

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What is Nonreligion? On the Virtues of a Meaning Systems Framework for Studying Nonreligious and Religious Worldviews in the Context of Everyday Life

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Discussions of nonreligion or secularity face a central challenge that has long plagued scholars of religion – that of specifying an object of study. Although several suggestions have been made, I think we can most effectively capture the range of things we want to study by (1) adopting worldviews, defined in terms of “big questions,” as an overarching rubric that encompasses both religious and nonreligious outlooks and (2) nuancing our understanding of worldviews in light of the meaning systems (MS) framework, already in use in psychology. Doing so relieves scholars of the obligation of defining religion and nonreligion and allows us to focus on how individuals and groups characterize themselves. It provides a neutral starting point for analyzing worldviews that is not biased toward religion, and, in so far as a case can be made that all humans must address these questions at least implicitly, it offers a basis for comparison across cultures. The so-called “existentially indifferent” provide a challenge in this regard and allow us to consider the value of an evolutionary perspective on meaning making.

The Problem

The study of “nonreligion” helpfully expands our focus beyond atheism and “nonbelief” (Lee, 2012), while at the same time introducing new problems. In characterizing our object of study as *nonreligion*, we are indicating that we want to think about it – whatever it is – in relation to *religion*. This means that the study of nonreligion faces the same definitional problems that have long plagued the study of religion. Moreover, the binary contrast between religion/nonreligion suggests that there is a clear, stable distinction between them, something that has been questioned in a number of NSRN blog posts (see, for example, Hutchings (2016) on angels and the afterlife, and Baker (2017) on the paranormal). In expanding the study of religion to include nonreligion, scholars are pushing our already troubled relationship with our key terms to the breaking point.

That is not necessarily a bad thing, however, as it challenges us to try to solve some of these long-standing definitional problems. Thinking about the religion/nonreligion binary as setting up a tacit comparison suggests a possible way forward. Structurally, a comparison involves two or more items, in this case religion and nonreligion, that the scholar juxtaposes based on a similarity that s/he perceives between them. The perceived similarities may be a similar feature or a set of features that define a larger category that encompasses them both. We can compare a red apple and a red ball based on their common feature

of “redness.” We can compare apples and oranges once we recognize that they are both fruits. If we take the first approach to comparing religion and nonreligion, we have to specify a feature – like redness – that religion and nonreligion share in common. Given that nonreligion can be anything that is not religion, we can generate many random comparisons using this approach, but doing so does not do much to clarify our object of study. The second approach is more revealing. In this case, we cannot compare religion and nonreligion without specifying an overarching rubric that encompasses them both, just as we cannot compare apples and oranges without a concept of fruits (Poole, 1986).¹ If we could specify and justify an overarching rubric, we could explore emic perspectives on what counts as religious, spiritual, paranormal, superstitious, and nonreligious under that larger rubric without ourselves having to define these terms.

Proposed Solutions

Both Thomas Coleman and Lois Lee have made significant attempts to address this issue. Coleman et al. (2013) propose “horizontal transcendence” as a way to characterize experiences that people view as profoundly meaningful and at the same time neither religious nor spiritual. This would suggest “profoundly meaningful experiences” as an overarching rubric that would encompass experiences that may or may not be appraised as religious or spiritual. Although it is important to compare such experiences, they are only one potential aspect of “nonreligion”. We need something more encompassing. Lee and Bullivant (Lee, 2015; Bullivant and Lee, 2016) make a case for “existential cultures” as an umbrella term that captures theist,

atheist, humanist, and other nonreligious subcultures and allows us to consider lived existential practices as well as more explicit existential beliefs. In applying this terminology, however, Lee struggled to conceptualize those she characterized as “anti-existential” (or Schnell (2010) as “existentially indifferent”), that is, those who didn’t want to think about existential questions. Moreover, in defining “existentialism” broadly in terms of “ultimate questions,” she highlights a feature that – as she acknowledges – has long been associated with the concept of “worldviews.”

