

2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 14 Psychotherapy in the light of Truth

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Introduction

Emotionally-marked crisis often urges people to seek some form of counselling therapy. Psychotherapy leads people to become involved in new relationships with therapists, relationships in which their involvement will almost necessarily involve them in confronting truth about themselves. But, the question, 'What is truth?' is problematic in the contemporary world being met with the sceptical response, 'Whose truth?' Modernism, postmodernism and critical realism have contributed to the discussion on truth but do not overcome the inherent dualism in their respective formulations, which also affect their various psychotherapies. However, Herman Dooyeweerd's complex philosophy was an attempt to let the Christian idea of transcendent Truth thoroughly penetrate philosophic thought.¹ This paper applies this understanding to psychotherapy by allowing a Christian Idea of transcendent Truth to shine as a light into the lives of clients. Because this Idea points to something beyond the temporal, which cannot be contained in concepts, the Truth can thoroughly penetrate human lives. Two counselling strategies are suggested,

¹ Dooyeweerd says his explicit intention is to illustrate the above thesis (1969b: 572).

which allow for this occurrence in therapy, namely: relativising what has been made absolute, and transcending any purely immanent standpoint.²

1. Holiday depression

A female student travels with a young man in Spain on a holiday. They get on very well with him drawing close to her by telling her much about his personal struggles. At a later point in the journey, the two are joined by a girlfriend of hers after which the student falls into a depression accompanied by deep self-hatred. She realises in this experience her intense jealousy for her girlfriend who is now enjoying more attention from the young man than she is. She breaks down and cries uncontrollably in her room at which the other two hear her and come to her. After some talking about how she feels, the depression lifts. However, she finds that even beyond the holiday she is more able generally to be a participant than an observer in social events.



Malan (1979: 2) analyses these events in terms of what he dubs, *the triangle of conflict* (pp. 13-15): **defence**, **anxiety** and **hidden feeling** (see Fig 1 below). Put simply, although much more can be said about the above situation, the student's *hidden feeling*, which is unacceptable to her and she would think to others as well, is jealousy. She feels anxious about being jealous because she is open to verbal attacks such as, 'you shouldn't be jealous. How dare you spoil our fun together with your immaturity! Grow up, why don't you!'

² We may use these strategies with both Christians and non-Christians although we need to tailor-make it for each counsellee.

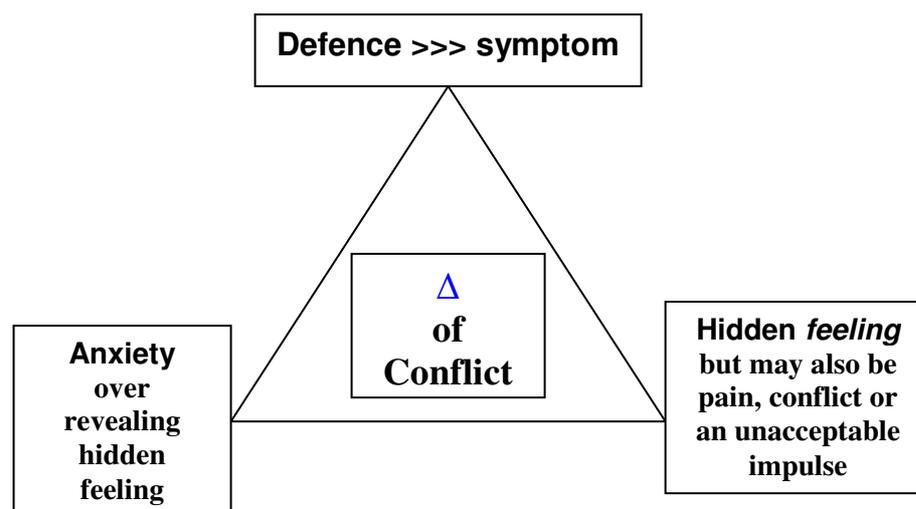
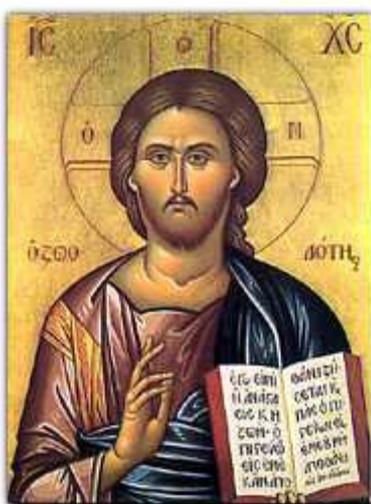


