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Need the Concept of 'Personal Worldview' be Replaced or Just Elaborated?

Response to Caroline Klintborg's "Searching for a Renewal of Religious Identity – A Swedish Perspective"

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Abstract

The concept of 'worldview' is widely used today in education and religious education, including the sub-concepts of 'personal worldview' and 'organized worldview'. This leaves the door open for both further reception and elaboration and, of course, also for theoretical and empirically based criticism. In her Keynote Address at the 2022 Nordic Conference on Religious Education in Riga, in June, Caroline Klintborg articulated the claim that instead of using the notion of 'worldview' – and its sub-concepts – there are good reasons for using the concept of *'existential configurations'* instead. In this response I weigh the power of her argumentation, and conclude from what I coin as a form of conceptual sustainability that her conceptualization should be interpreted as an elaboration of the concept of 'worldview' instead of as a replacement.

Key words: worldview, personal worldview, organized worldview, conceptualization, empirical use, existential configurations, conceptual sustainability

Adequate Empirical Use of the Concept of 'Worldview'

"Bas (15 years old) says: "The course is called 'religion/worldview' (that is a course in a Dutch third-grade pre-vocational secondary school with non-affiliated pupils, SM). (...) If you consider it as two parts of the subject, I am not captivated by 'religion' so much, but regarding 'worldview' I think more like 'Yes, this does appeal to me more'" (Minnaar-Kuiper & Bertram-Troost, 2020, p. 10).

This is, in my opinion, a very interesting quote, because these adolescents between fourteen and sixteen years old were not affiliated with or involved in institutionalized religious worldviews. Bas does feel excluded in the narrative of 'religion'; the notion of 'worldview', on the contrary, opens a window for him. In other words, he could feel himself included in this narrative.

In their 2020 article in the *British Journal of Religious Education* (BJRE), Minnaar-Kuiper and Bertram-Troost are focusing in the interviews with the pupils on their worldview formation processes, and on potential influential factors and sources in these

processes. The pupils emphasize that they are in charge of their own worldview formation process, and are choosing their own norms and values (for example 'friendship', 'happiness', 'being safe', 'equality'), and answers to life questions from various factors and sources (such as parents, siblings, friends, major events, the media, hobbies, school in general and more specific the course 'Religion and Worldview') (Minnaar-Kuiper & Bertram-Troost, 2020, p. 6). These choices are not randomly adopted, but they use their own reasoning abilities to judge possible worldview-related ideas, opinions and practices. 'Trust' or 'distrust' in the factors and sources, and 'being close to someone/or a source', is playing a crucial role in their choices. School is not playing a significant role in the pupils' worldview formation processes, in terms of commitment and exploration. This is in contrast to the still important influence of the parents, because the pupils trust their parents the most (Minnaar-Kuiper & Bertram-Troost, 2020, p. 11).

The inclusivity of all pupils was one of the reasons why Jacomijn van der Kooij, Doret de Ruyter and myself have chosen to use the concept of 'worldview' in four related and published articles in academic journals in which we provided: an analytical conceptualization of that concept (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013); conceptualized the influence of moral education on the personal worldview of pupils (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2015a); traced the influence of teaching morality on the worldview of pupils (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2015b); and showed the merits of using 'worldview' in religious education (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2017).

The article by Minnaar-Kuiper and Bertram-Troost, based on empirical research, is in my view, a very adequate example of using the concept of personal worldview in a school context and in this case also with non-affiliated adolescent pupils.

Sixfold Criticism

In her keynote presentation Caroline Klintborg (Klintborg, 2022) is only referring to our 2013 article, and she poses, as it seems, serious questions in respect to our and others' conceptualization of the notion of 'personal worldview'. Her criticism is sixfold: 1) the concept of 'personal worldview is conceptually related to the notion of 'organized worldview'; 2) emphasis is placed on content instead of also making room for processes as part of people's meaning-making; 3) individuals are supposed to have a kind of conviction and theoretical standpoint which determines the importance they attach to life questions or existential questions; 4) the focus is on answers to life-questions rather than on people's authentic everyday dealing with life questions; 5) the worldview concept also emphasizes reflected elements more than people's experiences; 6) attention is paid more to individuals than on the impact of the contexts in which people interpret their lives.

The hard core of her argumentation is that the concept of 'religion' is not adequate enough to describe the meaning-making among diverse individuals in society. But, in her view, the concept of 'worldview' cannot deal adequately with the way young people can relate to the content of the subject of meaning-making. We as researchers and professional educators need the concept of 'existential configurations' to adequately capture the complex and personal understanding of life among young adults today. This concept will also enable individuals themselves to understand their own existential meaning-

making. If I understand this correctly, then this seems to be a kind of meta-reflexive tool to be used by young adults themselves.