Worldviews: An Alternative

Although I appreciate these attempts, I think that “worldviews,” as discussed in the philosophical literature, better captures the sense of the “big questions” (BQs) that Lee and Bullivant associate with “existential philosophies.” Not only is the term “worldviews” readily recognizable and in widespread popular (and scholarly) use, it has generated an extensive academic discussion in philosophy and the social sciences since Kant proposed the term (Naugle, 2002; for further discussion see Taves and Aprem, 2018). Some within religious studies (Alma and Anbeek, 2013; Juergensmeyer, 2009; Smart, 1986, 1999) and anthropology (Droogers and van Harskamp, 2014) have advocated studying religions along with other worldviews. Recent Council of Europe publications discussing the place of religion in publicly funded schools are now referring to “religions and non-religious worldviews” (Jackson, 2014, 2016).

Although there are many different definitions of worldviews within philosophy, the concept emerged as a means of encompassing nonreligious as well as religious outlooks (Naugle, 2002) and, thus, in response to interests similar to those who study nonreligion and secularity today. Within religious studies, Ninian Smart (1986, 1999) issued a forceful call for scholars to shift from studying “religion” to studying religious and nonreligious “worldviews.” In doing so, however, he characterized worldviews in terms of the six dimensions that he derived from the study of religion and never actually defined what he meant by a worldview (Taves, 2017).

The interdisciplinary Worldviews Research Group founded by Leo Apostel in Belgium offers a more promising approach grounded in fundamental philosophical questions, which has been embraced by others (e.g., Droogers, 2014; Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Writing for the Worldviews Research Group, Vidal (2008) summarizes the big questions (BQs) as follows: (1) what is? (ontology), (2) what is true and what is false? (epistemology), (3) what is good and what is evil? (axiology), (4) how should we act? (praxeology), (5) where does it all come from? (explanation), and where are we going? (prediction). Variations on these BQs have been used to structure world religions textbooks (Prothero, 2010, Brodd et al., 2016) and textbooks in the history and philosophy of science (DeWitt 2010), where they provide a framework for comparison.²

Defining worldviews in terms of “big questions” has several advantages. First, and most crucially, it relieves scholars of the obligation to define “religion” and “nonreligion”

and allows us to analyze how individuals and groups characterize their answers to the big questions. Second, it provides a neutral starting point for analyzing worldviews that is not biased toward religious categories. Third, in so far as a case can be made that all humans have to answer these questions implicitly or explicitly, it offers a basis for comparison across cultures and time periods. Although in other contexts, we are making the case for the BQs as a stable basis for comparison, here I simply want to indicate the benefits of melding the philosophical and religious discussion of worldviews with the generic global meaning systems framework that psychologists have used to study coping in situations of trauma, loss, and bereavement (Baumeister, 1991; Park and Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010; Markman, Proulx, and Lindberg 2013). Although Murphy (2017) makes an excellent and much more fully developed case for viewing religious and secular worldviews as “different manifestations of the same, incredibly broad, psychological [meaning making] processes,”³ he does not engage the worldviews literature. A more thorough melding of the worldviews and meaning systems literature not only offers the BQs as a more precise means of analyzing human worldviews and ways of life but also a means of thinking about the worldmaking capacities of humans in relation to other animals (see Taves and Aprem, 2018; Taves, Aprem, and Ihm, 2018).

