contemporaries and his influence on subsequent generations became visible in Vollenhoven's survey – especially in his schematic charts (1962).

3.2 New additions to and editions of the basic texts

Following his retirement (in 1963) Vollenhoven continued with so-called private lectures (*privatissima*) to interested students in which he continued to explore the history of philosophy, along the way elaborating and modifying his method. These final developments in his method was published after his death by Tol (1979) and Bril (1982).

Since 1992 the process of the republication of Vollenhoven's writings on the problem-historical method gained momentum. Bril (Tol & Bril, 1992: 303 - 346) republished two texts. This was followed by Bril & Boonstra (2000) who edited a new edition of Vollenhoven 1962 with many valuable notes to enhance its accessibility. Then Bril (2005b) followed with a republication of Vollenhoven 1956 and 1961 as well as selections from Vollenhoven 1962. The most recent is the republication in one volume (473 pages) by Bril (2005c) of all the articles on philosophers and philosophical problems which Vollenhoven contributed (during 1959 - 1964) to the *Oosthoeks Encyclopedie*.

Hopefully all this indispensable, original material for an in-depth study of Vollenhoven's method will one day be translated into English. From the next section it will, however, be evident that quite a few explanations and applications of Vollenhoven's method are available in languages other than Dutch.

3.3 Articles and books by followers of Vollenhoven, explaining and applying his method

Vollenhoven's method fascinated many Christian philosophers around the world. Because of the complexity of two thousand years of Western philosophy, his method may be difficult to follow. (For educational purposes his students have mostly tried to simplify it). At the same time this method, developed from a distinct Christian perspective, provides much deeper insight into the patterns of the Western mind than most other methods. The following are a few examples of the world-wide interest in this method.

• ***The Netherlands***. the expert on this method is undoubtedly Bril. More than anyone else he has contributed towards continued interest in and knowledge about it after Vollenhoven's death. Apart from his contributions mentioned already, Bril (1986) explained and applied the method in his own dissertation *Westerse denkstructuren* (Western patterns of thought). Recently he (cf. Bril, 2005a) again provided an easily comprehensible introduction into Vollenhoven's method. It is highly recommended for English-speaking beginners.

• In ***Canada*** the contributions of Hart (1965a, 1965b), Seerveld (1973, 1975) and Wolters (1970, 1979) should be mentioned.

• In the ***United States of America*** Runner (1958/1959), Van Dijk (1969/1970) and Kok (1998) explained and/or applied the problem-historical method.

• For ***Australia*** see Van der Laan (1967 and 1973).

• In ***South Africa*** Taljaard (1955) applied Vollenhoven's method in his dissertation on Franz Brentano. He also translated Vollenhoven's survey of the history of philosophy (1956) into Afrikaans (cf. Vollenhoven, 1982). In a book on his own systematic philosophy (cf. Taljaard, 1976) the influence of Vollenhoven's method is evident. The present writer contributed articles on the method in Van der Walt, 1969/1970, 1973, 1978 and 1986. The method is also applied by South African philosophers who have not published on the method as such. For example, Venter of the School of Philosophy at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, employs a simplified version in his courses on the history of ideas.

The preceding survey (section 2 and 3) indicates continued interest in Vollenhoven's contribution to systematic philosophy from a Reformational perspective. This giant in the Reformational tradition is not forgotten. Returning *ad fontes* (to the sources) of our tradition is never a waste of time.

Simultaneously the renewed interest in Vollenhoven's very original method of studying the history of philosophy is evident. The aim of the next section of this article is to provide – especially for South African readers – a brief, elementary introduction into this method. (Since ample attention has been given to the sources which can be consulted, no further references will be given in this section.)

The author is of the opinion that not merely philosophers should take cognisance of this method. As philosophical presuppositions determine every scientific discipline, the method (with modification) should also be used by

scholars from different other fields of study. (In Canada, for instance, C. Seerveld employed the method in his studies on the history of aesthetics, while H. van Belle used it in his to be published book on the history of psychology.)

4. A simplified introduction into Vollenhoven's method for the historiography of philosophy

The history of Western philosophy often makes one think of a dense forest with a rich variety of fauna and flora. To follow a footpath at whim or at random will not be advisable. One needs a good guide in order not to get lost hopelessly.

