

Clarifying Four Meanings for “Worldview”

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Abstract

Because the majority of authors and speakers discussing the worldview concept have focused primarily on its effects and not its causes, they have been largely unsuccessful at clearly defining the initial origin and functional operation of the human worldview in certain key ways. Lacking this clarity, the term “worldview” is often used intuitively and even inaccurately. Moreover, different senses of the term are used as if all meanings were equivalent. The result, unfortunately, is that an individual may simultaneously reference distinctly different aspects of the worldview paradigm, thus either causing confusion by his or her statements or perhaps even becoming confused as to what he or she is actually discussing. Hence, four distinct potential meanings for “worldview” are identified and clarified: the *worldview mechanism*, *worldview structure*, *worldview perspective(s)*, and the *social worldview*. It is this last sense, which is a second-order construct of the individual’s *worldview perspective*, where one will find collective views such as the creationist worldview and atheistic worldview.

This, I think, I may at least say, that we should have a great many fewer disputes in the world, if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only; and not for things themselves.... And if men would tell what ideas they make their words stand for, there could not be half that obscurity or wrangling in the search or support of truth that there is.
(John Locke, 1690, III:10.5)

Introduction

It is important to understand the human worldview because it provides the conceptual tool a person uses to understand both himself and the meaning of his existence. Unfortunately, for that very reason it can be tremendously difficult to grasp. Our worldview is such an immediate component of our perceptual mechanism that in evaluating it, it becomes nearly impossible to differentiate reality from perception,

potentially making it invisible! Indeed, it can be like trying to remove one’s own eye to better understand its limitations and examine its defects.

Complicating this already difficult matter, people often equivocate on different meanings and unknowingly switch between nuanced meanings, applying characteristics to one aspect that belong to another. Chisham (2012) did not specifically label these meanings, but did describe their systematic interaction in perceiving and predicting truth. Consequently, it seems best to clarify these so the various senses of meaning can be utilized properly and interrelated correctly and clearly.

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Accepted for publication January 23, 2014

Potential Meanings for the Term “Worldview”

The first meaning for “worldview” refers to the overall functional system generating one’s opinions. We will call this the *worldview mechanism*. Chisham defines this process, pointing out that a worldview is a natural by-product of rationality. Because rationality drives it, people will typically develop their worldview only as far as their rationality demands (Chisham, 2012, p. 70). Consequently, some will think deeply, while others may focus only on areas of personal interest, and still others may seem to care very little about developing their ideas on broader worldview issues. However, even the latter may exhibit a surprising outburst of anger when a moral nerve is touched, indicating they do hold some things to be universally true!

A second meaning for “worldview” mentioned by Chisham (2012, p. 70) comes from the fact that this *worldview mechanism* automatically creates a “file” and thereafter uses it for reference. This functions like a jar where one deposits his answers to the universal worldview question Chisham identifies (i.e. How do I understand myself relative to ultimate truth?), indicating a certain retaining object within the human psyche—the *worldview structure*, if you will.

Third, every individual places his personal *worldview perspective(s)*, or truth values that define his unique system of thought, into this container we labeled *worldview structure*. One’s personal *worldview perspective* (singular when referring to the collective whole, plural when referring to certain specific values) is what most people are referring to when they talk about “worldview” (or think they are, anyway).

Fourth, and finally, a *social worldview* is a person’s *worldview perspective* within his social context. Usually the *social worldview* is stated as the aggregate opinion of a group. Examples of this might include a Christian or Hindu worldview, a German or Asian

worldview, a Republican or Libertarian worldview, and an atheistic or communistic worldview. These essentially express Gaussian distributions of opinion for topical areas of social interest, reflecting societal influences upon collective populations. It should never be forgotten, however, that worldviews are first and foremost personal. Thus, *social worldviews* are merely second-order expressions of views accepted or adopted by individuals.

