WHAT'S YOUR WORLD VIEW?

AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH TO LIFE'S BIG QUESTIONS

James N. Anderson

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Introduction

Have you ever read one of the "Choose Your Own Adventure" (CYOA) books? The basic idea behind them is ingenious. Rather than telling a story from a traditional third-person perspective, with a linear storyline and a pre-determined ending, a CYOA book has an "interactive storyline" in which the reader acts as the main character and determines the plot by making decisions at key points. CYOA books are sometimes called "game books" because reading one is like playing a game. Each book has many possible endings—some happy, some not so happy—but the outcome always depends crucially on *your* choices.

For example, on one page of a CYOA book you might find a belligerent goblin standing in your way. Do you try to flatter him into letting you pass or do you use the mysterious magic potion you picked up on page 12? If you choose the flattery strategy, you turn to page 22; if the potion, you turn instead to page 31. On one of these two pages, the adventure continues unabated. On the other page, things pan out a whole lot better for the hook-nosed green dude than for you. (Now you're dying to know which page was which. Exciting stuff, isn't it?)

This book is similar to a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book in some ways and very different in other ways. The similarity is that it's not meant to be read sequentially from cover to cover. (Please don't try to do that—you'll find it very confusing!) Instead, you're invited to make key decisions or choices at a number of points in order to determine the outcome. It's not really a "game book," but there's still a sense in which you're a "player." How things turn out in the end really depends on *you*.

I'll be the first to admit that this book may not be quite as exciting and entertaining as a CYOA book, but what it deals with is far

more important—one might even say *infinitely* more important. I hope you'll agree once you get into it. In this book, rather than choosing an adventure, you'll end up choosing a *worldview*.

What in the World Is a Worldview?

You may have come across the word *worldview* before, but don't be put off if you haven't. I'll try to define the term clearly and explain why it's such an important concept.

Just as the word itself suggests, a worldview is an overall view of the world. It's not a *physical* view of the world, like the sight of planet Earth you might get from an orbiting space station. Rather, it's a *philosophical* view of the world—and not just of our planet, but of all of reality. A worldview is an all-encompassing perspective on everything that exists and matters to us.

Your worldview represents your most fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the universe you inhabit. It reflects how you would answer all the "big questions" of human existence, the fundamental questions we ask about life, the universe, and everything.

Is there a God? If so, what is God like and how do I relate to God? If there isn't a God, does it matter? What is truth and can anyone really know the truth anyway? Where did the universe come from and where is it going—if anywhere? What's the meaning of life? Does my life have a purpose—and, if so, what is it? What am I supposed to do with my life? What does it mean to live a *good* life? Does it really matter in the end whether or not I live a good life? Is there life after death? Are humans basically just smart apes with superior hygiene and fashion sense—or is there more to us than that?

You get the idea. Your worldview directly influences how you answer those kinds of big questions—or how you *would* answer them if you were asked and gave them some thought.

Worldviews are like belly buttons. Everyone has one, but we don't talk about them very often. Or perhaps it would be better to say that worldviews are like cerebellums: everyone has one and we can't live without them, but not everyone *knows* that he has one.

A worldview is as indispensable for thinking as an atmosphere

is for breathing. You can't think in an intellectual vacuum any more than you can breathe without a physical atmosphere. Most of the time, you take the atmosphere around you for granted: you look *through* it rather than *at* it, even though you know it's always there. Much the same goes for your worldview: normally you look through it rather than directly at it. It's essential, but it usually sits in the background of your thought.

Your worldview shapes and informs your experiences of the world around you. Like a pair of spectacles with colored lenses, it affects what you see and how you see it. Depending on the "color" of the lenses, you see some things more easily, while other things are deemphasized or distorted. In some cases, you don't see things at all.

Here are a few examples to illustrate how your worldview affects the way you see things. Suppose that one day a close friend tells you that she recently met with a spiritualist who put her in touch with a loved one who died ten years ago. Later that day, you read an article about a statue of the Virgin Mary that witnesses claim to have seen weeping blood. You also hear a news story on the radio about possible signs of complex organic life discovered on Mars. Your worldview—your background assumptions about God, the origin and nature of the universe, human beginnings, life after death, and so forth—strongly influences how you interpret these reports and react to them.

Worldviews also largely determine people's opinions on matters of ethics and politics. What you think about abortion, euthanasia, same-sex relationships, public education, economic policy, foreign aid, the use of military force, environmentalism, animal rights, genetic enhancement, and almost any other major issue of the day depends on your underlying worldview more than anything else.