4.1 Introduction: Why study the history of philosophy?

Before going into a consideration of *how* one should study the history of philosophy, there is a need to answer a proceeding question: *Why* one should deal with the history of philosophy?

Many people regard history as something that is merely belonging to the past. History has been described as being what Macbeth has called life: "... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing ...". The study of history is thus seen by some as digging over the debris of the past. Why don't one rather leave the old philosophers in peace? The answer is very simple: It is because they will not leave you in peace.

4.1.1 Everybody starts from a heritage

As a tree cannot free itself of the soil in which it is growing, or as man cannot ever extricate himself from his ancestry, because he carries within himself hereditary factors which determine his being, one cannot extricate oneself from one's past history. The past is also present today. No person can start at the very beginning – that privilege belonged to Adam en Eve alone. Everyone starts with a particular background, a certain tradition, and an idiosyncratic personal history. Even somebody who rebels against his heritage still lives by it – and he needs it as a springboard to get on.

If then one cannot be freed from the history of philosophy because it will not let one go, what purpose is to be found for an involvement in it? At least two additional reasons can be mentioned.

4.1.2 One can learn from one's predecessors

In the first place every human being is confronted by the mystery of his being and of the world as a whole. He/she has to find answers to

fundamental questions, such as: Who am I? What is the sense of my existence? Who is God? What is my relationship to him? What are the yardsticks by which I live? What is good, and what is evil? How can I find true knowledge and wisdom on which I can trust and build?

These are the most profound and troubling questions humans wrestle with. But at the same time the answers to these problems determine one's whole life. The history of philosophy tells how the greatest minds in history have grappled with these fundamental issues and how they found answers to them. Their answers can not be regarded as final solutions – even though many of them thought so at the time. Their struggles, however, were not in vain. To listen to the accounts of their struggles, provides some sort of schooling in one's own quest for answers.

4.1.3 One can attain a broader perspective

In the second place one can see further and wider if one knows the history of philosophy. One then becomes like a toddler sitting on his father's shoulders. By sitting on the shoulders of the giants of the human search for wisdom, one can broaden one's own perspectives. One does not live any more merely in the present, surrounded by the fashionable philosophy of the day. One can compare and sift, and arrive at a more accurate vision. It can also help one to evade some of the pitfalls that one's predecessors have fallen into.

But is philosophy not mere speculation, theoretical reflection, abstract intellectual games? Does it really have practical relevance for daily life?

4.1.4 Philosophy has practical consequences

The division between theory and practice implied by such a question does not exist. Scientific and philosophical views can have deadly implications. Some views in, for example modern philosophy, psychology, biology and political philosophy can really kill people. If these concepts originate, on the other hand, in the light of the Word of God, they can become liberating means of promoting peace, sanity and spiritual health.

Behind the machine gun there is a pen, impelled by the revolutionary convictions of men. Philosophical views infiltrate and march throughout history. The Bible rightly maintains that man's struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual and evil powers. This spiritual battle is waged in the field of philosophy with the greatest fervour.

The conclusion is that knowledge of the history of philosophy is not only worth while, it is almost indispensable. It is essential for anyone who does not want to go through life with blinkers.

4.1.5 Value in non-Christian philosophies for Christians

An often asked next question is whether a Christian philosopher can also learn something from a secular philosopher.

The reply is that one must understand the non-Christian's way of thinking, because one's own times become permeated by unchristian ideas. If one does not do that, one would not be able to understand the spirit of one's own time. Then one would also not be able to bring a message of redemption for one's time, because one would not be able to uncover the crises.

One can learn something from all the great thinkers. Through the grace of God the lie has not fully captured the world. There are moments of truth, fragments of clarity in any philosopher's life. Augustine recommended Christians to do what the Israelites did in their exodus from Egypt: They had to take along the gold en silver (of the heathen Egyptians) to construct a temple for the Lord, but they had to leave behind the idols. One might be critical about this statement of Augustine, yet the image he uses is very useful in pointing out that without the thought of pagan and secular thinkers Christians would be poorer.

Let us return to my metaphor of the indigenous forest at the beginning. In the course of history one giant of the forest after the other has either been toppled, or cut off for the sawmill and the factory. But they are still of value. One has the task to study the various kinds of wood. Each is different. From their colour, texture and (when they are cut up) fragrance this becomes clear. In this way one also has to look at the greats in the field of the human intellect in the light of their heritage (writings) to determine of what "wood" they were carved. For this, however, one needs a good method because the history of Western philosophy is old (2 500 years) and complicated.