Discerning These Differences in the Discussion of Worldview

Note carefully that the *worldview mechanism* and the *worldview structure* it creates are objective aspects of human reality, not just “notions.” Their existence is not at all optional, imaginary, or subjective. Rather, these two aspects of worldview are quite real, predictable, and, frankly, nonnegotiable. They represent how humans actually think and the mental structures and substructures created as a result. The third item, however—one’s personal *worldview perspective*—is subjective and unique for each individual, consisting of various subjective personal notions or observations on life. Because the *social worldview* is a second-order expression of one’s *worldview perspective*, it also is subjective; but this is not always clear to the individual because his surrounding community seems to hold a very similar view. It is often only by comparison to other cultures that one can perceive the influence of his or her cultural paradigms.

So, for example, when Summit Ministries founder David Noebel says, “Every individual bases his thoughts, decisions, and actions on a worldview” (Noebel, 1997, p. 1), he is not suggesting everyone holds the same opinions on life! Rather, he is referring to a collection of opinions serving a specific, unified function—a collective truth definition matrix, if you will. He is indicating

the *worldview structure* (created by the *worldview mechanism*). He is speaking of a reservoir into which one’s *worldview perspectives* are inserted (i.e., the answers to that “final” question: How do I understand myself relative to ultimate truth?).

In our next example, R. C. Sproul’s website introduces his “Christian Worldview” teaching series with the claim, “Everyone has a worldview, a framework that helps them to interpret reality and answer life’s ultimate questions. Many people, however, are unaware of their presuppositions” (Sproul, 2013). The first sentence refers to a ubiquitous “worldview framework,” referring to the *worldview structure*, while the second sentence speaks of “presuppositions,” indicating specific *worldview perspectives*. Sproul is clear but moves from a universal to particulars without warning, as if they were the same.

Notice how this division fades with Francis Schaeffer (1990, p. 132): “Let us remember that every person we speak to, whether shop girl or university student, has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not.” In one sense, he acknowledges a universal “set of presuppositions” (i.e., the *worldview structure*), but the presuppositions themselves represent the individual’s unique *worldview perspectives*; so in a sense he fails to distinguish the universal from the specific.

This can become increasingly uncertain in the context of a live discussion because at any moment the speaker or author may begin with universal concepts (the *worldview mechanism* or *worldview structure*) and without warning turn to particulars of a *worldview perspective*, as if the principle and the position were one in the same. In the blink of an eye, the discussion may flip between the two, confusing both participants.

This extremely common error confuses the information in the jar (*worldview perspectives*) with the jar itself (*worldview framework*). David Naugle

demonstrates this problem when he claims,

Presently I will show how any theory or definition of “worldview” is itself a function of the actual worldview of the theorist or the definer.... What nuances, in other words, does Christian theism as a *Weltanschauung* impart to the notion of *Weltanschauung* itself? ... A worldview is a semiotic system of narrative signs that has a significant influence on the fundamental human activities of reasoning, interpreting, and knowing. I begin here with a look at how any view of “worldview” is itself worldview-dependent. (Naugle, 2002, p. 253)

Interestingly, the title of Naugle’s book is *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, indicating there is a *single* concept. He intuitively senses a single, underlying concept toward which he is reaching but fails to precisely identify what that concept is. In this case, he is infusing “*weltanschauung*” with two meanings: (1) the definition *for* the concept (*worldview structure*) and (2) the definitions provided *by* the concept (*worldview perspectives*). Further confusing the matter, in common usage “*Weltanschauung*” typically refers to a *social worldview*. Later in the same chapter, Naugle demonstrates that an entire conference of anthropologists fell into the same error.

