

‘Social identity’ and ‘shared worldview’: Free riders in explanations of collective action

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Abstract

The notions ‘worldview’ and ‘social identity’ are examined to consider whether they contribute substantively to causal sequences or networks or thought clusters that result in intentional group actions. Routine reference to such purportedly key components of agents’ intentions are presumed to help explain their collective actions. But problems emerge when we consider the theoretical details of attributing one worldview and identity to each individual, or a shared worldview to a whole community. Where does one worldview, or type of identity, leave off and another begin? Comparable fuzziness surfaces when we inspect the notion of distinct worldviews as inherently incommensurable, or distinct social identities as inherently antagonistic. Three proposed explanations of sectarian conflict or ethnic violence are analysed as examples of theories that link intentional group behaviour to the worldviews and social identities of the individuals directly involved. But as will be shown, it is not facts about worldviews and identities as such, but historically specific facts and contingent circumstances that impinge upon those individual agents’ welfare (as well as their beliefs and values) which need to be examined in order to explain their group-motivated behaviour—be it violent, conciliatory, or otherwise.

1 Introduction¹

If you want to explain how a human being is transformed into a suicide bomber, or how one neighbourhood group turns into a killing machine against another, it is generally conceded that the process under scrutiny is considerably less transparent than the sequences of thought involved when two people paint a house, or take a walk together (Bratman 1993, Gilbert 1990, Velleman 1997), or when a group goes blueberry picking every summer (Tuomela 2003) or when two rival teams try to defeat each other for the championship (Turner 2003). Indeed the process whereby people throw down everything and resort to violence in the name of a group allegiance remains obscure, and initially appears distinct from these other examples of coordination.

Since the end of the twentieth century international relations scholars, social psychologists, political scientists, and anthropologists have been preoccupied with situations where people are engaged in ethnic conflict, tribal war, sectarian violence, without being formally conscripted and institutionally authorised to do so by any sovereign state openly declaring its responsibility and control over the killing operations (Christie 1998, Eller 2005, Horowitz 1985). Theories that address such phenomena have been proliferating in the social sciences and in foreign policy circles without scrupulous philosophical attention.

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The recent analytic literature devoted to scrutinizing theories of collective intentionality has developed a specialisation within action theory, wherein contributing decision theorists, philosophers of language and of mind have tried to characterise the collective sort of thought which “creates and maintains institutions,” that is, the “we-attitudes” and “we-modes” of intention constitutive of norm-following (Tuomela 2003: 153, 162). Theorists in this vein have proposed models of interactive knowledge and coordination (Bratman 1993, 1999; Chant and Ernst 2008, Searle 2008, Tuomela 2005) to reveal the cognitive working behind global teleconferences and the stock market. Analytic precursors to these recent projects attempted to uncover the linguistic foundations for the kind of rule-following that makes all language participation possible including the meaning of moral imperatives (Wittgenstein 1958, Sellars 1963).² Other analysts have attempted to secure a metaphysical rather than linguistic or epistemic foundation for the assertability of statements referring to groups. Ruben (1982) for instance deduced the existence of a species of natural kinds as the necessary ontological commitment for correct statements of fact about stable social groups. However, such models were devised to explain the possibility and persistence of institutional arrangements given individual allegiances that are assumed to be fixed. For example Raimo Tuomela (2003: 136), among the most prodigious formalists in this area, brackets any variables concerning group dynamics by dubbing the group referent in his functions as “egalitarian,” and treating it as a dummy constant, in order to study the logic of collective intentionality among individuals whose group commitments constitute a fixed status quo.

In this essay the focus is on collective behaviour that includes “struggles for social justice” (Hardin 1995, Honneth 1998). Violent group actions are intended to challenge, confront, and disrupt prevailing norms and institutions of the status quo rather than to sustain them. It is not obvious that the models of “collective acceptance” and “we-mode” of thinking (Tuomela 2003: 136, 144) ascribed to agents to explain how social institutions are composed and maintained are appropriate to represent episodes of unprecedented violence and social protest.

