

David Naugle on Worldviews

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ABSTRACT Key Words: worldview, hermeneutics, philosophical theology, Augustinian epistemology, realism, relativism, David Naugle, Michael Polanyi..

*David Naugle's book, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, offers a comprehensive, interdisciplinary history and analysis of the concept of worldview from an Evangelical Reformed perspective with the aim of converting it to Christian use—specifically, to disabuse it from association with historicism, relativism, and anti-realism. Despite his theological agenda, his wide ranging discussion provides good food for thought to anyone interested in the nature, history, and development of the concept of worldview and the problems of historicism, relativism, and anti-realism. While his account of Polanyi's understanding of worldview in connection with the natural sciences is sympathetic and sound, he does not draw as fully as he could have on the resources of Polanyi's thought in developing his own more general understanding of worldview.*

David K. Naugle. *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002. Pp. xxii + 384. ISBN: 0-8028-4761-7, \$26.00, paper.

Naugle's book attempts a comprehensive interdisciplinary history and analysis of the concept of worldview from a perspective of the interests and concerns of an Evangelical Reformed Protestant philosopher-theologian. This is deliberate; Naugle has a specific agenda. His aim is not to produce a work of philosophically and theologically neutral scholarship – rigorous scholarship that would satisfy philosophers and theologians of whatever stripe, though at first that is what I had supposed – but to clarify and refine the concept of worldview in a way that will “convert it to Christian use” (259), rendering it “useful for service in the church and acceptable to her Lord” (290) and specifically freeing it from certain problematic features that have brought it under suspicion among some Evangelical Reformed Protestant spokespersons (notably Karl Barth) as to its suitability for general theological use.

Why review a book of this sort in the Polanyi Society journal? Primarily because Naugle's history of how the concept of worldview has been deployed includes an entire chapter on its use in explaining the disciplinary nature and methodology of the natural sciences that draws exclusively upon the work of Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn, who, Naugle notes, was decisively influenced by Polanyi. Naugle expounds in eight pages Polanyi's understanding of the tacit, fiduciary character of all knowing (188-195), embracing it wholeheartedly, as seen in the fact that he expresses no critical reserve about it. To be sure, Naugle is well prepared to be in deep sympathy with this Augustinian model of knowledge as a gift of grace received in faith, as it is a principal strand within the overall position he takes within the book and a view in which he is independently, theologically grounded. He casually but repeatedly alludes to Polanyi's understanding with favor in the remainder of the book. Anyone reasonably well acquainted with Polanyi's thought will find nothing new or problematic in his handling of Polanyi. But it strikes me that there is a good deal more in Polanyi's thought than Naugle brings into discussion that is relevant to sorting out what it is that Naugle is attempting to get at in terms of worldview in this chapter and elsewhere (e.g., Polanyi's entire discussion of “articulate frameworks,” among other things).

That may be due in part to the fact that Naugle seems to be relying primarily on secondary expositions of Polanyi's thought --a practice evident in his coverage of the thought of several other major thinkers that he discusses at length, though not all--and to the fact that, for the most part, Naugle limits his discussion of the thought of any one thinker to what that thinker has directly written about worldviews and/or closely related concepts. What else a thinker may have to say that may significantly bear upon Naugle's central concern but does not explicitly do so is likely to be overlooked. As a result, and given the fact that an understanding of the untreated larger context of a thinker's explicit account of worldview may significantly alter the meaning that account seems to have on its own apart from that context, Naugle risks distortion in his exposition of that thinker's view. For example, I notice his handling of Kierkegaard's thought particularly suffers in this regard: his account is not just distorted but garbled and misses the point of Kierkegaard's critique of thought—including worldview thinking—that is not “doubly reflected” and oriented to “reduplicating” existence in thought and thought in existence. The force of Wittgenstein's critique of conventional philosophy is similarly missed: he takes a strictly relativist reading of Wittgenstein's appeal to language games and forms of life, thereby missing entirely Wittgenstein's point about how conventional philosophizing often loses connection with the shared commonsense grounds for making sense in language. As well, he misses the force of Husserl's critique: Husserl's radical quest to attend so far as possible to the pre-reflective, pre-constituted given of our experience, beyond distorting, constituting presuppositions—such as those pertaining to worldview, and especially to what Husserl called “the natural standpoint”—that we bring to our experience in an effort to determine its meaning, represent it to ourselves, and so reflect on it, gets lost. On the other hand, his handling of the thought of other figures – e.g., Dilthey, Heidegger for the most part, and Gadamer – seems thorough, fair, and well balanced – well grounded in a profound acquaintance with the larger philosophical concerns of the work of those thinkers. Though Naugle doesn't explore the resonances between Polanyi's thought and that of Heidegger and Gadamer regarding hermeneutics, the lucid way he expounds the thinking of the latter two in chapter 11, particularly in connection with conceiving a worldview as a semiotic system, serendipitously opens up a large and fascinating horizon of fruitful philosophical research for students of Polanyi's thought.