Meaning Systems

The meaning systems framework as developed by Park and Folkman (1997) is premised on distinction between global meaning systems (GMS) and situational meanings (SM). They characterize a GMS in terms of beliefs (world, self, self-in-world), goals, and subjective sense of meaning or purpose. Park (2005, 2013) has explicitly linked GMS with religious meaning systems. Moreover, in the MS literature, it is assumed that a GMS may be explicit or implicit, shared or idiosyncratic, rudimentary or highly developed. Within both the MS and worldview literature (Paloutzian and Mukai, 2017; Peterson, 2013; Vidal 2008), some are arguing that much of the human meaning making process builds on processes that we share with other animals in so far as other animals must make sense of themselves in the world, albeit not consciously, in order to function. We have developed this idea elsewhere based on our translation of the BQs into the language of predictive coding. On that basis, we argue:

Even simple organisms with the most basic world-and-self modeling capacities enact implicit answers to some of the BQs, such as what exists, and which actions are preferable in given situations. In enacting implicit answers, organisms tacitly “make sense” of situations (what is) and events (what is happening). Humans differ from other animals in their *capacity* to articulate and reflect on the BQs – that is, to approach them *as* questions – and to offer narrative descriptions of, and links between, situations and events. (Taves, Aprem, and Ihm, 2018, emphasis added)

Just because we have the capacity to articulate and reflect on the BQs, however, does not mean that we necessarily feel the need to do so. In this framework, those whom Lee characterized as “anti-existential” or Schnell as “existentially indifferent,” are those who don’t surface or reflect upon the implicit meaning systems upon which their way of life is based.

Although the MS literature has been primarily concerned with how people appraise “situations” that stand out because they are traumatic, we can enrich our sense of situational meaning by recognizing that everyday life is a series of situations or events, most of which people experience as quite ordinary and unremarkable within the context of their overarching worldview or way of life. These ordinary, unremarkable events are appraised, but because they are expected and predictable, the appraisals take place unreflectively and mostly unconsciously. The situations considered could range from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary, the traumatic to the ecstatic, or the mundane to the highly significant. They would, thus, include “experiences that people consider profoundly meaningful,” some of which, as Coleman et al. (2013) suggested, may be considered as instances of “horizontal transcendence”.

Situations and events do not need to be described in the “thin” terms characteristic of psychologists, but can be richly characterized in the socio-cultural-environmental terms that characterize research on lived religion in history, anthropology, and religious studies. Researchers could ask self-proclaimed nonreligious persons about symbols or objects that hold particular meaning; the social groups to which they feel connected (e.g., networks, congregations, “imagined communities”); their everyday practices, more formalized ritual practice and ceremonial rites; and the observance of moral and ethical codes of behavior. Lee’s (2015, 172) conception of existential cultures could be assimilated with this approach. She clearly views existential cultures as constituted by the meaning making processes inherent in everyday life. As she observes, “thinking of meaning making, not as a narrow, philosophical practice but as something enacted in multiple ways, small and large, in everyday life calls into question the idea that large groups of people can be easily located outside the existential cultural field”.

Finally, the MS framework recognizes that a GMS is not simply constituted by beliefs, but also by goals and a subjective sense of meaning or purpose. Given the popular and scholarly tendency to reduce worldviews to beliefs, this is a crucial enlargement of the concept. Expanding the concept of situations to include everyday situations and the concept of worldviews to include goals and a subjective sense of meaning and purpose offers a conceptual framework for analyzing worldview dynamics, that is, how implicit or explicit worldviews interact with other aspects of life. Although psychologists have focused primarily on the way that individuals discover or transform meaning in response to traumatic situations or events, the study of worldview dynamics, as Droogers (2014) argues, should be broadly attentive to social and group dynamics under both everyday and exceptional circumstances and seek to

identify the factors that make a difference in these dynamics across worldviews and cultural contexts.

The Problem of Indifference Revisited

There is growing interest in studying those who seem indifferent with respect to existential questions among scholars of nonreligion (Quack and Schuh, 2017) and considerable uncertainty among psychologists as to how they fare under different conditions. Although Schnell (2010) found lower levels of positive mood and satisfaction with life among the existentially indifferent under ordinary (non-traumatic) circumstances, she did not find differences in mental health when compared to those with a greater sense of meaning. In seeming contrast, Silver and Updegraff (2013) found that pragmatically oriented types, who may not feel compelled to search for meaning even in the wake of trauma, often fare better than those who are compelled to find meaning in difficult events. In addition to different measures and definitions of meaning (Leontiev, 2013; Park and George, 2013), difficulties understanding the existentially indifferent may reflect researchers’ tendency to focus on conscious, reflective meaning making processes. Until we know more about the unconscious processes that give rise to an intuitive sense of meaningfulness under ordinary conditions (Heintzelman and King, 2013), it will be difficult to sort out the responses of those who are indifferent or feel no need to search for meaning.

