

Life's Ultimate Questions

An Introduction to Philosophy

Ronald H. Nash

Zondervan Publishing House


Zondervan Publishing House
Grand Rapids, Michigan
A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

Worldview Thinking

Fifty years ago, a California gangster named Mickey Cohen shocked people on both sides of the law when he went forward in a Billy Graham crusade and made a profession of faith. After several months, however, people began to notice that Cohen's life showed no sign of the changes that should have been apparent in the life of a genuine convert. During an interview, Cohen made it clear that he had no interest in abandoning his career as a gangster. He explained his position in a novel way. Since we have Christian movie stars and Christian politicians, Cohen noted, he wanted to be known as the first Christian gangster.

Until recently, most Americans, regardless of their competence in religious matters, would have expressed their dismay at Cohen's behavior. Religious converts, people used to say, are supposed to live better lives than they did before their conversion. I suspect that many Americans today would find nothing unusual in Cohen's attempt at self-justification.

One purpose of this chapter is to explain these odd happenings. Cohen displayed a defective understanding of the cognitive and moral demands of what this chapter will call the Christian worldview. If someone considers himself a Christian, he is supposed to think and act like a Christian. The fact that so many Americans no longer think that way is indication of a major shift in their worldview.

One thing students can learn from philosophy is the nature, importance, and influence of worldviews. If one is serious about getting somewhere in the study of philosophy, it is helpful to examine the bigger picture, namely, the worldviews of the thinkers whose theories have become a large part of what philosophers study.

A worldview contains a person's answers to the major questions in life, almost all of which contain significant philosophical content. It is a conceptual framework, pattern, or arrangement of a person's beliefs. The best worldviews are comprehensive, systematic, and supposedly true views of life and of the world. The philosophical systems of great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas delineate their worldviews. Of course, many worldviews suffer from incompleteness,

The Importance of Worldview Thinking

inconsistencies, and other failings. Few of the pieces of such worldviews fit together.

Most people have no idea what a worldview is, or even that they have one. People like this are unlikely to know much about the specific content of their own worldview. Nonetheless, achieving a greater awareness of our own worldview is one of the most important things we can do; insight into the worldviews of others is essential to understanding what makes them tick. One thing we can do for others is to help them achieve a better understanding of their worldview. We can also help them to improve it, which means eliminating inconsistencies and providing new information that will fill gaps and remove errors in their conceptual system. A worldview, then, is a conceptual scheme that contains our fundamental beliefs; it is also the means by which we interpret and judge reality.

Worldviews function much like eyeglasses. The right eyeglasses can put the world into clearer focus, and the correct worldview can do something similar. When people look at the world through the wrong worldview, reality doesn't make sense to them. Putting on the right conceptual scheme, that is, viewing the world through the correct worldview, can have consequences for the rest of a person's thinking and acting. The *Confessions* of Augustine provides ample support for this claim.

Most of us know people who seem incapable of seeing certain points that are obvious to us; perhaps those people view us as equally thick-headed or stubborn. They often seem to have a built-in grid that filters out information and arguments and that leads them to place a peculiar twist on what seems obvious to us. Such obstinacy is often a consequence of their worldview.

The study of philosophy can help us realize what a worldview is, assist us in achieving a better understanding of our worldview, and aid us in improving it. Another thing the study of philosophy can teach us is that some worldviews are better than others. Even though Plato and Aristotle got some things, perhaps many things wrong, chances are their worldviews will generally get higher marks than will those of students reading this book. The fact that some worldviews are better than others suggests the need for tests or criteria by which worldviews can be evaluated. This chapter will identify some of these criteria.

Five Central Worldview Beliefs

Worldviews contain at least five clusters of beliefs, namely, beliefs about God, metaphysics (ultimate reality), epistemology (knowledge), ethics, and human nature.¹ While worldviews may include other

¹ One important area of human knowledge that could be added to our list is history. I have devoted a book to representative theories about history. See Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998).

beliefs that need not be mentioned at this point, these five usually define the most important differences among competing conceptual systems.

God

The crucial element of any worldview is what it says or does not say about God. Worldviews differ greatly over basic questions: Does God exist? What is God's nature? Is there but one God? Is God a personal being, that is, is he the kind of being who can know, love, and act? Or is God an impersonal force or power? Because of conflicting views about the nature of God, such systems as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shintoism are not only different religions but also different worldviews. Because Christianity and Judaism are examples of theism, conservative adherents of these religions hold to worldviews that have more in common with each other than they do with dualistic religions (two deities), polytheistic faiths (more than two deities), and pantheistic systems that view the world as divine in some sense. One essential component, then, of any worldview is its view of God.

Metaphysics

A worldview also includes answers to such questions as these: What is the relationship between God and the universe? Is the existence of the universe a brute fact? Is the universe eternal? Did an eternal, personal, and all-powerful God create the world? Are God and the world co-eternal and interdependent beings?² Is the world best understood in a mechanistic (that is, a nonpurposeful) way? Or is there purpose in the universe? What is the ultimate nature of the universe? Is the cosmos material, spiritual, or something else? Is the universe a self-enclosed system in the sense that everything that happens is caused by and thus explained by other events within the system? Or can a supernatural reality (a being beyond nature) act causally within nature? Are miracles possible? Though some of these questions never occur to some people, it is likely that anyone reading this book has thought about most of these questions and holds beliefs about some of them.

