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From Worldvision to Worldview: A Review of Personality and Worldview

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From Worldvision to Worldview: A Review of Personality and Worldview

Abstract

"We should not underestimate the cumulative impact of generations of faithful communal commitment to a Christian worldview."

Posting about the book *Personality and Worldview* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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From Worldvision to Worldview: A Review of *Personality and Worldview*

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Title: *Personality and Worldview*

Author: J. H. Bavinck, translated by James Eglinton

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In many Christian circles, it has long been common to talk about worldview, but what is that, exactly? I tend to like the term because it's one of those words that suggests its own definition: a worldview is the perspective from which we view the world. However, it turns out that this simple definition leaves a whole range of questions unanswered. How much is a worldview something individual, or is it something a group holds? Is it a set of philosophical concepts that order our thinking, like a personal philosophy, or is it more like John Calvin's concept of "spectacles", in that they calibrate the way we see the world at a level before conscious thought? In line with this, is it more appropriate to talk about *the* Christian worldview, or just *a* Christian worldview?

In the recent English translation of his 1928 book, *Personality & Worldview*, J.H. Bavinck (nephew of the more well-known Herman Bavinck) tackles questions like these from a slightly different perspective. In doing so, he offers us new tools for thinking about worldview, and he opens up fertile avenues for further consideration of how we both shape and are shaped by the basic intuitions we hold about the world around us.

From Worldvision to Worldview

The first helpful framework that Bavinck can offer us is a distinction he makes between what translator James Eglinton renders as "worldvision" in contrast with "worldview." For Bavinck, a worldvision is the simplest form of what we might otherwise call a worldview. It is the rudimentary, typically unexamined assumptions that we make about the world and our place in it. This is not a philosophical system; it is the sum of our intuitions. In this way, everyone has a worldvision, but not everyone strives to either articulate it or integrate it in a more coherent fashion.

For Bavinck, worldviews first emerge when effort is made to reflect and bring coherence to a worldvision. In this way, a worldview is something more cognitive, philosophical, and reasoned. It is also something more external to a person. Bavinck sees worldview as an admixture of both a person's subjective worldvision, which is closely related to our personality, and reasoned consideration, which represents a certain mastery or conquering of the self. This makes worldview something altogether more difficult and aspirational. It becomes something to be achieved and maintained, neither something that totally appears in us nor something wholly outside of us.

Taken together, this reframing of the concept of worldview can be tremendously helpful to us. It provides a differentiation of vocabulary that helps to counterbalance issues created by imprecision. When we use worldview to mean something more like worldvision, we can run the risk of making it sound like our actions are guided by some sort of personal philosophy. This opens up James K.A. Smith's criticism of worldview as supporting a stilted view of humans as "brains on sticks." At the same time, by introducing worldvision as a more precognitive thing that can be developed into a worldview, Bavinck creates room to honor the very real impact that cognitive effort can have on our actions. While we are not brains on sticks, philosophy gives ample testimony to the fertile results of seeking to wrestle with our inconsistencies and assumptions in order to become better, more consistent beings.

In this way, worldvision speaks to our presuppositions and gives us a posture to engage with reality as we intuitively perceive it. At the same time, worldview is freed to become a matter of calling, a cultivating task that we can eagerly undertake as a vital work of growing in wisdom. My legal background may predispose me to favoring a proliferation of precise terminology, but in this case, I think the additions to our collective vocabulary are beneficial indeed.

How Philosophy shapes our World

But why is this book called *Personality and Worldview*? Bavinck was writing in the early 20th century against the flowering of psychology. Freud was coming into his heyday, and phrases like "personality" were being developed and explored in important new ways. With this growth came the question of whether philosophy might be swallowed up by something like psychology. In other words, could the great philosophies of the world be reflections of the personality quirks of the geniuses who expounded those ideas? If we could explain ideas in terms of the personalities of the people who proposed them, might we not be seeing a truth deeper than the one we engage with if we took the ideas at face value? These were vital questions to answer in an age where the "masters of suspicion" were so prominent.¹

In this way, J.H. Bavinck provides a wonderful example of a deft Christian engagement with the ideas of the day. Bavinck dismisses efforts to reduce worldview down to personality; yet, he also points out that the two are connected in important ways. He argues his point first by articulating what the link looks like, then he spends most of the book exploring how these ideas

have played out via an abbreviated tour of most of the significant philosophical worldviews that have come, at various times, to dominate the world stage.

