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Contours of Unity and Diversity: Dooyeweerd's Ground Motives and the Challenge of Philosophical Dualisms

Morne Diederiks (PhD Education)

Lecturer (Philosophy), Akademia

ABSTRACT

The enduring tension between unity and diversity has shaped Western philosophical and theological reflection from classical metaphysics to contemporary debates about identity, authority, and social order. This article examines how key philosophical traditions have configured the relation between the one and the many, and assesses whether Herman Dooyeweerd's reformational creation–fall–redemption ground motive offers a more coherent alternative to the dualisms that repeatedly emerge within these traditions. Through a historical-philosophical analysis of Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and postmodern thought, the study shows that attempts to secure unity immanently within creation consistently generate unresolved tensions, oscillating between reductionist unity and fragmentary plurality. These patterns are traced to deeper religious ground motives that structure thought prior to theoretical reflection.

Building on Dooyeweerd's theory of ground motives, the article argues that the Greek form–matter motive, the medieval nature–grace synthesis, and the modern nature–freedom dialectic are all structurally dialectical, unable to integrate unity and diversity without hierarchy, compartmentalisation, or fragmentation. In contrast, the biblical creation–fall–redemption motive provides an integrative framework by grounding unity transcendentally in the Creator and affirming diversity as law-structured differentiation within creation, further articulated through the principle of sphere sovereignty. The contemporary relevance of this framework is demonstrated through a critical engagement with Two Kingdoms theology as a modern theological expression of the same unresolved unity–diversity tension. The article concludes that Dooyeweerd's reformational philosophy offers a more coherent and normatively integrated response to both historical and contemporary dualisms.

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CONTACT

morne.diedericks@akademia.ac.za

Problem Statement and Research Question

The enduring tension between unity and diversity has shaped Western thought from classical metaphysics to contemporary debates concerning identity, authority, and equality. Throughout the history of philosophy and theology, intellectual traditions have repeatedly oscillated between projects that seek to secure a dominant principle of unity at the expense of plurality and approaches that affirm diversity in ways that fragment shared moral, cultural, and theological horizons. This unresolved tension continues to surface in contemporary Western culture, where expressive individualism increasingly understands the self as self-constituting and internally defined, thereby weakening inherited forms of communal and ecclesial unity while simultaneously imposing new ideological norms concerning identity and recognition (Trueman, 2020:40–41; 61–67). At the same time, critics of liberal modernity point to a paradox in which diversity is rhetorically celebrated, yet powerful political and social forces press communities and traditions into a homogenising public order (Goosen, 2015:305–306).

Theologically, similar patterns emerge within contemporary ecclesial and ethical debates. The discourse of "tolerance" has been reformulated in ways that treat competing truth-claims as functionally equivalent, marginalising confessional Christian commitments and producing a new form of ideological uniformity under the guise of pluralism (Carson, 2012:13–15). As a result, discussions concerning authority, gender, equality, and hermeneutics often proceed based on implicit and unexamined assumptions regarding the relation between the one and the many. Some theological approaches tend to absolutise unity, resulting in totalising institutional or ideological structures, while others absolutise plurality, leading to fragmentation or radical autonomy. From a reformational perspective, this recurring pattern reflects the tendency of non-integrative frameworks to oscillate between collectivism and individualism when they lack a coherent grounding for unity and diversity (Rushdoony, 1971:16).

A contemporary illustration of this unresolved tension can be observed within certain expressions of Two Kingdoms theology. Although often motivated by principled concerns to protect the gospel from reduction to social or political activism, this theological framework introduces a structural division between a sacred, ecclesial sphere governed by Scripture and a secular, public sphere understood to possess its own integrity and normative order (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008:62). In practice, this "grace alongside nature" model confines normative Christian commitments primarily to the life of the church, while cultural, political, educational, and legal domains are treated as religiously neutral and mainly governed by natural law or shared moral reason (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008:128; Boot, 2016a:386–388). Rather than resolving the unity–diversity problem, this twofold division reproduces a dualistic pattern in which unity is preserved within the ecclesial sphere and plurality outside it is managed through neutrality rather than principled integration. The practical consequence of this configuration is the emergence of tensions within Christian life and witness, as believers are required to navigate competing normative frameworks and to function as Christians within the church while adopting a posture of neutrality in public and vocational contexts (Frame, 2011:118–119; Van Riessen, 1997:69).

There is therefore a need for an account that can critically diagnose the deeper religious and philosophical commitments that generate such dualisms and that can offer a more integrative alternative. Herman Dooyeweerd's notion of religious ground motives provides a conceptual instrument for this task. Ground motives function as the deepest spiritual driving forces of a culture, shaping how reality, meaning, unity, and plurality are understood prior to explicit theoretical reflection (Strauss,

2021:7). Dooyeweerd identifies four major ground motives that have guided Western thought: the Greek form–matter motive, the medieval nature–grace synthesis, the modern nature–freedom dialectic, and the biblical creation–fall–redemption motive (Dooyeweerd, 2012:9–11). He argues that the first three are structurally dialectical, perpetually generating tensions between unity and diversity, whereas the reformational creation–fall–redemption motive is integrative, grounding unity in the Creator and diversity in creational differentiation, further articulated through the principle of sphere sovereignty (Dooyeweerd, 1953:65–66; Dooyeweerd, 2012:110).

