On Vollenhoven's
Problem-Historical Method[1]

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Vollenhoven is chiefly known for his "consistent problem-historical method" (*consequent Probleenmhistorische methode*) in the historiography of philosophy. I believe that this is to be seen against the background of the development of the idea of *Problemgeschichte* in early twentieth-century neo-Kantianism, the philosophical movement which dominated the Dutch intellectual scene during Vollenhoven's formative years. This development, which must itself be seen as a reaction against Dilthey and the rise of historicism, finds its two most explicit spokesmen in the German philosophers Nicolai Hartmann (1882-1950) and Richard Hőnigswald (1875-1947), men whose works we know were intensively studied by Vollenhoven in the early years of his development.

Characteristic of the neo-Kantian concept of *Problemgeschichte* was the subordination of historical study to systematic philosophical interests. The history of philosophy, in this view, is the story of the great thinkers' struggle to come to terms with the perennial and immutable systematic problems of philosophy. The contemporary philosopher is intensely interested in this history because he, too, is struggling with these same enduring problems and can expect to gain systematic insight from the giants who have preceded him.

It is helpful to be aware of this neo-Kantian background because it provides a context for Vollenhoven's work in the history of philosophy. One of the exasperating things about that work is that Vollenhoven seems to have an aversion to discussing the methodological presuppositions implicit in his method. The following is in large part an attempt to hunt down those presuppositions on the basis of bits of evidence scattered throughout his writings.

From his first published work, his dissertation, to his last researches, [232] Vollenhoven's activity as a philosopher has been dominated by that peculiar combination of systematic and historical interests which was characteristic of the

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[1] The following is substantially the central part of my *doctoraalscripti*, "An Essay on the Idea of the Problmgeschichte," written at the free university of Amsterdam in 1970. Its first part is briefly summarized in the opening three paragraphs here. All the translations from Vollenhoven's Dutch text are my own.

idea of *Problemgeschichte*. Oddly enough, although he was acquainted from the beginning with the work of Hartmann and Hönigswald, he does not seem to have adopted the term *probleemhistorisch* until 1949[2] -in fact, he gave his method no name at all until 1948, when he spoke of "problem analysis" and "the method of philosophical analysis" to describe his approach to Plato's development (16: 1, 6 and *passim*). He seems to have been so absorbed with the actual -task at hand that it was not until later that he realized that he had in fact been using a distinctive method all along.

From systematic priority to historical priority: a documentation

There can be no doubt, however, that the 1917 dissertation is already *fully problenigeschichtlich* in approach. Although primarily a *systematic* attempt to arrive at a specifically "theistic" philosophy of mathematics, the greater part of the work is devoted to a historical orientation of the problems involved, beginning with the pre-Socratics. The treatment of the history of philosophy proceeds from the assumption that there are basically three kinds of metaphysics: dualism, which recognizes a qualitative difference between mind and matter, and two kinds of monism, one of which reduces mind to matter (materialism), and another which reduces matter to mind (psychomonism) (*1*: 2, 3). Corresponding to these three philosophies are three basic types of mathematical theory: intuitionism (dualistic), empiricism (materialistic) and formalism (psychomonistic). On the basis of these distinctions and after an introductory chapter significantly called "A priori construction of the possible solutions of the most important problems," the history of the philosophy of mathematics is sketched in three longitudinal sections. First the "empiricistic" line is traced from Democritus and Epicurus to J. S. Mill. Then comes the "formalistic" line, including the Pythagoreans, Heraclitus, Scholasticism, and Hume. Finally "intuitionism" is pictured as beginning with Socrates and leading via Plato, Aristotle and Augustine to Kant. This takes the three basic types to the middle of the nineteenth century, the time of some important new developments (e.g. non-Euclidean geometry, symbolic logic, Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie*). After discussing these in an intermediate chapter, Vollenhoven picks up the three lines again and brings them up to date, describing how each reacted to the new contributions. A fifth and final chapter brings his own systematic conclusions.

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[2] To the best of my knowledge, his first use of the term is at 18:6. Since this is dated Jan. 1, 1950, we may assume he had adopted the term in 1949.

It is plain from this structure of the dissertation how closely allied the [233] young Vollenhoven considered questions of systematics with their history. It is also evident that he already viewed the history of philosophy in terms of constant types reaching back to the beginning of Greek philosophy and characterized by a remarkable degree of continuity. Perhaps most striking of all is the total absence of any discussion or defense of his historiographical approach. It is simply assumed. The only reference to it is in the discussion of purposes: "in this [work] history will have to provide its ever valuable guidance" (1: 3).

Involuntarily, one is led to speculate on the influences which could have led the 25-year-old promovendus to assume so naturally such an unusual attitude to the history of philosophy, especially with respect to the theory of constant types. It is unlikely that his thesis supervisor, Geesink, could have contributed much towards the shaping of his views: he was an overworked pastor-turned-philosopher and had for some time been a very old man with little vigor or vision in his teaching. It is more likely that a formative influence was exercised on the young Vollenhoven by J. Woltjer, the only other member of the ten-man Free University faculty in those days who sometimes gave philosophical lectures. He was the author of a brilliant dissertation on Lucretius, the Roman materialist philosopher, and was Vollenhoven's teacher both in the Amsterdam Christian classical high school (*gymnasium*), of which he was founder and principal, and later in the university. It is certain, in any case, that Vollenhoven thought very highly of Woltjer, at one time mentioning him in one breath with Augustine, Bradwardine, Calvin, and Kuyper.[3] Perhaps it was Woltjer who first aroused in him an interest in ancient philosophy and its fundamental importance for the history of Western philosophy. Another important influence may have been Herman Bavinck, who was one of Vollenhoven's theology professors. Bavinck laid great stress in his dogmatics on thorough historical orientation, and his approach is said to have been problem-historical."[4] Moreover, it is known that in the last years of his life (during which he had Vollenhoven as student), his interest had turned strongly to philosophical questions.[5]

Be that as it may, the fact is that Vollenhoven's subsequent work remained true to the pattern set by the dissertation: all systematic questions are set against the background of their history, and the history, in turn, is viewed in terms of systematic

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[3] Cf. 12. Further appreciative references to Woltjer can be found in his dissertation (1: vii) and in 3: 136)

[4] R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), p. 385: "... in this favored approach was the problem-historical one." It is noteworthy that Bavinck's own professor in dogmatics at leiden, J. H. Scholten, is also said by Bremmer to have a problem-historical method (*ibid.*, p. 389).

[5] R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tidgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), p. 249.

criteria. An especially striking example is his article (3) "The increase in logical consistency in recent physics," ostensibly a book review, in which he gives, within the compass of three pages, a short review of eleven chapters dealing with the history of physics. This he does by showing that history is the struggle to overcome two "dualisms," thus summing up in a nutshell both the history and the theoretical problems involved, so that it is a very easy transition to a theoretical exposition of his own systematic views.

[234] Despite the continuity of vision, however. there is a gradual shift in Vollenhoven's development from setting systematic problems against their historical background to dealing with the history of philosophy in systematic terms. It is this shift which Vollenhoven himself calls his transition from systematic to historical studies (*22:* 97; cf. already 6: 6), a slightly misleading representation of his development, since the historical interest was far from absent in the early period. The date of the shift is quite early-it coincides roughly with the first fundamental clarity with respect to his own systematics: the discovery of the pre-functional heart and the first elaboration of the scale of modalities in the late 1920s. In an article written in 1931, Vollenhoven writes (with reference to his own rejection of the term *theistic*)*:* "Since that time [the author] has not ceased to be intrigued by the question of the *classification of the opponents' basic themes* in terms of his own standpoint. *In the last years* the following terminology has proven to be rather serviceable . . ." (8: 194-italics mine). From this it appears that the question of classifying the history of philosophy had already occupied him for some years prior to 1931. The later "consistent problem-historical method," which acquired its present general shape during or shortly after the second world war, is a lineal descendant of this early attempt specifically directed towards charting the whole history of philosophy.

