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Camel, Kangaroo and Elephant

*Behold the amazing elephant
Whose name is always relevant
To what we can know
And where we can go
And to all things lowly and elegant.*



I do not know precisely where I got the following story, which I adapted long ago for my own purposes. In any case, I have told it often as I have tried to help students understand two central characteristics of worldviews: their *presuppositional* character and their possible answers to the most fundamental question we can ask.

Camel, Kangaroo and Elephant

One day a little boy came to his father. “Today the teacher showed us a big round globe. She said it was a model of the world. She said the world was just surrounded by space. How can that be? Dad, what holds up the world? Why doesn’t it just fall down?”

His father, knowing that this was just a child’s question, gave him a child’s answer: “It’s a camel that holds up the world, Son.”

The boy went away satisfied, for he trusted his father and for the moment it made sense. He’d seen pictures of camels holding up all sorts of things. So why not the world? But then he got to thinking about it and by the next day decided something was missing in his father’s answer. He asked, “Dad, I was just wondering: if a camel holds up the world, what holds up the camel?”

His father now thought that he might be in trouble. So, knowing that a quick answer turneth away further questions, he said, “It’s a kangaroo that holds up the camel.”

Again the boy went away, but this time only for a couple of hours. Back again with his

father, he asked, “Dad, if a camel holds up the world and a kangaroo holds up the camel, what holds up the kangaroo?”

This time the father realized that he was in deep trouble. So he chose the largest animal he could think of and he put a capital on it. That is, he shouted. *People believe you if you shout*, he thought. “It’s an Elephant that holds up the kangaroo.”

“Come on, Dad!” his son retorted. “What holds up the Elephant?”

His father, in a fit of genius deriving from necessity, replied, “It’s . . . it’s . . . it’s Elephant all the way down.”

What the boy said next is not recorded. But notice two things. The father has been pushed to the logic of his first answer. If it takes something to hold up the world, then there has to be a first holder, something that doesn’t require being held up—a prime foundation. If the father is to answer his son’s question in the way it was asked, he is committed to naming the final foundation of reality—that is, what holds everything in existence.

Second, the father has to recognize that he has no logical way to stop the regress. He must take another tack. He must simply commit himself to the most likely one—the biggest animal he can think of, the elephant.

The story thus illustrates two characteristics of any worldview: its understanding of *prime reality* and its *pretheoretical* character. The story makes this clearer when the father takes his son’s question more seriously.

Natural or Supernatural

In this story, the father respects his son’s curiosity and intelligence. So when the son asks, “What holds the world up?” the father replies, “Gravity holds the world up, son.”

“Gee, Dad, what’s that?”

“The law of gravity states that the force (F) exerted between two bodies (such as the earth and the sun) is equal to the gravitational constant (G) multiplied by the product of the masses of the two bodies (m_1, m_2) divided by the square of the distance (r) between them. Here, let me write the formula for you:

$$F = Gm_1m_2/r^2$$

“Now look up *gravity* in an encyclopedia. I think you’ll get the picture.”

“Wow, Dad,” he says after he’s pored over the *World Book Encyclopedia*, “I understand the formula. It’s neat. But why?”

“Well, son, the law of gravity expresses the relationship between bodies in space.”

“Why, Dad?”

“Well, you see, the universe is a uniformity of natural causes, and the law of gravity expresses this uniformity in a mathematical way.”

“But why is the universe uniform? What makes it be what it is? In fact, what makes it be at all?”

Now the father is at a crucial point. He has named a series of reasons, all linked logically. But he now faces a question that cannot be answered within the framework of his previous answers. In philosophic terms, his son has been asking physical questions. Now he is asking a metaphysical question: why is there something rather than nothing? In other words, what is the Animal all the way down?

The father, so it seems to me, has two basic ways to answer. He can say, “That’s just the way it is.” There is no further reason. There is just Being itself, brute reality, fundamental *isness*. If he takes this approach, he sides with the naturalists, who, like Carl Sagan, say, “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”

But he has a second choice. He can name one more Animal, a sort of animal beyond all animals. He can say, “God made it that way.” In this case, he has sided with the theists; that is, his one more Animal is a nonnatural, even supernatural, Creator.

His son can then ask again, “Why, Dad?” And his father is again at the end of his answers. Unless he has extranatural information, he must now say the same thing as the naturalist: “That’s just the way it is.”

Naming the Elephant

This story illustrates two primary characteristics of a worldview. First is the fact that our primary foundational commitments are just that—*commitments*, that is, presuppositions. They are what we come to when we can no longer explain why it is we are saying what we are saying. Second is the character of the question the young boy asks. He asks *what* is the case, not how we know or believe that it is the case. And the father answers in kind. I want to say from the beginning that I think the young boy asked the right question in the right way and the father likewise answered—whether as a theist or a naturalist—in the right way.

There are other ways to tell the story, other ways for the father to begin his series of answers, but his answers represent a foundational principle in the two worldviews most common in the Western and Middle Eastern world: naturalism and theism. We will examine one other story later. For now my point is simple. At the base of all our thought—all our ruminations about God, ourselves and the world around us—is a worldview.

What Is a Worldview?

