



CHAPTER SUMMARIES
2016 Sergio Tangari

The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog

James W. Sire

Introduction: the value of this study is akin to a baseball scout taking the necessary time to understand the opposing team's ball player's strengths, weaknesses and tendencies. After such due diligence is accomplished, the odds of "competing" and "beating" the "opposition" are enhanced. While the aforesaid may be crude and offensive, in the world of ideas it's true. Too often Christians are bested in the classroom, boardroom, or family room because we have not done our due diligence regarding other worldviews when compared to Christendom. This book is a remedy for such maladies as Sire notes:

"For any of us to be fully conscious intellectually we should not only be able to detect the worldviews of others but be aware of our own—why it is ours and why in light of so many options we think it is true" [Opening page]

Chapter 1: A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE: INTRODUCTION (Pgs.12-19)

This book aims at answering the following questions: What is prime reality, the real? What's the nature of external reality—the world around us? What is a human being? What happens to persons after death? Why can we know anything at all? How do we know what's right and wrong? And what's the meaning of human history?

Chapter 2: A UNIVERSE CHARGED WITH THE GRANDEUR OF GOD: CHRISTIAN THEISM (Pgs.20-38)

In this chapter Sire points out that up until the 17th century intellectual strife was "in house" between Christians but the Enlightenment changed that forever. Christianity and Western civilization were hand and glove such that the cradle's milk began with theistic presuppositions (Pgs.22-23).

Christianity was the meteor that dented the world with its view of reality starting with how we viewed human beings: Since God is a personal God; those created in his image are also personal creatures, not chance accidents.

The ***universe*** contra naturalism is ***not a closed system*** but one that is open meaning that both divine and human decisions significantly shape the present and the future (Pgs.26-29). Consider the quote on page 29 regarding human longing and how God fulfills it.

Our **epistemology** is also grounded in the God of creation. That's why we can know anything about reality as it truly is (pg.30). The **Fall** demonstrates the significance of human decisions then and now (pgs.32-33), our **ethics** are grounded in God and **history** is linear which means that it's filled with *purpose* even though much of it we don't get. An excellent overview of the Christian worldview.

Chapter 3: THE CLOCKWORK: DEISM (Pgs.40-51)

Deism according to Sire came about as a response to: internal strife within Christendom; and resulted in a view of reason that trumped any revelation, thus making autonomous human reason the ultimate reference point.

Deism's God is not personal, but an unknowable architect of the universe, who wound up the creation and left it alone to govern itself. The major tenets of Deism are:

First, *God* is utterly transcendent and not personal; second, *creation* runs itself deterministically; third, while *human beings are personal*, their decisions are not significant because somehow they are *not self-determined*; fourth, there's a *denial of the Fall and sin*, so what is, ought to be. Moreover nature tells us what we need to know about God, He does not write books. He's a designer but not a lover or judge; fifth, *ethics* reveals nature so what is ought to be, thus there's a denial of right and wrong good and bad; sixth, the course of history is linear but predetermined at creation, thus Deist's are not interested in history for God's knowledge is had through nature, not any of God's acts in the past; seventh, there's a *denial of the incarnation*.

Interestingly, many religious pluralists hold to many of these tenets not least of which is the denial of the incarnation.

Chapter 4: THE SILENCE OF FINITE SPACE—NATURALISM (Pgs.52-73)

According to Sire, Deism is the isthmus between theism and naturalism. Naturalism affirms that matter is eternal, God does not exist, and the cosmos is in a closed system (I.e., no outside forces can interfere with nature like a "miracle"). Humans are thus nothing more than complex machines in a "monistic" framework of matter and when death beckons human identity is forever extinguished. This position also removes meaning from history (really all of life) and many turn to nihilism (I.e., life is meaningless) as a result.

What ends up happening, is that people become the architects of what meaning in life is; not some extrinsic being. When this occurs, human beings are the measure of all things, thus ethics and truth become relativized and living out the implications of said state of affairs creates many inconsistencies, practical contradictions such that what *is*, *ought* to be.

As architects of what determines meaning, naturalism's child "secular humanism" affirms human *value* from a physicalist worldview, but the problem is that one does not get *values* from the physical world; it comes from an immaterial reality. Sadly, this problem of contradiction is ignored.

There's also Marxism, which Sire affirms comes in varied forms be it a democratic or a totalitarian packaged worldview. Marxism considers the meaning of life from an economic locus where people are mere subjects of their environment (Influenced by philosophers Hegel and Feuerbach). Marxism's goal for history is utopian, its' atheism is reductionist, it loathes capitalism, it fails to factor in human sin, and considers the redistribution of wealth as a virtue.

