

**The three-legged stool of experience and theoretical  
thought:**

**The transcendent (religious) basis and  
transcendental (universal) framework for any field  
of study – with special reference to the social  
sciences.**

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## **1. Preface**

There is a legacy of great Christian thinkers over the centuries. The specific tradition within which I stand is that of John Calvin, who with Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli led the movement in the Sixteenth Century for the reformation of the church based on the rediscovery of the integrity of the biblical message of the good news of Christ's sheer gift of grace in his death on our behalf as the sole basis on which we can be made right with God. Calvin's distinctive contribution was the affirmation of the lordship of Christ is over the whole of life, an insight taken up in the Nineteenth Century by the great Dutch Calvinist thinker, Abraham Kuyper and stated as the principle of 'sphere sovereignty' – that all areas of life are distinctively under Christ's rule. This insight was developed systematically as what is called 'Reformational Philosophy' in the Twentieth Century by the two Christian philosophers, Dirk Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd, both professors at the Free University of Amsterdam which Kuyper founded.

Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd taken together also provide a systematic account of what I call the transcendental location of human life and experience, such as identified, for example, by the greatest modern Western philosopher, Immanuel Kant – even if the answers that that philosopher provides to account of human experience are not entirely satisfactory because he seek to develop his philosophy not in the light of an integrated Christian worldview (certainly not on with a Trinitarian basis), but on the basis of a dualism between nature as the object of rational investigation on the one hand, and the free exercise of human subjectivity on the other. Nevertheless, Kant identifies for us the necessary elements of human experience, even if, he does not have the basis to account for those elements in a systematically satisfactorily way.

Here the key link provided by Abraham Kuyper and the thinker most directly influenced by him in America, Cornelius Van Til. Central to the thought of both is the inner Triune covenant as the basis for the creation, redemption and transformation of the world. It is this insight which lies behind and made possible Kuyper's enunciation of 'Sphere Sovereignty' ('Souvereiniteit in eigen kring) – the Lordship of Christ over every area of life. The Son is a full and equal participant with the Father and the Spirit in the covenant of creation and has authority as Lord of all, so that his act of redemption on behalf of all humanity has cosmic significance.

## **2. The transcendent (religious) basis**

The key Trinitarian insight is that only the inner-Triune relations, not anything external to God, bind the Persons. Accordingly, from a Trinitarian perspective, God is not subject to the order of the world, although he reveals himself to us sovereignly and definitively in the language of the created order. At the same time, the notion of a discontinuity between the sovereignty of God and the order of the world is also rejected: the order of the world is determined sovereignly by the Persons acting together, not by the abstract fiat of an essentially unitary deity. The constitution of the world is not arbitrary or ad hoc; it is consistent with the covenant settled eternally

between the three Persons. The love between the three Persons of the Trinity and their joint love for the world is revealed as the basis for one's belief in the original goodness of the world, and holds out to us the hope of redemption.

The doctrine of the Trinity sets out for us why God is, as John Calvin puts it, both '*legibus solutus*' and equally '*non exlex*'. God is '*legibus solutus*' because laws result from the mutual compact of the three Persons acting out of freedom and love, not out of submission to any external or impersonal law or principle. God is '*non exlex*', since the mutual love of the Father, Son and Spirit gives the universe both stability and settled character.

So, we are not to see the Persons in isolation from one another but 'perichoretically'. This means that each Person 'makes space' for each of the other two Person in the three great acts of God: creation, redemption and transformation (with the Father leading in creation, the Son leading in redemption and the Holy Spirit leading in transformation). The self-giving love of the three Persons provides a grounding, shape and purpose for as Christians and the basis on which our Christian faith can be worked out in every area of life.

1. The Father is known as the Origin of all things in and through the Son and through the agency and execution of the Holy Spirit. All persons and things have their distinctive individuality through the calling of the Father, and are named by the Father. This is made known to us in and through the Son and is effected by the Holy Spirit.
2. The Son in his unbroken relationship with the Father and the Spirit assures us of his continuing transcendence. The many different aspects of the world are bound together harmoniously in the relationships made possible in and through him. As the Son is the One in whom all things hold together, so this allows us to comprehend the diversity of all things without reducing them to one another. He is the focus of all things, and yet he frees all things fully to fulfil the calling they have from the Father, as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. He has become a fully human individual; and through the anointing of the Spirit and declaration of the Father is 'the Christ' ('the Messiah' – the anointed one).
3. The Spirit is sent by the Father and witnessing to the Son – indeed, bearing the latter's identity as the 'Spirit of Christ'. The Holy Spirit makes all things possible according to the will of the Father, as they are transformed according to the eschatological measure of the risen Son. This is true not just for each element considered separately, but also for the elements seen in combination. In all these dynamic interactions, dependence does not constitute a deficit but enables each of their distinctive work.

The three Persons of the Trinity are bound solely by their mutual relationships, not by universals, the laws of creation, or anything outside their mutual love and commitment to one another. God as Trinity has in God's own constitution the ultimate principles of unity and diversity.

Each human being stands before God as a unique creature, and as such, is responsible to God for his or her actions and indeed for the basic underlying orientation which gives rise to those actions. The original relationship of human beings with God, other

human beings and their environment has become distorted through sin and rebellion. Humanity is in a state of disobedience, and creation as a whole has been distorted as a consequence. However, in the midst of the all-pervasiveness of sin and its consequences in the rest of creation, each individual human being still has the responsibility to turn to God in total dependence and covenantal obedience.