As you can see, then, worldviews play a central and defining role in our lives. They shape what we believe and what we're willing to believe, how we interpret our experiences, how we behave in response to those experiences, and how we relate to others.

I hope by now you have a good sense of what a worldview is and why it's so significant. As I said earlier, this book is about choosing a

worldview rather than choosing an adventure (although I like to think there's something quite adventurous about reflecting deeply on all the big questions). Strictly speaking, however, in this book you're not so much *choosing* a worldview as *identifying* your worldview, because you already have a worldview, even if you didn't realize it. So one of the purposes of this book is to help you identify and clarify your worldview and its implications.

Nevertheless, what you read here may also prompt you to reconsider your worldview—perhaps even to change it. It isn't easy for someone to change his or her worldview—it can be like relocating to another continent, intellectually speaking—but it can and does happen. For example, the novelist C. S. Lewis famously moved from an Atheist worldview to a Theist worldview, partly through discussions with his colleague and friend J. R. R. Tolkien. But even if you stick with your current worldview, this book will give you the opportunity to explore a number of alternative worldviews, all of which are (or have been) held by real people at some time and place.

Here are the main goals of this book:

- To help you identify and clarify your worldview.
- To encourage you to consider the big questions and to think through some of the implications of various answers.
- To help you appreciate that there are important differences between worldviews—and that not all worldviews are created equal! (I'll say more about this last point in a moment.)

How Does the Book Work?

You'll be presented with a series of questions that are designed to be answered yes or no. (Don't worry if you're not really sure how to answer a particular question. Just go with the answer that best reflects your current beliefs, the answer that seems to you most likely to be true. You can always go back and choose a different answer later if you want to.) The question will be stated in a box at the top of the page, and the rest of the page will give an explanation of the question to make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked.

Depending on your answer to the question, you'll be directed to another page, where you'll find one of the following:

- A brief commentary on your answer and its implications.
- A further question, to narrow down the remaining options.
- A final worldview page.

The last of these will have "Worldview" in the page heading. If you land on one of these pages, you've hit the end of the trail you have followed. There you'll find a summary of the type of worldview you have, based on all the answers you gave, along with some commentary designed to provoke further thought. You'll also have the option to go back up the trail, so to speak, by returning to one of the earlier question pages.

As I mentioned at the beginning, one of the features of a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book is that not all of the possible storylines have happy endings. Often a poor choice leads to a short and sticky end. Your choices have consequences: sometimes fatal consequences! In a manner of speaking, the same goes for the different outcomes in this book. Some worldviews have more serious problems than others. Some walk with a pronounced limp. Some have failing organs. Some are mortally wounded. A few are simply "dead on arrival"! In each case, I'll point out a few of these problems, but I'll leave it to you to make the final diagnosis and prognosis.

Let's go back to the encounter with the goblin for a moment. In fact, going back is exactly what you would do, I suspect, if you made a poor choice the first time you met the goblin. I know I would! If I got squished, I'd flip back to the earlier page and take a different path. I'm pretty sure that's what most readers of CYOA books do when their stories come to abrupt and undesirable ends. Is that cheating? Not at all. It's just getting your money's worth from the book!

I want to encourage you to approach this book in much the same way. If you don't like the outcome of your answers to the questions, please feel free to flip back to the previous question, or to an even earlier one, and follow a *different* path. I want you to get your money's

worth! In fact, I hope you'll be intrigued enough to explore *every* path in the book, along with the worldviews at the ends of all those paths, because that will help you to gain an even better understanding of your own worldview.

There's one other issue I should mention before we get started. Since everyone has a worldview, I have my own worldview, too, of course. I'm not going to tell you which worldview that is, but I haven't tried to disguise it. You should be able to figure it out by exploring the different "storylines" in the book and reflecting on my comments on each worldview.

Does that mean the whole book is biased? Well, sure! But if you think about it, that's unavoidable. Since everyone has a worldview, everyone has a bias. All of us are naturally biased toward our own worldviews and all of us tend to interpret and evaluate the world in accordance with our worldviews. So do I have a bias? Yes, of course—but so do you!

The real issue isn't whether we have biases—we all do—but whether we're aware of them and able to think critically about them. In a certain sense, each of us can step into someone else's worldview, just as we can step into someone else's house, to examine it "from the inside" and to compare it with our own. I've tried to represent other worldviews fairly in this book: to summarize them accurately and to be realistic about their strengths and weaknesses. Even if you think I've failed in some cases, I hope you will nonetheless learn something useful along the way and benefit from thinking about these important matters.

No doubt this book will raise a number of questions in your mind. I've tried to anticipate the most common questions and provide answers in the appendix.

