

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 40 | Number 4

Article 3

---

June 2012

## Connotations of Worldview

Roger Henderson

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

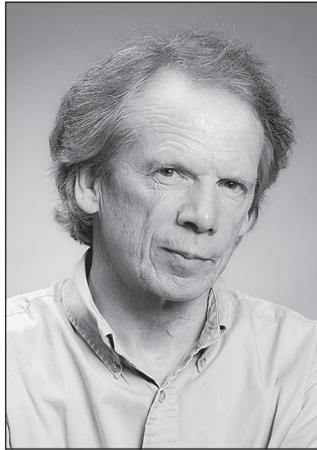
Henderson, Roger (2012) "Connotations of Worldview," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 40:  
No. 4, 10 - 21.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol40/iss4/3](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol40/iss4/3)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Connotations of Worldview

---



by Roger Henderson

Two general tendencies can be distinguished in the use of the term *worldview* (*weltanschauung*), tendencies that reveal profound differences, which I propose to examine in this essay. The two connotations give rise to two very different assessments of talking and thinking about *worldview*. Those who discourage its use often identify it with an unprincipled pluralism or relativism; those who favor its use identify it with a web or system of beliefs with a common denominator, a system that clarifies implications for life and vocation.<sup>1</sup> Although there is no mention of anything like worldview in

---

Dr. Roger Henderson, formerly Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College, now lives in the Netherlands, where he writes and teaches in the Spice Program (Studies Program in Contemporary Europe, at the Gereformeerd Hogeschool, Zwolle).

the Bible, the importance of what a person thinks and believes is stressed throughout.<sup>2</sup> If attention to worldview serves this emphasis without compromise, it is beyond reproach. Before we can clearly distinguish the two connotations, we must consider what quite generally is at stake in the idea of worldview. My overall goal is to show that discussions of worldview can be very valuable, while pointing out certain ways the notion of worldview can be misunderstood and misused. I start with a brief definition and then turn to the history of art, reflecting on the fact that each people and culture inevitably portrays things in their own characteristic way. This, I suggest, indicates the presence of a worldview.

A good way of approaching the idea of *worldview*, I contend, is that there is “beneath and beyond all the details in our ideas of things. . . a certain *esprit d’ensemble*.”<sup>3</sup> This French expression, used by Orr, is insightful: It says there is something that colors and gives flavor to the content of what a person or group believes. It implies that such an *esprit* unites all the particulars into a consistent whole. It also means that something comes about out of a certain arrangement of details that displays this *esprit*. Such a “spirit” is that which enables all the details to fit together in the first place, like a hidden “logic.” Something is shared that goes beyond individual details while imparting unity and character to them as a whole. The *esprit* is an overall meaning and impression arising in and through everything. Like the “spirit” of the law often spoken of, it is something better, more life-giving than anything simply evident in the details or parts of our ideas of things. It is something under, over, and above all

the parts as such, a shared quality or feel. As such, it denotes the web-like structure of human belief(s), the coherence of life as reflected in thought, the interconnectedness of thought and reality. *Worldview* depends upon the unity of human existence and the coherence of it (and thought) as fitting together within one creation. Like the “spirit” of the law, the meaning of worldview is sometimes better, more beneficial than what people at times make of it. Yes, talk of worldviews can, like everything else, be misused and misplaced. But this misuse does not detract from its intrinsic value or the insight it offers us into reality.<sup>4</sup>

and recognition always occur within some frame of reference, it seems natural to us to assume that what the two artists see is the same. This amounts to saying, however, that the lake’s true appearance is what is captured in a photograph. Yet, when we look at a photo, we automatically compensate for its flatness, point of focus, shadows, size, and texture discrepancies, repeatedly reminding ourselves of what the various things in the picture “stand for.” Skillful representative works of art do this and much more for the viewer, although the viewer will still compensate for certain “discrepancies.”

We read a lot into a photograph and somewhat



In his book *Art and Illusion, a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, E.H. Gombrich considers the following question: “Why is it that different ages and different nations have represented the visible world in such different ways?”<sup>5</sup> Think, for example, of how differently landscapes are represented in Medieval as compared with seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. Or imagine two artists, one from China and one from England, sitting in front of the same lake, making a drawing or painting of it. Even though we know that seeing

less into a painting. Paintings involve more selecting and poignant presenting of what the artist considers important for us to see. Still, we wonder why the artist who paints the lake in the Chinese fashion does not see what *we* (seem to) see and gladly accepts what we consider the discrepancy (between what we see when we compare her painting with a photo). Why doesn’t she see the same thing we do and notice the obvious difference between her lake and what we see (there, or) in the photo? She doesn’t see the same thing we see probably because

she considers its Chinese look or style to be true and correct—a look which *to her* the lake obviously does have and *to us* it obviously does not have. We tend to think in a similar way about accents: people who don't talk like us have accents—but we don't, or at least we think we don't.<sup>6</sup>

