WORLDVIEWS

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"Worldview" is a useful vague notion that facilitates communication in multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural contexts in many marvelous ways. So often, each of the diverse positions in such pluralistic contexts for communication has its own languages and terms for focusing topics, even when the topics are ostensibly the same for all the positions. For representatives of different positions to engage one another over competing worldviews, or over competing interpretations of a common worldview, the vagueness of the notion of worldview is helpful, perhaps essential, to getting the conversation started.

Nevertheless, the felicity of the vague notion of worldview disappears at the point that precision is required about its meaning. When thinkers assign precise meanings to the notion of worldview, and those precise meanings differ, communication often breaks down. This is the condition in which “precision” is reductive, and one precise meaning reduces out as irrelevant what another precise meaning takes to be important.

An alternate approach to precision is to enrich the vague notion with elements that can be spelled out while sustaining the vagueness useful for communication. “Enriching precision,” as opposed to “reductive precision,” facilitates communication among parties each of which can engage part of the overall notion without the other parts, but with awareness of what is left out that interests others. The logic of this general point about vagueness was originally developed by Charles S. Peirce, who defined a vague category as one under which the law of non-contradiction need not apply.1 For instance, early Christianity in

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the first century fits under the vague category of Second Temple Judaism, claiming that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, which directly contradicts the other forms of Second Temple Judaism, each side saying that the other is illegitimate in some sense as Second Temple Judaism. Conversations between Jews and Christians today are facilitated by the recognition of the common vague identity of their traditions in the first century. In what follows I shall elaborate a technically precise, but enriched, notion of worldview that sustains the helpful vagueness while allowing for indefinite clarification.

Here is my stipulated notion. A worldview is a cultured set of signs for orienting intentional behavior that has spectra of (1) scale, (2) sophistication, (3) valuation, (4) identity, and (5) commitment. Each of the “terms of art” in this definition shall be explained.

“Orientation” here means taking a stance toward things so that they have meaning within one’s field of engagement. Orientation involves the backgrounding notions and purposes that contextualize engagement. For instance, one’s orientation to individuals within one’s family is different from one’s orientation to individuals one meets in the supermarket, although all are human, to be treated with dignity, and so forth. A worldview shapes the contextualizing orientations to the various things a person or group engages, distinguishing and relating them to one another.

“Intention” here means purposive but not necessarily conscious behavior. One’s worldview supplies all sorts of purposes that provide orientations of which an individual or social group can be unaware. A great many purposes are embodied in the terms of a culture’s semiotic system.

“Behavior” includes internal impulses and thinking as well as overt action. Thinking and emotional behavior cannot be separated from overt behavior.²

That a worldview’s set of signs is “cultured” means that it is learned, with at least three dimensions of learning: ritualization or habit-taking, age-specific development, and vulnerability to correction. Ritualization or habit-taking refers to acculturation, wherein people are shaped by their participation in a cultural enterprise; consciously or not, they develop their habits to facilitate participation. Age-specific

development means that individuals’ sets of signs grow and change as they mature; maturing individuals take more and more responsibility for their own culturedness, sometimes making them vulnerable to correction. This is because cultured sets of signs are not merely given in acculturation but are changed by individuals and groups as they observe how their cultures lead them to interact with the realities of their world.

This definition of worldview does not limit the ascription of worldviews either to a group or to an individual. Worldviews obviously involve shared symbols but they differ within given cultures and societies, are porous to one another in the interactions of cultures and societies, and are modified and shifted within the individual life of each person within a social group.

Worldviews are sometimes thought of as world-pictures that have definite univocal categories. I think rather that worldviews consist in dimensions of traits where each dimension has a spectrum of definite univocal categories. Within a given world view there is not one picture, but a spectrum of pictures in each dimension. The important dimensions are scale, sophistication, valuation, identity, and commitment.

1. A worldview has a spectrum of scale. At one end of the scale spectrum, the ultimacy end, are the signs articulating what Peter Berger has called a “sacred canopy.”3 These signs, most often religious symbols, define the ultimate boundaries and grounds of the world, signs of creation and ultimate purpose, of cosmic geography and destiny, of the grounds for value, hope, and judgment, stories and myths of the founding of peoples and individuals, symbols of ultimate identity. Many people, when they use the word “worldview,” especially “religious worldview,” have in mind mainly this sacred canopy at the ultimate end of the spectrum of scale. At the opposite, proximate, end, however, a worldview says when to wash your hands, i.e., how to handle purity issues, when to pray, how to defer to people in different stations, and when to go to war or have babies. All along the spectrum of scale are sets of signs that mediate between ultimate and proximate matters for orienting behavior. An attack on one’s bodily symbolic behaviors of deference and respect is just as much a jolt to one’s worldview as an attack on one’s symbols of God or the Dao.

