

## ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

### 3. WHAT ARE SYSTEMS?

#### 3.1. Belief System

A belief system is a set of mutually supportive beliefs. The beliefs of any such system can be classified as religious, philosophical, ideological, or a combination of these. Philosopher Jonathan Glover says that beliefs are always part of a belief system, and that belief systems are difficult to completely revise. Glover believes that he and other philosophers ought to play some role in starting dialogues between people with deeply held, opposing beliefs, especially if there is risk of violence. Glover also believes that philosophy can offer insights about beliefs that would be relevant to such dialogue.

Glover suggests that beliefs have to be considered holistically, and that no belief exists in isolation in the mind of the believer. It always implicates and relates to other beliefs. Glover provides the example of a patient with an illness who returns to a doctor, but the doctor says that the prescribed medicine is not working. At that point, the patient has a great deal of flexibility in choosing what beliefs to keep or reject. Also, the patient could believe that the doctor is incompetent, that the doctor's assistants made a mistake, that the patient's own body is unique in some unexpected way, that Western medicine is ineffective, or even that Western science is entirely unable to discover truths about ailments.

Glover maintains that any person can continue to hold any belief if they would really like to (e.g., with help from ad hoc hypotheses). One belief can be held fixed, and other beliefs will be altered around it. Glover warns that some beliefs may not be entirely explicitly believed (e.g., some people may not realize they have racist belief systems adopted from their environment as a child). Glover believes that people tend to first realize that beliefs can change, and may be contingent on our upbringing, around age 12 or 15. Glover emphasizes that beliefs are difficult to change. He says that we may try to rebuild our beliefs on more secure foundations (axioms), like building a new house, but warns that this may not be possible. To Glover, belief systems are not like houses but are instead like boats. As Glover puts it: "Maybe the whole thing needs rebuilding, but inevitably at any point you have to keep enough of it intact to keep floating." Glover's final message is that if people talk about their beliefs, they may find more deep,

relevant, philosophical ways in which they disagree (e.g., less obvious beliefs, or more deeply held beliefs). Glover thinks that people often manage to find agreements and consensus through philosophy. He says that at the very least, if people do not convert each other, they will hold their own beliefs more open mindedly and will be less likely to go to war over conflicting beliefs.

### **3.2. Life Stance**

A person's life stance is their relation with what they accept as being of ultimate importance. It involves the presuppositions and theory of the beliefs, commitments and practice of working it out in living. It connotes an integrated perspective on reality as a whole and how to assign valuations, thus being a concept similar or equivalent to that of a worldview; with the latter word being generally a more common and comprehensive term. Like the term worldview, the term life stance is intended to be a *shared* label encompassing both religious perspectives, as well as non-religious spiritual or philosophical, without discrimination in favor of any.

Humanists interested in educational matters apparently coined the neologism life stance in the mid-1970s; Harry Stopes-Roe of the Rationalist Press Association and British Humanist Association developed the concept originally in that context. The term originally arose in the context of debates over the controversial content of the City of Birmingham's *Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*. That document referred to non-religious stances for living. According to Barnes: It was the first syllabus to abandon the aim of Christian nurture and to embrace a multi-faith, phenomenological model of religious education; and it was also the first syllabus to require a systematic study of non-religious stances for living, such as Humanism, and for such study to begin in the primary school. In the late 1980s Harry Stopes-Roe initiated a successful campaign for the adoption of the term by the International Humanist and Ethical Union and by other organizations. It was not an uncontroversial proposal among humanists.

Harry Stopes-Roe, who fought for the term's acceptance by the Humanist movement, defined life stance as the style and content of an individual's or a community's relationship with that which is of ultimate importance; the presuppositions and commitments of this, and the consequences for living which flow from it.

A life stance may be distinguished from general support of a cause by capitalization of the first letter. For instance, the life stance of Humanism is

distinguished from humanism generally. Many life stances may contain humanism to a greater or lesser extent as instrumental value in order to fulfill their own chosen intrinsic value(s). However, Humanism regards it as having intrinsic value. A life stance differs from a worldview or a belief system in that the term life stance emphasizes a focus on what is of ultimate importance.

***Religious Life Stances*** - A religion is a set of beliefs and practices, often centered upon specific supernatural and/or moral claims about reality, the cosmos, and human nature, and often codified as prayer, ritual, and law. Religion also encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, and mythology, as well as personal faith and mystic experience. The term religion refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction.

In the frame of European religious thought, religions present a common quality, the hallmark of patriarchal religious thought: the division of the world in two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane. Religion is often described as a communal system for the coherence of belief focusing on a system of thought, unseen being, person, or object, that is considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine, or of the highest truth. Moral codes, practices, values, institutions, tradition, philosophy, rituals, and scriptures are often traditionally associated with the core belief. Religion is also often described as a way of life.

***Non-Religious Life Stances*** - Alternatives to religion include life stances based on atheism, agnosticism, deism, skepticism, free thought, pantheism, secular humanism, spiritual but not religious (SBNR), Objectivism, existentialism, modern incarnations of Hellenistic philosophies, or general secularism.