Figure 1 Triangle of conflict



None of us likes to be thought to be jealous. For Christians, it is a sin³ so all the more reason why we *lie* to others and our selves about it. But, when we do that, we are trying to live outside reality and hence, we are forced to develop some *defence* (a symptom) to stop the awareness of our jealousy forcing itself into our consciousness. Depression is ideal for this purpose because on the one hand, it punishes for feeling jealousy by its aversive nature and on the other hand, defends against being aware of it by numbing feelings. According to Frank Lake, a Christian much influenced by the psychodynamic tradition, depression was about covered up anger, which is defended by 'guile' (Christian, 1991: 69).⁴ Depressed persons have learned to be 'crafty' with regard to their anger because angry expressions from them were not acceptable in their families. However, their guilefulness has become automatic to such an extent that depression readily follows angering situations to cover up their hurt and outrage. The axis on which the above discussion turns is that of **truth**. Notwithstanding the

³ In my view, the Scriptures treat *actions* fuelled by jealousy to be sins rather than the feelings themselves. However, even if the feelings are sins, we cannot afford to lie to ourselves about their existence. This is to live in unreality.

⁴ Significantly, a compilation of his voluminous writings by Christian (1991) is entitled *In the Spirit of Truth!*

thorny issue of truth in contemporary life, each psychotherapy presupposes some theory of truth and hence, truth is a subject that cannot be avoided in therapy.

2. The current truth problematic

Truth is more difficult to speak about in contemporary life than a century ago even though attitudes towards truth had begun to change even then (Grenz, 1996: 83). To see the problems with present-day ‘truth’, we need to see the classical (Greek, Roman), medieval (500 AD? – 1300 AD?) and early modern struggles with this question. According to Geuras, the three classical questions of philosophers like Plato (427-347 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC), Augustine (354-430 AD) and Aquinas (1225-1274? AD) were posed and answered in the following order: **what is real?**⁵⁶ **How can I know reality?** Lastly, **how can I be certain of what I know?**⁷ These classical philosophers were more interested in what was real and in knowledge about reality than in certainty (Geuras, 2002: n. p.). ‘Ordering the questions in [the above manner] permits us to suppose that there is a knowable though not fully understood reality that we can discuss even without the benefit of certainty’ (Geuras, 2002: n. p.).

i) The modernist search for certainty

Rene Descartes⁸ (1596-1650), the very epitome of the modernist project (2002: n. p.), *asked these questions in a different order* and changed the face of philosophy for all time.⁹ Descartes was focussed on question three, the certainty question, before questions one and two because he wanted to overcome the scepticism of his time, believing it could only be overcome by reason. In a fine piece of irony, Descartes used doubt, to overcome scepticism by suggesting that if one doubts something, one

⁵ Within these three questions, the question of truth is interwoven.

⁶ Technically, a branch of philosophy known as ‘ontology’ from the Greek word, ‘ontos’ meaning being.

⁷ These two later questions are what are known as ‘epistemological’ questions, from ‘episteme’ to ‘know’. Hence, Descartes moved philosophy from its traditional ontological foundations to its now epistemological bases. This movement was of world-shattering importance. We are all Cartesians because of it.

⁸ Rene Descartes, famous for his *I think, therefore I am* statement, is usually credited with ushering in the ‘modern period’ of philosophy.

⁹ He lived in a sceptical age and although not sceptical himself, tried to communicate with that age on its sceptical terms. In doing that, he seriously compromised the Christian faith and set in train a sceptical direction in all western philosophy, from which we are still trying to recover. Personally, Descartes’ ‘scepticism’ had a personal effect on my early Christian life leading me away from the Faith.

must be thinking and therefore one must exist (*cogito ergo sum*¹⁰). (Geuras claims that many recent philosophies including postmodern philosophies are beset by a Cartesian-like scepticism also, which has been extended to reason (2002: n. p.)) Descartes' assumption was that 'we cannot know what we cannot prove' and that what we know must be provable by reason. Many have accepted Cartesian doubt and the Cartesian faith in the power of human reason (but few have accepted Descartes' solutions). *Post-modernism* reflects the failure of Cartesian modernistic reason to provide certain footing for knowledge.

ii) Post-modern disquiet with truth

Groothuis, in *Truth Decay* sums up six aspects of the loss of confidence in 'objective' truth (2000: 26-30): 1) failure of the enlightenment project to bring actual progress; 2) multi-cultural situations count against the validity of a unique understanding of truth promoting pastiche-approach to faith and spirituality, 3) pluralistic environment undercuts any fixed notion of identity or a settled way of life. He also indicated that 4) language, being merely created by humankind, 'cannot represent any objectively knowable reality' (p. 29) and that, 5) moreover, language does not have a knowable meaning but can evoke multiple responses according to who reads them.¹¹ Lastly, he says that contemporary understandings of truth believe 'truth' is used in the service of power (p. 30).

