

# The Worldview Required for Holistic Thinking

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## Abstract

Indigenous cultures have survived and thrived over millennia with a deep understanding of the interdependent relationships with their particular landscape. Language, ceremony, and stories allow future generations to continue such place-based knowledge. However, such holistic wisdom no longer exists in many places or is suppressed. This article proposes that rebuilding place-based wisdom requires, in addition to supporting existing Indigenous cultures' sovereignty, re-embracing the holistic worldview precepts that stem from and apply to such traditional ecological knowledge.

**Keywords:** Indigenous worldview, place-based wisdom, holistic education

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*The kind of separation of man, God, and Nature which characterizes the worldview of Western man is, I think, by no means universal. And there is, I shall suggest later, something to be said on this point as to the worldview of the primitive peoples.* — Robert Redfield (1952, p. 34)

[In his article](#) "What is a Worldview," Dr. Kenneth H. Funk defines the term as referring to "a set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of Reality (sic) that ground and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing" (2001). The "Reality" refers to conceptions of our relationship with nature, spirituality, morality, and ourselves (Human Nature). Using this definition and agreeing that the worldview is a vital consideration for life in balance, I propose the worldview most of us have been using has serious problems.

To begin with, the word "worldview" is a European invention. Immanuel Kant introduced it briefly in *Critique of Judgment* in 1790 as *Weltanschauung*, translating to "the world looked at." It does not allow for an other than visual perspective of the world—what William James refers to as a sense of the world's presence. He writes, "This sense of the world's presence...involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completist of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of the universe in which we dwell?" (1988, p. xi). Ultimately this "seeing with the eyes" bias, has led to absolutist thinking that tends to block authentic holistic thinking and dialogue with claims that "there is only one way."

This "one way" emphasis was used by the Church for a long time, however, history reveals that religion as a worldview has not worked well. This is what promoters of the secular science revolution of the 1800s thought. Starting with the theory of evolution to explain life, they offered another "only way" of understanding that replaced the Church's answers to "What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? and What happens after death?" With the advancement of the sciences, a "Western worldview" took hold, although it never entirely shook aside the unshakable influence of organized religions. The push-back against the scientific worldview continues today. Look up the books about worldview, and you will find almost all of them are by religious authors claiming their religion is the only accurate way to "see the world."

As with the religious worldview, there was little questioning of the scientific worldview for a long while. Eventually, critical scholars started recognizing that it is also guilty of either-or thinking that ultimately proves harmful. Some reacted by merely promoting the idea that any belief can be considered a worldview. Others put forth the perspective that there is no worldview and that claims of one are dangerous to liberty. This [position is known as "Liberal democracy."](#) Pluralism is its mantra. Instead of stopping dialogue, the goal of Liberal Democracy is to encourage it. Unfortunately, pluralism often involves [eliminativism](#), which can lead to picking and choosing based on what is left. Science and education support such fragmentation. Hierarchical leadership uses it for dividing and conquering counter-hegemonic forces.

So pluralism as a way to achieve the purpose of a worldview defined above does not work. There cannot be many ways to explain Nature, human nature, or the Nature of spirit from the conflicting assumptions of scientists, religious leaders, physicians, psychologists, carpenters, or lawyers. Nature itself is the only source of such knowledge and insight. Studying fragmented parts of nature, as if dissecting a frog to learn all about its nature, cannot lead to a complete understanding of the nature of a frog. A true worldview calls for a holistic understanding based on experience and observation over millennia. What can come closest to a proper understanding of the right relationships between humanity, nature, and spirit is thousands of years of lived experience *in nature*. Surviving and thriving as part of nature and developing a worldview that reflects how nature works to maintain optimal balance is the closest a human can come to understand our triangle of concepts. This is what all of our ancestors did for 99% of human history, with relative success at maintaining healthy living systems. The great diversity of cultures they experienced in such a setting had an in-common worldview that stemmed from and supported their unique place-based knowledge, unique social systems, and different spiritual traditions.

An early prominent scholar who understood this was Robert Redfield, known as a leading pioneer of social/cultural anthropology and worldview studies. In the 1940s and 50s, his pioneering research brought him to conclude there are fundamentally only two worldviews operating in the world. One stems from the Eurocentric writings that reflect humanity's separation from and sense of superiority over nature. He referred to this as the "metropolitan" worldview. I call it the "dominant worldview." Today, the great diversity of cultures, philosophies, ideologies, religions, etc., tend to embrace the basic precepts in this worldview at their core. The second worldview understands that humans are intrinsically part of nature and necessarily must abide by its laws of symbiotic interconnectedness. Redfield refers to this as "primary worldview" and sometimes as "primitive worldview." I refer to it as the Indigenous worldview. It reflects how we understood our place in the world for most of human history. It is "spun of duty and ethical judgment" (Redfield, 1952, p. 3). It is based on:

