

# MEANING OF LIFE AND WORLDVIEW DELIBERATION

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## 1. Introduction

What is the meaning of life? This comprehensive life-shaping question is hardly ever raised in academic research and teaching. Yet, being able to cogently reflect on what is meaningful, significant, worthwhile, and valuable to pursue in life is indispensable for personal growth and development. It's thus not surprising that the existential question of what is the meaning of life has been raised and struggled with numerous times throughout the history of mankind. It's simply unavoidable. We as human beings cannot else but ask ourselves this deep question. Precisely because – as I shall argue for in this paper – the inescapable question of life's meaning cannot be answered by purely scientific means, philosophy has no choice but to step in and take responsibility in at least trying to shed light on how to approach and answer it. It thus seems to me that it is both an epistemological and ethical responsibility of philosophy to deal with this profound question. Without doing so philosophy would not be true to its *telos* and origin. As shall become more clear in what follows, the main reason for why science cannot answer this grand question is that in order to approach it a more much holistic or inclusive model of rational deliberation is required. The proper object of evaluation in the case of reflecting on the meaning

of life is not a scientific theory or set of such theories. The proper object of deliberation here is what I shall refer to as – to borrow a famous term of the historian and hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey - *weltanschauung* or worldview (Naugle 2002). I will have more to say about what is to be understood by a worldview in the rest of the paper. For now let me just say that a worldview or *weltanschauung* is a perspective on or a mental model of reality. It is the way in which the whole of reality is conceptualized or apprehended. Worldviews could be both religious (e.g., Taoism, Christianity or Hinduism) or secular (e.g., naturalism, scientism or materialism). The relationship between the collection of prevailing worldviews throughout human history and possible answers to the question of the meaning of life seems to me both *prima* and *ultimate facie* straightforward. For each specific given worldview, whether it is religious such as Christianity or secular such as physicalism, entails a unambiguous answer to this question. If, say, physicalism or materialism is true, life has no objective meaning, so that the answer would be that there simply is no meaning to life. But if, say, theism is true, the meaning of life is ultimately grounded in Gods purposes for mankind.

Now, a worldview includes a broad picture of the origin and nature of reality. People inevitably shape their lives by adopting some type of worldview, such as humanism, theism or naturalism. And they do this either explicitly or implicitly. Adopting some kind of worldview enables us to attribute meaning to our ordinary and existential experiences. A worldview guides our lives and informs the way in which we understand ourselves and the world that surrounds us. In the first part of this paper my aim is to explicate the peculiar nature, function, and structure of worldviews. How should the notion of a worldview more precisely be defined? Can we identify its concrete purpose or purposes? What are the constitutive elements or components of a worldview and how do the building blocks of a worldview mutually relate?

For a long time philosophers of science such as Rudolf Carnap, Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Imre Lakatos, Bas van Fraassen, and Ian Hacking have been developing criteria for the rational evaluation and epistemic comparison of established scientific theories, such as quantum mechanics and relativity theory in physics, genetics and evolution theory in biology, and market equilibrium and price theory in micro economics. Within philosophy of science this has resulted in a wide range of fine grained proposals on how different scientific theories should be rationally compared with respect to their epistemic strength. When it comes down to the rational evaluation of worldviews many philosophers who embrace scientific naturalism (e.g., Philipse 2012; Rosenberg 2011; Ladyman & Ross 2007) take it that worldviews are nothing more or less than scientific theories and should therefore be rationally evaluated and compared to each other by purely scientific means. That is to say, the same criteria used to assess scientific theories should be used to assess worldviews. These philosophers are advocates of *scientism*, here understood as the normative claim that the mathematical and empirical methods of the sciences (predominantly physics) *and only those* must be used by all other disciplines in academia, including philosophy and the humanities. One could characterize or even define an adherent of scientism *in this sense* as someone who simply equates worldviews with scientific theories. As I will argue in this paper, this equalization is simply untenable. Worldviews are not scientific theories. They may *include* such theories but should never be equated with those. The key underlying problem I see is that advocates of purely scientific approaches to the evaluation of worldviews tend to ignore a crucial preliminary question that should never be ignored. Before we engage in the rational assessment and comparison of worldviews we first must ask ourselves what *model of rationality* we should use for the rational evaluation of a worldview and the rational comparison of that worldview with other alternative worldviews. And if we do this

genuinely it becomes quite clear that we have to use a different, more encompassing model of rationality than the mathematical and empirical centric model of the natural sciences. Hence, in what follows I develop a comprehensive, more inclusive *model of rationality* that is specifically suited to evaluate the reasonableness of worldviews and rationally compare them against each other. I argue that such an evaluation must simultaneously take into account *cognitive-theoretical* as well as *existential-practical* and *aesthetic-affective* reasons people may have for their worldviews. I further develop this idea by identifying specific and concrete *criteria* for the rational evaluation of worldviews. In doing so, I deploy insights from key philosophers both from the continental and analytical tradition who have been working in the same area or in related areas, such as Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, David Holley and Mikael Stenmark.

Instead of pursuing a very generic, abstract and detached approach I develop the model and the criteria from out a specific and concrete contextual question, namely the question of *whether religious belief can be rational*. This question will inform the way my account is developed and presented. It is precisely this question that lurks in the background of many scientific arguments for treating worldviews merely as scientific theories. By bringing this perspective to the forefront below and taking it as my main point of departure, the more inclusive model of rationality and corresponding criteria for worldview comparison I propose can be more plausibly developed.

## **2. Positivistic and scientific challenges to religious belief**

Can religious belief be rational? This question has been the subject of many public debates and scholarly discussions amongst philosophers since at least the days of early 20<sup>th</sup> century logical empiricism or logical positivism. Following Stenmark (1995) and Philipse (2012) I discuss a

number of challenges to religious belief. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century positivists maintained that a statement is meaningful just in case it can be conceptually (analytically) or empirically verified. They called this principle the *verification criterion* of meaning. Now, since, as they argued, religious claims are neither analytic nor empirical, these claims must be rejected as meaningless. So, on this account of positivism, religious statements such as “God exists” or “God doesn’t exist” are not even false. They are just senseless or meaningless. They lack any cognitive content (Stenmark 1995; Philipse 2012).

