



Meet the Marine. Be Inspired.

Critical Thinking and Worldview

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Some people are able, seemingly by nature, to reflect upon themselves asking about their strengths and weaknesses, and thus seeking to improve themselves regarding both. Some people find this nearly impossible to do. The first principle of Marine Corps leadership is to know yourself and to seek self-improvement. To do this, one must be able to examine himself closely and honestly. The nature of this examination, or perhaps we might say the focus of this examination, will change over time as someone grows because the focus of one's concerns will change with personal growth. It is not controversial to observe that this process of knowing oneself and seeking self-improvement requires, among other skills, the ability to think carefully and critically. Here the nature of the process of knowing oneself and seeking improvement becomes substantially more interesting, and perhaps even more complicated, when we consider the place of worldview in the process of thinking.

Each of us has a collection of fundamental propositions about the world, ourselves, and how we got here that form the foundation of the ways in which we understand our reality. In general, people reason from the propositions of their worldview rather than to them, and for this reason many people fail to grasp that they see the world through the lens that is one's worldview. This helps explain why we find ever more people who are easily offended and do not tolerate disagreement well. Often, when people speak on a topic or express disagreement with someone else's position on a topic, irritation is incited because what is said challenges one of the tenets of a person's worldview without the offended person understanding this as the cause of anger. Importantly, worldview is implicated in the nature of a cultural tradition since it is possible, for example, for two people to possess worldviews which are mutually exclusive to the point where it is nearly impossible for them to discuss serious subjects calmly and profitably.



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The contents of one's worldview will logically draw him to convictions about secondary and tertiary questions that comport with the originating worldview, and this helps us understand how it can happen that incompatible worldviews, when held by enough people in a society, can be damaging to a people's cultural tradition. For example, we may acknowledge that either we human beings are created or we aren't. There is no third possibility, so one of these two has to be true. This is important because whether or not we are created, and thus whether the world we live in is created, is perhaps the most fundamental tenet in someone's worldview. The importance of one's position on this question is evident from the friction that is occasioned by disagreements over it, and this is because one's position on questions of fundamental concern sets the contours of one's mind and character. Knowing oneself is thus crucial to self-improvement.

We are complex creatures, but for certain we have minds and wills, both of which need to be developed. So it is that how one answers the question of our creation, yes or no, will have an effect on how one addresses the question of whether the principles of morality, of ethics, are discovered or invented. This is so because if there is a creator, there is what we might call final truth, that is, the truth that is the genuine health of the mind because it is the truth about who we are as beings at once physical and spiritual, and why we are here. If there is no creator, then we appear to be alone in a universe

that is indifferent to us and thus whatever meaning there is in life is meaning we must fashion for ourselves. Here again, it is easy to understand how disagreement on this fundamental question, whether morality is discovered or invented, can be culturally and socially unbalancing. It is easy also to see that one's worldview has a direct impact on how one can think critically on matters great and small.

Here is a matter of some relevance to this discussion which should be mentioned without much commentary. On fundamental questions like whether we are created, and thus whether there is a God to whom we are beholden, people will advise that we take a neutral position so as not to alienate people who disagree either with a positive or a negative answer to the question. If, however, there is no third position, that is, either we are created or we aren't with no third position for us to take, then we have no neutral position available. Typically, the consequence of following this advice is that people who believe we are created beings are made to speak and act as if they do not believe this. Even in an environment like this, however, people will hold to the basic tenets of their worldview, and thus a certain dishonesty is introduced in our relations one with another.



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If the gaps among differing worldviews remain small, there isn't much of a cultural problem from it since the tradition of the society remains largely undisturbed. However, when the tradition that has held a people together falls into a crisis of confidence, what role, if any can reason play in the restoration of a tradition. Up to this point, we have been discussing reason as critical thinking and the function of worldview in the activity, but it will be helpful to consider as we close the discussion what role reason can play when a tradition fails. In 1965, a scholar at the University of Notre Dame named Stanley Parry published an essay titled "Reason and the Restoration of Tradition" in which he discusses this issue of the role of reason in restoring tradition.[i] His answer begins in a tone that is less than encouraging: the role of reason in addressing the concern to restore or revitalize a tradition is negative. "It [reason] must purge itself of the arrogance that is an integral part of the crisis of tradition itself and return to a humble questing in the real world of being for whatever wisdom it may be able to wrest from that world." [ii] This is but a snippet of a complex argument but it captures the essence of what Parry is saying about the role of reason in the restoration of tradition. In Parry's analysis, the cause of crisis and debility in a tradition may have multiple contributing factors, but Parry gathers them together under the heading of hubris.

It is this outsized pride that causes people to think that we can improve conditions in society by taking aim at the core convictions of the cultural tradition and begin dismantling them. It becomes clear after a while, however, that this approach causes harm with little in the way of offsetting benefit. Moral reasoning has a subjective element to it, namely, the person doing the reasoning, and the quality of one's moral reasoning is determined by the moral quality of one's character at any given time. Thus as we grow as human beings, our inner moral world improves and we become better reasoners. "In the inner moral world man can construct realities that are not morally true." [iii] It is this possibility, often even probability, of constructing false inner moral "truths," especially in a time of crisis in a tradition, that leads Parry to argue that in such a time the role of reason is humbly to examine ourselves and our world for truths that once were understood, but the understanding was lost with the tradition that understood them. We must be re-united, Parry argues, with the source of meaning, and this takes us back to the important question of the role of worldview in critical thinking. Perhaps a close examination of one's worldview is a helpful place to begin for anyone who is interested better to know himself, and to seek self-improvement.

[i] Stanley Parry, "Reason and the Restoration of Tradition," *What is Conservatism*, Edited by Frank S. Meyer, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1965, Pp. 107-129.

[ii] *Ibid.*, P. 109.

[iii] *Ibid.*, P. 111.