



## CHOOSING A WORLDVIEW

**Mikael Stenmark**

*Department of Theology, Uppsala University, Sweden*  
*Correspondence email address: Mikael.stenmark@teol.uu.se*

**ABSTRACT:** If we accept that many, perhaps most, people have a religious or secular worldview of one kind or another, an interesting philosophical question is how we – all of us – should think about and act when it comes to choosing (if, indeed, we can choose) a worldview and what attitude we should adopt towards people who have a different worldview. I aim to shed some light on the intellectual and existential conditions for choosing or maintaining a worldview in a situation of significant worldview diversity. I will argue that when we become aware that we have a worldview and start to reflect on its content and its rivals, we should be guided by certain intellectual norms. These are the principle of epistemic conservatism, the fallibilistic principle of belief regulation, the principle of deep concern, the cautious principle of belief revision, and the principle of weak pragmatism. In this article, I will specify, more exactly, the content of these epistemic norms, give concrete examples of how they could and should regulate our religious or secular worldview formation, and give some reasons why we, in the first place, should accept them.

**KEYWORDS:** religious, secular, epistemic conservatism, pragmatism, fallibilism, worldviews

### Introduction

In the Western world, we can see changing attitudes towards traditional religions.<sup>1</sup> People are less inclined to accept the traditional teaching of their home religion and instead prefer – to a larger or smaller extent – to decide for themselves which of these doctrines they should believe in and what practices they should participate in. A new form of spirituality is also emerging among people today. Its participants aim to

---

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article has been published in Swedish; see Stenmark (2022b).

discover the divine in themselves, guided not by religious organizations but by self-help books, courses in meditation, and other spiritual techniques. Another significant change is that more people than before (especially in the Northern parts of Europe) self-identify as non-religious and reject religion (Inglehart, 2021). They want to live secular rather than religious lives.

I have argued elsewhere that, presumably, all these individuals have a worldview of one kind or another (Stenmark, 2022a). Of course, whether that is the case partially depends on how we define worldview.<sup>2</sup> In my understanding of the notion, it is the case that people have a *worldview* if they – whether or not they are religious – have, or express in their lives, particular attitudes, beliefs, and values about who they are, what the world is like, what their place in it is, and what they must do to live a good life. A worldview is about these things, but people’s worldviews could still be more or less articulated, comprehensive, and coherent, and people may be more or less aware of their worldviews. For many, their worldviews remain simply a background or horizon of which they are only vaguely aware but still guide how they perceive the world and what they do. Given these qualifiers about the degree of articulation, awareness, coherence, and comprehensiveness, my account would imply that essentially, every properly functioning human being (excluding small children), in their ways of thinking, talking, and acting, inescapably expresses a worldview of some kind or another.

I have also suggested that we could and should distinguish between religious and secular worldviews. Roughly speaking, we can say that *religious worldviews* affirm or at least assume the existence of a transcendent, divine, or spiritual dimension of reality and its importance for how we understand and live our lives. In contrast, *secular worldviews* deny or at least doubt the existence of a transcendent, divine, or spiritual dimension of reality and affirm or assume that reality has a different makeup, and the basic features of this reality are important for how we should understand and live our lives.<sup>3</sup> The difference between religious and secular worldviews is not simply divergence in some core factual claims that each endorses but also concerns a disagreement regarding some of our deepest values, the things we fundamentally care about, and which give meaning to life.

If we accept that many, perhaps most, people have a worldview of one sort or another, an interesting philosophical question is how we – those of us who have a worldview of one kind or another – should think about and act in real-world situations when it comes to choosing or maintaining a worldview and what attitude we should take towards people who have a different worldview. I will address these issues in this article. The main question to consider is, “What are the intellectual and existential conditions for choosing or maintaining a worldview in a pluralistic society?”

---

<sup>2</sup> Recent discussions of what a worldview is and the relevance of worldviews can be found in Lewis Hall and Hill (2019), Taves (2020), Peterson and Venema (2021), and Stenmark (2022).

<sup>3</sup> There are clearly borderline cases, such as religious naturalism, but paradigmatic instances of secular or religious worldviews, such as secular humanism and Christianity, would not be hard to find.

## Choosing, Revising, or Chancing a Worldview

At some point in their lives, many, perhaps most, people who live in a pluralistic society become aware that they have a worldview (even though they may not be familiar with the term in question). That is, it becomes clear to them that their way of looking at the world and living their lives differs more or less radically from how other people look at and live their lives. This difference is due, they realize, to other people having or expressing through their actions and their way of being a different understanding of who we are, the larger context in which we live our lives, and what is valuable to strive for in life. These people have a different worldview than the one they have themselves – even if there are, of course, also larger or smaller overlaps in content.

However, we cannot avoid being socialized into a particular worldview or accepting some outlook on life. We acquire it through our upbringing at home, our schooling, the communities we belong to, and the people around us that – without thinking about it – we see as “significant others.” Therefore, we always have a worldview, but one we can be more or less aware of. In that sense, we cannot choose a worldview. It has been given to us already. Notice that this also means that what we take to be good reasons for accepting or rejecting a worldview or aspects of it is also initially given to us.

In another sense, however, we can choose worldview. When we reach a certain level of maturity and self-determination, we can decide whether we should remain the religious or secular people we are, change our outlook on life in any significant way, or even convert and embrace another worldview. With the emergence of a pluralistic society like ours, people can choose a worldview in a way they previously could not. As Ninian Smart points out, “in a society which is highly homogeneous, people do not meet other value-systems. They take their worldview for granted. But with the interplay between religions [and secular worldviews], new possibilities emerge. The question of judging worldviews becomes more existential: choice becomes just possible” (Smart, 1995, pp. 1–2). This also means that we can start to reflect on what we previously considered good reasons for accepting or rejecting a worldview or aspects of it and change our view in this matter as well. (See below for a discussion of different kinds of reasons for the relevance of worldview formation and regulation.)