Nevertheless and despite these criticisms, Naugle's book is an extraordinary achievement – so much so that one can learn a great deal from it philosophically, even if one has no special interest in Naugle's primary intention identified above or has no special sympathy with his theological perspective. It covers a huge amount of ground and introduced me to aspects of the work of Dilthey, Jaspers, Michael Kearney and Robert Redfield in Anthropology, among others of which I had little or no knowledge. Naugle starts out the book surveying influential efforts to articulate a Christian worldview by several Reformed Protestant theologians in the twentieth century: James Orr, Gordon H. Clark, Carl F. H. Henry, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Francis Schaeffer. In an effort to “balance” things theologically, he devotes a chapter to surveying parallel, complementary efforts among a sampling of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians. From these surveys he then turns to philology in tracing the etymology of “*Weltanschauung*”/“worldview” (and closely related words) in European languages back to its origin in Kant, its expanded use in Fichte, and Schelling, its rapid appropriation among Romantic thinkers, to its widespread use in virtually every intellectual field by the beginning of the twentieth century. He next undertakes an exercise in philosophical history (more so a chronological sampler of major philosophical treatments), tracing the filiation of ‘worldview’ as a philosophical concept (not just a word) from Hegel to Heidegger and to Donald Davidson. From thence, he ventures a “disciplinary history” of the concept within the natural sciences and the social sciences.

Naugle's concern in this ‘historical’ section of the book is not to tease out variations on the denotative

meaning of the concept, which have been fairly limited in scope and non-controversial – “Roughly speaking, it [‘worldview’] refers to a person’s interpretation of reality and a basic view of life” (260). Rather his chief concern is with principal developments in what he calls the connotative meaning of the concept (i.e., philosophical elaborations of what it involves and implies by successive thinkers), for with the latter has arisen the problematic legacy that has heightened suspicion of the suitability of the concept for Reformed theological use – namely, its intimate association with historicism, relativism, and anti-realism.