Against this background, the central problem addressed in this article is that contemporary theological, philosophical, and ecclesial debates continue to engage questions of unity and diversity without adequately recognising the historically embedded ground motives that configure these debates. This obscures both the internal tensions present within classical, medieval, modern, and postmodern approaches and the constructive potential of a reformational alternative. Accordingly, the guiding research question of the study is: How do classical, medieval, modern, and postmodern Western traditions configure the relation between the one and the many, and to what extent does Herman Dooyeweerd's reformational creation–fall–redemption ground motive offer a more coherent framework for integrating unity and plurality?

Theoretical framework: Dooyeweerd's ground motives

Dooyeweerd conceptualises a "religious ground motive" as the ultimate spiritual driving force operating at the deepest pre-theoretical level of human thought. According to Strauss (2021, p. 7), Dooyeweerd's term *grondmotief* denotes a fundamental religious impetus or mainspring that shapes the formation of a worldview long before formal theory emerges. Dooyeweerd describes such a ground motive as "the deepest driving force behind the entire cultural and spiritual development" of society, functioning as "a spiritual mainspring in human society" and as an "absolutely central driving force" arising from the religious center of life. It governs how people intuitively understand reality, meaning, unity and diversity at the most basic level prior to conscious reflection. A ground motive is not merely an individual idea; rather, it functions as a communal spiritual power that directs thought and culture. Humans do not control it; rather, it exerts control over human thinking, institutions and cultural development. Because of this deeply religious nature, it reflects either a commitment to the true God or the elevation of a created entity into an idol. In essence, a ground motive directs how a civilisation views unity, plurality and meaning, long before scientific or philosophical systems take shape.

Dooyeweerd identifies four major ground motives that have guided Western intellectual history: (1) Form, Matter in classical Greek thought, (2) Nature, Grace in medieval Christian Scholasticism, (3) Nature, Freedom in modern humanism, and (4) Creation, Fall, Redemption as the Biblical or reformational motive. The first three operate dialectically, since each rests on a tension between two competing poles that cannot be fully reconciled. The fourth, by contrast, is integrative. It holds unity and diversity together without collapsing one into the other.

The Form–Matter motive of ancient Greek philosophy can be summarised as a tension between unity (form, rational structure) and diversity (matter, flux). Greek thinkers from Plato to Aristotle attempted to secure cosmic unity through form, while simultaneously acknowledging the multiplicity and instability of matter. This inability to reconcile form and matter produced persistent dualisms. The human being, for instance, was divided into a higher rational soul and a lower material body, reflecting the unresolved character of the motive. Classical thought, therefore, oscillated between an ideal of rational unity and the stubborn multiplicity of

sensory reality, without integrating the two (Dooyeweerd, 2012, pp. 15–18).

The Nature, Grace motive arose in medieval Christianity as an attempt to synthesise biblical creation with Greek dualism. Nature denoted the temporal realm of human reason, social life and creation, while grace signified the supernatural sphere of salvation. These two were arranged hierarchically. Nature was incomplete without grace, and grace functioned as the higher unifying principle. This produced tension similar to the Greek motive. Philosophy grounded in natural reason operated beside theology grounded in revelation, and the two demanded continual harmonisation. Strauss (2021, p. 36) notes that the motive remained dialectical, pulled between affirming creation as good yet regarding it as religiously inferior to grace. In practice, the church, as bearer of grace, ruled over temporal life, institutionalising dualism and setting the stage for later conflict as the secular realm asserted autonomy.

The Nature–Freedom motive emerged in the Renaissance and Enlightenment when humanism shifted attention from a theocentric worldview to the autonomy of the human subject. Nature came to represent the law-governed structure of the cosmos and the domain of scientific determinism, while freedom referred to human personality, creativity and moral self-legislation. Modern philosophy continuously oscillated between absolutising nature, reducing reality to mechanistic causality, and absolutising freedom, grounding dignity in autonomous selfhood. Kant formalised this split by placing nature under deterministic causal law while reserving freedom for the noumenal moral will beyond nature. As a result, the unity of truth became contested, since scientific determinism and moral autonomy remained difficult to reconcile. This internal dialectic provoked ongoing tension between naturalism, mechanistic science, liberal humanism and later existentialist reactions (Dooyeweerd, 2012, pp. 45–52).

In contrast, the Creation–Fall–Redemption motive offers a non-dualistic framework grounded in Scripture. Reality has one divine Origin who gives

unity to all created diversity. Creation is good, structured and differentiated by God's law. The fall distorts direction rather than substance, meaning that sin affects the human heart without dividing reality into higher and lower metaphysical levels. Redemption restores creation in its totality instead of elevating one realm above another. Because this motive refuses to absolutise any created aspect, it integrates unity and diversity under one divine order. Where apostate ground motives absolutise Form, Nature or Freedom, the biblical motive directs worship to the Creator alone and therefore possesses what Dooyeweerd calls "the living, healing power of the Word of God" (Dooyeweerd, 2012, pp. 113–121).