The data I am addressing here register as “sudden . . . episodic outbursts shattering periods of apparent tranquillity” (Horowitz 1985: 13). Such behaviour constitutes for some observers “a return to the primitive” (Freeman 1998: 15). To study the complex anatomies of social rupture constituted by groups’ non-compliance with prevailing norms of dominance and subordination, one must look to the work of social and political philosophers contributing to a literature which has mushroomed in the last fifty years alongside the geographic dispersion of people from post-colonial societies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, migrating into former colonizing and neo-colonizing nations of the global North. These discussions are about cross cultural interchanges within a single socio-political network (Kymlicka 1997). Here theories about the ontogeny and moral status of groups have been used as vehicles to re-examine principles of distributive justice and civic rights, fairness, equity, and political obligations under the impact of changing demographics called ‘multiculturalism’ (Fraser & Honneth 2003). But again, no ready guidelines or precedents are on offer in these theories for analysing the causal mechanics or the logic that motivates individuals *in extremis* to engage in unprecedented violence due to their allegiance to subjugated or dominant groups.

The following reflections offer no positive account of why individuals engage in group violence. Rather, I scrutinize a general approach to explaining group conflict which rests on the assumption that violent behaviour is an inherent symptom of the way the combatants perceive

²I am grateful to Stephen P. Turner (2003) for reviving my attention to Sellars’ classic analysis of ‘ought’ statements in his convincing analysis.

the world and themselves. I will demonstrate three snapshots of theories about ethnic and sectarian violence that display this assumption, but only as examples of my narrow concerns about treating social conflict as an *a priori* consequence of the way humans identify themselves as social beings. My snapshots are intended neither to do any significant damage nor full justice to the well reputed and widely received theoretical projects from which they are drawn. After defining terms in section 2, section 3 demonstrates the question begging effect of appealing to the group identity of agents in conflict in order to explain why they are in group conflict. I will introduce an argument from a World Bank consultancy report produced by the political scientist Donald L. Horowitz (1998) whose seminal book on ethnic conflict has lasting influence. Horowitz spells out the psychological roots of ethnic affinity as a means of accounting for its flipside, ethnic conflict. He proposes an analysis of ethnic affinity whereby "ethnic conflict is one phenomenon and not several" (1985: 53); but in doing so he recognises that "ethnic affiliations are located along a continuum of ways in which people organise and categorize themselves" (1985: 55). Hence Horowitz is neither simplistic nor essentialist in his analysis of the great swathes of data he selectively collects to document ethnic conflicts throughout Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, searching for root patterns and categories of behaviour to yield an "explanation that will hold cross culturally" (1985: xi). In section 4 I continue to examine this unilateral view of how to explain ethnic conflict, but the theorist relies on deductive method rather than enumerative induction, to reveal the nature of social identity as inherently adversarial. There my example derives from another seminal paper on ethnic conflict by Walker Connor (1972), the social scientist celebrated among nationalist movement activists (Conversi 2004), who coined the term 'ethnonationalism' (Zuelow 2002). I will show why an axiom of group identity which Connor regards as fundamental to personhood appears paradoxical because it defines group conflict among persons as logically inevitable. Section 5 addresses another problem with drawing up a universal template fitting all motivations for social conflict. I sketch the central argument of Axel Honneth (1992, 2001, with Fraser 2003), the widely acclaimed political philosopher at the centre of the debates about social justice and political recognition. Honneth's work is championed as uniting and empowering activists engaged in all sorts of struggle for social justice everywhere—from gay rights in Delhi to pastoralists' entitlement to land in Darfur (Babiker 2006, Deng 1995)—but ironically, Honneth's account of the fundamental need for social recognition can be interpreted as elitist and provincial. In closing I will show why the vocabulary of shared identity appears to force Connor to commit a fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Ryle 1949) when he proposes social engineering to reform combatants' worldviews, their perceptions, and their core sense of identity, as a means of ending ethnic conflict (Connor 1972: 353).

In all three of these examples it is the very nature of personhood, defined in different ways, which is presented as the key factor, irreducible to contingent circumstances, which is held chiefly responsible for all types of group conflict. These depictions of the *sui generis* nature of personhood as an essential contributor to group conflict counter views that regard group-identified violence as the result of rational choice (Hardin 1995) or as a response to extreme economic deprivation (Agnew 1992). The trouble with talking about the nature and logical structure of personhood *as such* is that it shifts our analytic focus away from the specific and very practical conditions, historical episodes, and material circumstances which undermine people's mutual trust, self confidence, and which feature in the way people perceive their options. But the deficit inherent in this shift of focus cannot just be declared; it has to be shown. And of course it is a patent truism—too trivial to bear remarking upon—that discovering facts about a region's political history, its relation to foreign powers, its changing economic

dynamics, will be key to understanding the causes and solutions to conflicts among people who occupy that region.³ My objection to referring to the structure of every person's subjective 'worldview' as the key causal factor in all group conflict is that it diffuses the possibility of making such discoveries and mitigates their potential impact. Talk of worldviews and identities *per se* lends a misleading sense of locality and concreteness to the sources of individuals' decision making, as if actions could be wholly accountable in light of what agents themselves perceive and believe to be true and important.

