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Ground-Motive

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"Ground-motive" is an expression coined by the translators of Herman Dooyeweerd to render the Dutch word *grondmotief*. It designates a fundamental category in Dooyeweerd's thought, referring to the structure of the religious depth-dimension which underlies all human thought and culture. It may be helpful, especially to the English-speaking student of Dooyeweerd's work, to make a number of observations about the Dutch word *grondmotief*.

To begin with, it should be pointed out that Dooyeweerd did not at first use this term, but initially preferred the expression *grondthema*, "fundamental theme." The first major statement of his theory of the four ground-motives of Western culture is contained in an article published in *Philosophia Reformata* in 1941, under the title "De vier religieuze grondthema's in den ontwikkelingsgang van het wijsgeerig denken van het Avondland," (The four religious fundamental themes in the development of philosophical thought in the West). The sub-title of this article ("A contribution toward determining the relationship between theoretical and religious dialectic") is also significant, since it alludes to the fact that in this article Dooyeweerd conceives of the "fundamental themes" as playing a pivotal role in relating theory and religion. It is via these *grondthema's* that religion influences theoretical thought.

In the course of the 1940's, however, Dooyeweerd abandoned the term *grondthema* in favour of *grondmotief*. In a series of guest lectures which he gave at the Technical University of Delft in the academic year 1946-1947, the switch has already been made.¹ That this was a recent innovation at the time is shown by the lectures of his follower S.U. Zuidema, who also lectured in Delft during this year, and who still consistently uses the older term *grondthema*.² Thereafter both Dooyeweerd and his disciples (not Vollenhoven, who never adopted the theory) regularly use *grondmotief*.

What accounts for the change? As far as I know, Dooyeweerd never explicitly gives an account of his reasons for the change in his usage, but it is not difficult to guess what prompted it. The Dutch word *motief*, like its cognates in other European languages, is ambiguous: it can mean both "motif" (i.e. "theme") and "motive" (i.e.

"driving force"). By using it Dooyeweerd can make the point that his ground-motives refer not only to a recurrent pattern in philosophical thought, but also to a deeper and more encompassing religious power which motivates human life in general. It is by exploiting this latter connotation of the word that Dooyeweerd can make the point which he so often stresses, that ground-motives are religious driving forces which *precede* theory and are at the root of entire civilizations. This is an emphasis which is particularly evident in his *Roots of Western Thought*, first written in the years 1945-1948.

R.J. Rushdoony is therefore right when he points out, in his *Introduction to Dooyeweerd's In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley, N.J., 1965), that the second element in "ground-motive" connotes underlying motivation, but he is wrong to suggest that the meaning "motif" is thereby excluded.³ The point of Dooyeweerd's use of the word *motief* is precisely that it can carry both meanings.

As a matter of fact, it is the second sense which is usually the operative one in the compound form *grondmotief*. This compound is not a word listed in Dutch dictionaries, but it is not at all uncommon in Dutch academic literature, where it almost invariably means "basic theme" or "fundamental motif," without any connotation of motivation or power. This is its meaning, for example, when Vollenhoven speaks of the *grondmotieven* of Scriptural philosophy in his work *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy*,⁴ when Herman Ridderbos refers to the *grondmotieven* of Paul's thought in his book *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*⁵ or when Jan Veenhof entitles the major chapter of his dissertation "*Grondmotieven in Bavinck's Views on Revelation and Scripture*."⁶

The language of Dutch academics here parallels or reflects (as so often) the usage of their German neighbours. Like its Dutch counter-part, German *Grundmotiv* is not listed in the dictionaries, but occurs quite frequently in scholarly prose. For example, we find the following sentence in Richard Harder's authoritative introduction to *Enneads* I, 6 by Plotinus: "Äusserlich gesehen fasst Plotin zwei platonische Grundmotive zusammen, die Erotik und die Kathartik...,"⁷ where the *Grundmotive* refer to the "fundamental themes" of love and purification in Plato.

Viewed against the background of the regular meaning of both *grondmotief* and its German cognate,⁸ it is all the more striking that Dooyeweerd deliberately introduces into his use of the compound the other meaning of *motief*, namely "driving force." In doing so he is forging a new technical term, with a meaning peculiar to his own philosophy, in the time-honored manner of philosophers from Aristotle (cf. *kategoria*) to Heidegger (cf. *Dasein*).

