

World View Grid

This grid roughly approximates the set of questions I have asked myself in focusing my thoughts about what I believe, in a world of uncertainty. In each case, I give not only the question, but how I answered it myself. I do not follow out all the possibilities had I answered some of the questions differently.

Question 1. Do I want a world view which is rational?

This question distinguishes rational world views from a large number that are irrational, such as mysticism, believing whatever your parents taught without questioning it, following some other human leader without question, and escapism (throwing ourselves into work, pleasure, travel, etc., without thought as to why.)

My thought process on this is that it is intrinsic to who I am to be a rational person; I can't escape it. In fact, the very fact that I am having doubts and concerns about what is true shows that I am a rational person at core; if I wasn't, I would just believe whatever came down the pike from my parents or culture without questioning it.

Having decided I need to be rational, some things immediately follow.

Logic. If I am going to be rational, I will need to use logic. Logic is not optional set of rules; it is intrinsic to rational thinking. Logic is based on the premise that we can believe something is true and also false; self-contradiction is merely nonsense, because our brains don't work that way. As Aristotle pointed out many years ago, to argue against logic is to use logic, because argumentation itself is based on logic.

Induction. Along with logic, another built-in way of thinking is the use of induction, that is, the more experience we have with something, the more confident we are that we know what is true. Logic alone has no truth value; it simply tells us how to handle the relationships between different truths. The inputs to our rational thinking, which tell us about the way the real world is, all come ultimately from our senses, which can include internal senses, such as our conscience, and sense of beauty, as well as the external five senses. Whenever we deal with sense experience, we use induction to make sense of it. This is intrinsic to our thinking because all language is learned inductively, and we cannot think without language. Therefore, to construct an argument against induction is to use induction, because we must construct that argument in a language that we learned inductively.

A consequence of inductive rational thinking is that we can never say that we have 100% certainty about any of the things we believe about the real world; there is always the possibility of doubts, even if they are unreasonable doubts. Logic can give us 100% certainty only about tautologies, relationships that are not directly connected to the real world. Nevertheless, although we can't have 100% certainty about anything, we can have very high certainty about many things, to the point that we can say we "know" these things beyond a reasonable doubt.

One thing that does not follow is that I need to be rational and logical all of the time (like the stereotype of Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*). I can often have thoughtless pleasure or thoughtless interactions with people, etc. This question only asks whether my deep world view will be based on rational thinking. Once I have a rational world view in place, I can often operate on “autopilot” and not need to rethink everything all the time.

Question 2. Is my rationality and personhood an accident in an impersonal universe?

Another way to state this question is, “Is there a God?” but many people, when they state the question that way, envision a basically impersonal universe with a big man flying around in it, called God, who is subject to impersonal laws of nature just as we are. That is still an essentially impersonal universe at its core. The same is true of versions of paganism that have many gods all subject to impersonal laws outside themselves, as well as dualism which has two gods or godlike forces, also subject to a larger, impersonal set of laws.

The real question is whether I think that the whole notion of personhood, and the whole notion of intention and purpose, are intrinsic to the fabric of the universe, or accidents. If I say yes, then I can simply identify “God” as that essential personhood at the core of the universe and all things.

My answer to this is partly informed by my internal gut feelings, and partly by science. In my gut, I can’t believe that thought and intention are just ephemeral, fleeting accidents of random atom motion. Scientifically, I find the fine tuning of the universe all levels, including the origin of life, shout out to me that there is intentionality at the core of all things.

Question 3. Is there anything that is not God?

This is sometimes called creator/creature distinction. Many world views make no distinction between God and not-God; it is all one continuum.

The decider for me on this issue is that, if I am God and don’t know it, I have a very poor memory about something pretty crucial. I can believe that I share attributes like personality and intention with God, but I am most definitely not in control of the universe or omniscient. Thus, I am not-God in crucial ways. Therefore the existence of not-God is possible and observable.

One thing that follows from this is *humility*, recognizing that I am not in charge of the universe and someone else is. My relationship to God must be one of subservience and honoring, not taking God’s place.

Another thing that follows from this is *responsibility*, the notion that I have a domain of control such that some actions can be called “mine” and not God’s; I have ownership of things within my sphere of activity and control and therefore can be held accountable for my actions.

Question 4. Is God fundamentally relational?

