What’s in a worldview? On Trevor Cooling’s Doing God in Education

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In his recent report Doing God in Education (Cooling, 2010), Trevor Cooling identifies and tries to refute a particular view about the place of religion in education. According to this view, ‘religious belief is a private matter that should not impinge on the objective, educational task of promoting rationality’ (p.18). Education is properly concerned with developing the capacity for rational thought and, in relation to this task, religious beliefs are ‘irrelevant clutter’ (p.20). Advocates of the view grudgingly allow a curriculum slot to Religious Education (RE), as ‘the place where you study the myriad of bonkers beliefs to be found in the world’ (p.50), but otherwise they favour an education that ‘simply leaves out the religious clutter’ (p.21). In short, they see religious beliefs ‘as a problem to be dealt with by marginalizing them’ (p.59). We might call this the marginalizing view of the place of religion in education.

Cooling believes that the marginalizing view, which he associates with the writings of Paul Hirst, Richard Norman and Andrew Copson, represents ‘an influential undercurrent’ in contemporary educational discourse (p.14). He suggests that Hirst’s objections to Christian education are ‘very influential in current thinking’ (p.18), and that ‘concern about the toxicity of religion is influential amongst policy makers’ (p.23). For Cooling, then, the marginalizing view is a matter of more than theoretical interest: it poses a clear and present danger to the education of British children.

I think Cooling rather exaggerates this threat. We are talking, after all, about a national education system in which a third of maintained schools are faith-based, all schools are required by law to provide a daily collective act of worship, and RE is the only curriculum subject compulsory to the age of 18. There is something rather comical about Cooling’s plea for education policy to focus less on ‘forcing people to comply with certain structural arrangements (for example by abolishing faith schools and making every school a ‘neutral’ community school)’ (p.59): it is difficult to imagine a policy community less interested in abolishing faith schools, and less insistent on conformity to the model of the local authority community school, than our own. For some time now UK education policy has been moving steadily in the direction of greater diversity of school provision: in the decade following the enactment of the 1998 Religious Character of Schools Designation Procedure Regulations, 84 new maintained faith schools were opened in Britain (Hansard 486, 2009).

There are also difficulties with Cooling’s attribution of the marginalizing view to Hirst, Norman and Copson. Norman and Copson make it abundantly clear, in their published
response to *Doing God in Education*, that they neither suppose religious beliefs to be irrational clutter nor build their educational arguments on that supposition (Norman and Copson, 2011, p.1). And Hirst, far from seeking to marginalize religion, makes it integral to the educational theory for which he is justly celebrated: the forms of knowledge thesis (Hirst, 1965; Hirst and Peters, 1970). Religion, on Hirst’s view, is one of seven or eight basic forms of human knowledge into which children must be initiated as a condition of developing rational minds. There are certainly some puzzles about Hirst’s postulation of a religious form of knowledge (for a discussion of these, see Hand, 2006), but he can scarcely be accused of dismissing religion as irrelevant clutter.

Nevertheless, the marginalizing view is a familiar one, and perhaps an attractive one to those without much time for religion. If the view is wrong, and I agree with Cooling that it *is* wrong, there is value in the enterprise of explaining why. To that extent I am sympathetic to the task Cooling sets himself in *Doing God in Education*. I am also sympathetic to some of the objections he advances and to some of the strategies he recommends for engaging constructively with religion in schools. At the same time, however, I think much of what he has to say is badly off-target. My aim in this article, then, is to separate the wheat from the chaff in Cooling’s report, to disentangle the cogent from the confused in his attempted refutation of the marginalizing view.

I will argue that there are, in fact, two distinct lines of argument running through Cooling’s text, predicated on two distinct concepts marked by the term ‘worldview’. I will not suggest that one or other of these concepts is the *correct* meaning of ‘worldview’: both fall within the range of standard senses of the term. The problem is not that Cooling uses the term incorrectly, but that his use of it conflates, or is ambiguous between, these two concepts. And whereas one concept of worldview is integral to a powerful case for engagement with religion in education, the other underpins an entirely spurious justification for faith schools and school worship.

I will begin by distinguishing the two senses of ‘worldview’ I think Cooling conflates, then examine the place of each in the lines of argument he pursues.

**Two senses of ‘worldview’**

One of the things we sometimes mean when we describe someone as having a worldview is that they subscribe to a *theory of the meaning of life*. A theory of the meaning of life is a general account of the significance, origin and purpose of human existence. Not everyone subscribes to such a theory: some people are agnostic about these matters. But for those who commit themselves to a theory of this kind, there are few things more important or more central to their identity.