4.2 Requirements for a method to study the history of philosophy

A method presupposes amongst others an *aim* to (for example a survey of and insight in a specific field), careful *planning* to enable one to reach the goal, *execution* of the plan by a *person* (or apparatus controlled by a person) with due consideration of the *material* that has to be processed, and the *means* that he has at his disposal. A method (both scientific and

pre-scientific) rests on assumptions or presuppositions and it can therefore not be neutral.

This leads to at least two requirements for a method by means of which the history of philosophy should be studied:

- *It should truly be built out “in Your light”* (Psalm 36:10), which means that one cannot just use an existing (secular) method and graft onto it the Christian approach. The light of the Word has to be incorporated in it in such a way that the method should enable one to penetrate to the core of the history of philosophy.
- *It should be a truly philosophical method*, by which is meant that it has to fit the material which has to be worked with, which is the history of philosophy. A non-philosophical method may not simply be imposed on the field of study. The method has to tie in with the field of study. Seeing that the field of study of philosophy is a very wide one (the whole spectrum of reality) and not a particular facet (as is the case in the subject disciplines), the method would also have to be comprehensive.

It is important to determine now already that the problem-historical method constitutes *a* method, not necessarily the only method of philosophical historiography, by means of which only certain facets are taken from the rich field of study. The method may therefore not be accused of leaving unexplored other facets which it does not intend to cover. The name of the method clearly indicates its potential and also its limitations.

This method will now be tested by the already-stated double criterion: Is it truly developed “in His light”, and is it truly philosophical? The answer to the first of these questions will receive more attention to be able to indicate that Vollenhoven provided Christian scholars with the first integral Christian historiography of philosophy in history.

4.3 Is the method developed in the light of God’s revelation?

Vollenhoven in his method uses the Bible as a determining touchstone. How does he, by means of insights gleaned from the Bible, determine the kind of “wood” used to carve a certain philosopher? In accordance with Biblical revelation Vollenhoven distinguishes three realities in his ontology: God, his laws and the cosmos (which is subjected to God’s laws). He therefore tests each philosophy on three levels. He looks carefully at the *colour* of the philosophy, he sees the wood and smells the special *fragrance*, he planes the wood and touches its unique *texture*.

4.3.1 *The “colour” is the spirit or religious direction emanating from a particular philosophy*

Vollenhoven puts a direct question to each philosopher: “What have you done with the Word of God?” This is not a purely formal question. Vollenhoven does not merely wish to know whether a specific philosopher knew about the Scriptures, but also whether his philosophy has been given shape and content according to the Scriptures. From the history of philosophy he receives the following three answers:

- *The Greek and Roman philosophers of antiquity* (500 BC – 100 AD) answer that they did not know the Bible or the God of the Bible at all.

The Patristic and the Medieval philosophers (200 to 1400 AD) say that they could not only listen to the Word of God, because they also had to keep account of the important philosophical heritage of Antiquity. They therefore tried, in their synthetic philosophy, to serve two masters at the same time.

- *The philosophers during the period of history from the Renaissance and the Reformation* (1500 and after) do not like the spirit of compromise of the Middle Ages. This is, however, as far as they agree. Renaissance man (and all his many followers in Western history) does not like synthesis, because the Christian elements encompassed in it offends him. The Reformers (and their small number of spiritual children) want to get rid of the pagan element in synthetic philosophy in order to be able to listen to the unadulterated Word of God once more.

These three replies, which lay bare the deepest religious direction of philosophers, causes Vollenhoven to divide the history of Western philosophy into *three main eras or periods*:

- the *pre-synthetic thought* of Antiquity (Greek and Roman philosophy);
- the *synthetic thought* of the Church Fathers and the Middle Ages;
- and the *following post- or anti-synthetic thought* (Modern philosophy).

In anti-synthetic philosophy he makes a distinction between anti-synthetic left (those who broke with the Scriptures) and anti-synthetic right (those who kept in mind the Word of God).