A perichoretic Trinitarian view sees the three Persons acting jointly and in mutual dependence at every juncture in the great narrative of the creation, redemption and final transformation of the world. While it is necessary to distinguish the role of each of the Persons, it is crucial not to see any of the great acts of creation, redemption and the transformation of humanity and the cosmos as pertaining solely or even primarily to any one of the Persons. While the Father has an initiating and commanding role in the act of creation, one needs to see at the same time that the Son an ordering and revealing role and the Spirit an effecting and transformative role in that action. Similarly, the act of redemption is carried out through the will of the Father, by the Spirit and in and through the Son (in whom all things hold together). Redemption is motivated by the love of the Father for the world and humanity, through the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son as he was empowered in each of these through the Spirit. The transformation of the world is effected by the Spirit under the rule and anticipated return of the ascended Christ, in the authority and to the glory of the Father. Thus a Trinitarian grounding for a Christian philosophy will need to take account alike of the common work and yet distinctive roles of all the three Persons in the creation, redemption and transformation of humanity and the cosmos.

The transformational covenant concerns both personal sanctification and the transformation of the world in anticipation of the eschaton.

In palingenesis, God's saving purposes are revealed at the centre of human experience, for each individual. Palingenesis, implies, if not a sudden conversion experience, at least the unfolding of the effects of the Spirit's work in the life of the person concerned and the transformation of his or her character. The Holy Spirit transforms the hearts of redeemed humanity it to the pattern of the Son, as they are directed to the Father in inner rebirth. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the dynamic of prayer that the battle needs to be waged against the spirit of apostasy in human culture. This needs to be worked through in every area of life by building up a community which gives this corporate expression.

There are two 'main springs' (as Herman Dooyeweerd calls them) that operate in human hearts, which orientate the whole person religiously. The first is the dynamic of the Holy Spirit re-directing creation, through Christ, to the Father as true Origin. The second is the spirit of apostasy in the human heart from the true God. The apostate main spring cannot itself provide anything new but only distort creational reality according to the 'law of sin': the religious misdirection of the human heart towards a pretended origin rather than the true Origin. This involves the idolising absolutisation of an aspect, or combinations of aspects, of the created order. Since the whole of created reality is refracted through the human heart, the fall of humanity thus involves the diremption of the cosmos as a whole.

There is thus a need for the transformation of human consciousness within the temporal process of human experience, as a concentration point which unifies the diversity of

that experience. Because it is only in Christ that the true connection with the Origin is possible, it is only through self-reflection on one's part with Christ that one can discern the true and irreducible diversity of the created order. This diversity of meaning relates to the central unity of divine law revealed by Christ: to love God and one's neighbour. This is not an escape from temporality, but a call to bring about a 'concrete community of love' through right relationships with one's neighbour. So for the human being to be considered in religious terms, he or she cannot be removed from their context, because that would make the community necessary for the human being to be considered in those religious terms, impossible. But not only is temporality necessary for the community which makes religion possible, it is also necessary for human beings themselves to be considered as whole persons.

This vision of God's creative, redemptive and transforming action in the world provides the basis for the way we should understand the world and our life and work in it. Religion in this regard is that which shapes and governs our worldview

#### **4. *The transcendental framework***

The transcendent vision (that is, the vision given us on the basis of biblical revelation) gives rise to three presuppositions which are necessary for any Christian philosophy, or indeed, Ideas (capital 'I') or presuppositions upon which any philosophy is grounded.

A Christian philosophy needs to take into account our experience of the world. There are three transcendentals (the necessary conditions for any possible experience). These are purely regulative of experience and theoretical thought, i.e. they limit our conceptual claims in an anti-reductive way. For any experience to be possible there needs to be certain basic conditions, namely:

- a. That there are persons/things/social entities (individuals or individualities).
- b. That these are related according to certain universal ways of relating.
- c. That both a. and b. are subject to a series of changes and development.

Systematic attempts have been made to deny the basic necessity of one or other of these conditions – but only at the cost of serious distortions of life and thought. Individuality has been relativised by monists, from the Bhagavad-Gita (Fifth to Second Century B. C.), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). The 'externality' of relations has been systematically denied by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716). The actuality of time has been questioned by the Eleatic philosophers including Parmenides (c. 510- c. 450 B.C.), and, in modern times, by J.M.E. McTaggart. However, whatever their philosophical views, none of these thinkers, or any other human being, could systematically deny individuality, relationality or time in everyday life without extreme pathological consequences; and my argument is also that the neglect or denial of any of the transcendentals results in systematic problems in theoretical analysis.

If any one of these conditions is not met, we cannot speak of created existence or experience – it is impossible to conceive of created existence or experience without all these conditions being met together. A fruitful correlation can be made with the 'analogies of experience' in Kant's *Transcendental Analytic*. Slightly changing Kant's

order, these are: the principle of succession in time, the principle of co-existence at any one moment in time, and the principle of permanence or continuity through time.

These are the ‘transcendentals’ – a ‘transcendental’ is a condition which pertains to all creatures always and everywhere without which any possible experience is inconceivable. Each transcendental provides a distinctive point of entry to the way one experiences and knows the world

Individuality, relationality and time are transcendentally distinct (i.e. each is a necessary, distinct, interdependent yet mutually irreducible condition for created existence and any possible experience). The transcendentals mark out three different elements of experience: individuals, relations and events. Overall, in one’s experience is of individuals in relation over time, and in reflecting upon that experience, one needs to appreciate the independent distinctiveness of each transcendental and the need to give each transcendental its appropriate weight and systematic analysis’

The transcendentals are illuminated by totality-Ideas or presuppositions providing a (non-reductive) view of the whole as follows:

**a. Individuality – illuminated by the totality-Idea of Origin**

First there is a transcendent ground upon which all things depend. This is true even when it is held that there is an infinite regress, or, as Christians affirm, there is a definitive Origin upon from which the whole of creation derives its being.

The first totality-Idea involves the intuitive grasp of individual wholes as they are seen as directly dependent upon the Origin (taking together the full sweep of all their modally-specific functions into a whole). It is the ‘idea of the whole of a thing ...’ i.e., the encounter of an individual, not the conceptual description of that individual.

For Christians, it is the Father who is the Origin of creation, redemption and transformation through his decree. As all things are ordained by the Father, and are redeemed through his love for the world in general and for humanity in particular, so all as his creatures are called to render him his praise.