- The "unitary nature of the cosmos;"
- A "prevailing attitude of participant maintenance" (working with, not against the elements);
- An understanding that "not-man and the universe are morally significant" (p. 36). Such a perspective led to cultures that emphasized freedom and equality (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

Redfield described the two worldviews as a continuum, starting with the group of beliefs held by uncompromised Indigenous cultures, moving through rural folk cultures, and ending with dominant cultures. He felt the greatest tragedy of human history was the destruction of the Indigenous

worldview by colonizing forces of modern civilization. However, he also believed that, ultimately, people would come back to the Indigenous worldview as they realized the problems departure from it has caused. Having done so, humanity and the world would gain the benefit of having a greater conscious awareness of its importance: "The primary world view was fashioned thousands of years ago in thousands of small communities. Civilization, among many other things, is the story of its destruction and its remaking" (Redfield, 1952, p. 36).

It is worth noting that Redfield's reference to "small communities" reflects an oversight in his research still held today by most cultural scientists. He did not seem to comprehend that "pre-contact" societies were complex and often more extensive than those in Europe at the time. Recent research shows our ancestors made conscious decisions about social structures and political forms. They were intentional about cultivating ways to help balance the environment and other-than-human life. They were the unacknowledged models for the call for liberty and equality during the Enlightenment. For example, consider the research of Graeber and Wengrow in their recent book, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). They show why claims that we must accept the dominant worldview and its loss of freedoms as a necessary price to pay for our more advanced civilization do not reflect the evidence.

Archeologists have discovered over that past 20 to 30 that more cities existed in the ancient worlds than previously understood. Evidence for the emergence of cities appears to predate that for kingdoms, states, empires, or even writing systems. And a surprising number of cities were organized on what seemed to be along very robustly egalitarian lines. So the whole idea that merely scaling up the number of people and the density of people, obliges you to give up freedoms and set up managerial systems and top-down governments is challenged by our growing knowledge of ancient societies (Wengrow, 2021).

Thus the "Indigenous worldview," one that all people indigenous (small "i") to our planet (suggesting here that there are people not indigenous to our planet?), avoids the problems of a rigid binary. It is the deep foundation for the holistic mind and holistic education. As can be seen in the worldview chart below that compares the dominant and Indigenous worldviews, nature allows for, even requires, many paths and incredible diversity. It embraces the unknown and mysteriousness of things with fearless courage. It recognizes the significance of the dominant worldview as part of a continuum, as did Redfield. Although pluralism and the idea of many worldviews continue to dominate education, more and more visionary

thinkers are telling us that the Indigenous, nature-based worldview is vital for re-balancing our world.

One example of this is the [Worldview Literacy Project](#) of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). The project asserts that the most potent step people can take toward achieving their highest potential relates to worldview awareness. [Lisa Reagan writes](#) that the project "offers 21st-century citizens abilities to create the world we want our children to inherit consciously." Its founder, Edgar Mitchell, the Apollo 14 astronaut and sixth person to walk on the moon, realized the importance of our Indigenous ways of understanding our relationships in the world. When he looked down on the Earth, he had an epiphany. In his book, *The Way of the Explorer* (1971), [he writes](#), "The only way for humans to survive is by questioning many fundamental assumptions underlying civilization (Mitchel, 1971, p. 64). He was referring to our dominant worldview. Mitchel also recognized the worldview that preceded it. Writing an endorsement [for a book about Indigenous worldview](#), he says, "Only a handful of visionaries have recognized that Indigenous wisdom can aid the transition to a sustainable world."

While searching for information about Mitchell's epiphany during his voyage back from the moon, I came upon a science article about "rights of the moon," something Mitchell also studied. The article quotes Dr. Erin O'Donnell: "When rights of nature movements have been successful in 'reframing human relationships with nature' often by elevating Indigenous worldviews" ([Evans, 2021](#)). This is the [same conclusion the 2019 United Nations Biodiversity Report came to](#), revealing that Indigenous worldview is a significant factor in reducing or preventing extinctions (Four Arrows, 2019). One recent study shows that for 13,000 years complex pre-Columbian societies in the Amazon forests actually "[increased the abundance and distribution of useful species](#)" ([Meyer, 2017](#)).

In closing, I want to suggest that re-embracing our Indigenous worldview can solve the historical problems of the concept. Doing so does not require being Indigenous, although logic holds that people who begin to engage with the Indigenous worldview ought to do everything possible to support existing Indigenous cultures and their place-based wisdom before they are all destroyed. However, the best way to re-learn a nature-based worldview when we are not privy to Indigenous place-based knowledge is to reflect on our two worldviews. This must be done, not as a strictly either-or project, but as genuine search for complementarity. We also must and realize that we are all in this together. I was going to say we are all in the same sinking boat, but I prefer the previous phrase. In any case, I define hope not as an expectation for an outcome, but the certainty that what I am doing is worth doing regardless of

the outcome. I learned this from my study of *Sitting Bull in Sitting Bull's Words for a World in Crises* (2019).