Epistemology

A third component of any worldview is a theory of knowledge. Even people not given to philosophical pursuits hold some epistemological beliefs. The easiest way to see this is to ask them if they believe that knowledge about the world is possible. Whether they answer yes or no

2. Advocates of what is known as process theology answer this question in the affirmative. For a detailed analysis of this increasingly influential position, see Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

to this question, their reply will identify one element of their epistemology. Other epistemological questions include the following: Can we trust our senses? What are the proper roles of reason and sense experience in knowledge? Do we apprehend our own states of consciousness in some way other than reason and sense experience? Are our intuitions of our own states of consciousness more dependable than our perceptions of the world outside of us? Is truth relative, or must truth be the same for all rational beings? What is the relationship between religious faith and reason? Is the scientific method the only or perhaps the best method of knowledge? Is knowledge about God possible? If so, how can we know God? Can God reveal himself to human beings? Can God reveal information to human beings? What is the relationship between the mind of God and the human mind?³ Even though few human beings think about such questions while watching a baseball game on television (or during any normal daily activities), all that is usually required to elicit an opinion is to ask the question. All of us hold beliefs on epistemological issues; we need only to have our attention directed to the questions.

Ethics

Most people are more aware of the ethical component of their worldview than of their metaphysical and epistemological beliefs. We make moral judgments about the conduct of individuals (ourselves and others) and nations. The kinds of ethical beliefs that are important in this context, however, are more basic than moral judgments about single actions. It is one thing to say that some action of a human being like Adolf Hitler or of a nation like Iran is morally wrong. Ethics is more concerned with the question of why that action is wrong. Are there moral laws that govern human conduct? What are they? Are these moral laws the same for all human beings? Is morality subjective, like some people's taste for squid, or is there an objective dimension to moral laws that means their truth is independent of our preferences and desires? Are the moral laws discovered in a way more or less similar to the way we discover that seven times seven equals forty-nine, or are they constructed by human beings in a way more or less similar to what we call human customs?⁴ Is morality relative to individuals, cultures, or historical periods? Does it make sense to say that the same action may be right for people in one culture or historical epoch and wrong for others? Or does morality transcend cultural, historical, and individual boundaries?

3. My answers to many of these questions can be found in Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992).

4. Examples would include the ways men in our society used to open doors for women or walk on the street side of their female companion.

Anthropology

Every worldview includes a number of beliefs about the nature of human beings. Examples of relevant questions include the following: Are human beings free, or are they merely pawns of deterministic forces? Are human beings only bodies or material beings? Or were all the religious and philosophical thinkers correct who talked about the human soul or who distinguished the mind from the body? If they were right in some sense, what is the human soul or mind, and how is it related to the body? Does physical death end the existence of the human person? Or is there conscious, personal survival after death? Are there rewards and punishment after death? Are humans good or evil?

An Important Qualification

I do not want to suggest that adherents of the same general worldview will agree on every issue. Even Christians who share beliefs on all essential issues may disagree on other major points. They may understand the relationship between human freedom and the sovereignty of God in different ways. They may disagree over how some revealed law of God applies to a current situation. They may squabble publicly over complex issues like national defense, capital punishment, and the welfare state, to say nothing about the issues that divide Christendom into different denominations.

Do these many disagreements undercut the case I've been making about the nature of a worldview? Not at all. A careful study of these disagreements will reveal that they are differences within a broader family of beliefs. When two or more Christians, let us say, argue over some issue, one of the steps they take (or should take) to justify their position and to persuade the other is to show that their view is more consistent with basic tenets of their worldview.

However, it is also necessary to recognize that disagreement on some issues should result in the disputants' being regarded as people who have left that family of beliefs, however much they desire to continue to use the Christian name. For example, many theological liberals within Christendom continue to use the label of *Christian* for views that are clearly inconsistent with the beliefs of historic Christianity. Whether they deny the Trinity, the personality of God, the doctrine of creation, the fact of human depravity, or the doctrine of salvation by grace, they make clear that the religious system they espouse is a different worldview from what has traditionally been called Christianity. Much confusion could be eliminated if some way could be found to get people to use labels like *Christianity* in a way that is faithful to their historic meaning.

Conclusion

Whether we know it or not—whether we like it or not—each of us has a worldview. These worldviews function as interpretive conceptual schemes to explain why we see the world as we do, why we think and act as we do. Competing worldviews often come into conflict. These clashes may be as innocuous as a simple argument between people or as serious as a war between two nations. It is important, therefore, that we understand the extent to which significant disagreements reflect clashes between competing worldviews.

Worldviews are double-edged swords. An inadequate conceptual scheme can hinder our efforts to understand God, the world, and ourselves. The right conceptual scheme can suddenly bring everything into proper focus.