In the work of the Father, we have the Origin which constitutes the individuality of each person or thing through his decree. As all things are ordained by the Father, and are redeemed through his love for the world in general and for humanity in particular, so all as his creatures are called to render him praise

**b. Relationality – illuminated by the totality-Idea of Coherence**

Second, there is a basic order of the world in the way that the many different kinds of relation harmonise with one another. No one kind of relation can provide the basis for its own harmony with all the other kinds of relation.

The second totality-Idea involves the grasp of the irreducible but harmonious diversity of the different kinds of relation holding together.

More specifically, from a Christian perspective, this transcendent Coherence is provided by the eternal Son of the Father, through whom all things come into being and in whom they hold together. As John Donne (‘Good Friday – Riding Westward’) puts it:

... those hands which span the poles and tune all spheres at once, ...

If any attempt is made at all to understand the world (and that includes us) there is a need to account, at least implicitly, for how it is that all things hold together in an ordered and harmonious way. Without the presupposition of such a basic coherence, experience and reflection lapse into chaotic irrationalism.

### **c. Time – illuminated by the totality-Idea of Providence**

Third, there is time, the unfolding succession of events, none of which is entirely determined by any previous event. The passing of time (i.e. diachronicity) needs accordingly to be given weight as a transcendental (i.e. as a necessary condition for experience) in its own right, alongside individuality and relationality in considering experience and human reflection upon that experience.

The third totality-Idea involves the grasp of events as wholes in the light of an overarching unfolding of events, which cannot itself be reduced to any succession of events or process.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit there is a basis for holding that there is a transcendent Providence: that the present states-of-affairs and one's reflection on what is past can be engaged with truly and with genuine hope, even if only provisionally. Through the Spirit new possibilities are opened up, not in a random way (although it may seem so at the time), but in a way that creates new possibilities for the future. In the narrative of the unfolding of the Triune work in the world, there is true eventfulness: the same states-of-affairs are not simply repeated age after age, but there is genuine movement forward.

In concrete situations we see the leading role of the Holy Spirit, but this role is orientated to the transcendence of the Father and is directed towards the greater realisation of the Kingdom of the Son. The Holy Spirit also gives us a longing for that which is to come: the 'greater weight of glory' – that makes everything we do in the light of the Kingdom, indeed everything which happens, worthwhile, no matter how tragic or seemingly futile, since it is proleptic of that reality which is to come.

Thus the Idea of a transcendent Providence, seen in the light of the work of the Holy Spirit, provides us with a link to the third transcendental, that of time and helps one to see time as genuine eventfulness and no mere extrapolation from one moment to another within a universe conceived as a timeless block. This involves the diverse ways in which states-of-affairs (i.e. combinations of individuals in connection with one another) lead to one another, or, to put it another way, the different ways in which states-of-affairs are linked together successively. The Idea of a transcendent Providence provides the grounding for the notion of time as a transcendental, which in turn regulates both the one's grasp of naïve experience of and also makes possible theoretical reflection upon its many aspects.

The Idea of a transcendent Providence, provided by being open to the work of the Holy Spirit, regulates one's grasp of events by preventing one's judgement of those events being reduced to any one modality. It also prevents the reduction of time either to relationality (the actuality of specific events cannot fully be captured by the description of all the relations involved) or individuality (events cannot be seen purely within the



world-lens of any individual – there is an actuality of events which happens among all the individuals which is not merely the sum total of the experience of all the individuals concerned). The Idea of Providence holds open the possibility of genuine eventfulness, and so provides the grounding for time as a distinct transcendental. More specifically, the purposiveness of events is the work of the Holy Spirit, from the event of creation through the work of the regeneration of human hearts, to the transformation of the universe.

#### **d. The perichoresis of the transcendentals and Ideas**

The different transcendentals (individuality, relationality and time) need to be looked at in combination rather than separately. That each of the transcendentals is relatively independent from the other two means that each can be seen as the Archimedean point for the other two transcendentals. We should also not conceive of these three points as standing between the created order and God. Rather they come into being as a result of the engagement with the world by God as Trinity.

Individuality, relationality and time are each an axis for one's experience of the world and one's reflection upon it. Individuality needs to be held together with relationality and time. Individuals are individuals in that they exist in diversity of different relationships and also over time and yet individuality is distinct from relation and time. Relationality needs to be held together with individuality and time in that it is individual who are which have relationships, and time involves time in relationships. Time, then, needs to be held together with individuality and relationality. It is individuals who or which come into existence and relationships which do the same, and for time to have any meaning, it needs to be seen in terms of both and yet distinct from both.

Individuality as an independent element allows for the appreciation of the diversity of relations. It is only possible to seek coherence in all things if one can find a point from which all things can be contemplated, or at least to find a point in which all things have a common source of authority. How is coherence of all things related to that source of authority, and how can they be considered truly in the light of the beginning and the end? Individuality, rightly conceived, provides such a point, but not abstracted from the temporal order but located integrally within it.

Similarly, it is only from the robust standpoint of true individuality that purposive transformation can be contemplated. An appreciation of continuing individuality allows for the possibility of real purposive transformation - since without the possibility of the diachronic persistence of the individual, purposive transformation itself is not possible since everything become one continuous, undifferentiated flow. If everything is in flux, then true purposive transformation is not possible. Heraclitus' dictum that one cannot step into the same river twice has some force in that the river is subject to change, but it is necessary to be able to step into the same river twice if the perduring individuality of the river is to be recognized.

Relationships need to be recognized, valued and nurtured but not cling onto and no relation should finally be isolated from the individuals whom or which it connects. Faithfulness involves the proper giving of value and weight to our relationships, but with the recognition that their outcome and final goal is not in our own hands but in the

hands of the Holy Spirit who works out all things for the greater good.