Theories of the meaning of life need not be religious, and a religion need not include a theory of the meaning of life. But, at least in the case of the major world religions, religious commitment typically does involve subscription to such a theory. It is appropriate to speak of a ‘Christian worldview’, for example, because the core Christian narrative of the creation, fall and redemption of humanity is plausibly construed as an account of the significance, origin and purpose of human existence.
Indeed, it is arguable that the prevalence of this sense of ‘worldview’ in the English-speaking world owes much to the adoption of the term by Protestant theologians in the late nineteenth century. James Orr, in *The Christian View of God and the World* (Orr, 1989 [1897]), argued that it was no longer sufficient for Christian apologists to attend narrowly ‘to special doctrines or to points of supposed conflict with the natural sciences’; rather, they must be ready to undertake ‘an exposition and vindication of the Christian view of things as a whole’, over against a range of rival views of the world (p.4). Orr elaborates on the notion of a ‘view of things as a whole’ as follows:

The causes which lead to the formation of ‘Weltanschauungen’, that is, of general theories of the universe, explanatory of what it is, how it has come to be what it is, and whither it tends, lie deep in the constitution of human nature. They are twofold - speculative and practical, corresponding to the twofold aspect of human nature as thinking and active. On the theoretical side, the mind seeks unity in its representations. It is not content with fragmentary knowledge, but tends constantly to rise from facts to laws, from laws to higher laws, from these to the highest generalisations possible. Ultimately it abuts on questions of origin, purpose, and destiny, which as questions set by reason to itself, it cannot, from its very nature refuse at least to attempt to answer… But there is likewise a practical motive urging to the consideration of these well-worn questions of the why, whence, and whither? Looking out on the universe, men cannot but desire to know their place in the system of things of which they form a part, if only that they may know how rightly to determine themselves thereto. (pp.6-7)

Worldviews, then, understood as theories of the meaning of life, are at once speculative and practical, concerned both to explain the human condition and to prescribe a pattern of life. They go beyond the ‘fragmentary knowledge’ yielded by local and specialised inquires to offer integrated, general accounts of the whole of human knowledge, experience and value.

Like any theory, a theory of the meaning of life stands or falls by its fit with the data it purports to explain. We are rightly inclined to reject any worldview that conflicts with what we know, or negates our experience, or denies the value of what we hold dear. Orr is clear about the requirement on worldviews to be consistent with the findings of science and reason: the worldview to which Christians stand committed, he says, must be both ‘reconcilable with all that is certain and established in the results of science’ and ‘in harmony with the conclusions at which sound reason, attacking its own problems, independently arrives’ (p.8).

Assessing the fit between a theory of the meaning of life and the data of human knowledge and experience is not, of course, a straightforward matter. But there is at least the possibility here of comparing one worldview with another and making sensible judgments about their respective merits. And this possibility holds out the hope of an eventual rational convergence on the correct worldview, however remote that prospect may seem at present.

I turn now to the second sense of ‘worldview’. What is sometimes meant when people are described as having different worldviews is that they have different conceptual
A conceptual scheme is a system of basic concepts or categories that makes experience possible. The Kantian thought here is that sensory input alone cannot be sufficient for intelligible experience: in order for us to experience a world of distinguishable objects and events, we must impose some order on the deliverances of the senses, and our conceptual scheme is the means by which we do this. The accompanying, unKantian thought is that the system of categories by which sensory input is ordered is subject to cultural variation. Different social groups have different systems for filtering or dividing up the sensory manifold, so they experience the world in fundamentally and incommensurably different ways. To talk of different worldviews in this sense is therefore to presuppose a strong form of conceptual relativism.

Strong conceptual relativism derives what little plausibility it has from the controversial Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which proposes that people acquire their conceptual schemes from natural languages and that the differences between natural languages run deep. Benjamin Whorf articulates the hypothesis like this:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language… We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated (Whorf, 1956, pp.213-14).

A worldview in the second sense, then, is a system of categorial concepts that makes experience possible, and the suggestion that categorial systems differ between social groups rests principally on the idea that ‘we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages’.

This brief sketch will be enough to show, I hope, that conceptual schemes do not much resemble theories of the meaning of life. For one thing, conceptual schemes are not theories at all. They do not assert anything, or purport to explain anything, nor can they be tested against evidence or experience. For another, conceptual schemes are not optional in the way that theories of the meaning of life are. We can remain agnostic about the significance, origin and purpose of human existence, but we cannot opt out of the business of ordering our sensory input.