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, started to realize themselves that the verification criterion of meaning is itself in fact deeply problematic. For, since this criterion cannot be analytically proven nor empirically verified, it is according to its own terms meaningless. In short, the verification criterion of the early positivists is self-refuting. Moreover, it became clear that it is not possible to specify the verification conditions of many theories in the natural sciences either. But then even the natural sciences themselves are not able to satisfy the verification criterion of meaning. Accepting the verification criterion to render religious belief meaningless thus entails that even the natural sciences deal with many meaningless propositions, which is an absurd conclusion. Surely, the natural sciences are not irrational. If a practice having such high epistemic standards would be irrational, then all our human epistemic endeavours would be irrational. The latter is a sceptic conclusion too strong to reasonably accept. Therefore the verification criterion cannot be used to reject religious belief as cognitively meaningless.

The problem does not go away if we replace the verification criterion of meaning by Popper’s famous falsification criterion according to which a non-falsifiable scientific theory is unjustified or even meaningless. First, this criterion is itself not falsifiable and thus self-refuting. Second, we

know since Thomas Kuhn's seminal *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that many profound scientific theories are not falsifiable, so that this criterion is too strong as well. It will not only render many religious beliefs untenable, but also many well established scientific theories such as evolution theory or string theory. That is to say, it proves (or better: rejects) too much.

Nevertheless, in the last decennia a new updated challenge to the rationality of religious belief has been put forward by philosophers of religion. It may be called the *scientific challenge* to religious belief (Stenmark 1995; Philipse 2012). On this challenge religious beliefs are not taken to be meaningless. Religious statements do have cognitive content. They are surely not senseless as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century positivists maintained. Still, in order to be considered rational, religious beliefs must fulfill the same *or at least similar* standards of rationality as scientific beliefs. And since religious beliefs are taken not to fulfil the same or similar standards as science, they are considered to be irrational and thus should be abandoned after all.

One may think that philosophers who embrace scientism, such as James Ladyman, Alex Rosenberg and others, accept this scientific challenge to religious belief. However, this is in fact not the case. For scientism is the view that science and only science itself provides us with genuine insight into the nature of reality. But then on scientism religious beliefs must meet *exactly the same* standards as the sciences in order to count as rational. It is not enough for the rationality standards of religious beliefs to be merely *similar* to those of the sciences. Hence scientism leads to an even stronger challenge for religious belief.

The problem of scientism though, is that it is self-refuting as well. For the claim that science and only science can provide us with genuine insight into the nature of reality cannot be established by purely scientific means. It is a philosophical statement and not a scientific result. But then scientism entails that we should not accept scientism, which renders the view deeply problematic

and therefore rationally untenable. Apart from it being self-referential incoherent there are many other problems with scientism as well (de Ridder, Peels and van Woudenberg forthcoming). I will not go into those problems here.

Yet, the earlier mentioned weaker variant of the scientific challenge is not self-refuting in this way. It has been put forward by many philosophers who do not see themselves as strict adherents of scientism, such as for example in the Netherlands the atheistic philosopher Herman Philipse. In his book *God in the Age of Science* he characterizes religious belief as a vice since it doesn't meet the weaker variant of the scientific challenge. It is this challenge that has been presented by many non-religious philosophers to their religious philosophical adversaries. And since it is not obviously self-refuting, many religious or more particularly theistic philosophers felt inclined to accept this challenge. They subsequently tried to meet it by showing that the essential beliefs of theism, such as that God exists and that God created the cosmos, do in fact fulfill the same, *or at least similar* standards of rationality as scientific beliefs. A comprehensive scholarly example of such a project can be found in the work of theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne (Swinburne 2004). Note that the fact that such a project can be found in Swinburne's work does not entail that he does not endorse or prefer alternative approaches to rationally evaluate worldviews.

Swinburne considers bare or mere theism and reconstructs this generic theistic worldview as an integrated set of essential propositions, such as 'God exists', 'God created the world', 'God is good', etc. The propositions themselves are defined by Swinburne as clearly and as unambiguous as possible. In this way he renders or reconstructs bare theism as a (large scale) theory.

It is not the objective of Swinburne to prove God's existence beyond doubt. Surely not. For that is clearly impossible. The existence of God cannot be infallibly proven. His aim is to show that the available empirical and other scientific evidence renders God's existence *sufficiently likely* or

sufficiently probable. At least likely or probable enough to rationally accept bare theism as the correct worldview. His epistemic project is thus fully in accordance with the weaker variant of the scientific challenge according to which worldview deliberation should take place by using epistemic methods sufficiently similar to those of the natural sciences, namely by treating the above mentioned set of theistic propositions as a large scale theory that needs to be properly supported by empirical evidence or other evidence *sufficiently similar to* scientific evidence. The evidence offered must be systematically described in such a way that it is entirely publicly accessible. That is to say, it should not be confined to theistic believers alone. Examples of such pieces of evidence include, but are not limited to, the origin of the cosmos, the fine-tuning of the natural constants and initial conditions of the cosmos, and the fact that the cosmos is ruled by a limited number of uniform, stable and simple laws. These generally accepted scientific facts can be readily accepted both by adherents and adversaries of theism.

The question of whether bare or mere theism can be rationally accepted as a worldview is then statistically answered by applying the probability framework of Bayesian statistics. Swinburne aims to qualitatively determine the *posterior probability* of theism given the available evidence. The posterior probability is defined here as the product of the prior probability of theism and its explanatory power. He wants to show that the posterior probability is large enough to render theism epistemically rational. The debate between opponents and proponents of theism is then about whether the posterior probability of theism is large enough to render the theistic worldview rational. Swinburne purports to show that the posterior probability of theism is larger than fifty percent, so that theism is rationally justified and can be accepted. The opponents argue to the contrary that this probability is lower than fifty percent.