In summary, Dooyeweerd's framework illuminates how deep religious commitments steer Western philosophy. Ground motives function as spiritual engines shaping how unity and diversity are conceived. The first three generate fragmentation by absolutising parts of creation. Only the creation, fall, and redemption motive provides an integrated picture of reality and thus serves as the theoretical foundation for this article.

Unity and diversity in key philosophical traditions

Aristotle: Form, matter and organic unity

The Greek philosophical tradition, expressed most fully in Aristotle, plays a foundational role in shaping the historical discourse on unity and plurality. Aristotle's metaphysics is anchored in the hylomorphic model, according to which every concrete entity is composed of matter (*hylē*) and form (*eidos*). Matter represents potentiality, while form constitutes actuality, identity and intelligibility. Form gives order, structure and unity, whereas matter individuates and allows multiplicity to emerge (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1045b). For Aristotle, unity is therefore not an abstract ideal detached from reality

but something enacted through the embodiment of form in matter. He repeatedly insists that nothing exists as pure form or pure matter; existence is always the outcome of the inseparable union of both principles (*Metaphysics*, 991a; De Anima, 412a). Actualisation (*entelecheia*) marks the fulfilment of form, and potentiality (*dynamis*) expresses what matter may become (*Metaphysics*, 1050a; *Physics*, 255a). Aristotle is thus able to hold the one and the many in a single conceptual framework, even though the tension between unity and diversity remains structurally present. Form directs being toward unity; matter continually opens the possibility of plurality.

This metaphysical insight also shapes Aristotle's epistemology. Knowledge does not arise from abstract universals detached from concrete reality but from the relation between substance and its accidental attributes (Categories, 1a20–1b9). Aristotle distinguishes several modes of knowing: *nous* as intuitive apprehension of first principles, *dianoia* as discursive reasoning, *episteme* as demonstrative science, *techne* as skilled craft, and *phronesis* as practical moral discernment (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b). Saket (2023, pp. 384, 386) notes that universals, for Aristotle, are not independent transcendent Forms but *genera* under which particulars are classified. Unity in knowledge, therefore, remains contextual and embedded within concrete entities rather than existing above them. Peterson (2017, p. 648) similarly observes that Aristotle's ontology integrates universality and particularity by rooting knowledge in the concrete rather than separating the intellectual and material worlds. Epistemology thus mirrors metaphysics: the universal element yields unity, the particular introduces multiplicity, and knowledge consists in their coherent relationship.

The political implications of this structure are evident in Aristotle's conception of the *polis*. The *polis* is not merely a homogeneous unity but a differentiated community directed toward the good life, or *eudaimonia* (*Politics*, 1253a). Aristotle rejects Plato's more radical proposals for unity, such as the abolition of property or family life, and instead views the city as a plurality organised toward a shared *telos* (end) (*Politics*, 1261b). Peterson (2017, p. 654) describes Aristotle's *polis* as numerically diverse yet

functionally unified, comparable to an organism whose differentiated parts function together for the flourishing of the whole. Even so, Aristotle's own political writings reveal the fragility of this unity-plurality balance. Güremen (2014, pp. 61–65) shows that where Book III of Politics presents a relatively inclusive model of citizenship, Book VII moves toward a more restrictive structure, favouring elite participation. In this move, plurality is reduced to secure unity. The *polis* requires diversity to remain dynamic, yet excessive diversity threatens cohesion. Conversely, unity that suppresses plurality risks stagnation or exclusion. In this respect, his politics reflects the same structural tension present in his metaphysics.

The ethical dimension of Aristotle's thought displays similar patterns. *Phronesis* is central because it negotiates between universal moral principles and the demands of concrete circumstances (Faure, 2013, p. 62). Coelho and de Moraes Mello (2017, p. 81) argue that Aristotle seeks to reconcile equality and diversity in civic participation, though the balance remains uneasy. Unity requires shared virtue and common purpose, while plurality reflects different capacities, roles and social functions. Ethical harmony relies on virtue, yet virtue itself presupposes a hierarchy privileging rational citizens over those considered incapable of fully rational participation. Plurality is therefore present, but its expression is subject to unifying ethical standards. Once again, unity tends toward form, and plurality arises from matter; unity demands ordering, plurality risks instability.

The tension between unity and plurality is thus not incidental but constitutive of Aristotle's entire philosophical system. Saket (2023, p. 386) notes

Aristotle's ongoing difficulty in reconciling universals and particulars, while Faure (2013, p. 62) points out that Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* attracts renewed attention in postmodern ethics precisely because it accommodates plurality without collapsing into relativism. Yet the dialectic persists: where unity predominates, plurality is threatened; where plurality expands, unity weakens. For this reason, Güremen (2014, p. 72) argues that Aristotle ultimately promotes a form of controlled pluralism, where diversity is permitted but bounded for the sake of stability.