---

*A worldview is like a certain encryption code allowing us to open, organize, and “place” the things we see within familiar categories.*

---

Compensation factors are always at work. We make allowances for discrepancies of appearance, caused by bad lighting, distorting weather conditions, and uncharacteristic momentary looks, in order to portray and bring out what something is “really” like. Familiar objects can suddenly look strange in certain environments, just as strangers can sometimes be mistaken for familiar persons. A lot of what we perceive is what we have been taught and (come to) consider important. Similarly, when someone says something in a foreign language, it is hard to even make out the sounds, let alone what (s)he is saying. Goethe once said that people hear only that which they understand. The uninitiated eye or ear is not very open to what is just there. A good (picture) frame tells us how and where to look; it should intimate the kind of painting we are meant to see; the frame also tells us where the little world (and story) of the painting starts and ends—even though a frame (work) is not made to be consciously noticed.<sup>7</sup>

Like any other picture, the Chinese lake painting (above) presumes to reveal what is important and real about the lake but perhaps not obvious to us at first. After seeing the painting, we may be able to see the lake in the Chinese fashion and appreciate important facets of the lake previously hidden to our view; the profound and skillful artist highlights what is most savored, worthwhile, good, or true, rendering this service to the viewer. And here we have a parallel with worldviews—they

give us eyes to see and understand what otherwise might have gone unnoticed. Although artistic limitations can never be excluded from explaining variety in representation, the very existence of artistic schools, styles, and traditions tells us that like (verbal) languages, artistic conventions of representation are not merely individual but communal—as are languages, accents, and worldviews. We tend to see, think, and talk about things as do our friends and like-minded community. For these and other reasons to be mentioned later, I argue in this essay that worldviews are communally held, shared perspectives, or ways of thinking, passed down from old to young. This means that they are not the same as philosophy or religion—philosophy being more analytical and abstract, religion being an all-embracing way of life and not limited to a way of thinking.

A worldview is like a certain encryption code allowing us to open, organize, and “place” the things we see within familiar categories. One of Gombrich's main points throughout his book is that “to see a few members of a series is to see them all”;<sup>8</sup> and this is one of the keys to how perception is assisted by acquaintance with a worldview, a category, type, or kind. The operative word in the quotation is “members.” What makes a member a member is that it shares in the same *esprit* or spirit. In this way things fall into certain categories as *members* of groups or kinds—and acquaintance with these assists discovery. Similarly, once a person has become aware of a certain *esprit*, style, or brand, for example, of architecture, music, or clothing, it becomes easily recognized anywhere. A brand is like a man-made generic type or kind. You need only hear a few bars or catch a quick glimpse of something to know that it is one of that kind. Acquaintance with a type or kind is an identifier that tells a whole story. This is similar to the way worldview-awareness works and assists us. Familiarity with one tells us a great deal about what to expect from *members* of the community possessed of it. The reason for this correlation is that reality is highly integrated; things are tied together with a thousand bonds constituting kinds and types in a coherence, not an aggregate of things just standing side by side. Attaining a “view” of a whole affords an implicit, intuitive, or tacit grasp of many things,

and this grasp is something a worldview offers.

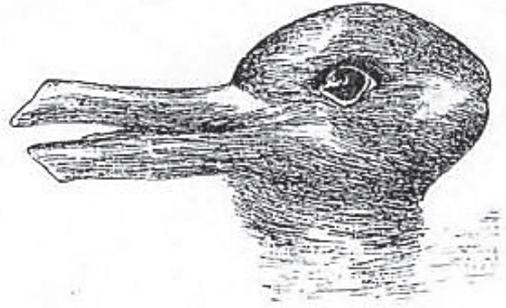
### Equivocal Perceptions

Related to worldview, a relevant question today is no longer just whether different people living in different cultures and ages perceive things in different ways but the significance of one and the same person perceiving one thing in different, incompatible ways. It has become popular to present one thing that can be seen in two different ways, such as the rabbit-duck or the young-woman/old-woman drawings.<sup>9</sup> While there is a certain fascination in perceiving “one thing” in two ways, such experiences can also be unsettling. If the world and any one thing can be perceived in different ways by one and the same person, does this mean there is no such thing as truth? Is truth, then, paradoxical? In spite of its problems, this is a conclusion many people feel driven to draw, once they have experienced a plurality of contradictory perspectives. And if correct, wouldn't this plurality of contradictory perspectives undermine any legitimate idea of worldview?