Is such a choice really possible? After all, we do not have control over what we believe, at least not like we do when choosing between different courses of action. If you tell me that I will get a million euros if I start to believe I have a living mouse in my pocket, no matter how much I want this money, I cannot just persuade myself or choose to believe that it is the case. We lack direct control over the formation of our beliefs. If so, how can we choose what to believe and take responsibility not only for our actions but also for our beliefs? In short, I think the answer is that we can voluntarily perform actions that allow us to change our beliefs. Rik Peels, for instance, argues that we have influence over our beliefs (Peels, 2017). We can choose to do or

refrain from doing certain things that make a difference in what we believe, such as gathering further evidence on some topic. For example, I can choose to read Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006) or Richard Swinburne's *Is There a God?* (2010), and that decision can affect the content of my religious or secular worldview. Even if we cannot choose our beliefs, we can affect them by doing or refraining from doing things and, in such a way, change our beliefs and thus be responsible for them.

Moreover, some elements of our worldview might be such that we do not believe them to be true but rather, say, hope they are. We may hope that people are made in the image of God, that there is human dignity, or that people are essentially good and act on these assumptions in the life we choose to live. For this reason, parts of our worldview content might best be understood in non-doxastic terms rather than doxastic (Audi, 2011; Palmqvist, 2022). Non-doxastic commitments, such as hope and acceptance, appear to be within our control and thus be a less controversial idea than that belief is, in some sense, a voluntary epistemic attitude.

However, my idea of choosing a worldview does not presuppose that belief formation must be voluntary. It merely assumes that worldview beliefs, or at least many, depend on an intermediate voluntary action or course of action, like assessing the evidence, moving one's body, or engaging in conversation with people with other views. The talk of choosing a worldview presupposes that the range of actions we can perform that affects what we believe, assume, hope, and do when it comes to worldview matters has dramatically increased so that I am, for example, well aware that I do not have to be a Christian. I may be a Christian today, but I can perform actions that make me become a Muslim or a secular humanist. No outlook on life seems inevitable anymore. The cultural diversity that characterizes our contemporary society entails that people's ability to choose between and within different worldviews has increased drastically.

But how should we choose? How should we think and act when we become aware that we have a worldview that is not as well-thought-out or as comprehensive or coherent as it perhaps ought to be? How should we think about the content of other people's religious or secular worldviews, especially when they do not agree with what we believe, assume, or do? What advice can we, as philosophers, give to ordinary people in this situation? In this essay, I intend to confine myself to presenting a proposal on how I believe we, as reflective and rational people, should think about the choice and maintenance of a worldview in a pluralistic society without having the space to argue its plausibility fully. So, I will inevitably lose a certain depth in the argument offered but instead gain an overview of, at least possible, hopefully plausible, norms of worldview choice and management in real-life situations. (I do not suggest that my list of intellectual norms is complete.) We obtain a holistic understanding of some of the intellectual and existential conditions for choosing or maintaining a worldview in a pluralistic society. We get an account of the bigger picture, even if the arguments for some of its details need more attention.

## Epistemic Conservatism

To begin with, I share the conviction of many philosophers that we can and should take responsibility not only for our actions (practical rationality) but also for what and how we believe or hope to be true (theoretical rationality). As I see it, human rationality is ultimately a matter of seeking to do the best we can realistically manage to do in the circumstances we find ourselves, given our cognitive and other relevant resources (Stenmark, 1995, p. 194f). The demands of rationality must be related to (a) who we are, (b) where we are, and (c) what we are trying to achieve.

When it comes to theoretical rationality, I advise that once we begin to reflect on our worldview, we should accept or take our starting point in *epistemic* or *doxastic conservatism* and thus privilege the religious or secular worldview we find ourselves having by birth and unbridled habit. We would, then, initially assume that what we find ourselves believing is true until a good reason arises for us to question whether we may have made a mistake. The idea is that the rational and realistic thing for people to do is to continue to believe what they already believe about God, life, and love until they find good reasons to believe something else. Without a good reason to do so, we should not doubt what our cognitive faculties have already generated because it risks undermining our epistemic self-trust. Moreover, given that our time and cognitive resources are limited, each application has a price, and any waste of these resources must be avoided.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we should assume that what we already believe is intellectually innocent until proven guilty rather than taking the opposite view.<sup>5</sup> However, accepting this overarching epistemic stance does not prevent the most rational alternative in a specific situation to be to neither believe *p* nor *not-p*.

Moreover, the worldview diversity that surrounds us is not sufficient in itself to force us to begin to doubt what makes us the religious or secular people we are. The reason is that we otherwise risk becoming epistemically paralyzed. Regardless of what you do, if you continue to believe, believe the opposite, or refrain from taking a stand, other intelligent, honest, and well-informed people have a different view than you. Regardless of what we believe or do not believe, worldview diversity remains. Therefore, we cannot escape it by changing our minds *merely* because of this diversity. There is, so to speak, nowhere to go, and then it is just as well to remain where we stand until there are good reasons to change what we think about our life and our place in the scheme of things. The mere fact that some people believe other things than we do is not a good reason to change our outlook on life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Expression and defenses of epistemic or doxastic conservatism can be found in Vahid (2004) and McCain (2008). In Vahid's terminology (p. 102), what I suggest should be regulating belief policy in real-life situations would be a version of "perseverance" conservatism.

<sup>5</sup> A more substantial argument for this view can be found in Stenmark (2004, pp. 82-115).