2. The spectrum of sophistication runs from folk culture to philosophy. By this I mean that all along the spectrum of scale, from the ultimate to the proximate, there is an intermittent and orthogonal spectrum of signs expressing different levels of abstraction. "Abstraction" is not quite the right word, because a symbol in folk culture might have a very wide range of references not transparent to the symbol itself; one thinks of the elaborate meaning of the Balinese cockfights that fascinated Clifford Geertz. But if abstraction means that the signs apply across a relatively wide range of contexts, with metaphysical signs aiming to apply across all contexts, then the spectrum-contrast holds. The ultimate, for instance, can be symbolized by angry, jealous, Yahweh who would have killed Moses had his wife not intervened to circumcise their son, a part of biblical Israelite folk religion (Exodus 4:24-26). Thomas Aquinas, at the opposite end of the sophistication spectrum, intended to symbolize that same God as the utterly simple Act of Esse. For Aquinas, the ultimate God was not only symbolized so abstractly, however; Thomas said that God is the Act of Esse and also that Mary is His mother. At the ultimate end of the scale spectrum, a very large swath of the sophistication spectrum applies. At more proximate reaches of the scale spectrum, there are also orthogonal scales of sophistication to understand each orienting position.

It is tempting to understand the sophistication spectrum historically, supposing a movement from folk religion to more sophisticated kinds of religion with appropriately sophisticated worldviews. That temptation should be resisted, however, because it is obvious today that all the major world religions, which boast extremely sophisticated metaphysical views for the ultimate portions of the scale spectrum and equally sophisticated social-science views of folk-practice, still exhibit complex world views that combine or even confuse folk elements with high-level scientific and philosophical abstractions.

One exception to resisting this temptation to historicize sophistication, however, is to understand the rise of the Axial Age religions and cultures. Whereas pre-Axial Age folk cultures were local, with local sacred canopies, strong definitions of the ingroup, and definitions of individual identity in terms of the people and places of the ingroup, the Axial Age religions all, in one way or another, conceived the world to be a whole, a cosmos, with ontologically unified foundations, for instance a monotheistic God, an underlying Dao, or
cooperative principles such as Heaven and Earth. Moreover, although Axial Age individuals still had locally defined identities, their more important personal identities related them to the unifying ultimate principle, which in turn made them relate to other people, not just those in their in-group, as all equally related to the unifying ultimate principle. So, in the Axial Age cultures universal ethics and metaphysics flourished, and so did comparative cultural conceptions and theories of “the human.”

But the Axial Age cultures did not supersede the folk cultures: they were laid down on top of them. Hence the actual Axial Age worldviews, as opposed to their revolutionary ideologies of unity and individual relation to ultimacy (which are only part of the worldviews), embraced the whole sophistication spectrum from philosophy to folk culture. Sometimes the ingroup patriotism of the folk cultures is in serious tension with the universalism of other parts of the Axial Age worldviews.

3. A worldview has a spectrum of valuation that, in large part, is a function of the interactions of the spectra of scale and sophistication. At one end of the valuation spectrum is the set of values that would be articulated explicitly by the worldview as defining human aspirations, and the limitation of aspirations. At the other end is the large set of values that are implicit in the signs in the cultural set of the worldview. The signs in a given culture tell that culture what is important to interpret in the world. They articulate reality’s “worldliness” for that culture, and another culture might take different things to be more important to interpret. Evolutionarily speaking all cultures must get enough of what is really important in reality so as to have survival value.

The middle range of the valuation spectrum is the most interesting. Social psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt have proposed that there are five moral projects for valuation that are universal across cultures, although varying greatly in cultural specificity.4 These projects are evolutionarily primitive and it is easy to see that they add to selective advantage in the conditions of our ancestors living in small family or tribal groups on the edge of the savannah, competing with one another and with the forces of the wild for resources for survival. The

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first of these moral projects is the development of compassion or care for others in the in-group. This includes both habitual actions to express care and also the instincts of empathy and feeling of horror at people’s suffering. The second moral project is the development of a sense of reciprocity and fairness within the ingroup, with elementary rules for reciprocal roles, for each doing his or her duty, and scorn for cheaters; this moral project is developed both in habitual actions and also in gut reactions and instincts.

