

How to Choose a World-View
St. Andrew Holborn, 26th September 2008
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Clergy and politicians are sometimes called upon to make speeches when they haven't prepared anything. (Today is not actually an example of such an occasion, however much that might be the impression given.)

There is a sketch of Sir Markus Browne, a somewhat pompous and mildly bucolic M.P., who was completely unprepared for a political speech, and this was the result (trying to sound Churchillian and to cover up a lack of substance with rhetorical flourish – those of you who have sat through my sermons will be familiar with the sort of thing):

If we are to prevent the lights going out on our lives once more, we must ask ourselves crucial questions. [Pause, while he thinks what those crucial questions might be.]

Where are we?
How did we get here?
Why did we come??
Where do we want to go?
How do we want to get to where we want to go?
How far do we have to go before we get to where we want to be?
How would we know where we were when we got there?
Have we got a map?

Well, Sir Markus wouldn't have known this, but what he was doing was asking world view questions. A world view is basically a set of basic beliefs and assumptions and values through which we look at the world, and which constitute the map by which we navigate our way through life.

People's world views are often quite unconscious and un-thought-through, but the more reflective and self-conscious world views have to answer various basic questions:

Who are we?
Where are we?
What is wrong?
What is the solution?
Where are we going?
How should we act?

It's difficult not to sound as pompous as Sir Markus Browne when listing them, but it's easy enough to see how our answers to these questions shape how we see the world and, indeed, the sort of people we become.

So everyone has a world view, however little they may have reflected upon it. They may just have absorbed one from the culture around them and never really thought about it, but it will still be shaping them.

On the basis of Socrates' principle that 'the unexamined life is not worth living', and on the basis that it is better not to be entirely passive about the influences that are shaping us, I suggest that it is important to give these beliefs and assumptions and values an occasional MOT. We do that with our cars and our teeth and our eyes, so why not with the lens through which we view the world, the criteria by which we make all our choices and decisions? Does this lens give us clear vision or does it distort? Do we need a new prescription? Are these criteria helping us to make good decisions, choices that make for joyful living? Do they need tweaking – or replacing?

There are, of course, lots of different world views on the market. As has often been remarked, the first law of philosophy is that, for every philosopher, there exists an equal and opposite philosopher. And the second law of philosophy is that they are both wrong!

Given that there are so many, and given that people much more intelligent than we have given their lives to thinking them through in enormous depth and with bewildering sophistication – and they all end up disagreeing – how do we barter our way through the world view market place? How do we decide between them or formulate our own?

Well, I take for granted the usual criteria for assessing a hypothesis - whether it's an historical hypothesis or a scientific hypothesis, the criteria are the same, and they seem to me to be sensible ones. A good hypothesis has a) to fit the facts, b) to be self-consistent and c) to shed light on other areas than that which it is attempting to explain.

I take it for granted that we will apply those basic criteria to the competing world views. What I want to do here is simply to suggest one more criterion. That's all. There are many more one could come up with, and maybe we'll come back to this subject again. *How to Choose a World View 2, How to Choose a World View Revisited, The Return of How to Choose a World View, Just when you thought it was safe to Choose a World View* – it'll be the philosophical equivalent of the Rambo movies, and I'll still be doing them when I'm 61 and my intellectual muscles are less bulging even than they are now.

So the criterion I am recommending is this: **We should choose a World View that chimes with – and undergirds - what we believe in and value when we are at our best.**

I haven't found a snappy way of putting that, so I'll just say it again a few times in different ways! I suggest we should choose a World View that fits with – and grounds – the beliefs we hold and the values we live out when we are most comfortable with who we are.

We should choose a World View that puts ground under our feet when we're doing what we know to be right; that puts ground under our feet when we are being the sort of person we would like to be all the time.

What do I mean by the beliefs we hold and the values we live out when we are most comfortable with who we are? What sort of things do I have in mind?

Let me give you three of my underlying assumptions, and then reflect briefly upon them. Yours may be different, but hopefully these will work as examples.

My first underlying assumption is that people matter. People have value, however poor, or sick, or unattractive. We know that's true. Deep down. We want to be the sort of people that live accordingly – we don't always manage it, but we want to. We know we should. We admire those who do, even if we find them a little uncomfortable at times.

Okay, so take that principle and then ask, Which world view embeds that principle deepest into the fabric of being? Which world view offers the firmest foundation for the value of every person? Is it not one in which the Ultimate Reality is a Person too? A Person who values us, cherishes us, loves us? Is it not a world view in which the Person who is the Ultimate Reality, the Person upon whom all other reality depends, values us so highly as to be prepared to die for us? Does that not embed the principle of individual value as deep as it is possible to go?

Or take the second of my gut instincts, namely that relationships are what make life worthwhile, relationships are what life is for. Again, we all know that. Being unsuccessful in our work is bad, but it comes nowhere near being unloved. So take that instinct, and ask which world view grounds it most deeply. Is it not a world view which sees the Ultimate Reality as a Relationship? Is it not a world view that sees the origin of all things as a loving relationship? Is it not a world view that sees us as owing our existence to a loving relationship, the way a child ideally owes its existence to the loving relationship of its parents? Isn't that a healthy way to see ourselves? Does that not ground the insight about the paramount importance of relationships as deeply as it is possible to go?

Or take the third of my fundamental principles, that peace is nobler than war. You can't prove it, and many have denied it, but, again, I suggest, we know it's true.

The question we need to ask is, what world view best enshrines that principle? Pagan world views tend to answer the Who Are We? question by saying, 'We are the product of conflict.' The pagan creation myths tend to see the universe as being the by-product of a battle between the gods and some dragon or monster. The gods win it, slay the dragon, and the dead carcass of the dragon becomes the raw material out of which the universe is made. We emerge from conflict, is the message, and we are characterised by conflict. And, if we are characterised by violence, then violence is also the answer to that other world view question, 'How should we act?'

Abi and I went to a lecture last night at the British Museum on the Assyrian palace reliefs from the great Assyrian empire, the way you do. And the lecturer said that their great message was that through warfare and conflict, order can be restored. That is, of course, a classic expression of pagan belief. That's what we emerged from, so that's how we live.

See our origin not as primeval violence, however, but as the Community of love given and love received that is the triune godhead, and you have a very different vision of what it is to be human, and how it is that we should act.

It is in that conception of Ultimate Reality, I suggest, that all our best and most human values find their securest foundation.