

6A Worldview Categories

Note: Portions of the Appendix were developed by the authors for papers presented to conferences of the American Society for Engineering Education. [1][2]

The term “worldview,” in its broadest sense, means a person’s outlook on life. A worldview, in fact, is a foundational set of philosophical presuppositions about the nature of the universe, a filter through which we deal with reality. Only three Basic Worldview Categories (BWCs) exist, upon which all others depend, and these are mutually exclusive. A society’s culture derives from one of these three BWCs, and the traditions and idiosyncrasies of that society can be traced to that worldview category.

Each BWC has some inherent logical consequences, and people may tend to “pick and choose,” often illogically, the consequences of one or more BWCs outside their own. However, given a culture which predominantly holds to one of BWC’s, one can predict some general trends in that culture, given the passing of a few generations.

Allan Bloom writes:

"[Sociologist Max] Weber purported to demonstrate that “men's 'worldviews' or 'values' determine their history, spirit compelling matter rather than the other way around. This has the effect of restoring the old view that individual men count for something, that there is human freedom and the need for leadership.” [3]

We do not make ethical decisions in a vacuum; our basic presuppositions about the universe or worldview affect our decisions. Most people do not look at the "why" of ethics; they catch their presuppositions, like the measles, without knowing it. They need to go back to the philosophical underpinnings of their worldview.

James Davidson Hunter expressed it this way:

To speak of moral authority is to speak of the fundamental assumptions that guide our perceptions of the world. These assumptions provide answers to questions about the

nature of reality –what is real and what isn't. For example, is there a spiritual as well as a physical and material realm of existence? Does God exist? If so, what is God's nature? Is God an active agent in human affairs or a distant ideal of human aspiration? These are also the assumptions that define the foundations of knowledge—how we know what we know. Upon what do we ground our knowledge of the world, our understanding of truth, and our conception of moral and ethical behavior? Does our knowledge derive from divine revelation, through the analysis of empirical evidence, or through personal and subjective experience? These generally unspoken assumptions are the basic standards by which we make moral judgments and decisions. The point needs to be made that all individuals ground their views of the world within some conception of moral authority. Not only those who are religious in a traditional sense, but also those who claim to have no religious faith at all base their views of the world in unprovable assumptions about 'being' and 'knowledge.' To imagine otherwise would be philosophically naïve. ...Even average, non-activist secularists—ordinary people who maintain no religious belief, who worship no deity—live by unspoken assumptions about their world; they too are people of particular, even if implicit, faith commitments. [4]

Finding One's Own Basic Worldview Category

The determination of which of the three BWCs from which one operates is given by one's answer to the three following questions about the nature of ultimate reality:

The first question is, "Does a supernatural realm exist or does all the universe simply consist of physical matter?"

If one's answer is that the universe is only physical, that there is absolutely nothing beyond the material universe, one holds to BWC #1 (Naturalism).

If not, the second question is asked, which is, "Is that which is supernatural in the universe personal, or impersonal?" That is, "Does the supernatural entity care about mankind, and, in particular, about me, or not?" One may conclude that there are several spiritual entities, which have personalities, but we are concerned with the Prime Spiritual Entity, the source of all the rest. Does that entity have personality, caring for humanity, or not?

If the answer is "no," then BWC #2 (Pantheism) is being held. If "yes," one is in BWC #3 (Theism).

If god is concerned with mankind, personally, but is impotent; that is, he is at the mercy of another, higher power in the universe, then we must conclude that he is not really God; the higher power is God, instead. This is tantamount to saying that the god we originally proposed is not infinite. If we restrict ourselves to the discussion of The Infinite God, then, there are only two alternatives; either He cares what man does, or he (more accurately, it) does not care. The former alternative will be referred to as The Infinite-Personal God, and the latter as an impersonal god.

It doesn't matter whether or not one professes not to know which of these three is actually true, because we are talking about an operating definition here. Around what assumption is one's life patterned? Everyone has some operating assumption, so that each individual operates in one of these three categories. No one can stand aloof and speak from outside these systems.