There is one article in Vollenhoven's early period which does deal specifically with the historiography of philosophy and is therefore of great interest for our purposes. It is entitled (2) "Some methodological comments concerning Dr. T. Hoekstra's *History of Philosophy,* I[6] and it appeared in 1922[7] Hoekstra (born in 1880), a fellow member of the Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) Church, had written a dissertation in philosophy under the neo-Kantian Windelband in 1906 and had

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[6] T. Hoekstra, *Geshidenis der Philosohie*, I (Kampden: Kok, 1921)

[7] It is worthwhile seeing this article against the background of the *Geformeerde* intellectual world of that time (of which *Stemmen des Tijds* was the journal). Hoekstra and Vollenhoven were two representatives of the small handful of young *Gereformeerde* scholars who had written dissertations in philosophy and who stood squarely in the tradition of Kuyper and bavinck (both of whom had just died). One cannot help wondering whether there was not some jockeying for position within this ne generation, especially with an eye to the chair in philosophy which would soon be vacant at the free university: Geesink was 77 years old at the that time.

taught at the Theological Seminary in Kampen since 1912. His history of philosophy was intended chiefly as a non-technical survey for the benefit of interested church members, written from a Reformed point of view. The first volume, dealing with ancient philosophy, appeared in 1921. Vollenhoven's criticism came down to this, that there was too much "transcendent" and not enough "immanent" criticism (2: 294)[8] in the book, with the result, first, that the inner "dialectic" of the history of philosophy was not brought out (2: 294)[9] and second, that skepticism and philosophical relativism were thereby abetted (2: 299-301).

This rather devastating judgment is buttressed by the following arguments. Philosophical criticism must always be both immanent and transcendent (2: 294)[10] but always in that order: rejection of a philosophical position from one's own standpoint (transcendent criticism) must always be based on the pointing out of an *internal* logical difficulty in the position criticized (immanent criticism). There are two kinds of in-[235] manent criticism: that which is directed against a given philosophy by its contemporaries, and that delivered by later thinkers (including historians of philosophy). Both are necessary for a well-founded transcendent criticism.

The first is necessary because it helps explain the dialectical career of philosophy. Vollenhoven writes:

> In the approaching of truth, the line which the course of human thought describes may not be a straight one, and not a zigzag either (because it is precisely the conception of a dialectic in reality which allows for other than exclusively logical oppositions); there is a line nevertheless (2: 296).

That is to say, the history of philosophy is concerned with *approaching truth - a* truth which is eternal and unchanging (2: 295) - and has *continuity,* that is, there is connection (*verband, innerlijke samenhang-2:* 296) between the succeeding systems and periods. They do not stand in isolation from each other" (los *naast elkaar-2:* 300). This is not a continuity of *progress* (straight line), not even via temporary

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[8] Ironically, the title of Hoekstra's dissertation had been *Immanente Kritik zur Kantischen Religionsphilosophie* (Kampen: Kok, 1906).

[9] I have not been able to discover with whom the distinction between "transcendent" and "immanent" critique originated. Both Hoekstra and Vollenhoven use the term (as does Dooyeweerd, *suo modo*), but neither defines them. Vollenhoven speaks of the "ordinary forma requirement" that both should be applied (*ibid.*). From the context it is plain that immanent criticism is such that points out logical inconsistency or terminological confusion *within* a given philosophy, on its own premises, whereas transcendent criticism highlights errors seen form the critic's own standpoit.

[10] Cf. 4: 388: 5: 54-9.

relapses (zigzag line), because there is more involved in philosophy than logic (namely, religious direction). Vollenhoven continues:

> And the course of this line is such that a psychologically explainable reaction to a specific point constantly allows one movement after the other to assert itself. If this reaction it not an absolute one (and where could such a reaction be found in the area of Greek-Hellenic: philosophy?), but opposes the older system or prevailing culture on one or more specific points, then the recognition of this dialectic will help to explain the rise of those new schools (2:296).

The continuous line of the history of philosophy, we may paraphrase, is articulated into schools and periods. These arise out of *reaction* to preceding schools and periods. Such a reaction always allows of a *psychological* explanation, that is, it is understandable as a reaction of man's soul (*psyche*) in the sense of the inner man, with all its more-than logical desires and aspirations. Since that soul is always a pagan soul in Greek philosophy, that is, not guided by the light of God's Word, its reaction will always be relative and one-sided, not absolute, lacking an absolute perspective from which to judge. The faults it sees and against which it reacts will always be "out of perspective" (and give occasion to a later generation to react against its one-sidedness).

It is in this context that contemporary immanent criticism is important: it is the logical, specifically philosophical aspect of the reactions which shape the history of philosophy. It is the key to preserving "the in-[236]trinsic connection even in cases of great conflict" (2: 296) and seeing "the unity which, for all their differences, binds two periods together" (2: 297). As an example, Vollenhoven adduces the transition from the Hellenic to the Hellenistic period in ancient philosophy, which Hoekstra simply reports as a change from theoretical to practical interests. Vollenhoven comments: "But we look in vain for the explanation why that ethical element came to the fore so suddenly, at least, a philosophical explanation. Surely political and cultural trends are not the only ones here" (2: 297). What he means by such a "philosophical explanation" is illustrated in what follows: "But there is no mention of the antipathy against the earlier intellectualism, nor of the continuing effect of the pragmatic influence of the Sophists, nor of the fact that logic and ethics had come close to each other in Plato" (2: 297). The change in philosophical periods must thus be seen as involving a change in attitude to the philosophical issues-for or against

intellectualism, pragmatism and the connection of ethics with logic. Such a change of attitude finds its expression in contemporary immanent criticism.

The other kind of immanent criticism-that given by later thinkers, including the historian-is especially important with a view to the readers. Not only does it show them how difficult and complicated the problems of philosophy are (thus fostering true scientific modesty), but it shows the philosophical position of the Christian philosopher-historian to be a positive alternative. By giving no immanent criticism, the historian presents all philosophies as standing unconnected beside each other -to which his own is then added as one more in the same loose series, with ultimately no more claim to being accepted than the others. This leads to skepticism and relativism. Instead, he must demonstrate, by pointing out the internal logical inadequacies of the systems of the past, that his own is more satisfactory.

I have dealt with this article in some detail not only because it shows how early Vollenhoven was already concerned with the methodology of the historiography of philosophy, but especially because it contains *in nuce* the principles of his own later historical work: the emphasis on the specifically philosophical, i.e. systematic, aspect; the view of the "dialectical" movement; the thesis that philosophy involves more than logical considerations; and the conviction that dealing with the history of philosophy should strengthen one's own standpoint.

The last theme is brought forward with considerable emphasis in Vollenhoven's 1926 inaugural: (*6*) *Logos and ratio: The relationship of the two in the history of Western epistemology.* At first sight one might be inclined to think that this study deals with a history of philosophical terms. Nothing could be farther from the truth: here again the systematic interest is so dominant that it is difficult to decide whether the long discourse about

the history of western epistemology should really be qualified as history. To begin with, the distinction between "logos" and "ratio" is a systematic one, taken from Vollenhoven's own epistemological investigations at that time." The thinkers of the past are dealt with according to the criterion: How have they accounted for the realities which Vollenhoven calls "logos" and "ratio"? Moreover, this investigation is not interested in the history of philosophy for its own sake, but it is subservient to the goal of elaborating a positive Christian epistemology, that is, of coming to *systematic* clarity. "For my goal is not at all to bring forward particularly some recently discovered historical details, but rather, my ideal, also in the investigation of history, has been the further development of my own systematics" (*6:* 6). The conviction that such a positive working out of a specifically Christian epistemology is

possible constitutes "the basis of the critique contained in the historical survey" (*6:* 66). Because this criticism is admittedly "transcendent criticism" (*6:* 6), the method he has followed is "pragmatic" (*6:* 6).

The same general point is made in Vollenhoven's first important book: (*9*) *The Necessity of a Christian Logic* (1932). Again, the title does not prepare one for the fact that more than two thirds of it is history for the sake of systematics. There are two chapters of unequal length: the first, by far the longer, is called "The struggle in the past" and deals with the history of logic from the pre-Socratics to the Reformation; the second is significantly entitled "The lesson of the past" and briefly sums up the basic systematic lines of a Christian logic. Vollenhoven introduces the systematic chapter with the words: "... for we do not seek knowledge concerning the past in order to show off or bother others with it, but in order to be instructed by the past" (9: 81).

The view is no different in the major work which followed in the next year: (*10*) *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy*. Again, by far the greatest part is historical, but systematic insight is the actual goal: a Scriptural systematics must be developed.

> For that purpose we must also consult the past. A person who neglects this is like someone who had been brought blindfolded into the middle of an unknown forest, and who tries in vain to orient himself. He can easily take the wrong path. On the other hand, a person who seriously investigates the past learns from the difficulties experienced by previous generations, from the solutions which they found, and from the mistakes which they made (*10:* 314).

It would be tedious to show how this view of the relation of history to systematics is maintained in Vollenhoven's later writings. The evidence so far adduced should be sufficient to show that this relation is a reciprocal [238] one, and that Vollenhoven's historical work was in the nature of a preparatory orientation for the sake of the actual task at hand-the working out of his own systematic conception.

