

Worldviews

Meeting our Worldviews

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Introduction

It's common these days to hear calls for new worldviews. New paradigms are sought after and better futures are longed for. Many people are realizing that the worldviews we hold are not adequate to the realities we face.

The logic appears sound. How we see the world determines what we do in the world. If we want to see a new world brought into being, we need a different worldview.

However, calls for new worldviews are often accompanied by a condemnation of the current ways of thinking, doing, and being. Whether the subject in question is neoliberal capitalism, reductionist materialism, or partisan populism, existing paradigms are routinely ridiculed for the ill-effects they have on systems, souls, and society.

The impulse within these protests is important. Without it, there would be no energy to bring a better future into being. But the outright rejection of current worldviews means that a crucial part of the transformational process is overlooked.

My claim is that every worldview is attempting to take care of something. And if we don't acknowledge and respect these aspects of our current worldviews, then they won't fundamentally change.

In this essay, I first shed light on the structure of worldviews and metaphysics. Then I explain what it means to acknowledge and appreciate what worldviews are attempting to take care of. Finally, I share a few thoughts and personal anecdotes on what that process could look like.

Metaphysics, worldviews, and their origins

A worldview is the fundamental set of assumptions about who we are and what life is. It's our presupposed, embodied, often taken for granted stance towards ourselves, other selves, and life itself. As it encompasses so much more than how we see the world, a more accurate term could be a *worlddo* or a *worldbe*.

Technically, this is called metaphysics. The word literally means above (*meta*) physical properties (*physics*). It's the bringing together of what is (ontology) and how we know (epistemology) into a foundational framework of our relationship with reality. (The definitions of worldview and metaphysics are so similar that I will use the terms interchangeably from now on.)

Everyone has a worldview. Perhaps you don't see the glasses you're wearing, but the glasses are still there. To claim that you don't have a metaphysics is itself a metaphysical claim. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of developmental psychological maturity is the ability to "look at" one's worldview, rather than to "look through" it without noticing that it's there.

Worldviews do not arise randomly out of nowhere, nor are they hardwired into genetic code. They are partially constructed in autopoietic response to our external and internal environments, much of which gets cemented in childhood and then evolves in an ongoing exchange with our families, cultures, and society at large. Worldviews emerge through what Nora Bateson calls *symmathesy*, the mutual and interactive process of how an organism is learning to be in its world.¹ As we learn about our environment and it learns about us, we construct a generalized and therefore a necessarily distorted picture of "how things work around here". Although most of our core assumptions are developed early in life, their hold on us can last for a lifetime (or longer, as we will see).

Worldviews play an important role in our sense of identity. One of our prime directives as human beings is to maintain identity coherence.² If I can't tell myself a coherent story about who I am, I will feel as though I am falling apart. This is the personal crisis. Our worldviews form part of our defense

against identity disintegration. In fact, worldview and identity are so closely intertwined that they could be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Our worldviews are indistinguishable from our sense of who we are.

I see the world, therefore I am.

Without a worldview, our place in this world would be incoherent and senseless. As we move through our embodied experience of life, we require a coherent framework, a set of fundamental assumptions, to lean back on to make sense of anything at all.

The purpose of a worldview is to help the organism make sense of themselves within the context of their environment. A worldview makes life livable for its holder.

At the root of every worldview is the notion of care.

What worldviews are taking care of

There is no worldview without a positive intention in it. Even for the most evil and despicable of worldviews, beneath the surface there is always an impulse to take care of something.

Care in this sense does not mean that all worldviews are centered on notions of altruism and loving-kindness. It simply means that, at its root, a worldview is based on a positive intention. This positive intention is often clouded by decades of selective memory and cultural conditioning. Although it can require some metaphysical gold digging³ to get at it, care is always there.

To understand the intended positive outcomes of worldviews, we need to look deeper into their structure and the process of how they are developed.

To do so, imagine a young boy. He grows up in an environment where he receives affection only when he is quiet, still, and cheerful. If he gets angry or makes the slightest unapproved noise, he is castigated, shamed, or neglected by his caregivers. Over an extended period of time in mutual interaction with this environment, he learns: "I must be a good boy. Otherwise things get nasty. So I'll do what I'm told and won't annoy anyone, ever. If I put my own needs first and express myself, then I will be bad and unloved. So, I will be helpful, good, and earnest forever, I promise."