A Reformational philosophical reading exposes these limits more sharply. Dooyeweerd argues that Aristotle remains bound within an immanent dualism unable to provide a final synthesis between the one and the many (Dooyeweerd, 1953, I: 64–65). Form operates as a unifying absolute, while matter introduces irreducible diversity, and attempts at synthesis result in hierarchical integration under a dominant principle (Dooyeweerd, 2012, p. 19). Strauss (2009, p. 57) warns that such a pursuit of unity becomes coercive when it lacks grounding in a transcendent Creator. Reformational thought, instead, affirms sphere sovereignty, in which family, state, church, and academy possess distinct God-given responsibilities (Dooyeweerd, 2012, p. 45). Unity rests in divine order, and plurality belongs to creation rather than functioning as a philosophical problem requiring resolution. Aristotle, however, seeks unity within the created order itself, without a transcendent point of integration.

In conclusion, Aristotle's form–matter framework offers a highly influential account of unity and plurality that resonates through metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and politics. His thought provides an enduring foundation for philosophical reflection, yet the relationship between unity and multiplicity remains dialectical and unresolved. Aristotle succeeds in holding the two together, but not in overcoming the tension inherent in their relation.

Aquinas: Nature and grace, unity and plurality in a Christian synthesis

The shift from Greek philosophy to medieval Christian theology introduces a new attempt to resolve the unity–plurality tension. While Aristotle grounded unity in form and plurality in matter, Aquinas receives this framework and reinterprets it through a Christian metaphysical vision. This transformation generates the nature–grace synthesis that shaped Christian intellectual life for centuries. The structure remains dual, yet now unity is located in God as pure act of being, while plurality emerges within creation through participation and differentiation. Aquinas adopts Aristotle's hylomorphism, but positions it inside a two-tier metaphysics where grace perfects nature rather than abolishing or bypassing it. The central tension of the Greek form–matter schema is therefore not removed but elevated into a theological hierarchy.

Aquinas begins by asserting that unity accompanies being itself. "One" does not add something new to existence but expresses undivided being (ST I, q. 11, a. 1). Created entities are composite because they possess both act and potency, and for that reason they admit plurality and limitation (ST I, q. 47, a. 1). God alone is *actus purus*, pure actuality without potentiality, while creatures realise their existence through participation in divine being (ST I, q. 4, a. 2; q. 13, a. 6). Diversity within creation is therefore not accidental or problematic, but intentionally willed by God, since a multiplicity of beings reflects divine goodness more fittingly than a uniform world (ST I, q. 47, a. 2). Aquinas retains Aristotle's framework of form and matter, yet the metaphysical grounding shifts: plurality exists because creatures receive being from God in finite modes, whereas unity derives from the absolute simplicity of the Creator.

The doctrine of participation is the key mechanism through which Aquinas integrates unity and diversity. Creatures possess being analogically, not univocally or equivocally; they resemble God while remaining

distinct from Him. The universe reflects divine plenitude through a structured order of differentiated natures, each possessing goodness in degrees (Harris, 2019, p. 14). Because God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, self-subsisting being, all finite beings exist only by receiving *esse* from Him. Universals and particulars are reconciled through this analogy of being: what is found in creatures exists in God formally and eminently, not as multiplied essences but as a single undivided perfection (ST I, q. 3, a. 4; q. 4, a. 2; q. 13, a. 5–6). In contrast to Aristotle's unresolved dualism, Aquinas relocates the problem of unity and plurality into the relation between Creator and creature, mediated through participation and analogy.

The doctrine of the Trinity sharpens this metaphysical framework. God is one in His absolutely simple essence, yet three in persons. The distinction between the divine persons lies not in essence or composition, but in relations of origin within the Godhead (ST I, q. 40, a. 3). In this way, unity is preserved without erasing personal diversity, and diversity is maintained without dividing the divine essence. Yet for Aquinas this truth remains a revealed mystery, inaccessible to unaided human reason (ST I, q. 32, a. 1). Natural theology can demonstrate that God exists and can know something of His attributes, but knowledge of the Trinity surpasses the limits of metaphysical reasoning (ST I, q. 12, a. 12). The unity–plurality tension is therefore resolved at the divine level in a way inaccessible to Aristotelian philosophy alone.

Ethics and politics in Aquinas reflect a common structural logic. Human beings are directed toward the beatific vision as their final end (ST I-II, q. 2, a. 8). Earthly goods have real value, yet they remain subordinate to union with God. The moral life is ordered by the cardinal and theological virtues, unified and animated by charity as their formal principle (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 8). Unity is therefore teleological: all action ultimately aims at the highest good. Yet plurality remains through the many forms of virtue and the diverse expressions of social life. Politically, Aquinas upholds the common good as the organising principle of society, understood as peace, or *tranquillitas ordinis* (ST II-II, q. 29, a. 1; cf. ST I-II, q. 90–97). As in Aristotle's *polis*, society consists of differentiated roles and offices that contribute to the flourishing of the community. However, Aquinas grounds this order not only in human rationality but in divine intention. Hierarchy is therefore both logical and theological: rulers are entrusted with guiding communal life toward justice and the common good (*De regno* I, 1–3).