Recently, Gergen fully outlined his post-modernist challenge to modernist theories in its criticism of three of its contentions: 'the centrality of individual knowledge', 'the world as objectively given', and 'language as truth bearing' (2001: n. p.). Against these, he substituted three post-modern doctrines 'communal rhetoric', 'socially constructed world' and 'pragmatic language' (Gergen, 2001: n. p.). Gergen neatly summarises the modernist position as he sees it with the words, 'if the individual mind acquires knowledge of the [objective] world, and language is our means of conveying the content of mind to others, then language becomes the bearer of truth' (n. p.). Against the belief in the truth-bearing character of language, he posits his belief of language as pragmatic, as different language games within social

¹⁰ I think therefore I am.

¹¹ This assertion has prompted the 'reader-response' approach to the Scriptures. No text beyond our reading of it exists and therefore, we are condemned to reside within our own interpretations.

interactions for people to play. For Gergen, humankind can never get out of its social-cultural context.

Kruger (2002) has sought to represent Gergen's brand of post-modernism as seeking to provoke response rather like what happened with Dada Art rather than seeking truth and knowledge. On the other hand, others have strongly opposed Gergen, showing that, among other things, the 'view that a theory of truth [as correspondence with reality] is important for science' (Haig, 2002: n. p.). Haig presses the issue of psychological science and the importance of some form of correspondence theory of truth whereby something is true if it is found to conform to reality. Interestingly, the above example of the student's depression would seem to suggest some type of correspondence view of truth in which truth corresponds with the facts of reality (Chessick, 1996: n. p.; C. Hanly, 1990).

iii) Critical realism

Somewhat predictably, a 'new' critical realist position is now abroad, which some claim, somewhat extravagantly, signals the demise of postmodernism (Lopez & Potter, 2001). The well-known NT scholar Tom Wright describes his work as 'critical realism' by saying,

it acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence "realism"), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence "critical") (Wright, cited in 'Critical Realism', 2007: n. p.).

Southgate presents a more sophisticated explanation of critical realism, which shows numerous misunderstandings in my humble opinion not the least being that he makes no clear distinction between non-scientific experience and theoretical or scientific thought (n. d.: n. p.). He rejects 'naïve realism', the view that 'every scientific discovery directly corresponds to a truth about the world' (n. d.: n. p.) because we cannot escape our various preconceptions of the world and because our science evidences continual change. On the other hand, the findings of science in medicine seem to indicate that our knowledge 'articulate something of the complexity of reality, in a way which is open to ever-new discoveries' (n. d.: n. p.). Hence, he rejects those forms of 'idealism', 'which promote the notion that mental concepts are

somehow more real than the physical world' (n. d.: n. p.). Therefore, Southgate champions 'critical realism'. According to Southgate,

the critical realist holds that there is a progressive closing between our views of reality and reality itself, but recognises that we hold our views provisionally, [and] that we cannot simply read off the nature of the world from scientific data. The theories and presuppositions with which we approach our studies are acknowledged to affect our selection of what data we count as important to collect, as well as the ways in which we interpret these data Experimental data are never other than theory-laden, and there is [sic] never enough data totally to demonstrate every element of a theory. Other reasons for adopting a critical approach take into account the fact that observations themselves affect the character of an entity as it is observed (n. d.: n. p.).

Critical realism has already made its presence felt in psychotherapy by providing an alternative to postmodernism use of narrative (e. g., M. F. Hanly, 1996: n. p.) and also in psychoanalytical therapy (e. g., Clarke, 2003: n. p.).

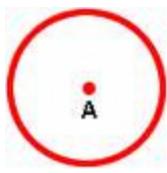
iv) Dooyeweerd's alternative

However, all these three understandings are flawed being all caught within the problems created by Descartes' subject/object dichotomy. Descartes began the problem by trying to establish the indubitable existence of the human subject (the I) and then attempting to establish the world beyond the I using theoretical thought. Postmodernism is still challenging 'modernists' as to how they can legitimately talk of a world 'out there' observed by a 'mind' within and furthermore, how they can do this and not observe that they are dependent on language to do it (Gergen, 2001: n. p.). Critical realism assumes the existence of a subject-independent object and tries to accommodate the challenges of postmodernism by giving a fuller place to human subjectivity than did earlier forms of realism. However, critical realism dangerously inflates the place of theoretical thought and because it conflates science and everyday knowing, fails to understand the dependence of science on the latter.