## The Fallibilistic Principle of Belief Regulation

On the other hand, this diversity, or more precisely, the realization that many intelligent, informed, and honest people around us have a different outlook on life than we do, should make us less confident that we are right. This type of diversity is thus characterized by the fact that we realize that there are (a) many intelligent, well-informed, and honest people who believe other things than we do when it comes to choosing and shaping one's worldview and (b) we meet them daily and socially interact with them more or less regularly. More precisely, the assumption in (a) is that these people are intelligent, well-informed, and honest concerning the points where they differ from us on worldview matters – although, of course, they can also be assumed to meet this requirement more generally. Condition (b) goes beyond (a) in that these people are located in our immediate environment, not other parts of the world. In such a pluralistic society, people with different worldviews, ethnicities, and lifestyles meet and talk to each other, eat together, and even marry each other (Berger, 2014). They do not live in sharply segregated communities and merely interact in economic transactions. In turn, this second condition is vital for what constitutes “live options” for us and not for other people in other places and situations, but more about this later in the text. We can call this kind of cultural situation *significant diversity* and classify it as non-significant when one or both of these conditions are not met. In what follows, when I speak of “diversity,” I will refer to such significant diversity unless otherwise stated.

This form of diversity, I claim, should reduce our epistemic confidence and make us aware that there is a real chance that we could have made a mistake. Thomas Nagel seems to react in this way when he writes that he is worried about the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people he knows are religious believers (Nagel, 1997, p. 130). That fact removes some of the epistemic confidence with which he embraces atheism, and that God could exist is, for him, a non-negligible possibility. Alvin Plantinga embraces a Christian worldview, instead, but is well aware that many others reject such an understanding of life. His reaction to this plurality is:

This is life under uncertainty, life under epistemic risk and fallibility. I believe a thousand things, and many of them are things others – others of great acuity and seriousness – do not believe. Indeed, many of the beliefs that mean the most to me are of that sort. I realize I can be seriously, dreadfully, fatally wrong, and wrong about what it is enormously important to be right. (Plantinga, 2000, p. 437)

When it comes to most of what we believe or hold to be true, we may not reflect very much on the degree of conviction with which we embrace these beliefs. Instead, it is probably the case that we become aware of it only when our beliefs are in some way questioned, for example, when other people express a different opinion. Generally

speaking, only in such a situation do people begin to think about how confident they are that what they believe is true. If the diversity we live in is significant, our general stance should be fallibilist in the sense that we should be less certain that we are right and realize that there is a real risk that we might have made a mistake. We should take the stance that the truth exists and is important, especially when choosing a worldview, but we must realize that we often have no secure access to it. Such a *fallibilistic principle of belief regulation* says that when we discover that other intelligent, well-informed, and honest people around us do not share but even deny some of our most fundamental religious or secular beliefs, we have an obligation to actually take into consideration the possibility that we may be wrong. As rational people, we should strive to keep in mind that it is not obvious that we are right and that it consequently is not obvious that others are wrong.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, if we embrace such an epistemic stance, it will have positive consequences for the possibility of creating more peaceful and less hostile relations between people – people who embrace different, sometimes radically different worldviews or outlooks on life. Let me explain why I think it would make a significant difference. Suppose I am out walking in the street and meet someone who prevents me from going further. The reason he stops me is that he believes that just behind him is an invisible abyss. I shake my head and keep walking. If he insists on stopping me, I first tell him to move out of the way, and if that does not work, I perhaps push him aside so that I can keep on walking. What I maintain is that my way of treating this man is strongly affected by the fact that I can hardly imagine that I am wrong and he is right. This assumption justifies my way of treating him. In other words, we have a justified tendency to ignore fools and sometimes even take the liberty to lock them up. We also often assume that we know better what is in their best interest than they do, even when they object.

My suggestion is that it is likely that things could be similar when it comes to our view of people who hold a different worldview from ours. Yours and my attitude towards and treatment of people with a different religious or secular faith will be heavily influenced by whether we assume that it is entirely out of the question that these other people could be right and we could be wrong. But the fallibilist principle of belief regulation I propose blocks the possibility in a pluralistic society to treat people who adhere to other worldviews as “fools” or as suffering from severe cognitive malfunction or something similar and, thereby, justifies the view that one does not really need to respect their intellectual integrity, self-determination, and way of living.

Note, however, that accepting this principle does not prevent us from maintaining that there are many cases of irrationality when it comes to other people’s choice of worldview. We should, to the same extent, not assume that everyone who endorses

---

<sup>6</sup> Notice that the principle expresses a weaker and more pragmatically oriented stance than what is typically associated with fallibilism. Fallibilism is the thesis that no belief or view can ever be justified in a conclusive way; there remains always a possible doubt as to the truth of the belief or view.

our religious or secular worldview, whatever it might be, does so rationally. A good starting point is to assume that regardless of the shortcomings that characterize other people's choice of worldview, they are probably just as common in my group (McKim, 2019, p. 9).

### **The Principle of Deep Concern**

We should, thus, be guided by epistemic conservatism and the fallibilistic principle of belief regulation in our quest to understand and develop our worldview but also in our understanding of people who have a different outlook on life than the one we have. In a pluralistic society, we inevitably encounter people with different understandings of reality and what is meaningful and worthwhile in life. Typically, I do not abandon my worldview for theirs, and they do not surrender to mine, but we influence each other. Another consequence such a meeting should have is that we begin to reflect on what constitutes our *core commitments* and what constitutes more peripheral beliefs and values, on what is of great importance in our lives and what matters less. As rational people, we should reflect on what is "negotiable" for us in our critical and constructive dialogue with people we share social space within a pluralistic society.

The answer to these questions about the center and the periphery also plays a role in how we should assess the objections directed against our religious or secular worldview. Not everything we believe affects us to the same extent. As I said, part of what we believe is more peripheral, and we can abandon such beliefs without much happening in our lives. For this reason, in a critical assessment, a rational person must consider what place something she holds to be true has in her life. It is not rational to treat everything we believe in the same way. For example, suppose that you approach me and tell me that the train to London that should have left the station at 1 pm is canceled and that I, therefore, must take the train that leaves at 1:30 pm. I might reply, "Okay," and immediately change my original belief. But assume instead that you approach me and tell me that Elon and Alice are not my biological parents. I would be much more hesitant to accept what you are saying. Why? The reason is that if the latter – in contrast to the former – turned out to be true, this would have profound consequences for my identity. I can give up the former but not the latter belief without much happening. We could say that different things have different "depths of concern" in our lives.

