The blind spot in debates on religion. In search of an adequate concept of rationality for assessing the reasonableness of world views

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The main title of my lecture is: "The blind spot in debates on religion". With *debates on religion* I refer to the many recent discussions, mostly between philosophers, on the question of whether religious belief is reasonable, or more generally the question of which worldviews, like theism, atheism or pantheism, can be justified rationally. But what do I mean by that blind spot? Well, I'd better put my cards on the table right away. In my opinion the blind spot is twofold. In the first place there is a lot of discussion and debate about the assumed reasonableness or unreasonableness of various world views without any real thought being spent on a crucial question that precedes it, to wit the question of which *notion of rationality* is actually at stake here. Because obviously theists, atheists, pantheists etc. have to have good reasons for being able to accept their belief systems *rationally.* But the question is what reasons in this context may be qualified as good reasons. When is something allowed to be adduced as a reason? That fundamental question should be asked and answered first.

My study aims to answer exactly that question. In fact, I want to do for world views what we have been doing for scientific theories for a long time now in philosophy of science. Science philosophers think about adequate criteria for a rational assessment of scientific theories. In my opinion this should also be done for world views. There have been philosophers, primarily in the continental tradition, who have reflected on this. My project, however, is analytical in the sense that I want to chart those criteria in a much more detailed way. I am trying to achieve the most accurate explication possible of what it really means to say that a certain world view is justified rationally or not justified rationally. However, I also specifically make use of insights from continental philosophy, such as the work by Charles Taylor, Hannah Arendt, and David Holley.

I stated that the blind spot is twofold. So what is the second aspect? Well, usually it is tacitly assumed that with respect to assessing the rationality of world views we should limit ourselves exclusively to epistemic norms, goals and reasons. Therefore many debates on religion, when addressing the question whether religious or secular belief is reasonable, only focus on epistemic norms, goals and reasons. In that way the concept of rationality is imperceptibly *reduced* to merely epistemic rationality, or it is assumed imperceptibly that for assessing the rationality of religious belief we have to separate epistemic rationality from practical rationality at any cost.

In my study I want to show that this is unjustified. In order to evaluate a world view rationally, we should enter into the equation not only epistemic norms, goals and reasons but also non-epistemic, in other words practical norms, goals and reasons, like 'existential liveability', 'possibilities for self-realization', and 'contribution to moral growth'.

The thing is that choosing a particular world view is not only a matter of a theoretical choice. It is rather an existential answer to an unavoidable existential question, to wit

the existential issue that none of us can escape, of how we should live our lives as human beings in this world. Sooner or later each one of us is faced with existential questions, and we have no alternative but to deal with them one way or the other in the course of our lives. For life, if it is to be lived at all, has to be lived *in a particular manner*. If we base ourselves on this human condition, we also understand that the concept of 'rationality' in the case of evaluating the reasonableness of world views cannot be interpreted completely epistemically. Assessing the reasonableness of world views correlates with the question of *why* and *to what end* people have belief systems anyway, so with the concrete *goal* that people pursue with them. And that goal is most definitely not purely epistemic. Hence the question whether a particular belief system is rational cannot be addressed exclusively epistemically either.

In short, the most adequate *model of rationality* for evaluating the reasonableness of world views demands that both epistemic and non-epistemic or practical norms are taken into consideration. It is rarely acknowledged that good reasons for rationally embracing a world view can be both epistemic and practical in nature (and even have to be such). I really find this remarkable because even scientific research, where epistemic reasons are clearly decisive, is not insensitive to practical reasons. For instance, the fact that a certain scientific theory ‘works’, that is to say it enables us to make useful predictions, is rightly a good reason to take that theory scientifically seriously. And also the ‘straightforwardness’ or ‘simplicity’ of a theory can constitute an excellent rational grounds for scientists to accept it.

As soon as we realize that the epistemic *as well as practical* reasons we have for our world views are relevant to the question of whether we are *rational* in accepting it, it can become clear why a lot of criticism regarding religion (like the formal Bayesian approach by Herman Philipse) is rather pointless for assessing the rational acceptability of religious belief. Bayesian approaches only pay attention to epistemic reasons, and thus they ignore the relevant practical reasons that people may have for embracing a particular view of the world. So formal epistemic criticism regarding religion, in evaluating the *rationality of belief systems*, uses a flawed concept of rationality. The concrete human condition under which people reach (and have to reach) their existential convictions is completely ignored.

