

TUTORIAL

6.1

# Worldviews 1

This is the first of four tutorials exploring the concept of worldview. In this tutorial, we introduce and define the concept of worldview. We look at how all human beings have, and express, a worldview and talk about the concept of meta-narratives. The notes were transcribed from a video presentation, so watch the video as you read the notes.

## Introduction

In this set of materials we are going to be specifically thinking about the concept of “worldview”. We want to give an introduction to worldview as a concept because it is very important for us, as we evaluate life for ourselves, and also as we try to grapple with the meaning of life and the ways that other people in other kinds of cultures and situations evaluate life for themselves. So, we are going to reference the idea of worldview back to the notion of *God’s Story* - because He is the one who describes the essence of our world for us, and that’s what we, as Christian Theists, believe. So we are going to talk about how worldview relates to God’s Story.

There is a lot of material to cover in this discussion of worldview, but we would like to give an introduction. We are going to think about the fact that as God’s Story is given, other worldviews are formed by human beings - lots of people in this world don’t believe God’s Story - so how are their worldviews being formed? Why are they being formed? What are they based upon?

We will describe and define what worldview actually is - we will give a definition and talk about what worldview is. That definition will come from others who are thinking and writing about these things - we aren’t the only ones thinking and writing about worldview, and we will rely on some other resources that will help us to think about worldview. We will look at some specific examples of worldviews and describe some of the primary features of those.

There are a lot of shades and varieties of worldview. We know that there are 7 billion people in our world today, or more, and if you were to ask each of those individuals to tell you their story - or to give their account of the world to you -

their stories would each be different in various ways. So, we are not trying to suggest that we can reduce everyone's view down to eight categories... or ten categories... or twelve categories. We are not trying to be that simplistic. But, we do want to suggest that we can conclude upon a set of categories that tends to cover the majority of the ways that people handle, and think about, the meaning of their lives and their existences. So we will present a number of examples of worldviews and describe some of the core features of them.

We also want to give a picture of a worldview model, or framework, that will help us to understand how to visually encapsulate the idea of worldview - a way that fits with our goals and objectives for the program.

Also, we would like to have enough information to think about and evaluate the worldviews around us. We believe that the best starting point for doing that, is to be able to evaluate our own worldviews first - to be able to critically reflect on what worldview assumptions we actually hold to, and how those are played out in our lives and in our behaviour. So, we need to critically reflect on what our worldview assumptions are, and then we want to be able to apply that critical reflection to others in the world around us as well.

We would also like to consider what it is that motivates worldview change. We are very interested in that concept, because we as Christian Theists - and as people who talk about seeing others evaluate their worldviews and come to understand God's plan and His Story, and who God is, and what He wants them to know about His view of things, and to know Him as the definition of reality - we are going to need to understand about worldview change. We want to see change, so it is a really important concept for us, and we want to understand what God intends in the process of worldview change, and what it is going to take for worldview to shift in that way.

So that is the direction we will be heading in this set of four tutorials on worldview.

## Considering our human existence

I have a picture here of a sculpture by Rodin, made in 1902, called "The Thinker". It is a portrait of a person sitting on a stump or a rock, with his elbow on his knee and his fist under his chin. When we as human beings see that portrait, we relate to that picture - we look at a person who is being described in the pose of 'a thinker' - and we say, yes, we understand that picture of a human being considering or thinking through - contemplating - aspects of life

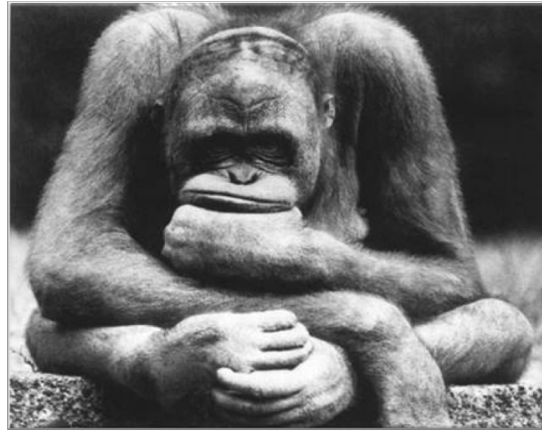


and existence, contemplating aspects of meaning in life. That is something that we human beings very closely relate to.