The list below represents a well-researched "true dichotomy" that compares fundamental worldview precepts under our dominant worldview with those under the increasingly disappearing Indigenous worldview. I propose that using it to stimulate rather than stop dialogue is a provable solution to what we all are facing; we must use it to rebuild rather than prevent the destruction of life systems. It can help guide us from situation to situation, moment by moment. Its emphasis on interconnectedness of Nature, body, mind, emotion, attitude and spirit makes it a prerequisite for authentic holistic thinking.

We continue to live with a pandemic that originates from our seeing other-than-human life as strictly practical rather than conscious, as illustrated by our continuing deforestation and industrial farming(not clear how this connects to the pandemic). The worldview chart will help us realize that we are all related, humans and nonhumans alike. Bruce Wilshire says this beautifully in his chapter "On the very Idea of 'a Worldview' and of 'Alternative Worldviews'" (2006, p. 270): "Fellow nonhuman beings will then not be mere objects to be studied and tabulated by some special science, but fellow-subjects, regenerative presences...on this planet" (p.270). Perhaps with this metacognitive work and application in real life we will come to refer to "natural resources" as our dear relations and teachers. Then we will once again comprehend that the many dimensions of life are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole.

#### **Common Dominant Worldview Manifestations**

1. Rigid hierarchy
2. Fear-based thoughts and behaviors
3. Living without strong social purpose
4. Focus on self and personal gain
5. Rigid and discriminatory gender stereotypes
6. Materialistic
7. Earth as an an unloving "it"
8. More head than heart
9. Competition to feel superior
10. Lacking empathy
11. Anthropocentric
12. Words used to deceive self or others
13. Truth claims as absolute
14. Rigid boundaries and fragmented systems
15. Unfamiliarity with alternative consciousness
16. Disbelief in spiritual energies
17. Disregard for holistic interconnectedness
18. Minimal contact with others
19. Emphasis on theory and rhetoric
20. Acceptance of authoritarianism
21. Time as linear
22. Dualistic thinking

23. Acceptance of injustice
24. Emphasis on rights
25. Aggression as highest expression of courage
26. Ceremony as rote formality
27. Learning as didactic
28. Trance as dangerous or stemming from evil
29. Human nature as corrupt or evil
30. Humor used infrequently for coping
31. Conflict resolution with revenge, punishment
32. Learning is fragmented and theoretical
33. Minimal emphasis on personal vitality
34. Social laws of society are primary
35. Self-knowledge not highest priority
36. Autonomy sought in behalf of self
37. Nature as dangerous or utilitarian only
38. Other-than-human beings are not sentient
39. Low respect for women
40. Ignorance of importance of diversity

#### **Common Indigenous Worldview Manifestations**

1. Non-hierarchical
2. Courage and fearless trust in the universe
3. Socially purposeful life
4. Emphasis on community welfare
5. Respect for various gender roles and fluidity
6. Non-materialistic
7. Earth and all systems as living and loving
8. Emphasis on heart over head
9. Competition to develop positive potential
10. Empathetic
11. Animistic and bio-centric
12. Words as sacred, truthfulness as essential
13. Truth seen as multifaceted, accepting mysterious
14. Flexible boundaries and interconnected systems
15. Regular use of alternative consciousness
16. Recognition of spiritual energies
17. Emphasis on holistic interconnectedness
18. High interpersonal engagement, touching
19. Inseparability of knowledge and action
20. Resistance to authoritarianism
21. Time as cyclical
22. Seeking complementary duality
23. Intolerance of injustice
24. Emphasis on responsibility
25. Generosity as highest expression of courage
26. Ceremony as life-sustaining
27. Learning as experiential and collaborative
28. Trance-based learning as helpful and natural
29. Human nature as good but malleable
30. Humor as essential tool for coping
31. Conflict resolution as return to community
32. Learning is holistic and place based
33. Personal vitality is essential
34. Laws of Nature are primary
35. Holistic Self-knowledge is most important
36. Autonomy sought to better serve others

37. Nature as benevolent and relational
38. All lifeforms are sentient
39. High respect for women
40. Aware of vital importance of diversity<sup>1</sup>

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### **Acknowledgement**

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He is currently involved in helping create the first No Take Zone Marine Park on the Costalegre in Mexico. Four Arrow was first alternate for the 1996 Olympic Equestrian Endurance Team and placed 4th in the World Championship Old Time Piano Contest. He enjoys a number of ocean sports at his homes in Jalisco, Mexico and British Columbia, Canada with his photographer wife. He is a popular and thought-provoking keynoter and has presented on various topics in Australia, Canada, the U.S., Mexico, South Korea, and Japan and is on the Fulbright list of International Scholars.