Also, regarding our worldviews, certain things are closer to people's hearts than others. Their degree of concern varies for us. For some people, God and their relationship with God are at the center; for others, it is the environment and the climate, or women's struggle for equality or a fight against poverty and injustice, or for that matter of getting rich and famous. For yet other people, hedonism, consumerism, or nationalism are at the centre of attention. So, it is reasonable to



assume that certain things that both religious and secular people believe and do are of great concern to them. If they are changed or abandoned, it will have far-reaching consequences for their outlook on life. Consequently, it is reasonable that we demand stronger reasons for abandoning something central to our religious or secular faith than if it was less important in our understanding of and approach to life. I, therefore, want to suggest that in our belief formation, we should be guided by what I previously called the *principle of deep concern*, which says that we should demand stronger reasons (or a larger amount of counter-evidence) for abandoning something that has great significance in our lives than for something that plays a more peripheral role and thus does not allow the outcome to be determined solely by the evidence we have access to (Stenmark, 2004, p. 106).<sup>7</sup>

While the degree of conviction means that we can be more or less convinced of certain things, the degree of concern signifies that certain things affect us more or less. Some things in life affect us not only because they are at the center of our worldview but also because they are associated with strong (positive or negative) emotions, which affect our attitudes. Let me give a couple of examples. Nagel writes, “It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that” (Nagel, 1997, p. 130). Nagel not only believes that God does not exist but also takes a certain attitude towards the existence of God. He does not want God to exist. But as an atheist, you might as well want or wish for God to exist, even if you do not believe that God exists. The different attitudes of these atheists are part of their worldview and, sometimes, we could say that they reflect a fundamental attitude towards life as a whole. For most of his life, Nagel’s basic attitude appears to have been that (self-conscious) life is absurd.

Religious faith provides another example of the relevance of emotions and attitudes when explicating people’s worldviews. Most theists do not merely believe that God exists but also think it is appropriate to adopt particular attitudes towards this perceived truth. A person only has genuine religious faith, on such an account, if she loves and trusts God or prays to or worships God.<sup>8</sup> Attitudes towards God play a central role in how these people understand reality. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to identify this feature when we try to describe their worldview. The form of secular faith that Martin Hägglund thinks we should have is also tied up with a particular attitude. He writes: “My point [...] is that if you care for our form of life *as an end in itself*, you are acting on the basis of secular faith...” (Hägglund, 2019, p. 9). This sense of finitude, of being devoted to a life that will end, is at the heart of his

---

<sup>7</sup> In epistemology there has been a discussion about “pragmatic encroachment,” that is, whether what counts as sufficient conditions for knowledge depends on the circumstances of the knower (Kim, 2017). Are pragmatic factors relevant to whether a subject has knowledge? My stance here concerns merely rationality and is silent about cases of knowledge. It says that pragmatic factors (in particular, how important they are for the self-identity of the individual in question) are relevant for determining when it is rational for a person to revise what she already believes.

<sup>8</sup> Other accounts of religious faith are possible; see Buchak (2017) and Kvanvig (2016).

secular faith. Devotion towards finite life is a crucial ingredient of Hägglund's secular worldview.

### **The Cautious Principle of Belief Revision**

If, in our conscious reflection on our worldview, we realize that we should change or abandon something we believe in, how should we proceed? With the help of an everyday example, let me illustrate what I think is rational for us to do in such a situation. For example, suppose I think Peter is honest, but then I discover he lied to me. Should I then believe that Peter is a dishonest person, or should I revise my previous view more carefully so that I now believe that Peter is, overall, an honest person but that he sometimes lies? It seems that the latter proposal is more reasonable than the first. If there is reason to revise something we believe, we should not change the original belief more than necessary. I, therefore, suggest that we accept the following principle: when revising something we already believe, we should choose, among those alternatives that are available to us, one that is close to our original conviction. Let us call it the *cautious principle of belief revision* because it says we should not change our beliefs more than necessary.

Nagel can again be used as an example. He asks, "What, if anything, does secular philosophy have to put in the place of religion?" (Nagel, 2010, p. 4) and also writes: "I am resistant to the broad acceptance of scientific naturalism as a comprehensive world view. Theism is one form that such resistance can take, but I believe that there must be secular alternatives" (Nagel, 2010, preface). His way of reflecting on his worldview aligns with the cautious principle of belief revision. Presumably, as a young philosopher, Nagel may have been schooled into accepting scientific naturalism as the worldview he should embrace. When he begins to doubt that such a worldview is sound, the rational choice for him is not to start embracing any form of theism. Nagel should instead seek to develop a secular understanding of life that is closer at hand. Given his initial predicament, it is a naturalistic worldview different from scientific naturalism. The naturalism he, in fact, seeks to develop, which he hopes could replace both religion and scientific naturalism, contains a rejection of an epistemology where science sets limits to what we can know. It also affirms an ontology that contains a natural teleology according to which the existence of value is not a random side effect of life but rather seen as part of the explanation of why there is life at all (Nagel, 2012, p. 122). Only in a situation when he no longer sees that such a modification of naturalism is reasonable should he consider converting to a theistic worldview.

We also must take into account that *worldview conversion* is not merely a gradual shift in beliefs but a choice of a new way of perceiving reality and living. For this reason, it constitutes a significant break in a person's life and is not a gradual process of change (Faulkner, 2019). Conversion is a dramatic change, a fundamental shift in how the world is perceived and what we fundamentally care about in life. It is a gestalt

switch in Thomas Kuhn's (1970) terminology: the world is seen in a radically different way. In this situation, the increased mismatch between our worldview and what we experience is too much, so we leave our old worldview behind and convert to another.