From this point of view, alone, one could classify BWCs into just two categories - those for which there is, or is not, a personal God, or "One Who cares". In these two categories, one will find that in the former, there is a logical base for morals and ethics, whereas, in the latter case, there is no basis.

It is important to distinguish "Basic Worldview Category" from "religion"; the BWC is more fundamental. A BWC is defined here as a basic, self-consistent system of thought concerning the universe, and one of the three proposed here is actually 'true' in the "brute-fact" sense. This, of course, means that the other two are actually false, in that same sense. The illogical position, that all points of view are equally valid, falls into the Pure Pantheistic category. Plainly stated, everyone has a right to his own opinion in the matter, but there are only three possibilities, and two are wrong!

The Pure Naturalistic Basic Worldview Category (BWC #1)

The Pure Naturalistic (materialistic) BWC consists (only) of matter, with no God included. A typical explanation of beginnings for Naturalism consists of dense material that exploded. This matter, plus time plus chance, explains all that there is. Carl Sagan's religious statement of faith for Naturalism sums it up: "The Universe is all that ever was and all that ever

will be.” Processes develop through evolution alone, and science is highly emphasized. This BWC is the core of modern humanism, as well as Marxism (dialectical materialism).

We have some basis for logic in the Naturalistic system, but none for universal morality. This system has no inherent absolute moral base; various bases are proposed, such as a 51 % majority (socialism or democracy), a ruling elite, or some derivative of a Theistic system (the greatest "good" for the greatest number, but without any universally accepted definition of "good"). Without an external reference, we have no consistent case against even the most horrible atrocities. A man with strong naturalist leanings stated:

"The stronger must dominate and not mate with the weaker, which would signify the sacrifice of its own higher nature. Only the born weakling can look upon this principle as cruel, and if he does so, it is merely because he is of a feebler nature and narrower mind; for if such a law did not direct the process of evolution, then the higher development of organic life would not be conceivable at all.

“...if Nature does not wish that weaker individuals should mate with the stronger, she wishes even less that a superior race should intermingle with an inferior one; because in such a case all her efforts, throughout hundreds of thousands of years, to establish an evolutionary higher stage of being, may thus be rendered futile.” [5]

As G. Bahnsen summarizes,

"If...God...does not exist, then [there is no] principled moral complaint about what Hitler did...In a Godless universe, what one 'animal' does to other 'animals' is ethically irrelevant. What happens, happens: period. "[6]

In the Pure Naturalistic system, there is no categorical distinction between man and the rest of the universe-man is simply a complicated molecule. There is no ultimate meaning to life. Existentialism- the logical absurdity of existence-is one logical conclusion, so that one must create one's meaning for life (this seems to lead to a transition to the third BWC: Pantheism).

A society composed entirely of BWC #1(Naturalism) will probably eventually result in a totalitarian system because of the absence of an absolute moral base on which to build an ethical system. Democracy in a society predominantly composed of BWC #1 cannot work; an

authoritarian structure becomes necessary to prevent total anarchy. Communism and fascism are illustrations of this condition. Further, this system does not value human life.

The Pure Pantheistic Basic Worldview Category (BWC #2)

The BWC of Pure Pantheism has its outworking in many varied systems, but the essence is as follows: The Pure Pantheist BWC is that in which whatever ultimate reality there is does not care about mankind. There may be a supernatural realm, but the distinction between that realm and the realm of real things is indistinct, because we are all part of god. In this system, god did not create the universe outside of himself, but the material universe is itself god, or part of god.

Pantheism is therefore based on the concept that "all is one," which is the source of the term "Monism." God, man, and the world are indistinct in this system, so that everything and everyone is part of it. There is no individual significance, because significance here is gained by losing one's identity and becoming part of the whole. There is no beginning or end. Everything has always been and always will be, with no categories at all. Neither true science nor true ethics has a consistent base in this system.