Dooyeweerd overcomes these problems by his insistence that no temporal thing, including humankind, exists in itself or for itself (Rom 11: 36). This seemingly unsophisticated claim has far-reaching consequences. All temporality exists as the image of God, the garment of God (using Calvin's words based on Psalms 104 and Romans 1: 19-20) (Zaclunan, 1997: 305). However, within that framework,

humanity has a special place as supratemporal heart of mirroring love towards God. The presence of humankind ‘makes the rest of temporal existence complete’ (Dooyeweerd, 1979: 30) because without humanity all the later ‘object functions’ (logical, historical, economic, aesthetic etc) for the rest of creation would not be unfolded. Who but humanity laments about cruelty to animals? Who but humanity nurtures plants? Who but humanity includes land, water, plants and animals in its blessing rituals? Hence, Dooyeweerd was neither a realist nor an idealist.

Using another metaphor, all things exist in the Centre, which is Christ and all those joined to Christ. All individualised things come from the Centre and exist at its circumference. Hence, no division exists between the Centre, where the supraindividual heart of humankind is in the supratemporal condition with Christ the true Centre, and the circumference, where humankind is *individuated* as separate individualities. Hence, unlike both modernism, post-modernist and critical realism, which stem directly or indirectly from the 17th century Enlightenment division between the observer and the observed, in Dooyeweerd’s view no such dualism, is promulgated.



Furthermore, Dooyeweerd argued that both humankind and creation function within a common spectrum of modalities of meaning and that humankind is not enclosed within temporality but transcends time by virtue of the supratemporal heart, which resides in the supratemporal condition, the *aevum*. The modernist is correct to see a relationship between our knowing and reality. We can know the truth because the revelation of God permeates all reality. ‘The whole earth is full of His glory’ (Isa 6: 3). However, modernist fixation on rationality, particularly scientific rationality, as the infallible key to knowledge is unsound and the protests of post-modernism on this point are correct. Post-modernism’s point that many types of knowing are valid is well-taken. Dooyeweerd would also say that pre-scientific experience is fundamental to any science. Hence, Dooyeweerd was able to espouse without embarrassment, ‘a correspondence theory of truth. We form images, which we compare and these images must correspond to what is given in reality (Friesen, 2003-2007: n. p.). However, Friesen explains that Dooyeweerd’s theory was not a *copy*

theory, which would suggest that things existed *in themselves* independently of humankind and needing to be copied into our minds (2003-2007: n. p.).¹²

3. Truth's penetration of the therapeutic process

Herman Dooyeweerd understood his philosophy as an attempt to allow the Christian Idea¹³ of transcendent Truth¹⁴ to thoroughly penetrate philosophic thought 'from root to crown' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 572). A worrying concern for Dooyeweerd was that previous Christian efforts to produce philosophies expressive of the Christian *way of life* (Acts 9: 2) had often been lacking. These philosophies have sometimes been merely a faith confession tacked onto a secular philosophy. The contradiction in such a union is revealed when one understands that any combination of a Christian and secular approach is a bringing together of two religiously opposed standpoints because each is expressive of a different way of life.

To overcome such a contradiction, Christians must implement in the whole of their lives, the basic commitment they express in their worship. Only one true God exists and that is why we are exhorted to love the Lord our God with all our hearts (Deut 6: 4f). We would not think of trying to worship a false god at church. But, Christians often compromise and worship other gods in other parts of their lives; this danger was prevalent even in the first century (1 Jn 5: 21). To break away from these compromises, we have to allow the Lord to teach us how to, in Dooyeweerd's words, let the 'Transcendent Truth of God penetrate' throughout our lives.

Hence, with respect to counselling, following Dooyeweerd, we wish to allow the 'Christian Idea of transcendent Truth' to thoroughly penetrate our counselling procedure (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 572). Moreover, through therapy, *we desire the 'Christian Idea of transcendent Truth' to gradually permeate the life of the client.*

¹² Neither does humankind exist in itself but only in terms of its relation to its Origin.