One of the underlying or foundational questions that we ask in the discussion of worldview is - *Why do we pursue an understanding of meaning?*

Around the world, human beings grapple with a common set of issues - a very similar set of questions - about the meaning and the nature of existence. The questions come up time, and time, and time, again. If you go from one culture to another, to another, to another, and you try to understand the way each group of people interpret reality, you begin to see that they are grappling with some very basic questions about the meaning of existence and the meaning of life. We are going to try to grapple with some of those questions and try to describe what some of those common questions are.

We looked at the picture of “The Thinker”, now let’s look at another picture: of a chimpanzee, or orangutan, who is sitting in a pose, with his legs crossed, his hands folded and his hand under his chin as well. I showed these pictures to my young children, and when they saw the picture of the statue of *The Thinker*, it didn’t get much of a response from them, apart from relating to the fact that it is a human being, thinking. But when they see this picture of this chimpanzee or orangutan looking like he is contemplating - with his chin on his hand and looking forward - they chuckle at that, and we do too. We chuckle at the idea that a chimpanzee strikes a similar pose to a human being as a thinker.



For Naturalists - those who believe in the material world only, and no transcendent presence (in other words no one speaking into the material box in which we as human beings live) - that chimpanzee with his chin in his hand looking like he is thinking, is a person in the process of becoming a self conscious thinker. But we instinctively as human beings, know that, when we see those two pictures, we are not describing the same thing. We have to have a certain presupposition - we have to presume something - in order to even contemplate the idea of *thinking* about worldview. Because we have to explain or describe the difference between the chimpanzee - with his chin in his hands supposedly thinking - and the human being, who is a legitimate thinker, contemplating existence.

In some worldviews, their starting point for answering the very basic question - *What is the difference between a thinking human being contemplating the*

*meaning of life and a chimpanzee who looks like he is contemplating?* - is very different. It is very difficult for some worldviews to answer that question, because the presuppositions underpinning their worldviews don't provide a substantial basis for resolving that very question: about the act or ability that human beings have to contemplate the difference in their life vs. the life of an animal.

We do have some thoughts about that as Christians. Those are the things we would like to describe or at least introduce in greater detail, so that we can begin thinking about them for ourselves.

## All human beings have a worldview

There is a natural tendency that human beings have, to deal 'worldviewishly'; to think and live in worldview terms.

We are going to look at the painting (*The Gulf Stream by Winslow Homer: 1890s*). When we express ourselves artistically or creatively we tend to demonstrate our 'inner working' or our core commitments. In the painting, Winslow Homer has depicted an ocean scene (the Gulf Stream was something he was very familiar with) and we can see a number of objects in that painting that catch our attention. There are five or six objects that capture the nature of this painting for us.



The first thing we can see - because it is front and centre - is a broken-down, relatively small, boat with its mast broken and seemingly drifting with the sea around it. The sea is not calm, and as you look at it you notice that in the water in the forefront you see quite a number of sharks that don't look particularly friendly either. There is a tinge of red in a number of places in the water, which would at least give the impression of blood in the water. The man who is in the

boat is not well dressed; he only has on a pair of pants. He is also a black person, and at that time and era in American life, that kind of individual would not have had a great standing in society. Then as we look in the background - in the right hand corner - we see a waterspout, which is not a welcome sight for people on the ocean, because it has a lot of destructive power. Then way up in the left hand corner, on the horizon, as you look closely at the painting, in the clouds and the shading of the clouds, you can see the masts of a ship - very faintly in the distance.