Origin, Coherence and Providence, as the three Ideas can thus illuminate the intuition which makes possible both theoretical thought as well as everyday engagement with the world. Each of the Ideas thus regulates a transcendently distinct ‘totality’: the ‘totality’ of individuals seen in the light of the Idea of the Origin, the ‘totality’ of relations (the ontic systasis) seen in the light of the Idea of Coherence and the ‘totality’ of events seen in the light of the Idea of Providence.

## **5. *The modalities and theoretical reflection***

Theoretical reflection constitutes a second sort of differentiation, as the different sorts of things, relations and events are distinguished from one another, and rigorous analysis made of the specific norms and laws by which those persons or things, relations or events are governed, and how the relevant generalisations, functional characterisations and causalities can be defined and specified. As one seeks to reflect on and rigorously analyse the different functions pertaining to individuals (persons or thing), the different kind of relations that there are and the different ways there are in which time passes and things happen.

In naïve experience there is no explicit reflection with respect to the diversity of functions which structure the individuals concerned, or the distinct kinds of relations which connect them, or the different aspects of time there are that. By contrast, in theoretical reflection, individuality functions, kinds of relations and aspects of time are all identified in terms of the different modalities.

Conceptual knowledge arises from the distinguishing or ‘refraction’ of the modalities, made possible and complemented by intuitive knowledge, which are regulated by the transcendentals of individuality, relationality and time. This is necessary for both ‘pre-scientific’ or naïve (i.e., modally undifferentiated) experience, as well as for ‘scientific’ or ‘theoretical’ (i.e., modally differentiated) reflection.

In the case of ‘pre-scientific’ or ‘naïve’ experience, this intuition makes possible the grasp of whole individuals, the ‘ontic systasis’ of the different kinds of relations and the entirety of events. In the case of ‘scientific’ or ‘theoretical’ reflection, this intuition of the transcendentals makes possible the three lenses through which the modalities are refracted to yield the modally-differentiated individuality functions, the kinds of relations (or ‘relation frames’ – to use the term of the Dooyeweerdian philosopher, M.D. Stafleu), and time aspects.

Seeing the transcendentals as distinct in this way thus makes it possible to make systematic sense of the lists of modalities provided by both philosophers as they are seen as respectively as refractions of individuality (the modalities as individuality-functions), relationality (the modalities as irreducible kinds of relation or relation-frames), and of time (the modalities as kinds of time, or time aspects).

Careful reflection uncovers incommensurability in certain respects. For example, the discrimination of a person’s moral goodness is not rightly contradicted or confirmed by the claim that they have dark hair or are poor. The understanding of economic marginal utility is not rightly contradicted or confirmed by the understanding of what it means to

be a faithful husband. The judgement that it will rain tomorrow is not rightly contradicted or confirmed by the judgement that I deserve a pay rise for all the hard work I have done.

And yet, while there is an intuition that there is incommensurability in all these cases, there is also a countervailing intuition that those disparate aspects cohere. Intuition is a conspectus of the whole gamut of our experience and the grasp of that experience by all the various human faculties. It involves the process of consciously examining and integrating that experience in the light of all-encompassing vision of reality. Intuition (the ‘seeing’ of the way in which the modalities are interrelated) needs to be seen as an actual epistemic act. The exercise of intuition (which can only take place as an actual act, not in abstraction) brings about a turn from the naïve to the theoretical attitude. Intuition thus gives rise to the possibility of the theoretical thought.

Naïve experience and theoretical reflection alike are thus made possible by the intuitions grounded in the Ideas of Origin, Coherence and Providence, exercised implicitly. Intuition, then, has a perichoretic role moving between them all weaving a schema in the light of the transcendent presupposita of Origin, Coherence and Purposiveness. Bringing these together, we can see the Origin as that sought for in the quest in Western philosophy from the Greeks on for the originating Other; we can see a transcendent Coherence as the true and only non-reductive basis in the quest for a structured order of all relations; and finally a transcendent Providence as the answer to the quest for a purposive process, which cannot simply be extrapolated from the way things are

By a process of ‘transcendental-empirical’ sketching, each of these transcendentals can be portrayed as refracted according to the fifteen modalities, i.e. the irreducible ways of knowing and being (identified by Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, respectively with one small change in their final ordering, see diagram below). The modalities (from ‘higher’ to ‘lower’) are schematically as follows:

pistical (faith)

ethical

juridical/legal

economic

social

symbolic/lingual

aesthetic (NB, I position this here rather than between the economic and juridical)

historical/cultural-formative

logical/analytical

psychic/sensory

biotic

physical  
kinetic  
spatial  
numerical/quantitative

Further, each modality has a characteristic nucleus of meaning which makes it irreducible to other modalities: the laws of number and space and their distinctive subject matter are mutually irreducible. Those of a kinetic kind are distinct from the numerical and spatial, and their 'meaning kernels' are quantity, space, movement and so forth. So the key factors subsumed under a modal law can be rigorously isolated. The pre-logical modalities do not require the intervention of human subjectivity and are subject to laws. The logical modality is also law governed but anticipates the formation of norms, which takes place from the cultural-formative modality on.

Each modality refers to every other modality 'analogously'. This is the specifically Reformational sense of 'analogy', namely the way in which a concept specific to one modality refers to ('has an analogy with') a concept specific to another modality. Analogies indicate the coherence of that modality with all the other modalities (this is the 'sphere universality' of each modality). Analogies can be either 'antecipations' (referring 'forward' to), or 'retrocipations' (referring 'back' to) the other modalities. For example, a number series (in the numerical modality) antecipates points on a line (in the spatial modality) while the points on the line retrocipate the numerical series. In a similar way, the spatial antecipates the kinetic, the kinetic the physical (energetic), the physical the biotic, the biotic the psychic (sensory), the psychic the analytical, and so on until the pistic (the modality of faith or certitude).