This gets at the basic question of what aspects of myself are shared by God, i.e., are at the core of the universe itself and not just details of the specific instantiation of them in my body. There are many aspects of myself that seem obviously non-essential to the notion of personhood, such as having two legs (we can easily imagine having three, or none, and still being a person). But communication and language seem essential to personhood. I think only in a language, and I cannot even imagine what language would look like that involved no other persons. This leads me to conclude that if God is personal, he is also relational. In my experience, people who are cut off from other people, who are non-relational, are impoverished as persons, not a superior type of person. As C.S. Lewis argued, God is not less than us; though he may have many aspects different from us, he cannot be less personal or less relational than us. If he was less personal or relational than us, that would say that somehow the lesser creates the greater, which seems implausible.

One consequence of seeing God as intrinsically relational is to see the idea of the *Trinity* as plausible. The Trinity says that God was relational from all time, in essence, not only after creating us.

Question 5. Is sin real?

All of the above questions are ones that, in principle, I could decide objectively and rationally just based on the persuasiveness of the arguments. This question is one that cannot be treated purely that way. If the answer is yes, I have to deal with the possibility that I am a sinner, and I cannot be neutral or disinterested about the answer to that question.

Sin here means real evil, deserving God's anger and curse. It is easy to believe that we might make "mistakes," or be "imperfect," but to see myself as actually doing real evil is heart-wrenching; my natural inclination is to turn my eyes away from this question and to excuse myself as not "seriously" evil by all kinds of arguments such as comparing myself to other people, claiming my parents or my genes made me behave as I do, etc.

My experience is that I didn't believe I did anything really evil, until my "eyes were opened," against my will, to see the nature of who I really am, deep down. I've also since then come to grips with the inexcusable actions of other people, and do believe that evil is real.

Believing that evil is real does not presume that God is personal; there are versions of deism that allow for universal morality. But if God is personal and relational, then my evil is also seen by him, and known for what it is by him. That can be a scary thought that biases my answers to the previous questions.

Question 6. Is justice real?

If I believe that sin is real, and that God knows it for what it is, I must ask whether he does anything about it, or leaves it to go on forever.

There is no logical reason why God must prevent evil from ever existing for any amount of time. (I discuss this in a separate essay, “Thinking about the problem of evil.”) But if nothing is ever done about evil, ever, then it seems to drain all the purpose from our lives.

Experientially, it is much easier for us to believe in justice than to believe that we ourselves are sinners. As others have argued, a person cut off by another driver on the road feels immediately that the other driver has done *wrong*, in an absolute sense. We also believe deep down that something is wrong if the powerful oppress the weak. Our hearts cry out for justice, for a hope that evil will be defeated. This connects to the deep concept of intentionality in the universe, discussed above. We have a sense of what “should” be, not just what is.

Theologians have shown how much follows from belief in justice. If there is justice, there must be a judge, someone to actually set things right. That judge must be good, and not delight in evil. The judge must also be omniscient, to know all the facts and extenuating circumstances, to give a just judgment. The judge must be able to raise the dead to prevent people escaping judgment by death. The judge must be omnipotent to prevent the thwarting of the judgments. This sounds an awful lot like the Christian conception of God.

Question 7. Does God speak to us?

Deism says that there is a God, but he is silent and remote from us. It is certainly logically possible for there to be a God who remains silent. But if my personality is a reflection of the intrinsic personhood of God, and language and communication are essential aspects of my personality, it seems natural to expect that God also communicates. This doesn't automatically tell me which purported communication from God I should expect, but it tells me that it is plausible that God would speak through some means like the Bible.

There are two arguments against the plausibility of the Bible that don't work for me. One is the argument that if God is to speak at all to humanity, he must speak equally to all people in all parts of the world and in all ages, and cannot restrict himself to speaking to just some people at some times. This strikes me as a completely artificial restriction on God's freedom. God could not speak at all, or speak just a little, or speak a lot, as he sees fit.

Sometimes this argument is tied to justice—if anything that God says is required for our moral accountability, then it would be unjust to hold us accountable for that if we have never heard the message. This argument only works if we assume that people are *tabula rasa*, blank slates, when it comes to morality. It is certainly plausible and logically coherent to believe that all people have an internal moral sense of right and wrong apart from any direct communication from God, and that the direct communication that God gives would supplement, not overturn, that inner moral sense, or give us other information besides moral precepts.