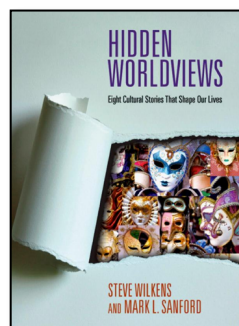
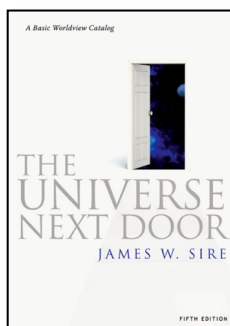
As we look at this picture, we see a grim picture; we don't see a happy picture there. The point isn't to over-evaluate the painting, as an art critic might. But the point is this: we, as human beings, are also artistic and creative beings. As Christian Theists we would say we are creative beings because God Himself is creative and that is part of His identity. We as creative beings *exude* worldview. In this painting, Winslow Homer is portraying a very grim worldview - but even though it is grim, we can see that he is portraying *something*. When critics look at this painting they see a portrayal of the world around us as a very difficult place - that we are on a boat that is taking us in a direction that we are not clear about, that there are a lot of obstacles in the world, there are a lot of dangers and a lot of ways in which our lives may not end up positively.

So, as we evaluate this kind of human creative process - as we read, as we watch movies - we see artistic expression *demonstrating* core commitments of worldview. That is a natural occurrence for human beings. Human beings do that by definition - time and time and time again that occurs. One of the questions we are asking is, *Why?* Another question we are asking is, *What?* What is actually demonstrated in artistic and other forms of expression that point back to worldview commitments?

Worldview is something that we as human beings *do* or that we *hold to*, that helps us to explain the meaning of our existence. Worldviews are a description of meaning in relationship to our existence as human beings.

## Two worldview resources

Two worldview resources that we will be referring to during these four tutorials are:



**James W. Sire.** *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th Edition. Kindle Edition. 2009.

**Steve Wilkens & Mark L. Sanford.** *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives*. Kindle Edition. 2009.

James Sire is a Christian philosopher and apologist, and in his book he describes worldview in a theoretical, formally descriptive way. He does that deliberately to contrast other worldview systems with the worldview system of Christian Theism. He includes in his book, a description of traditional religious worldview systems. He gives a definition of 'worldview' and then he outlines a set of *universal questions* that we can ask to arrive at a description of any given worldview. We can use these universal questions to help us to understand where another worldview stands, in what Sire considers to be some critical areas. Then Sire explains some of the strengths and weaknesses of these worldviews - how they stand up - in comparison to Christian Theism. We will be looking at some of these universal questions later in these tutorials because they are helpful in explaining or describing worldview systems.

The second book - by Wilkens and Sanford - takes a less formal approach. They are trying to describe worldviews that they describe as being *lived worldviews*. They don't go into comparing religious worldviews - such as comparing Islam and Christianity - because they are describing the more subtle influences of cultural shaping in our lives. They look at the kinds of influences in our societies and cultures that tend to come in and shape the ways that we think and live. They are deliberately taking a less formal approach, but are describing some very pertinent areas of worldview and worldview formation for us, and they are describing it from the perspective of the *story* that each of us lives - the story that undergirds and supports our life and that our worldview derives from. That is a good concept for us because it relates to some of the things we think and talk about in terms of God's Story and God's relationship to us in our story.

Hopefully you will have an opportunity to look at these two books yourself. We will be referring to them in the next three tutorials as we move ahead, but not covering them exhaustively. It would be good for you to look at them yourself.

## **A Definition of Worldview**

The following definition is from James Sire, but it is the same definition that is used by the authors of the other book as well.

*Worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being. (Sire)*

## **Meta-narrative**

Before we look at this definition in more detail, there is a need to look at the concept of *meta-narrative*. So, what is a meta-narrative? If you talk about meta-narrative in our post-modern world today - the Western world - you will run into a great deal of skepticism about the notion of meta-narrative. But we think of a meta-narrative as an overarching story that people believe in - usually a group of people - that ties reality together for them, that fundamentally joins together the aspects of reality for them. We believe that worldviews are meta-narratives - those commitments that we make at a heart level are overarching stories to tie reality together for us.

