

Topic Page: [World views](#)

Summary Article: **Worldview**

From *Encyclopedia of Identity*

To posit a discussion of identity and worldview is to explore philosophical constructs of time, place, and culture. The components of a definition of one *self* (*self* being a commonly accepted synonym for the *identity* of the human) change depending on the habitat of the human, the historical era in which he or she lives, and the culture to which his or her community subscribes.

One's worldview encompasses not only one's particular and individualized perspective on the common, mundane, and ordinary comings and goings of daily life but also a comprehensive and usually personal conception of the collective self, humanity in all its pluralities.

The word *worldview* comes from the German word *Weltanschauung*. It was first used in 1858 to denote a broad idea of the world, especially from a specific point of view. The term *worldview* can be further organized into perspectives on identity related to place (physical location on the globe), time (historical era), and culture. The intersections of identity, worldview, and culture are the centerpieces of this entry. The entry explores the roles played by the interpretations of religions, genders, politics, languages, fashions, and leisure activities in the formation of both individual and collective worldview identifications of self. It examines whether any of these constructs act as identity exemplars, as metaphors or similes for worldview identities of self.

Worldview, Identity, and Definitions

In the interest of understanding the conceptual frameworks of this discussion, operant definitions of *worldview* and *identity* must be established. A beginning point for the establishment of such definitions can be found in religious philosophy. Religion in this context is broadly and universally defined as the attention paid to the existence of metaphysical forces. And it is to this word *self* that religion, again in its broadest and most universal aspects, addresses it *self*. Believers in these metaphysical forces are assured that to know one *self* is indeed a prime directive. The *self*, as commonly defined in religious terms, refers to the essence of the human being. The study of self, as defined in this way, can be seen as part of the science of hermeneutics. For the quest for identity is indeed universal and subject to interpretation, oftentimes in terms of morality, values, and distinctions between the black and white philosophical poles of right and wrong. These subjects, of course, are the major axes along which religious thought is promulgated.

A survey of various dictionary definitions of *self* leads to the concepts of intention, knowledge, and cultural norms. As one unpacks these definitions, one learns that the self is essentially a singular, inner awareness of the human being. The self connects with the world, forming a singularly individual worldview, through its interpretation of its existence within a particular time frame, a discreet era in history. These periods or ages of human history (time) are characterized by unique circumstances of existence of specific cultural, philosophical, or religious mores. The self may even be projected onto the world stage in a futuristic way as is depicted in the popularity of science fiction. In summary, worldview meets identity in the focusing of the lens through which one envisions the world. Worldview is an aggregate set of values, an individual prism for interpreting reality. It is the outcome of thinking about the way things were, the way things are, or the way things could or should be.

The passage of time, whether counted in centuries or months, has a profound impact on one's individual worldview. Identity is extended to individuals at birth. Where, when, and even how one is born have lasting effects on the sense of self and what is possible for the self to achieve and to do. A 16th-century British royal female has in common only the country of birth with a 20th-century phenomenon like Princess Diana. Low-birth-weight, premature babies endure dreadful struggles to achieve and maintain the state of well-being held by full-term infants.

Worldview, Identity, and Time

Central to a discussion of worldview, identity, and time is an examination of what time is and when and how time began. How time is regulated is also significant. It is generally accepted that time has both metaphysical and scientific attributes. According to Jan Faye, Uwe Scheffler, and Max Urchs, time is essentially the interaction of temporal relations with other logical connections and operators. To begin a review of the philosophy of time is to begin with Aristotle and Immanuel Kant. In *De Interpretationes*, 4th-century Greek philosopher Aristotle described time as an aggregate of motions or actions counted sequentially and fixed in place onto a continuum, a decidedly linear and Western view of the cosmos. History is cast as a slide rule against which people may calculate their place in time. History informs them about their personal realities. Kant, the 18th-century German philosopher, on the other hand, relates time to the observer's subjective analysis, a more metaphysical approach. But it is Aristotle's contemporary Augustine, an important Latin church father, who relates time to the identity of humans, through a comparison with God.