The fact is humanity is much more than a brain and the desire for meaning and purpose is a relentless issue in life that always pricks the human soul. Despite its many metaphysical, epistemological and ethical problems, naturalism holds sway for many because it's viewed as objective and without bias, for it's always looking for the truth with no "axe to grind".

Chapter 5: ZERO POINT—NIHILISM (Pgs.74-93)

Sire begins this chapter by arguing that nihilism is a denial of ultimate reality and is thus more of a worldview than a philosophy. This is evident in the artwork produced which *denies meaning* on the one hand, but *possess a structure* to it on the other hand, and thus ends refuting itself. For structure, presupposes meaning, a mind, design, etc.

Nihilism, Sire continues, is the child of naturalism which reduces all of life into chance plus time plus matter. To make a choice is really illusory for what seems to be "our decision" is actually determined matter in motion. This means there's no such thing as free will. All that exists is *unknown determinism* masked as chance that cares for no one nor favors anyone. It just is. Add to that naturalism's claim to knowledge which according to Darwin is quite dubious since our brains are only a higher order from monkey's, who knows if it's not deceiving us into thinking something illusory?

Nihilism, in light of the aforesaid, commits the; *is/ought fallacy*, for there's no outside influence telling us what is right or wrong. This loss of knowing ushers in a loss of morals, which escorts people into a meaningless life. Futility thus destroys any sense of real beauty in art and living this worldview consistently often leads one to madness (Pg.93 consider nihilism's heroes).

Chapter 6: BEYOND NIHILISM—EXISTENTIALISM (Pgs.94-116)

Sire argues that existentialism arose as a response to nihilism. This view of reality comes in *atheistic* and *theistic* forms. After the horrors of WW1 people needed answers to make sense of all the evil. Sartre and Camus gave aid through their literature.

Atheistic existentialism (AE) presupposes naturalism's world of only matter in a closed system of cause and effect where choices are real but for humans they're only imagined. Thus, for (AE) one goal is to derive meaning from non-meaning seeing that matter doesn't "care" about meaning, matter *just is*. Much of what transpires is what Schaeffer describes of the Upper/Lower story of reality (Pg.98), where values are subjective and unverifiable, as opposed to science which is objective and verifiable.

Humans determine their essence by actions, not by some intrinsic quality (E.g., image bearers) and thus are free to choose their own destiny as kings of their subjective world. True here is the mantra; conceive, believe, achieve. For the (AE) death is the pinnacle of absurdity rather than a signpost pregnant with meaning (E.g., God's judgment for rebellion).

Ethics is a bit of a conundrum for what *is—ought* to be, because we determine what meaning is. Hence, when one chooses it's never to do evil, but always to perform the good. If this is the case, then what defines the *good*, the sociopath? When ethics is ultimately grounded in the creature rather than in the Creator, relativism is spawned and makes life absurd.

Theistic existentialism (TE) arose from Kierkegaard's response to the dead orthodoxy of his day which touted the keeping of rules over the nurturing of a relationship with God. This view thus started its' focus on how humans relate to God and the cosmos, not with God and how all of creation is to properly relate to Him (Pg.107).

Reading through some highly abstract positions was somewhat of a bore but from this view came the movement known as *Neo Orthodoxy* (NO) which among other things emphasized either (according to Sire) Pelagianism or a hyper

Calvinism. Many (NO) don't believe in the historicity of biblical accounts but rather see them as mythical and symbolic. Much of this came from German "scholarship" that imbibed naturalism as a fact (Pgs. 113-115). This chapter was by far the most difficult to follow because of the subjects' writers deep abstraction. Nevertheless, I can see residues of this theology with many of my church friends.

Chapter 7: JOURNEY TO THE EAST—EASTERN PANTHEISTIC MONISM (Pgs.118-135)

Sire begins by pointing out the disparity of thought that obtains between the West and East and the problems which arise as a result. Many events, including the Vietnam War, caused many Westerners to look to the East for meaning in life. This shift of thinking in the West was evidenced by the Hippy movement of the 1960's.

Eastern thought is both pantheistic and monistic where *all is god and God is all, thus the One is Atman and Brahman are true reality*. First, it is held that every soul is the Cosmos where distinctions are eradicated. Thus, God is each person and each person is God so whatever distinctions appear to be the case, are a mere illusion.

Second, *some things are more than others which means that pure being is unity with the One*. Third, many if not all roads lead to the One, thus Hicks view of salvation obtains here. One can meditate a *mandala*, *chant a mantra*, or *chant the OM where solitude and silence are necessary*. Here it is where non-rational content has meaning and for one to become one with Atman, it is necessary for the waking, dreaming, sleeping and awakening which result in enlightenment. The word OM is multifaceted in meaning (Pgs.125-126).