In the eighteenth century, philosophers aware of the problems raised in accounting for perception and knowledge argued that knowledge arising from sense experience is *subordinated to necessities of the structure of the human mind* (“*Vernunft*”).<sup>10</sup> The unintended eventual consequence of this argument was the permanent separation of reality into subjective and objective realms, with consciousness now being primary and independent. We will return to this momentarily. Many people now believe that there is no *single* right way of looking at reality, no single right worldview, only incompatible perspectives and “incommensurable paradigms.”<sup>11</sup>

### Negative Connotation

As some writers understand the term, *worldview* has the connotation of unmitigated “perspectivism,” implying that humans are fogbound within their own perspective, or system. (Those who actually believe that they themselves are fogbound like this might be asked how it was possible that they made this discovery, given that they were supposedly captives within their own system.) If talk of worldview assumes or necessarily leads to such “perspectivism,” it is understandable that it has



The rabbit/duck, a wood engraving, from Germany, is *Kaninchen und Ente*, published in *Fliegende Blätter*, 1939. The young woman/old woman drawing is from an unidentified German postcard of 1888, called “*Junge Frau oder Hexe?*” drawn by the English artist W.E. Hill, *Punk* magazine, USA, 1915.

been greeted with distrust and skepticism.

This connotation exemplifies a key feature of modernism, namely a preconceived notion of a gap between that which is seen and anything that might exist outside of perception—an assumed chasm separating consciousness and a so-called external world. It suggests the primacy or ultimacy of *views*.

Everything that is seen is then a matter of (consciousness and) someone's *view*. Accordingly, what we see is a result of our angle or vantage point but even more of our prejudice, will, linguistic conditioning, and cultural bias. Here we detect the modernist and post-modernist attitude of suspicion and a complete rejection of the long venerated, classical and medieval assumption of an *adaequatio re et intellectus*, a coordination of viewer and viewed.

The contemporary relativist attitude considers perception to be "*underdetermined*" by any collection of ingredients, either internal or external. This attitude, then, has moved away from that of the eighteenth-century modernist philosophers, who contended that the observer is furnished with certain "standard equipment," which when used to process the input from the senses produces reliable knowledge. While that "modernist" approach was clever, it was soon interpreted as meaning that beauty and everything else was indeed only in the eye of the beholder. This view is part of the background of the negative, subjectivistic connotation of worldview. According to contemporary relativists, neither the structure of human subjectivity, nor the structure of what is, uniformly produces what is perceived. Knowing is controlled, not by a set of regular human faculties or by what is, but by random, ever-changing factors in the viewer—unconscious interests and desires. Knowledge is ultimately a matter of perspective, a way of seeing and perceiving. In this view, total human *autonomy* is assumed, the idea that human beings have an unlimited control and are completely self-determining. But ironically, this very view can switch at any moment to its own opposite, into the view that nature is determined and is an all-determining mechanism—over which humans have little or no control.

The nativity of this *relativist perspectivism*, which we have been discussing, is sometimes ascribed to the German Idealist philosophy of Kant, Fichte, or Schopenhauer. This ascription is ironic, however, since Kant, at least, believed he was pointing out the standard equipment and various rational necessities controlling human perception and knowledge-acquisition, including the assumption, or postulate, of *a* world. While he believed he was giving a firm basis to scientific knowledge, his

philosophy eventually achieved the opposite in the popular mind. Perception came to be seen as more subjective than ever and less connected to a known (or even knowable) world. Reality outside of the human mind became ever more hypothetical. By ascribing to "inner sense" or "intuition" (*Anschauung*) a universal role in knowing, "intuition" took on an exaggerated importance. It (*Anschauung*) was also connected by Kant to the notion of world (*Welt* in German), giving us the German term *Weltanschauung*—which might have been more correctly translated *world-intuition* instead of world-view. In any case, it was only a new name for something not new—a perspective of the whole.<sup>12</sup> Although *worldview* is sometimes given a bad name because of such associations—and hence has led some (Christian) writers to conclude that it is a contaminated and dangerous notion—there is little good reason to surrender the term to this negative usage or confuse it with a proper definition or connotation.