It is noteworthy that Dooyeweerd is not alone among twentieth-century European thinkers to make "ground-motive" a fundamental category of his thought. The Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren (born in 1890, four years before Dooyeweerd) uses the Swedish term *grundmotiv* in a technical sense which has some striking analogies with Dooyeweerd's

usage. Nygren is the chief advocate of the scholarly program of "motif research" (Swedish *motivforskning*) in intellectual history, the best-known example of which is his own monumental work *Eros and Agape* (Swedish 1930-36; English 1939 and 1953). In a brief encyclopedia article entitled *Motivforskning*, Nygren summarizes his views as follows:

Motif research in the humanities and theology aims at penetrating behind the garment of ideas in which a conception presents itself, and to pinpoint what is constitutive for it. Considered from the outside, an idea may appear the same within different conceptions; in actual fact its meaning becomes completely different according to whether it is put in one context or another, whether it gives expression to one fundamental conception or another. Therefore to gain full clarity about the real meaning of even a single idea, we must see it against the background of the overall structure of the conception into which it enters. This is the task which motif research undertakes; it could therefore also be designated as structural analysis. It has two senses. We can (1) inquire after the fundamental motif (*grundmotiv*) in a particular thinker's conception; he usually has something which is central and foundational for him, a nucleus as it were around which his other ideas group themselves and from which they receive their characteristic stamp. We can (2) inquire after the fundamental motif (*grundmotiv*) in a larger historical context. *Grundmotiv* in this sense then signifies a total attitude of life, characteristically distinct from other total attitudes of life.--Motif research has been widely practised especially in contemporary theology. By way of example we can refer to the difference between the love motif of Hellenism and that of Christianity.⁹

What is remarkable about Nygren's use of the term *grundmotiv* (rendered "fundamental motif" in the English translation of his *magnum opus*) is that it can refer to an attitude of life which dominates and gives meaning to the themes and ideas of intellectual history, and that he works this out especially with respect to the conflict and synthesis of the "ground-motives" of biblical Christian and pagan Greek thought in the Western tradition (represented by *Agape* and *Eros*). All of this is strongly reminiscent, despite obvious differences, of Dooyeweerd's approach to the intellectual history of the West. Even the ambiguity of the term (both intellectual and fundamentally attitudinal) is found in both thinkers.

Was Dooyeweerd perhaps influenced by Nygren? As far as I know there is only circumstantial evidence which might suggest this, but it is certainly striking that Nygren published a book entitled *Filosofi och motivforskning* ("Philosophy and Motif Research") in 1940, one year before Dooyeweerd's article on the four *grondthema's* of the West, and six years before his adoption of term *grondmotief* with its peculiar double meaning. Given the fact that Dooyeweerd was working in Nazi-occupied Holland in the years 1940-45, when scholarly communication with other countries were virtually cut off, and that he did not have a command of the Swedish language, we can probably rule out direct intellectual filiation. Yet the parallels between his

doctrine of *grondmotif* and Nygren's of *grundmotiv* remain startling, and must have something to do with the common European intellectual milieu, largely dominated by German thought, in which the Dutch and the Swedish thinkers both lived and moved prior to World War II.

Footnotes

- 1 H. Dooyeweerd, "Sociologie," in Stichting Studium Generale aan de Technische Hoogeschool te Delft, *Syllabus 1946-1947* (Delft, 1947), pp. 131-178, esp. 140-148. The lectures are reprinted in H. Dooyeweerd, *Verkenningen in de wijsbegeerte, de sociologie en de rechtswetenschap* (Amsterdam, 1962), pp. 67-146.
- 2 S.U. Zuidema, "Huidige existentiële filosofie" in *Syllabus 1946-1947*, pp. 87-100, esp. 96, 98.
- 3 *Op. cit.*, p. xv.
- 4 *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte* (Amsterdam, 1933), p. 22, cf. 49.
- 5 Grand Rapids, 1975. The phrase "ground motif" of the English translation (p. 49) reflects *grondmotief* in the Dutch original.
- 6 *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam, 1968), p. 250, cf. 141.
- 7 *Plotins Schriften*, übersetzt von Richard Harder. Neubearbeitung mit griechischem Lesetext und Anmerkungen. Bd. Ib. (Hamburg, 1956), p. 366.
- 8 On the Dutch and German use of the term see J. Stellingwerff, "Problemen van het historisme," in *Perspectief. Feestbundel van de Jongeren bij het vijfentwintig jarig bestaan van de vereniging voor Calvinistische wijsbegeerte* (Kampen, 1961), pp. 216-220.
- 9 See the article in *Svensk Uppslagsbok*. Second edition. Band 20 (Malmö, 1960). (my translation)