Worldview Thinking and Religion

Worldview thinking has important links to religious belief. Take the Christian faith as an example. Instead of viewing Christianity as a collection of theological bits and pieces to be believed or debated, individuals should approach it as a conceptual system, as a total world-and-life view. Once people understand that both Christianity and its competitors are worldviews, they will be in a better position to judge the relative merits of competing systems. The case for or against Christian theism should be made and evaluated in terms of total systems. The reason why many people reject Christianity is not due to their problems with one or two isolated issues; their dissent results rather from the fact that the anti-Christian conceptual scheme of such people leads them to reject information and arguments that for believers provide support for their worldview. One illustration of this claim lies in people's differing approaches to the central place that miracles occupy in the Christian faith. Religious believers who affirm the reality of such miracles as the resurrection of Jesus Christ need to understand how one's general perspective on the world (that is, one's worldview) controls one's attitude toward miracle claims. People who disagree about the reality of miracles often find themselves talking past each other because they do not appreciate the underlying convictions that make their respective attitudes about miracles seem reasonable to them.

Christianity then is not merely a religion that tells human beings how they may be forgiven. It is a world-and-life view. The Christian worldview has important things to say about the whole of human life. Once we understand in a systematic way how challenges to Christianity are also worldviews, we will be in a better position to rationally justify our choice of the Christian worldview.

Religious faith is not one isolated compartment of a person's life—a compartment that we can take or leave as we wish. It is rather a dimension of life that colors or influences everything we do and believe. John Calvin taught that all human beings are "incurably religious." Religion is an inescapable given in life. All humans have something that concerns them ultimately, and whatever it is, that object of ultimate concern is that person's God. Whatever a person's ultimate concern may be, it will have an enormous influence on everything else the person does or believes; that is one of the things ultimate concerns are like.

This view was shared by the late Henry Zylstra, who wrote:

To be human is to be scientific, yes, and practical, and rational, and moral, and social, and artistic, but to be human further is to be religious also. And this religious in man is not just another facet of himself, just another side to his nature, just another part of the whole. It is the condition of all the rest and the justification of all the rest. This is inevitably and inescapably so for all men. No man is religiously neutral in his knowledge of and his appropriation of reality.⁵

No human is religiously neutral, Zylstra states. Whether the person in question is an atheistic philosopher offering arguments against the existence of God, or a psychologist attributing belief in God to cognitive malfunction, or an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer attempting another tactic to remove religion from the public square, no human is religiously neutral. The world is not composed of religious and nonreligious people. It is composed rather of religious people who have differing ultimate concerns and different gods and who respond to the living God in different ways. Each human life manifests different ways of expressing a person's allegiances and answers to the ultimate questions of life. All humans are incurably religious; we manifest different religious allegiances.

This point obliterates much of the usual distinction between sacred and secular. A teacher or a politician who pretends to be religiously neutral is not thinking very deeply. Secular humanism is a religious worldview as certainly as are Christianity and Judaism. It expresses the ultimate commitments and concerns of its proponents.

The Role of Presuppositions

The philosopher Augustine (354–430) noted that before humans can know anything, they must believe something. Whenever we think, we take some things for granted. All human beliefs rest upon other beliefs

5. Henry Zylstra, *Testament of Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 145.

The Unavoidability of Religious Concerns

Other Considerations

that we presuppose or accept without support from arguments or evidence. As philosopher Thomas V. Morris explains,

The most important presuppositions are the most basic and most general beliefs about God, man, and the world that anyone can have. They are not usually consciously entertained but rather function as the perspective from which an individual sees and interprets both the events of his own life and the various circumstances of the world around him. These presuppositions in conjunction with one another delimit the boundaries within which all other less foundational beliefs are held.⁶

Even scientists make important epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical assumptions. They assume, for example, that knowledge is possible and that sense experience is reliable (epistemology), that the universe is regular (metaphysics), and that scientists should be honest (ethics). Without these assumptions that scientists cannot justify within the limits of their methodology, scientific inquiry would soon collapse.

Basic assumptions or presuppositions are important because of the way they often determine the method and goal of theoretical thought. They can be compared with a train running on tracks that have no switches. Once people commit themselves to a certain set of presuppositions, their direction and destination are determined. An acceptance of the presuppositions of the Christian worldview will lead a person to conclusions quite different from those that would follow a commitment to the presuppositions of naturalism.⁷

Paradigms

One purpose of this book is to help the reader recognize overlooked, unseen patterns of thinking that operate in and control much human thinking, including many of the philosophical theories we'll examine. I have talked about worldviews and the impact that presuppositions have upon such conceptual systems. Another relevant factor is sometimes discussed under the label of *paradigms*. A paradigm is a habitual way of thinking. In a sense, every worldview is composed of many smaller paradigms. A worldview, in other words, is a collection of paradigms.

Paradigms provide boundaries. They act as filters that screen data, namely, data that do not meet expectations connected with the paradigm. Paradigms filter information produced by our experiences. They admit data that fit the paradigm and filter out data that conflict with the para-

6. Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 109.