Nevertheless, the nature–grace framework introduces a structural division. Nature is granted its own integrity and completeness, yet remains open to further perfection through grace. Dooyeweerd argues that this results in an enduring dualism, since nature retains a degree of autonomy while grace stands above it as a higher realm (Dooyeweerd, 2012, p. 19). The analogy of being, which lies at the centre of Aquinas' synthesis, is therefore criticised for implying a continuity of being between God and creatures rather than an absolute Creator–creature distinction (Van Til, 2003, p. 31; Stoker, 1967, p. 199). Reformational thinkers further contend that Aquinas underestimates the noetic effects of sin and places too much confidence in unaided human reason (Van Til, 2003, p. 40; Strauss, 2009, p. 57). Whereas Aquinas seeks unity through metaphysical participation, Reformed philosophy grounds the relation between unity and plurality in covenantal order and sphere sovereignty. Creation is differentiated not by degrees of being but through divinely instituted structures, none of which holds supremacy over another (Dooyeweerd, 1953, p. 120; Dooyeweerd, 2012, p. 45).

In summary, Aquinas offers one of the most influential attempts to reconcile unity and plurality within a Christian philosophical vision. Standing on Aristotle's foundations, he relocates metaphysical tension to the relationship between Creator and creation, mediated through analogy and fulfilled in

grace. His synthesis is elegant and comprehensive, spanning metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics. Yet its hierarchical two-tier configuration leaves a dualism that later Reformational thinkers would challenge. As a bridge between Greek immanentism and Reformed creation theology, Aquinas occupies a pivotal place in the historical pursuit of reconciling the one and the many.

Kant and modern autonomy: Nature and freedom

The transition from the medieval nature–grace synthesis to the Enlightenment marks a decisive reorientation of the unity–plurality problem. Whereas Aquinas located unity in God and allowed plurality to unfold through participation, Kant shifts the centre of philosophical gravity from the transcendent to the human subject. Modernity begins, in effect, when unity is sought not in being or revelation, but in reason. The question is no longer how creation reflects divine order, but how the mind constitutes order. Reality is interpreted through a new ground motive: nature and freedom. Nature represents the realm of determinism, causality and empirical law, while freedom denotes rational autonomy and moral self-legislation. These two poles define Kant's system and set the trajectory for the modern age.

Kant's central thesis is that knowledge requires the synthesising activity of the subject. In the Critique of Pure Reason, he argues that intuitions without concepts are blind, and concepts without intuitions are empty. Sensory impressions alone are insufficient for knowledge; the understanding must actively organise them under innate categories such as causality, quantity and substance (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B134–B140/247–250). The manifold of experience becomes knowledge only when unified by the transcendental ego through what Kant calls the synthetic unity of apperception. Every representation must be capable of accompanying the thought "I think" if it is to belong to a single consciousness (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B132/246). Unity, therefore, arises from the subject rather than from the external world. The world we know is a world already shaped by cognition.

This breakthrough, for Kant, leads directly to the distinction between phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are objects as they appear within the forms of space and time and under the categories of the understanding. Noumena refer to things-in-themselves, which exist but cannot be known empirically (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B294/338–339; B311–B312/368–369).

Human knowledge is thus limited to appearances; metaphysical reality lies beyond the limits of reason. In contrast to Aristotle, who located form and intelligibility in nature, and Aquinas, who grounded unity in God, Kant restricts knowledge to the phenomenal realm and claims that reality outside experience cannot be grasped. We know not things as they are, but as they must appear to a being equipped with human cognitive faculties (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A256–A257/315–316). The unity–plurality tension, therefore, relocates from ontology to epistemology. Unity becomes a function of rational synthesis; plurality persists as the diversity of sensory input which must be ordered.

Nevertheless, reason seeks systematic unity. Kant maintains that although we cannot know ultimate reality, the mind is driven by an innate rational impulse to organise experience under unifying principles. Unity here is not descriptive but regulative. We proceed in science as if nature were fully coherent because, without such an assumption, knowledge could not progress (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A651–A652/B679–B680). Reason postulates ideals, the soul, the cosmos, and God, not as objects of knowledge but as guiding concepts that orient inquiry (Kant, *Prolegomena*, 4:332; 4:355–356). These Ideas of Reason provide direction rather than information. They unify thought, even though their objects lie beyond observation. Unity is thus rationally necessary but metaphysically unreachable.

Kant's moral philosophy forms the second pillar of his nature–freedom dialectic. In theoretical reason, knowledge is restricted to phenomena, but in practical reason, autonomy becomes the source of universal moral obligation. The categorical imperative requires that one act only on maxims that can be willed as universal law (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 28–29). Freedom, therefore, stands above nature, since rational agents must act not from inclination or in pursuit of outcomes, but from duty alone. Kant envisions a community of rational, self-legislating beings who together form a realm of ends, united by universal moral law (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 32). Unity is consequently moral and procedural rather than ontological. Nature is ruled by causal necessity, whereas moral freedom operates beyond deterministic structures. Yet this synthesis contains a tension: human beings, as empirical individuals, belong to nature, while the moral will is located in a noumenal sphere that cannot be known. The one-and-many problem thus re-emerges as a divide between nature and freedom, rather than between form and matter or nature and grace.