Augustine is giving the believers a model of identity to which they are exhorted to strive. As created things/beings, the believers both have and do not have the identity of God. This conundrum is the legacy of free will. But to define *worldview*, *time*, and *identity* in terms acceptable to the religious and nonreligious alike, the concept of time seems to be a basic organizing principle, a necessary prerequisite to understanding ourselves and the world in which we live.

The accident of birth at a particular time causes the formation of identity in a particular manner—a manner that is married to the particular moment in time when the birth occurs. In the previous example of the two British princesses, outside of birth in England and gender, the two royals have nothing in common. As we are seeing in the 21st century, even concepts of gender identification have changed dramatically. The march of time orders the world, demarking human behaviors, cultures, and conditions.

Grant McCracken, in his book *Transformations: Identity Constructions in Contemporary Culture*, gives us a startling perspective on how the passage of time affects the definition of both the individual and collective self as each seeks identity. In one example, he contrasts the collective life spans of humans as hunters and gatherers with the changes that have occurred in life experiences over an astonishingly shorter period of time.

He presents a ratio of movement and achievement across a backdrop of time, putting into perspective the stasis of the earliest human identity (diggers with sticks), even as it juxtaposes the remarkable and miraculous achievement of the human race as a fraction of time. Whereas McCracken's theory is based on a linear and decidedly Western concept of time, the African-centered concept of time is circular. This entry on worldview, time, and identity accepts the Western and the African, the linear and the circular concepts of time.

Issues of identity repeat themselves and resurface as the human progresses through time. For

example, the righteous yet benign “noble savage,” an object of literary studies in the early 19th century, reemerges as a member of the beat generation of the mid-20th century. While primarily seen as other, apart from society, there was a significant evolution of this modern noble savage. Identity struggles, both individual and collective, which had taken place over the passage of time, served to empower the beatniks. Their influence on the arts was far-reaching, explosive, and long lasting.

A couple of additional examples underline the importance of time as an agent of identity and worldview. In the 18th century, society was constructed along fairly rigid and castelike lines. Any movement across the lines was achieved only through an extraordinary change in individual circumstances. This change, or upward mobility, came with prima facie identity reformations in fashion, language, domicile, and community. But these exemplars of changing identity were unable, in the 18th century, to establish this new identity on their own. Contrast this state of affairs with the current, postmodern time, when identity and the assumption of it has become an individualized activity, almost by definition. It is the identity as destiny school of thought.

Worldview, Identity, and Space/Place

If, in examining identity, worldview, and place, one divides the spaces and places occupied by humans into rural and nonrural, suburban and urban, across the continuum of time, one finds both similarities and differences in the formation of the self. This bifurcation of identity can be brought into clear focus using the optic of contemporary United States in the context of its global citizenry. In contemporary times, those who were born in the United States are hardly culturally distinguishable from those who acquire citizenship through a legal process. In fact, it is not really even necessary to live in the United States to live the cultural life of an American. U.S. popular culture is pervasive: Euro Disney, Starbucks in Russia, and the popularity of Oprah worldwide. *E Pluribus Unum*, the motto on the U.S. Seal and translated as “Out of One, Many,” has become the keyword phrase for U.S. culture.

An interesting sidebar to the discussion of a globally colored U.S. identity is analysis of the climate of the post-9/11 United States. H. V. Savitch looks at identity in a time of terror by tracing the connections to space and place of so-called jihadists and religious extremists and the important functions of place in terms of support for individual identity. The formations of identity would appear to apply as well to domestic terrorists like Timothy McVeigh, the D.C. sniper, and the Son of Sam. These men are examples of youthful males untethered to any one cultural community and only loosely tied to those with similar philosophies. As these agents of twisted identity roam their neighborhoods and the world, the impact has been a shrinking of the perception of available, safe space within U.S. cities. Space is physical and outlined by a sense of personal boundaries. The self operates freely within the confines of those boundaries. Some cite the Homeland (place) Security Act, a direct outgrowth of 9/11, as having significantly altered the U.S. self-concept by collapsing the boundaries of personal space.