And whereas many religions include distinctive theories of the meaning of life, it is hardly plausible to suggest that they include distinctive conceptual schemes. Christianity certainly offers answers to the ‘well-worn questions of the why, whence and whither’, but it does not furnish its adherents with a system of categories for dividing up the sensory manifold. To lose one’s faith is to lose a way of making sense of life as a
whole, but it is not to lose one's capacity to experience a world of distinguishable objects and events.

With these two concepts of worldview in mind, let us return to Cooling's critique of the marginalizing view.

**Cooling's first argument**

One central line of argument in Cooling's report provides a plausible justification for doing God in education. At the core of this argument is a distinction between, on the one hand, knowledge, skills and shared values, and, on the other, ‘interpretations of meaning and significance’. Cooling introduces this distinction in the opening pages of the report with a discussion of the contrasting religious views of Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins:

Dawkins and Collins are scientific colleagues. They share the same knowledge base and can work with integrity within the same discipline. Their different religious beliefs make no difference to their professional capacity to work as biologists. There is a shared scientific activity which is based on rational principles. However, they differ fundamentally when it comes to the meaning and significance they attribute to their shared enterprise. For Collins it only makes sense in a world where there is a Creator, but for Dawkins it leads him to believe that God does not exist. Dawkins and Collins have both written books intended to persuade others of the truth of their beliefs. For both of them the shared activity of science is important, but the interpretation of the meaning and significance of science is even more so (Cooling, 2010, p.12, author's emphasis).

The picture here is straightforward enough. The shared activity of science is ‘based on rational principles’ and yields a common ‘knowledge base’. Dawkins and Collins do not disagree about the scientific facts. But they do disagree in their ‘interpretation of the meaning and significance of science’: they disagree about how to relate their scientific knowledge to other areas of human understanding and experience, about how to fit it into a more general account of human life.

Cooling immediately indicates what he takes to be the educational relevance of this distinction by advancing the following practical recommendation:

… the value of teaching science in schools should lie not just in learning scientific information, but in developing the ability to make judgments about the meaning and significance of science. In other words, science in schools should be contributing to pupils' development as persons and not just to their knowledge of science. (p.13)

We have a choice to make about science education. One option is to make the subject ‘purely about passing on the facts of science and inducting students into scientific method’ (p.13). The other is to supplement our teaching of scientific knowledge with opportunities to consider the implications of science for beliefs about the significance,
origin and purpose of human existence. When a child asks a question about creationism in a science lesson, we can either 'dismiss it outright as wrong-headed' or 'engage with the question as a legitimate exploration of a worldview' (p.11). Cooling favours the latter course on the grounds that 'grappling successfully with questions of meaning and significance contributes to developing into a healthy, balanced person and is a fundamentally important component of education' (p.14).

It is not only scientists who disagree about the meaning and significance of what they do, and not only science education where such disagreements should be brought into the curriculum. Cooling’s argument is quite general: in relation to any area of human knowledge or practice, there will be important questions about its place in the larger scheme of things, and adequate educational provision in the area will include opportunities to explore those questions.

Here the influence of the first concept of worldview sketched above will be clear. Recall Orr’s remarks about the tendency of the human mind to seek ‘unity in its representations’ by going beyond ‘fragmentary knowledge’ until it ‘abuts on questions of origin, purpose, and destiny’. People subscribe to worldviews, or theories of the meaning of life, because they are not content with isolated pockets of knowledge, skill and value: they want the parts of their lives integrated into a meaningful whole. And a theory cannot integrate and explain the different areas of human knowledge and experience unless it is, at least for the most part, consistent with them. The consequence for education is that, as we expand children’s knowledge in particular disciplines or areas of study, we are likely to be contradicting or corroborating theories of the meaning of life to which some of them already subscribe and others are giving active consideration. So the sort of learning that goes on in school subjects raises ‘questions of meaning and significance’ that go far beyond the scope of those subjects.

The thrust of Cooling’s first line of argument, then, is that religions should not be marginalized in education because they feature prominently among the theories of the meaning of life whose plausibility and fit with disciplinary knowledge is a live issue in contemporary society. Insofar as the bodies of knowledge we impart in school have implications for the adequacy of religious worldviews, there is a clear pedagogical case for exploring these implications in the curriculum contexts where they come to light. Moreover, Cooling suggests, it is actually in the worldview implications of subject knowledge that its real interest lies:

The pivotal argument of this report is this: in human life it is the interpretations of the meaning and significance, and the applications made, of shared knowledge and values that ultimately matter. It is these that inspire people, not the shared information that they learn. They shape the sorts of adults that pupils become. Education should not, therefore, just be about passing on knowledge and skills. Rather it should strive to support people in the process of making their own wholesome interpretations of human knowledge and of applying those in their lives (pp.39-40).