### Positive Connotation and Use

Ideally speaking, a worldview represents a unified "life-conception,"<sup>13</sup> affirming and indicating how the many facets of life fit together. Things are meant to line up, fall into place, and constitute "their own kinds." While there are legitimate differences in perspective, these are not caused by any supposed indefiniteness or unknowability of the world; instead, they arise out of both the richness of creation and the limitations or fallibility of human knowing. For example, some beliefs are distorted, based on a limited or mistaken acquaintance with things. Yet the world is far from being an unknowable thing in itself or a mere aggregate of parts. Just the opposite is the case; it is so rich in meaning that there is practically an inexhaustible diversity of pictures that can be drawn of it (including any one of its lakes) without exhausting its meaning. This is so, partly because of its temporal character—things go through phases, grow and develop in time, repeatedly revealing a new gestalt. The break, gap, or fragmentation that can sometimes alienate knower and known is not original but *adventitious*, signifying dysfunction and break down, not a shortage of meaning, reality, or truth.

A worldview may color but cannot create what

is there, or all of what is perceived. While every worldview has its limitations, both internal inconsistencies and faults in its account of reality, there is usually some visible hint of these limitations, especially when they are very mistaken in some way. Whether a person takes seriously the hint or light coming through the cracks in the wall depends upon the person's courage, integrity, and good faith.

Failure to follow up indications of problems can be disastrous. This truth became painfully clear to me in talking to the parents of friends I made while studying in Germany in the 1980s. As *Christian* teenagers, they had all joined the Hitler Youth League—*Hitlerjugend*—and saw nothing wrong with it at the time. After many questions and much discussion, at least one thing (hint) came out in each case that, if followed up, could possibly have opened their eyes to the surrounding evil—as it did to the youth of *Die Weiße Rose* group in 1941.<sup>14</sup> One such missed hint was briefly witnessing the horrible condition and mistreatment of a group of prisoners—quickly “explained” by a parent as treatment reserved for “traitors to our country”—which allowed the terrible sight to be categorized, sanitized, and forgotten until much later. Another case was the family's (of one of the people I talked to) being told by long-time friends, who were Jewish, “You must never visit us again, because it could put you in danger.” The family could not—did not work hard enough to—understand what this warning signified.

In a significant way, sinful human beings are still at home in this world and often have opportunities to rectify or compensate for its present brokenness. We are made for learning and created for discovery—we are supposed to become acquainted with God, his handiwork, its kinds, its regularities, and its patterns, i.e., its unity and interconnections. An eye for worldviews can assist in this process. Although there are ways in which we seem to know God directly, what we grasp (of Him through Scripture) is understood largely through our perspective and experience in creation. Scripture often instructs us by comparing God to the behavior of things around us, like birds caring for their young or shepherds keeping their sheep or the sun rising anew each morning.

*Worldview* properly refers to a coherence of beliefs within a world for which humans were well suited—and this is its proper connotation. It grants only a secondary importance to “view,” since “a view” is not quite the same as “the truth.” Some of the differences between the two connotations are a matter of emphasis, one focusing on human volition and consciousness, and the other seeing human life as coordinated with what is there, the order and laws by which God governs and sustains the universe. A proper awareness of worldview is meant to alert people to the way (primary) beliefs attract similar (secondary) ones, repel contrary ones, and form unified belief-systems. Knowledge of a worldview can alert a person to far-reaching implications and consequences of first principles. No one can avoid having some perspective, with its own direction, guiding thought along certain lines, showing it where to go, and indicating concordant action.

There is a limited number of first principles or primary beliefs, and this means that worldviews are seldom if ever individually but rather *communally* held. *Belief* is understood here as a commitment with a specific character and a potential cost if upheld in practice.

Worldviews also map things out, give guidance and direction to human thought and action, but motivate only in a secondary sense, not with the driving force of religion. Factors such as fear,

---

*In a significant way, sinful human beings are still at home in this world and often have opportunities to rectify or compensate for its present brokenness.*

---

greed, and pride also play a big role in motivation and sometimes work against or in the opposite direction of a person's own worldview. By inclining persons to act contrary to what they (say they) believe, such cravings commonly give rise to dissonance and confusion within their worldview.

Because fear, greed, and pride are not in accord with the deepest confession of the heart, they act as foreign or inauthentic motivations—not rendering the satisfaction to people of having acted with the courage of their convictions or of having done what they knew was good and right.

A number of key points can now be summarized. People are unavoidably possessed of beliefs and assumptions about reality. These beliefs and assumptions constitute not mere collections but “comprehensive frameworks.”<sup>15</sup> As we have seen, people are not possessed of unrelated individual beliefs simply standing side by side, like marbles bouncing around in a bag, but rather are possessed by congruent systems, webs, or frameworks of belief, each with a distinctive *esprit* of its own. If human beliefs and “belief-forming processes” were essentially singular or atomic, we would have a hard time making sense of the mutual attraction of similar and repulsion of contrary beliefs. This is one of the most remarkable characteristics of the way human beliefs work, that is, the appearance of systems or families of beliefs bearing a common spirit.