Does she convince me by her own criticism and that of Edwin van der Zande's criticism in his doctoral dissertation (Van der Zande, 2018) of the notion of worldview, – more specifically of our use of the concept of 'personal worldview'? The answer is a very clear 'no'. Elsewhere I have used the notions of a social, practical and political sustainability, and even pointed to sustainable general education and worldview education (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2015; Miedema, 2017). With an eye on my reconstruction of Caroline Klintborg's criticism, my perspective here has especially to do with what I like to coin as 'conceptual sustainability'.

I first will present a clarification of our approach and then deal with the six critical points. The approach in our four articles was based on the methods of systematic review of literature and conceptual analysis or clarification, – methods especially practised in the analytical tradition in philosophy, and in philosophy of education. No qualitative or quantitative empirical research was related to our approach in this published work.

This doesn't mean that our theoretical work excludes further empirical elaboration. On the contrary, it could be best interpreted as heuristically theoretical work that might be very helpful in using clear and distinct theoretical and methodological concepts in empirical research. We follow here the practical turn in the analytical tradition in philosophy and philosophy of education since the 1980s and 1990s. This became strongly manifest in the writings of the British philosopher of education Paul Hirst (Hirst, 1998). The implication of this practical turn is that conceptual analysis is not dealing with the interrelations of concepts as such and thus as a method *sui generis*, but that such analyses are carried out with an eye on empirics and praxis too.

Contra the Six Criticisms

The first criticism states that the concept of 'personal worldview is conceptually related to the notion of 'organized worldview'. However, in our 2013 article, we clearly define that the concept of 'worldview' includes the overarching concept that 'organized worldview' and 'personal worldview' in our analysis should be interpreted as relative autonomous sub-concepts. We also clearly state that "a personal worldview is not necessarily based on a (religious) organized worldview" (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013, p. 213).

The second criticism claims that emphasis is placed on content instead of making room for processes as part of people's meaning-making. We have made an analytical distinction between two conceptions of 'personal worldview': a) a first conception consisting of certain norms, values and ideals; b) a second conception in which also the practices that arise from these norms, values and ideals are included (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013, p. 213). So, practices and processes could in this second conception next to content be part of the concept of 'personal worldview. We were not prescribing a certain conception, but in the four articles it becomes very clear that we ourselves are in favor of the second conception.

In the third criticism it is said that individuals are supposed to have a kind of conviction and theoretical standpoint which determines the importance they attach to life questions or existential questions. I think, that related to existential questions, we con-

vincingly presented our conviction that analytically speaking from the perspective of a personal worldview, no clear cut answers are a necessary or sufficient condition for speaking about a personal worldview. There might be rather vague answers, a person could be in search of a personal worldview, or exploring a worldview (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013, p. 218). "The idea of a personal worldview implies that someone *has* this worldview and having a worldview means that it is not a theoretical construct, but has impact on someone's life" (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013, p. 219).

I take the fourth, the fifth and the sixth criticism together, that is (4) the focus is on answers to life-questions rather than on people's authentic everyday dealing with life questions; (5) the worldview concept also emphasizes reflected elements more than people's experiences; (6) attention is paid more to individuals than on the impact of the contexts in which people interpret their lives.

A crucial term in our description of the concept of 'personal worldview' is based on the book *Man's Search for Meaning* by psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl, that is experiencing meaning in life (Frankl, 2004). We wrote: "Individuals are strongly motivated to find personal meaning, to understand the nature of their lives and to feel that it is significant" (Frankl, 2004). Research shows that people find meaning in life by undertaking activities like their work and hobbies and by having relationships with their friends, family, and children (Baumeister, 1991). By giving meaning to these activities and relationships, they are able to attribute meaning to their lives…" (Van der Kooij, De Ruyter, & Miedema, 2013, p. 219).

In my chapter "Personal world view, existential questions and inclusive pedagogy. Theological and pedagogical underpinnings" in the edited book *Challenging Life: Existential Questions as a Resource for Education* (Ristiniemi, Skeie, & Sporre, 2018, pp. 137–155) I have elaborated on these issues. I have presented the (transformative, hermeneutical, critical and pragmatic) pedagogical paradigm behind my view on personal worldview formation. (See also my article in the Special Issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religion* for my South African colleague Cornelia Roux (Miedema, 2014)).