This is somewhat overstated. Worldviews do not have a monopoly on inspiring people, or mattering ultimately to them, and the disciplinary knowledge and practical skills children acquire in school may be as influential in shaping the sort of adults they
become as their large-scale ‘interpretations of meaning and significance’. But the overstatement does not diminish the force of Cooling’s basic point: worldviews answer to a fundamental human concern and thus merit serious educational attention.

I think this general strategy for rebutting the marginalizing view has much to commend it. It seems right to say that an adequate preparation for adult life will include an exploration of theories of the meaning of life, including religious ones, both because of their intrinsic interest to human beings and because of their interrelationship with knowledge, skills and values whose place on the curriculum is uncontested. And the sort of exploration required is not a whistle-stop tour of ‘bonkers beliefs’, but a close, critical and sensitive examination of credible and widely-held worldviews.

I have one reservation about this argument, and it pertains to the optionality of worldviews. We should not lose sight of the fact that people can be agnostic about the meaning of life. If people were obliged to subscribe to a general account of the significance, origin and purpose of human existence, critical scrutiny of the best accounts available could scarcely have higher priority. But they are not so obliged. They can, and frequently do, ignore or suppress the ‘desire to know their place in the system of things of which they form a part’. Some decline to adopt a ‘view of things as a whole’ because evaluating and choosing between worldviews is difficult and psychologically demanding and it is easier not to bother. Others decline on principle, because they judge there to be good epistemic or ethical reasons for worldview agnosticism, scepticism or suspicion. The availability of the option not to subscribe, and the possibility that it may actually be the right option, gives rise to a worry about the allocation of substantial curriculum space to the study of worldviews. It may load the curriculum dice in favour of the idea that people ought to subscribe to worldviews, that a disinclination to wrestle with the question of the meaning of life is some sort of failing. This worry does not lend support to the marginalizing view, but it does invite caution in response to Cooling’s call for attention to ‘questions of meaning and significance’ in all areas of the curriculum.

**Cooling’s second argument**

Intertwined with the argumentative thread just described is a second and altogether more dubious line of thought. It comes to the fore in Chapter Two of the report, where Cooling defends a ‘critical realist’ view of human knowledge against the ‘objectivist’ and ‘post-modern’ alternatives. Objectivists, according to Cooling, hold that ‘there is an objective world to be discovered’ and that education is a ‘process of liberation from the shackles of other people’s interpretations’ (p.31). Post-modernists, by contrast, hold that ‘knowledge is always someone’s interpretation and is shaped by the particular “belief clutter” out of which it has been constructed’ (p.31). Critical realists steer a middle path between the two extremes:

This stance accepts that everyone grows up shaped by a particular view of the world held by their family and others of significance (including their school). But… it is maintained that **one can connect with objective reality from within one’s own worldview** and that this can change one’s perception… In this view, the so-called “clutter” of beliefs is integral to knowing, but our “clutter” is modified and develops as we learn (p.32).
Crucially, Cooling’s preferred critical realist view shares with the post-modern view the idea that knowledge is always constructed from resources furnished by a worldview. Whereas the post-modernist (as Cooling presents her) denies the possibility of connecting with ‘objective reality’ and thus ‘sinks into relativism’ (p.32), the critical realist thinks of knowledge and perception as susceptible to influence from the ‘world outside’. But both hold that knowing and perceiving only happen within a worldview and are heavily shaped by the content of that worldview. Cooling draws the following striking conclusion:

If human knowledge is constructed from within a belief framework, as the critical realist position… maintains, then it is clearly both inevitable and essential that children are nurtured into a worldview from the earliest age. Without this experience, children cannot think at all. (p.36)

Plainly this is a different concept of worldview from the one deployed in Cooling’s first argument. The claim is no longer that theories of the meaning of life deserve educational attention because of the human desire to understand things as a whole. Having a worldview is now construed as a necessary precondition of thinking itself, a conceptual framework that makes knowledge and experience possible. Ensuring that all children are equipped with such a framework thus becomes the first and most basic task of education, something ‘both inevitable and essential’ for participation in a human form of life. It is clear, I think, that Cooling has here shifted to an understanding of worldviews as conceptual schemes.

Cooling appears to take it as read that religious belief systems qualify as worldviews in this sense. And from this he understandably infers that ‘faith schools make a lot of sense’ (p.64). At least in the early years of education, the priority will be to give children a world by instilling a worldview, and this will be best achieved by enabling parents to choose schools where the home worldview is endorsed and consolidated. However, Cooling also insists that schools should create opportunities for young people to engage with worldviews other than their own and ‘evaluate them for themselves in their own pursuit of understanding the truth about reality’ (p.34). And engagement with other worldviews will now involve rather more than assessing rival theories against established bodies of evidence: it will involve experimenting with radically different ways of knowing and experiencing. I take this to be the reason for Cooling’s advocacy of collective worship in common schools, which, he says, ‘should be regarded as a positive opportunity to engage with the significance of the religious dimension of life in today’s world and not treated as an anachronistic relic’ (p.70). The idea, presumably, is that genuine engagement with distinctively religious ways of constructing reality requires participation in some distinctively religious practices.