The general accepted division of the history of philosophy into Antique, Medieval and Modern philosophy is, according to him, not very sensible. Are the Middle Ages merely a middle period, and who determines what is Modern? Vollenhoven not only substitutes this with something that makes more sense, but he also succeeds in doing this in the light of God’s Word. This is the first facet of his method which allows the light of Scripture to

plumb the depths of a philosopher's thought: he is either a *pagan* (before the coming of Christ), or he is a *half-hearted Christian*, or a (modern) *secular* philosopher who rejects Christ, or an *integral Christian* who, in his whole life – also in his philosophy – wants to follow Christ.

The fact that Vollenhoven includes God as part of his Christian ontology (God-law-cosmos) is an important step. It does not imply that God became an object of philosophical study. A Christian philosopher accepts His existence in faith.

4.3.2 *The "fragrance" of a philosophy is the particular concept of law held by each philosopher*

The Word of God clearly reveals that (1) *God* is there, that He has called (2) *creation* into being, and that He has subjected creation (including human beings) to (3) various *laws*. For (non-human) nature these laws are imperative, but for man they are indicative: they tell him what he *ought to do*. The central law applicable to man is the commandment of love (Matthew 22: 37 - 40).

Vollenhoven does not merely ask the *formal* question (viz., what a particular philosopher's attitude towards the Word had been), but he also asks questions about *content* (with reference to *what* the Bible reveals to us). It is not because Vollenhoven wishes to judge people unjustly (such as the Greeks who could not know the Bible), but because he is convinced that only the light of the Bible can supply answers to ultimate questions.

Therefore the second question that each philosopher has to answer according to this method is: Where did you seek and find direction? How did you determine what is right or wrong, true or false, ugly or beautiful?

In Greek thought already this question revealed some interesting facets. As pagans the Greeks did not know that God had given laws to direct all creatures on earth. For that reason they sought laws either inside (within the subjects or in their qualities) or outside the cosmos. Furthermore, they also did not know the central commandment of love, and therefore they overstressed the modal laws. In the third place the law was confused with the universal. (Universal-individual is one of the fundamental traits of all created things and not the same as the distinction law-subject.) (Cf. 4.3.3 below.)

Vollenhoven found three different replies to his second question: a subjectivist, an objectivist and a realist answer.

• Subjectivists

Subjectivist thinkers did not distinguish clearly enough between creatures or subjects and the laws, norms or principles which they had to obey. The basic reason for this was to be found in the fact that they did not know God as the Giver of the laws. Therefore they could not distinguish between the nature of subjects which *are* and the nature of laws which are *valid*. They thus identified the law with something of the cosmos. The result was inevitably that some part of creation now became its own law and was consequently absolutized.

Initially these subjectivized laws were still sought in something creatively outside the human being. Man, however, soon became the yardstick for all things (cf. Protagoras of Abdera). There was no other guideline from “above”.

Unnecessary to say that subjectivism (often accompanied by individualism, relativism and pragmatism) ultimately opens the door to anarchism and even nihilism. Each individual has his/her own principles and determines for him-/herself what he/she regards as true, right, good and beautiful. The direction and the certainty that one seeks so urgently, the subjectivist fails to find.

Of the three views about the law, it was subjectivism which eventually (with the Greeks already) gained the upperhand and which still – even if in different forms – dominates Western thought. Both modernism (rationalism) and contemporary post-modernism (irrationalism) are clear examples.

• Objectivists

The objectivist thinkers developed a viewpoint to include another interesting facet of creation, viz., the qualities of concrete things such as colour, sounds, sizes, etc. The qualities of things determined to a large extent what things could do or what could be done with them. Our daily actions are influenced by what we see, smell, hear and feel. An artist has to seek for the right materials with the right qualities in order to create the work of art he has visualized.

This has the unfortunate effect of seducing the objectivist to seek firm ground, basic certainties and guidelines for life in these objects. The objects have now become the laws for the subjects. An object, for example the seductive fragrance of one’s girl- friend’s perfume, may well influence one’s actions, but may never become the norm for one’s behaviour.

The objectivist too seeks for basic direction somewhere in creation, so that objectivism, looked at carefully, does not offer any advantage over subjectivism – certainty keeps eluding both.