Every kind of concept abstracted from the expressions of the different kinds of relation needs to be enunciated with an awareness not only of the specific 'logic' appropriate to the modality in question, but also with a sense of the analogies (antecipations and retrocipations) which that concept has with the other modalities. For example, the concept of 'development' retrocipates the biotic concept of growth, and antecipates the social concept of complexity. Because it involves the tracing of analogies across the modalities, theoretical thought cannot find its foundation within any one modality alone and so the exponents of any 'special science' (i.e., any modally-specific discipline) must recognise that it cannot provide the sole basis for itself and need to recognise its dependence on all the other modalities as the one which is the primary focus for that 'special science'.

The transcendentals and modalities together express the harmoniously irreducible diversity of God's 'law-word' and the plural facticity (both ontic and noetic) of the created order. Each of the transcendentals in turn can be refracted into the different modalities. Individuals/ities, relations and time are refracted into individuality functions, relation frames and time aspects.

#### **a. Individuals and individuality-functions**

Naïvely, individuals are intuited as undifferentiated wholes. The intuition of an individual as an undifferentiated whole is a naive idea, that is it is the integral transmodal grasp of a thing or a person. They are naive in this sense is not of a lower

status than scientific. It is a powerful and valid prescientific awareness that things exist (transmodally) in a total way prior to modal analysis. In naïve experience, individuals are known as ‘plastic’ wholes. A normally functioning human being knows the world not as a disordered mass, but as discrete and concrete entities

Theoretically, individuals are intuited as having a diversity of functions. The intuition of this reality of diversity of functions in philosophical practice also becomes a theoretical idea: a complex of functions each differentiated from one another by having a different modal focus (although each function points to all the other functions analogically). Theoretical ideas draw together the conceptual diversity of the many functions of an individual or individuality. They traverse a diversity of modalities and so are trans-conceptual. The theoretical idea of an individual is what as Dooyeweerd calls an ‘individuality-structure’ (and which Vollenhoven describes in terms of the ‘thus-so’ connection), that is, but the ordering of the functions of the individual (especially the ‘founding’ and ‘leading’ function of that individual – the former the ‘earliest’ or ‘lowest’ modality germane to the functioning of that individual, and the latter the ‘last’ or ‘highest’ modality in that respect). For example, the theoretical idea of a plant will take into account how that plant is guided by the biotic function, or what it means to be subject to the laws governing biology.

There are different ways for individuals to function ('subject' refers to the active pole of specific relation; 'object' refers to the passive pole of a specific relation):

**Individuality Functions (listed below from ‘higher’ to ‘lower’ as ‘subject/object’)**

<b>pistical (faith):</b>	believer/belief
<b>ethical:</b>	ethical agent/good deed
<b>juridical/legal:</b>	legal subject/legal object
<b>economic:</b>	trader/commodity
<b>social:</b>	social actor/custom
<b>symbolic/lingual:</b>	communicator/symbol, language
<b>aesthetic:</b>	admirer/aesthetic object
<b>cultural-formative:</b>	shaper/utensil, know-how
<b>logical/analytical:</b>	analyser/proposition
<b>psychic/sensory:</b>	sensor/sensation
<b>biotic:</b>	organism/cell
<b>physical:</b>	particle/energy-packet
<b>kinetic:</b>	body in motion/trajectory
<b>spatial:</b>	extended figure/point
<b>numerical/quantitative:</b>	cardinal numeral

For the purpose of analysis, the individual being analysed is isolated from his, her or its context and seen in terms of the laws and norms that govern that individual, that is, in terms of its individuality-structure. However, this individuality-structure should not be confused with the individual itself, or even the naïve idea of the individual, and needs to be seen as generalised approximations to one’s understanding of the individual at a given time, not as a full account of that individual as concrete fact, which can only be built up indirectly by looking at the account of that specific individual in the

complexity of all their relationships over time. In this sense, theoretical reflection on individuals needs to be done in the light of the limiting-idea of individuality – that while individuals can be described in terms of either naïve or theoretical ideas, this can only be an approximation and needs continually to be revised in the light of the encounter with the concrete (and not fully conceptualisable) individual over time.

Whether individuals are seen then as the whole entities encountered in naïve experience or as the ordered structures discerned in theoretical reflection, individuals as such are finally unknowable. Individuality as a transcendental is a limiting idea: while we can have a naïve or theoretical idea of an individual, we need to be aware always that such an idea is provisional and incomplete.

## **b. Relations and relation-frames**

Individuals are not to be seen in isolation. They are necessarily connected with other individuals through a network of relations. Relationality is the second transcendental or necessary condition of any possible experience, to which I now turn. Relations are universal realities connecting individuals. They are known integrally by the faculty of understanding in naïve experience and the naïve process of concept forming, and, rigorously analysed in terms of one or more of the modalities, in theoretical reflection.

The naïve grasp of relations does not distinguish the different kinds of relation, but rather takes them tacitly within the context with which they are situated without differentiating the different kinds of relation or focuses on them directly. The naïve understanding of relations, or what Dooyeweerd calls the process of 'naïve concept forming', does not, as we have seen, address relations directly, but attends to them in the context of the individuals and events which they connect. Naïvely we truly experience the reality of relations. One does not have to wonder if a ball one throws up in the air will (under normal circumstances) fall down again. This can be seen as we now look at the theoretical understanding of relations.

Theoretically, the different kinds of relation are distinguished in a modally explicit and ordered way. Different kinds of relations are seen as part of an overall harmony by tracing analogies (antecipations and retrocipations). The modalities are marked out by the basic, mutually irreducible kinds of relation. There are quantitative relations (or more or less), spatial relations (near or far), relations of movement (faster or slower) etc. Because the modalities mark out the different basic kinds of relation, the reverse procedure is also possible. By working out the different kinds of relation that there are, it is possible to identify what the modalities are.

