

Worldview and Peace

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THE CONSTITUTION OF UNESCO declares that, “Since wars begin in the minds of men (and women), it is in the minds of men that defenses of peace must be constructed.”

There are many ways in which our minds cause violence but they can be divided into two broad groups. In the first are emotions. These include greed, jealousy, the lust for power, the desire for revenge, fear of those who are different, and fear of losing possessions, status or security.

In the second group are the beliefs we hold about “life, the universe and everything.” Collectively these form our worldview, which enables us to create a mental model of how the world works. This model, in turn, determines what we perceive, and how we interpret our perceptions. In other words, the reality we experience is created by our minds based on our worldview and sensory data. It follows that our worldview strongly influences the way we act. For instance, it may lead us to stereotype certain groups, and to react to them accordingly.

A characteristic of all worldviews is that their basic beliefs can become so deeply embedded in the way we think that we simply assume this is “how things are”—we call them self-evident truths, and common sense. As a result, we can lose any conscious awareness of them or of their consequences for our lives.

In this article, I explore three of the deep beliefs underlying the modern western worldview, and their potential to lead to violence. They are respectively the belief in Truth, individualism, and the meaning and purpose of life. I argue that enduring peace at all levels from the community to the international level will be possible only when we reflect more consciously on such beliefs. Additionally I make suggestions for alternatives.

Belief in Truth

All religions purport to provide the believer with a true understanding about the nature of reality. As with anything, there are mature and immature ways to appropriate such grand promises. Those ways that result in intolerant, unloving proselytization or, worse, downright aggressive or oppressive treatment of others in the name of religion would indicate a misappropriation of the gentle promise made in all religions that we as believers can inherit and strive to be involved in “true ways” of being in the world.

Of course this way of behavior is not limited to what one would classically define as “religion” per se. Similar forms of oppression and aggression can be found among adherents of what might be dubbed “non-religion” ideologies, such as Marxism, Fascism, Capitalism, Nationalism and Democracy. Similarly, many scientists or other scholars in other fields can also believe their methods are the best, or even the only, path to the Truth about existence. We need look no further than Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, for an example.

There are a number of explanations as to how people come to have such non-productive and even destructive relationships with otherwise inspiring insights. Belief in an absolute Truth, whether it be a revelation, inspiration, theory or practice all too often leads to a desire to pressure others to convert, and to zealous and closed-minded defense of “our Truth” against any real or perceived challenge to it. For some individuals, this sort of behavior boosts our sense of identity and increases our feeling of psychological security (even though the very opposite might be manifest). For institutions, leaders imagine this form of aggression to be a road to growth, power and status in the world. It is never, however, consonant with the fullness of any classical compendium of scripture.

Active evangelism of any faith, even when exercised peacefully and with the best of intentions, is fraught with dangers from those who would exploit the expansionist impulses of missionaries. We saw this in the Christian missionary movement, which tragically provided a conduit and even sometimes served as an accomplice to European imperialism and colonialism. There was always the shadow lurking that could darken the genuine *agape* in missionaries to denigrate other cultures and beliefs with spiritual, psychological and material

consequences, many of which are still being suffered by numerous peoples. Sadly, such zeal at its worst can degenerate to become sectarian violence, pogroms, genocide and wars against “unbelievers.” Even religions that preach tolerance often breed hatred and trample the innocent under rampage from the dogs of war rather than bringing life-affirming love and the doves of peace.

I reluctantly conclude that the idea of “Truth,” whenever it is grasped in weakness and narrowness, is one of the greatest sources of evil and violence. But belief in the existence of Truth and the possibility of attaining it is so deeply a part of our culture and perhaps in the very nature of our being, that it may simply be with us forever. Surely, you may say, there must be a single, absolute Truth underlying reality even if we have yet to discover it, or the human mind is unable to encompass it. Perhaps. But perhaps “Truth” can be absolute and simultaneously soft and fluid, in ways we have yet to grasp in the greater human family.

Science was founded on the idea that there are fixed and eternal Laws of Nature that we can discover through the scientific method. But some scientists now argue that these “laws” may evolve and change with time, and be little more than cosmic habits developed over eons. Further, what we discover may be a mirror of our own beliefs rather than some absolute or “objective” Truth. This is nowhere better illustrated than in research into the paranormal and other subtle phenomena where believers get positive results, and skeptics get negative ones. Similarly, some scientists argue that the extraordinary precision with which mathematics describes the material world reveals the Truth that the universe is mathematical in nature. Still others claim that these scientists find a mathematical universe because that is what they are looking for.