Well, that's more than enough introduction!

Are you ready to begin the "adventure"? If so, just turn the page.

The Freedom Question

DO YOU HAVE THE POWER TO MAKE *FREE* CHOICES?

Chips or salad? Diet Coke or Dr Pepper? Dine-in or take-out?

It's a basic fact of human life that we make choices. We make them all the time—sometimes so effortlessly and so subtly that we don't even notice it. For example, you chose to start reading this book. By continuing to read it, you're implicitly choosing not to do something else right now. Before this day is over, you'll make hundreds more choices.

But are those choices *free*? That's one of the most enduring questions in the history of human thought. Some philosophers have said that we do make free choices, while others have denied it. Still others have said that our choices are free in some senses but not free in others.

There's a sense in which even a computer makes choices. For instance, it chooses the best time to run maintenance services (usually when the computer is idle). Nevertheless, we don't usually think of a computer as making *free* choices, the kind of choices that are made by a thoughtful, self-conscious, morally responsible agent. It's just a machine following its programming.

But what about *you*? Are your choices just the stimulus-response outputs of a neurological computer (also known as your brain)? Or are they the free choices of a morally responsible agent?

Do you have the power to make *free* choices?

If you answered yes to the Freedom Question, go to page 12.
If you answered no to the Freedom Question, go to page 12.

A Joke with a Serious Point

Forgive me! I couldn't resist beginning with a little philosophical humor. As you probably realized, you were directed to this page no matter how you answered the Freedom Question.

But there's a serious point here, too. One of our most basic human intuitions is that we, unlike computers and robots, have the ability to make free choices in life: to deliberate about our options and to select between different courses of action. What's more, we're often held morally responsible for our choices (and rightly so). You may be reading this book simply for entertainment, but how you decide to answer the questions, and how you respond to what you subsequently read, is, in a very important sense, *up to you*. And how you choose to respond may well have important implications for your life and the lives of others.

So press on! Consider carefully how you would answer the questions and take responsibility for the choices you make and their implications for your worldview.

Of course, some readers of this book may still want to insist that in reality none of us make any free choices and none of us are morally responsible for our choices, despite our strong intuitions to the contrary. If that's what you really think, it's going to be difficult to change your mind at this point.

But on one level, that doesn't matter for the purposes of this book. After all, you've already made the choices to pick up the book and to read this far, even if those weren't *free* choices. In the same way, you can choose to *continue* to read: to answer the questions and to reflect further on your worldview.

For the time being, I'm happy to settle for that.

Now continue to page 13.

The Truth Question

IS THERE *ANY* OBJECTIVE TRUTH?

"It's all relative, isn't it?"

Some people believe—or at least claim to believe—that all truth is relative. They say that what's true for one person need not be true for another person, or that what's true for people in one culture (e.g., a Jewish community in New York) needn't be true for people in another culture (e.g., a Buddhist community in Tibet). Such folk often insist that truth isn't something "out there" to be discovered; rather, truth is something we choose or create for ourselves. Truth is always "inside" us rather than "outside" us.

So, for example, while the statement "There is a God" may be true for some people, it doesn't have to be true for everyone. What's true is always *relative* to a person's particular viewpoint, context, or culture. So we shouldn't speak about *the* truth, as though truth is the same for everyone. Rather, we should speak about *my* truth, *your* truth, *their* truth, and so on.

In contrast, other people insist that many truths—including the most important truths—are *objectively* true. There are some things that are just true period, regardless of what anyone happens to think, hope, or feel about those matters. (As they sometimes say, "The truth hurts!") These objective truths are true for everyone, everywhere, because they're based on objective facts about reality that are independent of human ideas, desires, and feelings. According to this view, it makes no sense to say that the statement "There is a God" could be true for me but not true for you. Either it's true or it isn't: end of story.

But which position do you take? Is there *any* objective truth?

If you answered yes to the Truth Question, go to page 14.
If you answered no to the Truth Question, go to page 27.

The Knowledge Question

IS IT POSSIBLE TO *KNOW* THE TRUTH?

It's little use having millions of dollars in the bank if you can't *access* that money. In the same way, objective truth is little use to us if we can't *access* it—if we can't know, with some degree of confidence, just what that truth is. If the truth is unknowable, if it's always beyond our grasp, there might as well be no truth at all. We'd be wasting our time by trying to pursue it.