Yet the slight shift of attention from systematics to history (of which he had spoken already in 1926)[11] continued. Gradually the emphasis begins to fall on the history of philosophy, not as an initial orientation for the benefit of systematics but as a goal in its own right. In the (12) "Provisional attempt at an ordering of philosophical conceptions" (1939), Vollenhoven writes that the goal of his

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[11] Cf. 6: 6.

historiographical work is merely "to illuminate our own times" (12: 4), though he does mention as a positive systematic result that the contemporary distinction between rationalism and irrationalism is relativized (*12: 76*). In his (*13*) "Guidelines for orientation in current philosophy" (1941), there is the same transitional ambivalence: on the first page he emphasizes the importance of systematics: "A provisional attempt along these lines *will* also, by way of side effect, prove to be fruitful for the study of the history of philosophy; yet it must follow not the historical but the systematic method" (*13: 3*). On the last pages of the same paper, however, he writes: "[May this study] be a stimulus to the study not only of systematics, but also of the history of philosophy. The latter, precisely when it is pursued in the light of Holy Scripture, has again and again yielded unexpected results" (13: 161-2).

When finally the (*18*) *History of Philosophy, I,* appears in 1950, the systematic interest has receded far into the background. Whereas he had spoken of his *Richtlynen* (1941) as being *"by way of side effect (zijdelings)* fruitful also for the study of the history of philosophy," he now calls his work a "history" which *"by way of side effect* provides the indispensable criterion for the scope of one's view" (*'zijdlings* den onmisbaren toetssteen voor de breedte van eigen visie biedt" *18:* 11-italics mine). This work is now (1950) *a history* of philosophy and the method is no longer "pragmatic" (*1926*) or "systematic" (1941) but *"probleem-historisch."* In 1961 he goes so far as to say of his work on the earlier Greek thinkers: "Whatever gains for systematics may be forthcoming from the study of the earliest period accessible to us have from the beginning been of secondary importance" (21: 10-11).

Methodological reflections

So much for the shift in emphasis from systematics to history. We should now ask what Vollenhoven has to say about his historiographical method once his interest has turned to history in its own right, since it is then that he begins to speak specifically of *probleemhistorische methode.* He speaks of this method chiefly in two places: in the beginning of his (18) [239] *History of Philosophy, I* (1950), and in his article (*21*) "The consistent problem-historical method" (1961).

Every philosophical "conception" is a combination of themes. Each theme, in turn, contains implicitly *a problem* (or complex of *problems-problematiek*) and the solution given to it. With this thesis Vollenhoven begins his *History of Philosophy,* I. The immediate task at hand, therefore, was to trace the history of the chief themes of philosophy, in order to be able to sketch their various

combinations against a well-illuminated background. "In this way I arrived at the problem-historical method" (*18: 6*).

Although the history of philosophy is too interesting to justify spending much time with methodological prolegomena (*18:* 14), Vollenhoven does make a few remarks under the heading "Method." The first is that the method followed in writing the history of philosophy must itself be *philosophical.* The methods of psychology or sociology are therefore necessarily inadequate.

The second remark comes to the heart of the matter. "Methode" (from the Greek word *meta-hodos*) in science always involves, besides the field of inquiry, an investigator of that field. This means that logical thinking always plays a role in the method of investigation, although it is not (except in the case of logic) the only factor. In the case of the historiography of philosophy, there is logical thinking not only on the side of the investigator (the historian), but also, in the philosophical problems and solutions of the past, on the side of the field of research. This should not lead to the conclusion, however, that the history of philosophy is a purely logical affair.

> For although the course of the history of philosophy cannot be conceived apart from the logical activity of earlier generations, yet there have appeared many other factors in that history, behind and beside the logical factors; besides religion, we can point, for example, to the influence of social life, art and politics in ancient times, and to the development of industry, technology and communications in the modern age. Consequently, there can be no question here of a purely logical process (*18: 14*).

This second "remark" on method (the third and last is about literary sources, and does not concern us in this context) merits closer study. The extremely compact text needs some elucidation. It should be realized that when Vollenhoven speaks of "method," there is in the background his early struggle against the "method-monism" of certain neo-Kantians, closely related to their discussions concerning concept formation (*Begrffsbildung*). The answer which Vollenhoven developed (and which became one of the cornerstones of his philosophy) was that a theory of scientific [240] methodology must recognize the radical diversity of ontological *Gegenstände* corresponding to the various special sciences. Against the methodological monism of the Marburg School, *a   pluralism* of method is to be maintained, which honors the unique character of each scientific field of research. The unity of the sciences lies in their *logical* character; their diversity in the variety of distinct "non-logical" fields with which this logical element is brought into synthesis. This synthesis of logical and

non-logical gives rise to the various types of scientific concept formation, corresponding to the diversity of modal *Gegenstände* (fields of inquiry). The case of logic is exceptional, since here concepts are formed of a *Gegenstand* which is itself logical.[12]

Furnished with this background material, we can perhaps illuminate Vollenhoven's terse comments on his method in dealing with the history of philosophy. Scientific "method" involves an investigator (i.e. a "scientist," one who is logically busy) and a field of research (i.e. *Gegenstand*). This *Gegenstand,* except in the case of logic, is *not* logical (i.e. it is non-conceptual, *niet begripsmatig*) – *at* least, that is the general rule. But there is one other exception besides logic: the *Gegenstand* in the case of the historiography of thought also has a logical element, namely, the philosophical problems and solutions. But, Vollenhoven hastens to add, that does not mean that the history of philosophy does not include extra-logical factors (religion, society, art, etc.).

We are now faced with a curious problem. Vollenhoven is dealing with the "History of Philosophy" in the sense of "a complete (*volledige*) *Historia Philosophiae*" (*18:* 6). The philosophical conceptions of that history lead him to the themes which are involved in them, and these in turn lead him to the *problems* of philosophy (with their solutions). Thus he arrives at the *problem-historical* method. Now, in the discussion of this method *qua* method, we are told that the problems (and solutions) of the history of philosophy are its logical element. The problem-historical method is thus an instance, as in the case of logic, of the logical coming into a synthesis with (= forming a concept of) something which is itself also logical. The method of logic and that of the historiography of philosophy are thus in principle the same. However, we are warned at the same time that there *is more* to the history of philosophy than the logical factor. There seems to be a disparity between the historian's method (which is exclusively logical) and his *Gegenstand* (which is more than logical).

The reader who is faced with this problem can, by patient rereading of the passages in question, come to a partial solution of the difficulty, although the text does not explicitly point the way. By keeping in mind Vollenhoven's distinction between philosophy as *activity* (philosophizing) and philosophy as *result* (system, conception), a way out seems to present itself. The historian of philosophy deals with both as his *Gegenstand:* his [241] "field of inquiry," Vollenhoven explicitly states, is "the history of philosophical thought and its results" (*18: 14*). On the basis of this distinction we could interpret Vollenhoven as saying that the problem-historical method applies to the conceptions (as *results* of philosophizing) while the extra-

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[12] Cf. 4: 5; and *17:* 14-17.

logical factors in the history of philosophy are restricted to the *activity* of philosophizing.

Whether this interpretation is correct or not, the initial difficulty remains: a historian is here pictured as using a method which is inadequate (or only partially adequate) to his *Gegenstand*. Even on the interpretation which distinguished conception as result from philosophizing as activity, it seems clear that the problem-historical method applies only to the first of these; another method would have to deal with that part of the historical *Gegenstand* which includes non-logical factors.

With this difficulty in mind, we may well look with expectation to the article entirely devoted to his method which Vollenhoven wrote eleven years later in *Philosophia Reformata*. After a brief sketch of how and in what philosophical climate his method arose (in which, incidentally, he denies any connection with former methodologies [*21:* 1], he mentions neither Hartmann nor Hönigswald and mentions Windelband in one breath with Ueberweg and Falckenberg [*21:* 6]), he comes to the point which interests us. Unfortunately, his remarks are again very brief: they belong to the short "preliminary considerations," preceding the "first concretization" which constitutes the body of the article, dealing with the method in action. These preliminary considerations deal with two questions regarding the delimitation of the field of inquiry. The second is of no concern to us, since it treats only the external restriction of Vollenhoven's work to Western philosophy.

It is the first question which shall have our attention here: it touches, as Vollenhoven remarks, "a fundamental point, namely, the respecting of the boundary between systematics and historical research in philosophy" (*21: 9*). Because of its importance, I shall quote the greater part *in extenso:*

> (1) The primary requirement for the delimitation of the history of philosophy as field of inquiry is clarity in regard to the mutual relationship between systematics and the study of the history of philosophy. This involves two questions: a methodological and an ontological one. (a) The methodological question touches the difference in procedure of the systematic philosopher and of the historian of philosophy. The former forms concepts which have reference (as long as he does not deal with epistemology and logic) in the first place to the non-conceptual (*het niet-begripsmatige*) in reality; the historian of philosophy, on the other hand (at least in his attempt to understand the results of previous thinkers) wants to form a concept (*zich een begrip vormen*) concerning matters which are themselves conceptual in character. Briefly put: the systematics of philosophy is concerned [242] with primary concepts; the study of its history, however, largely (*goeddeels*) with secondary.

