

Valk, John. *Worldviews: A Comprehensive Account to Knowing Self and Others*. Cham: Springer, 2021, xiv+307 pp.

Lauri Snellman  
University of Helsinki

John Valk's book *Worldviews* (2021) is a fine addition to the current debate on worldviews in the philosophy of religion and epistemology. Recently, the discussion on worldviews has been driven by the goal of widening traditional philosophy of religion and religious education to become more of a general philosophy of world-views and worldview education (see e.g. Stenmark 2022). There is also an older tradition of the philosophy of worldviews, by authors like Wilhelm Dilthey and David Naugle (2002), who perceive worldviews as cognitive and moral frameworks.

The book in question relates to both of these traditions. Additionally, the book offers an account of worldviews as frameworks for understanding ourselves, others and the world. This is done through addressing questions about *identity, the cultural dimensions of a world-view, existential and ultimate questions, of ontology and epistemology* and lastly about the *interpretation of universal values*.

The first chapter of the book concerns definitions and aspects of a worldview. As a starting-point, Valk takes Naugle's and Dilthey's accounts of world-views as sign-systems formulated as: "frameworks by which we understand others, ourselves, and the world in which we live. They are the integrative and interpretative frameworks by which order, and disorder are judged, and the standard by which reality is managed and pursued" (13). This means that worldviews include a belief-system that offers a view of life closely related to ways of action, for example, the practices of worship in Abrahamic traditions. Furthermore, worldviews are associated with communal ways of life. Belief-systems, practices and community on the one hand, and beliefs, values and behaviours on the other hand, therefore, go together in world-view frameworks. Worldviews give starting-points for inquiries, and therefore they are first accepted on faith. Accepting world-views on faith does not, however, lead to relativism. The world does not reduce to a world-view, and one cannot live according to an "anything goes" relativism in practice. Finally, in the first chapter Valk introduces five groups of worldviews and classifies them on a religious-secular continuum. These are capitalism, consumerism, exclusive humanism, spiritualism and monotheism. The immanent worldviews include capitalism, consumerism and varieties of exclusive humanism, like scientism. Religious worldviews divide into monotheistic and spiritual ones. Each worldview has six aspects: identity, culture, ultimate questions, ontology, epistemology and the application of universal values in particular cases.

The topic of the second chapter is the influence of one's *identity* on the formation of one's worldview. Valk's approach is causal, guided by the question: what kinds of factors cause one to have a particular outlook of the world and life? In his description, this includes features of one's personal identity e.g. gender, family, disabilities and education, social features including community, religion and economic status, and ethnic features including nationality, language and ethnicity. Valk's description of these causes firstly locates a person and her worldview in the context of social interactions and institutions, and then describes the life situation these institutions create: e.g. what it is like to be a Canadian in the world (34, 67-69), how going to a faith school affects one's outlook on life (45), and what kind of life a Newfoundland fisherman has due to his job and due to relationships in his community. (54)

The third chapter on *cultural aspects* of a worldview, is where Valk's approach shines. By building on Ninian Smart's (1998) aspects of religion he gives an account of the mentioned worldviews, capitalism, consumerism, exclusive humanism, spirituality and monotheism. Worldviews are then seen as having a grand narrative or a mythical aspect, like the story of progress in exclusive humanism (81), or doctrines, like the invisible hand in capitalism (91) and ethical teachings, like the Torah in Judaism (95). Additionally, worldviews include a ritual aspect, like the sun dances and spirit journeys of Indigenous spirituality, (105) and institutions which offer support to the world-view community: for example, shopping malls that welcome consumers (118-119). In sum, the descriptions of practices give an overarching account of the worldview, and the place of doctrines, narratives and moral teachings in the way of life that embodies the worldview.

The fourth chapter discusses *existential or ultimate questions* which worldviews have to answer. What is the meaning of life? What is human nature like? Is there a greater force? What is right, and what is wrong? What happens to people after death? The approach of the chapter is somewhat doxographic, but it also describes methods by which different worldviews answer these questions. For example, monotheist religions answer questions about human nature by emphasizing the interrelatedness of humans, God, and the earth through the Genesis narrative about the creation of man (132-134). However, the descriptions by Valk are often quite brief, as he goes through the answers to each of the questions one worldview at a time. At times, one gets the impression that the questions have been formulated from the point of view of a particular religious or spiritual worldview, but the discussion is still balanced.