Since some beliefs have greater weight and authority, *more and farther reaching implications*, than others, these may be thought of as primary beliefs. For this reason, beliefs form hierarchical structures in which the primary ones take the lead in coloring the whole framework or worldview. Because beliefs are drawn together to form webs, or systems, it is rather uncommon to find a person whose thoughts combine diametrically opposed primary beliefs.<sup>16</sup> When a primary belief is altered, the change usually has far reaching ramifications, whereas the changing of a secondary belief or opinion occasions little notice.

The attraction and repulsion of human beliefs that give rise to systems of belief and worldviews make blatant inconsistencies and contradictions within a worldview all the more interesting and puzzling. If things function and work as they are supposed to most of the time, why don't they always work in this way? This question requires more attention. For the moment we can only be reminded that the presence of dysfunction does not contradict the existence of normal or proper function but rather reinforces it.

Assuming for the sake of argument that every normal adult human has a worldview, we should ask whether it is final or subordinate to something else more profound and all-controlling. A worldview represents a person's primary beliefs, yet it depends upon something deeper, namely, a person's religion, religious commitment, or religious state. In general, worldview is subordinate to religion. Worldview depends upon but is not the same as religion; it reflects religion's intellectual structure or bent. Religion is more than a set of ideas or way of thinking to which a person acquiesces. It has a vital or lived-out quality that transcends both theory and ideology. Religion involves being connected to something that transcends visible reality and embraces the divine in some way. To be divine is to be self-existent, dependent on nothing else.<sup>17</sup>

A key biblical term in connection with religious is *heart*. Although an adequate account cannot be given here, something must be said about this word because of its frequent use in Scripture in connection with a person's basic religious orientation. This is not the modern usage of heart as organ of *infatuation*. The heart is the center from which all kinds of activity begin. The heart is said to devise plans, to think, to speak. Sometimes it is said to be foolish, darkened, divided in allegiance. The tongue speaks, but the heart is far off; or the heart speaks, but something in us is unable or won't listen. We are in the bivalent position of being both its keeper and its dependent—we rely upon it for guidance, initiation of action, but we must also guard it carefully. Scripture speaks of the heart as having *its desires*, which are often (but not always) given by God. In a sense, it can't be defrauded or dissuaded from doing what it is set on, either for good or for evil. We can pretend we want to do one thing, but if there are other plans (priorities or *treasures*) in our heart, they will prevail. (This is not the level at which worldviews operate, although it is the place out of which they grow and receive direction.)

I have tried to show that worldview is more than a mere convention or human construction yet less than a simple given of nature. It appears to be a way human beliefs cluster themselves together and divvy themselves up to form patterns or systems of belief. This process initially happens without

great conscious effort. It is learned, but it first happens at an intuitive level; and like a person's native language (for example, English), it normally needs education in order for its facility in use to be gained; refinement and cultivation are necessary and beneficial.

---

*The willingness to test our ideas against experience repeatedly and adjust our view of kinds and types accordingly is a perennial goal of a Christian worldview, true science, and philosophy.*

---

#### **Assumptions about “Kinds”**

As described above, knowing that a certain person has a certain worldview is a little like acquaintance with a (natural) kind: once you have recognized it, you have a way of anticipating behavior in that kind and that person. Without going into detail about the status of natural kinds, I should say something about assumptions, since it is often said that acting on the basis of one or another is inevitable. When we say “fruit,” “worldview” or “human being,” “chair,” “act of courage” or “dog,” do we refer to a *universal*—or only names coined in experience for convenience sake? The standard views are that their existence is either (1) ontological (Plato), (2) conceptual (Aristotle), (3) verbal (Ockham), or what one Christian author takes to be a matter of (4) creation disclosure (H. Dooyeweerd). This distinction is significant because it affects the importance attributed to experience in contrast to the use of reason, models, paradigms, or perspectives, particularly in the sciences—the role attributed to empirical input. In attempting to explain patterns or regularities, one can easily overlook any (new) factors that don't easily fit within the familiar, established perspective. This means that there comes a moment when the usefulness of an established theory, paradigm, or (world) view has shrunk, and

the expansion or renovation of the familiar perspective is needed. You will be able to make sense of the new experience or observation, only when struggle (imagining and borrowing) has yielded a new or renewed perspective. This idea of struggle implies the limited practical validity of the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of inborn or fixed “forms” because in both cases, these notions have (in principle) a very limited openness to correction by experience.