The implications are significant. Objective knowledge of God, soul or eternal truths is, by Kant's system, unavailable to theoretical reason. Religion becomes morally postulated rather than revealed or metaphysically grounded. Freedom, rather than divine sovereignty, secures human dignity. Unity originates within rational autonomy; plurality becomes the domain of empirical variation. This inversion of the medieval paradigm establishes the foundations for modern secular selfhood.

Reformational thinkers argue that Kant's restructuring of unity around the subject ultimately destabilises the coherence of truth. Van Til contends that the transcendental ego replaces God as the ultimate point of reference, making the self the origin of order rather than the recipient of divine revelation (Van Til, 2003, p. 2–3; 36). Strauss notes that knowledge is now grounded in human synthesis rather than in the intrinsic order of creation or the Word of God (Strauss, 2009, p.123). Hicks emphasises that if objects must conform to the subject, the link between knowledge and reality weakens, opening the door for later fragmentation (Hicks, 2011, p.68).

In summary, Kant's project marks a turning point in the unity–plurality debate. Knowledge begins in the structures of the mind, not in the world. The noumenal realm remains inaccessible, while experience is unified only through the subject. In ethics, autonomy grounds universal duty, creating a realm of ends governed by rational freedom. Kant offers unity through reason rather than through creation or revelation. Yet the dialectic persists: nature binds us, freedom elevates us, and the two remain conceptually aligned but never reconciled. Modernity inherits both dignity and instability from this structure. Kant stands as the architect of a worldview in which human reason becomes the source of unity, even as reality itself remains fragmented beyond its reach.

Postmodern and late-modern ideas of unity and diversity

Postmodernism does not emerge suddenly as a historical rupture, but develops as the intensification of tendencies already present within Western intellectual history, especially nominalism, historicism and critical modern epistemology. William of Ockham's nominalism, by reducing universals to linguistic conventions rather than real entities, marked a transition from a correspondence view of truth to one based on coherence (Strauss, 2009, p. 264). Kant advanced this trajectory by arguing that the mind actively organises experience through a priori categories, so that knowledge reflects the structures of consciousness rather than the independent order of reality (Strauss, 2004, p. 265). Postmodern thought radicalises this turn by treating truth as contingent, provisional and interpretive. Meaning becomes something produced within

contexts of discourse, power and culture (Strauss, 2004, p. 268).

This shift represents a major metaphysical reorientation. Whereas classical and medieval thought sought an underlying unity capable of grounding the world's diversity, postmodernism denies any transcendent or objective order. Reality is no longer assumed to exist as an integrated whole prior to interpretation, but is constituted through language and social construction (Strauss, 2004, p. 270). Unity itself becomes suspect, often regarded as a mechanism of control. Fragmentation, multiplicity and difference are therefore celebrated as signs of authenticity and liberation. Lyotard's description of postmodernity as an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984, p. xxiv) illustrates this rejection of comprehensive explanatory systems claiming universal authority (Craig & Gould, 2007, pp. 31–32). Postmodernism operates as a deliberate refusal of synthesis, elevating plurality over integration.

Epistemologically, this tendency leads towards relativism. Knowledge is no longer viewed as the apprehension of an objective order, but as an interpretive construction shaped by linguistic and cultural frameworks. Derrida's notion of *différance* demonstrates how meaning is continually deferred and never fully present or fixed (Davison, 2010, p. 327). Berger and Luckmann argue that social reality becomes institutionalised through repeated human practices and is then perceived as self-evident (Strauss, 2009, p. 127). Foucault (1977, pp. 194–202) extends this claim to ethics by suggesting that moral norms arise from shifting configurations of power rather than universal principles (Strauss, 2004, p. 271). Within this paradigm, knowledge and truth refer to nothing beyond discourse. What counts as truth is whatever a linguistic and cultural community affirms at a given moment.

The ontological implications are pronounced. Reality is no longer regarded as possessing inherent structure or meaning but as fluid, contingent and dependent on interpretation. Tarnas notes that the world "only comes into being through interpretations" (2010, p. 410). Nominalism and phenomenology reinforce this development by eroding confidence in a world that exists independently of consciousness (Davison, 2010, p. 187; Strauss, 2009, p. 125). Hick argues that postmodern thought ultimately leads to an anti-realist metaphysics in which reference to an objective external world becomes unintelligible (Hicks, 2011, p. 216). Ontology, therefore, collapses into semiotics, and what the world is becomes inseparable from how it is spoken about.

This fragmentation extends into anthropology. The human self is no longer conceived as possessing a stable essence, but is reconceived as a fluid, relational construct shaped by narrative, discourse and desire. Bartholomew observes that identity is not discovered but continually authored and re-authored (2015, p. 325). Taylor emphasises that the self develops dialogically and not from an autonomous inner core (1992, p. 34). Sire characterises the postmodern self as "slippery", lacking constancy and integration (2020, p. 228). As with truth, identity becomes contingent upon context and interpretation.