All this is largely or broadly in accordance to generally accepted scientific procedures. Theism is treated as a large scale theory of reality and Swinburne aims to render this theory rational by appealing to a well-known probabilistic framework that fits the natural sciences. The hidden assumption here is obviously that theism as a worldview must be considered analogous to a scientific explanatory hypothesis. Theism is nothing more or less than a large scale theory that explains why there is something at all rather than nothing and why the world as a whole is as it is. Swinburne's defense of bare theism as a worldview can thus indeed be properly understood as an attempt to meet the weak variant of the scientific challenge. For the Bayesian method used is similar enough to scientific reasoning. But is it the right approach for the specific *context* of orientating oneself in the world and interpreting and guiding one's concrete life? Take someone with proper functioning cognitive faculties who wants to engage in an intellectually responsible process of deliberation to select a worldview for orientating herself in this world and guiding her life. Is the Bayesian method utilized by Swinburne and others apt for this concrete context? In what follows I shall argue that it is not.

Note however that it is not the case that Swinburne's attempt is not an adequate attempt to meet the scientific challenge. For it clearly is. The problem is that the scientific challenge itself is actually deeply misconceived and should be rejected. For the aforementioned concrete context of life orientation and guidance we need a quite different approach to the rational evaluation and comparative assessment of both religious and secular worldviews.

### **3. Towards a more inclusive approach**

The kind of detached dispassionate thinking involved in the scientific challenge to religious belief and the attempts of Swinburne and other religious philosophers to meet this challenge is in

fact the wrong way to decide whether such life-shaping and life-transforming convictions as religious beliefs can be rational. Formal epistemic methods distract us from the concrete nature and function of religious belief (Vidal 2012; Holley 2010; Stenmark 1995; Taylor 1989). The matter should not be approached strictly theoretically. What's needed is a much more engaged type of deliberation. That is to say, we need a model of rationality that is particularly suited for the specific nature of the practice of religious belief. More specifically, belief in God is to be understood as something that is not only epistemically relevant for the religious believer, but should also be considered as something that functions to guide the believer's whole life. And both goals cannot be separated. The question to answer in the case of the rational evaluation of theism is thus *not only* whether it's true or epistemically justified to believe that God's exists. The adequate question to answer is whether there is an alternative worldview that fares much better than theism in being plausibly true *and at the same time* being able to practically and affectively guide people's lives. For one way or another, people have to guide their concrete life and therefore simply need some feasible worldview for doing so. As David Holley points out in his book *Meaning and Mystery*:

“To think of God solely as an explanatory hypothesis, posited to explain general features of the world, we end up talking about things that bear little relation to the kind of belief religious people actually hold or to the considerations that actually convince them of the religious beliefs.” (Holley 2010)

Religious belief originates in a context in which we acquire a life-shaping narrative that enables us to understand and navigate the world and to understand and form ourselves. Such a *view of*

*life or worldview* helps us to orient and guide ourselves. It is crucial for forming our identity and enables us to discern what's valuable, worthwhile, important and relevant to pursue in our lives. In short, worldviews, life orienting stories, help us to render our world meaningful and livable. As human beings we therefore have no choice but to adopt some kind of life orienting narrative. That is to say, we cannot else but embrace some religious or secular worldview to guide ourselves in our lives and render the world we live in meaningful. But then a disengaged, formal epistemic approach (such as Bayesian probability theory) to the question of whether religious belief is rational indeed suffers from a substantial *blind spot*.

In fact, we can identify four aspects of the blind spot that Herman Philipse, Alex Rosenberg and a number of other non-religious philosophers face when they utilize Bayesianism or another formal epistemic method to argue that religious belief is unreasonable or irrational, or intellectually unjustified, irresponsible or unwarranted.

First, it is often presumed that religious believers are committed to some worldview, whereas non-believers simply withhold judgment. But, as Mikael Stenmark has rightly pointed out in his book *Rationality in Science, Religion and Daily Life*, this thesis is false. Disagreement between religious believers and non-believers involve substantial positive claims on both sides. Non-believers have their own 'view of life' consisting of substantial secular beliefs, such as 'there is nothing beyond the material realm' or 'humans are the measure of all things'. Therefore it is more appropriate to make a proper distinction between religious *and secular* worldviews, and a distinction between religious believers and secular believers. Both have beliefs on the nature of humans, the world and the good. So the key question becomes more broadly which religious *or secular* worldviews can be rational.

Second, formal Bayesian cases for the rationality of a religious or secular worldview reduce the worldview to just a limited set of theoretical and factual propositions that have to be rationally justified. An example of such theoretical factual proposition would be the proposition ‘God exists’ or ‘God created the cosmos’ in the case of Christianity. Everything else about the worldview is ignored until this set of essential propositions is rationally grounded. But this is inadequate. For the proper subject of rational evaluation of a worldview should not be a limited essential set of theoretical factual propositions. Instead, it should be the entire integrated collection of theoretical *and practical* beliefs of the worldview in question. For worldviews are existential wholes of both factual theoretical claims and normative practical claims. As such a worldview is an integrated framework for life orientation that cannot be split in parts for rational evaluation. It can only be rationally evaluated *as an existential and integrated whole*. Though within a worldview factual theoretical claims can surely be distinguished from normative claims, we should *for the concrete context of* orienting in the world and navigating through life never consider one set of claims in isolation from the other if we want to adequately assess whether the worldview in question is intellectually reasonable. To answer the question of whether religious beliefs of actual people in their concrete lives are rational, the focus should be on their complete life-orienting narrative and not just on a limited (theoretical factual) part of it.

Third, as earlier mentioned, advocates of formal purely epistemic approaches for the evaluation of the rationality of religious beliefs often entirely ignore a crucial question that should be asked *before* starting to assess the rationality of some given worldview, namely: what concept of rationality is religiously relevant? What model of rationality should be invoked for the specific context of adopting a worldview as a life-orienting narrative? Should it indeed be similar to the

model of rationality used in science? Or do we need a different model of rationality for the assessment of religious and secular life-orienting beliefs?