Our worldviews form part of our defense against identity disintegration. In fact, worldviews and identity are so closely intertwined that they could be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Our worldviews are indistinguishable from our sense of who we are.

The lessons he learns form the bedrock of his worldview. It freezes and locks into place, quarantining itself off from future updates due to its existential importance at the time. His personal metaphysics gets crystalized into a couple of core presuppositions: “Love is conditional” and “I am not enough”.

The consequences of this worldview will be that the boy grows up always trying to do more. There will never be enough he can do to feel OK. He won't trust others, but mostly he won't trust himself. He'll try to control his world as much as possible, and won't let anyone in too close. He'll feel a need to constantly improve himself without rest. He'll avoid conflict, trying to please and impress the world around him by doing whatever is deemed to be “good”. Try as he might, he will never be able to please others enough to feel OK in his soul. His basic metaphysical assumption will be that he (and the world) will never be never enough.

These are the *consequences* of his worldview. But no matter how sad or tragic these consequences might seem, his worldview is still taking care of something.

As a child, it would be terrifying to acknowledge the reality of his plight. It would be unthinkable and heartbreaking for him to blame his troubles on his external world. So instead the boy takes the judgement, anger, blame and shame he receives and turns it inward on himself. It's desperately painful to do so, but it is better than the alternative – because at least there he can retain hope of being the solution to his predicament.⁴

This confluence of assumptions and beliefs is not faulty, wrong, or bad. On the contrary, it is a highly intelligent strategy, as it allows the boy to survive. It makes his life livable. Getting angry at the world around him would have led to receiving more blame and shame, and facing the reality of his plight would be lead to devastating and overwhelming heartbreak. His worldview therefore allows him to make sense of his surroundings in a livable way. It gets him through the day. Although his worldview will have a host of negative consequences throughout his life, it was at the time better than the alternative.

His worldview is attempting to take care something. His worldview is trying to take care of his pain. His worldview is taking care of him.

Changing and healing through meeting

When we try to change, our instinct can be to force the issue. Many of us tell ourselves to try harder, defeat our weakness, and overcome the obstacles that are in our way. Much of the self-help industry itself is built upon this premise.

But if you try a break or destroy your worldview, it only tightens its grip. An attack on your belief system is tantamount to a threat to your identity. The natural response to any dangerous threat is to close down and tighten. This is how a worldview responds when we try to deny it.

Changing a worldview requires a radically different approach. The primary objective cannot be to change the worldview at all.

The approach required is one of acknowledgement and appreciation. When we meet what is—when we honor our histories and understand what our worldview has been trying to take care of—then it will dissolve. This does not mean condoning or supporting it; it simply means understanding it. By fully feeling what's underneath our worldviews, we give them space to resolve themselves, allowing a more updated and appropriate version to emerge.

The psychological notion of emotional completion can help explain how this process works. Emotional completion is the idea that every emotion has a lifespan. Under normal circumstances, an emotion comes and goes, leaving few if any lingering traces. For example, if you get angry and then allow yourself to feel and express that anger in an appropriate way, you will eventually move on with your life. You will be affected by that emotion, but you won't be caught up in it forever. The same goes for any experiential state. If we acknowledge, feel, and express what our emotions are telling us, then we can move on to the next thing that life throws at us. When we allow our emotions, our emotions don't get stuck.

But there are times when we don't allow our emotions to complete. For example, we might get excited, but we feel like we should hide that excitement because it's perceived as uncomfortable to those around us. Or we might find ourselves getting angry, but we push down the anger because our loved ones experience anger as a threat to connection and belonging. When we don't allow our emotions to be there, they get stuck and frozen in incompleteness.

This process of incompleteness can last longer than just a single situation. Over time, we accumulate layer upon layer of incomplete emotional experience.

As we move through time, our worldviews get shaped based on emotional experiences which haven't had the time, space, care, or attention required to complete and move on. Tragically, we then shape our surroundings through these lenses, conspiring to sculpt the world into a monument of our incomplete emotional experiences.