There is similar diversity of belief amongst religions. Many hold strongly to a notion of absolute Truth of their particular revelation that is final and complete, which then leads them to regard all other systems and insights as errant. But, increasingly, believers in all traditions (surely still the minority) are becoming open to wisdom and bona fide “truth” found in all different communities and systems of belief. From this perspective, religious diversity reflects various cultural expressions of a deeper Perennial Philosophy, and offers alternative paths to the same spiritual destination. On the more radical end of the spectrum there are those who claim that there are many valid destinations!

So were does this leave us? Western logic tends to see matters as grounded in irreconcilable opposites where something cannot be both true and false, good and evil. But Taoist and other Eastern philosophies do not have this tendency or impulse. Rather, they believe that polar opposites exist in dynamic tension, and that nature seeks a harmonious balance in all things. If anything moves too far towards one extreme, aspects come into play to restore balance.

In our modern western worldview, in part due to the rise of scientism, and the habits of dogmatism that hover around religion, we may have moved too far towards viewing “Truth” in rigid, constraining, and closed ways. Consequences are outlined above. Perhaps it is time to redress the balance, and move back toward living with permanent humility and permanently seeking greater and greater understanding. For myself, I recognize that there is a huge diversity of beliefs about every issue, and that I cannot know for certain which, if any of them, is “the Truth” in the narrow sense of the term. I try to hold the position that “I choose to believe this while accepting that I may be wrong and remaining open to other possibilities.” This applies to the beliefs I have expressed in this article as much as to any others!

As English leader Oliver Cromwell wrote to the general assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1650: “I beseech you in the bowels of Christ think it possible you may be mistaken.”

Individualism

Over three centuries ago, René Descartes believed he had cracked the problem of identity when he declared, “I think, therefore I am”—a statement which has become one of the foundation stones of the modern Western worldview. The consequences of this view are profound.

My mind is a highly personal world that I cannot share directly with you, and that you cannot comprehend fully even with the latest high-tech equipment. I believe this will remain the case no matter how sophisticated our brain scanning techniques become. So if I am my mind, I am cut off from direct relationship with other humans and other living beings. Inverting John Donne’s conclusion, I am, and will always be, an island, entire of itself.

This sense of isolation is reinforced by the reductionist approach of science that seeks to understand how the world works by breaking things down into separate components, and then studying their prop-

erties and interactions. Physicists have been engaged for centuries in the search for the fundamental particles of matter in the belief that discovery of this holy grail will open the door to a “theory of everything.” Following the same track, social scientists often study the behavior of individuals, or social atoms, in order to understand society as a whole.

These two factors are significant sources of the individualism that has swept the modern world—a belief system that has been used as a foundational justification for the nineteenth-century philosophies of social Darwinism and capitalism. Inspired by the traumatic social upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, and drawing on Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, social Darwinism envisages society as a fierce, competitive struggle for survival in which only the fittest individuals survive. The strong and ruthless prosper, while the weak and merciful go to the wall; this idea was likely at play in Hitler’s drive for Aryan supremacy. Similarly, Adam Smith had a peculiar twist when he claimed that when individuals pursue their economic self-interest, they are led by an invisible hand to serve the good of the collective as well. And so we need not concern ourselves with issues such as poverty and exploitation.

For a period after the Second World War, the worst excesses of individualism and capitalism seemed to have been diminished and were moderated by Social Democracy. But in the greedy eighties and beyond, these reforms were swept aside, some say by revitalized right wing political and economic ideologies following the collapse of the Communist bloc.

Individualism and the sense of separateness that it brings is implicated in many of our problems today. This implied “separateness” participates in the view that nature is no more than a cornucopia of riches for our exclusive benefit, and in return has resulted in the greatest number of species extinctions ever in the course of hundreds of millions of years. This “separateness” participates in our brutal treatment of animals on factory farms and in experiments, grounded in a material worldview that leads us to imagine that animals are unfeeling machines whose cries of pain mean no more than the squeaking of a wheel. Similarly it enables us to stereotype other races, cultures and religions as “sub-human,” which can lead to torture, pogroms, and genocide.