So when in addition to epistemic goals also practical goals constitute an indispensable part of any assessment of the rationality of religious belief, this could radically change the current debates on religion. Therefore a new opening in this debate comes into being when we first ask the question what it *means* to embrace a view of the world rationally, and then understand that in addition to epistemic norms and reasons, also practical norms and reasons play a role in the evaluation of the reasonableness of religious or secular belief.

I will now elaborate this thesis a little further. When Martin Heidegger discusses man’s existential condition, he states that as human beings “we are thrown”. It has always been the case that we have been involved in reality happening to us. We can never extricate ourselves from it. From this ‘thrown’ condition we try to find guidance by

orienting ourselves in our everyday environments. We do this by means of interpretation; after all, humans are interpreting beings. Our existence is primarily a matter of interpretation: interpretation of ourselves, the other, and the world we live in. All of our thinking, experiencing and acting therefore is always interpretive thinking, experiencing and acting. By means of interpreting ourselves, the other and the world, we apply orientation and structure to our lives. Thus each one of us develops a world view, a particular guiding frame of reference to help us to understand, and to be able to handle, the world we have been thrown into.

Each world view therefore has a narrative character. This is necessary in order to make orientation in life possible. Nobody can do without a narrative interpretation framework. If we did not embrace a philosophy of life, we would not be able to achieve *unity* in our lives. We would not be able to *create an identity*, which is crucial to each human being. We simply need a particular life vision for shaping our identity, for self-realization and for developing as a person.

This is why from an early age, we all construct our world views almost without noticing by interpreting reality as we deal with it. But there comes a moment when we become aware of the fact that people can have very different attitudes towards the given. Various alternative views of the world present themselves. One can for instance adopt a world view according to which everything eventually comes down to inanimate matter. Here the world is understood as having emerged from purely lifeless and entirely random material. The person believes there is nothing outside visible material reality. But you can also perceive the world as having arisen from conscious spirit. Then everything is regarded as being animate as well as having been created by a divine power. These two world views compare to one another as two totally different perspectives on that which is. And there are more life perspectives in addition to these two. Each of these manners of orientation is characterized by a specific mental focus and way of experiencing, either by that to which someone is sensitive, or is not sensitive, by that to which someone is open, or is not open, by that amount of reality that reaches someone, or does not reach someone.

So at some point in his or her life, almost without noticing, every human being will start to search for a world view that suits him or her best. This is inevitable; we have no alternative. In this connection Charles Taylor calls a view of the world a *best account* and David Holley Taylor calls a world view a *life-orienting story*. Mikael Stenmark uses the term *a view of life* and others, more adequately in my opinion, mention *a way of life*.

A philosophy of life therefore constitutes a manner of perceiving and handling the world. It is the unifying perspective from which someone understands and shapes his or her life. In addition to a theoretical image of the nature of the world that transcends the empirically observable (a *metaphysical picture*), a person's world view also always includes a practical vision of the good life, a view of what we should do and attempt in this world in order to lead a purposeful life. Views of the world therefore are always *existential collections* of both theoretical convictions and practical rules of guidelines.

As such, every world view provides answers to the great questions, such as the question regarding the origin of the cosmos and man's place in it. And views of the world, like Christianity or secular humanism, do not only provide answers to the question of what we can know about the nature of the world, but also of what we should do in this life and what we have a right to hope for. The same thing goes for all other religious and secular belief systems. Therefore world views are *regulative* comprehensive frameworks for life.

All in all, a philosophy of life is not a scientific theory. Each one of us constructs their world view by practical interaction with the world and by interpretation of our experiences interacting with our surroundings, rather than by means of scientific theories. The choice in favour of a particular world view for understanding ourselves and the world we live in thus always existentially precedes any form of scientific reflection. We implicitly or explicitly embrace a world view on the basis of everything we see, learn, and experience in our lives, rather than on the basis of formulating and testing scientific hypotheses.

This however does not imply that every view of the world is equally adequate or inadequate as any other one. For a belief system can be rationally legitimate to a greater or a lesser degree. Therefore we can question the rational justification of a particular philosophy of life. Assessing the reasonableness of a world view, like theism or atheism, however is not a positively scientific activity.