Bavinck describes the link between personality and worldview by starting from a baseline of capacities of the soul. Bavinck doesn't get too far into specific mechanisms, but he does argue that the soul has capacities to receive/perceive, remember, connect, appreciate/value, and long. He says that these five capacities must be integrated to some extent in order to form a personality, and that the relative balance of these different capacities will have a significant influence on the sort of person we become. In addition to this, Bavinck weaves in a range of hungers that guide us (such as the desire for recognition, transcendence, etc.) and the interaction of self, society, and God. In this way, personality is to these basic inclinations what worldview is to worldvision.

Finally, Bavinck links worldview and personality in that they reflect a certain organizational synthesis, functional balance (which desires are more central), and moral balance. This sets up the majority of the text, which works through various systems of faith and thought and how they reflect a synthesis of these factors. At the end of the book, Bavinck circles back around to show that it would be an error to think that we understand great worldviews simply by burrowing to the personalities of those who first articulated them. Instead, a worldview takes on a life outside of the person who works to develop it, and, further, a worldview, once articulated, takes on a shaping and directing role with regard to what sort of people we are that further shapes our worldview. The process is not linear but circular: we shape the worldviews that in turn shape us.

Cultivating a Christian Worldview

Perhaps you've been with me through the first part of my review, and I may have lost you during the middle bit, so let me bring this around in clear terms to address what difference Bavinck's ideas can make for us today.

J.H. Bavinck follows his uncle's analysis in asserting that there are ultimately two worldviews: one that rejects God and one that accepts him. While this might seem like too simple of a binary, it is a powerful insight. Bavinck's review demonstrates sensitivity to a vast range of configurations that beliefs can take, but the fact that a worldview is not simply a work of personal thought, but something enmeshed in relations means that all worldviews either entail personal relation with God or they do not. In Bavinck's words: "If the gospel is anything, it must be a living connection of the living human being to the living God, the God who speaks and acts!" If we have a conception of a Christian worldview that is not centrally, foundationally, anchored by this personal facet, then our worldview is not consistently Christian.

Along with this, Bavinck offers good guiderails on our relation to a worldview. On the one hand, he says we err if we think that adopting a worldview "changes your whole life in a single

moment.” We don’t think our way to new action, to new identity; we have to let it sink in further. In this way, “worldview thinking” is no panacea for what ails us.

At the same time, he says “the power of worldview should not be underestimated.” He says this principally in terms of the cumulative effect of generations committed to a worldview. Indeed, even when a worldview falls out of favor, behaviors, attitudes, and other echoes of the past linger. In this way, Bavinck anticipates later thinkers who would come to call our contemporary age “Christ haunted.” Yet, beyond this interesting application for cultural analysis, the import is deeper. We should not underestimate the cumulative impact of generations of faithful communal commitment to a Christian worldview. The effects that we can expect from this labor is not an instant conflagration of change, like switching on a gas burner. Instead, the commitment to cultivating a Christian worldview is a generational commitment to stoking coals that will burn hot long after the flames have died down.

Bavinck closes with a pithy inversion: “You could say ‘tell me who you are, and I will tell you what your worldview will be like.’ You could also invert this: ‘Tell me what your worldview is like, and I will tell you what you will become.’” For Christians, the call to cultivate a worldview is the call to cultivate our relation to Christ, for He is the image of what we hope to become.

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1. This phrase is a name given by philosopher Paul Ricoeur to Marx, Nietzsche, and

Freud for their varied approaches to reality, often seeking to tear off masks of what

was being said to get to some deeper truth supposedly operating behind the

scenes.