• **Realists**

The great Greek philosopher Plato (427 – 347 BC) gave a third reply to Vollenhoven’s question about law. Because he realized that neither subjectivism nor objectivism offered sure direction, he visualised the law *outside* the cosmos. The law is according to him a *thing* (Latin *res*, from which “realism”), which exists independently outside the cosmos, and indicates to us how we should live in terms of what is true, good and beautiful. (In this way Plato became the first Greek thinker who acknowledged two separate modes of being.) According to him we can know these laws by way of our reasoning power.

The great Plato too, however, missed the point. According to the Scriptures God’s law is not a “thing”, something either above or behind creation. It is also not independent, apart from God, the Law-giver. Furthermore, it is not just an example to us, discovered by reason, which we can follow. According to the Scriptures man has to stand in the correct relationship with God in order to know his law, and then one has no option but to bow in obedience.

As mentioned above, the subjectivist concept of law (also as a result of the emergence of the *a priori* theme, which located the laws in the human mind) came out of the struggle triumphantly. This state of affairs has lasted to the present day. The point of contention which, after the Greeks, gave rise to different philosophical trends centred mainly on smaller details, while they all showed similarities in their rejection of both objectivism and realism. The struggle today, for instance, between rationalism and irrationalism (or between modernism and post-modernism) is merely a storm in the same teacup, an internal fight between factions of the subjectivist viewpoint.

With this division into a variety of trends Vollenhoven indicated how, as a result of their communal conception about norms – in spite of systematic differences – there can be a communal bond between philosophers. A trend, time-current or a philosophical school links together different philosophers into a historical unity. These consecutive trends of thought constitute an important cause for the dynamics of Western philosophical history.

A comparison of Vollenhoven’s method with a variety of other methods of historiography, like the chronological, genetic, conceptual, comparative

and psychological-nationalistic methods (cf. Van der Walt, 1973:163), clearly reveals that in this way he probes much deeper into the history of philosophy.

4.3.3 *The “texture” is the unique way in which each philosopher views reality*

The way in which each philosopher has given shape to his views about reality can be felt from his philosophy as one feels texture. Vollenhoven gained a sufficiently clear touch from the various philosophical “woods” to distinguish clearly all the different kinds.

Philosophers are questioners. They do not have the answers to the questions – as is generally assumed. One could rather say that they have questions about all the answers. There are certain basic questions (as Vollenhoven has discovered) which each philosopher asks and provides answers to.

Such questions include: Where does reality come from? What did it look like originally? Each philosopher is also absorbed by the mysterious relationship between the universal and the individual: What makes an oak an oak, a syringa a syringa and a peach a peach? Why do we call them all trees? How is that we are all people and yet each remains a unique being?

Throughout the ages human beings have also wondered about themselves. Where does he/she come from? Does he/she consist of body and soul? What is the sense of his/her existence, and what is his/her destiny? How does he/she have to live with others? How does he/she attain true knowledge?

Vollenhoven now asks – in the light of the Scriptures – what each philosopher’s answer to these basic questions had been. It is impossible to give all the answers here. Only a few of the “textures” that he discovered will be outlined.

• **The origin of reality**

As regards the question about *origin* there are those who have called on myth (the result of fantasies of faith) to explain the origin of reality. These tinkers are characterized as *mythologizing*. Others have rejected this explanation. Vollenhoven calls them *non-mythologizing*. Within this group there are also differences: the *purely cosmological* philosophers completely evade the question about origins and they philosophize only about the cosmos as it exists, while the *cosmogono-cosmological* philosophers do not disregard the question of origin.

• **Original unity or diversity**

As regards the question about *how the cosmos looked like originally*, there are mainly two points of view. The one group of philosophers maintains that it had been a unity, so that the diversity that one observes in the cosmos is purely a matter of secondary nature. The other group feels that the diversity (usually a duality, consisting of a transcendental and a non-transcendental part) existed from the beginning. They are thus confronted by the problem of where the unity of the cosmos came from. Vollenhoven calls the former group *monists* and the latter group *dualists*. The basic point of departure of these groups also determines how they will see the human being: a unity or a duality (of, for example, soul and body). And if he/she is to be seen as a duality, what then is the relationship between his/her higher and his/her lower component? A whole range of anthropological theories is offered as possible solutions.

