



What is a worldview?

# A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

The word 'worldview' comes from German philosophy and literally signifies an all-inclusive 'vision of the world'. Nowadays, the word has a more generic cultural or geopolitical usage, often associated with an equivocal or indefinite meaning. Looking at its history, this paper intends to clarify the meaning and implications of the term. For such an analysis, two thinkers, Wilhelm Dilthey and Karl Jaspers, both of whom thematised the concept of *Weltanschauung* at the beginning of the 20th century, will be taken into account. What follows is a brief depiction of some peculiar and constitutive traits of the concept: the composite nature of it; the connection to life; and the both total and personal value of a worldview for the holder of it. This paper suggests that the potential conflictuality between contrary or competing worldviews is not accidental; rather, it is an aspect of such a conceptual constitution, at whose core is a delicate balance between internal strength and external challenge. This is what the paper calls 'the vitality paradox' of a worldview.

## WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW? A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

### One word, many questions

The word 'worldview' is the English translation of the German *Weltanschauung*. It comes from the field of philosophy and literally signifies an all-inclusive 'vision of the world'.

Many are the questions related to the concept of worldview and all come from one main question: What is a worldview? Is it something innate or artificial, naturally known or socially learned, intuitive or pedagogically transmitted? Does everybody need a worldview? Or, who actually needs a *Weltanschauung*?

If taken seriously, these questions are very difficult to answer - not even the philosophers seem to have been able to answer them, even though many of them have, throughout history, conceptualised big ideas that encapsulate and systematically order reality. In the cultural discourse it is not unusual to hear mentions about a Platonic, Marxist or 'the scientific' worldview.

The philosophical origin of the term may have caused initial resistance to the comprehension of it as it seemed speculative and unclear. Throughout the history, the plurality of philosophical systems has often caused scepticism towards philosophy in general and suspicions of irony or belittling of *Weltanschauungen* in particular. The word, as it is commonly used, has been and is still often associated with magniloquent promises and disproportional expectations; it is often considered an outmoded word promising a spiritual overlook. In everyday,

popular usage, it sounds abstract, pretentious and bombastic - as only certain philosophical words do. Is this feeling a reaction to the use of this word due to a lack of clear understanding of the concept? Is there equal difficulty in grasping the proper meaning of other words or phrases which could be hypothetically used instead of 'worldview', namely, culture, civilization, state of mind, *Zeitgeist* and idea or a system of ideas?

For one reason or another, each of these options seems incomplete and insufficient.

What, then, is a worldview?

### **Some suggestions from the history of the concept**

Moving from use of 'worldview' in popular language and the connected objections and questions, the assumption has to be formulated that a distinction has to be drawn between the common use of the word and the scientific, namely philosophical, meaning of it. The history of its scientific meaning begins in the German language with the philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) and includes the following sentence:

'The bare capability of thinking this infinite without contradiction requires in the human mind a faculty itself supersensible. For it is only by means of this faculty and its idea of a noumenon - which admits of no intuition, but which yet serves as a substrate for the intuition of the world, as a mere phenomenon - that the infinite of the world of sense, in the pure intellectual estimation of magnitude, can be completely comprehended under a concept although in the mathematical estimation of magnitude by means of concepts of number it can never be completely thought'. [*Das gegebene Unendliche aber dennoch ohne Widerspruch auch nur denken zu können, dazu wird ein Vermögen, das selbst übersinnlich dessen Idee eines Noumenons, welches selbst keine Anschauung verstattet, aber doch der Weltanschauung, als bloßer Erscheinung, zum Substrat untergelegt wird, wird das Unendliche der Sinnenwelt in der reinen intellectuellen Größenschätzung unter einem Begriffe ganz zusammengefaßt, obzwar es in der mathematischen durch Zahlenbegriffe nie ganz gedacht werden kann.* <sup>1]</sup>

What Kant wants to say here is that beyond the perception of the world objects and also beyond the numerical quantitative estimation of world objects, there is a comprehensive and imaginative faculty of human reason oriented towards the idea of unity. In this way, he indicates the faculty of the individual's imagination

1 I. Kant. 1790. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Bd. V: *Akademie Ausgabe von Immanuel Kants. Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin: Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902, B 92f., § 26.

to elaborate a comprehensive concept of the world being valid as the framework of all the phenomena they experience in and through it.