Most people would agree that we have intellectual faculties, such as reason and perception, which allow us to investigate matters of interest to us and to discover the truth about those matters. Even if we don't have absolute certainty about most things, we can still know a great deal about ourselves and the world around us by using our intellectual faculties in responsible ways. For example, most educated folk would say they know that Mount Everest is the highest peak in the world, even though, strictly speaking, it's possible to be mistaken about something like that.

Other people, however, take a much lower view of the human mind. They insist that even if there is objective truth about important matters, no one can really know what it is. Everyone has his own opinions, and some of those opinions may happen to be true, but no one's opinions are more or less reasonable than anyone else's. Certainly no one has any right to say she *knows* the truth. We're all mired in ignorance, and the sooner we accept that the better.

Which side do you take on this issue?

Is it possible to *know* the truth—at least *some* truth?

If you answered yes to the Knowledge Question, go to page 15.
If you answered no to the Knowledge Question, go to page 29.

The Goodness Question

IS ANYTHING *OBJECTIVELY* GOOD OR BAD?

"That was a good meal!" "Bush was a bad president." "I'm sure you did the right thing." "Abortion is always wrong." "Osama bin Laden was an evil man." "The invasion of Iraq wasn't justified."

All of these statements involve value judgments of some kind or another. They don't simply state facts in a disinterested way; rather, they make evaluations of the facts. They make judgments that certain things are "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," "justified" or "unjustified."

All of us make value judgments all the time. Some are very significant, others not so much. Either way, value judgments are an essential feature of human life.

But is anything *objectively* valuable? Is anything *objectively* good in the sense that it is a good thing *period*, regardless of what anyone happens to think, hope, or feel about it?

Some people believe that all value judgments are ultimately relative or subjective; that they're no more than expressions of human preferences, either personal preferences or cultural preferences. On this view, nothing is *intrinsically* good or bad. Instead, we *make* things valuable by projecting our desires, tastes, and goals onto the world.

Other people insist that some things—such as marital love and musical skill—are *objectively* good, while other things—such as rape and child abuse—are *objectively* bad. Their goodness or badness isn't ultimately a matter of personal or cultural preferences.

Which view do you take? Is anything *objectively* good or bad?

If you answered yes to the Goodness Question, go to page 16.
If you answered no to the Goodness Question, go to page 23.

The Religion Question

IS THERE MORE THAN ONE VALID RELIGION?

There's a bewildering diversity of religion in our world, and we're more aware of it than ever. Encyclopedias are devoted to documenting the ever-increasing number of religious faiths and ideologies, some of which are quite obscure. By most estimates, there are around twenty religions (or families of religions) that have more than one million adherents. Whatever else you might think about religion, it's clear that humans have a natural religious impulse.

But what do we make of this diversity? Some simply insist that all religions are misguided. (Atheists usually take this view.) Others want to say that *at most* one religion can be valid. For example, Christians often claim that Christianity is the only true religion, while Muslims say the same for Islam, and so forth.

An increasingly popular view, however, is that *more than one* religion can be valid. According to this view, Hinduism is right for some people; Buddhism works for other people; Judaism for still others; and so on. By the same logic, some people might not be suited to any religion at all.

On this way of thinking, the different religions represent diverse but equally valid perspectives on the ultimate reality. Sometimes the analogy is used of a group of blind men encountering an elephant. One feels the trunk and says, "It's like a snake!" Finding a tusk, another says, "It's like a spear!" A third grasps the tail and says, "It's like a rope!" The conclusions are vastly different, but none of them is more or less right than the others. Each man interprets the whole according to his own individual (and limited) perspective. So the major world religions, some argue, are like those men feeling the elephant.

Do you agree? Is there more than one valid religion?

If you answered yes to the Religion Question, go to page 25.
If you answered no to the Religion Question, go to page 17.

The God Question

IS THERE A GOD?

This is the big one. You knew it was coming. The God Question is undoubtedly one of the most important questions to ask, because it marks a major fork in the road when it comes to worldviews. How you answer the God Question has enormous implications for how you understand yourself, your relation to others, and your place in the universe. Remarkably, however, many people in the West today don't give this question nearly the attention it deserves; they live as though it doesn't really matter to everyday life. As the rest of this book will show, that kind of indifference is a big mistake.

But what exactly is this question asking? What precisely do we mean by "God"? Definitions are crucial here, because often people who claim to believe in God have very different conceptions of God.

For the purposes of this question, and to keep things relatively simple for now, let's define "God" in fairly broad terms. We can nail down the details later on, such as whether God is a personal being, whether God has communicated with human beings, and whether there is only one God.

So here's our question spelled out more precisely: Is there a Supreme Being that deserves our worship and gives meaning, purpose, and direction to the universe and to human life? (If you think more than one being meets this description, you should answer yes to the God Question for now.)