On each of these accounts, the beliefs picked out as the primary source of protracted conflict are purported to prevail independently of the particular historical, cultural and contingent facts that distinguish groups and their purportedly characteristic behaviour patterns. But an explanatory model may fail to account for a certain kind of behaviour if it deflects attention away from the contingent events and relations unfolding at the specific times and places which comprise the reasons *why* people view the world as they do and therefore make the particular choices that they do. This is because the reasons that underlie intentional behaviour may involve factors of which the agents themselves are not aware. This point suggests there is something wrong with methodological individualism, which insists that the warrantability of a social explanation presupposes every substantive statement is translatable into one that attributes properties, relations and dispositions to individual agents and their situations (Brodbeck 1954, James 1985, Watkins 1973: 179). On the other hand, problems of coherence arise when worldviews are treated as emergent properties belonging to a group of individuals, or to any specifiable locus other than individual agents, as will be discussed in section 3.

Perhaps the objection raised here to positing worldviews in explanatory discourse would be better directed at the notorious difficulty of the subject matter itself; the dilemma at issue is succinctly captured by the mixed metaphor familiar to social psychologists: "people are both shaped by and the architects of their worlds" (Shepherd and Stephens 2010: 353). Making the phenomena under explanation in the social sciences even more intractable, the subject matter talks and sometimes explains itself. People's own accounts of what they get up to may not provide the whole story, but surely the agent's version of the facts must figure large in explaining what he aims to be doing, especially when his behaviour appears desperately counterproductive. To clarify situations quite so murky as this, surely it is innocuous to posit an abstract inner repository of beliefs and attitudes housed in a conceptual framework or system, and to associate that framework with an individual agent's most profoundly influential circle of social influences, allocating their centrality by positing the individual's 'social identity' as intrinsic to the framework's core. Positing worldviews might have instrumental value even if it lacks ontological status and epistemic respectability. But if we have no way of learning characteristics of such a framework (the agent's 'worldview') or its core (the agent's 'social identity') except by analogy from properties already and routinely ascribed to the individual agent's particular thoughts, then no clear explanatory purpose is served by making more than nominal references to a conceptual framework or to its core.⁴

³I am very grateful to the anonymous referees of *Abstracta* for stressing this point, and for other substantive comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

⁴A comparable though distantly related point (as well as others parallel to observations here concerning worldview individuation and its attribution to a community) is made by Frederick Suppe (1979: 218) in his exhaustive critical review of the (now passé) reference to *weltanschauungen* in twentieth century debates about the nature and dynamics of conflicting scientific theories. Of course the connection is oblique: my concern here is with worldviews as they get attributed as part of the data; not in the way that worldviews have been purported to characterize or qualify the content and tempo of scientific practice and theory change. Another point of departure for this analysis is Donald Davidson's seminal objections to the contrast between 'scheme' and 'content' (2001 (1974)).

This last point seems to recommend methodological individualism, contrary to the remark concluding the paragraph above. Overall, I do not expect the considerations gathered here will decide a preference for either methodological individualism or collectivism, for instrumentalist or interpretivist or an inductive realist reading of social explanation (Salmon 1992). I only mean to show the disappointments encountered by treating purportedly essential components of an agent’s personhood or psyche or outlook as either necessary or sufficient for explaining why that agent has gone to radical extremes of group-affiliated behaviour on a given occasion. I propose that these disappointments are salient regardless of what view one holds about the underlying logic or overall significance of a social scientific explanation, or the levels of category by which it must be constructed, or the methods by which it should be pursued, or the means by which it should be assessed. I do not mean that the notions under interrogation are philosophically noxious in themselves. As will be sketched in section 2, both ‘worldview’ and ‘social identity’ carry a weighty spectrum of connotations accumulated from a range of respected literatures.