¹³ Deliberately capitalised and to be distinguished from a concept. According to his translator Dooyeweerd used *Idea* in a technical 'sense of a "limiting concept" which refers to a totality not to be comprehended in the concept itself' (Dooyeweerd, 1969a: 8). For example, the Idea of Origin is one such Idea. So are the Ideas of Supratemporal Totality and Temporal Coherence. These Ideas are humanly discovered and are not substitutes for the actual realities to which they point. And, they can only approximate those realities. They can never fully describe them.

¹⁴ Dooyeweerd cited his brother-in-law, Vollenhoven as having ascertained that 'truth' in scripture means '*steadfastness, certainty, reliability*' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 571).

Dooyeweerd's understood Truth as *Divine Revelation* (1969b: 598) shown in 'the indissoluble unity of both its cosmic-immanent sense and its transcendent-religious meaning' (p. 563). 'Cosmic-immanent' means truth is revealed in the things that have been made (e. g., Acts 17: 27-28; Rom 1: 19, 20) and 'transcendent-religious' means Divine Revelation (Truth) is also beyond what has been made.



Truth is a great transcendent **LIGHT** by which we are enabled to see 'reality again perspectively' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 563).

Perspectively means that those standing in the Truth are able to grasp the various levels of experience (viz. supratemporal, cosmic, modal and individuality structure horizons). Christian

believers stand in the Light of Christ and experience reality more truly, *in principle*, than those who reject Christ.¹⁵ Standing in the Light of Christ means 'standing in the Truth' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 572).

A trusting 'acceptance of the Divine Revelation' (p. 563), the Truth, 'with our full personality and with all our heart' (p. 563) enables us to know God, ourselves, and the cosmos rightly. Thus, we are personally involved in a 'standing in the Truth [as] the indispensable pre-requisite for the insight into the full horizon of our experience' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 564). The 'standing in the Truth' phrase reminds us that Truth ought not to be considered simply a set of propositions we believe. Standing in the Truth is 'the sharing in the fullness of meaning of the cosmos in Christ' (p. 564) for 'Christ as the fullness of God's revelation is the Truth' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 564) (e.g., Col 2: 9; Heb 1: 3). Standing in the Truth means a giving up of 'the illusion of possessing the norm of truth in our own fallen selfhood'¹⁶ and means that correspondingly, '[w]e have arrived at the self-knowledge that outside of the light of Divine Revelation we stand in falsehood' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 564).

In order to let the major principle of allowing the light of Transcendent Truth to permeate lives, I propose the following two therapeutic strategies, which are interrelated:

¹⁵ However, Dooyeweerd says, 'I do not deny at all that sin again and again [darkens] the Christian's insight' (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 572).

¹⁶ Contrast this understanding with that of Carl Rogers.

i) Relativising what has been made absolute

Dooyeweerd realised that ‘many thinkers who start from a non-Christian attitude have discovered *relatively true states of affairs* within the temporal horizon’ (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 572, italics in original). Therefore, it is quite in order to say that Freud or whoever has discovered some truth about something. Nevertheless, we should not miss the word ‘relatively’ because to say that someone has discovered a truth, without reference to the Truth, will tend to inflate that truth’s rightful province. Hence, ‘all relative truths, within the temporal horizon, are only true in the *fulness* of Verity [Truth], revealed by God in Christ’ (p. 572, italics in original).

It is possible, indeed common, for humankind to turn the relative into the absolute, to absolutise that which is relative (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 572). Such absolutisation ‘turns truth into falsehood’ (1969b: 572). Dooyeweerd went as far as to say that:

even the judgment: $2 \times 2 = 4$ becomes an untruth, if the law-[abiding] state of affairs, expressed in it, is detached from the temporal world-order and from the sovereignty of God as the Creator. It become an untruth, if it is absolutized into a “truth in itself” (1969b: 572).

The theme of absolutising, of making something relative into a supposed absolute, is a key topic throughout Dooyeweerd’s writings with Dooyeweerd linking absolutising with idolatry (Dooyeweerd, 1969b: 323).

For Christian counselling, we might say complementarily (and with apologies to Freud) that **a major part of all Christian counselling is assisting the client *to relativise what has been made absolute***. Hence, for our example above, we might ask at this preliminary stage:

- firstly, what *relative* ‘truth’ has the student absolutised?
- secondly, what *relative* truth has the psychodynamic explanation absolutised?