The Pantheist system is similar to the Naturalistic system, except that a supernatural realm has been added. This could be termed "god", but is not the same as the infinite-personal God described in the Theistic system; this god is the system itself--everything and everybody is part of this god, and death could seem relatively unimportant because of the continuity of all things.

There is no individual significance, because significance is gained by losing one's identity in becoming part of the whole. Individual human life is not ultimately important in a pantheist system, because it is not in a separate category from the rest of the universe. Animal and vegetable life is sometimes deemed more important than human life, for this reason. In this system, one can either have morality or logic, but not both. If one is logical, one realizes that he is god, so that whatever he does, or whatever happens, is right. The distinction between reality

and illusion becomes blurred, since one's thoughts are god's thoughts, so it may be that all that is, is simply in one's mind. Societies that adopt this philosophy usually come up with a moral system, but

to do so is actually illogical, since there is no logical basis for the morality; whatever is done is done by god. The usual theory of beginnings in a pantheist system is that there is no beginning, nor end. Everything has always been, and always will be.

In the case of a society composed only of BWC #2 (Pantheism), that culture would eventually see a complete loss of science. Progress would be considered a negative concept, and logic would lose importance. Human life would be considered less important than, or on the same level of importance as, animal or vegetable life. Examples of this trend are already present in our western civilization. Monism is very nearly equivalent to (though a subset of) Pantheism, and, according to Guinness: "-- Here is the first problem: Monism as related to reality does not give a sufficient basis on which to ground continuing scientific investigation or to distinguish between fantasy and reality.”[7]

The Pure Theistic Basic Worldview Category (BWC #3)

The Pure Theist's view is that God is both infinite and personal. The term "Infinite-personal God" was coined by Francis A. Schaeffer [8]. The concept that God is "personal" means that He is nearby, or cares personally about what I do. Either God cares what we do, or He does not, in which case we might as well refer to him as an "it" rather than a person; the Deist's "watchmaker-god", which winds up the universe and looks on dispassionately as it runs down, is a classic example of an impersonal god. The Deist actually has a naturalistic or pantheistic worldview.

The other part of Schaeffer's term, "infinite", signifies how Godlike the god referred to is. The old system of Greek gods and goddesses was pantheistic, since the "gods" were non-infinite and fallible, and were themselves created by a higher power. Any polytheistic system will ultimately reduce to pantheism, since the ultimate source of a multiplicity of gods is what should actually be considered the god. By its very nature, polytheism tends to be pantheistic; that is, those gods owe their existence to some "nature of the universe. “

The Pure Theistic BWC begins with an infinite-personal God. He is infinite, meaning that He created everything; and, a personal God, meaning that He cares what we do. He creates the universe outside Himself; that is, not as an extension of Himself, but out of nothing. He then creates man, but man is in a different category from the rest of the universe, yet not an extension of God, either. Man is a created being, but with capabilities, both for moral choices and a relationship with God. Man is seen as more than simply material. In this BWC, there is room for both logic and morality, two essentials for an ethical system.

The basis for morality in a Theistic system is what God wants man to do. Absolute moral standards exist, and since they are prescribed by a God Who cares for mankind and knows what is best for him, these principles are not simply arbitrary, but have the good of mankind as their object. The basis for logic in a Theistic system is that God is reasonable and has created a reasonable universe. (This, by the way, is the basis upon which we have science. Science as we know it arose out of a matrix of the Theistic world view.) [9]

Conclusions

People often do not live in a manner completely consistent with their worldviews; however, as a whole, the lifestyle of a society will eventually conform to its worldview. Although the Naturalistic base will not logically support a morality, in the evolution from the theistic to the naturalistic system, a memory of the Theistic based morality is retained in the transition, so that there is an illusion of morality, even when a society has nearly completed the transition. In Western Culture, over the past century, we have drifted from a Theistic, to a Naturalistic, and recently, to a Pantheistic base; which is a natural evolution. As a result, our ethics have eroded, because the basis for ethics has changed. If we do not learn from history, our present civilization will be in danger.

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