Since this first mention, the term *Weltanschauung* has existed and spread rapidly throughout everyday German language and abroad to foreign languages. 'By the 1840s it had become standard in the vocabulary of the educated German, denoting a global outlook on life and the world—akin to philosophy but without its rational pretensions. In the 1830s the notion of *Weltanschauung* began to penetrate other languages' and 'by the end of the nineteenth century (when the word reached a crescendo of popularity in the German-speaking world) it had made its way into virtually every speech community in the Western world'.<sup>2</sup>

The beginning of the 20th century marks a crucial point for the development of the concept of worldview. In the German-speaking (and thinking) world, many thinkers felt the need to address the meaning of a worldview, among them: Heinrich Rickert, Georg Simmel, Paul Natorp, Edmund Husserl, Nicolai Hartmann and Emil Lask. In 1911, Wilhelm Dilthey published *Die Typen der Weltanschauung und ihre Ausbildung in den metaphysischen Systemen*, which went on to become a reference text in the field. The year 1919 was an important year for the intellectual history of *Weltanschauung*, as it was the year that Martin Heidegger delivered his first lectures at the University of Freiburg with the title *The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview*.<sup>3</sup> That same year, Karl Jaspers published his book *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.

Jaspers was understandably influenced by Dilthey but he personalised the thinking about the *Weltanschauung* thanks to his education and professional competencies as a physician and psychologist. Jaspers wanted to describe different types of worldviews in order to create a sort of conceptual map of the possible worldviews and their basic grounds.<sup>4</sup>

Through Jaspers' work, it is possible to categorise some general traits that characterise the concept of a worldview as it has evolved over time. What Jaspers, like other interpreters and thinkers of that time, makes clear, is the all-inclusive character of a worldview, which implies and allows us to consider it as a whole.

At the beginning of his book Jaspers asks the same question that was asked at the beginning of this paper: What is a *Weltanschauung*? His answer is: 'It is something total and universal at the same time. [...] They [The worldviews] are the highest and total expressions of the human being, both from the point of view of the

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2 A.M. Wolters, *On the Idea of Worldview and its Relation to Philosophy*, in P. Marshall et al. (eds.) *Stained Glass*, University Press of America, 1983, pp 14-25, p. 15. For a detailed history of the concept see C.v. Wolzogen, 'Weltanschauung' Heidegger und die Begriffsgeschichte eines fragwürdigen Begriffs, in *Heidegger Studies*, vol. 13, *The Critical Threshold for Thinking at the End of Philosophy* (1997), pp. 123-142.

3 M. Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem (Auszug aus der Nachschrift Brecht)*, in *Heidegger Studies*, vol. 12, *Thinking in the Crossing toward the Arrival of 'Being'* (1996), pp. 9-14.

4 R. Garaventa, *All'origine dell'idea jaspersiana di Weltanschauung*, in *Discipline Filosofiche*, XXVII (2017) 1: *Karl Jaspers e la molteplicità delle visioni del mondo*, pp. 13-28, p. 16.

subject, as experiences, forces, feelings and from the point of view of the object, as worlds which have been moulded in an objective and concrete way'.<sup>5</sup>

This character of wholeness of worldview has many implications, four of which follow:

#### 1) A matter of life

More than the intellectual, theoretical and cognitive values of a worldview, Jaspers remarks, 'It is not a mere form of knowledge, but it shows itself through evaluation, through the hierarchical order of values which one chooses'.<sup>6</sup>

Evaluation, values and choice — these terms argue that a worldview embraces a set of beliefs, ideas, ideals, views, feelings and judgments which serve as grounds for the individual to orient themselves in the world.

The worldview brings order in the world of the subject by helping them to separate what is a life worthy for them and what is irrelevant, what is fitting for life and what is not. What emerges is the belief-oriented and pragmatic value of the individual's worldview. Thus, a worldview is needed not only to know but to live — it implies not only an assessment of the world, but it helps the human being to live meaningfully in it.

In more recent years, Mark Koltko-Rivera has spoken of the worldview as 'a belief system'.<sup>7</sup>

#### 2) A complex mix

According to the philosophical tradition, *Weltanschauung* is a compound of many parts, including attitudes and 'personality type' of the subject (active, contemplative, aesthetic, intuitive, rational, reflective, ascetic, hedonistic, enthusiastic or non-enthusiastic); different types of psychological, cultural and sensitive worldviews (mechanical, natural, historical, mythical) and a grounding 'metaphysical conception of the world' (how to think about the world with respect to a metaphysical entity). In particular, according to Jaspers and typical of his philosophy, a worldview also includes different world orientations, different reactions to life situations as the limit situations (death, fight, pain and guilty), different spiritual types (such as nihilism, scepticism, liberalism, authoritarian or the tendency to infinity). So, worldview is chosen not intellectually but existentially by the individual, by acting, feeling and living. As Jaspers declares: *Das Leben ist das Ganze*, 'life is all'.<sup>8</sup>

What is important to emphasise is the complex and composite nature of worldview, whose core elements are so highly interrelated that it is almost

5 K. Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919), Springer, now in *Karl Jaspers Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. I/6, ed. O. Immel, Schwabe Verlag, 2019, p. 23.