• **Universal and individual**

To the question as to what the *relationship between the universal and the individual* is, history offers fascinating theories. Vollenhoven distinguishes between *universalism* (which regards the universal of primary importance and puts the individual in the second place), *individualism* (which does the exact opposite) and *partial universalism*, which follows a middle road. Among the partial universalists Vollenhoven distinguishes two subtypes, viz., those who hold to a *macro-microcosmos theory*, and those who accept the doctrine of *form and matter*.

Vollenhoven therefore indicates how philosophers have given incorrect answers to all three of the questions mentioned (origin, original condition and individual-universal), because they did not know the Scriptures or did not wish to acknowledge the Scriptures fully. His own view, gained in the light of the Bible, is not a choice for one of the solutions produced by history, but it brings to the fore something quite different. In this respect too it is clear that Vollenhoven does not offer a method that is Scripturally bound in name only.

4.3.4 Summary

In conclusion one could say that Vollenhoven has through his method devised the following means to determine a philosopher's stance:

• *era or period*, which is determined in the light of a philosopher's attitude to *the Word of God and the God of the Word*;

- *trend of time-current*, which is determined according to a philosopher's view of law; and
- *type*, which emerges from the philosopher's vision on the *cosmos*.

In inverted order one could say that Vollenhoven's zoom lens lifts out in succession three "levels" of a philosopher's conception. The focus first falls on the specific philosopher's *view of the cosmos (type)*. Then a deeper facet is brought to light when it is directed at the philosopher's *concept of law*, that in which he seeks his security and direction (*trend or time-current*). Because the law is an important link between the creation and the Creator, a even deeper level is reached, viz., the specific philosopher's *relationship to God and his Word (era or period)*

Vollenhoven's own systematic philosophy, with its basic distinction between God, law and cosmos, clearly influenced the way he understood the history of philosophy.

The first and major question (as to whether Vollenhoven's method was really constructed in the light of the Scriptures) can therefore be answered affirmatively. The second question set at the beginning, viz. as to whether this method does justice to the field or investigation can be dealt with briefly.

4.4 Does Vollenhoven's method do justice to the history of philosophy?

The requirement set above, was that an alien method should no be imposed on a field or investigation. Stated in positive terms there should be compatibility between the nature of the method and the prospective field of study. This is an important requirement.

4.4.1 A caricature of the method

People have accused Vollenhoven of "raping" the history of philosophy by his method. He has also been accused of being guilty of a pigeonhole-type of schematism. He would then have gone around like a Sherlock Holmes and arrest every philosopher he encountered, label him and shove him into a cell previously prepared. The mesh imprisoning the philosopher would be woven of type and trend, and the man would be guilty as charged until he had proved the opposite!

4.4.2 A reply

Such criticism could only emanate from people who had the least knowledge of what Vollenhoven was trying to do. In the first place he did not formulate

his method fully before he turned to the history of philosophy. His method grew gradually on the basis of what he discovered in the history itself. (It was only in 1948 that he formally named his method.)

In the second place Vollenhoven was always willing to adapt his method, to correct it and to make it more encompassing. These continual adaptations were often the cause of great despair among his students, but also clear proof that he did not attempt to force the history of philosophy into a steel corset. By means of his terminology he wished to distinguish small details in the patterns of thought of the various philosophers.

In the third place it is also not true that Vollenhoven tried to pigeonhole philosophers in one of only a few pigeonholes. This is rather true of many of the current textbooks of philosophical history which have no more than three or four labels at their disposal. Vollenhoven's method allows several thousand possibilities. If his method has to be called a prison-house for philosophers, then it is rather a liberal prison-house.

4.4.3 *The two sides of the method*

In philosophy one deals with the *basic problems* that each philosopher wrestles with anew, but never fully chews. One could say that the ever-recurring problems point at the *constant* element. As every other history, the *history of philosophy* is *dynamic*, ever-changing. As a result of the quest for direction (especially in terms of norms or laws), which never comes to rest, the history of philosophy remains in motion.

Vollenhoven thus wishes to do justice to the field of investigation by giving attention to both the problematic and the historical. (This explains the name of the method.) Emphasis purely on history is not sufficient. On the other hand history will disintegrate into small fragments when only the philosophical issues are lifted out.

The emphasis on the close link between these two facets of the history of philosophy ensures that the philosophical historiographer sees the problems as they originate, or as they developed in the course of history. This prevents, for example, that one should anachronistically superimpose one's own problems on a previous era and, for example, refer to Socrates as an existentialist.