One major goal of this gathering was to discuss and define the term “worldview” itself. The conveners’ perspectives were plentiful, their agreements few, their negotiations mostly unsuccessful. There was a simple reason ... for their patented lack of progress on this front. As Jones tells the story in his report, as the conferees were *openly discussing* “worldview,” they were *tacitly revealing* their own. (Naugle, 2002, p.254)

Noebel’s assertion above that “everybody’s got a worldview” is so common it seems surprising a comprehensive

definition had not already been found. The fact that so many have found this elusive for so long points to a different fact: extracting your own worldview is tremendously difficult when discussing it, whether conceptually, personally, or otherwise. This is because separating your personal definitions from concepts and other people’s ideas (while people are freely interchanging terms) simply becomes mentally overwhelming. Little wonder that confusion ensues! Furthermore, as Chisham points out, the common definition everyone seeks is probably best posed as a question, not a statement (Chisham, 2012). If Naugle’s anthropologists were hoping everyone could agree on a uniform *worldview perspective*, they were in error, for they would have to share a single mind to have a single perspective, which is clearly physically impossible. The fact they could not demonstrates they could not separate concepts from beliefs. Understanding the four usages discussed here likely would have solved their dilemma.

Contemporary usage of “worldview” typically refers to what we have labeled the *worldview perspective* and/or *worldview structure*. It is extremely rare to find any writers who even attempt discussing the *worldview mechanism* as a functional system. Most people cannot even put the terms “mechanism” and “worldview” in the same sentence, until the principles given in Chisham (2012) describing this global mechanism are explained. Naugle comes close to stumbling upon this when he defines a worldview to be a “semiotic system of narrative signs.” He explains that semiotics (the study of the nature and relationships of signs in language)

is best conceived as a general theory of culture, and all cultural studies can best be explained and understood under the rubric of semiotics. This would include the cultural reality and the fundamental mechanism of *Weltanschauung*. (Naugle, 2002, p. 292)

However, it might be suggested that Naugle is looking at the backside of the tapestry. Certainly, semiotics plays a role in the *worldview mechanism*. (If you think about it, language is nothing more than symbolic sense or sense-derivative information used programmatically to create sentences describing more complex thoughts.) René Descartes made a similar epistemological mistake in thinking his “method of doubt” was the basis of knowledge. Consider the sequence by which humans come to know things (in reverse order): (3) You cannot use symbolism (in the case of Naugle) or doubt (in the case of Descartes), which both involve rationalization, without having already acquired a language. (2) Language, however, is necessarily acquired through first-order sense experience. Thus, (1) analogy-to-self (i.e., via personal sense experience) is the basis upon which language and, subsequently, rationality are built. Consequently, the proper rubric for understanding worldview is simply that people acquire knowledge by way of analogy-to-self. As Chisham explains by way of an analogy to matter,

In summary, sense experiences provide the particles from which language is formed, and language provides the matter out of which intellectual thoughts are constructed. Lacking initial sense experience, none of this intellectual hierarchy will materialize. If a language does form, some alternative sense proxy was found. Thus, every opinion or understanding is ultimately traceable to individual, not communal perception—at least not in any primary sense. (Chisham, 2012, p. 65)

Consider one final example from Chuck Colson and Nancy Pearcey, coauthors of *How Now Shall We Live?* (1999), who use “Creation, Fall, and Redemption” as a method for understanding worldview. Broad usage of this three-point shorthand for “worldview” can be traced from Reformed teachers

such as Kuyper and Dooyeweerd (e.g., Pearcey, 2005, p. 26), through Cornelius Van Til to his student Francis Schaeffer, and through him to Pearcey and Colson. In fact, Schaeffer influenced many modern worldview thinkers such as David Noebel, founder of Summit Ministries, and Del Tackett, host of Focus on the Family's *The Truth Project*. The "Creation, Fall, Redemption" motif answers three common questions, which according to Colson and Pearcey are: (1) Where did we come from? (2) What went wrong? (3) How do we fix it (p. 14)? These can be understood as simply past, present, and future tense (time domain) restatements of the universal worldview question: *How do I understand myself relative to eternal reality?* As such, the Creation, Fall, redemption sequence serves as shorthand Christian answers to the universal worldview question, thus providing the Christian *social worldview*, as we have defined it. In her book *Total Truth*, Pearcey states:

