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Why You Think the Way You Do
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WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

This book is about why you think the way you do. Chances are, if you are reading this, you either grew up in the Western world or have been heavily influenced by it. And this means you probably look at the world from one of the perspectives that developed within Western culture. In other words, your *worldview* has been shaped by the Western cultural experience.

What is a worldview? A worldview is the framework you use to interpret the world and your place in it. It is like a set of glasses that you look through to bring what is happening in the world into mental focus. If you like computers, you can think of your worldview as your operating system, the thing that converts your experiences into the “ones and zeros” your mind understands — the thing that defines what inputs (i.e., experiences) mean, which of them you accept as meaningful, and which you exclude or ignore. More simply, your worldview is what you think of as common sense about the world. It is your gut-level, instinctive response to the basic philosophical questions, such as “What is real?” (metaphysics), “What can I know and how can I know it?” (epistemology),



and “Are there such things as right and wrong, and if so, how do I know what they are?” (ethics).

But you do not need to be a philosopher to have a worldview. Philosophers think about these issues in greater depth than most people, but whether or not you’ve studied philosophy, you still have intuitive answers to the questions and therefore you have a worldview. In fact, everyone has a worldview, because otherwise it would be impossible to learn, to make decisions, to decide on values and priorities — in short, to function at all in the world.

To understand worldviews a bit better, consider the first of these questions: What is real? Is the physical universe real? Does it exist? Chances are, simply asking these questions on some level seems ridiculous to you (unless you were a philosophy major). The answer probably is, “Of course the physical universe is real! What kind of stupid question is that?” But the problem is that your answer, which seems so patently obvious to you, is not so obvious to people who hold a different worldview. So, for example, many Native Americans have historically believed that the physical universe is secondary to the world of dreams; in this culture, dreams are more “real” than the waking world. Or if you are a Hindu, you may argue that the universe is not truly real; it is simply a dream in the mind of God. Not everyone thinks of the same things as common sense, or, to put it differently, not everyone shares the same worldview.

Along with these basic sorts of questions, another aspect of worldview involves understanding what it means to be human. Where did I come from? Are we different from animals? How do I relate to other people? How do I relate to [other] animals and to the physical world? Why am I here? Does life have any purpose or meaning? What happens when I die? These are the big questions of life, and most people do not have conscious answers to these sorts of questions — just like they do not have conscious answers to the more philosophically oriented worldview questions. But whether they are aware of them or not, they do have answers, which they live out every day of their lives. What you think of other people and your relationship to them is evident in how you treat them; the same applies to animals and the physical world. Whether you think life has meaning and purpose is evident in the

ways you spend your time, treat yourself, express your attitudes, and live out your priorities. So the answers are there, even if we aren't consciously aware of them. In fact, it is even possible that we may think we have a particular worldview when in fact we do not. For example, if we say we care about the environment, if that is part of what defines our self-image, yet we litter or dump our motor oil down the storm drains, we reveal through our actions what we really think and what our values really are — and thus our worldview. This is how worldviews operate — below the radar, behind the scenes, guiding our thoughts, words, and actions and only rarely being examined or analyzed.

WORLDVIEW AND CULTURE

Though our worldviews shape how we live, this is just part of the reason worldviews are important. Most of the people who grow up in a society tend to share a common worldview. In fact, for a society to function effectively or to have any semblance of stability, there must be broad agreement on at least a core set of values drawn from a common conception of what it means to be human and how we are to relate to each other, which in turn presupposes a set of beliefs about the world, truth, and morality. Even cultures that value pluralism operate from a worldview consensus that holds pluralism as a value and that sees certain kinds of differences between people as unimportant to the society. In all cases, pluralism has limits. For example, American culture allows for religious pluralism, yet we did not allow Mormons to continue practicing polygamy, nor do we allow honor killings among Muslims or *sati* (ritual suicide or killing of widows) among Hindus. So even pluralistic societies depend on a broadly accepted worldview that defines where pluralism is appropriate and where it is not. Without this agreement, a society will self-destruct.

So like people, cultures also have worldviews, and these worldviews shape the society. For example, what people believe is real determines what is taught and what is studied, as do ideas concerning the nature of knowledge; questions of ethics shape laws; concepts of humanness influence everything, from the structure of families to whether or not to hold slaves to principles of law and justice and to who has what rights.

A society's worldview can change over time, resulting in changes in the culture. Worldviews generally evolve slowly due to either their own internal logic or the force of new ideas and pressures. Sometimes new worldviews are introduced that out-compete their predecessors and become a new cultural consensus, though when that happens the result is generally something of a hybrid of the new and the old. Occasionally, worldviews are overturned in periods of social, political, or religious unrest.

What all this means is that to understand a culture or a civilization, you have to understand its worldview, since all of its successes and failures are largely the product of the basic ideas that shape the society. In fact, the society's worldview will inevitably shape the culture around its ideas, which means that the logical implications of these ideas will inevitably be followed by the culture if it survives long enough. And if you want to understand why and how a civilization changes over time, you need to track the evolution of its dominant worldview.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ... AND IS NOT

In this book I'll be explaining the development of Western civilization from the perspective of the changes in worldview from the Roman Empire to the early years of the twenty-first century. Although this may sound like intellectual history or the history of philosophy, it is not. Since worldviews are typically held unconsciously, formal philosophical or intellectual history does not usually deal with them much, preferring instead to focus on elites who self-consciously set out to develop systems of ideas. My interest here is in the fundamental ideas that shaped the culture and how those ideas were lived out in Western society. As we will see, the intellectual elites who are studied in philosophy sometimes had a very important influence on shaping (or expressing) worldviews, but for my purposes they only enter this story to the degree that they had an influence on the broader culture.

This book is also not a formal history of religion, though since worldviews deal with foundational questions about existence, morality, and purpose, religion naturally enters the discussion. All societies in history prior to the modern West were intrinsically religious, probably because they knew that life was precarious.

Death surrounded them on all sides. If they wanted meat, they had to either kill something or pay someone to do it for them. Until around the nineteenth century, more people died in cities than were born in them (and so cities had to rely on immigration to survive), infant mortality was extremely high, and epidemic diseases and famines were not uncommon. In the Roman Empire, the average life span was around thirty years. In this kind of world, is it any wonder that people oriented their lives around supernatural forces to try to find protection from life's dangers or to look for a source of hope when death claimed them?

As a result, religion is essential to understanding worldviews. In Western history, this means particularly Christianity. In fact, in many ways the history of Western worldviews is the history of the rise of Christianity and with it the emergence of a biblical worldview, the de facto rejection of this worldview over one thousand years later by a significant segment of the cultural and intellectual elites, and the results of the movement away from a biblical worldview. Again, my concern here is not with church history per se, but rather with the impact Christianity had on worldviews and thus on culture.

The key dynamic that begins the development of a distinctly Western worldview is the interaction of Greco-Roman civilization with Christianity. To understand this dynamic, I must start with a survey of worldviews within the Roman Empire.