

Conceptualizing "Worldview:" Ontology, Epistemology & Linguistics | Jessica Ptomey on WordPress.com

I'm currently working on a project focused on examining the rhetoric of "worldview" language in certain cultures of the evangelical tradition. In preparation for this project, I have been reviewing various definitions and conceptualizations of "worldview." One valuable resource I have just read through is James W. Sire's most recent work on the subject, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*. He is also the author of *The Universe Next Door* (1976 and two later editions), in which he first defined the concept of worldview and examined how one's worldview may conceptualize the world in a completely different way than another's.

In *Naming the Elephant* he is concerned with revising his earlier definition of worldview, and in doing so he reviews the literature for significant definitions of worldview and the philosophical starting points from which scholars have theorized in conceptualizing the "first things" of a worldview. His new definition adds two elements that I track with: (1) that a worldview is a "commitment of the heart" more than *merely* a set of intellectual presuppositions, (gets at Jamie Smith's argument in *Desiring the Kingdom* that we are primarily "desiring beings") and (2) that the worldview serves as a foundation for the way that we live. (He notes that our lived actions are a truer indicator of our *actual* worldview than what we state to be our worldview beliefs.)

One particular issue that Sire explores is the philosophical starting point for a worldview — the "first thing." He argues that ontology (*being*, specifically God's existence) must precede epistemology (*knowledge*) in constructing a worldview. In other words, he says that our ontology (what is ultimately real) is what determines our capacity for knowledge. He says that because God exists we are then able to comprehend things about him, or about anything he has created in the world.

It is on this point — his order of "first things first" — that I am not sure if I agree with him. As a Christian, I of course believe in God's existence and his creation of all things. However, I am not sure that we (as finite human beings) are able to separate what is *real* (ontology) from what we *know* is real (epistemology). As soon as a claim is made that something is *real*, the question that comes immediately to mind is *how do we know* what is real? To further complicate things, the question that comes next is how can we separate what we *know* from how we *talk about* what we know (linguistics)? Sire of course presents his arguments for why ontology precedes both epistemology and linguistics, and he also reviews the thoughts of philosophers who have raised the same challenges/questions that I just mentioned. He particularly addresses the contribution of postmodern philosophers, some of whom I think raise important issues.

The issue of whether ontology, epistemology and linguistics can be understood apart

from each other — at least in our rhetoric — is one that has been particularly interesting to be as of late. It gets at the question of what God intended our humanness and our *interpreting nature* as human beings to be. (Jamie Smith's first book, *The Fall of Interpretation*—see particularly the second edition—is all about this question. For those of you who are also in process on these important “first things” kind of questions (and they are vitally important), I encourage you to share your comments and the resources that you have found useful in your journey.