The third moral project is the development of in-group identity itself, with all the markers that allow for immediate recognition of in-group and out-group individuals. In evolutionarily primitive conditions the social units were small, perhaps only multi-generational families. But there are in-groups within in-groups, families within villages, villages within clans, clans within nations, where “nation” still carries the Latin connotation of a common birth in some sense. Ancient Israel was a nation of many clans born of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and looked over by a common God who fought the gods of other nations. Much of the particularity of culture involves defining in-group identity for immediate recognition, from dress and scarification to diet, sexual customs, and explicit oppositions to the various out-groups, sometimes in ritualized war-fare. The identity practices of the out-groups are defined as foul, and are internalized as such. Red Sox fans are vulgar about the Yankees.

The fourth moral project is the organization of the in-group with an authority structure where everyone has a place. This involves recognition of elders, care for the younger and weaker members, patriotism regarding one’s own authority structure, and condemnation of breaches in the authority structure.

Finally, the fifth moral project is the cultivation of a sense of purity and impurity that can be internalized as visceral reactions, mainly disgust reactions. Perhaps arising as responses to food that might be poisonous, the pure/impure moral “faculty” is generalized to include and reinforce all the internalized instincts of care/hurt, fairness/cheating, in-group/out-group identity, and loyalty/betrayal of the authority structure of one’s in-group culture. Whereas some purity/impurity functions might be nearly universal in biology, like avoiding poisonous food, many if not most of those functions, such as sexual taboos, are relative to the cultures whose in-groups/out-group distinctions give them content. To function as internalized in-group/out-
group markers, the purity/impurity visceral reactions need to be particular to and differential among groups.

All worldviews have some version or other of these five “moral projects.” We tend to think of morality in terms of deliberation about hard cases, and most worldviews do have elaborate means of social and individual deliberation. In practical life, however, these moral projects prepare people to act immediately with little or no deliberation. They are parts of how people view the world, and people respond to the world’s moral exigencies as if they were simple perceived.

The case of the Axial Age cultures is interesting at this point. Seeing all human beings as the in-group under God, or the Dao, or Brahman, the Axial Age religions extended the moral project of compassion and care to everyone, in one way or another. For the same reason, they extended the moral project of reciprocity and fairness to everyone. By contrast, the moral project of defining the in-group over against out-groups was relativized somewhat, because officially no one is in an out-group over against the ultimate principle. Of course people still have special responsibilities to families, local communities, and so forth, but in the Axial Age religions these responsibilities play less of a role in defining individual identity and worth: humanity is more important than clan identity. Similarly, there always are authority structures for local groups—politics cannot be escaped. Yet for the Axial Age cultures these are not so sacred, that is, sanctioned with ultimacy. Authority structures can be judged pragmatically; Plato’s and Aristotle’s comparative discussions of various constitutions, including democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny, would not have been possible in a pre-Axial Age folk culture. Axial Age cultures recognize the visceral realities of human purity/impurity responses; but they also recognize that these are culturally relative, and in the larger scale of all under Heaven each thing is clean for someone. Most of us would be disgusted by a diet of bugs and worms, although we know that this was the preferred cuisine of our ancestors back on the savannahs who developed the first purity codes.

Worldviews differ in how they articulate these moral projects, but they all have some versions of them, weighted variously. Jonathan Haidt notes that Americans with self-described “conservative” worldviews weight the five moral projects roughly equally, whereas self-described “liberals” give great weight to love and justice, the first
two, and significantly less weight to the last three, in-groups exclusiveness, social authority structure, and purity/impurity.

4. The spectrum of identity refers to the degree to which a worldview determines a person’s or group’s identity. At one end of the spectrum, the worldview tightly determines group and individual identity and at the other end is a very loose, almost under-determination of identity. For much of the 20th century, North Atlantic anthropologists studied cultures in a taxonomic way, which assumes that individuals within the culture are rather tightly defined by their worldviews as articulated in some taxonomy. Or, if they are not so defined by the worldview, they are not interesting. Andrea Bieler has pointed out, however, that “softer” postmodern anthropological approaches look more carefully at how individuals relate to their cultures and worldviews, and find that there is considerable variety, even in traditional “closed” or “folk” cultures. Since the beginning of the Axial Age, worldviews have been interacting, learning from one another, redefining themselves in terms of one another, and moving from one context to another. In late-modern society, a given individual is likely to be offered many worldviews, few of them tightly consistent and all requiring to be evaluated and chosen with regard to both their structure and the individual’s commitment. In many Western societies the inherited historical worldviews contain many elements that are simply irrelevant to that toward which individuals and societies need orientation, and on the other hand they fail to supply guidance in many important areas. So it is important to determine, with regard to any worldview, just how much of life it encompasses in that for which it supplies orientation, for this or that individual or group.

