

CO-CREATING MY WORLDVIEW

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I felt a coldness—a sense that I was intruding on my family and in the world—long before I could name it or voice it. And when I finally conquered the feeling, it was my body that could say I was accepted, in the right place—home. Can I build a whole worldview on my sense of displacement? I have to start somewhere, and the first “where” is my own body and my own experience. I used to tell students in my introduction to philosophy courses that they could not generalize from their own experience that X is Y to the belief that *all* X is Y, but they could refute any such universal statement if it were not true to their experiences; for example, any statement that begins “All people are...” that was not true about themselves cannot be true. They were people, they counted, and their experience was prime data. Only within that context did we realize that “All people are...” formerly meant all *men*, and my women students felt written out of the tradition and even written out of the criteria defining what it means to be human. Feminism arose from a visceral place; feminist critiques are valid in that they expand what the tradition has to include.

I build out from my starting point. That means, among other things, even if I felt there was no place for me within the time and concern of my parents, I could step back, look further, and see the larger context in which I *did* feel wanted and even needed. I was reaching for help to really experience this larger context. I began my quest—most recently—with asking whether I was one self or many. A prior question, of course, is Who am I? This much I knew: I can see myself only in the context of

other people, of part to whole. Who teaches us who we are and how we are valued? How do we learn that we are pretty or cute or deficient? The standards are not out there, floating around in the ether. We know our worth by how people react to us. A friend in school suffered from retina damage of the kind that could, today, be corrected by laser surgery. But reading at that time, she saw some words, then a space, then more words followed by another space. She never thought of herself as having a disability. A classmate of ours, in contrast, got reading glasses and his parents “explained” to him that his nearsightedness constituted a flaw, an imperfection, a disability. Our expectations help determine how we judge things to be whole or impaired, good or bad, normal or deficient. Our first experience of the world is very small: we discover—learn, actually—who we are from our restricted contact with parents and other caregivers. Fortunately, we also have siblings and friends who early on give us an enlarged perspective.

The way I understand, name, and think about my place shapes how I react to it. I do not create reality; indeed, there was a reality before I came on the scene. Nor do I discover it, coming upon it as it is. Instead, I co-create it. On a simple level, naming things has genuine effects in this world. For example, calling a particular plant a weed causes it to appear ugly and makes us want to destroy it. Calling the same plant a flower allows us to appreciate its beauty and fragrance, and makes us want to preserve it. The way I choose to understand myself is crucial to the way I live in this world. I am taking my personal questions seriously and in the process making a declaration about worldview. In other words, my thinking about reality helps create reality for me.

I use the term *worldview* rather than *theology* because many deeply spiritual people I have known are uncomfortable with the latter term. But where theology is a study of the beliefs, practices, and experiences of religion, worldview provides a chance to help me make sense of my life and perhaps contribute a direction for the twenty-first century. Worldview stands at the beginning of my life, but it is provisional, affected by everything I learn. It is never frozen or rigid, it is always open and welcoming to new ideas and experiences. Worldview matters in giving shape to my hopes. Following are nine questions I think a well-thought-out worldview ought to address.

1. Who am I?

Judaism describes people as having been created in the image of God. In accepting that definition, I realize that it has very serious implications, in that on good days it leads me to approach the world with openness and trust, and on bad days I think people are in the image of God except for people who disagree with me on important matters. According to philosopher Karl Jaspers, we are what we do to others, a view in keeping with his existentialist perspective, in which people have no fixed essences or character but are defined in terms of what they do. In this view, people are constantly creating themselves by the choices they make. Our choices do make a difference so I am, indeed, what I do to others, but I am also more. That “more” opens out to a vision of wholeness, to a reconciliation with aspects of myself that I have banished and must reclaim. Part of what is so frightening about this sense of who I am is that ultimately, if I am truly in the image of God, I am as mysterious to myself as God is to me. No simple label can encompass all of me. I am “in the image of God” not because I am intelligent but because I join head and heart and create a compassionate world.