This book arises out of two primary circumstances. The first is my own dissatisfaction with the way I defined a worldview in the first edition of *The Universe Next Door* in 1976. Because

the definition is so rooted in my own mind and has been disseminated widely to students over the past quarter of a century, I will begin this book with it and then raise the issues that have seemed to me most problematic about it. In subsequent chapters I will address these issues in hopes of bringing clarity to the worldview concept and conclude with a redefinition that embodies my conclusions.

The second circumstance is the publication of David Naugle’s *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, which has provided a rich source of information on the way this term and concept have developed. It has precluded my own need for extensive historical research.

What, then, is a worldview? The definition which appears in the first three editions of *The Universe Next Door* is this: A worldview is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of our world.

The first thing every one of us recognizes before we even begin to think at all is that something exists. In other words, all worldviews assume that something is there rather than that nothing is there. This assumption is so primary most of us don’t even know we are assuming it. We take it as too obvious to mention. Of course something is there!

Indeed it is. And that’s just the point. If we do not recognize that, we get nowhere. Still, as with many other simple “facts” that stare us in the face, the significance may be tremendous. In this case the apprehension that something is there is the beginning of conscious life—as well as of two branches of philosophy: metaphysics (the study of being) and epistemology (the study of knowing).

What we discover quickly, however, is that once we have recognized that something is there, we have not necessarily recognized *what* that something is. And here is where worldviews begin to diverge. Some people assume (with or without thinking about it) that the only basic substance that exists is matter. For them, everything is ultimately one thing. Others agree that everything is ultimately one thing but assume that that one thing is spirit or soul or some such nonmaterial substance.

But we must not get lost in examples. We are now concerned with the definition of a worldview as such. A worldview is composed of a number of basic presuppositions, more or less consistent with each other, more or less consciously held, more or less true. These presuppositions are generally unquestioned by each of us, rarely if ever mentioned by our friends, and brought to mind only when we are challenged by a foreigner from another ideological universe.

Seven Basic Questions

Another way to get at what a worldview is is to see it as our essential, rock-bottom answers to the following seven questions:

1. What is prime reality—the really real? To this we might answer God, or the gods, or the material cosmos.
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us? Here our answers point to whether we see the world as created or autonomous, as chaotic or orderly, as matter or spirit, or whether we emphasize our subjective, personal relationship to the world or its objectivity apart from us.
3. What is a human being? To this we might answer a highly complex machine, a sleeping god, a person made in the image of God, a “naked ape.”
4. What happens to persons at death? Here we might reply personal extinction, or transformation to a higher state, or reincarnation, or departure to a shadowy existence on “the other side.”
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? Sample answers include the idea that we are made in the image of an all-knowing God or that consciousness and rationality developed under the contingencies of survival in a long process of evolution.
6. How do we know what is right and wrong? Again, perhaps we are made in the image of a God whose character is good; or right and wrong are determined by human choice alone or what feels good; or the notions simply developed under an impetus toward cultural or physical survival.
7. What is the meaning of human history? To this we might answer, to realize the purposes of God or the gods, to make a paradise on earth, to prepare a people for a life in community with a loving and holy God, and so forth.

Within various basic worldviews other issues often arise. For example: Who is in charge of this world—God, or humans, or no one at all? Are we human beings determined or free? Are we alone the maker of values? Is God really good? Is God personal or impersonal? Does God exist at all?

When stated in such a sequence, these questions boggle the mind. Either the answers are obvious to us and we wonder why anyone would bother to ask such questions, or else we wonder how any of them can be answered with any certainty. If we feel the answers are too obvious to consider, then we have a worldview but have no idea that many others do not share it. We should realize that we live in a pluralistic world. What is obvious to us may be “a lie from hell” to our neighbor next door. If we do not recognize that, we are certainly naive and provincial, and we have much to learn about living in today’s world. Alternatively, if we feel that none of the questions can be answered without cheating or committing intellectual suicide, we have already adopted a sort of worldview—a form of skepticism that in its extreme

form leads to nihilism.

The fact is that we cannot avoid assuming some answers to such questions. We will adopt either one stance or another. Refusing to adopt an explicit worldview will turn out to be itself a worldview or at least a philosophic position. In short, we are caught. So long as we live, we will live either the examined or the unexamined life.

Some First Reflections

Reflecting on this definition, one can soon see that a number of relevant issues are not addressed.

What is the history of the concept itself? Who has used it, how and why? Isn’t the concept so tied to its philosophic origins in German Idealism that it imports into Christianity ideas that undermine the Christian faith? Is there any foundation in Scripture for worldview thinking? (This is addressed in chapter two.)

What is the first question a worldview should answer: What is prime reality? Or, How can anyone know anything at all? That is, which is more primary—ontology or epistemology? (This is addressed in chapter three.)

How is a worldview formed? What is the character of the foundational principles a worldview expresses? Where do they come from? Are they theoretical, pretheoretical, presuppositional or a combination of the three? (This is addressed in chapter four.)

Is a worldview primarily an intellectual system, a way of life or a story? (This is addressed in chapter five.)

What are the public and private dimensions of worldviews? What relevance does this have to their objective and subjective character? What part does behavior play in an assessment of the nature of a person’s worldview? (This is addressed in chapter six.)

If the initial definition of a worldview is inadequate, what more adequate one can be given? (This is addressed in chapter seven.)

What role can worldview thinking play in assessing one’s own worldview and those of others, especially in our pluralistic world? (This is addressed in chapter eight.)