Historically, we have seen a steady movement away from a belief in the explanatory power of meta-narratives. Pre-modernists were very religious and very skeptical of scientific knowledge. Then we moved into a period of modernism where there was an explosion of industry, and understanding and science and an amazing growing awareness of the intricate nature of God's creation, and a growing belief that science could provide answers for life. Then there was an increasing skepticism about science's ability to provide answers and a movement toward Post-modernism, which is a belief in a *relative* view of truth - that there is no meta-narrative that describes and holds reality together



for us. So, there has been a shift from concrete belief in religious, or spiritual concepts, to a belief in science or naturalism, to a skepticism about either being able to provide a meta-narrative that describes reality.

So we will run into people today who are extremely skeptical about meta-narratives. In worldview terms we can describe even that position of skepticism as a meta-narrative - that is a vicious cycle that some post-modern thinkers find themselves in.

## Our story and God's Story

Worldviews are fundamental orientations of our hearts. The Biblical concept of 'the heart' takes in the human person as a whole. These orientations of our hearts - these commitments - can be expressed as stories, and we as human beings have stories - each of us has a story. Our stories are the way that our worldview unfolds. If I was to describe my entire life story to you, you would be able to look at my story and find that my story gives you a good understanding of what my meta-narrative process or my worldview process has been about. You would find the elements of my worldview in my story.

This orientation of our hearts is based on a story, and often if worldviews are formalised, those stories can be defined as a set of presuppositions - these assumptions that are summary statements of the core commitments that I have made. About who God is, about God and His nature - I believe in a triune,

personal, transcendent God who has created all things and has love and care for all the things that He has created, and has a personal relationship with what He has created. That is a presupposition that I would be operating on the basis of, as a Christian Theist.

Those presuppositions are almost always derived from a story. My story is connected to another overarching story, which is God's. Some of us hold to our commitments more or less consistently. Sometimes we are not aware of our commitments on that level. Sometimes we hold to things that we don't understand clearly, in our conscious self, but we find that, "Oh, yeah, I have bought into that." I have bought into that presupposition about life, even though I wasn't aware of it. That happens to us as believers, and is something we have to be on guard against, which is a concept that Wilkens and Sanford particularly focus on.

So, these presuppositions that we hold to are sometimes consistent and sometimes inconsistent. But they provide information for us about the basic constitution of our world, of our reality. They help us to understand reality, and they are the foundation for what we do.

As we think of worldviews as a story, we know that our worldviews are not static. They are in flux (not necessarily our core commitments, although core commitments can, and do change). Our worldviews change as our stories move forward.

My son's worldview - at eight or ten years old - may be founded on some of the same presuppositions that I hold to as a Christian Theist, but obviously there is a lot of changing, growing and expanding that will occur in the course of his story. My story today is not the same as it was ten years ago. I, as a maturing and changing person, see change in my worldview. Our stories are changing, growing and expanding - which makes worldviews messy, but we can describe a set of presuppositions that we hold to at a heart level that provide a foundation for our reality.



Worldviews can also be described as being *absorbed* rather than *adopted*. We see worldviews being absorbed from our nature and from our nurture - we absorb what is described and defined from our social environments and from our physical environments. It is not as if we as human beings have *thought* our way into worldviews; that we have compared all the systems logically and decided on one - that is not how worldview formation works for people. Their worldviews are formed by their social and physical circumstances. In many of the world's contexts, those worldviews are not formally defined the way that



we are talking about worldview today; they are generated in bits and pieces. We will look more at these ideas in the next tutorial, as well as some specific questions to help guide us in identifying and evaluating worldviews.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Worldview 1*

1. How has your worldview changed since you were a child?
2. What specific influences can you pinpoint that caused the most significant changes in your worldview?

## ACTIVITIES

### *Worldview 1*

1. Look at the artworks below - all by the same artist - and write a few points about what you think they might express about the worldview of the artist.
2. Now do a little research to find out more about the creator of the artworks above - British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy (born 26 July 1956). Find out anything about his worldview, what he values, etc. and see if he did express those things to you through his artwork.