(b) Here, as elsewhere, the methodological diversity is of course rooted in the ontic diversity of the fields of inquiry concerned. For systematics is the result of reflection on the structure of creatures and their ontic genesis. The study of the history of philosophy, on the other hand, deals with the genesis of a subdivision (*een onderdeel*) of human culture. I expect it is clear that history according to this conception is not purely functional, but touches man in his totality, i.e. as body and soul (*naar lichaam en ziel*).

The question at issue is clearly the delimitation of the history of philosophy as field of inquiry: the "definition," if you like, of the *Gegenstand* of the historiography of philosophy. As in the 1950 discussion, the question is put in the general context of the methodology of science and thus involves the ideas of concept and concept formation.

To define the *Gegenstand* of the historiography of philosophy, that philosophical discipline is contrasted with another-systematics. It is of fundamental importance that these two disciplines be clearly distinguished. They are discriminated first by their differing *methods* (*i.e.* by the different ways in which concepts are formed in them), and then by the *ontic* difference in *Gegenstiinde* in which the methodological difference is rooted. The argument can be schematically represented as follows:

		Philosophical Discipline	
		Systematics	Historiography
Concept Formation	Primary	The structure of creatures and their genesis	
	Secondary		The genesis of a subdivision of human culture

The way the scheme stands, the distinction between the two disciplines is indeed clear and exhaustive. However, the diagram is *not* complete. There is one exception under Systematics: epistemology and logic are branches of it which deal with what is already conceptual, so that their method is typified by secondary concept formation. There is also an exception under History, although it is not named. The historian of philosophy forms con-

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cepts of what is already conceptual, at least in his attempt to understand the
results of previous thinkers" (*21*: 9). That is why his concept formation is "largely"
secondary. Apparently there is a small part of his concept formation which does *not*
deal with what is itself conceptual (i.e. with what is non-conceptual) and is
therefore primary. In short, the neatness of the distinction between systematics
and history in philosophy has been destroyed. The diagram now becomes:

Philosophical Discipline		
	Systematics	**Historiography**
Primary	The structure of creatures and their genesis, *except*:	?
Secondary	The objects of epistemology and logic	The genesis of a subdivision of human culture at least "largely"; "at least in his attempt to understand the results . . ."

(Left axis label: **Concept Formation**)

The only thing we can say about the unknown part of the historical
Gegenstand is that it does *not* have to do with the philosophical results of the past
and that it does not call for the dominant (cf. "largely") method advocated by
Vollenhoven. In other words, it is that part of the *Gegenstand* which is not
"conception" (result of philosophy) and is not accessible to the problem-historical
method. It is, in fact, that same area for which we found the problem-historical
method inadequate in our discussion of the remarks in *History of Philosophy*, I.

 If we may assume that the two short passages dealing with the
methodological basis of the problem-historical method, though separated by
eleven years, may be interpreted in the light of each other (which we have every
reason to believe), we can draw some further conclusions. The historiography of
philosophy is a scientific discipline: it therefore has a specific *Gegenstand*. The
method to be followed by this discipline must be adapted to its *Gegenstand*. In this

case the *Gegenstand is* constituted by the activity of philosophizing ("philosophical thought," which is a "logical activity") and its result ("conceptions" which involve a combination of "problem solutions") (*18:* 5, 14). The problem is: What method is adequate for such *a Gegenstand?* That depends in the first instance on [244] whether the *Gegenstand is* conceptual or non-conceptual (whether it is of a, logical character or not). What is the case here? Are both the activity and the result of a conceptual character? It seems clear that the result (the "conception") is indeed conceptual, but is this also true of the *activity* of philosophizing? It is called a "logical activity" (*18:* 14), but can that be said to be "conceptual"? The 1950 text left us uncertain.[13] The upshot was therefore that the historical *Gegenstand is,* at least with reference to philosophy as result, of a conceptual character. The method of the historian dealing with this *Gegenstand* must thus be one geared to his forming concepts of a conceptual reality, "at least in his attempt to understand the *results* of previous thinkers" (*21:* 9-italics mine). This method, it would appear, is restricted to the *results* of philosophy in the past. The uncertainty touching this activity is thus resolved in favor of its non-conceptual character.

The following picture now emerges: the historical *Gegenstand is* constituted by two elements, i.e. activity (non-conceptual) and result (conceptual). For Vollenhoven, the latter is the major element, since the historian's method is "largely" geared to it. But that still leaves the minor element, which is treated as negligible. Very little is said about its positive character, and nothing about the method which can deal with it. Yet it is here that the actual activity of philosophizing takes place and that the extra-logical factors of the history of philosophy enter in-art and politics, commerce and society, etc. What kind of a method can deal with these? Vollenhoven, although he recognizes (in fact, emphasizes) the importance of these extra-logical factors, gives no answer to this question. The problem-historical method, which deals only with the "themes" found in "conceptions," i.e. with the conceptual result of philosophizing, is his dominant concern.

There is another point which strikes us in Vollenhoven's methodological comments. We found that the method of logic and epistemology, on the one hand, and the problem-historical method, on the other, are in principle the same: both are based on secondary concept formation. Wherein, then, do they differ, since they are referred to different disciplines? The first deals with the conceptual part of the *Gegenstand* of systematics, the second with the conceptual part of the

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[13] See above, pp. 240-1.

Gegenstand of historiography. Wherein, then, do these *Gegenstände* differ? It is not, as one might suppose, that one views the conceptual as abstracted from time and the other in its development through time: systematics also deals with genesis. Vollenhoven distinguished their respective *Gegenstände* as follows: systematics deals with "the structure of creatures and their ontic genesis," whereas historiography of philosophy deals with "the genesis of a subdivision of human culture" (*21:* 9). It is difficult to see at first glance just where the specific difference lies: both deal with genesis, both deal [245] with creatures (man, too, is a creature), both deal with what is ontic (he is describing the "ontic diversity of the fields of inquiry concerned") (21: 9). That leaves, as the distinctive difference, "structure" vs. "culture." This means, for our discussion, that the method of logic and epistemology is geared to the conceptual as *structure,* whereas the problem-historical method is geared to the conceptual as *culture.*

What does Vollenhoven mean by "structure" and "culture"? It is plain that they are mutually exclusive, and that culture is something specifically human and historical. Structure, on the other hand, is the subjective correlate of the structural law (*structuurwet*) which "is rooted in the command to exist at creation" (*wortelt in het ontstaansbevel bij de schepping—21: 11*). This gives us a clue that the answer to our question must be found in the distinction which Vollenhoven makes between "structural law" and "law for love" and their respective subjective correlates. This can be formulated briefly as follows: the structural law holds by virtue of creation and "is correlate with the structure and modal specification (*verbijzondering*) of all creatures," whereas the law of love "presupposes in the correlate creature not only creatureliness, but also a heart," and therefore holds for man (*21: 11*). *Besides* his creatureliness, man has a heart which can love or hate God and his neighbor; that is, his life is religion. That is why history, that peculiarly human phenomenon, is for Vollenhoven at bottom an affair of the heart, and all its manifestations (including culture) are fundamentally religious.

For our question this means that "structure" refers to creatureliness, "culture" (as part of history) to religion. The method of epistemology and logic therefore applies to the conceptual as structure, *that is, as creatureliness;* the problem-historical method applies to the conceptual as culture, that is, *as religion.*

It is difficult to see how this methodological distinction can be very strictly maintained. How can the concepts and judgments man forms be assigned to two different scientific studies, one of which deals with them and their development as conforming to the laws of creation, and the other with them as conforming (or not

conforming) to man's. basic religious task? Undoubtedly a distinction should indeed be made between structure and religious direction, also in the results of man's logical activity, but should these two moments in the conceptual be seen as the subject matter of two distinct disciplines, each with its own method? It seems odd that the systematic discipline of logic should not also deal with logical fallacies, but only with the analytical in its creatureliness, that is, apart from error. It seems, too, that the method of the historian of philosophy should differ from that of the logician in something more specific than in the added dimension of religious direction.

We may sum up our conclusions so far by saying that the problem-[246] historical method, arising out of a systematically directed interest in the history of philosophy, deals, according to Vollenhoven's own account (so far as we have been able to piece it together), with the history of philosophy exclusively in its strictly logical or analytic aspect (and within that aspect only with that part constituted by the *result* of logical activity), and that, as method, it seems to become practically indistinguishable from that of the systematic logician and epistemologist.