Religious and secular believers, such as theists and atheists, do after all have to have good reasons for their respective religious or secular faiths in order to be able to accept them as *rational*. But then the prior question becomes what may count as rational reasons in this specific context. When may something be introduced as a proper reason for accepting some worldview? In other words, what is the proper concept or standard of rationality in order to assess and compare guiding views of life? It is this fundamental question that must be posed and answered first, before we can proceed to evaluate whether some given religious or secular worldview can be rationally accepted.

So, what's an appropriate answer to this crucial prior question? Which notion or model of rationality is especially suited for the specific context of evaluating and comparing life-orienting worldviews? What's needed here is to do for views of life what philosophers of science have been doing for a long time for scientific theories. Philosophers of science think about adequate criteria for the rational assessment of scientific theories. The same must be done for religious and secular worldviews. For as I have mentioned earlier, worldviews are not to be conflated with scientific theories.

An account of rationality that is relevant for this context must take into account the character, nature and function of the beliefs of the practice in question (Stenmark 1995, Holley 2010, Taylor 1989). We thus need to address the question what a life-guiding worldview really is. Why do people embrace life-orienting narratives? We need to understand what function worldviews have in our lives. What if we cannot meaningfully live our human lives without embracing some

worldview to orient ourselves, interpret the world and navigate through life? That is to say, what if having a worldview is simply essential for human life so that we cannot withhold judgement? Rationality must also be understood realistically here. It has to be sensitive to what human beings in their lives can reasonably be expected to do (Stenmark 1995).

In short, a proper account of rationality for a certain practice needs to be *practice-oriented*, to borrow a crucial term from Mikael Stenmark, that is, it needs to make substantial contact with the practice in question. We must be sensitive to what is going on in a practice, such as taking notice of its aims and activities. However, this all does not imply that we cannot establish from the outside of a practice proper criteria for the rational assessment of those activities and aims. There is still a reflective basis independent of the practice from which we can critically assess its rationality and propose adequate evaluation criteria for it.

My aim then is to identify as precisely as possible the relevant criteria for rational acceptance of a religious or secular worldview. That is to say, I aim to develop a precise account of how to assess whether a specific religious or secular worldview can be rationally justified. It's not that such an account and corresponding criteria have not been provided earlier. Both philosophers from the continental and analytical tradition have contributed here, such as Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, David Holley, and Mikael Stenmark. It's more that I want to explicate and articulate these criteria as detailed, precise and unambiguous as possible. More on that will follow below.

I stated that the blind spot has four aspects. What is the fourth aspect? To bring this to the foreground I closely follow Stenmark's way of articulating the point. But it can be found in Holley, Taylor, Arendt, and many other philosophers reflecting on worldview deliberation as well. It is the implicit assumption that the only reason for adopting a *belief* may be an *epistemic*

reason, that is, a reason that renders the belief likely true. So, it is thought, beliefs simply cannot be rationally justified on the basis of a non-epistemic or practical reason. Only epistemic reasons count for rational belief justification.

As a consequence, it is tacitly assumed that we must limit ourselves exclusively to epistemic norms, goals, and reasons while assessing the rationality of a worldview. So, when dealing with the question of whether religious or secular life-orienting narratives can be rational, most if not all philosophers only look at epistemic norms, goals, and reasons. Hence, rationality as a concept is reduced without much ado to purely *epistemic rationality* (Stenmark 1995). It is simply accepted that we have to ignore completely the practical dimension of rationality when assessing the rationality of religious or secular faith.

But this is incorrect. To assess whether a given religious or secular worldview is rational, we need to invoke *simultaneously* epistemic or truth-conductive norms, goals and reasons and non-epistemic or practical norms, goals, and reasons. Examples of practical criteria include for example the extent to which the worldview helps us to deal with our unavoidable existential challenges and longings, and provides us with concrete practical guidance in life. Other practical criteria refer to the existential quality of life induced by the worldview (e.g., with respect to wellbeing or disclosing significance and purpose through meaningful practices), the possibilities the view of life offers for meaningful self-realization and actualization, and the contribution of the worldview to personal moral growth.

We need to take into account practical criteria as well for the very reason that the choice for living a certain worldview is not only theoretical. Such a choice is to be understood as an existential answer to an unavoidable existential question that no one can escape, namely how we should live as human beings in this world. For life – if it is to be lived at all – must be lived *in a*

*particular way*. Each of us is confronted sooner or later with existential questions, concerns, and longings, and we have to answer and respond to them in one way or another. This is inevitable. We cannot avoid asking and responding to existential questions, either explicitly or implicitly in the way we choose to live.

Existential questions thus arise because of the kind of humans we are. These questions are asked by concrete human agents who are prepared to act and participate. We cannot else but ask ourselves what to do in life. But then it follows that existential questions have a clear practical component. A proper answer to them cannot be only theoretical. It always contains a major practical dimension.

So, given our human condition of inescapably seeking answers to existential questions, the relevant model for the rational assessment of life-orienting worldviews simply cannot be limited to epistemic criteria only. Indeed, the question of how to rationally assess worldviews is deeply connected with the question *why* and *for what purpose* people embrace a certain worldview at all, that is to say, with the concrete *objective* that people aim at in entrusting some worldview. And since that goal is certainly not purely epistemic, the question of whether a worldview is rational cannot be approached merely epistemically either (Stenmark 1995, Holley 2010).

To conclude, the most adequate *model of rationality* for evaluating the rationality of worldviews demands that both epistemic and non-epistemic or practical norms are taken into account.

It is actually remarkable that it is so often ignored that good reasons for rationally embracing some worldview can be also non-epistemic in nature. For even science, a practice dominated by epistemic goals, is not ignorant to practical reasons for theory adoption. For example, the fact that a certain scientific theory “works”, that is to say, allows us to make useful predictions, is often considered by scientists as a rational reason for accepting the theory in question, even

though a theory's usability is strictly speaking a practical and thus non-epistemic reason. Or take simplicity. Scientists prefer the simpler scientific theory above the more complex ones, even though it can be argued that simplicity is primarily a practical and not an epistemic virtue. Given that even in science non-epistemic reasons inform theory choice, it should not surprise us that they are in fact vital for worldview evaluation.