An evolutionary approach to meaning making promises to shed light on this issue.

We need to consider the possibility that meaning in the sense of purpose is our default mode and not something that necessarily requires reflection. If, as Barrett (2015) suggests, the evolution of thought is bound up with the fact that animals move around, i.e., with mobile organisms’ capacity for goal directed action, then purpose is built into action (as the goal). If meaning is bound up with sense of purpose, then an implicit sense of meaning is inherent in purposeful, goal directed action. This would suggest that, as evolved animals, *we would generally experience life as meaningful without reflecting on the fact or trying to express why we feel it to be so*. It may be that it is only when this sense of purpose or direction crumbles – when we feel uncertain, lose our sense of direction, or feel there is no point in going on – that life feels meaningless. This sense of confusion, pointlessness, or lack of purpose is a feeling not a thought or belief. Conscious, reflective meaning making – the search for meaning – may be a response to this feeling. In other words, it may be that from an evolutionary perspective we need to attend as much to when and why people lose an implicit or functional sense of meaning as to how they explicitly search for it. If this is the case, then the contented nihilists and existentially indifferent may not be worrying about meaning simply because they have access to enough of the things that naturally make life feel meaningful.⁴

Conclusion: The current interest in studying nonreligion and secularity pushes our difficulties in defining religion to a breaking point and challenges us to articulate

an overarching rubric that encompasses both. I have suggested worldviews as the most plausible option because it is already in widespread popular and scholarly use, can be defined in terms of BQs without privileging religion, and can be melded with the generic meaning systems framework, which, when grounded in an evolutionary perspective, allows us to consider unconscious meaning making processes, implicit worldviews, and worldview dynamics as they are expressed in the everyday life of humans under both ordinary and exceptional conditions.

Notes

¹ Poole (1986, 414) makes the point more technically when he writes: “A comparative framework portrays the range of variation of the focal phenomenon either within a boundary and with respect to rules of inclusion and exclusion based upon distinctive features, or around a conceptual center and with respect to semantic distances from a prototype. Thus, comparison inevitably involves some mode of classification or categorization, which is predicated upon perceived similarities in various qualities or aspects of the phenomena to be compared.” We compare a red ball and red apple based upon “perceived similarities in various qualities,” in this case redness. We compare apples and oranges “with respect to rules of inclusion and exclusion based upon the distinctive features [of fruit].”

² In later elaborations on the initial blog post, we have defined a worldview in terms of representations that embed answers to the “big questions” (BQs), such as (1) ontology (what exists, what is real), (2) epistemology (how do we know what is true), (3) axiology (what is the good that we should strive for), (4) praxeology (what actions should we take), and (5) cosmology (where do we come from and where are we going), that govern a way of life (Taves, Asprem, and Ihm, 2018).

³ After this first appeared as a blog post, James Murphy (2017) alerted me to his article, then in press, on the value of a meaning systems perspective for studying lived religion.

⁴ Portions of this paragraph, which appeared in slightly different form in the comments section of the original blog post, were adapted from a lecture on “Finding and Articulating Meaning in Secular Experience,” given on September 21, 2016 at the 5th biennial SIG 19 Conference at the University of Siegen, Germany; the lecture has since been published under that title in Dan Fleming, Eva Leven, and Ulrich Riegel, eds. *Religious Experience* (Research on Religious and Spiritual Education), Waxmann Verlag (Taves, 2018).

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Further reading

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