The historical environment

In the light of these conclusions, it is difficult to suppress the question: What is the specifically *historical* in this "problem-historical" method, if the extra-logical factors in the history of philosophy, such as social, economic and political conditions, are deliberately excluded? With this question in mind, it will be interesting to take a glance at Vollenhoven's most recent publication dealing with questions of method in the historiography of philosophy: the article (23) "Methodological pitfalls in the interpretation of Parmenides." This article is a critical discussion of the Parmenides interpretation of J. Mansfeld, and goes into great detail in the discussion of the fragments involved. We are not here concerned with the philological, chronological and exegetical detail but only with the remarks on method which Vollenhoven makes in this connection.

Vollenhoven's chief and fundamental objection to the interpretation of Parmenides given by Mansfeld is that it *is anachronistic:* it does not sufficiently take into account the course of the history of philosophy both before Parmenides and after him. Both must receive due attention, since Parmenides can only be understood in the light of his philosophical *predecessors* (including contemporaries), and to do that, the exegete-historian of today must realize that he himself stands in the

tradition of philosophy developed by Parmenides' *successors*. The danger of underestimating these two factors is that the historian may read into the texts of Parmenides philosophical themes which did not (in fact: *could not*) arise until much later, and therefore could not have come up in Parmenides' philosophical milieu. The result, in Mansfeld's case, is that he sees Parmenides primarily as a logician (whereas logic did not become a central concern in philosophy until Hellenism)-a logician, moreover, whose theory of logic shows a remarkable agreement with twentieth-century irrationalism. Vollenhoven's own interpretation, on the other hand, proceeds from the methodological assumption that the texts must be read *in immediate connection with the problems and solutions of their philosophical environment*. The result is that, where Mansfeld sees logic, Vollenhoven sees ontology; the crucial Fragment 2 is read by one as a [247] disquisition on the logic of propositions (*Aussagen-logik*), by the other as a polemic against Parmenides' contemporaries.

His own interpretation, Vollenhoven sums up, demonstrates "that an approach in terms of the history of pre-Platonic ontology is considerably more fruitful for the interpretation of the fragments than an approach in terms of modern thought" (23: 86).

If we consider this line of argument in the light of Vollenhoven's previous remarks on the methodology of the historian of philosophy, there is one thing that stands out: his criticism of Mansfeld's method is based on *other* methodological criteria than those which he has hitherto revealed. Had he judged Mansfeld in terms of his own previously formulated rule, namely, that the historian of philosophy must be concerned exclusively with the conceptual result of a past philosopher's analytic activity, he would have had little reason to find fault with him. For Mansfeld avoids the pitfalls of a psychologizing, or Marxist, or one-sidedly philological interpretation and adopts a strictly systematic-philosophical approach, just as Vollenhoven advocates. His fault lies not in the delimitation of his *Gegenstand* but in the neglect of "the required tying of the interpretation to the historical environment" (23: 86).

What is the meaning of this new methodological canon? That it is of the highest importance is evident from the last pages of the article, where Vollenhoven waxes eloquent in his insistence that the exegete-historian must not rest, though it take years, until the texts become understandable in terms of the problems of their environments (23: 111). But what does it mean that the interpretation must at all costs be "tied" or "bound" to this environment? The answer must be sought in Vollenhoven's own interpretation of Parmenides, which places the latter

squarely in the philosophical world of sixth century Greece. The ties which "bind" him to that world (and which Vollenhoven methodically seeks and finds in the texts) are the ties of philosophical kinship and dissent. The ties of kinship are those which link him with Anaximander and Xenophanes; those of dissent join him in battle with Pythagoreanism and subjectivism.

There are a number of questions which arise at this point, which it will be wise to pose and attempt to answer, since we are here at one of the half-obscured presuppositions of Vollenhoven's method. They touch his view of *verbanden* (translated as "ties," "bonds" or "connections") in the history of philosophy. Again we shall have to gather hints and clues spread throughout his writings.

I. In what sense can we speak of a "tie of dissent"? Does not the fact that Parmenides polemicized *against* subjectivism invalidate the assertion that he was "bound" to his milieu? We are reminded here of a remark made by Vollenhoven in his review of Hoekstra in 1922, with reference to

the "dialectic" of history: "If we recognize it, then we are in a better position to preserve the intrinsic connection even in cases of great conflict" (2: 296). This is an idea which Vollenhoven has never abandoned and is, in fact, one of the mainstays of his method. Behind every philosophical difference he looks for the common ground which makes it possible. So he writes in 1961, with respect to the battle between subjectivism and objectivism in Greek thought, that we must not see this anachronistically in the light of modern philosophy, and then:

> If on the other hand we follow the problem-historical method, then there emerges, from behind the dispute which drove apart the parties involved, what both had in common, namely: first, the thesis that the law is to be found within the cosmos (and more particularly, within the correlation of subject and object), and second: the *problem,* which is understandable only in terms of this basis, whether the law lay in the subject or in the object (*21*: 13).

In other words, to use the problem-historical method means not only to limit one's investigations to the conceptual results or conceptions of the past but also to trace the *connections* between these conceptions in terms of their common framing of the problem (*probleemstelling*). Philosophical differences are not, to put it in logical terms, "contradictory" but "contrary": they always pre-suppose a common basis which makes comparison and contrast possible. This common basis is the

formulation of the problem, and the comparison and contrast establishes *verbanden.*

In the case of Parmenides, one of the most important connections to be shown is that which situates him with respect to the major philosophical issue of the day-for or against subjectivism. But this is an issue which has long ago become a "dead letter" in the history of philosophy: the struggle has long since been decided in favor of subjectivism. The result is that a historian who stands in an age-old tradition of subjectivism very lightly overlooks this debate, since it no longer presents a live issue for himself. This is the mistake Mansfeld has made, in Vollenhoven's view.

To interpret Parmenides correctly, the same procedure ("method") of asking back to a shared putting of the problem must be followed for other basic philosophical issues as well, thus bringing other *verbanden* to light. Besides the question of the place of the law, which shows Parmenides, as an objectivist, to stand in a relation of kinship to Anaximander, Anaxagoras and Alcmaeon, and in a relation of dissent to the dominant tradition of subjectivists (notably Heraclitus and Xenophanes), there are three other fundamental problems which divided the philosophers of early Greece and in terms of which other *verbanden* of Parmenides to his predecessors and contemporaries are revealed. The most important of these is the question of unity-in-diversity, which sets monists against [249] dualists. Parmenides chooses for the dualist position, and consequently sides with Xenophanes and Alcmaeon against the majority of his contemporaries. Then there is the issue for or against the view of man as a microcosm, which clashes with the traditional universalistic view. Here Parmenides chooses *for* the tradition and against such men as Alcmaeon and Anaxagoras. Finally, a whole series of bonds of sympathy and antipathy is set up with respect to the touchy issue of mythology. Here again Parmenides sides with Xenophanes, whose violent reaction pours scorn on the myths and goes to the opposite extreme of relativizing all coming-to-be in favor of a changeless structure. This affinity entails a double disagreement: both with mythologizing thinkers, who accept a certain mythological framework, and with the more moderate rejecters of mythology, who do not throw out the baby genesis with the mythological bath water.

The result of situating Parmenides in terms of these four fundamental philosophical problems of his day is that a complex of positive and negative relationships is revealed, which neatly pinpoints his position in the history of Greek philosophy until that time. It presupposes, of course, that each of his

predecessors and contemporaries has been analyzed in the same way, so that their *verband* with Parmenides, with respect to each of the four problems, can be determined with a fair degree of certainty. It is the job of the historian of philosophy to track down these complicated connections: "a history of philosophy gives its author's view of the conceptions of others concerning these points [i.e. the basic problems of philosophy] *and of the connections in which these conceptions stand to one another"* (*20:* S8—italics mine).

II. The question arises: Just how *real* are these connections? Our formulation in the preceding paragraph was not strictly correct, since not the connection of Parmenides to his predecessors must be traced but those of Parmenides' *conception* to the *conceptions* of his predecessors. We must not forget the methodological restriction to the analytical result. But are the *verbanden* between conceptions more than abstract logical relations? Are they also concrete *historical* bonds? Does the fact that Parmenides was an objectivist and therefore stood in a relationship of affinity or kinship to Anaximander, the father of objectivism, mean that he knew Anaximander, or had read his writings, or had at least heard of him?