2. Where is God?

I have discovered that everything can be a gateway to finding God. We do not need flaming cherubim, even the day-to-day can be a location for finding God. Things are more than they seem, and it is the “more” that draws me. The empirical world does not explain itself. If I simply observe a day, it certainly looks as if the sun actually rises from below the horizon, then travels across the sky until it drops back below the horizon. I have to turn away from what my eyes are showing me and think whether there might be some other explanation that would make sense of what I am seeing. It is analogous to the Midrashic story of how Abraham, seeking the real God, began with the sun only to recognize that if it did not hold sway at night, it could not be God—something more encompassing must be the cause. I do not create the relationship of the sun to the earth or to the experience of day and night, but simple perception would not allow me to recognize what I am really observing. As psychoanalyst Marion Milner put it, “Without our contribution we see nothing.”

As I think through my worldview, I find the word *more* occurring over and over again. It was first articulated for me in Maurice Sendak's book *Higgelty Pigglety Pop! or, There Must Be More to Life*. Things are what they are, and—in addition—they also point to something beyond themselves. As a child I often went to art galleries and museum with my father. He would stop in front of a painting and tell me it was a great work of art. I would complain that I did not see it—more truthfully, of course, I did not get it. He would then begin to point out what he was responding to, and after a while, I began to see what he was seeing. The painting, which had been simply shapes, colors, and textures, was becoming that “more.”

3. Why are we here?

Do we discover, create, or co-create meaning? Returning to the biblical template, I find three forms of creation: procreation, manufacture, and creation *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. I have no trouble with the first two. Although procreation in our grandparents' day occurred only through sex, and medical breakthroughs have now expanded the process, the underlying principle of sperm meeting egg persists. Manufacture is taking preexistent material, such as a sword, and changing it into something new, say, a plowshare. But the concept of creation out of nothing makes no more sense to me than pulling an ice cream cone out of thin air.

Co-creating is accepting what we are given and making it into something more. I take what is there and by seeing it in a new way, connect it to something to which it has never been connected before. For example, if the restaurant where I am the *maître d'* closes, people will commiserate and say that I must be feeling terrible. But if I can look at the job loss as a chance to think about what I really want to be doing—perhaps, eventually opening my own bed and breakfast—I can happily find out what I will need to learn and then work toward that goal. I am here to contribute to the world in my own unique way. On a more sophisticated level, the world as it is given to me has no intrinsic meaning. If it is to have any meaning, I must co-create it by screening it through my own worldview (which, of course, the world helped to model). At the same time, I will value it, because in co-creating it, it is where I meet God.

4. What sense do we make of the human trajectory?

We move from dependence to proficiency, then back to dependence. If I am to make sense of this route, I need a story that gives it shape and meaning. The story may focus on another world—an afterlife—or it might focus on the lasting changes I hope to make in this world. The story we tell is the informal presentation of our worldview. It powerfully affects our commitments in this world: what we choose to focus on and give our energy to, how we choose to live our lives and raise our children. Some cultures have stories that make sense of all the phases of life. Our culture, focused as it is on some notion of progress, has no story for the last part of the human trajectory. “Golden Agers” is a name, not a thought-out understanding of old age.

Some things that were natural and effortless in childhood must be reacquired in adulthood, often with great effort, by conscious choice and deliberation. As children most of us effortlessly received whatever we needed: food, warmth, protection, and love. How hard it is when we first mature, to gracefully acknowledge our prior dependence and recognize the ways in which we needed others in order to preserve our being. We are dependent in our prime as well, but we may choose not to focus on it and, rather, disguise the ways that others make our being possible. In childhood we have natural senses of wonder and delight which we disguise and deform as we grow in what we think is sophistication. It is a long, hard process back to delight and wonder. As youngsters we are loved just for being. As we get older, we focus more on doing. It takes some curtailment of our capacity to do before we can once again appreciate just being.

5. What sense do we make of death?

Many of the losses—of doing, of making a mark, of creating something lasting—are undone or revealed to be impossible in old age. My friends and colleagues are dying off. Causes I supported long ago have been forgotten, and what I built has become destroyed. New people with whole new worldviews have come into authority. We are dying in stages, going through “little deaths” almost as a rehearsal for absolute death. The simple truth is that we know about dying and about the inevitable finitude of our lives, but we do not know anything about death. Some people have made sense of death by filling in the blanks of what we do not,

and cannot as humans, know. For others, not knowing is a signal that death is not where we should be focusing our attention. My consciousness is designed to work in this world and I do not believe I can add anything by trying to apply it to some other realm.