Worldview and Cultural Formations of Identity

The historical review of worldview and identity formation has focused on formations not necessarily individualized or achieved as a matter of individual effort. Upward mobility and the resultant change in self-concept required at least tacit approval of society at large. Even then, such self-definitions could carry a negative valence, for example, the difference between the newly rich and old money. The stories of unsuccessful attempts of immigrants to recast themselves are analogous to the continuing saga of the Black man in the United States. For example, one of the legacies of slavery, in North America in particular, has been the remnant of identities formed by the slave masters. Throwing off the

jacket tailored with hostility and hate has proven to be very difficult.

Assimilation, integration, cultural rites of passage, even the study of archetypes—as agents of identity transformation, all require a modicum of collective will. The ascendancy of the self as its own creator is a relatively recent phenomenon (given the vast timeline of human existence presented at the beginning of this entry). But the definition of *self*, by self, seems to be growing exponentially. There are hundreds of dictionary definitions of words beginning with the prefix *self*, *self* being defined equally as the essence of the individual, the survival instinct, and moral character.

We are now situated in the era of “to each his or her own.” We are cocooned inside our individual cars, listening to our own personal theme music created for us by the iPod shuffle, and wearing jeans to work on Friday in honor of “dress down day,” an acquiescence to a collective of individual identities: no uniforms for us. We are almost slavishly beholden to popular culture. Entertainment icons define and transform us into specific types and orientations. Pervasive use of the World Wide Web has made it possible for individual identities to meld with like minds, sending viral messages of “come fly with me” seamlessly and effortlessly, seeking to effect a more perfect “brave new world.” People everywhere are in chat rooms, on blogs and social networks, gaming and reinventing themselves. Culture in the 21st century is breeding an individualistic orientation to the world, which seems to know few limits. Leaving traditional ways of the world in defining *self*, McCracken offers a postmodern construct that defines the self in terms of worldview. He posits that the individual is actually a multiplicity with distinct assignments for its parts. A global self is the result of interactions between the world and this individuated self. Achievement of a global self is the purpose of life. The postmodern exemplars of identity are those who are in the vanguard of world movements.

McCracken offers two cultural formations of identity that are globally present today and that will likely extend into the near future. The first is the *swift self*, and the second is the *radiant self*. Each can be seen as aspects of the global self. The swift self is an outgrowth of a need for change. The advent of computer technology is an example of what happens when a need is met with the ability to effect a change. In less than 50 years, computers have revolutionized almost everything. Their presence in the market has affected the worldwide economy and the stock market, the language, the spaces we inhabit, the way we communicate, and the way we have come to define business. The computer industry morphed into a wealth of information technology architects and engineers, who work to invent smaller and smaller gadgets, until our bodies are literally and figuratively wired for sound and action. All of this happened, and is changing at the speed of thought, simultaneously across the globe. It is a transforming or transformation phenomenon that is producing transformational selves. The swift self is a product of this movement of change. The swift self stands ready to sacrifice all to better its own environment. Swift selves are about refashioning reality.

The swift self stands apart from another modern identity formation, the radiant self. One of the casualties of the Age of Reason was a turning away from the metaphysical, a rebuke of the mythical and magical, a repudiation of the third eye, fifth dimension, and supernatural powers of man and woman. In postmodern times, we have seen a massive return to what McCracken calls “Re-enchantment” New Age teachings; feng shui, iridology, and the healing powers of touch and crystals now inform the lifestyles of not only the rich and famous but also the ordinary mother, father, and child. The radiant selves lead the charge toward all things new. The radiant selves are global selves responsible for raising global consciousness on a variety of critical issues: the environment, genocide, and clean energy, for example. Momentum is not all, but exploration of possibility and hope is paramount. Some see the

election of Barack Obama as president of the United States as a result of a call to the radiant selves of the world. His challenge to believe in change is in alignment with the quintessential character of radiant selves to concretize possibility.