Chapters 9 and 10, “Theological Reflections” and “Philosophical Reflections” on worldview, where his project is to liberate the concept of worldview from these problematic associations, are the most interesting, as far as I am concerned, and the most full of insight and creative promise. Here Naugle makes some genuine creative advance in thinking through for himself the idea of worldview vis-à-vis the current options of waning modernism and postmodernism, rather than simply critically presenting the thinking of others on the subject. In chapter 10, he sets out to establish that any theory or definition of ‘worldview’ is itself a function of the worldview of the theorist or the definer; i.e., meta-worldview accounts are never worldview neutral or free of prejudicial preconception – the Enlightenment presumptive prejudice against prejudice (i.e., the presumed possibility of escaping prejudice – and thus all faith commitments) notwithstanding. For example, the presumption to conduct a metaphysically neutral account of worldviews and form a correlative conception of worldview itself prejudicially favors an anti-realist result. Given this general thesis, Naugle proposes, first, that *a Christian perspective* on worldviews (not just a Christian worldview) will imply [presuppose?] the *knowable* objective reality not just of the universe but also of the Trinitarian God who establishes its moral order and governs its every aspect, in light of which worldviews that do not acknowledge it will be found wanting. So also, second, *a Christian perspective* on worldviews implies an orientation of human subjectivity rooted in the heart that will decisively shape a vision of life and human fulfillment as well as one’s knowledge and understanding of all other things – what has typically been ascribed to the concept of *Weltanschauung*. That is., “the heart and its content as the center of human consciousness [particularly highlighted in the Augustinian spirituality of knowing] creates and constitutes what we commonly refer to as a *Weltanschauung*” (270). It is “a vision of the heart,” “defining the person” and supplying “the fundamental assumptions upon which a life is based” (291): “The human heart is its home, and it provides a home for the human heart” (330). It follows for Naugle, third, that *a Christian perspective* will interpret worldviews and relations between them in light of the Fall as fraught with idolatry and as the locus of “cosmic spiritual warfare in which the truth about reality and the meaning of life is at stake” (274). Fourth and finally, *a Christian perspective* will understand the formation of a Christian worldview amidst other worldviews as a primary function of grace and redemption in Christ: salvation has fundamentally to do with a transformation and rectification of one’s worldview.

Chapter 11 advances new philosophical ground in explaining what kind of thing a worldview is, bringing into play elements not considered earlier in the book. He proposes that a worldview is “a semiotic system of world-interpreting stories” – narrative signs and symbols for interpreting the world – that provides “a foundation or governing platform upon or by which people think, interpret, and know” (291). Drawing on Collingwood and MacIntyre (but not Polanyi, though he certainly could), Naugle contends that rationality is itself worldview dependent: “not a formal, atemporal process, but a way of thinking that is grounded in a commitment to a system of narrative signs associated with an historical tradition” (310). Enlightenment rationality is so as well, he claims, though it denies its contextual dependence. He then tackles the problem of the hermeneutical circle, starting with a discussion of the Meno paradox (again, with no reference to Polanyi): insofar as all interpretation is governed by preunderstandings and governing commitments, how can one hope to transcend subjectivity? Drawing on Heidegger and Gadamer (but not Polanyi, though here too he is relevant), Naugle critiques the prevalent modern

understanding of the interpretive process--i.e., its prejudice against prejudice and its radically individualistic interpretive model--and fundamentally opts for a dynamic, communitarian, dialectical understanding of interpretation where both the meaning of a text and the preunderstandings brought to it are continuously questioned within one's own community and, if I understand Naugle correctly, between communities: "a healthy mixture of a hermeneutics of trust with an adequate amount of doubt or suspicion in relation to the tradition in which one stands" (320). Naugle ends the chapter with a fine clarification of the difference in reference to worldviews between (a) naïve, direct, or commonsense realism, (b) creative antirealism, and (c) critical realism. In regard to explaining critical realism with which he identifies, he draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of "the dialogical imagination" and "creative understanding" among all parties of an ongoing critical conversation among persons of differing frames of reference, different worldviews, where each recognizes the possibility that others may be able to see things that are incapable of being seen from one's own framework. This seems to me to be an important concession that leaves me unclear as to how it can be reconciled with the absolutist perspective that otherwise Naugle seems to favor (e.g., p. 266). He ends the chapter with a case for the relevance to assessing worldviews by the three familiar criteria of rational coherence, empirical correspondence (broadly understood), and existential pragmatism.

Naugle's concluding reflections in chapter 11 give an overview of what he takes to be the philosophical, theological, and spiritual dangers and benefits of utilizing the concept of worldview. In two appendices Naugle gives synopses of Evangelical worldview articulations additional to those covered in his book and a bibliography of books on the Christian worldview he does not address.