#### **Degrees of Openness**

While the process of seeing and recognizing things always occurs within some frame of reference, each community is more or less open and has a greater or lesser willingness to face certain things that are unknown and to learn from them. To recognize “new” things requires openness and imagination—stretching oneself and one's perspective—to go from the known to the unknown. There are various types and degrees of openness, for example, to instruction, to correction, and to what is there, outside of us, waiting to be experienced and discovered. Indeed, the rise of modern science has been credited, in part, to the third view of “kinds” outlined above—late medieval nominalism. By accepting the idea that kinds and categories are human models, constructed by using language and numbers to formulate the regularities of experience (as laws), various thinkers began forsaking Platonic or Aristotelian deductive methods (based on universal “essences”) in favor of more tinkering-based, inductive methods of studying nature and a more malleable approach to kinds.

However, the idea of being completely open to experience and using only induction is an illusion, since complete openness would only mean indiscrimination and pretending that theories arise automatically (as Francis Bacon imagined). The willingness to test our ideas against experience repeatedly and adjust our view of kinds and types accordingly is a perennial goal of a Christian worldview, true science, and philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Human knowledge is not a copy or mirror of nature; it is a human account of what is behind the observable regularities, historically qualified articulation of formulas, laws, and decrees holding for the behavior and function of creation.

## Worldview Benefits

Thinking in terms of worldview can help us recognize the logically consistent inferences of our beliefs. Knowing that a certain person has a certain worldview (biblical or otherwise) sometimes makes it possible to anticipate accurately what his or her opinion will be on various issues. Each particular community with its own intellectual-spiritual orientation has its own worldview and key insight. Behind each such community (and worldview) is locked a criterion for selecting, interpreting, and arranging life and pursuing certain goals. Even an implicitly held worldview offers an interpretive framework for identifying and understanding (or sometimes *misunderstanding*) other communities (of belief), cultures, and historical periods.

As a result, a worldview allows identification in two ways—one for the identifier and one for the identified. Because each community (or collective, partly) embodies a worldview, each is distinctive and identifiable, making it possible for a person familiar with it to pick out its members. To know or have knowledge of something also involves acquaintance with its effects. We don't know what a lake is like just by looking at it. Acquaintance with its kind and all other types and kinds can tell us a great deal and assist us in recognizing the things we meet. Without such knowledge, we would have to experience each unique individual, its operation, its actions, its doings, and its effect upon us, in order to know what it is.

## Pictures and Truth

I now return to questions raised earlier about seeing two images in one picture. By concentrating on one or another of the leading features of a picture and taking one's cue from that feature, one determines the image one will perceive.<sup>19</sup> I dare say, nobody can see both images at the same time, but one can move quickly back and forth between the images. We are inclined to ask, "Which of the images is the real thing?" We know from the visual compensating we do that we can be fooled and tricked, and it may be the artist's intention to do just that. We also know that the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, that dead-looking wood branches produce gorgeous colored blossoms, that every coin has two sides, that the tiny baby becomes the

large adult; but we assume that a thing is one thing, with a single identity, when pressed to determine it.

When Jesus says that the same tree cannot produce good and bad fruit and that the same well cannot bring forth sweet and bitter water, he is not unaware of changing cycles over time. Indeed, it is time that is the key to the changing images we are discussing. That one thing can function in many ways over time poses no problem; a hammer can be both a paper weight and a nail driver, a car can offer both shelter and transport, and a light can offer both heat and illumination.

If one can pick out an image in a cloud as children often do, and then another and another, is there any problem with that? And if a third thing can be seen in the rabbit-duck drawing, should that be troubling? As a rule, things start out as one thing with a specific function; they can then change or be changed. Changing and transforming things is essential to artistic activity. The mutability of materials, their susceptibility to change and molding, is the condition of artistic work. Even if one thing has many (possible, potential) functions and images, one function or image almost always starts out as the chief, even if another soon takes over.

All of this illustrates the richness and fecundity of creation—mentioned earlier. There is wonder stored up in a thing made by a very imaginative Creator. "There are more things in heaven and earth my dear Horatio, than is dreamt of in your philosophy," says Shakespeare's Hamlet.<sup>20</sup> And if one asks what is really there when one is looking at the different images in the clouds, the answer may have to be that it is just a cloud, and a drawing is just paper and ink—although as the handiwork of God, there is so much more that we cannot describe it all.

## Presence in the World, Absence On-Line: A Cyber-Sized World-View

What about images on the computer? What effect are the long hours of sitting in front of our computers and Internet screens having on our life and world-view? Prior to the late 1980s, people in a few occupations spent long hours sitting in front of their typewriters. Now millions spend most of their days looking into screens, staring at texts and pictures on their computers. While our world

(view) is hugely enlarged in the narrow electronic channels of the streaming audio-visual information presented to us on the Web, it lacks presence and depth of perspective, it lacks the grounding of boundaries, of location in space, and the last-chance limitations of time. Although the Internet can show us places and things from all over the world, everything we experience takes place right in a room while we are sitting at a table, staring into a screen.