I have coined the process of personal worldview formation inspired by the Dutch pedagogue Langeveld as the self-responsible self-determination of the students in respect to worldviews and religions, their own actorship and authorship. With Wolfgang Klafki, I emphasize the stimulation in freedom and self-consciousness of the personal self- and co-determination of children and youngsters, thus realizing at the same time sociality and solidarity. I follow John Dewey when he defines experience as the transactional relationship of humankind and her/his environment; an environment that is always cultural or cultivated, and in that sense a meaningful environment and context. That relationship is holistic in nature; it encompasses the whole person and is characterized by doing and undergoing; and with knowledge in function, that is in service of the transactional relationship (Miedema, 2018, pp. 144–146). Knowledge is for Dewey the possible relationship between actions and the consequences of these actions. The process of education – including worldview education – is a continuous reorganization and reconstruction of experience in which the experience might result in richer meanings for the person and these will also guide future meaningful experiences (Dewey, 1916, 1938; Miedema, 1995).

Do we Need a New Concept Instead of 'Personal Worldview'?

Caroline Klintborg is proposing the concept of 'existential configurations' as a more adequate concept. My two questions here are: 1) What is the connotation of this concept? and 2) Is the concept of existential configurations (in)compatible or/and (in)commensurable in Kuhnian terms (Kuhn, 1970) with the notion of 'personal worldview'?

In respect to the first question, I found two definitions of the concept of existential configurations nearly at the end of the keynote content:

> Definition 1 runs as follows: The concept of existential configurations summarizes the individual's self-understanding in a given context, both in terms of process and content, and in terms of a social and a personal dimension.
>
> Definition 2 describes the concept in the following way: When speaking in terms of existential configurations, the meaning-making process can only be interpreted and understood when it is situated in a social context, even though it is expressed by an individual.

Caroline Klintborg writes: "(W)hile the interviewees did not talk about their understanding of life in terms of given traditions, they nevertheless had distinct interpretations of important event in their lives (...), (events) not necessarily consciously thought through". She saw during her analysis of the interviews: "how the interviewees shaped their interpretations (in Ricoeurian terms 'meaningful figures') of individual events, and saw their experiences as part of a larger whole. Their statements could not be understood without understanding the larger context that surrounded them. The way they seemed to combine different figures (=interpretations, SM) into a whole suggested to me the use of configurations" (Klintborg, 2022, p. 66). "I could see that the interviewees expressed personal views on individual events and existential themes out of a desire to make their lives understandable, and this in relation to the people around them and the context they shared with these significant others... in whose company they could feel *ontological security*" (Klintborg, 2022, p. 66).

Comparing the theoretical and empirical research of Minnaar-Kuiper and Bertram-Troost on the worldview formation processes of adolescents, to which I referred in the beginning of this response, and the empirical research project of Caroline Klintborg, I just see a lot of similarities: no traditional binding, their own interpretations, influence of significant others, and based on trust or ontological security. Thus, I do not see incompatibility or even incommensurability. Probably the only difference might be that the adults were able to shape in the interviews their own interpretations to a larger whole, and from the adolescents this was not mentioned. It might be overlooked there, or it may also be an issue related to age: adults versus adolescents, or matters of degree in semantic mastery, or different skills in expression. This is characterized in Caroline Klintborg's research as existential configurations. I interpret this as a useful theoretical, analytical and descriptive addition and elaboration in using the concept of 'personal worldview'.

It is clear to me that 'existential configurations', is the concept in which the researcher has developed on the basis of the analysis of the empirical data, the analyzed interviews. However, one of the author's aims was to include, as I have formulated it in the beginning, that the concept of existential configurations will also enable individuals themselves (adults, and I would also ask, adolescents?) to understand their own existential meaning-making. Do I understand it correctly that this seems to be a kind of meta-reflexive tool

to be used by young adults and adolescents themselves in order to get a better grip on their own meaning-making processes and contents? But I am still puzzled here. On two places the author articulates the stance that "The concept of 'existential configuration' ...a theoretical concept (is), produced through the analysis of empirical material, but not something perceived by a person herself" (Gustavsson, 2018, p. 219; Gustavsson, 2020, p. 29).

Concluding Remarks

After we introduced in 2013 the concept of 'worldview', and more specifically the sub-concepts of 'personal worldview' and 'organized worldview', these conceptualizations are used by many scholars in religious and/or worldview education today.

This leaves the door open for both reception and criticism. Based in a strong Nordic pedagogical and didactical tradition in which worldview, mostly combined with existential questions, has been discussed for decades now, I have taken Caroline Klintborg's criticism on the very notion of worldview very seriously. However, as I have expressed my contention, I see her concept of 'existential configurations' not as replacement of the very concept of worldview, but as a useful theoretical, analytical and descriptive addition and elaboration of that concept.

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