In theoretical terms, to take the example cited above, it is possible heuristically to isolate the kinetic and physical considerations involved and express this in general (that is individually non-specific) formula, e.g. the formula for gravity. A ball thrown up in the air, or indeed any other ball (or indeed any other object) similar in relevant respects, will fall to earth again; and the theoretical formula adduced on that basis will be 'blind' to the distinctive individuality of both thrower and ball. What we call 'gravity' is, as far as we know, a universal relation correlative to the modal laws appropriate to it. More generally, the different sorts of relation can be expressed in terms of the different modalities, ranging from numerical relations (that is relations as they are subject to numerical laws) to relations of faith (that is relations as they are subject to creedal norms). The character of the different sorts of relations so identified (considerations of

whether one sort of relation is reducible to another, whether one sort of relation needs to be taken into account before the tracing of another can be considered etc.) provides the empirical basis for modal analysis. The understanding of the different kinds of relation needs to be seen as incomplete and fallible, and in need of being complemented by the consideration of all the other kinds of relation that there are. Real relations thus opened up the theoretical reflection upon the diversity of the different real relations that there are (which is why Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven call it the ‘modal’ dimension or determination). However, we can only grasp them, or approximate our thoughts to them in general and not genuinely universal terms, since our minds are finite in their reach and any claim we make about relations (either naïvely or theoretically) is provisional and fallible. Nevertheless, this does not mean we cannot know relations truly (just as, with individuals, the transcendental limitation of our knowledge of individuals does not mean that we cannot know them truly). However, in both respects, our knowledge, while indeed true, is also provisional.

The theoretical attitude means relations involve identifying the different sorts of relations that there are by identifying which are incommensurable with one another and by that token irreducible in kind to one another. The many different kinds of relation can be seen as follows:

#### **Relation Frames (from ‘higher ’to ‘lower’)**

<b>pistical (faith):</b>	trust
<b>ethical:</b>	benevolence, troth
<b>juridical/legal:</b>	fairness, retribution
<b>economic:</b>	optimal exchange, stewardship, thrift
<b>social:</b>	courtesy, social intercourse
<b>symbolic/lingual:</b>	meaning, significance
<b>aesthetic:</b>	harmony
<b>cultural-formative:</b>	formative control
<b>logical /analytical:</b>	identity, non-contradiction
<b>psychic/sensory:</b>	feeling, sensitivity
<b>biotic:</b>	cellular composition
<b>physical:</b>	dynamic system
<b>kinetic:</b>	approaching or receding, speed
<b>spatial:</b>	contiguity, comparisons of size or shape
<b>numerical/quantitative:</b>	more or less than, equal to etc.

Our knowledge of relationality is limited and regulated by a sense of an overarching Coherence, the second of the Ideas. There is an irreducible yet coherent diversity of relations which both govern and norm (the law-side) and describe (the fact-side) all the sort of relations which there are. As we have seen, this is what Dooyeweerd calls the ‘ontic systasis’. The ontic systasis is based on the prior epistemic belief in coherence and intelligibility – that law-like regularities can be identified and described, and that they together cohere – even if these coherence cannot be (and arguably, should not be) defined and described in terms of a single logical structure.

### c. Events and time aspects

Events are grasped by naive intuition as undifferentiated wholes. In the naïve attitude, attention is not paid to the structure of the events themselves, but the events are grasped implicitly by focusing on the individuals (persons and things) involved and the transitions within the configurations of relations among them. From a naïve attitude, events are experienced as the interaction of individuals in relationship. It involves a weighing of individuals and relations taking implicitly the narrative to that point and different anticipated narrative scenarios. *That* one can know events in this way is indisputable even though it is not possible to account for it in a theoretically univocal way. The only finally appropriate response to an event is to tell the story, to make it one's own and to live it out.

This is acknowledged in both ancient and modern philosophy. In ancient philosophy, Aristotle argues that for a narrative to be intelligible it needs to have a narrative unity given by its purpose. In modern philosophy, Kant argues that in order to make judgements, there needs to be a sense of the 'purposiveness' (i.e., that all things have an underlying purpose or unfolding design) if one is to make any judgments about any given states of affairs. In both respects, there is an implicit acknowledgement of the Idea of Providence – even if just as an 'as if'. From a Trinitarian perspective, the Holy Spirit, as the 'breath' or 'wind' of God unfolds history from the first, and who blows in the last things and so brings all history to its final consummation.

Events bring individuals together in relation, but are not themselves relations, or individuals. Time is not just what is on the watch on my wrist. I need time for others; we need to have sensitivity about the appropriate time appropriate to each of the (modally distinguished) time aspects.

From a theoretical attitude, events can be seen in terms of each of the modalities each marking out a different form of the passing of time. However, it is events cannot be analysed in terms of their component functions (as if they were individuals), nor, on the other hand, are they merely combinations of relations and so merely the working out of specific modal laws or norms. Theoretical judgement, thus involves breaking down an event into its modal constituents. There are different modals expressions of time: time as sequence (numerical), as simultaneity (spatial), as duration (kinetic), the ticking of a clock (physical), *durée* (psychical), and so on for all the modalities. The salient features of an event are identified and analysed in terms of the laws or norms that govern each modality. For example, is the leading feature a matter of faith (for example an act of martyrdom), an ethical one (an act of benevolence) etc.? But the features that typify an event (e.g. sequence, simultaneity, duration, irreversibility etc.) cannot be transferred, even analogically or metaphorically to relations or individuals without resulting in absurdity. Time thus, needs to be seen as a distinctive and necessary condition both for one's experience and for one's reflection upon that experience.