7. This claim assumes that the parties involved think and act consistently. We all know professing Christians whose judgments and conduct conflict with important principles of their faith. Many nontheists, often unconsciously, appear to draw back from positions that their presuppositions seem to entail.

digm. The outdated Ptolemaic model of the solar system⁸ functioned as a paradigm for centuries. Copernicus's new model placing the sun at the center of our solar system met enormous opposition at first. Much of that opposition came from the power that the old way of thinking, the old paradigm, had over the minds of many influential people.

Of course, not all paradigms are as big as our model of the solar system. People are subject to the influence of many kinds of paradigms in matters of race, religion, and other areas of life and thought.⁹

Personal Considerations

It is hard to ignore the personal dimension that is often present in the acceptance and evaluation of worldviews. It would be foolish to pretend that human beings always handle such matters impersonally and objectively, without reference to considerations rooted in their psychological makeup. Many people demonstrate that they are often incapable of thinking clearly about their worldview. Most of us have met people or read the writings of people who appear so captive to a paradigm that they seem incapable of giving a fair hearing to any argument or piece of evidence that appears to threaten their system. This is true of both theists and nontheists.

Sometimes people have difficulty with competing claims and systems because of philosophical presuppositions. But often people's theoretical judgments seem inordinately affected by nontheoretical factors. This is the case, for example, when racial prejudice causes people to hold untrue beliefs about those who are objects of their prejudice. Sometimes these factors are rooted in that person's history. Some writers have suggested that another type of nontheoretical influence affects our thinking. According to such writers, human thoughts and actions have religious roots in the sense that they are related to the human heart, the center or religious root of our being.¹⁰ Human beings are never neutral with regard to God. Either we worship God as Creator and Lord, or we turn away from God. Because the heart is directed either toward God or against God, theoret-

8. If any readers need reminding, this is the creation of the ancient Greek astronomer Ptolemy, who taught that the earth was the center of our solar system.

9. My use of the word *paradigm* in this book must not be confused with its meaning in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Kuhn did not invent the term; he took the word from the English language, redefined it, and turned it into a technical term. The lack of a suitable alternative forces me to use the word *paradigm* even though my usage of the term differs from Kuhn's in at least two ways. Kuhn's "paradigm" refers primarily to the way a dominant theory in the sciences tends to blind people to a new, better, and more adequate theory. Kuhn's usage also contains a heavy dosage of relativism. He often seems disinterested in questions about the truth of conflicting paradigms.

10. For example, see Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960).

ical thinking is never as pure or autonomous as many would like to think. While this line of thinking raises questions that cannot be explored further in this book, it does seem that some people who appear to reject Christianity on what they regard as rational theoretical grounds are acting under the influence of nonrational factors, that is, more ultimate commitments of their hearts. People should be encouraged to dig below the surface and uncover the basic philosophical and religious presuppositions that appear to control their thinking.

Two Challenges

The Contemporary Philosophical Assault on Conceptual Systems

Midway through the twentieth century, large numbers of younger philosophers in the English-speaking world became hostile toward philosophical system building. To people familiar with the history of philosophy, this repudiation of conceptual systems as the most important task of philosophers made some sense. Even the more famous and distinguished systems of philosophy, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, contained problems for which no solutions seemed possible. Things worsened in the nineteenth century, when philosophers like Hegel built conceptual systems that seemed less like attempts to understand reality than efforts to squeeze the world into artificial and arbitrary pigeonholes. Consequently, many British and American philosophers turned away from system building and focused their efforts on achieving a better understanding of small, isolated issues, problems, and puzzles.

Corliss Lamont, one of the more famous American humanists in my lifetime, admitted that "there has been some justifiable reaction against philosophic 'systems'" and then noted how "contemporary philosophers have tended to confine themselves to certain circumscribed problems and areas rather than striking out boldly toward a comprehensive world-view or *Weltanschauung*." Nonetheless, he counseled, analytic or linguistic philosophers like this "cannot really escape from the responsibility of endeavoring to provide a systematic answer concerning the main issues in philosophy, however unfinished and tentative their conclusions may be. Over-specialization within the field of philosophy is a convenient way of avoiding major controversial questions."¹¹ On this issue, at least, Lamont was correct.

During my master's and doctor's studies in philosophy, I took many courses from such analytic philosophers. I remember spending one semester examining a single sentence from the writings of David Hume. I spent another semester exploring the two-word expression "I can." I look back

11. Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 6th ed. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982), 6.

with admiration at the creativity of the professors, even though I remember many days in which I felt certain there were better ways to spend my time.

Imagine such a clever and intelligent philosopher who spends several decades studying the meaning of a few key words or concepts. Are we to believe that this philosopher holds no larger view of things, that his or her intellectual life contains only tiny pieces of information (important though they may be) that have no relationship to a larger picture? What if such a philosopher has reached a point of certainty about thirty individual beliefs? But what if the content of some of those beliefs logically contradicts other beliefs held by that person? What would we think about someone who fails to notice or care about such inconsistencies?

Let me make it clear that philosophical or conceptual or linguistic analysis is important, and several examples of it will show up later in this book. A well-formed worldview must be composed of something, and the separate pieces of the worldview ought to represent clear thinking about many smaller issues. No one in his or her right mind, I think, believes that the choice between a conceptual system and philosophical analysis is an either/or situation.