As soon as we see that both epistemic *and practical* reasons are relevant for answering the question of whether a religious worldview can be *rational*, it becomes clear why formal Bayesian epistemic approaches, such as for example the Dutch atheistic philosopher Herman Philipse pursues in his book *God in the Age of Science*, is of no use for properly assessing the rationality of religious faith.

Precisely because they focus only on epistemic reasons, they neglect the relevant practical reasons people have for embracing a certain worldview. They thus work with a deficient model of rationality. The concrete situation in which people must arrive at their existential beliefs is entirely disregarded. Hence, Bayesian epistemic approaches such as those of Herman Philipse are in fact *religiously* irrelevant. That is to say, it is not relevant for the concrete context of orienting in the world, and interpreting and guiding one's life.

#### **4. The notion of a worldview explicated**

To advance the debate we should therefore *for the specific context of* navigating one's concrete life move away from exclusively formal theoretical epistemic approaches, and, as I mentioned earlier, work towards a more adequate inclusive model of rationality for assessing the rationality of religious and secular worldviews. But how would such a more relevant model look like for the context in question? To answer this question I would like to take a step back and approach the

issue from a slightly different angle. For what's needed first is to explicate more precisely the notion of a worldview.

When reflecting on the existential condition of mankind in his monumental book *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger famously proclaims that as human beings we are thrown in this world. We are always already in the world. This being-in-the-world is an inescapable condition of humanity.

We are always already involved in a world that is constantly developing. It is impossible for us to occupy an absolute point of view from which we can objectively perceive ourselves and the world in which we are thrown. Such an *Archimedean point* is for us inaccessible. We can never take a position outside our lifeworld. So we need to orient ourselves *within* the world in which we are thrown.

We do this by interpreting: the human being is an interpretative being. Our existence is primarily a matter of interpretation: the interpretation of ourselves, the other, and the world in which we live. All our thinking, experiencing and acting, is thus always already inevitably a human interpretative thinking, experiencing, and acting. By interpreting ourselves, others, and the world, we bring unity, direction and structure into our lives. Therefore, inescapably, each of us develops some worldview during his or her life, that is to say, a guiding frame of reference for being able to understand and cope with the world in which we are thrown (Vidal 2012; Naugle 2002; Griffioen 2012; Hiebert 2008; Holley 2010; Stenmark 1995). By a worldview we render our lifeworld intelligible. Each worldview therefore must have a narrative character. This is essential to make orientation in our lives possible. No one can dispense with such a narrative frame of reference. As Charles Taylor has famously and as I take it convincingly argued for, without a view of life we would not be able to live an integrated and coherent life. We would not

be able to form a personal identity, which is crucial for every human being (Taylor 1989). We simply need a certain vision for life to render our world meaningful and worthwhile, and to develop and grow ourselves as human beings. Even those who claim not to have a view of life implicitly have a *de facto* one, as becomes clear once they are being asked about their basic commitments and attitudes towards life. Moreover, even a “fragmented” or “eclectic” view of the world is a worldview. So, for example postmodernism or pluralism are worldviews as well. From childhood on, we are developing our life-guiding worldview almost unconsciously by our interpretative engagement with reality. There comes a time, however, when we come to realize that we can relate to the given in many different ways. Alternative worldviews present themselves to us.

For example, one can adopt a materialistic worldview according to which everything that exists is composed of atomic material particles. The whole of reality is understood as having been arisen from unconscious lifeless matter. It is believed that there is nothing beyond the material realm. But the world can also be understood as having emerged from a conscious mind. Here the world is experienced as inspirited and as the creation of something divine. Both worldviews relate to each other as two totally different perspectives on the nature of reality. Both frameworks for orienting ourselves in the world are characterized by a specific mental direction and way of experiencing. That is to say, by those elements of the world one is sensitive to – or not – by those aspects of reality one is receptive to – or not – and by those modes of being one is capable of discerning – or not. Surely, there are many other types of life-orienting worldviews in addition to the two views mentioned.

At some point in our lives each one of us engages in a search, either consciously or unconsciously, for a view of life that fits best. And this is inevitable. We have no choice. It

follows directly from the human predicament. Charles Taylor speaks of a worldview as a *best account*. David Holley refers to it as a *life-orienting story*, and Mikael Stenmark prefers to talk about *a view of life* or *a way of life*.

A worldview does not have to be entirely explicit or complete. It can be to a certain extent implicit or incomplete. It can even be to a certain extent fragmentary, gerrymandered or eclectic, as for example adherents of postmodernists would prefer. Still, anyone lives some life-orienting story, reflectively or without being aware of it. Worldviews help us to understand and deal with the world we live in. A life-orienting story forms the meaningful unified perspective from out which we can make sense of reality and shape our lives. Now, a worldview consists of a number of different elements. First, it includes a theoretical view of the nature of the world and the place of human beings within it that transcends what is empirically observable. This theoretical view is often referred to as the “metaphysical picture” of a worldview.

Second, it involves a practical view of the good life, a sense of what we should do and strive for in this world in order to have a meaningful life. Third, worldviews include an affective element. That is to say, a basic mood or attitude towards life, e.g. fear, despair, trust or hope. This feeling towards life gives a specific emotional color to our experiences (Stenmark 1995). Worldviews are therefore what I would describe as *existential wholes*. Worldviews consist of different elements that are tightly integrated. It’s an integrated whole of both *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, to borrow a well-known triad of classical Aristotelian rhetoric. Here *logos* refers to the theoretical view of the nature of the world, i.e. the *metaphysical picture* that is central to any given worldview. *Ethos* refers to the practical view of *the good life* that is central to a worldview as well, and *pathos* refers to the *basic mood* or attitude towards life. But then a worldview can only be properly assessed as a tightly coupled unity. That is to say, *for the concrete context of relying*

upon a worldview to navigate through life and to orient oneself in the world, none of the elements that constitute a worldview, such as theoretical beliefs, practical rules and affective mood, can be considered in isolation as part of a *proper* worldview evaluation. They *must* be cogently considered together. An adequate rational assessment takes them *all* into account.