In a modally differentiated way, events are examined in terms of the differenced time-aspects. These time-aspects are ordered by a network of analogies (anticipations and retroceptions) in terms of the modal scale, as follows:



### Time Aspects (from ‘higher’ to ‘lower’)

<b>faith (pistical)</b>	liturgical time, ‘time of belief’, revelation
<b>ethical:</b>	‘right’ time, priority of moral obligation
<b>juridical/legal:</b>	length of validity, retribution
<b>economic:</b>	interest, rent, profit, wage, economic cycle
<b>social:</b>	conventional time, social priority
<b>symbolic/lingual:</b>	word order, tense, symbolic moment
<b>aesthetic:</b>	aesthetic moment, dramatic order, rhythm
<b>cultural-formative:</b>	cultural development, periodicity
<b>logical/analytical:</b>	<i>prius et posterius</i>
<b>psychic/sensory:</b>	tension, durée
<b>biotic:</b>	growth time, organic development,
<b>physical:</b>	causal irreversibility, physical time
<b>kinetic:</b>	constancy, duration
<b>spatial:</b>	simultaneity
<b>numerical/quantitative:</b>	succession, ordinality

The features that typify an event - sequence, simultaneity, duration, irreversibility and so forth are distinctively time aspects, not individuality functions or kinds of relations, and cannot be transferred to relations or individuals, even analogically or metaphorically without resulting in antinomies. It is not individuals or relations which succeed one another, are simultaneous, have duration, etc. – but events. When one speaks of one monarch succeeding one another, it is not strictly speaking the *monarchs themselves*, but their *reigns* (i.e., the events of those monarchs ruling) which are being referred to; it is two reigns (not the respective monarchs) which can properly be described as simultaneous if both monarchs came to the throne and left the throne at the same time; it is *reigns* (i.e. events) not *monarchs* (i.e. individuals) which last a certain length of time; etc.

Individuals or relations do not bear temporal qualifiers (or, more strictly, ‘modifiers’) unless the temporal context in which they come to exist (individuals) or hold (relations) is specified; and then the temporal qualifier refers to the fact of their existence or holding in that respect – talk about individuals or relations requires a temporal context (i.e. for them to be considered as constituents of an event - in this case existence or holding) for the concept of simultaneity to be applicable.

While there are what one might call ‘cross-transcendental analogies’, e.g. between the relational ‘more or less’ and the temporal ‘earlier or later’, these are transcendental analogies– they are similar in that they both pertain to the modality of quantity, but dissimilar in that they pertain to the different transcendentals of relationality and time respectively.

What is learned with respect to one event can be applied to another by the use of instances.

## **6.      *The three descriptive views***

By combining the transcendentals in turn in pairs, we arrive at what I call three ‘descriptive views’: individuals over time, relations over time, and, and individuals in relation. They are complementary with one another, and each is necessary for the full description of a specific state-of-affairs. Together these three descriptive views provide a rounded picture of relationships seen from different viewpoints. I shall look at each descriptive view in turn.

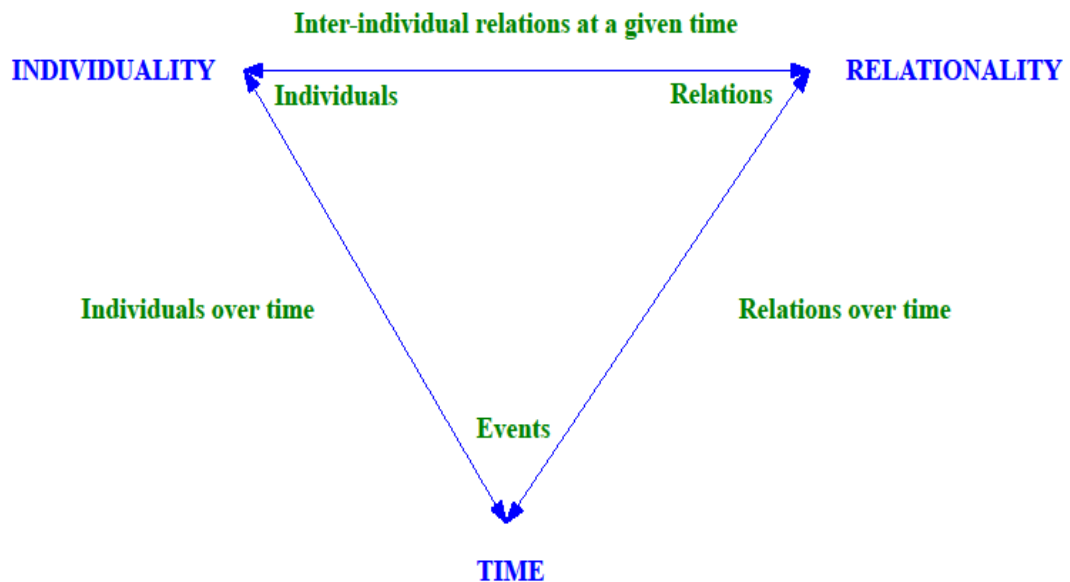
### **a.      Individuals-in-relation at a given time.**

Integrated descriptive views: how individuals are linked together through relationships and the wider ‘triangulation’ of these relationships with respect to other relationships in a wider web (focussing on issues of synchronic connection and their wider ramifications).

Every relationship has a multiplicity of aspects, and also that each relationship is connected with others in an infinite web which can encompass the whole of humanity. The ramifications of relationships can be looked at as seen at a given time. This includes not only the individuals between two or more individuals themselves, but also the wider ramifications of those relationships with respect to others not immediately focused on. This involves also taking into account all other individuals involved as ‘third parties’, and all the other relationships so involved. In theory this can extend out indefinitely to encompass the whole of humanity. However, for practical purposes, this probably needs to be confined to second or perhaps third degree relationships. Any relationship needs to be seen as part of an infinite network of other relationships, affecting them and being affected by them.

This view will be a snapshot at a given time (chosen, perhaps, because at that point in time the range and diversity of relations can be seen most clearly), but it could be extended to any point in time, either along the path mapped out by the ‘lifeline’ of a specific individual (as in a. above), or else in terms of the diverse permutations of the different relations (as in b. above).

### Diagram: The Three Descriptive Views



#### **b. Individuals over time – the ‘lifelines’ of specified individuals.**

Individualised descriptive views: how individual wholes change and develop over time (focussing on narrative identity through time).