This second argument against the marginalizing view seems to me quite wrongheaded. Let us suppose for a moment that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is true, that people who speak different languages have different conceptual schemes and therefore different ways of imposing order on the ‘kaleidoscopic flux of impressions’. To grant this is to grant the existence of multiple worldviews and to allow that all human knowing and perceiving is worldview-dependent in something like the way Cooling suggests. Even with these allowances, I contend, Cooling’s second attempt to rebut the marginalizing
view is vulnerable to a decisive objection, and one we have already noted: religious belief systems cannot plausibly be construed as conceptual schemes.

The reason conceptual schemes are conditions of the possibility of intelligible experience is that they filter or divide up the sensory manifold, giving us a world of distinguishable objects and events. It is hard to attach much sense to the suggestion that religious belief systems might have this function. Beliefs about gods, angels and avatars, about creation, salvation and reincarnation, may constitute theories of the meaning of life, or explanations of aspects of the human condition, or justifications of moral principles and ideals; but they do not supply believers with a means of filtering sensory input. Believers and unbelievers do not have different ways of carving up the world: they identify exactly the same things as people, plants and paintings, actions, accidents and assertions. The sort of concepts that Kant identifies as categorial (his twelvefold schema comprises unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, limitation, inherence, causality, community, possibility, existence and necessity) structure the experience of believer and unbeliever alike. Even the more metaphysically extravagant claims of religion assume these categories rather than posit alternatives to them.

In various presentations of his forms of knowledge thesis, Hirst argues that some religious concepts have categorial status. He claims that each form of knowledge is irreducible to the others because each possesses its own categorial concepts and thus involves a distinctive form of experience. But even if Hirst were right about there being a religious form of knowledge in this sense, it would not follow that categorial religious concepts amount to a worldview. Far from structuring the whole of human experience, they would structure only religious experience, understood as something sharply distinct from physical, social, moral and aesthetic experience. In any case, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Hand, 2006), there is no religious form of knowledge: some religious claims may be true, and if so they can in principle be known to be true, but they do not belong to an autonomous epistemological class differentiated by distinctive categorial concepts.

So religious belief systems are not worldviews in the required sense and the marginalizing view cannot be defeated by insisting on the importance of children acquiring a conceptual scheme. It may be possible, using an argument of this kind, to justify the claim that all children should be taught a first language; but few people need persuading of this. The fact that children need conceptual schemes, or first languages, lends no support at all to the case for doing God in education. And it certainly gives no succour to supporters of faith schools and school worship. Faith schools are objectionable because they attempt to secure children’s assent to epistemically controversial propositions; collective worship in common schools is objectionable because many children are not religious, and because those who are religious worship different gods in different ways. Claims about the role of conceptual schemes in human knowledge, and about the kind of formative experiences without which ‘children cannot think at all’, are simply not relevant to these objections.

Conclusion

The two arguments identified above, and the two senses of ‘worldview’ associated with
them, are entangled and conflated throughout Cooling's report. Only by separating them out and considering them independently is it possible to assess the merits of Cooling's case against the marginalizing view.

The first argument is that children should have an opportunity to explore different theories of the meaning of life, including religious ones. A curriculum narrowly focused on the transmission of knowledge, skills and shared values would be an impoverished one because human beings have a basic interest in their place in the larger scheme of things and because 'grappling successfully with questions of meaning and significance contributes to developing into a healthy, balanced person' (Cooling, 2010, p.14).

The second argument is that all human knowledge is generated by the application of conceptual schemes to sensory input and it would be arbitrary to privilege the knowledge yielded by secular conceptual schemes over the knowledge yielded by religious ones. Because children require a stable, provisional conceptual scheme, parents should be entitled to choose a school that will reinforce the conceptual scheme used in the home. And because all children should have an understanding of distinctively religious ways of constructing reality, they should all participate in distinctively religious practices in school.

I have argued, with a minor reservation, that Cooling’s first argument is persuasive: because of their intrinsic interest and social influence, religious theories of the meaning of life merit serious educational attention. His second argument, however, is bogus: whether or not categorial concepts are subject to cultural variation in the manner suggested by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, religious belief systems do not qualify as conceptual schemes.

References


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