***Humanism*** - Humanism is an example of life stance which may be considered to be religious (usually in a non-theistic, ethical sense) or non-religious or anti-religious. One of Stopes-Roe's reasons for advocating the adoption of life stance as a label for the Humanist movement, was his hope that it would end the arguments between the different sides as to how best to characterize their position. Humanists are divided into two camps... according to how they respond to the word religion. Do they respond negatively or positively? The ferocity of the antipathy on the one hand, and the power of the concern on the other, that is generated by this word quite obliterates reasoned discussion of many substantial and important questions on how we should develop Humanism. Likewise, our discussions with the god-religious are confused and frustrated. We need a new term for the idea and ideal of religion, opened out so that it is not discriminatory. Let this be life stance.

### 3.3. World View

A comprehensive world view is the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the entirety of the individual or society's knowledge and point of view. A world view can include natural philosophy; fundamental, existential, and normative postulates; or themes, values, emotions, and ethics. It is a concept fundamental to German philosophy and epistemology and refers to a wide world perception. Additionally, it refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs forming a global description through which an individual, group or culture watches and interprets the world and interacts with it.

The true founder of the idea that language and worldview are inextricable is the Prussian philologist, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt argued that language was part of the creative adventure of mankind. Culture, language and linguistic communities developed simultaneously, he argued, and could not do so without one another. In stark contrast to linguistic determinism, which invites us to consider language as a constraint, a framework or a prison house, Humboldt maintained that speech is inherently and implicitly creative. Human beings take their place in speech and continue to modify language and thought by their creative exchanges. World view remains a confused and confusing concept in English, used very differently by linguists and sociologists. It is for this reason that some suggests five subcategories: world-perceiving, world-conceiving, cultural mindset, personal world, and perspective.

Other writers regard world views as operating at a community level, or in an unconscious way. For instance, if one's worldview is fixed by one's language, one would have to learn or invent a new language in order to construct a new worldview.

A worldview is an ontology, or a descriptive model of the world. It should comprise these six elements:

- 1. An explanation of the world**
- 2. A futurology, answering the question "Where are we heading?"**
- 3. Values, answers to ethical questions: "What should we do?"**
- 4. A praxeology, or methodology, or theory of action: "How should we attain our goals?"**
- 5. An epistemology, or theory of knowledge: "What is true and false?"**
- 6. An etiology. A constructed world-view should contain an account of its own "building blocks," its origins and construction.**

***Philosophy*** - The philosophical importance of world views became increasingly clear during the 20th century for a number of reasons, such as increasing contact between cultures, and the failure of some aspects of the Enlightenment project, such as the rationalist project of attaining all truth by reason alone. Mathematical logic showed that fundamental choices of axioms were essential in deductive reasoning and that, even having chosen axioms not everything that was true in a given logical system could be proven. Some philosophers believe the problems extend to the inconsistencies and failures which plagued the Enlightenment attempt to identify universal moral and rational principles; although Enlightenment principles such as universal suffrage and the universal declaration of human rights are accepted, if not taken for granted, by many.

Philosophers also distinguish the manifest image from the scientific image. These phrases are due to the American 20th century philosopher Wilfrid Sellars. This is one angle on the ancient philosophical distinction between appearance and reality which is particularly pertinent to everyday contemporary living. Indeed, many believe that the scientific image, with its reductionist methodology, will undermine our sense of individual freedom and responsibility. So, many worry that as science advances, particularly cognitive neuroscience, we will be dehumanized. This certainly has powerful Nietzschean undertones. When our immediately given, manifest self-conception is shaken, what is lost for the individual and society? And does it have to be that way? Some questions well worth working on, then, are those concerning the refinement of the manifest view of such centrally important concepts such as free will, the self and individuality, and the possibility of real or lived meaning.

***Assessment and Comparison of Different World Views*** - One can think of a world view as comprising a number of basic beliefs which are philosophically equivalent to the axioms of the worldview considered as a logical theory. These basic beliefs cannot, by definition, be proven (in the logical sense) within the world view precisely because they are axioms, and are typically argued from rather than argued for. However their coherence can be explored philosophically and logically. If two different worldviews have sufficient common beliefs it may be possible to have a constructive dialogue between them. On the other hand, if different worldviews are held to be basically incommensurate and irreconcilable, then the situation is one of cultural relativism and would therefore incur the standard criticisms from philosophical realists. Additionally, religious believers might not wish to see their beliefs relativized into something that is only true for them. Subjective logic is a belief-reasoning formalism where beliefs explicitly are subjectively held by individuals but where a consensus between different

worldviews can be achieved. A third alternative sees the world view approach as only a methodological relativism, as a suspension judgment about the truth of various belief systems but not a declaration that there is no global truth.

The comparison of religious, philosophical or scientific world views is a delicate endeavor, because such world views start from different presuppositions and cognitive values. Finally, meta philosophical criteria for the comparison of worldviews, classifying them in three broad categories:

- 1. *Objective*: Objective consistency, scientificity, scope**
- 2. *Subjective*: Subjective consistency, personal utility, emotionality**
- 3. *Intersubjective*: intersubjective consistency, collective utility, narrativity**