If we are isolated individuals, it can be expected that we will pursue personal self-interest rather than the good of the collective. Hence, this belief can intensify our greed, and erode community and social ethics such as cooperation, compassion and charity. What were once social functions, such as care of the elderly, sick and young, become absorbed into the economy, dependent on the impersonal exchange of money rather than loving human relationships. People no longer work together to meet their social needs but rely on government and business to provide for them. Alienation, fear and loneliness increase as the sense of belonging to a caring community fades.

Individualism implies uniqueness and diversity. And yet, ironically, a large part of us strives to conform to group norms by holding acceptable opinions, wearing the latest fashions, listening to popular music and watching the most popular films. Our culture actually encourages only superficial differences but denies and rejects genuine diversity. We stereotype Jews, Muslims, Blacks or whomever, allowing a “tolerance” inside of tiny little boundaries. We believe conflict arises from difference, and hence aim for cultural simplicity and homogeneity. But there is another view that conflict arises from lack of diversity because, if we are all similar, we have to compete with one another for status rather than being able to express our true uniqueness. Also, social diversity is like a library of alternative forms of social organization that we can draw on as we face the growing challenges of the future.

Individualism encourages an emphasis on individual rights, and neglects the essential counter-balance of responsibilities. People grab all they can for themselves, and opt out of responsible citizenship and community involvement so far as possible. Individualism similarly can erode values such as honesty and the honoring of contracts on which capitalism itself depends. Without these values, greater and greater reliance must be placed on law and regulation to prevent abuses. But such systems are costly and it is impossible to police every situation. Besides, if we all pursue only our own self-interest, where will we find incorruptible guardians of public morality? These issues underlie the rapid rise of corporate and government corruption, with scandals such as Enron and the financial collapse of many retirement pension schemes. Simultaneously, the salaries and benefits that top corporate management pay themselves have gone sky high while the

lid has been kept firmly on wages for the middle class.

More directly related to the issue of war and peace, it has been estimated that as many as half the scientists and engineers in advanced countries are employed on military research. Not only does this emphasis draw funds away from urgent problems such as poverty and climate change, but also it has led to the increasing use of military superiority by rich nations to dominate others, and the use of so-called smart weapons to avoid the risks of military engagement.

This brief overview reveals that there are forms of capitalism that are aggressive at heart and thrive on inequality and exploitation. Some may deliberately generate an economy of violence of the haves against the have-nots, dividing the world into two camps as the rich build defensive barriers against the poor while continuing to exploit them to meet their selfish ends. The violence is often non-physical, but it is violence nevertheless. Gross inequalities and injustice breed anger, resentment and violence. They incite anti-social behavior, crime and terrorism, and they exacerbate old racial and ethnic conflicts rather than resolving them.

It may seem far-fetched to attribute so many of our problems to individualism. But recall that we are discussing the impact of a philosophically based worldview, not a mundane use of the term to describe simple self interest. Imagine how different things might be if we identified not only with our minds, but also with our bodies, emotions, relationships and souls and if our worldview emphasized not only our individuality but also the fact that we are integral parts of larger wholes.

Our presently contracted sense of identity could expand to embrace more of who we are. Descartes' declaration that "I think, therefore I am" would be joined by the Buddha's, "I breathe therefore, I am," Nicholas Humphrey's, "I feel, therefore I am," and the social and ecological perspective that "I relate, therefore I am."

The last of these is particularly important. It recognizes the indisputable fact that our very existence depends on the support of natural and social systems. Without our brothers and sisters, the bacteria, fungi, plants, insects, birds and mammals that form our ecosystem, we would have no food to eat, no air to breathe, no water to drink. Without the Living Planet and all her life-support systems, we would not exist. Without our fellow humans, we would scrape a bare subsis-

tence living at best. Without our society, we would have no language or culture, and no role or identity beyond that of an animal bent on survival. We are not only precious individuals with rights, but also totally dependent parts of larger wholes with the responsibility to care for them.

Once we recognize that we have no existence or identity apart from the whole, our sense of self starts to expand to include not only our minds and bodies, but also our families, our communities and our ecosystems. They become acknowledged parts of us. We come to understand that protecting and nurturing them is protecting and nurturing ourselves; that our true self-interest lies in the well-being of the whole. From this perspective, exploitation of other beings becomes exploitation of ourselves; violence against another being becomes violence against ourselves.

Similar to how I described the concept of "Truth," the pendulum here too has swung too far. We need to move towards a new balance in which individuality is complemented by an equally powerful collective identity, a strong belief in human and ecological community. With such a worldview, an economy of sufficiency and a society of cooperative communities would naturally emerge.