Ethically, this results in moral relativism. Without an objective order grounding human life, universal norms are difficult to justify. Morality becomes culturally and historically contingent (Strauss, 2004, p. 271). Whereas Kant retained a universal moral imperative grounded in rational agency, postmodernism dissolves the bond between freedom and shared normativity. Freedom becomes expressive self-definition, and individuals construct meaning rather than receive it (Strauss, 2009, p. 123). Watkin argues that self-construction is not only permitted but celebrated as a moral ideal (2022, pp. 151–152). With no transcendent point of reference, ethical responsibility risks being reduced to preference or negotiation.

Socially, postmodern thought rejects the idea of society as an ordered whole directed towards a common good. Hicks notes that the public sphere is increasingly imagined not as a unified community but as a space of contest between competing identities (2003, pp. 10–11). In literary theory, meaning is no longer located in the author or text, but arises from the reader's interpretation (Bartholomew, 2015, pp. 243–244). Woolfolk argues that no tradition may claim superiority since all truth claims are culturally bounded (2004, p. 42). Unity is viewed suspiciously as a mechanism of oppression, while plurality, even contradictory plurality, is valorised.

This intellectual movement culminates not in synthesis but in fragmentation. Frame contends that postmodernism represents a condition of disintegration rather than a constructive alternative to modernity (2015, pp. 504–505). Modernity still pursued coherence through reason, yet postmodernism abandons the attempt. The tension between nature and freedom falls away, leaving a diversity of competing interpretations with no unifying resolution.

A Reformed evaluation might appreciate postmodernism's critique of Enlightenment rationalism, although it must insist that without a transcendent Creator grounding reality and revelation orienting human reason, fragmentation becomes unavoidable. Plurality loses its integration, truth loses objective reference, and diversity stands isolated without coherence or meaning.

Unity and Diversity in Reformational Perspective: Dooyeweerd and the Critique of Two Kingdoms Theology

The central research question of this study has been how Western philosophical and theological traditions configure the relation between unity and diversity, and whether Dooyeweerd's reformational creation–fall–redemption ground motive offers a more coherent alternative to the dualisms that characterise these traditions. The preceding analysis demonstrated that from classical metaphysics through medieval synthesis and modern autonomy to postmodern fragmentation, attempts to integrate the one and the many repeatedly generate internal tensions. These tensions arise because unity is consistently sought within creation itself, whether in metaphysical form, hierarchical synthesis, autonomous subjectivity, or pluralistic openness, while diversity is either subordinated, compartmentalised, or left normatively unintegrated.

Dooyeweerd's reformational philosophy addresses this problem by fundamentally reconfiguring the source of unity and the meaning of diversity. He argues that unity cannot be grounded immanently within reality without producing reductionism or fragmentation, but must be rooted transcendentally in the Creator, while diversity belongs irreducibly to the created order itself (Dooyeweerd, 2012, pp. 9–11). Creation is structured by a comprehensive divine law-order that both guarantees coherence and affirms differentiation. Law, in this sense, is not an abstraction derived from reason nor an immanent structure within reality, but the expression of God's sovereign will that orders and directs all created existence (Dooyeweerd, 1953, p. 52). By locating unity in God and diversity in creation, Dooyeweerd avoids the dialectical oscillation between monism and pluralism that characterises non-reformational ground motives.

This law-structured view of creation enables Dooyeweerd to affirm genuine diversity without collapsing it into chaos. He distinguishes a plurality of irreducible modal aspects, each governed by its own normative laws and internal meaning, none of which can be reduced to another (Dooyeweerd, 1953, pp. 65–66). Unity arises not through metaphysical synthesis, but through the coherence of these aspects under the divine law-order. In this way, Dooyeweerd offers an account of unity and diversity

that is neither hierarchical nor fragmentary, but integrative without being totalising.

At the level of social and institutional life, this reformational vision is further articulated through the principle of sphere sovereignty. Dooyeweerd maintains that societal institutions such as church, state, family, school, and economic life each possess distinct God-given responsibilities and norms that cannot be derived from or subordinated to one another (Dooyeweerd, 1953, pp. 120–121). These spheres are not autonomous in the sense of self-grounding, but are equally subject to God's law. Unity is therefore preserved through shared subjection to divine normativity, while diversity is honoured through institutional differentiation. Sphere sovereignty thus guards against both totalising unity, where one institution absorbs the others, and radical pluralism, where institutions operate without normative coherence.

This reformational framework provides a critical lens through which contemporary Two Kingdoms theology can be evaluated. Two Kingdoms theology typically distinguishes between a redemptive or spiritual kingdom governed by Scripture and a common or civil kingdom governed by natural law or shared moral reason. Goheen and Bartholomew describe this position as a "grace alongside nature" model, in which Christian faith exists alongside cultural and social life without normatively transforming it (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 62). While often motivated by a concern to protect the gospel from politicisation, this approach restricts Scriptural authority primarily to the church and assigns public life to a supposedly neutral moral framework (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008, p. 128).