6. Am I free?

Do I have freedom, which is what religion famously promises, or must I somehow achieve freedom? One meaning of the word is freedom *from*: as a Jew, I feel the freedom gained from the external bondage by the Egyptians as something that happened to my great-great-great-etc. grandparents. But if that were all freedom meant, the Bible would have ended when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. Yet it continues, and in the process begins to delineate a larger sense of freedom “from”—the internalized sense of being slaves. The Israelites had accepted the Egyptian evaluation of their worth, and needed years of daily caring to go beyond that (Freud, a twentieth-century Jewish prophet, was focused on our inner pharaohs and compulsions).

But freedom *from* is still only one meaning of freedom, and I want to advance, in this article and in my life, to another: freedom *to*. In this category, the most obvious act is the liberty to choose among options that confront us. While real and significant, this freedom is still a response to external events, and many of our choices are forced or trivial. There is a far more important type of freedom, which I call *creative* freedom. I am free to help create the reality in which I pass my days. We do not simply move away from obstacles or choose among alternatives, or even choose how to respond to our environment. We are co-creators of our surroundings. So my usual understanding of freedom is not the simple understanding of freedom *from*, or freedom to choose among alternatives, but an opening up to my own deepest nature. Freedom grows from just being freedom of choice to being creative freedom.

7. Can people change?

Psychologists believe people can change, or else they would not go through the long, involved process of helping us learn new ways to respond to situations. We tend to believe there is a high degree of consistency among people, and that is why college students going home for

Thanksgiving during their first semester experience instant regression. Because family members falsely assume they are dealing with a person who has not changed, students can almost count on falling back into playing their old family roles. But most human activities are premised on the idea that we should change. Indeed, I believe that self-transformation is a major objective in life. I am the unfinished animal, and I am given a finite time to complete the job of co-creating my self.

8. Is God only positive?

To put the question another way, can I locate God in and through my experiences of evil? The problem of evil is a major question that has stumped many theologians. Worldviews ground our ethics, so I cannot simply refuse to understand what evil is. But on some as-yet-undefined level, I believe in reconciliation and wholeness. God is not absent from anything, even my deepest despair.

I find none of the standard answers to the problem of evil satisfying. According to one, we have no way of knowing good from evil—the “God’s ways are not our ways” argument. But accepting that answer would destroy our ability to use God, or any religious system, to ground our ethics. Another answer holds that God is good but that evil is real and has a different source. But Jews, not believing in the devil, argue that everything, even existence itself, can ultimately be traced to God and must therefore be good. This principle leads us to a third answer, that evil has no positive existence but is simply the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light—I cannot darken a room by screwing in a hundred-watt room-darkening bulb. The absence of good is then explained as distance from God. This argument is emotionally appealing because not only does it not jeopardize God’s rule over the entire universe, it also “absolves” God from the responsibility of having created something so undesirable.

Seeing evil as distance from God is highly metaphoric, but to me the spatial metaphor does not work, because if God is everywhere and in everything, then nothing can be “distant” from God. Okay, so what if I simply modify that idea to mean distant in *consciousness* from God? That would suggest, for one thing, that theists are less evil or better than atheists. But it is not clear who is a theist or who is an atheist: God, as I have been discovering over the course of my life, cannot be reduced to

any single characterization, so there is no good answer to the problem of evil. What I can affirm is that when I take any situation that I face and put it in the perspective of my relationship with God, I am less likely to do harm.

9. Is life good?

Is life neutral? Is it a test to be gotten through with clean hands? For followers of some religions, life is seen as exile, or as a trial. In Judaism life is a gift, a blessing. We wish one another long life. That does not mean we will not suffer, there will not be losses or pain. But the overall feeling is that life is something to celebrate. I am back to my belief that the personal is the theological. I remember the ward I was in the day after my daughter was born. There was not a mother there who believed that her child was inherently evil, that the child's birth was the entrance into a world of suffering, that she had witnessed anything less than a wondrous gift and a blessing. The mothers would be released from the hospital and follow the rites of their respective faiths that would pronounce the meaning of their child's birth, but before anyone else could name it for them, they knew they had participated in one of the greatest miracles imaginable.

Some of these questions engage me more than others. Worldview, I have discovered, begins as autobiography—an angle of vision on the whole world. I started off with very personal questions: Is there a place for me? Was I wanted? Do you love me? Am I good enough? Will there be enough for me? But I do not end there. I spiral out to view not just ourselves but reality.