On this point, Vollenhoven is ambivalent. On the one hand, he speaks of the *verbanden* as being no more than "correspondences and differences" (*overeenkomsten en verschillen*) and clearly refers to *systematic* philosophical correspondence and difference, which is of a strictly logical character. A striking instance of this is given in his *Method* article, where he discusses some examples of wrongly construed *verbanden* in the history of philosophy. Such a misconstrued connection is the one commonly [250] postulated between Berkeley and Hume, since in Vollenhoven's view their conceptions differed in almost every respect (*21:* 6). Yet Vollenhoven must be aware of the fact that Berkeley was, in actual history, one of the major intellectual influences on Hume. This would lead us to suppose that Vollenhoven makes a clear distinction between systematic and historical connections, and that the historian of philosophy is only concerned with the first. This conclusion is borne out by his remark, directed against Heyman's historiographical classification, that it is incorrect to suppose that psychomonism is derived from parallelism *either historically or systematically*. "Nor is materialism, in whatever sense it is taken, a one-sided derivate, *either historically or systematically,* of parallelism" (*21: 7,* 8—italics mine; cf. also *21:* 13).

On the other hand, we find the *verbanden* of which Vollenhoven speaks being presented as real historical connections. Immediately after his 'discussion of

the relation between Berkeley and Hume (the fourth such example), he writes: "In all these cases the positing of a non-existent connection of course meant a failure to recognize the *real historical relation* and a hindrance in the inquiry after it" (*21:* 6- italics mine). This certainly seems to indicate the equivalence *of verband* and "real historical relation," which would mean that in Vollenhoven's view, there was no real historical relation between Berkeley and Hume. This must be a mistake, or else *historical is* used in a very odd sense. We are more likely to understand Vollenhoven if, at least for the moment, we stick to the purely logical meaning of *verband*.

III. Is there no difference in kinds of connection between conceptions? To find the answer to that, the following passage merits attention:

> Now there exist a great variety of such conceptions. But the history of philosophy is more than this collection. *For these conceptions all have connections with each other, and that in two ways.* In answering the question concerning the place of the law, one solution came up after the other, so that a *succession* of time-streams arose. On the other hand, from an early date different answers to the question concerning vertical structure stand *side by side* within a single time-stream. Thus succession and simultaneity here go hand in hand (20: 44—first italics mine).'[14]

This passage is particularly illuminating, not only because it emphasizes again that the multiplicity of philosophical conceptions, rather than representing simply a disconnected collection, constitutes a *coherent* whole, but also because it makes a basic distinction of *two kinds of* coherence or *verband* among conceptions. It appears that the solutions to the basic problems of philosophy do not all have the same relation to [251] historical time: the answer to the question about the place *of* the law has a special character in that it binds together an otherwise heterogenous group *of* conceptions into the *historical* unity of the "time-stream" (*tijdstroming*). The other answers-to-problems (here lumped together by Vollenhoven as touching the "vertical structure" of

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[14] We should point out here, for the sake of clarity, that Vollenhoven's use of the words simultaneous and *successive* must not be taken too strictly in a merely chronological sense. Time-streams overlap to such an extent that they are sometimes practically congruent in time; such is the case in pre-Socratic subjectivism and objectivism. The result is that a particular type of conception sometimes has a representative in a "later" time-stream chronologically *before* the same type of conception is represented in the "earlier" time-stream. A striking case is that of Kierkegaard, whom Vollenhoven places as a "contemporary" of Sartre, in the time-stream "existentialism."
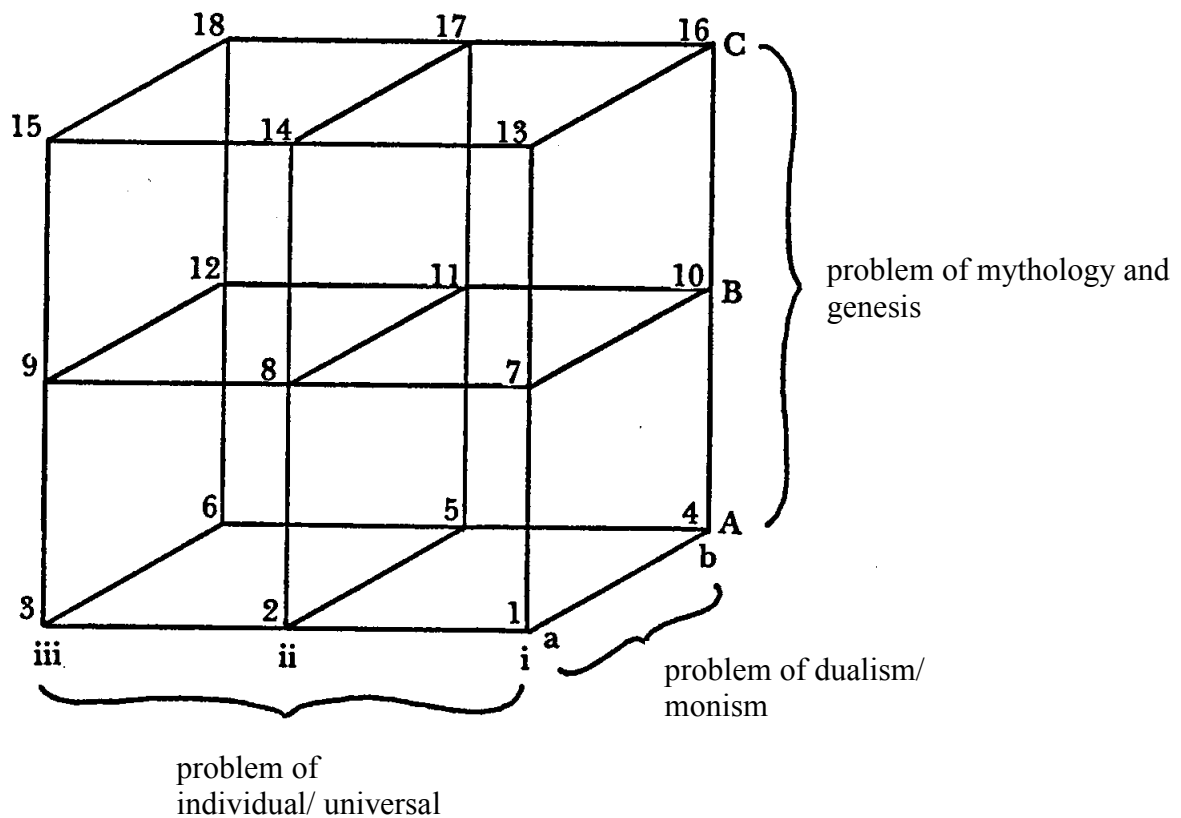
things) do not have this historical cohesive force but are relegated to co-existing *within* a given time-stream.

We now observe the following remarkable state of affairs. Whereas the answer to the problem of the law varies in each succeeding phase of philosophical history, so that as many different answers have been given as there have been different time-streams, the answers to the other basic philosophical problems are very limited in number and recur in every new historical period. The number of time-streams provisionally distinguished by Vollenhoven in 1962 was sixty-one, which entails an equal number of different solutions to the problems of the place of the law. In contrast, the problems regarding mythology and the individual have each traditionally found only three different basic solutions, and that of unity-in-diversity no more than two. There seems to be something timeless about these few last fundamental alternatives-a timelessness which contrasts sharply with the restlessness which characterizes the never-ending attempt by succeeding generations to anchor their certainty in yet another foundation. Ever since the dawn *of* Western philosophy, Vollenhoven writes, the battle over the place *of* the law "has not come to rest" (20: 39), whereas the basic combinations *of* the answers, after once having arisen, have persisted "throughout the changes of all succeeding time-streams" (20: 45).

The two kinds *of verband,* then, which bind together the multiplicity of philosophical conceptions into a coherent whole, are, on the one hand, the contemporaneous bond *of* a shared law-answer which unites the conceptions *of* one time-stream into *a historical* unity, and on the other hand the bond *of* permanence which joins specific combinations *of* other philosophical answers into the trans-historical *systematic* unity *of* continuous types.

A graphic illustration

By way *of* intermezzo, we shall now make an attempt to illustrate the preceding and what follows by an image *of* our own. We have said that Vollenhoven situates a philosophical conception according to the answers it gives to four primary ontological problems. If we leave aside one of these problems, that of the place of the law, it is possible to "place" every conception on a three-dimensional graph, of which each axis represents the scale of possible answers to one problem. Such a graph would look like this:

Problem of mythology and genesis

   A. Mythologizing (theogono-cosmogenic)

   B. Cosmogono-cosmological

   C. Purely cosmological

Problem of dualism/monism

   a. Dualism

   b. Monism

Problem of universal/ individual

   i. Universalism

   ii. Partial universalism

   iii. Individualism

Each intersection represents one basic type of conception. The one numbered "1," for instance, is the basic type of universalistic mythologizing dualism: it is represented, according to Vollenhoven, by such disparate thinkers as Musaeus, Pythagoras, Marcion, Manichaeism, the Cabala, and Sorel, to name only a few. A less esoteric basic type is that

numbered "10": [253] it represents the position of materialists throughout the ages, from Thales and Democritus to Holbach and Sartre.