From a reformational perspective, this division reproduces a familiar dualism rather than resolving the unity–diversity problem. By confining normative Christian commitment to the ecclesial sphere, unity is preserved within a limited domain, while the plurality of cultural, political, and educational life is managed through neutrality rather than principled integration. Boot argues that this framework marginalises God's revealed law in public life by treating education, jurisprudence, and political order as religiously neutral spheres, thereby echoing modern assumptions about the autonomy of reason (Boot, 2016a, pp. 386–388). Rather than safeguarding diversity, this neutrality dissolves creational distinctions into a uniform secular framework.

The dualistic character of Two Kingdoms theology becomes particularly evident in its ethical implications. Frame notes that this model effectively authorises two normative regimes, Scripture governs the church, while public life operates independently of God's revealed Word (Frame, 2011, p. 34). This produces what he describes as a false neutrality, in which Christians are discouraged from bringing Scriptural norms to bear on law, politics, or education (Frame, 2011, pp. 62–63). The practical consequence is a fragmented Christian identity, where believers are expected to live as Christians within the church and as neutral citizens in their vocational and civic lives (Frame, 2011, pp. 118–119). Van Riessen similarly observes that many Christians oscillate between religious and secular starting points, treating this tension as an inevitable condition rather than a problem requiring principled resolution (Van Riessen, 1997, p. 69).

Dooyeweerd's reformational alternative exposes the underlying weakness of this approach. The problem is not that Two Kingdoms theology recognises legitimate distinctions, reformational thought likewise insists on real institutional differences, but that it converts distinction into separation. By failing to integrate societal diversity under a single divine law-order, Two Kingdoms theology mirrors the nature–grace and nature–freedom dualisms that Dooyeweerd identifies as structurally dialectical (Dooyeweerd, 2012, pp. 9–11). In contrast, the creation–fall–redemption ground motive affirms Christ's comprehensive lordship over all of life, not by collapsing spheres into one another, but by

subjecting all spheres to God's law in their own proper ways.

The significance of this analysis for the research question is twofold. First, it confirms that classical, medieval, modern, and postmodern traditions configure unity and diversity in ways that inevitably generate dualisms because unity is sought immanently within creation. Second, it demonstrates that Dooyeweerd's reformational philosophy offers a more coherent framework by grounding unity transcendentally in God and affirming diversity as law-structured differentiation within creation. This framework not only clarifies the philosophical roots of contemporary Two Kingdoms theology, but also provides a principled critique of its dualism and an integrative alternative in which unity and diversity are held together without reduction or fragmentation. In this sense, Dooyeweerd's reformational vision answers the enduring problem of the one and the many more adequately than both its historical predecessors and its contemporary theological counterparts.Conclusion

This article set out to examine how Western philosophical and theological traditions have configured the relation between unity and diversity, and to assess whether Dooyeweerd's reformational creation–fall–redemption ground motive offers a more coherent alternative to the persistent dualisms that characterise these traditions. The historical analysis demonstrated that from Aristotle through Aquinas and Kant to postmodern thought, attempts to integrate the one and the many consistently oscillate between reductionist unity and fragmentary plurality. These tensions are not merely conceptual accidents but arise from deeper religious ground motives that locate coherence immanently within creation, whether in metaphysical form, hierarchical synthesis, autonomous reason, or pluralistic openness.

Against this background, the article argued that Dooyeweerd's reformational philosophy provides a principled alternative by reconfiguring the unity–diversity relation at its root. By grounding unity transcendentally in the Creator and affirming diversity as law-structured differentiation within creation, Dooyeweerd avoids both totalising synthesis and relativistic fragmentation. His account of divine law as the ordering principle of reality, together with the recognition of irreducible modal aspects and differentiated societal spheres, enables an integrative, non-dualistic understanding of coherence and plurality. Unity is preserved without suppressing diversity, and diversity is affirmed without dissolving normativity. In this way, the reformational ground motive offers not merely a reinterpretation of earlier traditions, but a structurally distinct framework for addressing the enduring problem of the one and the many.

The article further demonstrated the contemporary relevance of this framework through a critical engagement with Two Kingdoms theology as a present-day theological manifestation of the same unity–diversity tension. While often motivated by legitimate concerns to protect the gospel from politicisation, Two Kingdoms theology introduces a functional division between ecclesial and public life that mirrors earlier nature–grace and nature–freedom dualisms. By restricting Scriptural normativity largely to the church and treating cultural and institutional life as religiously neutral, this approach preserves unity within a limited sphere while managing diversity through neutrality rather than principled integration. The result is a fragmented account of Christian identity and vocation that reproduces, rather than resolves, the underlying dualism.

By bringing Two Kingdoms theology into dialogue with the historical analysis, the article has shown that contemporary theological debates cannot be adequately understood apart from their deeper philosophical and religious roots. In answering the guiding research question, the article has made a twofold contribution: it has clarified the shared

structural logic underlying classical, medieval, modern, and postmodern struggles with unity and diversity, and it has demonstrated that Dooyeweerd's reformational creation–fall–redemption motive offers a more coherent and normatively integrated alternative. In doing so, the article highlights the continuing relevance of reformational philosophy for contemporary theological reflection and for constructive engagement with the challenges of unity and diversity in modern Christian life.

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Author's contributions

M.D. is the sole author of this research article.

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