The second argument that doesn't work for me is that because there are liars and deceivers in the world, we can't trust that any purported communication is really from God. Certainly the existence of liars means that I cannot just take anything that is claimed to be from God as necessarily coming from God. But I can apply rational tests to any such claims to judge their credibility, as follows.

Signs that the communication comes from the controller of created order. If someone claims to speak for the creator of the universe, it stands to reason that there should be evidence of that control over the universe. For this reason I would expect the communication to be accompanied by what we call miracles, which demonstrate power over the created order.

Resonance with my inner sense of relevance. This is somewhat ambiguously defined, but if the purported communication was all abstract or nonsense that seemed to me irrelevant, I would find it hard to believe it came from God.

Coherence. Since I assume a rational view of personhood, I would expect communication from God to be internally coherent and not self-contradictory.

In practice, this simple grid rapidly whittles down the list of candidates to just the Bible. In regard to miraculous signs, very few purported communications from God even claim to have evidence of mighty signs and wonders. In regard to resonance, I find that the Bible addresses my sense of sin and evil in ways that make it intensely relevant. In terms of consistency, books like the *Koran* and the *Book of Mormon* claim to be consistent with the Bible, and I find on even a first reading that they are not.¹

All of this just establishes the plausibility of believing in the Bible, and does not address specifically the truth of the Bible we have. It also doesn't rule out a priori the possibility of new words from God attested by new mighty signs.

Question 8. Are the stories of Jesus credible?

In practice, while the Bible claims to be attested by signs and wonders from God, I don't have first-hand experienced with most of those events. My interaction with the Bible therefore comes down mostly to what I know of the testimony of the church about Jesus. For this, I don't need to assume any particular view of the inspiration of Scripture; I can rely just on the fact that we have many credible reports of what the church taught in the early centuries about Jesus, including the teaching of the New Testament documents themselves.

In examining this history, I find a universal testimony of the church that Jesus did many mighty signs and wonders, and rose from the dead. In fact, I would say this is the main message of the early church; they were often poor on theology, but very clear on stories and facts that were first-hand experience for many of them. I also find that the hypotheses of modern writers to explain why the church universally claimed this within a decade or two after Jesus, if in fact none of these miracles happened, are not very credible or believable to me. Several authors have produced books on the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus and I find these to be convincing.

¹ Some Muslims claim that the Koran is consistent with an older, lost version of the Bible, but we have enough old manuscripts of the Bible that predate the Koran to invalidate this argument.

Question 9. Is Jesus my lord?

If Jesus did all the miracles that are claimed, including the Resurrection, I am confronted with the need to decide if I should accept his claim to be my Lord. Here C.S. Lewis is again helpful: Jesus did not give me the option to put him in a category of just a nice guy. Either he is who he said he was, or he was a lunatic, or he was evil. But he could not just be a nice, good teacher if he claimed to be Lord and God and wasn't.

Once again, this is not a question that we can address completely neutrally and objectively. I naturally do not like anyone telling me what to do. Having a Lord means that I have to accept his commands and adopt his teachings.

On the other hand, we all have a deep longing for a good Lord. Literature is full of heroic saviors. We cynically shy away from that in reality because we are familiar (sometimes in our own lives) with people having lords who abused them or betrayed them.

Question 10. Should I follow the lead of Jesus in his attitude toward the Bible?

If Jesus is Lord, then I should "follow" him. One of the things that is striking to me in reading the Gospels is that Jesus was a strict student of the Jewish Scriptures and implicitly took a high view of them at every point in his ministry, quoting them, citing them, and using them even at the level of single words to resolve debates. This pattern is then taken up by the Apostles in the New Testament, and in extra-biblical accounts of the early church. It is not surprising, since extra-biblical accounts of Judaism at the same time period show the same veneration of the Scriptures in the Jewish population. There was clearly a sense of the "Word of God" being different from all other writings.