It is hard to say what influence the On-Line illusion of presence and the reality of absence is having, in particular, upon relationships. While it is often said that the Internet brings people closer together, in some ways the opposite is true. It certainly can increase the frequency and number of people we reach—with the touch of a button—but it is contact with no price. The ease with which we can fire off an email to a person or include someone in a group message facilitates cheapness of intent and shallowness of content. *It breeds disregard in both sender and receiver.* One is reminded of the emptiness of computer-generated birthday cards sent by agencies. The lowering of the threshold to writing someone is having a questionable effect on relationships. Can it make for better, more authentic communication? Even the act of speaking to someone on the telephone asks for a higher degree of engagement and sincerity. The lowered contact threshold affects the depth and intensity of the communication and relationship. Writing no longer requires special effort, nor results in a tangible artifact. It can be done with any motive or scarcely any motive at all.

Why do people sometimes travel all the way across the country just to be *with* another person—even for only a few days or hours? What's the difference between just talking to people on a telephone or through a computer screen and being in the same place together, *present* with them? In both cases, we can see and hear each other. What bearing or effect does being present together have upon us compared to communication at a distance by electronic means? Being present gives to and requires of us something more. Being absent eliminates touch, smell, and a sense of nearness. All parties are less vulnerable; the possibility of being uncomfortable or frightened by the other person,

or of imposing or being imposed upon is diminished. We can be quite indifferent towards one another and hardly notice it when apart. Acting and pretending are much easier and the temptation of insincerity greater.

Virtual presence and actual absence can also affect what we consider natural, intuitive, or self-evident and as such may alter the basis upon which we draw conclusions and make decisions. It can bring about a kind of insensitivity or numbness, because it is more partial (virtual) than we realize. It can both open up and stunt the growth of young people. For some, it becomes a replacement for a real (social) life. It allows people to withdraw into exclusive networks of friends and family, no longer

---

*The more people live  
a web-based existence,  
the more their frames of  
reference and world (view)  
shrink....*

---

needing anyone else, allowing them to close themselves off from all other contact. It makes it easy to stay within all their limitations and fears. It has also become a major source of addiction to many people, particularly addiction to game playing.

The more people live a web-based existence, the more their frames of reference and world (view) shrink, though they can be jolted back to fuller presence and awareness. By shrinking these limits, we land in utopia, precisely nowhere. In one sense, being On-Line is to be no place except in our heads, at least until we move away from the computer screen. Our worldview becomes a Google-sized, filtered Internet portal (under constant surveillance). It is a controlled environment. There is no out-of-doors available On-Line. We control much, and are controlled: if we don't wish to meet someone, we can click off—delete is always only a button away; and yet no one is ever really with us. We are more in contact than ever and less in contact than ever—firewalls (and worlds) away from reality and other people. What this will

do to us in the long run remains to be seen, but at present it allows us to create a sense of a man-made world(view) without presence: a universe in which much good talk about God can still end up sounding awfully hollow.

This nowhere Utopia fits well with a public philosophy that tells educated Western people they are in control of themselves, that what they do and think is within their own power, that they are autonomous—a law unto themselves. Many believe humanity is in charge of itself, can recreate itself, can wholly recreate the world. Yet when I walk down the street and smell something appetizing, something in me can crave it even if I do not wish to have any such craving. Before consciously deciding to get up in the morning, I sometimes notice I have stood up and am heading for the wash room. Many things bypass my will, such as appetites, instinctive cravings, longings. These may indicate something I need but don't at the moment want. Sometimes there is cultural interference between my ideas and my needs—because of certain notions or fears I have acquired. Indications of need are sometimes overlooked, ignored, or suppressed—like a craving to eat something with the vitamins in it I need. We can learn by observing such operations in ourselves. Their message is that there is more to me than I think, will, or consciously understand. Our thirst does not arise from our worldview—even though our thirsts, too, are trained, for example, to want water, wine, milk, or coke.

### Conclusion

Rather than thinking of ourselves as autonomous “individuals,” unattached to the rest of reality, we should recognize our relation to it, including all the ways our thought patterns are meant to reflect it; the many interconnections largely constitute our peculiar existence. These interconnections do not mean, however, that our thought lacks all originality or independence. Thanks to the way God has made and sustains us, we are not robots! Yet thankfully we constantly meet with hints of organizing structure(s) in and outside of ourselves. We perceive in freedom, in orderly ways, by virtue of divine ordinances and law—to which we are, thankfully, always subject—yet not in bondage. Under the best circumstances, there will be a good

match between our views of the world and the way the world is. The fit, however, will never be perfect or exhaustive because for that, the creation is far too rich and dynamic.