The reason we can assign figures from such different times to the same basic position on the graph is that we have abstracted from the problem of the law, which governs the different historical periods of the history of philosophy. In the absence of a four-dimensional graph, we can include the time-streams in our pictorial representation only by repeating the framework of basic types for every one. Each graph could then be labeled according to the different answers given to the law problem. It is not until then that they could also be *dated:* the graph as it stands is trans-historical.

If we use this illustration to elucidate the argument so far, we can say the following. The primary "tie of kinship" is that which unites all the positions of a single "dated graph" (time-stream): they share a common answer to the law problem. Secondary ties of kinship unite positions on the same "plane" of the graph: the positions numbered "1" to "6," for example, are all mythologizing and thus agree in their answer to the mythology problem. As for the "ties of dissent," their binding force lies in the fact that all the positions drawn *accept the alternatives built into the scheme:* they share a common framing of the problem. In terms of the distinction between simultaneous and successive *verband,* we can say that the first refers to the unique "color" which every time-stream gives to the graph, whereas the second denotes the constant structure of the graph itself, which persists through the changes of time and "color."

Perhaps we will be forgiven if we distinguish between "boxes" (dated graphs) and the Box (the graph itself) in this connection. We can then recapitulate by saying that bonds of kinship and dissent are positive and negative forms of inter-box and intra-Box relationships (successive and simultaneous *verbanden*). Together they constitute the history of the Box.

The "problematic" and Greek philosophical origins

What in my illustration is somewhat facetiously dubbed "the Box" is referred to by Vollenhoven as "the problematic arising out of the Greek environment," which he then also calls "this *thought-form*" (*denkvorm*) (*21:* 32). It is this idea of a Western *"thought-form" which is* the key to his approach to the history of philosophy. It will serve as a guideline in the remainder of our discussion of Vollenhoven's idea of *Problemgeschichte.*

It is not without significance that Vollenhoven refers to this *denkvorm* as being characterized by its Greek origin. His thought is dominated by the fundamental maxim

"As the twig is bent, so grows the tree"-or, in his own words: "The simple consideration that what is later in a historical

[254]

process is shaped, if not completely, yet in great measure by what precedes" (*21: 10*). *His* intense concentration on early Greek philosophy and its origins is rooted in the conviction that the problems and alternatives of twentieth century philosophy received their decisive formulation in the three classical centuries of Greek civilization. We will do well to sketch briefly Vollenhoven's view of the first rise of Greek philosophy. (The following is a rather free translation of Vollenhoven's sketchy systematic account.)

The "problematic" (i.e. the theoretical universe of discourse in terms of which philosophical answers are sought) or "thought-form"• of Western philosophy did not, like Minerva, spring full-grown from Zeus' head but showed a gradual development. This is why Vollenhoven begins his history of philosophy with the half-legendary figure of Musaeus, who functions as a representative of the dim mythological past out of which Greek theoretical thought developed. Though little is known about him, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty (if it were only by analogy with other primitive tribal cultures) that his thinking was subjectivistic, universalistic, mythologizing, and dualistic. It should be noted that these designations have meaning only in *opposition to* later positions which challenged these aspects of primitive thought. The first such challenge, in Vollenhoven's description of the course of events, was made by Hesiod, who is the first thinker on record to question the primary and fundamental dualism of gods and mortals: he became the first monist. With that, one dimension of the Box was established, and every succeeding thinker had to come to terms with (the tradition of) this alternative. In the century after Hesiod, the sixth before Christ (the age in which Greek philosophy is generally supposed properly to begin), new oppositions to the traditional world of thought were posited in rapid succession. Thales did Hesiod one better by not only adopting his monism but also calling into question the mythological framework of both his predecessors. So violent was his reaction against mythologizing thinking, with its emphasis on cosmogony and theogony, that he posited all coming-to-be to have but secondary importance-an extreme position which was soon moderated by his fellow Milesian and younger contemporary Anaximenes, who adopted a middle position with respect to mythology (rejecting it in itself but not the genetic element it contained), so that the three fundamental alternatives on another axis of the Box were established. At the same time, Anaximenes opened up another dimension in the thought-world of the Greeks, by making problematic a presupposition shared by all his predecessors -their

universalism. He chose for the recognition of the individual as a microcosm, thus setting up the opposition universalism vs. partial universalism on the third axis of the Box. No sooner had Anaximenes opened this fundamental new perspective than a third Milesian, Anaximander, at-[255]

tacked an even more fundamental presupposition of all *his* predecessors: he gave a critique of their shared conviction that the law lay in the ontological *subject*. In his view, the *object* was the anchor of the constancy in the world. In other words, by revolutionizing the idea of the place of the law, he inaugurated an entirely new philosophical movement—the time-stream objectivism, in opposition to that of subjectivism.

So we see that at the very dawn of Greek philosophy, a complex system of polar alternatives has already taken shape—a system which is the prototype of the Box as we have sketched it. This prototype remains the "thought-form" of sixth century philosophers after the Milesian pioneers: the further subjectivists Heraclitus and Xenophanes, for example, as well as the objectivists Anaxagoras and Parmenides, choose for existing alternatives within the established scheme. The only exception is Pythagoras, who initiates a maverick movement within objectivism of such importance that it constitutes a new time-stream-but the rudimentary Box is left untouched.

It is in the fifth century that the existing system of alternatives is broken through-at least in one respect. The Sophists, led by Protagoras, refuse to accept the traditional alternatives universalism and partial universalism as answers to the problem of the individual. They reject both as horns of a false dilemma and choose for a third solution-individualism. With that, the basic form of the Box was complete-a form which none of 'the subsequent greats of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy (in spite of important innovations in other respects) ever transcended. Nor did the advent of Christianity bring any fundamental change in this regard: the conceptions of all the great Christian thinkers, both orthodox and heretical, adapted themselves to the traditional scheme of Greek thought. Each succeeding generation perpetuated and corroborated this powerful intellectual tradition, passing it on unchanged to the Middle Ages and modern times.

The preceding thumbnail sketch is of necessity oversimplified, but it gives, I believe, the basic outline of Vollenhoven's conception of the history of Western philosophy. To understand it as a product of the problem-historical method, the following should be observed.

In the first place, we must not forget the initial restriction to the conceptual: the alternatives given on each axis of the Box are *logical* alternatives, based on

different *analytical* insights into the world at large (e.g. the recognition of the independent existence of individuals or objects). This means that the movement in the history of philosophy is always a matter of immanent criticism, in which only analytical considerations play a role. To take an example: if there were evidence that Anaximander, in his independent position vis-à-vis his fellow Milesians Thales and Anaximenes, was strongly motivated by ambition or jealousy, this would [256] be irrelevant for the course of history as Vollenhoven describes it. The only thing that counts for the problem-historical method is the fact that Anaximander, under whatever influence or by whatever course, came to the (real and valuable) analytical insight that objects are ontically irreducible to subjects, and so introduced, by his criticism of a weak point in subjectivism, an important new theoretical option into the Greek philosophical world. This restriction to the analytical has the positive side that Vollenhoven constantly pictures new alternatives as being based on valid analytical distinctions which explain and (partially) justify a theoretical innovation. In other words, he has not forgotten his own ideal of 1922 that the continuous line of the history of philosophy should be described in terms of a "dialectic" which is explained by contemporary immanent criticism.

This brings us to the question of intellectual continuity in the history of philosophy. There is first the kind of continuity which makes it impossible, or at least highly improbable, that Anaximenes should have adopted the philosophical position he did without the preceding steps taken by Hesiod (monism) and Thales (rejection of myth). "The break of a succeeding generation with the previous one is never complete," writes Vollenhoven (23: 111). Few thinkers incorporate more than one philosophical revolution in their conception. In fact, the vast majority do not even have that one break with the tradition in their thought, being content to combine existing options into a new combination. This is the guiding principle of Vollenhoven's treatment of Plato's intellectual development: apart from the one great discontinuity represented by his realism (based on the valid insight that the law must be sought neither in the subject nor in the object), Plato's thought never moves outside the intellectual horizon of his predecessors, and the course of his development is circumscribed by a comparatively short trajectory within a refined version of the Box. The same applies to the development of Aristotle, in Vollenhoven's view-with one remarkable exception: midway in his career he makes a triple

shift in orientation, preserving the continuity with his past only in the fact that he remained a partial universalist. But before and after this spectacular and inexplicable about-face in mid-career (Vollenhoven speaks of "a virtually complete break" -21: 23), the continuity of his thought is broken only by relatively minor changes.