"Nothing ever goes away," says Pema Chödrön, "until it has taught us what we need to know!" This is a stance of *being with*. It's a process of truly seeing our worldviews and understanding what they're about.

Whether we're talking about isolated incidents or lifelong worldviews, our task is to complete what is incomplete. The process of completing an emotional experience is one of "healing through meeting", as Martin Buber said.⁵ It's an act of connecting with the deeper underlying emotional experience, and getting to know what truth is hidden within. "Nothing ever goes away," says Pema Chödrön, "until it has taught us what we need to know."⁶

This is a stance of *being with*. It's a process of truly seeing our worldviews and understanding what they're about. It's a stance of showing radical hospitality⁷ to what we meet, by respecting, including, and consenting to (but not necessarily condoning) the existence of what is before us. It's the choice to feel, completely.

When we complain about a worldview, we aren't actually feeling it. We are separating from it, hovering above its surface, protecting ourselves from feeling the pain that is inherent within it. By fighting against a worldview, we are preventing that worldview from being felt, seen, understood and completed. Thereby we are complicit in ensuring its continued existence.

Only by getting to know our worldviews intimately—understanding what the underlying emotional experiences are about, what they're protecting, and what they're taking care of—will they have a chance of melting and dissolving, allowing something new to emerge.

This applies as much for own individual worldviews, as it does for the collective worldviews of our modern world.

Systemic worldviews and collective metaphysics

If you've made it this far, you will have noted that the discussion has revolved individual worldviews. But what does the emotional development process of an individual's worldview have to do with our collective worldviews, mainstream metaphysics, and cultural paradigms?

Before proceeding, it is worth addressing a couple of obvious objections. First is the objection of reducing the source of an individual's worldview to incomplete emotional experiences. Naturally, the influence of educational, cultural, technological, and societal factors all play a role in creating and cementing our worldviews. It would be foolish to think otherwise. But it's easy to fall into the trap of relying exclusively on societal explanations, leaving the crucial yet uncomfortable influence of our own histories unexamined.

The second objection is that of reducing global perspectives into "one single global worldview". It is of course presumptuous and inaccurate of me to speak of such a solitary phenomenon as that. There are 7.9 billion individual worldviews and counting, and none is exactly like the other. Worldviews emerge from the process of the organism learning to be in its world, and we all inhabit different worlds. Even siblings from the ostensibly same family grow up in very different circumstances and therefore with very different parents. We all have different worldviews.

While it is important to acknowledge people's unique differences, there is also a risk that we lean too heavily on our individuality. It's easy to shy away from seeing oneself in a collective paradigm that is creaking at its seams. When we point fingers at collective worldviews "over there", we are engaging in another act of separation. This movement of separation—distancing oneself from one's cultural context and/or one's own personal history—is, as we will see, a classic symptom of the modern worldview itself. And this is precisely the opposite movement of what's required to resolve and dissolve it.

So, with that said, what might we define as our common worldview? If pressed, it can be boiled down to a handful of assumptions. These assumptions generally apply across the political spectrum, and they extend their reach further than the so-called Western world. These collective assumptions include:

- Life is a competition.
- Truth is found by reducing phenomena to the smallest separable and objectively measurable parts of matter.
- Everything is separate.

These assumptions are rarely noticed and made explicit. But we need only to flesh out the natural consequences of these assumptions to gauge their influence on our lived experience:

- People would view their lives as ladders to be climbed or mountains to be conquered.
- Businesses would demand themselves to grow and beat the competition forever.
- Science, and physics in particular, would be seen as the definitive description of reality.
- Objective sources of truth, e.g. facts, numbers, figures, money, would be considered ultimate goods.
- Emotions, feelings, meaning, and consciousness would be deemed to nothing but the result of neurotransmitters, hormones, and other chemical systems, mostly confined to the brain.
- People would consider themselves separate from their bodies, emotions, physical surroundings, cultures, and collective contexts.

The consequences of this worldview are wide-ranging. On the one hand, it has contributed to the widespread adoption of science as the primary framework from which to view reality. On the other hand, it has played a part in systematically separating people from the natural environment.