As a follower of Jesus, I therefore take the same attitude that he had toward the Scriptures. Furthermore, this extends to the New Testament Scriptures. F.F. Bruce's book on the Canon of Scripture was very helpful to me; in particular, in showing that the early church clearly had a sense of "Word of God" and "everything else". The "received teaching of the Apostles" was immediately put in the same category of "Word of God" which they already had from their Jewish roots. While there was some debate about which books truly represented the received teaching from the Apostles (Bruce shows that this was really a peripheral debate about just a few books), there was no sense of any of the church leaders at the time saying that they were "creating" the Word of God; rather, they were responding to it, and propagating it and protecting it from distortion. Their veneration for it word for word is evidenced by the mysticism which some engaged in, such as Origen, in reading enormous allegorical meaning into single words; although this was misguided, it shows that they had a very high view of the words of Apostles. Debates in the early church also often revolved around single words in the New Testament, just as Jesus made arguments based on single words in the Old Testament.

This question is a watershed for deciding which Christian church movement to follow. Churches like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox church place Tradition side by side with the Scriptures, while Jesus condemned those who put Tradition alongside or above the Word of God.

Taking the Scriptures the way Jesus did puts me on a path of deciding church questions based on close reading of the Bible, informed of course by the scholarship of the church through history, but overall looking for the meaning of Scripture not in what I want it to say, or what my movement or culture wants it to say, but letting it judge me and not vice versa.

Question 11. How can I understand the Bible?

Believing that I should take the Bible as the Word of God does not resolve all disputes and disagreements among those claiming to be Christian, of course. There are several major interpretive schools of thought, with different answers to questions such as:

How much should the wisdom of the older generations (precedent) be weighted versus my individual understanding of the text right now?

How much should I weight my internal experience of perceived direct experience from God in reading the Bible?

How much should I strive to have coherent theological frameworks versus just making it up as I go along?

Within Bible-believing Christianity, there are the following major interpretive schools:

Reformed/Anglican/Lutheran. Strong emphasis on respecting the history of the church and its scholars, the coherence of the whole Bible together, and making coherent theological frameworks.

Arminian/Baptist/Methodist/Dispensationalist. Strong emphasis on getting out into the world to do stuff for God, on individual choice and responsibility, and individual interpretation of the Bible; strong break between the Old Testament and New Testament.

Anabaptist/Mennonite/Brethren. Strong emphasis on corporate life and social justice, on themes of justice in Scripture rather than specific details; strong break between the Old Testament and New Testament.

Charismatic/Pentecostal. Strong emphasis on mystical personal interaction with God, new direct revelation from God which can change our interpretation of Scripture, and the new work God is doing in the present without much reference to prior generations.

Within each of these schools of thought, there are also differences on the axes of: theologically liberal/conservative (liberal theology effectively or even officially allowing some Scripture to simply be ignored), legalistic/antinomian (to what degree do we make each other feel guilty for sin and call each other to repent—all the time, or not at all, or somewhere in between?), social Gospel vs. personal salvation/personal piety (there is only so much time in the day—how much energy should we put into evangelism and discipleship versus justice and physical needs?), politically liberal/conservative (to what degree should we ask government to solve social problems, and to what degree should we require personal responsibility and allow

people to fail?), and separatist/cooperativist (to what degree should we separate from those who claim to be Christians but have serious errors in their teachings or practice, versus working together with other Christians as much as possible?)

I have found the Reformed school of thought to be the most like that of Scripture itself, although I recognize some of its weaknesses and some of the strengths in other schools of thought.

Question 12. What Christian community should I join?

This question is not “Should I join a Christian community?” because a plain reading of the Bible makes it clear that every Christian needs to be part of a church, and our relational nature tells us in our heart that we need to be in community.

Some people are confused by the large number of Protestant churches and denominations, but this is unnecessary. There are many communities that are well defined even though they have many independent organizational structures. For example, the “academic world” has a definite culture and practice even though universities are all independent corporations, “independent filmmakers” and “craft breweries” have a connection and communal ethos even though they work independently, and towns in America have meetings of mayors and chambers of commerce even though they are independently governed. On the other hand, some organizations with organizational unity have serious fractures, such as the wars between the liberal and conservative wings of the Roman Catholic church today, and past wars (which were literally wars in some cases) between factions, leading to multiple Popes, etc., or the division in the United States which led to the Civil War even though there was official unity of one government. Organizational unity can also lead to oppression, as in the power held by communist countries that did not allow individual churches, clubs, or associations.

In general, there is a tension here between covenantal commitment to people, not dropping a church at the first sight of sin, and our need to be in a “healthy” church, which has body life of people encouraging each other to love and good works, veneration for God, leadership with integrity and not hypocrisy, and an outward not ingrown approach.