The fifth chapter concerns *ontology and epistemology*, and it is perhaps the most problematic chapter in the book. The ontological question is: what kind of universe and cosmos do we live in? while the epistemological question is: what kinds of knowledge is there? Valk gives two possible answers to the question about the nature of reality and the cosmos: physicalism and metaphysicalism. He defines physicalism in a fairly standard way as: "The physical is the essence of all that exists and contains nothing beyond the physical - nothing supernatural." (179) The definition of metaphysicalism, however, is more problematic. Valk writes: "Metaphysicalism states that there is something beyond just physical matter; something beyond what we can directly access with our senses; hence *metaphysical*." (182). The latter definition sounds much more like dualism than metaphysics, which is defined as the "science which

investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature" (Met. IV:1). Valk also gives an account of recent debates in the science/religion field and in philosophy (187-192).

In the fifth chapter, Valk also defines the question of epistemology as "What can we know, and how can we know that we can know?" (197) In response he identifies six sources of knowledge: common sense, science, rational knowledge, revealed knowledge and Indigenous knowledge. The description of Indigenous communal, identity-involving and nature-oriented ways of knowing, offers an often-overlooked perspective to the epistemologies of different worldviews. However, by doing so, the discussion of knowledge, suffers from similar problems as the discussion of metaphysics. Valk seems to straightforwardly assume a Calvinist epistemology (205), and he uses "rational or propositional knowledge" to mean rational justification in general (202-204). As a reader, one gets the impression that Valk takes part in these philosophical debates by using non-standard definitions and a doxographic method, and the focus on worldview description gets lost.

The sixth chapter concerns the *application of universal norms* in particular cases. These norms concern ethical distinctions that are made by all world-views. All human beings and all worldviews make distinctions, e.g. between right and wrong, or honour and shame, but it is extremely controversial where one draws the line. Valk lists the UN's *Declaration of Human Rights*, religious scriptures, national constitutions and tradition as sources of universal ethical distinctions. These distinctions are then interpreted and put into practices through ethical debates. Valk gives social movements like the struggle against racism and political hot-button issues like abortion as examples. The focus is on the different belief-systems and interpretations in public ethical controversies, and not on an account of politics or how ethical controversies are politicized in the social situation and political system we have today.

The book has many strengths. It defines worldviews as frameworks for understanding ourselves, the world, for making moral judgments and orienting ourselves in the world (a perspective that the reviewer shares, see Pietarinen & Snellman 2024). The book highlights the intertwining of beliefs, actions and community in the framework of a worldview. It also emphasizes the role of faith and worldviews as starting-points for argumentation. The use of Smart's tools for the description of worldview practices also gives both a rich and a thick description of a wide range of different worldview traditions. The book also identifies interesting Big Questions and charts different answers given by the description of different worldviews. The emphasis on an Indigenous perspective points out an often-overlooked worldview.

Still, the book has some weaknesses. The greatest flaw is the mentioned doxographic and non-argumentative account of the philosophical disagreements between worldviews - especially when the writer at times seems to pick a side. The chapter on the *universal and particular*, concerns the politics of values, but it does not give an account of how disagreements about values are politicized. One could also argue that the choice of worldviews - capitalism, consumerism, exclusive humanism, spirituality and monotheism - is too narrow. For example, the book could well have taken up world-views like environmentalism, socialism or nationalism. Similarly, one

could argue that the category of spirituality is too broad, as it would cover such different worldviews as polytheism, the Eastern religions, philosophies like Platonism, and spiritual but not religious worldviews.

All in all, the book is a good descriptive account of different aspects of worldviews. It helps advance the field of worldview studies by its account of worldviews and descriptions of their practices.

## References

Aristotle: *Metaphysics*. Transl. by W.D. Ross. Published in McKeon, R. (ed.) (2001). *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York, NY: The Modern Library.

Naugle, D. (2002). *Worldview*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Pietarinen, A.-V. and Snellman, L. (2024). The Semiotic Roots of Worldviews. *Semiotica*. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/sem-2023-0170/html>.

Stenmark, M. (2022). Worldview Studies. *Religious Studies* 58(3), pp. 564 – 582.

## Copyright Information

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