### Assessing Worldviews

How, then, should we think about the worldviews that other people in our society have or express in their lives and about our and other people's grounds for embracing a particular worldview?

My basic idea is that our level of epistemic confidence will affect our understanding of the prevailing worldview diversity we face and, thus, our view of rational disagreement. Nagel, as we saw, hopes that atheism should be true but is concerned by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people he knows are religious believers. In a terminology developed by another atheist, William Rowe, he is a *friendly atheist* (Rowe, 1979). Like Rowe, Nagel thinks it may be rational for intelligent and well-informed people today to disagree with atheists. This is possible because the evidence is ambiguous, and truth is not necessary for rationality. Nagel can thus say that his atheism is probably true and, at the same time, claim that it can be rational for other intelligent and well-informed people to believe that God exists. Graham Oppy takes a similar stance. He writes, "it is incredible to suppose that there are no religious believers who are reasonable in their religious beliefs, at least by any ordinary standards of reasonableness" (Oppy, 2011, p. 121).

By contrast, atheists like Richard Dawkins (2006) and Alex Rosenberg (2011) seem to be unfriendly atheists in Rowe's terminology; not in that they cannot be friends with theists or religious people in a social sense, but in the intellectual sense that they would maintain that these people – especially those who are intelligent and well-informed – are irrational in not being atheists. It is no longer possible to be an intellectually fulfilled theist. They believe that the evidence for atheism and against theism is so clear-cut that we must find explanations of why intelligent theists stubbornly resist the obvious. Perhaps it is due to their passionate nature that they want God to exist (purely wishful thinking), or some cognitive malfunctioning in this area of life that clouds their judgment, or it is the religious upbringing they received as children that they cannot free themselves from.

Note, however, that the same distinction applies to theists. *Friendly theists* think that while atheists believe something untrue, they may still be rational in believing as they do because they may not have experienced God's presence in their lives. *Unfriendly theists*, instead, think that what atheists believe is not merely false but that they are also irrational in embracing this misconception of reality. Atheists should know better, but maybe they are blinded by their sin or rebellion against God or are just living in delusion due to cognitive dysfunction (the natural God-instinct that God implanted in human nature may not work properly in these people).

Unfriendly atheism and unfriendly theism are not, as far as I can see, compatible with the fallibilist attitude or epistemic humility we should express in a situation of worldview diversity. Therefore, I believe that these atheists and theists actually deny that there is significant diversity in our society when choosing a worldview. They are likely to reject condition (a) and presumably modify in this way: (a\*) There are many *apparently* intelligent, well-informed, and honest people who think differently than we do when it comes to choosing and shaping one's worldview.

It is such a different understanding of worldview plurality that makes it possible, I presume, for a philosopher like William Lane Craig to maintain that "when a person refuses to come to Christ, it is never just because of lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties: at root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God's Spirit on his heart" (Craig, 2008, p. 47). It also makes it possible for an atheist such as Daniel C. Dennett, in his debate with Alvin Plantinga at The American Philosophical Association's conference in Chicago in 2009, to say that "I myself cannot see any rational grounds for preferring his [Plantinga's] theism over my Supermanism" (Dennett, 2011, p. 29). Alternatively, the rejection of condition (a) might be more explicit. For example, the Swedish philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö says in an interview, "I have a hard time understanding people who are religious; I think that they are not really adults [...] I believe that religiosity is a kind of personality defect [...] That it is a defect is a moral judgment on my part. Personally, I do not want to be like that, and I do not want to socialize with humans that believe in supernatural agents" (Tännsjö, 2006, my translation).

The implicit rejection of condition (a) explains their stance but does not excuse them. One cannot avoid the demands of the fallibilist principle of belief regulation just by being considerably uncharitable in one's assessment of how intelligent, well-informed, and honest people are who embrace another worldview than one's own.

### **Modest Perspectivism**

In a pluralistic society, people embrace a diversity of worldviews of both religious and secular nature. How much should we, as reflective people, care about this diversity? Or, more precisely, what "duty of examination" of other people's worldview do we have? The answer according to epistemic conservatism seems to be that we lack such a duty. Only when what other people say and do gives us a special reason to question our worldview or a particular part of it do we have an obligation to consider other people's worldviews fully. But I have also argued that the fallibilist attitude that we should adopt in a situation of significant diversity should make us aware that there is a real possibility that we might be mistaken. There is a non-negligible risk that we are wrong, and someone else is right. There is, thus, a reason to consider other people's worldviews.

However, we are surrounded by various alternative outlooks on life or different ways of living, so whom should we engage with? What other worldviews are worthy of our attention and merit examining? I suggest that the answer is relative to your point of departure and the particular way you look at the world and live your life. Therefore, you should first more fully try to understand and critically explore the worldviews that, given your perspective on life, constitute real alternatives or what William James calls “live options” (James, 1897).

However, the worldviews that constitute live options differ among people. The stance I advocate has sometimes been called *perspectivism*. Yet, I advocate a modest form of perspectivism because the assumptions, categories, beliefs, and values that make up our “perspective” or our “horizon” can, I believe, be rationally adjudicated. When all truths have been revealed, we will know which is the correct perspective, but it will probably not happen during our lifetime. So, how should we act in the meantime? We have limited time and cognitive resources and not the least other things to do in life than to think about the content of other people’s religious or secular worldviews. Therefore, in our search for the truth concerning our existential questions, we should be primarily interested in those alternatives that constitute a live option for us. That is to say, we should pay attention to those worldviews that – from our particular perspective – seem to constitute a serious challenge or, for that matter, appear most promising or worthwhile. They are the worldviews we should enter into a critical dialogue with and – given the epistemic humility that should characterize our attitude in a situation of significant diversity – be open to so that we can learn something new that we did not know or previously have thought of.

