# What Is Worldview?

*The unexamined life is not worth living.*

SOCRATES

Three friends once went to a nature preserve in the African Serengeti and experienced the majestic beauty and diversity of native African wildlife—zebra, elephant, gazelle, lion, and rhinoceros. Each was awestruck by the diversity of creatures observed.

The first friend, John Luther, commented boldly: "The Lord God has definitely created an amazing array of creatures that sing his praises and declare his glory to the ends of the earth, has he not?"

The second friend, Charles Dawkins, immediately responded: "An amazing array of creatures, to be sure. But you err, my good man, in ascribing their existence to a Creator. No, these incredible animals are the result of the unguided, purposeless combination of random mutation and natural selection. We too are the product of a natural evolutionary process. Indeed, we are no different from the creatures that we see."

The third friend, Shirley Chopra, serenely replied: "I pray you both would be enlightened to the full reality disclosed by our brothers and sisters on the nature preserve. For they too bear the same spark of divinity that lies within you and me. Do you not sense them calling to you, seeking to communicate with your spirit? We are all potential gods and goddesses; we just need to awaken to our heightened state and take hold of the possibilities that lie before us."

The three friends see the same animals within the same nature preserve. Thus, they experience the same objective truth. Nevertheless, due to their vastly different perspectives, the three friends see different things. Why? Simply put, John, Charles, and Shirley are experiencing a clash of worldviews. A *worldview,* as we will define it, is *the conceptual lens through which we see, understand, and interpret the world and our place within it*. The three safari friends wear different worldview glasses; thus, although they see the same thing, they actually see the world and their place within it very differently.

In 1999, the blockbuster film *The Matrix* was released. It was followed by two sequels in 2003 and ranks as one of Hollywood's most successful trilogies. *The Matrix* (1999) envisions a hypothetical futuristic scenario where humans have made increasingly sophisticated computers, complete with artificial intelligence. Eventually, the computers develop sufficient independent intelligence to wage war against their human creators. The computers win the battle and subsequently enslave the human race. Humans, however, are generally oblivious to this reality. Why? Because they are trapped in the Matrix. The world that people experience is an illusion—the result of an intricate computer simulation. In the real world, computers breed human beings in order to hook them up to machines and suck the heat and energy out of their bodies. The real world sees human bodies grown in vast fields, hooked up to electrical inputs to harvest their resources, and also linked to visual simulators that treat them to a virtual reality. This virtual reality resembles human life on earth as we know it (in 1999, when the movie was released). The human beings attached to these machines have the vivid experience of working normal jobs, having relationships, and so forth. The virtual reality is so compelling that people do not realize they are being manipulated and deceived.

However, a group of humans who have been awakened to the true nature of reality wage a quiet rebellion against the Matrix. In the movie, the focus is on Thomas Anderson (aka Neo), a computer hacker who questions his reality but has no concept of the true world. Morpheus and Trinity, two "liberated" humans, seek to enlighten Neo. They offer him two pills: one will return him to his virtual reality life; the other will show him what is really real. Neo famously takes the red pill, which opens his eyes to the illusion, and his world is forever changed. He will never look at things the same way again. He used to have one sense of objective reality but now has a very different perspective. Neo now sees the world through a new lens, a new theoretical structure. Basically, he has a new *worldview*.

## 1.1 WELTANSCHAUUNG: THE ORIGIN OF WORLDVIEW THOUGHT

The English term *worldview* is derived from the German *Weltanschauung*, a compound word (*Welt* = world + *Anschauung* = view or outlook) first used by Immanuel Kant to describe an individual's sensory perception of the world. The term spread quickly in German idealist philosophy "to refer to an intellectual conception of the universe from the perspective of a human knower."[1] In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, German philosophers used *Weltanschauung* increasingly for the concept of answering pivotal questions regarding life, the universe, and everything. Very quickly, other German thinkers—

von Ranke (history), Wagner (music), Feuerbach (theology), and von Humboldt (physics)—applied *Weltanschauung* to their own disciplines. Furthermore, *Weltanschauung* was quickly adopted in other European countries, either as a loanword or translated into the local language. The value of worldview language and thought was quickly recognized across disciplines and languages so that "since its inception in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, the notion of *Weltanschauung* has become one of the central intellectual conceptions in contemporary thought and culture."[2]

The roots of worldview thought are in philosophy. Nonetheless, worldview has become integral to other disciplines as well. Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos have been instrumental in applying worldview thought to the natural sciences. Psychologists, including Freud and Jung, have utilized worldview terminology and thought. Worldview has gained importance in sociology, particularly as sociologists like Karl Mannheim and Peter Berger have raised awareness of the pretheoretical construction of individual worldviews.

Other than philosophy, the discipline that has been most influenced by worldview thought is cultural anthropology. In the mid-1900s, Robert Redfield identified culturally prevalent worldviews, arguing that worldview "is the way a people characteristically look outward upon the universe." He distinguished worldview from culture and ethos, suggesting that worldview "is an arrangement of things looked out upon, things in first instance conceived of as existing."[3] Redfield suggested common components of worldview—distinction between self and others, distinction between man and not-man, and view of birth and death. Michael Kearney, writing a generation after Redfield, continues to draw out the importance of worldview for cultural anthropologists. A cultural worldview, according to Kearney, is "a set of images and assumptions about the world" and includes components of self and other, relationship (between self and other humans and nonhumans), classification, causality, and space and time.[4]

Anthropologist Paul Hiebert defines worldview as "the fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives."[5] Hiebert sees cognitive, affective, and moral aspects to worldview and identifies six worldview functions.[6] Hiebert argues that the transformation of the nonbeliever's underlying worldview lies at the core of the missionary task.

The importance of worldview thought in other disciplines cannot obscure its centrality in philosophy. It was particularly prominent in the work of nineteenth-century German philosophers, including Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, Georg Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Worldview thought and development continued in twentieth-century philosophy, with significant contributions from Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Donald Davidson, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Worldview has been particularly prominent in Christian philosophy since the late nineteenth century. James Orr, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Dooyeweerd were instrumental in bringing worldview into the evangelical Christian conversation. For Orr, seeing Christianity as a worldview helps focus philosophical discussion and debate. He argues that disagreement between Christians and non-Christians is not a matter of a particular doctrine or belief but a matter of underlying worldviews. The influence of Orr and other Christian philosophers can be discerned in this text, including James Olthuis, James Sire, Ronald Nash, David Naugle, Michael Goheen, Ken Samples, Arthur Holmes, Andrew Hoffecker, Doug Groothuis, Doug Huffman, Norm Geisler, and Brian Walsh.

## Reflection Questions

1. In the opening story, the three friends see the same animals but different realities. What are some other situations where you think people with different worldviews would interpret reality differently?
2. Why do you think worldview has had so much more prominence in philosophy than in other academic disciplines?