But the question of historical continuity (in Vollenhoven's specifically *conceptual* sense) has a more striking side for the casual observer: it touches the continuity of the Greek "thought-form" itself. How is it possible that the first time-stream of Greek philosophy should already show "the six basic types of philosophy, *which govern the subsequent course of history?"* (19: 4-italics mine). Closely related to this question is the fact that, in Vollenhoven's view, it is in principle to be expected that each position in

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the Box will be "realized" in each succeeding time-stream. Though he explicitly denies that this *must* be the case in every instance (*21:* 32), in practice his method often involves not resting until it is shown that a given type has, in fact, been *uitgekristalliseerd* (*20:* 38) in a specific time-stream. Once a type of conception has arrived on the scene of history, it does not leave it again (20: 45; cf. 21: 15), so that every position of the Box is likely to reappear in every generation.

Comparison and evaluation

In an attempt to understand this highly unusual view, we may compare it to the linguistic theory (as formulated by de Saussure) of *langue* as opposed to *parole*. *Langue* is the unconscious system of linguistic (phonetic, syntactic and semantic) "oppositions" which constitutes the "structure" of a particular language (e.g. Latin or French) and which is passed on by tradition from generation to generation. *Parole,* on the other hand, is the concrete speech in a language as it is actually spoken. It is as an unconscious system of oppositions perpetuated by tradition that the concept *langue* (or that of "structure" generally in contemporary structuralism) can serve as an illustration of what Vollenhoven means by the Greek "problematic" or "thought-form." It is, first of all, "unconscious," that is to say, implicit, presupposed, taken for granted, unchallenged. It is also a system of "oppositions," that is, of polar and correlative alternatives which are defined in terms of each other. For example, monism

derives not only its permanence and vitality but its very meaning from its polemical relation to dualism. Thirdly, the Greek "thought-form" is quite naturally passed on through the succession of philosophical generations -that is, it is perpetuated by tradition. (Vollenhoven notes that this is partly due to the influence of philosophical "schools" -20: 44-5).

The Greek "mind," then, in the sense of the assumed complex of philosophical alternatives, is like a natural language which children learn unquestioningly from their parents-and which is, in fact, the condition for mutual intelligibility. This language, once learned at the beginning of Greek culture, has been spoken ever since by the thinkers of Western civilization. Seen in this light, it is not so difficult to imagine that within every historical time-stream, the latent possibilities of the shared thought-world should recur.

It bears repetition that this analogy is entirely our own:[15] it is not our intention to show that Vollenhoven has a "structuralist" approach to the history of philosophy, but only to illustrate what appears to be a basic idea in Vollenhoven's version of *Pro blemgeschichte.*

We should add, too, that our representation of the Box was simplified [258] for the purpose of illustration. It represents only the basic framework of one pair and two triads of basic philosophical options, whereas a much finer differentiation is possible *within* these alternative problem solutions. There appear, for instance, to be two distinct varieties of partial universalism: one "horizontal" and one "vertical" in orientation. But the greatest differentiation is possible on the axis of monism and dualism, and it is this possible diversity which is taken by Vollenhoven as his principle of typological classification. The basic philosophical types are seen primarily as different kinds of monism or dualism, systematically discriminated and arranged according to the modal level of their primary ontological division of reality. The result of these and further refinements is that the Box of our illustration would become very complicated indeed and would have to accommodate several dozen distinct types on the monism-dualism axis. This would defeat the purpose of the illustration and cause us to lose sight of the fundamental simplicity of the "problematic" underlying the multiplicity of types. For all that, we must bear in

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[15] It is interesting to note, however, that Vollenhoven himself has used the image of language in this connection. With reference to the synthesis of Old Testament themes with pagan philosophy in Philo's thought, he wrote in 1933: "But when disobedient children of the covenant spoke the speech of Ashdod to such an extent, is it to be wondered at that the strangers and sojourners could not learn the language of Canaan?" (10: 114; with a note referring to Nehemiah 13:24).

mind that the historical development of this differentiation into sub-options ("broadening" and "unfolding of the problematic" -19: 7, 44; cf. *21:* 19, 33 and 24: 71) plays an important role in Vollenhoven's view of the history of philosophy.

We come now to another very startling aspect in Vollenhoven's conception of a Greek "thought-form." It is this, that he alone has broken that spell, cast by the early Greeks, which has bewitched the philosophers of the West until this day. The reason for this is that the Greek "thought-form" is rooted in paganism, whereas Vollenhoven's philosophy is radically Scriptural. Only by subjecting itself consciously and wholeheartedly to the Word of God can philosophy escape from the pagan "problematic" of Western thought thus far.

The conclusion that Vollenhoven himself stands outside the Box appears from the fact that he does not, with one exception, accept as valid the *probleemstellingen* which determine its structure, and thus cannot choose for the existing alternatives. The choice between dualism and monism is a false dilemma which must be rejected by the Christians (20: 45; cf. *21:* 16; *22:* 128). The same applies to the trilemma universalism/ partial universalism/ individualism (*18:* 40-1, 100; *cf. 19: 3*). Only in the case of the trilemma touching the myth is it legitimate to choose: the myths, being by definition paganistic, are to be rejected, as is the extreme reaction against them which relativizes all "genesis" (20: 45). That leaves the cosmogono-cosmological answer as the legitimate alternative.[16] As for the fourth (actually first) fundamental problem of philosophy, the question of the place of the law, the alternative solutions given by subjectivism, objectivism and realism are all to be rejected (*19: 14; 20:* 39, 42).

To place Vollenhoven in relation to the Box would mean extending two of the axes to allow for an additional answer. It is a pity that a fourth [259] axis, that of the law problem, cannot be included in the scheme, since it would demonstrate in an even more striking way how radical, in Vollenhoven's view, is the break of Scriptural philosophy with tradition. It would show that the most momentous decision with respect to the problem of the place of the law had been taken long before Greek philosophy began: in the primeval rejection of God's Word-revelation. All the thinkers of ancient paganism are characterized by the fact that they "hold down the Word-revelation in unrighteousness" (*18:* 18). Vollenhoven also speaks of "religious repression" in this connection (19: 1). The result of this deep-seated repression is that God is lost sight of,

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[16] Vollenhoven nowhere explicitly makes this point. Asked about it in private conversation, he agreed with the inference.

the religious law of love forgotten, and the structural law sought within the cosmos. This is first sought in the subject (subjectivism), then in the object (objectivism), and finally, with Plato and some of his disciples, outside both (realism). This development is one of *progress* within paganism (20: 39), although Plato's realism is still clearly un-Biblical, since his *ideai* are models, not norms (*19:* 14; 20: 39). After this "highest point" (*19:* 18), we see in the history of philosophy "a fateful change" (20: 39), beginning with Aristotle. This momentous shift is the anti-realistic return to subjectivism, which has dominated philosophy ever since. The result is that modern philosophy "is the precipitate of an age-long process, in which Western European thought has moved gradually but consistently in a subjectivistic direction" (21: 13).

Unlike the basic answers charted in the Box, the various solutions given to the law problem do not repeat themselves in history. The classical centuries of Greek philosophy saw the comparatively brief struggle between the three chief alternative answers given in paganism, out of which subjectivism emerged victorious. The subsequent controversies which ruled the differences of later time-streams were therefore basically concerned with side issues, while they all agreed in their rejection of objectivism and realism. The conflict between rationalism and irrationalism in our own time, for example, is thus a mere tempest in a teapot-an internal skirmish among factions of the winning party, long after the crucial battle has been decided (20: 40-2). A radically Scriptural philosophy, which has oriented itself well in the history of philosophy, stands above such contending parties of the modern age and refuses to take sides. Only it can be truly "impartial" (20: 47). With the help of the problem-historical method, the Christian thinker can be rescued from the insidious influence of a long and powerful pagan tradition.

With this we have come full circle. We began and we end the discussion of Vollenhoven's idea of *Problemgeschichte* by pointing to the *systematic* interest which informs it, its subordination to the task of developing a positive philosophical systematics of his own. Though it may sometimes seem as if Vollenhoven has lost sight of his original goal and has [260] made his problem-historical method an end in itself, his approach to history continues to bear the unmistakable mark of its systematic intent. This explains his focus on the conceptual and his interest in the first, decisive period of Western philosophy. His method is thus best understood as the tool for clearly tracing and illuminating the pagan physiognomy of European philosophy, the better to develop positively new perspectives in the light of Scripture. If his methodological restriction to the analytical aspect of history

makes him the philosopher's historian of philosophy, the emphasis *on* the pagan "thought-form." in that history marks him as the *Calvinist* philosopher's historian of philosophy.

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