Fourth, *one must realize their oneness with the Cosmos in order to pass beyond personality* which equals the acquisition of pure being, which is *nonconsciousness* (Pg.127).

Fifth, *realizing one's oneness with the Cosmos means one has gone past knowledge where the law of non-contradiction does not apply*. Here's where many Westerners get tripped up and rightly so.

Sixth, *oneness means going beyond good and evil*. This view makes it impossible for one to have moral outrage much less a moral position (Pgs.128-129).

Seventh, *death terminates the individual but really changes nothing* and history *is cyclical* (See how West must engage East with their W.V.). At the end of the day, the Eastern mentality denies reality as it truly is, thus evil and good are denied (point out this problem mannishly). Mostly, the law of non-contradiction must be championed in order to address this position.

Chapter 8: A SEPARATE UNIVERSE—THE NEW AGE (Pgs.136-170)

In order to embrace the East, Sire argues, that one must die to the West (i.e., to its way of thinking). That's essentially what the New Age (NA) is all about. While difficult to define as a movement, since the 1990's, through the likes of Marilyn Ferguson, Ken Wilbur and Shirley MacLaine, the NA has infiltrated every sector of Western society.

The NA influence is evident in areas of psychology, sociology, anthropology, the natural sciences, the health field, our politics, entertainment, movies and even in sports (Pgs.140-144). Of the many examples, I'll focus on three that Sire provides.

One example is in the area of *psychology* where people like William James, C.G. Jung and Abraham Maslow have argued for the validity of altered states of consciousness (drugs are often used here to expand our understanding of the universe). Another example is in *anthropology*, where Carlos Castaneda's books focus on the use of psychedelic drugs in Indian culture and reveal that he himself was the apprentice of Don Juan, a Yaqui Indian sorcerer. Castaneda's alleged experiences brought him into new realities and separate universes. A third example can be found in our *entertainment—movies*. Here the NA influence can be seen in George Lucas' *Star Wars Series* where divine power (i.e., The Force) is much like the Hindu Brahman who uses both good and evil to sustain a balance in the universe (e.g., Yoda).

The NA's relationship to other worldviews is that it embraces them all to one degree or another. That is, they are syncretistic and eclectic, but deny that there's any transcendent god (unless it's the individual) and affirm that we live in a closed system. Moreover, like the East, the NA rejects reason as a means or guide to reality, but nevertheless uses it to advance their position. That is, distinctions are the problem rather than the solution to problems (yet they use reason to persuade skeptics).

Sire also points out that animism is massive in the NA where the spirit world and spirit entities are guides to understanding our many—reincarnated

past lives (Pgs.144-145). The NA has several pillars of thought that govern it's thinking and hold up their structure of reality.

The first pillar is that *the nature of being ultimately finds its base in the self*. That is, since *the self* is king, one can create their own reality from within their conscience and no one can refute it as reality because it's a private experience. What's unfortunate is that self-deception is a very present danger here (Pgs.147-149).

The second pillar is that *the cosmos being unified in the self is manifest through both ordinary consciousness and altered states*. This can be accomplished through meditation, drugs, acupuncture, etc. The mind is a powerful tool for molding reality to our liking and is limitless (Pgs.150-151). Light and colors, alien populations and guardians (demonic spirits) obtain, they are real and they help us make the most out of our lives.

The third pillar is that *cosmic consciousness in space and time disappear along with morality*. Here there's no such thing as good and evil, there's just the illusion of such. To experience cosmic consciousness is akin to Atman as Brahman. Once again, this invites self-deception.

The fourth pillar is that *physical death is not the end of the self, thus the fear of death is vanquished* either through many re-incarnations, or the "evidence" from people's *near-death-experiences* (NDE). Transitions from one life form into another are thus good news, but Sire has argued that this view has been placed on "the scales and found wanting".

The fifth pillar is that *reality comes either under an occultic, psychedelic, or relativistic version*. Under the *occultic version*, one experiences a spirit guide through the use of tarot cards, mediums, crystal balls, etc., for direction in life. Here, even NA advocates warn of danger if a person is not properly prepared they could invite all kinds of hell into their lives. Under the *psychedelic version*, a person takes drugs like LSD in order to experience an altered state of consciousness in order to peer into new realities. And under the *relativistic version*, there's the expression of disjunction between objective and perceived reality where a symbol system of reality is merely substituted for another symbol system (i.e., one vision of reality replaces another vision of reality).