Meaning and purpose

The third deep belief I want to explore is that of the meaning and purpose of life. Materialistic scientism and atheistic humanism tell us that life is a meaningless accident in a purposeless universe. The cosmos is seen as a lifeless, mindless machine with every object and event determined by chains of physical cause and effect. Life evolved by chance through processes that are driven by aggressive competition for survival. Mind and consciousness are seen as mere byproducts of complex material systems with no independent existence. There is no life force, no soul nor spirit, no God, nothing beyond death.

Capitalism based on such assumptions presents a similarly bleak vision. Its purpose is endless growth of economic activity without regard to its non-monetary costs, and how it impacts the quality of life, human welfare and happiness, and its often horrible impact on nature.

The drive for material acquisition ignores the fact that nothing can grow forever without limits. When cells in our bodies lose their

self-limiting mechanism, they become cancerous and eventually destroy us. The human race, with our ever-rising numbers and per capita demands, already absorbs more than half of all nature's production, threatening the natural systems that sustain us. We are in danger of becoming a cancer on the face of the Earth, and are in danger of destroying our own home. Paradoxically, our greatest hope for the future lies in the crisis of climate change which may yet shock us into collective action before it is too late.

We must avoid the destructive habits that tend to see life only as ever-increasing consumption of goods and services rather than in relationship, community, artistic creativity, or spirituality. The satisfactions of consumption are transient. Like a drug, each fix soon wears off and we need more. Material wants are insatiable because they mask the enduring emptiness and inner hunger of life rather than fulfilling it.

Our culture leaves us, as individuals, to discover or create our own deeper meaning and purpose rather than providing a secure philosophical and psychological basis for existence. Given this situation, is it any wonder that so many people succumb to despair, depression, apathy, alienation and anomie, or fill the existential void with hedonism, sex, drugs, or retail therapy? Is it any wonder that so many are being drawn to fundamentalisms in the effort to bring meaning and certainty to life? Is it any wonder that young people find a sense of belonging and a kind of love in street gangs? Is it any wonder that many react with anti-social behavior, aggression and violence?

The nearest western civilization comes to a sense of purpose is the ideal of progress. Belief in the possibility of a better future was stronger in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than now. Two world wars and countless lesser conflicts, the nuclear age and the era of weapons of mass destruction, the rise of international terrorism and the looming crisis of climate change have sapped our confidence. When I was young, in the 1960s, we faced the prospect of nuclear annihilation and global hunger, but it was still possible to believe we could save the world.

Today, faith in progress is much harder to sustain, and emphasis has shifted to the less inspiring goal of sustainability and security against crime, terrorism, resource scarcity and environmental destruction. Rather than examining inner causes, we are projecting our problems outwards onto other nations and religions, creating en-

emies in our minds and in fact. Terrorism is the harvest from seeds we have sown.

Progress and security are goals that keep us focused on the future—on a time when things will be better if not perfect, when poverty, disease and violence will be banished, and peace and harmony will reign. We feed this yearning for a better future by perpetually forecasting and planning, and, paradoxically, by gazing in the rear-view mirror to see where we have been. We plot trends of every imaginable statistic to see if we are indeed making progress, and we take great interest in the lessons of history as guides to the future. We behave similarly in our personal lives, always imagining that things will be better when we have the latest gadget, another qualification, promotion at work, a new partner, more money.

Eckart Tolle argues in *The Power of Now* that this focus on past and future is a root cause of our dysfunction. Living so much in the past and future prevents us, individually and as a culture, from living fully in the present. Yet the present is the only time we actually have. All major religions state this. The Buddha taught that the root of suffering lies in constant wanting and craving. Similarly, Jesus urged us to take no thought for tomorrow, and to learn from the example of the flower and birds which are cared for by God.

It should become increasingly evident that peace can never come through the barrel of a gun and security cannot be gained by violence. Violence breeds violence. We only can create peace and security by accepting the feared stranger not just as our brother or sister, but as part of ourselves, and by healing the pain and suffering through love, trust, justice, understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness. Examples from many parts of the world show it is possible.

I concluded the last two sections with the image of a pendulum that has swung too far one way, and whose balance needs to be restored. In this case, perhaps one pole is unquestioning acceptance of the meaning and purpose of life that is promulgated by religious authorities, and the other pole is reliance on individual exploration and discovery. In the last few centuries, the pendulum has swung from authority to individuality, and now perhaps needs to swing back towards the center. Perhaps what we need is a range of alternatives, authoritative and reliable traditions from which we can choose on the basis of critical evaluation what resonates most strongly with our inner selves.