I don't know about you, but this sounds awfully familiar to the world I see around me. The underlying collective worldview that supports it is a thick, sappy liquid that covers every nook and cranny of the modern world.

The consequences of this worldview are wide-ranging. On the one hand, it has contributed to (and in turn been intensified by) the widespread adoption of science as the primary framework from which to view reality. It has enabled the modern world of global supply chains and ubiquitous digital information technologies. And it sits at the heart of the many medical and technological discoveries that have brought about extensions in human longevity. On the other hand, the same worldview has played a part in systematically separating people from the natural environment, instigating a relentless plundering of the planet, and igniting epidemics of alienation and meaninglessness throughout the world.

These are just some of the *consequences* of what the modern worldview has *led to*.⁸ But these outcomes still do not address what the worldview is trying to *take care of*.

To begin addressing what the current worldview is trying to take care of, the following questions can provide useful starting points:

- What would be taken care of if life was viewed as a competition, ultimately reduceable to and explainable by the smallest possible parts of measurable objective matter?
- What would be protected by ensuring a view of reality where disembodied objectivity is the sole measuring stick of validity and truth?

- Under what conditions would it make sense, from a place of care, to construct a relationship with reality based on distance, separation, and isolation?

There are no right answers to these questions. The range of influences is too large to accurately and adequately summarize. But here are a few conditions under which I believe the collective worldview makes sense from a place of care:

Emotional inattunement. If you have grown up surrounded by physical and/or emotional pain, and your caregivers haven't had the capacity to attune to your feelings adequately, you will learn to dissociate from your body and live exclusively in the realm of the mind. You will learn to neglect and avoid the body and feelings, because they're so painful to feel. Instead, you'll value abstract concepts and theoretical notions, seeking personal and professional outlets that gratify the cravings of your mind.

Inappropriate mirroring. If you've grown up without the adequate mirroring required to regulate your nervous system, you will be forced to find other ways of navigating in life.⁹ You won't receive the necessary confirmation of yourself required to feel anchored and rooted. To cope with the ensuing sense of inner rudderlessness, you will be forced to find alternative ways of knowing what's good and valuable for you. You will therefore orient around objective facts, measurable targets, and visible achievements as your navigational tools of choice.¹⁰

Conditional well-being. If you grow up in an environment where love is conditional and defined by a zero-sum approach to well-being, then you will learn that there's not enough goodness to go around for everyone. Love, attention, and other relational resources will feel scarce, always at the mercy of competition and at risk of being snatched away. So you'll construct a view of reality where everything is scarce, believing that the only way to feel safe and survive in the world is to competitively accumulate more scarce resources than others.

War and collective tragedies. If you grow up in a society that has been plagued by collective catastrophes, you will find yourself in an eerie atmosphere of silence, numbness, and disconnection. This haunting yet natural traumatic response will be felt not only at home, but at all levels of society, from community to politics to the culture at large. Whether the tragedy occurred within your lifetime or in generations past, the effects will

be felt today. You will feel the need to numb, disconnect, and separate yourself from what's actually going on within you and around you.

Cultural and ancestral exacerbation. If you grow up in a culture where all of the above situations apply, then each condition will exacerbate the other. The more ill-attuned and unregulated parents are, the more children will develop those propensities themselves. The more society is built around separation, distancing and numbing, the more that those who grow up in that society will separate and numb themselves too. Technologies, institutions, and societal structures built within this context will further intensify the dynamic. Cycle upon cycle of separation will occur and spread: separation from the body, from emotional and inner states, from each other, from communities, from society, from the natural world, from a sense of meaning, and a sense of home in the cosmos.

The categories listed above make up just some of the states that the current mainstream worldview is attempting to take care. The current collective worldview is, therefore, a beautiful piece of art and engineering, however strange that might sound. It provides solace and a (false) sense of control, making life livable for billions of people. Instead of having to face what feels like bottomless pain and relational hurt, it allows us to make sense of our experience of life, protecting ourselves from pain and hurt that was too overwhelming to process and regulate ourselves at the time of the original violations.

I am not speaking theoretically. I am speaking from my direct personal experience.