Let's unpack the third element a bit more. It refers to the aesthetic-affective dimension of a worldview. Each worldview is associated with a specific intuitive feeling or sentiment. In his book *Ideas have consequences* Richard Weaver refers to this emotive attitude towards the world a bit paradoxically as "the unsentimental sentiment" (Weaver 2013). The sentiment associated with a worldview could be life-affirming and directed towards a desire to cherish the world, but that is certainly not the only possibility. The basic mood or sense of style of Gnosticism as a worldview is for example to passionately reject the world and inner-worldly ordinary life. What makes a worldview's sentiment *unsentimental* according to Weaver is that it is not just "raw feeling". The basic mood or sentiment of a worldview is informed or proportioned by the inner logic of the world view in question. Within the context of a given worldview "our sentiments pass from a welter of feeling to an illumined concept of what one ought to feel." (p. 21). The formed sentiment of a worldview is normative for raw feeling and in that sense *unsentimental*. It's thus preserved from what Weaver calls pejoratively "sentimentality". The sentiment associated with a worldview is conceptually cultivated, refined and calibrated from the inner perspective of that worldview. In this sense the worldview's sentiment towards reality is a *rationalized* emotive attitude. Sentiment and reason are brought in a proper partnership, as Weaver has it . And this is crucial since "unformed expression is ever tending toward ignorance." (p. 24). Weaver goes even that far to argue that each worldview as such – referred to by him as a "metaphysical dream" – is in essence nothing more than refined sentiment. Here I do

not follow Weaver. Yet, I do agree with him that adherents of the same worldview are members of the same “metaphysical community” and share “a common feeling about the world” (p. 30).

The third aesthetic-affective element of a worldview broadly boils down to having either a positive or negative attitude towards the world and life. Fourth, contrary to secular worldviews, religious worldviews also include a transcendent element. It can be broadly defined as a person’s consciousness of and trust in the holy, numinous or sacred (Otto 1958; Stenmark 1995). The holy, numinous or sacred transcends the profane or ordinary reality and ordinary life. It can refer to what goes beyond the universe, to the depth of being (as Paul Tillich would characterize it), or to the metaphysical ultimate, or to yet something else. Moreover, the numinous, holy or sacred can be conceived of as unity or as diversity, as personal or as impersonal, and so on. Different religions entertain different notions of the sacred. The sacred is also often felt and viewed as a profound and deep mystery. It goes largely beyond our understanding and cognitive concepts. It is precisely the holy or sacred that gives the lives of religious believers substance and meaning. The numinous or sacred gives them both strength and wisdom to deal with deep existential experiences, problems, longings, questions and constraints.

The sacred invokes feelings of joy, grace, awe and fascination. But religious believers also tremble when they experience the majesty of the holy. Therefore, in his book *The Holy* Rudolf Otto characterizes the sacred or the numinous as *mysterium tremendum* or *mysterium tremenda majestas et fascinans* (Otto 1958). For religious believers the sacred is their *ultimate concern*, as Paul Tillich describes it (Tillich 1957). For them the sacred or holy is more real and of more value than anything else. It’s what they care most about beyond anything else in the world. It often invites them to worship which then involves attitudes such as praise, love and gratitude.

The characterization of a religious worldview as a worldview that includes an extra transcendent element defined as a person's trust in the sacred, seems broad enough to include a wide range of worldviews that we intuitively consider religious, ranging from Christianity to Hinduism. Yet, it is narrow enough to exclude secular views of life, such as humanism, Marxism or materialism (Stenmark 1995). As part of its theoretical dimension, a religious or secular view of life provides answers to the big questions such as that of the origin of the universe and the place of humankind in it. And, as said, worldviews such as Christianity or secular humanism, do not only provide answers to the question what we can know about the nature of the world. For, as part of their practical dimension they also answer the question what we should do in this life and what we can hope for. Hence, religious and secular worldviews are also regulative. They are complete comprehensive frameworks for living.

But then a worldview is clearly not a scientific theory. Each one of us forms his or her view of life through dealing with the world on a practical level and through the interpretation of our lifeworld experiences, not through the development of a scientific theory. Indeed, the choice for a life-guiding worldview to understand ourselves and the world we live in, inevitably existentially precedes each and every form of scientific thinking. We embrace a worldview, implicitly or explicitly, on the basis of everything we do, learn, and experience in our lives, not by positing and testing scientific theories. This does not imply, however, that every worldview is just as adequate or inadequate as any other. A worldview can, namely, be rationally justified to a greater or lesser degree. Yet, the assessment of the rationality of a worldview, such as theism and atheism is, however, not a scientific activity. Worldviews are, after all, as stated above, not scientific theories but practical-cognitive integrated wholes. They are complete life-orienting perspectives on reality. They necessarily include, to refer to Hannah Arendt, a *vita contemplativa*

and a *vita activa* at the very same time (Arendt 1978). So, as being existential wholes, they cover our entire human condition. In other words, a worldview involves the entire human being and takes into account all human capacities – our practical actions, our reflective reasons, our deepest experiences, our emotional responses, and our fundamental intuitions.

### **5. Rational criteria for worldview comparison**

The formal research methods of the positive sciences are therefore indeed inadequate to evaluate the rationality of a worldview such as Christianity or Sartrean existentialism. Rather, we have to work with a much more inclusive notion of rationality. We need a model of rationality that acknowledges much more types of reasons for embracing a worldview than just those reasons that are legitimate within the context of mainstream scientific empirical research. Examples of such additional reasons include, but are not necessarily limited to: proper basic beliefs, intuitions, existential experiences, phenomenological and hermeneutical reflections, thought experiments, a priori judgements, acquired practical wisdom, and other practical considerations.