Our perspective on life reflects and corresponds in varying degrees to an order that is larger than ourselves. It is intimated to us even in a fallen world and even through a less than perfect worldview. Beginning in earliest childhood we are instructed by intuition, instincts however minimal, and a tacit awareness of the arrangement of the world prior to our thought becoming self-conscious and focused. Such intuitive and tacit functioning is wonderfully evident in language, the way speech is learned by infants even before they realize what they are doing; they begin to talk and express themselves using signs or words long before analysis or independent understanding develops. We want and try to talk even before possessing a vocabulary because we are human beings—made to talk. Being so made is what allows us to learn, develop, and acquire language in the first place. Reality is made to be spoken of, and we are made to speak of it. Things are created to be known, and we are created to know them, to gain a view of the world and to gain acquaintance with God.

While there is nothing foolproof about the way all this human learning and “viewing” takes place, we constantly receive hints and indications telling us when we are right and when we are wrong, by the test of time and experience. Self-awareness and observation are there to teach us basic knowledge, and they far exceed what we consciously control. In a tacit way, we discover that many things are happening, are being suggested to us; we are being asked to respond to these things—some of which we eventually realize in a deliberate way. Many signals, however, go unnoticed because our worldview is off the mark, more a constricting ideology than an expanding vantage point. Sometimes we learn more about the world by careful observation of our own intuition and tacit awareness of things than by looking at things directly or by what we are taught. The ideas of our culture, or what experts and celebrated thinkers tell us, can easily be false. Cultivating an awareness of the *esprit d'ensemble* of all the things people think and believe offers the attentive observer an extra filter and a

valuable guide in sorting out what is (most likely) true. Recognizing that there is always one or another interpretive framework in play can be greatly instructive to us and lead us to deeper insight into ourselves, others and other communities.



This is the original rabbit/duck wood engraving, *Kaninchen und Ente*, published in *Fliegende Blätter*, 1939.

### Endnotes

- Another type of criticism identifies worldview with “rationalism.” This criticism incorrectly sees worldview as necessarily turning (Christian) faith into nothing but logical propositions and dogma.
- A person’s opinion on which connotation is most correct may depend on his or her eschatology, that is, what he or she thinks living in the “end times” means. It may also be influenced by the importance he or she places on the use of the intellect. These last two factors are indicators of whether a person’s attitude towards the use of worldview will be more positive or negative. Another concerns evangelism and the value a person attributes to the use of apologetics.
- James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World as Centering in the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1893, 1954), 6.
- Virginia Lloyd-Davis, *Willow by the Lake*, joyfulbrush.com.
- E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion, A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 2000), 3.
- It is likewise the case with a language; it too has its own color or esprit “beneath and beyond all the details” of the grammar, the speech, and the sound that animates it. The phonology of each language (or accent) naturally includes and excludes certain sounds. A certain spectrum or range of familiar sounds characterizes the whole, such that foreign words are recognized as not really belonging to it.
- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action, Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980, 1996), 122 ff.
- Gombrich, 220.
- The old-woman/young-woman drawing is from an unidentified German postcard of 1888, called “*Junge Frau oder Hexe?*” drawn by the English artist W.E. Hill, *Punk* magazine, USA, 1915. The rabbit/duck, a wood engraving, also from Germany, is *Kaninchen und Ente*, published in *Fliegende Blätter*, 1939.
- Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Academie Verlag, 1781, 1998).
- Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962, Preface & Ch. 10.
- A remarkable use of an equivalent to *worldview(s)*, (*wereld beschouwingen*) is found in the title of a Dutch book by Bernard Nieuwentijt (1654-1718), *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen, ter overtuiging van ongodisten en ongelovigen*, Amsterdam, 1715, literally, *The Right Use of World Views, to Convince the Unreligious and the Unbeliever*.
- Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 15.
- Their story has been written about and filmed: *The White Rose, Munich 1942-1943*, Inge Scholl (Wesleyan University Press, 1970, 1983).
- Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 3.
- I have met just one; he endorsed the revolutionary Communist teachings of Chairman Mao along with Dispensationalist Christian theology. Politics, he insisted, has nothing to do with religion.
- Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 21.
- Luther’s appeal to the written word (book) of God in Scripture, outside of himself, (to correct his own view of salvation), was imitated by scientists who appealed, outside of themselves, to the work (book) of God in nature.
- In the case of the duck-rabbit, it seems to be the nose of the rabbit; in the case of the lady, it seems to be the ribbon on the neck or the ear.
- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1. 5. 165-167.