If you answered yes to the God Question, go to page 21.
If you answered no to the God Question, go to page 19.

Atheist Worldviews

Atheism is simply the view that there is no God, no Supreme Being that deserves our worship and gives meaning and direction to the universe and human life. (Atheism shouldn't be confused with agnosticism, which is the view that there may or may not be a God, but we don't know or can't know either way.) Atheism has been a minority view in human history, and remains so today, even in supposedly secular societies. Still, that fact alone doesn't mean that it's wrong. The real issue is whether Atheism makes better overall sense of the world than the alternatives.

It's often said that there is no Atheist *worldview*, because Atheism is only a negative claim ("There is no God") and because Atheists can have widely differing views on other important matters. Even so, we can say that there are Atheist *worldviews*—in other words, there are a number of worldviews that answer no to the God Question. The remaining questions will help us to differentiate between these Atheist worldviews.

Precisely because Atheist worldviews share the belief that there is no God, they share a troublesome problem. Earlier you answered yes to the Goodness Question: you agreed that at least some things are *objectively* good or bad, not merely a matter of human tastes or preferences. If there is a God, this affirmative answer makes perfect sense. As the Supreme Being, God is the ultimate standard of goodness in the universe; God, we might say, is the ultimate good. Whatever conforms to God is good and praiseworthy. God is thus the ultimate basis for the distinction between good and evil.

Obviously this explanation isn't open to the Atheist. Indeed, one of the toughest challenges Atheist worldviews face is explaining how anything can be objectively good or bad if there's no God to serve as the ultimate standard of goodness. The same goes for objective meaning and purpose: if there's no God, then it seems that the universe can have no ultimate meaning, purpose, or direction. The universe just is what it is and does what it does; there's really no good or bad about it, objectively speaking.

For these very reasons, many Atheist thinkers bite the bullet and give up altogether the idea that anything is objectively good or bad, along with the idea that the universe has any ultimate significance. In other words, they argue that a consistent Atheist should also be a Nihilist (see page 23).

But since you answered yes to the Goodness Question, you must think these Atheists are mistaken. So where exactly does their reasoning go wrong? The challenge is to explain how Atheism can avoid being dragged into the black hole of Nihilism.

To reconsider the God Question, go to page 17.
To reconsider the Religion Question, go to page 16.
To reconsider the Goodness Question, go to page 15.
Otherwise, continue to page 31.

Theist Worldviews

Theism, as I'm defining it here, is simply the belief that there is a God: there is at least one divine being. For our purposes, we will treat Theism as a fairly broad category, one that allows for various conceptions of God and even for the possibility that there are many gods. In other words, there are various Theist worldviews, and the differences between them turn out to be extremely significant. The remaining questions will help us to narrow down the field and to identify more precisely *which* Theist worldview you hold.

It's worth noting at this point that your answers to the previous questions fit very nicely with one another. For example, you answered yes to the Goodness Question: you believe that there is a real, objective distinction between good and evil. It's widely recognized that Theist worldviews can account for this distinction far more easily than Atheist worldviews. If there's a real objective distinction between good and evil, then there must be an ultimate standard of goodness in the universe—and that ultimate standard is simply God.

Goodness, in the final analysis, is *godliness*: to be good is to be in conformity with God. As noted earlier, without God as the ultimate good, it's very hard to justify the claim that "good" and "bad" are anything above and beyond mere human tastes and preferences. So Theism has a distinct advantage over Atheism on this point.

Nevertheless, Theism faces challenges of its own. Arguably the greatest challenge that Theist worldviews face is the problem of evil. If there really is a God, why is there so much evil in the world? In fact, why is there evil *at all*? It's important to realize that Theists have addressed this problem in very different ways depending on their views of God. Exactly what you think God is like, and how you think God relates to the world, determines how—and how well—you're able to account for the existence of evil in the world.

The problem of evil is a formidable challenge for Theists, and they have penned thousands of books over the centuries as they have wrestled with the perplexing questions it raises. Even so, Theists often

point out to their Atheist critics that they'd much rather face the lesser problem of accounting for evil than the greater problem of accounting for *both* good *and* evil! (For more on this point, pay a short visit to page 19—but don't forget to come back here!)

To reconsider the God Question, go to page 17.
To reconsider the Religion Question, go to page 16.
To reconsider the Goodness Question, go to page 15.
Otherwise, continue to page 31.