Vollenhoven was not the first to develop a problem-historical approach. In his well-known *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Windelband also indicated the need for a "problemgeschichtliche" method according to which emphasis should be on the "Hauptprobleme" (main problems) and "Hauptrichtungen" (main currents or directions). Windelband, however, did not consistently stick to his problem-historical method.

Therefore Vollenhoven’s method is sometimes called the *consistent* problem-historical method. One or the other form of problem-historical approach (history of ideas) is quite popular today. Vollenhoven’s special merit, however, lies in the fact that, decades ago already, he *consistently* treated philosophical *problems* in their *historical context*.

In conclusion an affirmative reply can be given to the question as to whether Vollenhoven’s method does justice to the field of investigation. This does not mean that it should be regarded as the final and perfect method. Each method has its inherent limitations and weaknesses.

Before, in conclusion, a few arguments against and in favour of the problem-historical method are discussed, a synopsis of the method in the form of a diagram may be helpful.

4.5 A diagrammatic resume

In a simplified way the problem-historical method boils down to the following:

TRENDS (various concepts of law)

					Realism	Objectivism	Subjectivism				
							A	Mythologizing	Origin	TYPES (concepts of the cosmos)	
						B	Cosmogono – Cosmological				
			D		C		Purely Cosmological				
			E ₁				Monism	Original Condition			
		E ₃	E ₂				Dualism				
							Universalism	Universal-individual			
	G	F					Individualism				
H							Partial Individualism				
		Directed to the left									
	Directed to the right										
	Anti-synthesis		Synthesis		Pre-synthesis						

PERIODS (spirit or direction of philosophy, including or excluding God and his Word)

The letters (A to H) in the different blocks represent different philosophers:

- Philosophers A, B and C's philosophical conceptions do not only differ as regards to *trends or time-currents* which they subscribe to (subjectivism, objectivism and realism), but also as regards the *type* of philosophy that they adhere to: they hold to different viewpoints regarding the origin of reality. Their deeper relationship emerges, however, in the fact that they are all Greek philosophers from the same *period* preceding synthetic philosophy.
- Philosopher D, although from a completely different *period* (synthetic philosophy) most probably underwent influence from philosopher C – even though he was a pre-synthetic thinker – because they hold to identical *types* of philosophy. Systematically speaking they have “family” ties.
- Philosophers D and E, while they do differ as to the *type* of philosophy that they adhere to (the “texture” in the terms used earlier) are probably related in terms of *era* because they have been placed in the same *trend* (the “fragrance” of their philosophy is the same).
- Philosopher E was a dynamic thinker. He did not keep to the same point of view all his life. First he changed from a monistic (E1) to a dualistic concept (E2). Then he maintained his dualism, but a changed viewpoint on the law shifted him into a new trend (E3).
- Philosophers F and G agree strongly as to the “texture” of their philosophies, but the “colour” (religious direction) differs in both cases. F has broken with the Word of God, and G wants to use the light of God's Word in his philosophy. Although philosopher G's attitude is right, he does not yet think radically in biblical terms. Also the texture of his philosophy still has to be reformed in the light of the Scriptures.
- Philosopher H is a truly Reformational thinker. (For that reason he stands totally outside the diagram.) The colour, the fragrance and the texture of his philosophy are clearly determined by the Word of God.

4.6 Arguments against and in favour of the problem-historical method

As is the case with any method this method too has its limitations and its strong points. The objections that have already been aired in the course of the article, such as for example the objection that Vollenhoven imposes his own preconceived ideas on the material, will not be repeated.

4.6.1 Objections against

As far as possible a response will be given to the following objections – which of course does not mean that some of the objections are not valid, pointing out real weaknesses in the method.