Individuals over time are marked by lifelines. These lifelines cumulatively unfold the unity, continuity, constancy, physical change, biotic growth or decline, increase or decrease in sensory awareness, development of formative control (skilling or de-skilling), growth in aesthetic appreciation, use of communicative skills, socialisation, economic development, legal history, moral improvement or degradation and faith journey. The items last on the list can only apply to human beings, who can function in all the modalities, but more restricted lists of these ‘time-aspects’ apply variously to different kinds of thing, according to the number of modal functions in their type law. Character is thus expressed in the way that the different functions are unfolded. Character is the cumulative expression of individuality.

### **c. Relations over time – the unfolding or opening process.**

Differentiated descriptive views: how relations change and develop over time, taking on new features and applications (focussing on issues of causality and development).

Relations can be considered over time. This involves both the widening and deepening of existing relations, but also the discernment of new ones, as well as correspondingly, the expression of new forms of relations as new combinations of relations, and new structural formations express themselves and are recognized in relation to others.

### **d. Individuals-in-relation over time.**

These three combinations pairing the three transcendentals in turn (inter-individual relationship, relations over time and individuals over time) provide the ways in which concrete individuals, real relations and actual events can be described. This combination of descriptive views lead us back to a rich understanding of individuals, relations and events, just as the elements of experience and the corresponding laws and norms make these descriptions possible are their necessary constituents.

Once the transcendentals are treated as distinct, new systematic possibilities emerge, providing the basic elements for an inter-disciplinary framework of analysis which draws the transcendentals together systematically in pairs considered in their respective permutations as three descriptive views. Together these descriptive views provide a rounded approach to any given state of affairs. In this way all the transcendentals, as the necessary condition for experience, can be taken into account in balanced and systematic way.

Looking at human beings in terms of the story of their individuality over time, the diversification of those relations, and through taking snapshots of the combined question of these at a given time, we get a 360 degree view of the human being as one created to be in relationship – ‘It is not good that human beings live alone’ (Gen 2.18).

Distinguishing the transcendentals in the light of the Ideas of Origin, Coherence and Providence, and then drawing them together perichoretically as three descriptive views provides a way systematically to address perennial methodological problems which affect many ‘scientific’ or ‘theoretical’ attempts to describe or make sense of the world, as well as conceptions which shape everyday life and its structures.

## **7. *Implications for social theory***

In social theory, this fully-rounded picture helps one avoid the various impoverishments of seeing society either purely in terms of individuals (as in laissez-faire capitalism), or purely in terms of collective structures (as in a command economy), or purely in terms of the historical process (as in different forms of extreme nationalism).

The variety of institutions and associations which make up society each has its distinctive individuality is linked internally and externally by a network of relations. We can trace both the individual life-stories of the institutions and in the unfolding of their relations internally and externally.

With respect to society there are three philosophical questions: How is individuality possible? On what are true relationships based? In what does the historical process consist? Each of these disjunctions can only be overcome by re-founding our understanding of the world based on the distinct yet joint work of the three Persons of the Trinity. We need a fully developed Trinitarian understanding of society.

The dilemma at the heart of our corporate existence is that we depend for our identity on functions assigned to us by others, and yet in the mutual assignment of functions there is also the potential for our mutual enslavement. Freedom is only possible through an address which transcends our mutual relationships. Ethics, that is, communication based on law-like utterances, takes place among members of a community in that, as a community, they share the obligations and values according to which that community is constituted. This is true for all aspects of the corporate life of community, based as it is on the possibility of communication. This communication requires 'plausibility structures' (to use Peter Berger's phrase): a range of lexical, semantic and syntactic rules embedding shared values which together form a common ethical language and mark out a 'plausibility sphere' within which the discourse of that community can take place.

The plausibility structures of a genuine community cannot simply be the extension of the private concerns of the members of the community, but in some sense needs to be transcendent of them if they are to be genuinely common and not the means for domination by any individual or faction. This transcendence is the spirit of that community. In a community, as opposed to a collection of individuals (or 'collective'), each member finds his or her own reality from and with the others. Every community has spirit (lower case) in that it arises out of shared possibilities which members make available to one another (which is what being members of a community means). That to which the members respond corporately is a spirit that focuses beyond itself. It is this 'vertigo of freedom' created by the Spirit, which brings a community into being and makes its continued existence possible.

A purely unitarian conception cannot cope with this: either it is seen as a decree hauled down unilaterally, or, alternatively, creation itself is vested implicitly with divinity as a partner or correlative of God. By contrast, a Trinitarian basis for our understanding of society neither sees it as a decree handed down from God, nor an extension of God's being, but rather founded on the covenant among the Persons and so for the social order. The Father calls, the Son embodies and the Spirit draws forward. The possibility of societal diversity flows from the diverse nature of the world as God created it, and that in turn reflects the diversity within the threefold personhood of God. Through the Father we have diverse callings, and are bound together in relationship through the Son and are drawn forward by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we open ourselves to that joint operation of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, so society is opened up and enriched. This is the process by which we are drawn into the household of God, supremely through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. Christ took all the hurts and evils of the world upon himself. He presents the world so redeemed to the Father for its transformation through power the Holy Spirit. Our experience in society is diverse and many textured; but through our encounter with God we are given the basis to live coherently with others created, like us, in the image of God.

We need to see human society not as a conglomerate of atomistic individuals, nor as a collectivistic whole, nor mere flux. The individualist, collectivist and historicistic tendencies were present in unstable combination in the ideas of the French Revolution and the developments to which it gave rise, to say nothing of the extreme aberrations which came in its wake in the Twentieth Century and which afflict us today. Against individualism, collectivism and historicism we have out a vision of society in which there are clearly differentiated social structures, arising from the order of creation but unfolded in history, each with its own appropriate sphere of responsibility and competence.

The transcendental framework worked out in the light of the transcendent Trinitarian vision accords each transcendental element its proper weight by affirming individuals in relation over time, i.e. relationships, in all their richness and diversity the whole diversity of social structures (be it state, church, family, business or any other) without undue emphasis on any at the expense of others and recognising the appropriate place of each. This is the distinctive characteristic of a Christian social method.