5. The spectrum of commitment is related to this. An individual or a society can be deeply committed to an identifiable worldview, to the extent is does provide identity regarding the elements of life to which orientation is needed. Or an individual or society can be intermittently committed, living according to the worldview until a serious challenge arises, such as confrontation with an alternative worldview or the arising of a newly recognized phenomenon such as environmental sustainability for which the worldview has little to say.

Sometimes people are indifferent to their worldviews until some crisis requires them to ask fundamental questions of orientation. Furthermore, in our time worldviews are understood to have histories, and commitments are qualified by how one relates to the history. Modern sophisticates are likely to qualify their commitment to a religious worldview by treating the supernatural elements as not literally true, but as merely symbolic. Some people reject their inherited worldview because of its supernaturalism, or for some other reason, and think of themselves as secular. Some people commit themselves to secular worldviews that emphasize truth, freedom, and the enhancement of human life. Others admit to being secular in the sense of rejecting supernaturalism, but have no deep passion for secular values as defined by a non-supernaturalist sacred canopy or by moral projects. To understand the functioning of worldviews requires factoring in the ways and extent to which they elicit commitment.

A final point needs to be made about worldviews as such: their learning. Any individual is cultured by taking on the signs and interpretive habits of parents and local community. The Confucians understand this as ritualization, the internalization of signs for interaction with the social and physical environment that are culturally carried down. It begins in infancy when babies are taught to stand with the feet parallel, as East Asians do, or at an angle with the toes spread, as the Europeans do. It continues all through socialization and into self-conscious character development. In addition to the general process of ritualization, it appears that adolescence is a special time in the development of the nervous system when it is possible for an individual to make a deep commitment to a worldview, not just to accept the habituated part, but to commit to the worldview as such. Prior to adolescence there is too little responsibility for self-identity and after adolescence, if the commitment has not been made, the wholeness of affirmation is very difficult to achieve, however much an individual might affirm things intellectually and socially.

Finally, worldviews are learned in addition through intellectual means, in which adults take responsibility for the truth or authenticity of their worldview in part or whole. Since the Axial Age, truth has become an explicit value for intellectual thinking. Therefore, worldviews are learned with the supposition that they are true in relevant senses. And they are criticized when they are found in part or whole to be false or inauthentic. Precisely because skills at critical inquiry are acquired in much greater scope and precision after adolescence, many individuals have the wrenching experiences of finding their adolescent worldview commitments to be seriously mistaken. In our late-modern Western world it is not uncommon for adults’ commitment to a worldview to be itself the result of a rejection of a naively placed commitment and a new commitment that does not carry the weight of adolescent immediacy. Those of us who are cognizant of different and competing worldviews often live in a state of chastened commitment on the one hand and suspension of commitment on the other.

In this brief essay I have put forward an hypothesis for understanding worldviews as multidimensional. To repeat the original definition, a worldview is a cultured set of signs for orienting intentional behavior that has spectra of (1) scale, (2) sophistication, (3) valuation, (4) identity, and (5) commitment. My discussion has given brief illustrations of various points in that definition. The hypothesis suggests that the analysis of a worldview, or comparison of competing worldviews, needs to look to the character of the signs involved, how they orient behavior, how they are learned, and how they exhibit variations in scale, sophistication, valuation, identity, and commitment. The hypothesis will be justified if we find that it is helpful to make these multi-dimensional analyses, and that the failure to take note of them opens the door to imprecision.

Worldviews understood in this multi-dimensional way have great precision of articulation. This is a precision of enrichment, through the analysis of the various dimensions, rather than a precision of reduction that identifies worldviews by specific locations on the spectra rather than as holding together many positions along the spectra. Nevertheless, worldviews understood this way are properly vague, inviting different and potentially contradictory articulations along the spectra. For those who want to understand the metaphysics of the ultimate, arguments about Thomas’s Act of Esse can be engaged
without much attention to the folk religion and ecclesiastical history that says Mary is the Mother of God. Social scientists, or activists among poverty-stricken populations, can celebrate the worldview of the poor according to which Mary gives them comfort because she holds the body of her suffering son and holds them as well, without engaging in the metaphysics of the Trinity or the politics of Theotokos. Communication about worldviews can achieve precision, when that is needed, by determining the dimensions of worldviews of the sort discussed here. In an important sense, the Christian worldview that says that God is the Act of Esse and that Mary is His Mother is one vague but coherent worldview.