Imagine a person who enters a room and finds a large table where someone has dumped hundreds of pieces from a picture puzzle. What would an observer conclude if this person examined individual pieces with no display of interest in putting those pieces together? Or what would we think if this person laboriously managed to connect three or four pieces and then put them aside with no further interest in seeing how various groupings of pieces fit together in some pattern? Aristotle began one of his books with these words, "By nature, all men desire to know." Are analytic philosophers an exception to Aristotle's wise words? I think not. Sometimes I imagine that in various graduate departments of philosophy there may exist secret societies for analytic philosophers, a kind of parallel to Alcoholics Anonymous, where analytic thinkers receive help in overcoming their natural desire to see the bigger picture. The letters of such a society might well be "AA," meaning Analytics Anonymous.

I maintain, therefore, that the public philosophical assaults against worldviews that once were so fashionable may well have suffered from a degree of self-deception. All of those analytic philosophers had worldviews, whether they knew it or not, whether they were willing to admit it or not. And so, we are not going to allow the missteps of the old analytic philosophers to turn us aside from the legitimate task of worldview thinking.

A Second Challenge

As we approach the start of a new millennium, a new obstacle to getting people to think in terms of worldviews or conceptual systems has reared up, like Godzilla rising from the deep. Writing in *First Things*, Richard

Mouw, a former student of mine who is now president of Fuller Theological Seminary, recalls once observing two conflicting symbols in a car he was following. In the rear window of the auto was a Playboy bunny decal while on the dashboard was a plastic statue of the Virgin Mary. At the time Mouw saw the symbols, he interpreted their odd juxtaposition as a possible conflict between a devoutly Roman Catholic wife and a carnal husband. In his 1998 essay, Mouw leans in a new direction, namely, "that these symbols were indeed incompatible and yet were held simultaneously and sincerely by the same person."¹²

Mouw regards these conflicting symbols as a disturbing sign of a serious problem in American culture. Not too long ago, he writes, it was possible for Christians to argue for the truth of their faith by placing a "strong emphasis on the coherence of a Christian view of reality. The biblical perspective was shown to tie things together, to answer adequately more questions than other worldviews. Such an approach challenged students to make a clear choice between Christianity and, say, a naturalistic or an Eastern religious perspective."¹³ However, Mouw believes (mistakenly, I think), that the day when this approach might have worked seems to have passed. Today's students, Mouw continues,

don't seem to put much stock in coherence and consistency. They think nothing of participating in an evangelical Bible study on Wednesday night and then engaging in a New Age meditation group on Thursday night, while spending their daily jogging time listening to a taped reading of *The Celestine Prophecy*—without any sense that there is anything inappropriate about moving in and out of these very different perspectives on reality [worldviews].¹⁴

In short, many people are confused, and what makes the situation even more depressing is the inability of these people to see how confused they are.

Mouw then recounts a debate he had once with a theologically liberal church leader on a radio show in southern California. Mouw was there to defend the historicity of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, while the liberal attacked the reliability of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection. The radio program was a call-in show where listeners were invited to air their opinions; one of the first callers was a young woman identifying herself as Heather from Glendale who offered the following comments:

I'm not what you would call, like, a Christian. . . . Actually, right now I am sort of into—you know, witchcraft and stuff like that? But I agree with the

12. Richard Mouw, "Babel Undone," *First Things* (May 1998), 9.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

guy from Fuller Seminary. I'm just shocked that someone would, like, say that Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead!¹⁵

Mouw reports that he was taken aback by Heather's way of offering support for his belief in the resurrection of Christ. The more he thought about what Heather said, the more worried he became about what she embodies about contemporary culture. "I am concerned," Mouw writes,

about the way she seems to be piecing together a set of convictions to guide her life. While I did not have the opportunity to quiz her about the way in which she makes room in her psyche for an endorsement of both witchcraft and the Gospel's resurrection narratives, I doubt that Heather subscribes to both views of reality, Wicca and Christianity, in their robust versions. She is placing fragments of worldviews side by side without thinking about their incompatibility. And it is precisely the fact that these disconnected cognitive bits coexist in her consciousness that causes my concern. . . . Here is a sense in which Heather is a microcosm—or a microchaos—of the larger culture.¹⁶

Indeed she is; and that is bad news about American culture and that of other western nations. What steps can be taken to help confused people like Heather from Glendale? I believe the answers lie in the specifics of this chapter. We must help the Heathers of the world to achieve consciousness of how well or how badly the pieces of their conceptual system fit. We must help them understand the indispensability of thinking and behaving in a logically consistent way, so that when they finally become cognizant of their incoherent beliefs, they will begin the task of tossing many of them aside. In other words, we should strive to do what many Christians under the influence of postmodernism have ceased to do.

Many people, acting under a false sense of tolerance, are reluctant to disagree with the opinions of other people, no matter how patently false those opinions may be. It is only natural that many who think this way will adopt a kind of worldview relativism. In this way of thinking, all worldviews apparently are created equal, whether their creators happen to be Mother Teresa or Adolf Hitler. When this mantra is put into words, it comes out as "You have your worldview, and I have mine." For such people, one worldview is as good as another.

