

*2021 International Reformational Philosophy Conference*  
*'Philosophy in the Reformed Tradition: Celebrating the Heritage,*  
*Facing the Challenges, and Embracing the Future'*

**The Analogical Concepts of Economics and Theology: A Reformational-Philosophical Perspective**

Joost Hengstmengel  
(10 December 2021)

In my talk I will discuss the relationship between economics and theology from a reformational-philosophical perspective. My paper follows up on the renewed interest in this relationship over the past few decades. As you may know, the ties between theology and economics, or rather theology and economic thought are very old, stretching back all the way to the patristic and medieval period. It was only in the nineteenth century that their ways parted. Due to a variety of causes, economics secularized and dispensed with theological assumptions and notions. The last fifty years or so, economists and theologians engage in a process of reconciliation. Witnessing the emergence of new institutes, journals, and special chairs, both scientific fields increasingly aim at cross-fertilization.

A promising new approach focuses on concepts that are used in both economics and theology. The search for such concepts is central to a field called "economic theology." The idea is that a clarification of terms and concepts employed in both disciplines may foster interdisciplinary research, and eventually enrich both economics and theology. Some work has been done on such concepts as "trust," "debt" or "guilt," and "love." Clarifying these concepts and establish their meaning in both disciplines may help economists and theologians to develop a "richer language."

Now the reason for addressing this subject today is that the idea of analogy is a key concept in reformational philosophy. In 1954, one of the co-founders of this philosophy, Herman Dooyeweerd, published 'The Analogical Concepts of the Special Sciences,' which precisely dealt with the question why the different branches of science—including economics and theology—make use of similar fundamental concepts, and what the philosophical implications of these analogical uses are. Actually, Dooyeweerd wrote about analogies already in the 1930s, and claimed that his and Vollenhoven's reformational philosophy came with the first convincing theory of analogy. All the more reason, then, to revisit this theory, and to see what is in it for contemporary discussions between economists and theologians.

For those of you who are less familiar with reformational philosophy, or just to refresh our knowledge of it, it is useful to start with Dooyeweerd's ontology more generally. Or, as it is called in his main work, the "General Theory of the Modal Spheres." According to Dooyeweerd, and Vollenhoven, the universe is a cosmos or ordered whole. Thanks to creation's diversity, people experience the world around them in a multiplicity of ways. For example, things have a numerical aspect (they are quantifiable), a linguistic aspect (they can be described in language), and an economic one (they have a price and value). Reformational philosophy distinguishes fifteen of such modal aspects—from the Latin *modus*, mode

of being—including an economic aspect and aspect of faith. The latter is also known as the “pistic” aspect, from the Latin *pistis*, faith or trust.

Arguing that they are also manifestations in time, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven call the lower-numbered aspects “earlier” and higher-numbered “later” aspects. Rather than a hierarchy, the aspects form a succession in that earlier aspects enable for the increasingly complex later ones, and later aspect allow earlier ones to deepen their meaning. The different modal aspects not only form the ways in which we experience reality, they also delimit the special viewpoints under which the special sciences examine the empirical world.

As said, reformational philosophy also distinguishes an economic aspect and an aspect of faith. They are studied by economists and theologians respectively. But what exactly makes an economic aspect economical and what characterizes the pistic aspect? In reformational philosophy, answering this question comes down to defining what is called the “meaning kernel” or “meaning nucleus” of the aspects in question. This is done either intuitively or, as we will see, by studying the analogical moments in which the economic or pistic aspect is involved. Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven define the economic aspect as frugality, or more specifically “the sparing or frugal mode of administering scarce good.” So economy implies the pursuit of frugality and avoiding waste.

Their characterization of the meaning kernel of the pistic aspect is more complex. As the ultimate or “boundary” aspect of reality, the aspect of faith points to the supertemporal and the divine. However, it should not be confused with religion and the act of religious belief. It is, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven argue, the “ultimate mode of certitude” within the temporal world, which refers to the revelation of God or “what one considers to be such a revelation.” In other words, the pistic aspect denotes faith or (transcendental) certitude of any kind, whether religious, agnostic, atheistic, etc. It is studied by theology.