I have two additional comments. First, in reading through the book, I was puzzled by what seemed to me a recurrent shift in meaning in Naugle's concept of worldview that never quite gets resolved, though he comes close to doing so in the last three chapters. Is a worldview something reflectively constituted (a determinate representation of the world) or is it something pre-reflective and therefore less determinate? Is it a representation of the world (an account of how a certain person or persons understands the world) or is it the world as they experience it? Indeed, to what extent for Naugle is the world as pre-reflectively experienced *something more* (as in Polanyi's notion of reality as inexhaustible in its intimations of future manifestations), *less*, or *other than* the account one succeeds in articulating of the world; or can we ever safely presume that these are simply the same? All this relates, as I see it, to the philosophical question whether human knowledge is primarily a matter of progressively refined explicit representation – the conventional philosophical understanding – or a matter of ongoing tacit relational acquaintance that permits and calls forth an indeterminate range of always partial representations – Polanyi's understanding. Sometimes a given author that Naugle discusses leans toward one or the other of these alternatives. But Naugle doesn't attempt to sort it out along the way and only begins to do so in the last two chapters, alluding to it in what he identifies as the philosophical danger of objectification in the final chapter. It seems to me that he wants to have it both ways with a single worldview somehow being both at once – both reflective representation (as refined by philosopher-theologians) and pre-reflective relational acquaintance – yet the authors he has covered (especially the phenomenological authors) pointedly challenge that possibility in ways I am not convinced he realizes. My point is that each articulate representative rendering of the world (and of ourselves placed within that world) makes a difference, changing it and us in significant and indeterminately predictable ways, as Polanyi and others have claimed. The world is not the same pre-reflectively experienced as it is articulately rendered, at least for us for whom it is so rendered. Because of that, none of our articulate representations of the world can ever be decisively and finally determinate – despite the hope and supposition of dogmatists (of whatever stripe, even Evangelical Reformed Protestant). There will always be the possibility of challenge, change, and new insight unassimilable to any former rendering because of our deepening

tacit relational acquaintance with things that forever is capable of outrunning our explicit representational reach. Is this understanding of worldview itself a worldview? Yes and no. It is a worldview that recognizes its own finitude, partiality, openness to change, and *sitz-in-leben* qua worldview in the face of a reality that in important respects inexhaustible and that recognizes the existence, place, and value of other worldviews that it can never hope to completely incorporate within itself. Totalization that closes off this unpredictable uncertainty is impossible and the quest for totalization is morally problematic. At times Naugle seems to agree, particularly in chapter 10. But what then of Naugle's hankering for "an absolutist perspective on life" (266) that he claims is required of a truly biblical and Christian worldview? What, in this connection, would such a perspective amount to? Need "absolutist" require "reflectively determinate"?

Second, I wonder about the place and role of the person in Naugle's resulting conception of worldview. For Polanyi, a word means nothing apart from some person (or, strictly speaking, persons) taking it up and integrating it subsidiarily to its meaning. The same is true for a symbol, a sentence, an essay, a theory, or an entire articulate system (which opens up not a specific meaning but a whole horizon of meanings). The same is also true for a worldview – so far as it is at all something articulable, distinguishable from the person who holds it, sharable, transferable, etc. A person is more than a worldview, and a worldview is meaningless and lifeless apart from a person at least temporarily in an act of imaginative empathy trying it on for size. A worldview can be taken up in a great variety of different, sometimes significantly consequential ways by any one person. My point is that this essential role of the person in relation to any worldview is pretty much left out of account in Naugle's book (as it is left out in most of the accounts of worldview he covers) – at least until chapters 10 and 11, where he only begins to take it into account. In any case, *the world we actually live in* – and within which we hold this or that worldview (this or that view of the world we live in) – is not the same as, nor is it reducible to, the view we have of it (i.e., the world is not reducible to our worldview), however much we might wish or pretend it was. Ideally, our worldview should take account of that transcendence of ourselves and of the world to the view we have of it; but even when it does, that doesn't make it the world we actually and literally live in. However good a map happens to be, it still is never territory.

Notes on Contributors

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