Worldviews should be evaluated according to several tests. In fact, I contend, there are four such tests. They are the test of reason; the test of outer experience; the test of inner experience; and the test of practice.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. *Ibid.*

Evaluating a Worldview

The Test of Reason

By the test of reason I mean logic or, to be more specific, the law of non-contradiction. Since most of chapter 8 is devoted to an analysis of this test, I can be brief. Attempts to define the law of noncontradiction seldom induce much in the way of excitement, but I offer a definition anyway. The law of noncontradiction states that *A*, which can stand for anything, cannot be both *B* and non-*B* at the same time in the same sense. For example, a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time in the same sense; an object cannot be both round and square at the same time and in the same sense.

The presence of a logical contradiction is always a sign of error. Hence, we have a right to expect a conceptual system to be logically consistent, both in its parts (its individual propositions) and in the whole. A conceptual system is in obvious trouble if it fails to hang together logically. Logical incoherence can be more or less fatal, depending on whether the contradiction exists among less central beliefs or whether it lies at the center of the system.¹⁷

Worldviews should always be submitted to the test of the law of non-contradiction. Inconsistency is always a sign of error, and the charge of inconsistency should be taken seriously.

For all its importance, however, the test of logical consistency can never be the only criterion by which we evaluate worldviews. Logic can be only a negative test. While the presence of a contradiction will alert us to the presence of error, the absence of contradiction does not guarantee the presence of truth. For that, we need other criteria.

The Test of Outer Experience

Worldviews should pass not only the test of reason but also the test of experience. Worldviews should be relevant to what we know about the world and ourselves. My brief account of the test of experience will be divided into two parts: the test of the outer world (this section) and the test of the inner world. The human experience that functions as a test of worldview beliefs includes our experience of the world outside us. It is proper for people to object when a worldview claim conflicts with what we know to be true of the physical universe. This is one reason why no reader of this book believes that the world is flat or that the earth is the center of our solar system.

As part of the test of outer experience, we have a right to expect worldviews to touch base with our experience of the world outside us.

17. It is fair to raise questions about supposed contradictions within the Christian faith. I consider one of these in the appendix to chapter 4.

The worldview should help us understand what we perceive. A number of worldview beliefs fail this test, including the following:

Pain and death are illusions.

All human beings are innately good.

Human beings are making constant progress toward perfection.

No worldview deserves respect if it ignores or is inconsistent with human experience.

The Test of Inner Experience

As we have seen, worldviews should fit what we know about the external world. It does appear, however, that many who urge objective validation fail to give proper credit to the subjective validation provided by our consciousness of our inner world.¹⁸ Worldviews also need to fit what we know about ourselves. Examples of this kind of information include the following: I am a being who thinks, hopes, experiences pleasure and pain, believes, and desires; I am also a being who is often conscious of moral right and wrong and who feels guilty and sinful for having failed to do what is right. I am a being who remembers the past, is conscious of the present, and anticipates the future. I can think about things that do not exist. I can plan and then execute my plans. I am able to act intentionally; instead of merely responding to stimuli, I can will to do something and then do it.¹⁹ I am a person who loves other human beings. I can empathize with others and share their sorrow and joy. I know that someday I will die, and I have faith that I will survive the death of my body.

No matter how hard it may be to look honestly at our inner self, we are right in being suspicious of those whose defense of a worldview ignores or rejects the inner world. Worldviews that cannot do justice to an internalized moral obligation or to the guilt we sense when we disobey

¹⁸ My language in this section should not be understood in a way that suggests I view the human being as some kind of ghost in a machine. Phrases like "outer world," "inner world," and "the world outside us" are metaphors that come naturally to all of us who are not, at the moment, reading a paper to a philosophy seminar. My language is not intended to imply any particular metaphysical theory (for example, an opinion with regard to the mind-body problem) or epistemological view (such as a representative theory of sense perception). My language is *phenomenological language*, that is, it describes the way different things appear to us. My experience of my typewriter at this moment is of an object that appears to exist outside of and independent of my consciousness or awareness of the typewriter. My consciousness of my mental states (expressible in propositions like "I am hungry") is of something that most people can describe comfortably as belonging to their inner world. As long as the language is understood in a nonliteral way, there is no problem.

¹⁹ It would be a mistake to think that this sentence implies anything with regard to what we commonly refer to by the expression "free will." See chapter 15 in part 2.

such duties or to the human encounter with genuine love are clearly defective when compared with the biblical worldview.

The Test of Practice

Worldviews should be tested not only in the philosophy classroom but also in the laboratory of life. It is one thing for a worldview to pass certain theoretical tests (reason and experience); it is another for the worldview to pass a practical test, namely, can people who profess that worldview live consistently in harmony with the system they profess? Or do we find that they are forced to live according to beliefs borrowed from a competing system? Such a discovery, I suggest, should produce more than embarrassment.