Worldview: Nihilism

Nihilism (from the Latin word *nihil*, meaning "nothing") is the view that there are no objective values: nothing is really good or bad in any objective sense. In particular, there are no objective *moral* values. According to Nihilism, nothing is ultimately right or wrong, good or bad, justified or unjustified. What's more, there is no objective purpose or meaning in human life or the universe at large. There's simply no right or wrong way to live your life. Whatever you choose to do is just as valuable—or, rather, just as *valueless*—as anything else you might choose to do.

For the bona fide Nihilist, if you were to put down this book and throw yourself off the nearest tall building, that decision would be no better or worse, in any objective sense, than continuing to read this book. Ultimately, it really doesn't matter one way or the other. You may *prefer* to do one rather than the other (I hope it's the second option!), but for the Nihilist, no human preference is more or less valuable than any other human preference.

According to Nihilism, then, everything just is what it is: end of story. There's no right or wrong about it. Beyond our arbitrary personal preferences, there's nothing good to pursue and nothing bad to avoid. Our moral questions literally have no real answers. As the Cole Porter song famously put it, "Anything goes!"

Nihilism clearly isn't a very attractive or appealing viewpoint, but that doesn't mean that it isn't true. Indeed, often the truth turns out to be quite different than we want it to be! Nevertheless, Nihilism faces two formidable objections that make it very hard to accept on a rational basis.

The first objection is that Nihilism conflicts with our strongest moral intuitions. Most people recognize that some things are just plain wrong, no matter what. For example, torturing and murdering children for sadistic pleasure is *objectively* wrong. Even if everyone in the world enjoyed it and wanted to do it, it would still be wrong. Some moral values really are independent of human preferences.

Of course, the Nihilist might insist that our moral intuitions are completely unreliable and should be disregarded. But we would need to have *very* good reasons to dismiss such strong and widely held intuitions. Are there reasons to embrace Nihilism that are more obvious to us than our moral intuitions? And if our *moral* intuitions are so thoroughly misleading, why should we trust any of our *other* intuitions? Why should we trust our *rational* intuitions? Nihilism threatens to undermine our rationality just as much as it undermines our morality.

This leads to a second and even more devastating objection to Nihilism: it's self-defeating. Presumably the Nihilist thinks that it's *rational* to accept Nihilism. (Why would you believe something if you thought it wasn't rational to believe it?) But when we say that a belief is "rational," we're making a value judgment about it, at least implicitly. When we distinguish between rational beliefs and irrational beliefs, we're essentially distinguishing between good beliefs and bad beliefs. But if Nihilism is true, there's nothing objectively good or bad about any beliefs! Whatever you happen to believe is just as valuable or, rather, just as valueless as anything else you might believe.

Therefore, a truly consistent Nihilist should say that there's no objective distinction between rational beliefs and irrational beliefs. When it comes to beliefs, as with morality, "Anything goes!"

So if you're a consistent Nihilist, why do you believe Nihilism? Whatever explanation you give, it can't have anything to do with trying to be rational in your beliefs.

You've reached the end of the trail. However:

To reconsider the Goodness Question, go to page 15.

Worldview: Pluralism

Pluralism is the view that there is more than one valid religion. There is an ultimate reality, but no single religion has a monopoly on the truth about that reality. Each religion represents a different but legitimate perspective on it. Each religion has a distinctive understanding of "God," "truth," "enlightenment," "salvation," and so on, and they are all valid. In the same way, Pluralism insists that no single religion holds a monopoly on how we are to be "saved." As an ancient saying puts it, "There are many paths up the mountain."

Pluralism is a relative newcomer in the history of worldviews, but it's becoming increasingly widespread, particularly as people grow tired of religious violence and intolerance. Pluralism advocates a "live and let live" attitude, promoting tolerance toward all religious traditions (or at least toward *most* of them).

Appealing as it may seem in our day, Pluralism faces some serious problems. First, there's the fact that the major religions make central claims that are logically incompatible. Christianity teaches that Jesus was the divine Son of God, but Islam explicitly and vehemently rejects that claim. Judaism holds that God is personal, but many forms of Hinduism teach that God is non-personal. Some forms of Buddhism affirm no God at all. Clearly these aren't minor disagreements that can be swept under the carpet! These distinctive teachings lie at the very heart of these religions.

Even so, Pluralists think they have an answer to this problem. They often suggest that such conflicts can be resolved by taking all these religious claims *figuratively* rather than *literally*. For example, when Christians say "the Bible is the Word of God," we shouldn't interpret it as a claim that God literally speaks to people through the Bible. It's only a figurative way of saying that Christians happen to find reading the Bible spiritually edifying and enlightening—or something along those lines. Understood in that figurative sense, the sacred scriptures of the major religions could all be described as "the Word of God." No more conflicts!