We can, if we want to, consider Philip Kitcher’s ideas that naturalism not only challenges religion (“the challenge of secularism”) but that religion also challenges naturalism (“the challenge for secularism”) in this way (Kitcher, 2011, p. 24). He thinks that secular people can learn from religion how to handle their existential needs and how to create genuine social cohesion, as well as secular substitutes based on these insights. In some situations, this openness may even mean that we convert or change worldview, as Anthony Flew (2007) did from atheism to theism or Rowe did in the opposite direction.

### **Worldview Evidence**

Besides evidence and arguments, many factors influence people’s beliefs or values, and the choice of worldview is no exception to that rule. Therefore, in our dialogue with people with a different outlook on life than we have, we should ask (sometimes, at least) what reasons we think there are to prefer our worldview over the other religious or secular alternatives available in our society and which constitute live options for us.

Let us initially say that evidence or good reasons consist of everything that can indicate that something we believe is true or that reality is constituted in a particular way. But what considerations, more exactly, should be counted as evidence or good reasons when it comes to choosing, regulating, or justifying a worldview?

The scientific naturalism, which Nagel seeks (as I have previously pointed out) an alternative to, provides an answer: we should only accept the evidence that science gives us. Rosenberg, for example, says: “being scientific just means treating science as our exclusive guide to reality, to nature – both our own nature and everything else’s” (Rosenberg, 2011, p. 8). Scientific naturalists, thus, believe that reflective and intelligent people should fall back on what science says about life and then try to understand themselves and how they should live and shape their lives based on such a starting point and, by implication, be suspicious of anything that cannot be naturalized or understood by science. This attitude forms, for example, the basis of Rosenberg’s atheist-nihilistic worldview. He maintains there are no scientific reasons to believe that God exists, so we should assume that God does not exist in the same way we do not believe that Santa Claus exists. Moreover, Rosenberg argues that since ethics is not within the purview of science, we must embrace nihilism. Nihilism means that there is nothing that has intrinsic value, nothing that is morally right or wrong, but that everything is just evolutionary adaptations (Rosenberg, 2011, p. 109).

On the other hand, an atheist like Rowe would have big problems with such a way of reasoning. He writes that it was a keen sense of the lack of God’s presence in his life, the existence of meaningless evil or horrible suffering in our world, along with his conviction that morality need not be grounded in God’s nature (since Moore’s argument that moral truths are not merely true but necessary true is cogent) that were the decisive evidence in his case (Rowe, 2010, pp. 10–11). However, it seems rather obvious that these philosophical and existential reasons are not scientific reasons. If they are not within the purview of science, then atheists who justify their rejection of religion based on the kind of reasons Rowe gives would lack a rational ground. Science, here, becomes a double-edged sword. If secular people take it to be the only acceptable source of knowledge and rational belief, then such an epistemology requires not merely of religious people that they have to, for instance, support their belief in God with scientific reasons; it also requires that their own secular worldview must be scientifically justified.

Instead, Nagel argues, “The existence of conscious minds and their access to the evident truths of ethics and mathematics are among the data that a theory of the world and our place in it has yet to explain” and that we should not assume that science “has priority over the others, so that what it cannot explain is not real” (Nagel, 2012, p. 31). Nagel and Rowe, thus, reject the view that we must derive our worldview from science. Moreover, they do not seem to be convinced that it is correct to assume that we primarily should be guided by science in answering our existential questions or even in belief formation in general. Instead, the evidence provided by a first-person perspective on the world is prioritized, as are moral convictions and, in Rowe’s case,

also the absence of a particular type of experience of God's presence in his life. The presence of that kind of experience says another philosopher was crucial to her choice to become a Christian. Janet Soskice writes, "In my own case [...] faith came from a dramatic religious experience. [...] I was in the shower, on an ordinary day, and found myself to be surrounded by a presence of love, a love so real and so personal that I could not doubt it. [...] I was turned around. Converted" (Soskice, 2009, pp. 77-78).

It seems fairly obvious that many, like Soskice, base their choices and justification of a theistic worldview on this type of experiential evidence. Their belief in God has an experiential rather than argumentative basis. We must address at least two issues here: the first is whether we ought to accept that it is rational for Soskice and other people in similar situations to embrace, for example, a belief in God on this basis. The second question is whether this type of experience should be given any evidential value at all by those of us who have not had such experiences. Is their testimony worth anything to anyone but themselves? Rowe's answer seems to be that they have evidential value, but the lack of these experiences can constitute counter-evidence.<sup>9</sup> The lack of God's presence in a person's life supports a secular worldview, and its presence supports a religious one. Thus, it would be rational for Rowe not to believe in God while still maintaining that it is rational for people in Soskice's situation to believe in God, even if he thinks what they believe is false.

What importance the testimony of experiences of God's presence in human life should be given by those who lack this kind of experience is even more controversial. Kitcher thinks that the diversity of different types of religious experiences and the fact that many contradict each other constitute a good reason to entirely refrain from attaching any evidential value to them at all (Kitcher, 2011, p. 26f). Others, like Travis Dumsday, argue that even if religious experiences do not directly support theism, they constitute evidence for non-naturalism and, thus, against a secular worldview (Dumsday, 2016, p. 142). How skeptical or gullible we should be on this point is a difficult question to answer, but the perspectivism I have advocated suggests that it is also important whether or not, as in the case of Soskice, Christian faith is a "live option" for the kind of secular or religious people you and I are.

The evidence base of scientific naturalists is essentially limited to scientific reasons; these, and no other, should be considered in our choice of worldview. On the other hand, more liberal naturalists attach importance to other kinds of reasons (De Caro & MacArthur, 2004). They base their rejection of religion primarily on reasons of a different kind. Thus, they open up the possibility that a secular worldview can also be justified by appealing to philosophical, political, or moral reasons or to reasons that the social sciences and humanities can generate. But at the same time, of course, it makes it possible for religious people to use such non-scientific reasons to justify their religious worldview.