I see constructing a worldview as essentially and properly an art form. Reason is necessary up to a point, but it has its limits: for example, it does not serve as an invitation to the creative. Paintings evoke feelings that the analytic scientist does not; music summons emotions I cannot express; poetry opens worlds I could not otherwise enter. I could go on, but I want to stress my position that worldview leads us to questions we would otherwise never confront. For example, can works of art possess moral value? I firmly believe we can raise ethical questions about art works, in fact, I believe that all works of art, including worldview, can be measured by how much they engender compassion and interested engagement in this world. A work of art is the trace of a

magnificent struggle, though not the one the artist navigated to create it. The struggle is with this world we are trying to co-create in such a way that we can affirm it, and the work of art is our participation in this co-creation. Worldview is the art form using the largest canvas. It affirms meaningfulness and takes us beyond loneliness. Some people can arrive at the same value system by a different route, but what I most cherish in worldview is its emphasis that people are not the sole purveyors of value in the universe. We yearn for such transcendence, the temptation to opt out of the hard moral choices and the daily pain of living in a flawed world, but the test for a worldview, like the test for a work of art, is that we are better for having been opened to it, where better is not only for ourselves but for the world.

Our worldview is the picture we paint of reality. And just as Monet's paintings can educate our eyes so that we leave the museum conscious of light sparkling off every tree and building, so a successful worldview leaves us open to experience the blessedness of being alive. The test is whether we have become more engaged in the world, more loving toward its inhabitants, more suffused with a sense of wonder and delight. My worldview is a way of paying attention, of recognizing all the caring concern that has nurtured and still nurtures me. Each element in this worldview is part of one big "yes" to life, to my life and to the world.

Kafka writes that "a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." I am fascinated by that frozen sea. I know it can flow once again, and I want to bring warmth and light to that cold, dark interior and to help others be free, by—as Freud writes—decathecting what is blocked. I believe life is energy and we are meant to be fully alive, which means being new and creative, not running on inertia. Hermann Hesse, in *The Glass Bead Game*, proposes turning life into play, such that a passage from the Bible, for example, "could be taken into the Game just as easily and aptly as an axiom of geometry or a melody of Mozart" and that for genuine players, the Game is "virtually equivalent to worship."

All games have rules to stave off chaos; in other words, to break a rule is to end the game. The first rule of the religion or worldview "game" is that nothing is meaningless. Accepting that "rule" allows me to turn my deepest suffering into trials, tempering, or sacrifice, indications that I am nearing my goal ("Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" [Ps. 30:5]). Having accepted the religion, or

the game, I usually just try to play it well. But something may occur that leads me to question the rules and decide to play a different game. In football, as too many players were getting severely injured or even maimed, the rules were changed to allow for protective helmets and shoulder pads. At some point, I will have to decide that the game of worldview has caused or allowed too many injuries.

One way of playing, and the form of play central to religion, is to tell stories. The biblical stories give me a start on making sense of my life. I can ask if I appear as the hero, the romantic, the martyr, the adventurer. But over time, my own life leads me to modify and recombine these stories, whose categories are not capacious enough to express all of my experiences. We do not abandon stories, we contribute to them and alter them to fit our needs. Or, to put it simply, we co-create them.

What I call “The Ecclesiastes problem” illustrates how stories shape our experience of reality. The opening line of Ecclesiastes reads “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Although it appears that the author is making a statement about reality, the book is really about a limited and even distorted way of perceiving and naming. Ecclesiastes sees, in cyclical time, only that “there is nothing new under the sun,” ignoring the perpetual renewal that returns every spring. Similarly, linear time is viewed only as moving inevitably toward the grave, without any regard to the concept of progress or the joys along the way. Each of the arguments in Ecclesiastes is based on a skewed choice of candidates for meaning. The cynical view brought to love is built on a false definition of love, and the cynical view of God refers only to power and ritual, with no conception of relationship and presence.

Like Ecclesiastes, some people suffer from what could be called “cognitive distortions.” They tend toward all-or-nothing thinking; are subject to overgeneralizations; see only the negative and discount all the ameliorating positive; jump to conclusions; and anticipate that things will turn out badly. Worldview can help reframe these doubts, functioning the same way Spinoza’s *Ethics* does—it does not provide a set of answers, rather, it invites us to enter the creative process. At its best, the ancient Jewish stories help me find words to name my questions, show me that people have been wrestling with the same questions over millennia, offer the answers at which my ancestors arrived, and accompany me as I go through the rewarding—if difficult—process of co-creating my own story.



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