The trouble with this line is that it doesn't accurately reflect what the adherents of those religions themselves mean by these claims. In effect, Pluralists are suggesting that Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and so on are actually quite mistaken about how to understand their own religions. Are we to believe that they have less understanding of the teachings of their own religions than modern Pluralists?

Think again about the analogy of the blind men and the elephant. (If you need a reminder, flip back to page 16.) Doesn't the analogy imply not only that traditional religious believers are actually quite mistaken about the overarching truth, but also that the Pluralist *alone* has the full and correct view of the ultimate reality in his role as the narrator of the story? It suggests that the Pluralist has a uniquely privileged insight that everyone else lacks.

On closer examination, Pluralism turns out to be just as "exclusive" and "intolerant" as many traditional religions, if not more so, simply because it cannot accommodate any religion that rejects its distinctive perspective on religion. If Pluralism is right, other religions must be quite wrong. So much for "live and let live"! By excluding non-Pluralist religions, Pluralism exposes itself as just one more religious viewpoint in competition with all the others.

In the end, it's hard to defend the view that there are *many* valid religions. The conflicting teachings of the major world religions can't be harmonized without distorting those religions beyond recognition. At least some of these religious teachings must be mistaken, which means that some religions have a better handle on the truth about the ultimate reality than others. In fact, it's reasonable to suppose that one particular religion has the *best* handle on the truth, all things considered.

So the question becomes: Which one?

You've reached the end of the trail. However:

To reconsider the Religion Question, go to page 16.

Worldview: Relativism

Relativism is the view that there is no *objective* truth. According to Relativism, there are no beliefs or claims that are simply true period, regardless of what anyone happens to think, hope, or feel about them.

Relativists insist that what we call "truth" is always *relative* to something else. There are basically two kinds of Relativist. The first kind—the Subjectivist—claims that truth is always relative to the individual person. So the Subjectivist talks about what's "true for me" and what's "true for you"—and these two "truths" needn't be the same. For example, while it may be true for me that the universe has meaning and purpose, it might not be true for you.

The second kind of Relativist—the Cultural Relativist—doesn't claim that truth is relative to the individual person, but he does claim that it is relative to that person's culture or society. So the Cultural Relativist might talk about what was "true for the ancient Greeks" as opposed to what is "true for modern Americans"—and those two "truths" needn't be the same. Or he might talk about what is true for people in different religious communities. For example, while it may be "true for Christians" that Jesus is God, it isn't "true for Buddhists."

It's important to understand that Relativism (of both kinds) isn't saying only that people have different beliefs or ideas. It isn't claiming merely that what one person or culture thinks is true may not be the same as what some other person or culture thinks is true. No one would deny that! Relativists are making a far more radical and controversial claim, namely, that *truth itself* varies from person to person or from culture to culture. In other words, a genuine Relativist denies even that there are objective facts about reality that must be the same for everyone, everywhere. For the full-fledged Relativist, "facts" are just as relative as "truths."

Relativism is surprisingly widespread in our day, but in all its forms it faces two crippling problems. The first is that it flies in the face of our basic intuitions about truth. How credible is it to think, for example, that the statement "Dynamite is explosive" could be true

for some people but not for others? (Would you be willing to put that theory to the test?) Could a statement such as "The planet Earth has one moon" really be true for people in one culture but not for people in another culture?

Surely the same principle applies to religious claims such as "The universe was created by a personal God" and "God has spoken through human prophets." Either they're true or they're not true. Whether those claims are true or not depends on objective facts about reality, not on personal opinions or cultural conventions.

The second and even more serious problem is that Relativism is self-defeating. There's no way to be a *consistent* Relativist. Just consider the basic claim of Relativism: "There is no objective truth." Is that claim *itself* supposed to be objectively true? If so, it obviously contradicts itself! But if the basic claim of Relativism *isn't* objectively true, Relativism seems to forfeit any right to be universally accepted or meaningfully debated. It makes no sense for Relativists to say, "We're right about truth and everyone else is wrong," because that statement implies there's an objectively true answer to the question "Who's right about truth?"

In other words, Relativism ultimately trivializes disagreements, including the disagreement between Relativists and non-Relativists. If truth is always relative, then it's not possible for there to be real disagreements between individuals (for the Subjectivist) or between cultures (for the Cultural Relativist). For the Relativist, *everyone* can be right—relatively! But that means non-Relativists can be just as right as Relativists—which doesn't seem right to anyone.

In the end, it's hard to deny that there really is objective truth.