Towards a Worldview of Peace

In this last section, I want to revisit the themes of truth, individuality, and meaning and purpose in order to start building a more coherent worldview of peace. I begin with thoughts on the nature of knowledge and our relationship to truth.

If we find that the narrow, closed notion of Truth leads to violence, then peace should require us to think of Truth in ways that release us from this bondage. It requires us to accept the possibility of learning forever, and inheriting from any imaginable person, place, culture, and even religion! It is likely that each one of us knows no more than a tiny fraction of a more complex reality. Peace requires us to be humble, open to paradox and error in all that we think we know, and open to the wonderful diversity of human knowledge. What would it mean to follow such a path in practice? Here are a few guidelines that I find helpful:

1. Try to remain non-attached to what you know, and to maintain an attitude that “I currently believe this to be true while accepting that I may be wrong.”
2. Remain open to the potential validity of any new belief, information, theory, perception or experience, whatever its source.
3. Recognize that all human knowledge, including science, is founded on unprovable beliefs, and is molded by the way the brain works, the language we use, and other cultural and personal factors. Hence, pure objectivity is impossible, and all knowledge is subjective to some extent.
4. Accept that all human knowledge is partial due to biological and cultural limitations. Hence, apparently contradictory perceptions and worldviews may actually be complementary images of a more complex whole.
5. Accept nothing on trust or authority. Question all knowledge deeply regardless of whether it comes from science and the intellect, or from intuition, direct experience, relationships, spiritual insights and traditions, or any other source.
6. Engage in cooperative inquiry and collective critical evaluation to minimize the risk of individual delusion and personal bias.

7. Test potential knowledge for its reliability not only in predicting events in the material world, but also for its influence on manifestation of universal values such as love, compassion, wisdom and justice.
8. While continually testing the validity of your knowledge, trust your inner intuition when you choose what to believe and what to reject.

At this point, I would like to introduce some ideas from Gnostic cosmology, not because they are any truer than alternative beliefs but because they make sense to me, and carry fewer emotional and intellectual overtones than better known cosmologies. Gnostics recognized that there is a Mystery at the heart of existence; that no matter how far back we trace cause and effect there will always remain the questions: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and “Where did THAT come from?”

Gnostics believed that this Mystery is One; an undivided whole that is pregnant with potential consciousness. In some indefinable way, this Mystery wanted to know itself, to become self-aware. But self-awareness requires both a knower and what is known, an observer and what is observed, a subject and object, a witness and an experience. Hence, in order to know itself, the Mystery had to split into two, thus introducing duality into the primal Oneness. This was the split between God and Goddess, Spirit and soul, One and many, Being and becoming, eternal Perfection and evolution. This first split was followed by a cascade of further divisions through which Cosmic Consciousness brought the universe into existence, shaping the potential of the Mystery into energy, matter, life and consciousness as we know it.

This myth suggests that the cosmos has a purpose—to achieve full self-awareness in which every part, every being, knows its true nature and relationship to the whole. The path to this goal was left undefined at creation because there are many ways that cosmic self-knowledge can come about. Also, predetermining the path would have rendered illusory the self-awareness achieved by the created beings. Hence, Cosmic Consciousness left us creative freedom of action as true participants in an on-going co-creative evolutionary process.

There is remarkable unanimity amongst scientists, philosophers and spiritual traditions that our perceived self, our sense of identity, is an illusion. Who we are is a collection of stories that we have woven from the multiple strands of our being and our roles in the world. But

our existence as separate beings is possible only in and through our connections and relationships with each other and with nature. As our awareness of this “interbeing” grows, so our sense of self enlarges from “skin-encapsulated ego” to “person-in-environment-and-society.” We integrate more and more into our perception of who we are until we realize that we are one with Cosmic Consciousness.

That realization brings awareness that our creative freedom and power are real. We are free to experiment and innovate, to make mistakes and learn from them, to create evil, suffering and hatred as well as good, happiness and love. And as co-creators with all sentient beings and Cosmic Consciousness, we share responsibility for guiding the future of our world towards the manifestation of love, truth, compassion, wisdom, justice, peace and other universal values, and for awakening all beings to our true nature as Consciousness.

Here lie the foundations for a worldview of peace.



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