The kind of rationality that is necessary for evaluating worldviews thus differs fundamentally from the type of rationality invoked by the positive sciences. But what then are the extended criteria for assessing whether a certain worldview, such as theism or atheism, can be rationally justified? A rationally acceptable worldview should in any case be internally consistent on both a practical and theoretical level. In short, it should both be livable and believable. As such it needs to display an extensive degree of practical and theoretical coherence and integration. Moreover, it should offer a broad holistic perspective that makes it possible to understand and clarify the origin of the cosmos, of life, consciousness, and moral values, as well as a large number of other important life and world phenomena, in an unambiguous and meaningful way. So, a worldview

is a specific way of engaging with and perceiving the world; a way that clarifies, gives form, and renders our world meaningful. But there is more. The considerations that play a vital role in the assessment of the rationality of a worldview include the question whether a worldview

*(i)* has sufficient expressiveness, is thus able to inspire, motivate, and inspirit,

*(ii)* is practically feasible and livable or does not lead to impossible performative contradictions between what one thinks one believes and what one actually does believe (such as an intellectually sophisticated nihilist who in the concrete practice of her life accepts that murder is wrong, or who turns out, in actual practice, to live her life in accordance to the view that life has meaning and purpose),

*(iii)* actually shows us how to practically live by offering concrete guidance on how to navigate through life,

*(iv)* enhances our quality of life by offering an achievable vision on “the good life” and human flourishing, and by establishing a meaningful identity, personal growth and moral development,

*(v)* fulfils deep universal human existential needs and longings by adequately dealing with our major existential questions, challenges and problems,

*(vi)* does justice to our common sense and our deepest human intuitions,

*(vii)* meets intellectual requirements like simplicity, consistency, coherence, plausibility, probability or likelihood, and explanatory scope and power,

*(viii)* contributes to both our self-understanding and our understanding of universal human experiences, such as moral and aesthetic experiences,

*(ix)* links up with our own attitude, affective nature, sentiments or basic mood towards life,

(x) contributes to aspiring to and being able to remain faithful to certain fundamental personal life-changing experiences and major events that deeply impact our lives. An example of this last criterion would be the story in Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* of someone who loses all trust in humankind, becomes a thief, and is suddenly confronted by a victim who can easily turn him in but does not so and instead treats him full of compassion and understanding (Holley 2010). Or consider a criminal who is simply forced to revise his immoral worldview after he has truly noticed for the first time the suffering in the face of the other.

Of these ten criteria, the first eight are entirely or at least to a certain extent applicable within a publicly accessible intersubjective context. The last two criteria though, apply only to the *personal private context*. And there is nothing problematic with that. For, each one of us is a unique human being with a specific individual history of life-transforming personal experiences. Precisely these singular circumstances constitute a subjective reflective context that is significantly different from the publicly accessible intersubjective context. But then the view of life some human being rationally accepts is necessarily also partly based on singular subjective personal experiences. That is to say, in the personal context one is rationally justified to assess the cogency of a worldview against both generally available intersubjective evidence and deeply exclusive personal experiences. Indeed, with respect to the question of whether a given worldview is rational, the issue is always inevitably connected to the question: Rational for whom? In what situation? And for what purpose?

The rationality of a worldview is thus, in the end, to be assessed by investigating the extent to which it gives meaning to our lifeworld and makes it comprehensible, the extent to which it can guide us in our concrete lives, the degree to which it does justice to our intrinsic needs and helps

us cope with existential questions, and also the degree to which it contributes to our moral development or, more generally speaking, the good life.

This form of rationality for evaluating worldviews is no less reasonable than that of the positive sciences. It is simply different, while at the same time showing enough similarity to it. After all, some of the aforementioned ten criteria also apply to the rational assessment of scientific theories, such as those that refer to epistemic virtues such as simplicity, coherence, plausibility, explanatory scope and explanatory power. Moreover, as we saw, practical aspects also play an important role within the empirical sciences. Nevertheless, the model of rationality for assessing religious and secular worldviews that I have put forward here concerns a significantly different way of being rational, applicable within a different context, but surely no less important for our lives.

Now, based on the above ten criteria, one worldview can be more or less rational than another. What is relevant, therefore, is the relative degree of rationality, and not striving for an absolute proof or refutation of any given worldview. In addition, worldviews can change over time due to new generally available insights or personal experiences. A worldview can be subject to transformations.

Further, given that we *have* to choose some view of life, given that a choice for some way of life is an unavoidable existential choice, given that we cannot withdraw from existential questions, the crucial question becomes not whether religion is or is not rationally acceptable, but whether religious life views are more or less rational than secular life views. For, given that we cannot withhold judgment, a view of life shouldn't be abandoned, except in favor of a better view of life. It is thus not a matter of assessing the rationality of a single isolated view of life. It is always a *comparison* between two or more worldviews in light of all available experiences and

background insights. We compare multiple religious and secular life views in order to assess which of them meets the aforementioned criteria the best. While doing this it is of vital importance that we realize ourselves that no single view of life will meet all criteria in a maximal sense. Yet, we have to live our lives in some way.

Because of the plausibility and explanatory power aspects of the seventh criterion, formal metaphysical arguments for the existence of God – such as the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, the moral argument, the ontological argument and the modal-epistemic argument, *can and should* definitely also play their part in the rational assessment of a theistic worldview. But, and this I take to be a crucial point, their importance should not be overestimated given that these metaphysical arguments only address two of the five aspects of just one of the ten evaluation criteria. Hence, those that judge the rationality of theism only by considering those metaphysical arguments clearly miss the mark.

Also, because of the plausibility aspect of the seventh criterion, it is very important that a worldview is compatible with broadly accepted scientific results. A worldview should not conflict with the results of generally recognized scientific research. After all, the model of rationality proposed for assessing worldviews is and remains deeply connected to truth. That the model also takes into account a wide range of practical aspects does not change this. For, as stated above, the practical dimension plays an important role as well in the positive sciences. Indeed, a strict separation between the practical and the theoretical dimension of our rational deliberations would prevent us from an adequate evaluation of both scientific theories and life-orienting worldviews.