---

<sup>9</sup> John L. Schellenberg (2015) develops an argument from divine hiddenness along these lines.

## The Principle of Weak Pragmatism

The reasons we have discussed so far are those that give us evidence to believe that it is true that reality is constituted in a particular way. But are only such intellectual or epistemic reasons relevant when we seek to understand reality and our place in it and choose how to live our lives? Should we not also consider other factors that have more to do with how it feels to live and find meaning in the world? Our choice of an adequate worldview is, after all, also *existential* (What creates meaning and what is worthwhile to strive for in life?) and not just *intellectual* (What is true?). The existential resources – how to deal with suffering and evil and meet our needs for love, meaning, identity, community, and personal growth – that worldviews provide can and do differ and are something we should take into account.

Kitcher criticizes those he sometimes calls “militant atheists” or “Darwinist atheists” (like Richard Dawkins and Daniel D. Dennett) for completely neglecting the moral, existential, and social value of religion and relying, in their rejection of religion, solely on epistemic, preferably scientific reasons. He believes that such reasons are not enough to demonstrate the superiority of naturalism (or, in his terminology, secularism) over, for example, theistic religions because belief in God satisfies an existential and a social need in people’s lives; it gives their existence meaning and a context (Kitcher, 2011, p. 31f). Therefore, a secular worldview must be able to give people a secular substitute for the meaning-making that religions have given people through millennia; otherwise, it is “hardly unreasonable” for these people to remain religious (Kitcher, 2007, p. 160). Kitcher’s embracement of pragmatic naturalism leads him to this conclusion. As rational people, we must consider pragmatic reasons in our choices of what we should think about life as a whole, our place in it, and how we live our lives to flourish as human beings.

What, then, are pragmatic reasons? We can say that pragmatic reasons are practically oriented and seek to justify what we believe in terms of what benefits or utility we have from acting (or not acting) in a certain way or assuming that certain things are true.<sup>10</sup> Thus, unlike epistemic arguments, pragmatic arguments are benefit-oriented rather than truth-oriented. The benefit we are, perhaps, primarily interested in is the existential resources a worldview provides. How can it deal with our existential needs, needs to find meaning, belonging, personal well-being and growth, loving relationships, overcoming angst, guilt, suffering and alienation, creating hope, and giving consolation in our lives?

Hägglund’s argument for a secular faith is similar to Kitcher’s, in that it is based on the assumption that pragmatic reasons should be of great importance when choosing a worldview. However, Hägglund’s argument also differs from Kitcher in a significant way. He seeks to show that existential needs and the human predicament challenge religion and not (as Kitcher believes) a secular worldview. More precisely, these pose

---

<sup>10</sup> See Jordan (2018) for an excellent discussion of theistic and atheistic pragmatic arguments.



a challenge for such religions that include a belief in an afterlife or eternal life. He maintains that “devoted to this world and invested in finite lives ... [is] *necessarily* at odds with religious faith in eternity” (Hägglund, 2019, p. 30). An afterlife is not something you should believe or hope for because it undermines your life here and now.

We can contrast Hägglund’s view with John Hick’s pragmatic reasoning about the value of religion and a possible afterlife. Hick argues that naturalism (or atheism) is bad news for many people, for all those who have not had or will not have a chance to live a good life. He writes:

with the exception of tough-minded atheists, such as Bertrand Russell, they [naturalists] do not seem to be aware that they are announcing the worst possible news to humanity as a whole. They ought frankly to acknowledge that if they are right the human situation is irredeemably bleak and painful for vast numbers of people. For – if they are right – in the case of that innumerable multitude whose quality of life has been rendered predominately negative by pain, anxiety, extreme deprivation, oppression, or whose lives have been cut off in childhood or youth, there is no chance of their ever participating in an eventual fulfillment of the human potential. There is no possibility of this vast century-upon-century tragedy being part of a much larger process which leads ultimately to limitless good. (Hick, 1999, pp. 24–25)

Alvin Plantinga emphasizes the existential resources of the Christian faith to deal with suffering and evil. Even if Christians, he says, must admit that they do not know why God permits the evils this world displays, they know that God in Christ was prepared to suffer on our behalf. Of course, this does not answer the question of why God does permit evil, but it helps:

the Christian trust[s] God as a loving father, no matter what ills befall him. Otherwise it would be easy to see God as remote and detached, permitting all these evils, himself untouched, in order to achieve ends that are no doubt exalted but have little to do with us, and little power to assuage our griefs. [...] In this regard Christianity contains a resource for dealing with this existential problem of evil – a resource denied the other theistic religions. (Plantinga, 1985, p. 36)

I share the view of these philosophers that we should give pragmatic and not just epistemic reasons a role in our choice of worldview. Therefore, we should ask ourselves: What do we gain or lose from believing in a God who created the world and intended humans to exist and live a religious life in accordance with these core convictions? On the other hand, what do we gain or lose by believing that nature is all

that exists and that the universe has always existed or just popped into existence (in the Big Bang) without any cause and that self-conscious life arose through unguided evolution and living a secular life in accordance with these core convictions? As William J. Wainwright expresses the matter: "Are some religious [or secular] worldviews more effective instruments for coping successfully with life?" (Wainwright, 1999, p. 189).

Nevertheless, the question of truth cannot be neglected, for a purely pragmatic argument opens the door wide for wishful thinking, that we believe what we want to be true and not what is actually true or which we should hold on good grounds to be true. For this reason, I suggest that we embrace merely a weak form of pragmatism. *Weak pragmatism* is the stance that both epistemic and pragmatic reasons are important when choosing what to believe in and how to live one's life. In James's classical understanding of it, this means that if the evidence (that is, the epistemic reasons) between two live options is approximately equal – in our case, whether we should embrace a religious or a secular worldview such as theism or naturalism – then it is permitted to let pragmatic reasons or considerations prevail (James, 1897).