Sire concludes that the New Age has many problems such as their denial of a transcendent God, the self being the measure of reality and thus good and evil vanish. Also, dabbling in the spirit world with entities can be very dangerous, even landing adherents in a mad ward. Moreover, the nature of reality and truth

end in epistemological nihilism because the self is the measure of all things, not the Creator. Thus, our experiences derive “meaning” purely arbitrarily without any real grounds. That’s bad news.

Chapter 9: THE VANISHED HORIZON—POSTMODERNISM (Pgs.172-190)

In this chapter Sire argues that Postmodernism (PM) changed everything starting with the death of God which grounded its’ wisdom and demise, because far from being “Post” anything, it’s nothing without Modernism. What it has accomplished though is taking Modernism’s views to their natural end which failed to meet their own criterion.

To begin with, Sire admits defining (PM) is difficult. The term was first used to describe architecture. One definition advanced of (PM) is: *it denies there is any one metanarrative that is more credible than another to explain to us the nature of reality* (e.g., theism, pantheism, or atheism make part of the whole).

A good way to understand (PM) is to compare it to Premodern and Modern views of reality to grasp its’ significance. *Pre-moderns* for example focused on attaining a just society by basing it on the just God of revelation. *Moderns* contrarily focused their view of attaining justice through universal reason. *Post-moderns* however despair any universal attaining of justice because language is what constructs reality or meaning itself.

Sire continues and explains how the three different views lead to a way of ruling by virtue of their starting point. *Pre-modernism* lead to medieval hierarchy, *Modernism* lead to Enlightenment democracy, and *Postmodernism* leads to anarchy.

Concerning first principles, *Pre-moderns* saw metaphysics (being, existence) as the grounds for epistemology (how we know anything); *Moderns* held that epistemology is the grounds for ontology (the study of existence, being); and *Post-moderns* hold that epistemology is the grounds for significance but end their search with no confidence in human reason. The self-refuting nature of (PM’s) many positions is here obvious by their use of reason to make said statement.

Sire continues to point out the self-refuting nature of (PM) positions like its notion of truth that it is forever hidden from us. These “authorities” are telling us the “truth” that truth is forever hidden from us.

When (PM) says that all narratives are a mask for a play of power, they fail to see that they also are giving us a *narrative* of reality that according to them also falls into the category of a “play of power”.

Another notion of (PM) is that *language* is what’s used to construct who people are and what is ethical or not by society. This ends with a radical relativism that if consistently lived out has as its’ champion the sociopath. It leads naturally that from this view of language, the discipline that is king is literary theory, rather than theology, philosophy or science.

Sire than considers many of (PM’s) shortcomings not least of which is their denial of any *objective truth* but act as if it really exists by their writings and “insights” into describing reality, thus elites, not true experts end up ruling everywhere including the sciences (Pgs.184-187).

PM has rightly criticized naturalisms’ too high a view of reason, explained that language can be used to exercise power over people (these are not always negative situations however) but (PM’s) seem to overlook that their own criticism’s also apply to their use of words.

Sire points out that the “truth question” is very uncomfortable for (PM’s) and it should be pressed. Moreover, their negative view of reason should be considered in light of their use of reason to advance their position. That is, they employ their negative view of autonomous by using said autonomous human reason. It’s just self-refuting.

Finally, Sire concludes that (PM) is not so much a worldview, but a parasite on worldviews and it’s not surprising therefore that this position lacks confidence in truth, a trust in reality or hope for the future. Pessimism, nihilism and anarchy result if this thought of (PM) is followed to its natural conclusion.

Chapter 10: THE EXAMINED LIFE—CONCLUSION (Pgs.192-200)

Sire concludes the book by mentioning that worldviews are not as voluminous as one might think, but many of them overlap each other in nuanced forms that make it appear there are numerous worldviews.

To choose an adequate worldview, Sire rightly points out the need for the following. First, humility is essential. We just don’t know everything so it’s important to come with that reality in mind. Second, there must be *intellectual coherence* where the laws of logic are rightly applied so falsehoods are avoided. Third, there must be *experiential reality* where the data of all reality is considered by what we know through critical analysis and scientific investigation. Fourth,

there must be *explanatory power* where what is purported to be explained (e.g., human enigmas) are actually explained. Lastly, an adequate worldview must be *subjectively satisfactory* whose implications can be lived.

According to Sire, at the end of the day, a worldview can only satisfy if it's true (Pg.198). Christianity, says Sire, meets the above mentioned criterions for choosing an adequate worldview and makes most sense of reality as we know it, even though it has its own problems. Christianity, is not merely intellectual as a worldview, but an encounter with a person—the risen Christ that makes the examined life worth living.