This practical test played an important role in the work of the Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer. As Morris explains Schaeffer's thinking, the two environments in which humans must live include "the external world with its form and complexity, and the internal world of the man's own characteristics as a human being. This 'inner world' includes such human qualities 'as a desire for significance, love, and meaning, and fear of non-being, among others.'"²⁰

This is a good time to see these various tests at work.

An Application of Our Four Tests

In September 1996, an American monthly magazine published an article in which the author, Kimberly Manning, told the story of her sojourn among several conflicting worldviews.²¹ Mrs. Manning was reared in a Christian home in which, she reports, the "Christian values of love thy neighbor, personal morality, and strong faith were modeled constantly at home and reinforced by Anabaptist fundamentalists who set a very conservative tone for the community. Most significantly, I was raised with the old-fashioned idea that there is objective truth—that while there may be some gray areas in life, there is such a thing as definitive right and wrong."²² But because no one ever explained to Manning how these val-

20. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics*, 21. In this paragraph, Morris is both paraphrasing and quoting Schaeffer.

21. See Kimberly Manning, "My Road from Gender Feminism to Catholicism," *New Oxford Review* (September 1996), 20–26. Gender feminism is the present subject only because it was the new worldview toward which Mrs. Manning gravitated. All of the descriptions and opinions offered about this worldview are those of Mrs. Manning. She has produced a remarkable testimony of the events and conditions that led her to embrace gender feminism and then to reject it. It seldom happens that people who become converts to a set of paradigms such as her gender feminism are able to achieve sufficient distance from their original commitment to recognize its intellectual difficulties. Even less frequently can we find someone like Mrs. Manning who can describe her sojourn in such an engaging manner. Mrs. Manning's story is an excellent example of the worldview tests identified earlier in this chapter.

22. *Ibid.*, 21.

ues were connected to God and to a Christian worldview, she admits that it was easy for her to drift away from the beliefs and standards of her family. Over a period of several years, she slowly abandoned her Christian worldview and moved into the orbit of a worldview known as gender feminism.

Manning's abandonment of her parents' Christianity and her conversion to gender feminism were "a slow and insidious process. I use the word 'conversion' purposely, because I later came to see that gender feminism is a pseudo-religion in which all of the archetypal symbols are there in a twisted manner. 'Womyn' is deified, empowerment is the mantra, unborn children are the blood sacrifices in the ritual of abortion, and men are the scapegoats for our sins."²³ Keep in mind that Manning is describing beliefs she embraced as a substitute for her earlier Christian worldview. She was content with the beliefs she describes.

So long as she majored in science, nothing happened to move her toward gender feminism. Things changed, however, as soon as she changed her college major to social work. She tells of hearing "a lot of talk about 'woman's experience,' how it is the ultimate source of truth. It began to seem like an all-out attack on women was taking place in society, in the form of domestic abuse. . . . I began to read a lot about misogyny, considered by many feminists to be a deep psychological predisposition in all men."²⁴

After graduation from college, Manning explored pantheism and added features of New Age thinking to her worldview. She became fascinated with theories that stressed subjectivism from a female perspective. "Psychology and spirituality were my passions," she writes, "and the left-brained world of critical thinking was now diagnosed as anal-retentive."²⁵ I became convinced of such nebulous notions as there is no evil (or good/evil/God are all the same), pain is an illusion, God is really a woman, if you don't get it right in this life you can always come back and try again, truth is whatever we make it for we are all creating our own realities, and all views and choices are of equal value. My highest virtue became tolerance, and I felt guilty if I in any way judged another's actions."²⁶ In other words, Manning's radical feminism embraced many features of what is often called New Age thinking.²⁷ She goes on to note

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. The term *anal-retentive* is becoming a common term in American discourse. People who use it to demean persons who differ from them seem to have in mind something like intellectual constipation.

26. Manning, "My Road from Gender Feminism to Catholicism," 21.

27. For a discussion of the New Age worldview, see Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

that some feminists she read even described sex within marriage as rape.

Manning describes a view of history that she shared with others in her movement. She begins by talking about a time of peace and harmony on this planet. Humans held all things equally; violence did not exist. The major reason for the harmony and nonviolence was the fact that these cultures were ruled by women who wielded their power wisely. Given Manning's wholehearted commitment to her feminist paradigms, she was not troubled by the lack of any historical support for her theories.

Then, she writes, "It all came to a halt when men rose up and began to use force, rooted in misogyny, to bring women under their control. This was not some series of isolated uprisings, but a systematic reversal of world power and a subjugation of women which has left [the female] gender devastated. Rape was the first method used to subdue women, followed by the development of the institution of marriage; however, as time went on, more sophisticated mechanisms were employed to rob women of their power, both earthly and spiritual."²⁸ Manning is describing her beliefs at the time.

As she continues, Manning explains her growing hostility toward Christianity.