In fact, as mentioned we should in general aim to avoid an uncritical separation between theoretical and practical reason, between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, as mentioned earlier. Theoretical and practical reason are closely connected in most if not all our practices. For both aspects of human reason, the theoretical and the practical, are not only active in science and in our worldview evaluations, but also in for example ethics, politics, art, and daily life. Indeed, they are in fact always inevitably linked to each other. And this, as I have argued for in the case of rational worldview evaluation, for very good reasons.

So, to come back to our original point of departure of this paper, if we seriously want to explore cogent answers to the inevitable question of the meaning of life, we should engage in worldview deliberation. For each worldview entails – or in fact *is* - a specific answer to this question. What I have argued above is that the proposed enhanced model of rationality and the corresponding ten criteria for worldview comparison, are rationally the most adequate means to do just that. Worldview deliberation grounded in both should therefore remain or become an integral part of the curriculum of universities that want to fully live up to their epistemic responsibilities.

## **6. The argument formalized**

In this final section I would like to offer a formalized version of the argumentation provided above. Let *S* be a human being whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly and who entrusts (trusts, relies on, has confidence in, puts faith in) worldview *W* after a honest, careful, critical and thorough process of intellectual deliberation. Here I choose ‘entrust’ instead of ‘believe’ since I take it that it’s less controversial that trust can be voluntary (e.g., Peels 2018). Subject *S* deploys worldview *W* to orientate in the world, and to interpret and guide her life. Let

$C$  be the context of orientating in the world, and interpreting and guiding one's life. Consider the following *assertions* about  $S$ 's entrust in worldview  $W$ :

- i. Within context  $C$ , it is *intellectually reasonable* for  $S$  to entrust  $W$ ,
- ii. Within context  $C$ , it is *intellectually rational* for  $S$  to entrust  $W$ ,
- iii. Within context  $C$ ,  $S$  is *intellectually justified* to entrust  $W$ ,
- iv. Within context  $C$ ,  $S$  is within her *intellectual rights* to entrust  $W$ ,
- v. Within context  $C$ ,  $S$ 's entrust in  $W$  is an *intellectually responsible* entrust,
- vi. Within context  $C$ ,  $S$ 's entrust in  $W$  is the result of *well-functioning intellectual faculties*,
- vii. Within context  $C$ ,  $S$ 's entrust in  $W$  is the result of *intellectually responsible conduct*.

Many philosophers claim that (i)-(vii) must be understood solely epistemically (i.e., concerned with the likelihood of truth). They maintain that (i)-(vii) entail that *within context  $C$ ,  $S$  is epistemically entitled to hold that  $W$  is true*. As I have agreed this is misguided. Although (i)-(vii) surely have an epistemic component, there is also a non-epistemic (practical, existential) component involved. In particular, what I have argued for is that (i)-(vii) hold in all those cases in which  $S$ , after a process of critical intellectual deliberation, selects  $W$  because it sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the following ten criteria:

- a.  $W$  is consistent, coherent and simple (*epistemic*),
- b.  $W$  has explanatory power and scope (*epistemic*),
- c.  $W$  is background-plausible and supported by evidence (*epistemic*),
- d.  $W$  is in line with our common sense and our intuitions (*epistemic*),

- e. W contributes to our self-understanding and our understanding of universal (moral, aesthetic, etc.) human experiences (*epistemic*),
- f. W is practically livable and enables personal growth & self-realization (*non-epistemic*),
- g. W shows us how to practically live and enhances one's quality of life (*non-epistemic*),
- h. W fulfills deep existential needs and longings (*non-epistemic*),
- i. W is able to inspire, motivate and inspirit (*non-epistemic*),
- j. W remains faithful to fundamental experiences and major events that deeply impacted and changed one's life (*non-epistemic*).

The argument for my thesis can in light of the previous discussions be represented deductively as follows:

1. A human being must orientate in the world, and interpret and guide his life in order to live his life. (*premise*)
2. A human being needs a worldview in order to orientate in the world, and to interpret and guide his life. (*premise*)
3. A human being can select only one worldview. (*premise*)
4. The primary goal of intellectually selecting a worldview for a human being is to orientate in the world, and to interpret and guide one's life. (*from 1, 2, 3*)
5. Selecting a worldview after **successful** critical intellectual deliberation, amounts to intellectually critically selecting a worldview that sufficiently serves the goal of being able to orientate in the world, and interpret and guide one's life. (*from 4*)

6. A worldview that sufficiently serves the goal of being able to orientate in the world, and interpret and guide one's life is one that sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria. (*premise*)
7. Selecting a worldview after **successful** critical intellectual deliberation, amounts to intellectually critically selecting a worldview that sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria. (*from 5, 6*)
8. If after a process of critical intellectual deliberation S selects a worldview because it sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria, then S selected that worldview after **successful** critical intellectual deliberation. (*from 7*)
9. An instance of **successful** critical intellectual deliberation is an instance of (i)-(vii). (*premise*)
10. If after a process of critical intellectual deliberation S selects a worldview because it sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the ten criteria, then (i)-(vii) hold. (*from 8, 9*)

So S is intellectually justified to accept W. But what about *truth*? Would S also be intellectually entitled to maintain that W is true? On the presumption that truth is a pure epistemic notion, S is only entitled so in case W sufficiently meets sufficiently many of the *epistemic* criteria. But what if not just 'intellectual justification' (etc.) but even 'truth' itself is not always a pure epistemic notion? There might be existentially loaded situations, such as S's, in which we want to be able to speak legitimately of truth without having to suppose that all that is considered in such speak is purely epistemic. In such cases truth is partly non-epistemic. Truth would have an epistemic part (for example: correspondence to the "plain", "bare" or "raw" facts) and a non-epistemic part (that is not narrowly factual). If such an broader or more inclusive account of truth can be

developed, S might still be intellectually entitled to maintain that W is true, even though W does not sufficiently meet sufficiently many of the epistemic criteria. To develop such a notion of truth is outside the scope of the present paper though.

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