Perhaps it would even be rational to let pragmatic reasons play a more decisive role than James thinks. After all, what is at stake when it comes to choosing a worldview is not only whether some beliefs are true or what conclusions we should draw regarding specific arguments but also *how we should live our lives*. It is not just a matter of making up one's mind; it is also a matter of choosing a way of living. If we cannot avoid having some kind of worldview, this choice cannot be postponed for human beings. We must live right now, one way or another. For this reason, people might be rationally justified in taking risks they would not be entitled to when a decision can be postponed. Choosing a worldview is foremost an instance of agent rationality, not spectator rationality.

### Concluding Remarks

An interesting development in contemporary philosophy is that some prominent philosophers are not content to be atheists but seek to develop secular worldviews that intend to replace the world's religions. For this reason, among other things, it is valuable to reflect on what a worldview is and how we can and should distinguish between religious and secular outlooks on life without denying that there is a significant gray area between these two groups of worldviews. However, my main task has been to shed some light on the intellectual and existential conditions for choosing or maintaining a worldview in a situation of significant worldview diversity.

At this point, I have tried to suggest how we should think about this issue without having had the opportunity to argue fully for my position, but what we gained instead is a more holistic understanding of worldview choice and maintenance.

I have proposed that when we become aware that we have a particular worldview and start to reflect on its content, we should be guided by a set of epistemic norms. Ultimately, however, we as reflective people alone must take responsibility for the worldview we have, and if we are to do something as radical as convert and change our basic outlook on life or if we, in critical and constructive dialogue with other people, are to continue to develop the religious or secular worldview that we already have.

## References

- Audi, R. (2011). *Rationality and Religious Commitment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berger, P. (2014). *The Many Alters of Modernity*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Buchak, L. (2017). Faith and Steadfastness in the Face of Counter-evidence. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 81(1-2), pp. 113-133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-016-9609-7>
- Craig, W. L. (2008). *Reasonable Faith*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- De Caro, M. & D. MacArthur (Eds.). (2004). *Naturalism in Question*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dennett, D. C. (2011). Truth that misses their Mark: Naturalism Unscathed. In D. C. Dennett & A. Plantinga. *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 25-37.
- Dumsday, T. (2016). Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences and the Moral Status of Naturalism. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 8(3), pp. 123-144. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v8i3.1690>
- Faulkner, P. (2019). The Nature and Rationality of Conversion. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 27(4), pp. 821-836. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12472>
- Flew, A. (2007). *There is a God*. New York: HarperOne
- Hägglund, M. (2019). *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hick, J. (1999). *The Fifth Dimension*. London: OneWorld.
- Inglehart, R. (2021). *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- James, W. (1897). *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Longmans.
- Jordan, J. (2018). Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/pragmatic-belief-god/>.
- Kim, B. (2017). Pragmatic encroachment in epistemology. *Philosophy Compass*, 12(5), <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12415>
- Kitcher, P. (2007). *Living with Darwin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kitcher, P. (2011). Challenges for Secularism. In G. Levine (Ed.), *The Joy of Secularism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 24–56.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kvanvig, J.K. (2016). The Idea of Faith as Trust: Lessons in NonCognitivist Approaches to Faith. In M. Bergmann & J. Brower (Eds.), *Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 4–26
- Lewis Hall, M.E. & P. Hill. (2019). Meaning-making, Suffering, and Religion: A Worldview Conception. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22(5), pp. 467–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1625037>
- McCain, K. (2008). The Virtues of Epistemic Conservatism. *Synthese*, 164(2), pp. 185–200.
- McKim, R. (2019). *Religious Diversity and Religious Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nagel, T. (1997). *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, T. (2010). *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, T. (2012). *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oppy, G. (2011). ‘New Atheism’ versus ‘Christian Nationalism.’ In P. D. Bubbio & P. A. Quadrio (Eds.), *The Relationship of Philosophy to Religion Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, pp. 118–153.
- Palmqvist, C.J. (2022). Desiderata for Rational, Non-doxastic Faith. *Sophia*, 61, pp. 499–519. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-021-00862-4>
- Peels, R. (2017). *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peterson, M.L. & D.R. Venema. (2021). *Biology, Religion, and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plantinga, A. (1985). Alvin Plantinga – A Self-Profile.” In J. E. Tomberlin & P. van Inwagen (Eds.), *Alvin Plantinga*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, pp. 3–93.
- Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rosenberg, A. (2011). *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Rowe, W. (1979). The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16(4), pp. 335–341.
- Rowe, W. (2010). Friendly Atheism Revisited. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 68(1/3), pp. 7–13.
- Schellenberg, J. L. (2015). *The Hiddenness Argument*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smart, N. (1995). *Choosing a Faith*. New York Boyars/Bowerdean.
- Soskice, J. (2009). Love and Reason. In J. Cornwell & M. McGhee (Eds.), *Philosophers and God*. New York: Continuum, pp. 77–89.

- Stenmark, M. (1995). *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame.
- Stenmark, M. (2004). *How to Relate Science and Religion*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.
- Stenmark, M. (2022a). Worldview Studies. *Religious Studies*, 58, pp. 564–582.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412521000135>
- Stenmark, M. (2022b). Att välja livsåskådning. *Filosofisk Tidskrift*, 4, pp. 3–18.
- Swinburne, R. (2010). *Is There a God?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tännsjö, T. (2006). “Återinför statskyrkan!” *Humanisten*, 1, pp. 4–11.
- Taves, A. (2020). From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies. *Religion*, 50, pp. 137–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681124>
- Vahid, H. (2004). Varieties of Epistemic Conservatism. *Synthese*, 141(1), pp. 97–122
- Wainwright, W. J. (1999). *Philosophy of Religion*. Belmont: Wadsworth.

### How To Cite This Article

Stenmark, Mikael. (2024). “Choosing a Worldview,” *AGATHEOS: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 42–62.

### Copyright Information

This is an open-access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.