If the grid of Creation, Fall, and Redemption provides a simple and effective tool for comparing and contrasting worldviews, it also explains why the biblical teaching of Creation is under such relentless attack today. In any worldview, the concept of Creation is foundational: As the first principle, it shapes everything that follows. Critics of Christianity know that it stands or falls with its teaching on ultimate origins. (Pearcey, 2005, p. 150)

She is right about this grid being an effective tool for diagnosing worldview differences—if she is addressing a Christian—because she presumes a Christian perspective as her starting point. In fact, her second and third questions presume Christianity (i.e., "What went wrong?" and "How do we fix it?" [cf. Pearcey, 2005, p. 25]), as was also the case in *How Now Shall We Live?* noted above. This presumption would become immediately apparent if these same questions were asked of an atheist,

who might take offense to the suggestion something had "gone wrong." Because the points of disagreement are presented up front in the form of loaded questions, they are likely to preclude objective discussion of core principles, which in turn precludes resolution. Pearcey has so thoroughly embedded her own worldview into her definition that she is not able to articulate the concept generically, having intertwined the universal principle with her individual perspective. A better, more neutral restatement of these three time domain questions comes out roughly as: (1) Where did I come from? (2) How did I get (to) here? and (3) Where is my life and the universe headed, particularly after I die? Of course, Pearcey's conclusion is right in any case because the definition of one's origin also logically defines one's destiny and the nature of the universe for everything in between.

Atheism, however, also stands or falls on the question of origins, though Pearcey fails to recognize this in her statement. The unintended consequence of being self-centric when speaking about worldview concepts with those holding a *different* view is that the discussion is not particularly useful in helping the other individuals understand they hold many of the same sorts of presumptions in many of the same areas.

The benefits Pearcey advocates are achievable for all faith positions—if the three questions are stated in a neutral way. And, as any Christian apologist understands, getting an individual to admit his own presumptions and engage in fair and equitable debate is sometimes 90% of the battle. Understanding the fourfold nature of "worldview" can help Christians understand their own hidden assumptions, as well as create an expectation of honest reciprocity in dialog with others.

Thus, understanding of the worldview paradigm's definitions, concepts, and principles can be impeded by those who speak or write about them

if they use ambiguous and/or equivocated terms. This causes the worldview concept to appear even more ghostlike than it is—occurring as an object in one case, a personal perspective in another, and a mechanism elsewhere, as if these different meanings were synonymous. However, diligence and precision regarding these four meanings of worldview can provide more careful and accurate diagnosis of what is being discussed. Of course this comes ultimately from understanding the *worldview mechanism* and its principle question: *How do I understand myself relative to eternal reality?*

Conclusion

People have generally defined the term "worldview" by intuition, sensing an underlying principle of interpretation coloring the human perspective without ever really carefully dissecting, analyzing, and systematically understanding the worldview. Unfortunately, this intuitive usage has led to inaccuracy and sometimes even error. Consequently, this discussion was intended to provide additional precision to and structural definition for "worldview" to facilitate onward development of these principles.

If a worldview's purpose is to discover truth and predict true courses of action, it seems incumbent on us to speak about the concept itself and its pieces in precisely true ways. This paper is not intended to be the definitive corrective reference but merely a step toward better dialog in that regard. Thus, four distinct concepts were presented for the term "worldview." The first and most common use refers to the individual's subjective worldview ideas, or *worldview perspective(s)*. Second, while everyone's answers are not the same, rationality causes the common human experience of collecting such answers, forming a mental retaining object or "file" identified herein as the *worldview structure*. Third, as described by Chisham (2012), as well as in this paper, the *worldview*

mechanism is the tool that rationality uses to assemble the *worldview structure* and *worldview perspective(s)* and governs the concept, as a whole. Finally, a *social worldview* is a second-order consequence of humans rationalizing within social settings.

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