6 Ibid.

7 M.E. Koltko-Rivera, *The Psychology of Worldviews*, in *Review of General Psychology*, 2004, 8 (1), pp. 3-58, p. 4.

8 K. Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, cit., p. 292.



impossible to speak of one element independently of the others. The intellectual solidity and organic strength and efficaciousness of a worldview are proportional to the constitutive inner coherence and homogeneity between its parts.

This issue is more recently addressed by thinkers of psychology, who, by trying to classify the components of a worldview, take into account both the 'innate proclivities and the objective features of human worlds and lives'.<sup>9</sup> For this purpose, the following factors are listed: the self, the social and material world, epistemic presuppositions and limitations, evil and suffering, freedom of choice, the transience of life (the fact that we are exposed to the flow of time, which makes all the things contingent, transitory and relative), values and purposes.<sup>10</sup> In the end, a complex mix.

### 3) The individual and its world

Since a worldview is not only an intellectual order, it has the power to shape the world of the subject, providing them with grounds for life which make of them the person they actually are. The individuals *are their* worldviews. The involvement of the individual in their worldview is justified by the fact that the worldview works as a source of meaning for them. Each valid worldview is always a personal one.

More precisely, one's worldview is not something exterior, falling from outside over the subject and fixing their life; instead, it develops together with the subject and its emergence and growth are conditioned through the tuned correspondence between the interior and the exterior world of the subject. This correspondence exists when the two components which are implied by a worldview — that is, according to Jaspers, 'both the concrete existence of the soul seen as a whole and the rational doctrines, the imperatives, the objective images which the subject expresses, applies and uses to account for it'<sup>11</sup> — tally together.

Eventually, a worldview acquires so much validity and objectivity that it becomes the solid reality of the subject, who gains in this way a real basis for life, for the experiences of life and for action in the world.

### 4) Concreteness and authenticity: claim and paradox

In his analysis, Karl Jaspers observes that all *Weltanschauungen* are not abstract conceptualisations of the world. Rather, they are concrete; they have content. This content reveals itself in objective historical manifestations including religious doctrines, scientific theories, moral principles or an ethical canon, social habits, past interpretations, mythological narratives and so on.

All of these are outcomes of a process of objectification by which the inner life of the human being moves outside into the world. Without objective, historical and

9 A. Nilson, *The Psychology of Worldviews: toward a Non-reductive Science of Personality*, Lund University, p.79.

10 Ivi, pp. 79-91.

11 K. Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, cit., p. 52.

communicable manifestations, it is as if those life forces engendering and pervading a worldview do not exist.

In line with this view, Jaspers observes: 'A worldview, which in itself is unique, comes in communication with other worldviews by fighting, understanding and discussing; by showing itself as incomplete throughout the time, it moves on and evolves.'<sup>12</sup> A worldview defines itself through a relationship with others. And relationships vary and are not always peaceful and untroubled.

At the level of the historical manifestation of the worldview's content, the potential rivalry and conflictuality between contrary or competing worldviews may develop. In fact, the more individuals identify themselves with the content of a worldview, the stronger their attachment to the content is. This attachment, often displayed by the people who share a worldview, reveals their need for a conceptual framework providing them with an order of meaning and a set of beliefs. Just having this need makes them ready to claim their own worldview along with the willingness to defend, if necessary, its content. Even if worldviews can show different degrees of conflictuality and tolerance, that tension is not accidental or conditioned to the type of worldview or its content. It is intrinsically related to the complex nature of the worldview which is in itself — as Jaspers explains — 'something total and universal at the same time'.

The risk of conflictuality connected to the degree of authenticity of a worldview is the 'vitality paradox'. Paradoxically, the mutual conflictuality between worldviews may signify their internal strength and respective vitality. This risk is constitutive for any worldview and any worldview, regardless of how much different its content can be, may come to the point of being challenged by competing beliefs and visions of the world. Here the work of the negotiator can begin.

<sup>12</sup> K. Jaspers, *Philosophie I: Philosophische Weltorientierung*, Berlin, Springer, 1932, p. 244.