You've reached the end of the trail. However:

To reconsider the Truth Question, go to page 13.

Worldview: Skepticism

Skepticism is the view that even if there is objective truth, none of us can *know* what that truth is. Skeptics think that our minds simply aren't equipped to determine the truth with any degree of confidence. If anyone claims to know the truth, he's kidding himself. Skeptics are thus the champions of doubt; if nothing can be known to be true, then everything is subject to doubt.

Skepticism is perhaps more widespread in our day than ever before, but the view has been around for thousands of years. The ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho, who was born in the fourth century BC, is often credited with being the first Skeptic. He thought that our senses shouldn't be trusted, and therefore we can never know that things in the world really are what they appear to be. In other words, none of us can know the objective truth about the world. And since we can't know the truth, Pyrrho argued, we should try to suspend judgment about everything. If someone makes a truth claim, we should neither believe it nor disbelieve it. We shouldn't consider one person's opinion to be any closer to the truth than any other person's.

At first, Skepticism appears to be a thoroughly humble viewpoint. What could be more humble than saying you don't know anything? What could be more modest than considering your opinion no better than anyone else's? In reality, however, Skepticism is remarkably bold—even arrogant—because it makes sweeping claims about the capacity of the human mind that it can't consistently support.

In effect, Skeptics want us to believe that they alone have discerned some universal truth about human knowledge, namely, that there isn't any human knowledge. But do they claim to *know* that? If they do, they're not being consistently skeptical; specifically, they're not being skeptical about their own claim to know a universal truth. On the other hand, if they say they *don't* know that Skepticism is correct, why should we take their position seriously? By their own profession, their opinions about human knowledge are no better than anyone else's!

We can identify two basic problems with Skepticism that make it hard to take seriously. In the first place, the general claim that we can't know *any* truth flies in the face of common sense and cannot be consistently maintained in practice. We all take for granted—indeed, we *have* to take for granted—that we know many important truths, including all of the following: (1) There is a real objective world behind our sense experiences, a world that all of us inhabit. (2) This world has existed for more than ten minutes and it will probably exist for at least another ten minutes. (3) This world operates in an orderly and predictable fashion, according to laws of nature. (4) Other people have conscious minds like our own, even though we can see only their bodies. (5) Our bodies can be directed by our minds. (6) There are moral principles that apply to us and to others. If we didn't know all these things, our everyday decisions and actions would be pointless and worthless.

The second problem is that Skepticism is self-defeating. If its central claim is true, then no one can *know* it's true! So why should anyone believe it? (If we follow Pyrrho's advice, we should neither believe it nor disbelieve it.) Ironically, if you think that Skepticism is more reasonable than non-Skepticism, then you ought to reject Skepticism precisely because it denies that any one viewpoint is more reasonable than another! If you want to be a consistent Skeptic, you should be as doubtful about Skepticism as you are about everything else.

Skepticism doesn't just make a strong claim about knowledge. It makes *too* strong a claim. We certainly don't know *everything*, but it makes little sense to say that we don't know *anything*. Skepticism is hard to defend and even harder to live out consistently in practice.

You've reached the end of the trail. However:

To reconsider the Knowledge Question, go to page 14.

YOU'VE REACHED THE END OF THIS SAMPLER...

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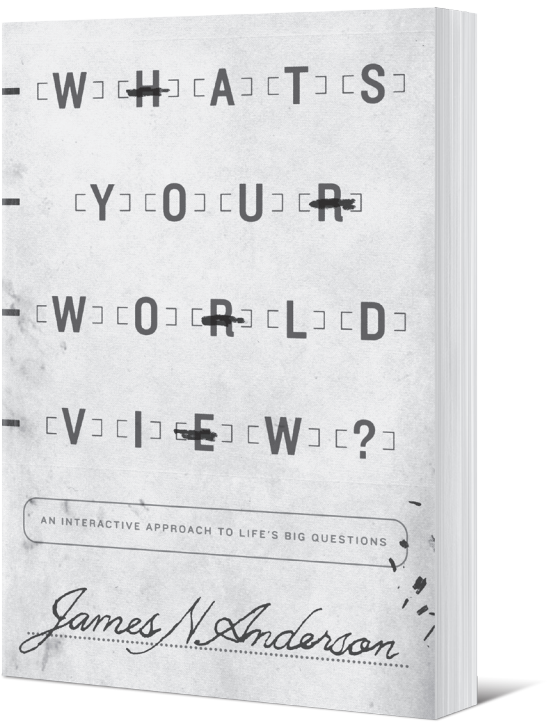

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