Views of the world, as was said earlier, are not scientific theories, but rather practical-cognitive comprehensive frameworks. This is because a world view is a matter of not only a *vita contemplativa* but also a *vita activa*. Views of the world are existential collections in which the entire human condition is at stake. In a world view one's full humanity is involved and all of our powers are challenged, like our actions, our reason, our deepest experiences, our emotions, as well as our intuitions. When we want to assess a view of the world the strict research methods of the positive academic disciplines are therefore definitely not suitable, but for our purpose we have to base ourselves on an inclusive concept of rationality in which, apart from sensory perception and the results of empirical scientific research, also other grounds are put into play, such as legitimate basic beliefs, intuitions, existential experiences, phenomenological and hermeneutical reflections, thought experiments, a priori lines of thought, sagacity that was gained in the course of one's life, and practical considerations.

The kind of rationality that is needed to evaluate views of the world thus differs fundamentally from the type of rationality that is in use in the academic disciplines. But what then are the rational assessment criteria to answer the question whether a particular world view is, or is not, sufficiently rationally legitimized? Well, in any case a rationally acceptable world view should be practically useable and liveable, should be internally consistent, should show a strong degree of coherence and unity, and should include a wide, holistic *explanatory scope* in which the origin of the cosmos, of life, of consciousness and of moral values, as well as a large number of other phenomena of various different qualitative natures, can be understood and accounted for. An adequate

world view therefore is a way of interacting with the world that clarifies, is formative, and puts things into a framework of meaning.

But that is not the only thing. The collection of considerations which is involved in a rational assessment of a world view includes the questions of whether a worldview (i) has sufficient power of expression, in other words is able to inspire, motivate and animate, (ii) is practically liveable, that is it does not lead to unliveable performative contradictions between what a person believes and what he or she actually does (such as a nihilist who in her concrete life cannot help considering voluntary murder condemnable, or who despite her nihilism in practice can only believe that her life has meaning and significance), (iii) fills deep generally human existential needs, (iv) does justice to our common sense and our deepest human intuitions, (v) meets intellectual virtues like simplicity, coherence, plausibility and the power to account for things, (vi) contributes to both our understanding of ourselves and our understanding of universal human experiences, like moral and esthetic experiences, (vii) is congenial to a person's own nature, and (viii) contributes to one's desire and ability to remain true to certain significant personal experiences and life determining occasions (like someone who has lost all faith in humanity, spends all his time stealing, and then is suddenly confronted with a victim who could easily denounce him but chooses not to, and instead shows him complete understanding; or a criminal who has no alternative but to review his world view when one day he really perceives the suffering in the other person's face). The first six evaluation criteria are inter-subjective. But the final two criteria only apply to the private context. And there is nothing wrong with that. When addressing the question whether a given world view is or is not rational, the point is always unavoidably also the question of: 'Rational to whom?', 'In which situation?, 'and 'With what goal?'.

All in all, we therefore assess the reasonableness of a world view by investigating to what extent it structures the world around us in a meaningful way, to what extent it can guide us in the lives we live concretely, the measure in which it does justice to our intrinsic needs and helps us to deal with existential matters, and possibly also the measure in which it contributes to moral development or more generally 'the good life'.

This type of rationality for evaluating world views is no less or no more rational than that of the academic disciplines. It is simply different, although there are also enough similarities and the difference is in fact only gradual because as we have seen, practical aspects also play an important part in the academic disciplines.

Still there is definitely a different way of being rational at stake here, which applies within a different context, and which is at least equally important to our lives. Indeed, based on the criteria mentioned above, one world view may be more rational or less rational than another one. Hence what is relevant is always *the degree of* reasonableness, rather than the search for absolute proofs or absolute refutations of a given world view. Apart from that, world views can change over time due to new insights and experiences. World views can be subject to internal development.

Due to the third aspect of criterion (v) (plausibility), it is important that a world view be logically compatible with science. A world view cannot clash with the results of generally accepted scientific research. Because we are still talking about a form of rationality *concerned with truth*. This is in no way diminished by the fact that this form of rationality takes into account not only theoretical but also practical aspects. Also in scientific research, as was said before, the practical dimension plays an important role. A strict separation between the practical and theoretical aspects of our rational deliberations therefore rarely contributes to an adequate evaluation of our judgments, not in science, and even less so where evaluating philosophies of life is the issue. We should rather avoid over-simplified contradictions between theoretical and practical reason, between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, as Hannah Arendt also argued in the previous century. These two aspects of human reason - the theoretical and the practical - are linked, not only in scientific studies and in our world views, but really almost always, in an inseparable way.