- **The method does not represent the biographical details concerning a philosopher.** It is true that biographical information is not given in Vollenhoven's *Schematische Kaarten*, but there is nothing to prevent one from giving this elsewhere – as Vollenhoven himself has done in his survey for students and in his articles for the *Oosthoeks Encyclopedie*.
- **The method does not allow the philosopher himself to become visible** – he disappears behind his abstract philosophical conception. This method is not in the first place concerned with philosophers as people but with their patterns for thought. If a philosopher's personality were to be of special interest for a true understanding of his ideas, attention can be given to this aspect.
- **The true influence of important philosophers can not be indicated by means of this method** – the dwarf stand on the same line as the giants from the history of human thought. This is once again true if one were to identify the method with the schematic charts of Vollenhoven. Those who know more about this method, are aware that Vollenhoven's method succeeds in showing the immense influence of great philosophers through the ages. And the so-called dwarfs are not included in his charts without reason – they are included because they have also contributed in an important way to the history of Western philosophy.
- **The method is very selective.** This is true, but each method is selective. The question is whether *one* method could be found to cover and exploit the entire field.
- **The development of movements, the reasons for the changeover from one trend to another, are not given.** Vollenhoven did (in, for example, the short survey for his students) pay attention to this “struggle of the intellects”.
- **Are there not more similarities (and also more differences) between philosophers** than merely the conceptual (type) and historical (trend)? That might well be possible. These are however, the two most important ones.
- **The method is fleshless and bloodless** – it merely offers the skeleton of a philosophy. This is true, but if it were to offer more, certain strong points (such as, for example, the broad survey that it offers) will have to be sacrificed.
- **The method is difficult to comprehend.** Usually the reference in this respect is to Vollenhoven's compact style and terminology. He does not, however, introduce new terminology purely for the sake of the

terminology, but in order to be able to distinguish more clearly. Scientific accuracy prevents Vollenhoven from – as many textbooks in the history of philosophy – using vague terms, such as “the Greek vision of the world”, “the Medieval ground motif”, “modern Anthropology” or “the concept of Aristotle”. (Aristotle did not have one concept only but a long and complex philosophical development – which can only be described by means of accurate terminology.) Each method has its own terminology. Scientific “jargon” is the “shorthand” by which scientists communicate.

• **The method is time-consuming and therefore not very useful.** This is true. Vollenhoven worked with it and on it his entire academic career. One does not gain anything which is worthwhile, especially in the field of philosophy, in one day. Digging – in history too – demands sweat and devotion. Most people, however, do not have to know the *whole* of history *in detail* or to write books about it. The method remains useful in the analysis of only one thinker or one trend.

4.6.2 Arguments in favour of the method

The following points highlight the value of this method:

- It is the **only truly Reformational, biblically-founded method** of philosophical historiography so far.
- It was also pointed out already that this method – as far as can be judged – **does not wilfully force the history of philosophy into a pre-conceived, restrictive scheme.**
- It offers a **useful overview** of the whole of Western philosophy.
- Apart from the **unity** of the history of philosophy it also allows one to see the **great diversity**. (Not only the “wood”, but every individual “tree” receives the right amount of attention.)
- At the same time it offers insight into the **pattern** (colour, fragrance and texture) of each philosopher’s thoughts.
- It has **an eye for the development of specific thinkers** and disposes of the apparatus to be able to describe the development. That for which in the past Vollenhoven was ridiculed, viz., that in various thinkers he often indicated a course of development and thus change of concept, would seem today to have been one of his great strengths.
- It is possible, by means of this method, to **indicate clearly the differences and relations between various philosophers.**
- At the same time the method lends itself to **indicate where and how philosophers have influenced each other.**

- The method has not been developed only recently. It has been tried out by Vollenhoven's students and **has already yielded some surprising results.**

- The possibility of the **application of the method in other fields** than the purely philosophically is not excluded. Theology (especially the history of dogma) is an obvious example, but philosophical presuppositions influence every field of study.

A important factor which in the past rendered this method unpopular, among especially young students of philosophy, is perhaps to be found in the fact that it was presented in a pedagogically unsound manner. Therefore it is of the greatest importance that his method should be offered in a simple and comprehensible manner. This article has been a modest effort in this direction.

5. Conclusion

The perceptive eye, sensitive nose and appreciative hand of the expert can help one to discern the great variety of “woods” from the history of philosophy. Each has its own colour, fragrance, and texture. Some are rough-grained, some are fine-grained. Some are dry while others have their own oil. In some one can discern the rings of growth very clearly, in others not.

Vollenhoven was such an expert, who could see from precisely what kind of “wood” a philosopher have been carved. His method brings us to the core of many “trees” in the history of philosophy. He left us a precious heritage which can be used fruitfully and should be explored more fully in future.

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