I now turn to the theory of analogy as developed, mainly, by Dooyeweerd. If a key feature of his theory of modal aspects is “sphere sovereignty,” the fact that the fifteen aspects of reality are irreducible, cannot be reduced to each other, the theory of analogy assumes “sphere universality.” According to Dooyeweerd, every single aspect is a mirror of the entire order of aspects, and reflects in its own way the totality of aspects. This is why the special sciences face analogies that refer to other aspects of our experience. For example, economists speak of “economic power,” “economic life,” and “economic rationality,” which respectively refer to the historical, biotic, and analytical aspect. Formulated more precisely, economics in these cases makes an analogical use of the core or meaning kernel of the aspects in question. The same thing happens when the non-economic sciences have analogical moments that refer to the economic aspect. One could think of such as concepts as analytical economy, linguistic economy, and aesthetic economy, which are used in logic, linguistics and aesthetic theory respectively.

In Dooyeweerd’s view, an aspect can only express its meaning kernel in a series of analogical moments. For the economic aspect, this means that what is characteristic of the economic can only be grasped from studying economic analogies in other, non-economic contexts. It then turns out that all of them assume frugality, “the avoidance of superfluous or excessive ways of reaching our aim.” Cultural economy, ceremonial economy, ethical economy of love, etc. all have frugality as a common

denominator, and together give expression to the core of the economic aspect. Apparently, economy is about preventing excess, warding off the superfluous, reaching a harmonious distribution.

How about economic-theological analogies? Unfortunately, Dooyeweerd nowhere in his work identified any theological analogies—so-called pistic “anticipations”—in economics. In a lecture on economics, he explicitly states that such an anticipation does exist, which “aim[s] the theoretical view at the religious root of the whole of economic life.” It is also clear from his other writings that theological analogical moments “qualify” the meaning kernel in question “by a relation of faith.” As I argue in some detail in my paper, stewardship may be the best example of economy driven by, or based on faith. And if so, stewardship may be seen as pistic anticipation within the economic aspect. When it comes to economic analogies in theology—so-called economic “retrocipations”—Dooyeweerd gives the example of sacrifice. True faith, he argues, is characterized by a readiness to sacrifice. “The economy of faith requires a sacrifice of the relative for the absolute, weighing value and countervalue and saving the temporal for the eternal.” Dooyeweerd gives some scriptural references to the New Testament letters, and as well mentions Christ’s discussion with the rich young man and the parable of the Pearl of Great Price. As far as I know, the idea of sacrifice has not been extensively studied from an economic point of view, which would be a worthwhile enterprise.

I would like to proceed, though, by posing the question what the relevance is of all this. As I see it, the importance of the reformational-philosophical theory of analogy not so much lies in the examples it provides, but rather in its incentive to study analogical concepts in the various special sciences. According to Dooyeweerd, the phenomenon of analogies is not simply a linguistic coincidence. It has ontological meaning. Analogical concepts are proof of sphere universality and hence show the interrelatedness of the different aspects of reality and their corresponding sciences. They not only underline the great diversity of God’s creation but also form a safeguard against all kinds of “isms,” or attempts at reductionism, in science. What is more, the study of analogical concepts helps in defining what is central to the various special sciences. As said, Dooyeweerd believed that the various aspects can only express their core meaning in a series of analogical moments. In case of the economic and pistic aspect, this would imply that studying economic-theological analogies may help to pinpoint the subject matter of economics and theology. Most important, perhaps, is that analogies give expression to what Dooyeweerd calls “the deeper root-unity of all modal aspects in the religious center of temporal reality.” Put more simply, the study of analogies may reveal the deeper unity of reality, which according to the reformational-philosophical tradition is of a religious nature.

Finally, what does all of this mean for the current dialogue between economists and theologians? What is the significance of Dooyeweerd’s and Vollenhoven’s theory of analogy for the new field called “economic theology”? The conclusion of my paper is that this theory provides a philosophical justification, or underpinning if you like, of the study of economic-theological analogies. According to reformational philosophy, economic-theological analogies not only are to be expected, they necessarily exist. As essential elements of a meaningful reality, the economic and pistic aspect refer to each other. Reformational philosophy encourages the investigation of these cross-references in economics and theology for the reasons mentioned at the previous slide. By doing so, economists and theologians may learn from each other, and arrive at a more realistic view of man and human institutions. Needless to say, this is essential in light of the challenges that Western society faces today.