Richmond put forward a psychodynamic view of therapy stating that ‘denied experience’ is at the core of psychopathology and that ‘dishonesty’ or truthfulness about feeling towards others and the therapist is the major issue that must be contended within the therapeutic process (1997-2007: n. p.). The student would appear to have absolutised appearance and surface over authenticity and

transparency. However, the psychodynamic explanation itself is in danger of absolutising the deceptive element of psychopathology. Not all psychopathology is created by deception or artifice although the deception factor is a valuable insight into the character of psychopathology.

We also need to remember that Christians are subject to absolutising, which requires that both Christian counsellors and clients be actively involved in resisting conformity to ungodly lusts and the 'pride in riches' (1 Jn 2: 15-17, NRSV) and be open to conversion in spirit and body (2 Cor 6: 14-7: 1).

ii) Transcending immanence

Temporal reality, as meaning, points beyond itself to its Origin according to the Word-Revelation. The so-called *immanence standpoint* is based on the delusion that temporal reality does not point beyond itself to its Origin (God). Dooyeweerd speaks graphically and poignantly of what everyday life can be like and often is like even for *Christians* at times within this standpoint:

every Christian knows the emptiness of the experience of the temporal world which seems to be shut up in itself. He knows the impersonal attitude of a "Man" . . . in the routine of common life and the dread of nothingness, the meaningless, if he tries to find himself again in a so-called existential isolation. He is acquainted with all this from personal experience (Dooyeweerd, 1969c: 30).

This 'shut up in itself' state is the immanence condition, where the temporal world is believed to be self-sufficient. One well-known immanence philosophy that demonstrates the attempt to live according to this way is existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre describes in his first novel, *Le Nausée* (1938) how his character, Roquentin's diarising of his own life in tedious detail accompanied by various epiphanies reveals the 'true' nature of human existence ('Nausea', 2002: n. p.). However, what Sartre's writing brilliantly shows is the character of experience in the immanence attitude: anxious and angst-ridden, alienation between people, absurdity, atheistic, nothingness, freedom from any law, existence preceding essence¹⁷ (hence, *existentialism*) and only a slight chance of hope because Sartre openly contends for the truth of the immanence standpoint ('Jean-Paul Sartre', 2007: n. p.).

¹⁷ Sartre believed this consequence followed if there were no God. Humanity is the I AM.

Dooyeweerd, who did not suffer from depression or any psychological disorder that I know of,¹⁸ gives an accurate picture of some of its character. This shut up in itself



experience and its accompanying ‘emptiness’ are reminiscent of states of perception described by certain existential writers, for example, Kierkegaard, to which Dooyeweerd appears to allude (Dooyeweerd, 1969c: 30). Dooyeweerd’s position implies, I think, that a choice of the immanence standpoint may result in profound feeling of ‘emptiness’, of meaninglessness, and of

‘the dread of nothingness’. C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* referred to the damned soul in hell as ‘nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself’ (Lewis, 1946: ch 11).

The potency of this feeling of emptiness leads some at least to adopt a routinised life to protect themselves against the meaninglessness of an existentially isolated life. The process of routinisation, which is regularly found in the commercial-service sector, has been found to have flow-on effects beyond corporate life into other areas of life (Leidner, 1993).

‘Immanence’ thinking, the desire to explain things from within temporal reality and apart from God, is a present reality in all our lives. *The immanence enticement is a lively temptation within Christian lives* as it is in non-Christian ones. However, Dooyeweerd proposed that although, every Christian by virtue of being human, knows this experience of emptiness,

the Christian whose heart is opened to the Divine Word-revelation knows that in this apostate experiential attitude he does not experience temporal things and events *as they really are*, i.e. as meaning pointing beyond and above itself to the true religious centre of meaning and to the true Origin (Dooyeweerd, 1969c: 30, italics mine).

Therefore, what is being proposed is that in order to truly experience ‘things and events they really are’ we need to open our hearts to the Divine Word-revelation (most notably scripture in this context) and experience things and events as ‘meaning

¹⁸ Both his brother-in-law D. H. Theo Vollenhoven and Abraham Kuyper suffered from serious breakdowns.

point beyond and above itself to the true religious centre of meaning [supratemporal self] and to the true Origin’.

Conclusion

We have established the central idea for our form of Christian counselling as being the requirement to allow the Christian Idea of transcendent Truth to shine on the lives of clients. We have also suggested two counselling strategies to allow for this occurrence in therapy, namely: relativising what has been made absolute, and transcending any purely immanent standpoint.¹⁹

¹⁹ We may use these strategies with both Christians and non-Christians although we need to tailor-make it for each counsellee.

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