Naming the Elephant

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Naming the Elephant, worldview as a concept is an outgrowth of James W. Sire’s, *The Universe next Door* and Sire’s dissatisfaction with his own worldview definition presented in his prior work. In this book, he begins by presenting a short story that deals with a little boy, his quizzical nature and his father’s response to worldview questions he presents. Naming the elephant, that is the prime reality, and last response of the father in the short story, helps us to understand worldview as a concept. In order to do so, Sire poses seven basic questions which he feels will help answer our personal worldview concept. Sire gives us a complex description and chapter on ontology verses epistemology. He further presents various other worldviews and definitions with which to identify and gives us his new and improved definition of a worldview. His concluding chapter and remarks name the elephant in the story from the beginning of his book and make it evident that Sire has a Christian worldview (Sire, 2004).

As mentioned, the book begins with the short story. A boy returns home from school where he is shown a globe and told that the world is surrounded by space. The boy then looks to his father as a source of knowledge and seeks answers to his questions. He wants to know “…what holds up the world? Why doesn’t it fall down?” (Sire, 2004, p. 15). The father’s initial quick response was a camel, which brought the question of basically who is the camel holder, which further leads to a kangaroo, a kangaroo holder, and lastly an elephant. After receiving the ‘elephant’ answer, and asking the father who the elephant holder is, the father responds, “…it’s Elephant all the way down” (Sire, 2004, p. 16). The premise of the book is that if we can name the elephant, the prime holder of the world so to say, we can answer the seven basic questions posed by Sire on page 20. We can understand what a worldview is and how to determine our own. Looking back at the text in the book to obtain the quotes, I now noticed that when Sire referred to camel, kangaroo and Elephant in the chapters, he always capitalized “Elephant”, but
never the camel or kangaroo. This may have been unintentional, but because of the repetitiveness of the capitalization, I suspect not. Had I paid more attention, I suppose it would have clued me in as to what was going to be the name of Sire’s Elephant. In the final chapter, Sire does simply declare, “God is indeed the name of the Elephant” (Sire, 2004, p.161). To arrive at this answer, Sire poses his seven basic questions for us to consider.

Sire believes that to allow us to see what our particular worldview is, we must answer the following basic questions:

1. What is prime reality – the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to persons at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?

These remain the same seven basic questions presented in Sire’s earlier works. Numerous samples from other analysts’ questions are presented and compared to Sire’s, but in the end, Sire, while desiring a new definition of a worldview, seems satisfied with the above questions. His new definition, stemming from these same questions however, includes three main new conclusions (Sire, 2004).

First, Sire maintains that one’s worldview must come from the heart. It is not a matter of intellect. It is ingrained and while conversion and variances may occur, our heartfelt worldview is not dislodged easily. Secondly, walking the walk is important. Behavior matters. Thirdly,
based on Sire’s ontology first precept, “each person’s notion of God or nature or themselves…” is the most important aspect of their character (Sire, 2004, p. 135).

Because this third concept of Sire’s worldview definition is ontological, Sire felt it imperative that we understand whether ontology or epistemology should be first. Repeatedly, he states that he feels that ontology must come first. To do otherwise he concludes, would be dangerous, because it would be basing our worldview on human reason or our community’s sense of reason (Sire, 2004). One statement that helped me understand this concept was: “From a realist ontological perspective, the object of knowledge controls the way knowledge of the object will be able to be apprehended” (Sire, 2004, p. 88). Basically, if your prime reality is God, God is in control, even of the knowledge that He reveals and we apprehend.

In summary, the book was complex and confusing at times. This was in part due the various references to other authors and worldviews sprawled throughout the chapters. Sire’s chapter on ontology verses epistemology, by his own admission was also “…long and circuitous…”, but necessary to bring home that our belief in God, gods or no god, drives our worldview (Sire, 2004, p.72). We all have a worldview, whether tied to a defined religion or lack of religion. We all have a worldview, whether we acknowledge it or not. Sire’s new definition makes clear that a worldview is not a matter of intellect but comes from the heart. We all have standards by which we live and preconceived notions of where life began and where, if anywhere, we will ‘be’ in the end. That is, if indeed we believe that there is an ‘end’. When looking at our neighbor, whether friend or foe, foreigner or fellow American, we may better understand their speech, action and deeds, if we step back and look at the name of their Elephant, and the answers they would provide to the seven basic questions that formed their worldview. In our pluralistic society, it seems this is no longer an option, but a necessity.
References