The coup de grace in this destruction of matriarchal utopia was the development of Christianity. This patriarchal system, purposely dominated by men, would seek to destroy the last vestiges of the great goddess-centered religions by establishing the complete authority of males over females through its use of supposed sacred writings (the Bible) and masculine symbolism to describe God. The great peace-loving goddess religions²⁹ were no match for the brute force of a male dominated Christendom and so were decimated. The greatest blow was the Inquisition, in which millions of pagan women, many high priestesses, were burned at the stake, as the Catholic Church made its massive attempt finally to eradicate female power. Then came the witch hunts in the New World, while today such constructs as gender roles continue the assaults against feminine energy on the planet.³⁰

Manning then deals with another dimension of her new worldview: "The evidence mounted in my mind: Men were simply evil, and governments and organized religion—specifically Christianity in America—were their weapons."³¹ She next turns her attention to the day when gender feminism

28. Manning, "My Road from Gender Feminism to Catholicism," 20–21.

29. The ancient goddess religions included enormous amounts of violence, including self-castration. For information, see Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Richardson, Tex.: Probe, 1992), chap. 8.

30. Manning, "My Road from Gender Feminism to Catholicism," 21.

31. *Ibid.*, 22.

ceased to be a collection of theories. It was the day of her "conversion," the day she had what she describes as her "click" experience, her paradigm shift, her rebirth as a gender feminist. She had begun working in a women's shelter when it struck her "that the cultural reality of my childhood did not exist. I realized in my moment of 'enlightenment' that *all* men were perpetrators and *all* women were victims."³² "From that moment on," she says,

for the next four years, I essentially abandoned the notion of objective truth and embraced the world view that all things are relative and truth is determined by the individual. This was a wholly right-brained approach to life in which one's personal experience and feelings at any given moment determine reality. Left-brained thinking patterns, such as critical analysis [i.e., logic] and skepticism, were deemed too rigid, too limiting, too male. I felt freed by the artistic approach to life [i.e., feelings] where everything is an open possibility.³³

At this point, it would have been understandable for anyone familiar with Manning's commitment to her new worldview to feel confident that any return to the Christian faith of her parents was inconceivable. But problems arose for her subjective, relative view of truth. First, it clashed with her studies in science, especially when the women's shelter falsified data and used a defective statistical method. The relativity of truth did not extend to mathematics, at least so far. But then she had an "anti-click experience."

One day it suddenly dawned on me that if I were to base my truth solely on my own personal experience, then I could not subscribe to the gender feminist model. After all, my experience [the test of outer experience] of my father, brother, and husband was that men were wonderfully kind and had the utmost respect for women. It was statistically impossible that I alone would have found the only three decent men in the entire world. So with that, gender feminism became a self-refuting proposition for me [the test of reason] and began to crumble before my eyes. That one such basic argument in logic could devastate my entire philosophy [i.e., worldview] was quite an embarrassing blow.³⁴

After leaving gender feminism, Manning began to attend a church where the pastor "argued that Christianity is not some nebulous religion of blind faith. He spoke of Christianity as the source of objective truth, grounded in a real act that had occurred in a specific moment in human history."³⁵ The rest of Manning's story is bound to produce disagreements among those who wish to read it. Nonetheless her account is a fine

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 23.

35. Ibid.

example of the ways in which worldviews come to control our thinking, both for the good and for the bad. As Manning discovered, the right eye-glasses (in her case, the correct worldview) can put the world into clearer focus. The wrong worldview can lead one into serious error.

Changing Worldviews

Though the influence of nontheoretical factors on people's thinking is often extensive, it is seldom total in the sense that it precludes life-altering changes. Even in the case of Saul of Tarsus—one of early Christianity's greatest enemies—where it might appear that a person was dominated by commitments that ruled out any possibility of a change or conversion, things may never be hopeless. People do change conceptual systems. Conversions take place all the time. People who used to be humanists or naturalists or atheists or followers of some competing religious faith have found reasons to turn away from their old conceptual systems and embrace Christianity. Conversely, people who used to profess allegiance to Christianity reach a point where they feel they can no longer believe. In spite of all the obstacles, people do occasionally begin to doubt conceptual systems they had accepted for years.

It does not seem possible to identify a single set of necessary conditions that are always present when people change a worldview. Many people remain blissfully unaware that they have a worldview, even though the sudden change in their life and thought resulted from their exchanging their old worldview for their new one. What does seem clear is that changes this dramatic usually require time along with a period of doubt about key elements of the worldview. Even when the change may appear to have been sudden, it was in all likelihood preceded by a period of growing uncertainty and doubt. In many cases, the change is triggered by an important event, often a crisis. But I have also heard people recount stories that lay out a different scenario. Suddenly, or so it seemed, one event or piece of information led these persons to begin thinking in terms of a conceptual scheme that was totally different for them or one that they were becoming conscious of for the first time. Quite unexpectedly, these people saw things they had overlooked before; or they suddenly saw things fit together in a pattern so that there was meaning where none had been discernible before. It seems foolish, therefore, to stipulate that life-transforming changes in a worldview must match some pattern. People change their minds on important subjects for a bewildering variety of reasons.

Conclusion

In keeping with this book's emphasis upon conceptual systems, the chapters in part 1 will deal with six of the most influential worldviews in the history of human thought. Even though these conceptual systems predate modern times, all of them continue to exercise a significant influence in our own day.