Before I proceeded down the road of coming to terms with my own version of separation, I leaned heavily on the crutch that the mainstream worldview of reductionist materialism provided. I latched on to narratives that proclaimed that all of existence is a result of meaningless randomness and that continuous objective improvement is the highest good. But a *pharmakon* (Greek for both poison and cure) in the form of burnout forced a deeper inquiry into myself and my makeup. As I have proceeded on my own journey of healing, I have come to understand that my previous worldview was attempting to make sense of a reality that felt true, and that to a certain extent was true, for me at the time. I was alienated and disembodied, measuring my well-being on corporate metrics and career success. The modern worldview fit like a glove, helping me to reassure myself that everything was fine and that I was fine. To embrace any other way of seeing the world earlier would have felt farfetched, irrelevant, or even threatening. It was only when I began to meet

myself fully and resolve the deeper emotional patterns underneath—when I came to feel and understand what my worldview was taking care of—that my grip on the modern materialist worldview was able to start morphing into something different.

By no means is my personal experience a playbook or a model for changing the world. Nor is my journey complete. But as Jonathan Rowson likes to point out, what is most personal is most universal.¹¹ Through my own experience and the intimate work I now do with people from around the world, I am continually amazed by what can happen when we fully encounter the other. When we respect, honor, and allow an incomplete experience to be felt, seen, and met, new worldviews can't help but come into being naturally and organically. As Martin Buber said: "All real living is meeting."¹²

There are many candidates for new and better worldviews out there. One that tickles me personally is a worldview of participatory relationality, where the fundamental assumption is that everything is relational and that we continuously participate in bringing reality into being.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Although visions, dreams, and pictures of a better future serve an important purpose, they can easily blind us from where we are. Rather than only looking forward, our task is to meet what is here, now.

Sitting in a cabin in the depths of winter, we hear a knocking at the door. We're tempted to stay seated by the fire, ignoring the harsh realities outside. But in that moment, we take a breath and make the choice to open the door, inviting our collective realities in from the cold. We encourage them to join us by the fire and share their stories. As we listen, we seek to understand and feel what they have been trying to take care of, regardless of whether we agree with them or not. In this act of hospitality, we're encountering not only the other but ourselves. We're honoring our interwoven fates, respecting the collective depths of who we are, fully, deeply, tenderly. We are seeing. We are feeling. We are meeting the very fabric of life.

And as we sit by the fire, staring into the flames together, we might even begin to hear the faint calls of the future, crackling into being.

Endnotes

1 Bateson, Nora, *Small Acres of Larger Circles: Framing Through Other Patterns*, Triarchy Press (2016), pp. 168-193.

2 Buchheit, Carl, *Transformational NLP: A New Psychology*, Whitecloud Press (2017).

3 Roy, Bonnitta, 'Why Metaphysics Matters', *Integral Review* (January 2019), Vol. 15, Issue 1, p. 44.

4 As the psychologist Ronald Fairbairn said, it is "better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God, than to live in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad; but there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that world around is good ... and in any case there is always a hope of redemption." From: Fairbairn, Ronald, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, Tavistock Publications (1952), pp. 66-67.

5 Rogers, Carl, *Carl Rogers Reader*, Houghton Mifflin Company (1989), p. 165

6 Chödrön, Pema, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, Shambala Productions (2005), p. 81.

7 Stephen Jenkinson in Rebel Wisdom, '[Myth, Wisdom & Pandemic](#)', YouTube (2020).

8 In a certain sense, you could argue that these consequences have been intensified, co-opted, and exploited by corporations and individuals for profit and other power-seeking interests, thereby ensuring that the modern worldview is "taking care of" such people and interests. But this is a topic for another day.

9 As psychologist D.W. Winnicott said, a child requires good-enough mirroring, with "the mother's role [being that] of giving back to the baby the baby's own self." From: Winnicott, D.W., *Playing & Reality*, Routledge Classics (2005), p. 58.

10 Or you'll lean the other way, and escape into nihilism or spiritual bypassing, where, effectively, nothing matters at all.

11 Originally attribution: Rogers, Carl, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, Mariner Books (1995), p. 83.

12 Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, T & T Clark (1937), p. 11.