There is, however, another school of thought as relates to McCracken's transformational construct, which poses the possibility that, at least in the United States, this acceptance of all things global leads to the nondevelopment of self. In *Death of the Grown-Up*, Diane West argues that we (continental Americans) are undergoing an identity crisis that has to do both with our split personality as the world policeman and world villain and what she calls unbalanced attention to multiculturalism. Far from embracing the global self, West is holding out for some emphasis on distinctly U.S. ways and means. She rejects the reticence to choose one's own way of being, to the exclusion of others, in the name of multiculturalism. To her way of thinking, some cultural practices, especially when defined in terms of identity, should be subjected to a standard of acceptability. Without such judgments, without such an absence of so-called political correctness, West argues that our children are being taught to be so accepting of others as to become members of a nation of people afraid and unable to speak plainly or in a forthright manner, an ability essential to maintaining a contained sense of self.

No matter which cultural formation of identity one subscribes to, as we move deeper into the 21st century, a fierce sort of individualism is pervasive throughout the world, forming the neural network of our senses of self. This individualism is unique to this time, but not to space, place, or national culture. This individualism is a world culture that reinforces identity. Fueled by a worldwide and seemingly unceasing desire for change and augmented by a longing for the mystical and mythical, the postmodern sense of identity is in a perpetual state of recareering. McCracken calls it "the switching of hats." The citizenry of the earth is now engaged in phenomenal changes in consciousnesses and self-management. In fact, change appears to be the hallmark of 21st-century constructions of identity. The global self is a complex personality, feeding on the synergy of its multiple selves and astonishing in its ability to meld its various faces. The global self, an identity crafted in line with universally held tenets of belief, is a transformational self. And like the popular toys known as transformers, which reassemble themselves from one form to another, in a process akin to the transformation of the caterpillar into the butterfly, assumption of identity, when subject to prevailing worldviews, produces creatures of magnificence, flexibility, and utility.

See also

Archetype, Cultural Studies, Gender, Identity Change, Philosophical History of Identity, Religious Identity, Self

Further Readings

- Faye, J., Scheffler, U., & Urchs, M. (Eds.). (1997). *Perspectives on time*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic.
- Gates, B. (1999). *Business @ the speed of thought*. Using a digital nervous system. New York: Warner Books.
- McCracken, G. (2008). *Transformations: Identity construction in contemporary culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Muhammad, E. (1965). *Message to the Blackman in America*. Chicago: Muhammad's Temple Number 2.

- Peters, T. (2003). *Re-imagine!* London: Dorling Kindersley.
- Savitch, H. V. (2007). *Cities in a time of terror. Space, territory, and local resilience.* Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Spiro, P. J. (2008). *Beyond citizenship. American identity after globalization.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Magras, Lydia Brown

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Magras, L. B., & Magras. (2010). Worldview. In R. L. Jackson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/world_views

 Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

 Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

APA

Magras, L. B., & Magras. (2010). Worldview. In R. L. Jackson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/world_views

Chicago

Magras, Lydia Brown, and Magras. "Worldview." In *Encyclopedia of Identity*, edited by Ronald L. Jackson, II. Sage Publications, 2010. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/world_views

Harvard

Magras, L.B. and Magras. (2010). Worldview. In R.L. Jackson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of identity*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/world_views [Accessed 21 October 2019].

MLA

Magras, Lydia Brown, and Magras. "Worldview." *Encyclopedia of Identity*, edited by Ronald L. Jackson, II, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2010. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/world_views. Accessed 21 Oct. 2019.