2 Defining terms

The term ‘worldview’ has had such an imposing career that its history has been tracked by several surveyors of different disciplines (Naugle 2002, Olthius 1989, Tuche 2008, Vidal 2008, Wolters 1989). General consensus and the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicate it first appeared in 1790, early in the tradition of German idealism when Kant coined ‘Weltanschauung’ in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. (Naugle 2002, Tuche 2008: 1, Wolters 1989: 15).⁵ The English term appeared in 1858 again (Tuche 2008: 1) in a popular treatment of Christian theology, and ever since it has played a key role in the ecumenical vocabulary that relates Christian doctrine with other phenomenological and scholarly traditions. For instance Wolters (1989: 15) recounts the extensive use of ‘worldview’ by the Dutch neo-Calvinists in the late nineteenth century, to contrast everyday beliefs (practices and rituals, folkloric, doctrinal, faith-based and commonsense convictions) of ordinary people, with the claims sourced in formal science and metaphysical speculation (arranged in highly abstract, systematic theories) labelled ‘philosophy’. The interface of worldviews with philosophies as a way of signalling different levels and styles of abstraction continues to this day in Belgium under the aegis of the Leo Apostel Centre in Brussels (Aerts *et al* 2011, Note *et al* 2009). Other German words that bear a family resemblance to *Weltanschauung* to refer to workaday thought and practice is ‘Lebensform’ (form of life, or way of life) and its cognate ‘Lebenswelt’ (life-world). The former appears famously in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953: p. 11 article 23, p. 88 article 241) to characterise language participation in its broadest conceptual and practical respects. Neto (2011: 76) observes that at the time Wittgenstein was lecturing, ‘Lebensform’ was a term commonly used in biology. Husserl (1936) is generally credited with first using ‘Lebenswelt’ to highlight and centralise the subjective experience of belonging in a collective (Carr 1970). He thereby embellished the received approaches in the sociology of his day. Anthropologists ever since have generally recognised the phrase ‘differences in worldview’ as synonymous with ‘cultural differences’ (Geertz 1973: 93).

In order to register my narrow compass of concerns as clearly as possible I will maintain a distinction, somewhat pedantically, between two obvious and often conflated connotations of worldview as used in psychology and sociology, popularized philosophical and theological discussions (Schutz 1973, Note *et al* (eds.) 2009). I will make use of these subscripts just for

⁵The first translator into English of *Kritik der Urteilskraft* purportedly in 1858 rendered this as ‘worldview’. I have not been able to locate with confidence the name of that first translator.

awhile, as it is intended only to keep the analysis more precise than it might be otherwise. I do not mean to imply that these senses cannot be co-extensive;⁶ nor need the contrast be signalled indefinitely. It is only a rough and ready contrast after all, and cannot be well-defined in any case.

Hereafter ‘worldview_{ef}’ connotes the sense in which certain mental states or belief contents are presumed to provide an uneliminable ‘empirical foundation’ (= ef) for interpreting everyday experiences and forming intentions.⁷ This is just a way of hypostasizing the range of know-how that gets called socialisation or social conditioning, combined with abilities regarded as innate. Ostensibly, some basic thoughts and categories are required in a transcendental⁸ sense in order to form judgments and negotiate survival. It remains a lively area of research in developmental psychology to determine when and how basic functions and their later derivatives are generated throughout a person’s cognitive maturation. Worldview_{ef} means to be exhaustive. Let us assume these common life skills, motor capacities, doctrines, theories and imperatives are responsible for all the different governance structures, architectures, cuisines, kinship arrangements, canons of education, legal systems, mythologies, stories of divinity, rituals of worship and courtship, that comprise the objective social realities sustained by different cultural traditions (Sayre-McCord, 1991).⁹ Part of this basic layer or foundation of thought or sub-propositional awareness might be the roots of one’s social identity. I will introduce what I mean by ‘social identity’ in this picture momentarily. Worldviews_{ef} feature in conflict episodes in the following way. The influential theorists whose views are only partially sampled later in this essay—Connor (1972), Horowitz (1985, 1998) and Honneth (2001, 2007)—regard the co-existence of multiple worldviews_{ef} as the chief cause of belligerent hostility among people living under one state apparatus. They regard the propensity to engage in conflict as *sui generis* to personhood, positing the propensity for social struggle as intrinsic to having any social identity whatsoever (Connor 1972; Honneth 2001; Huntington 1993). These diverse views of social conflict sweep aside contingent circumstances as incidental to episodes of violence, attributing social conflict instead to fixed universal features of human cognition. But it seems that Connor’s appeal to every individual’s worldview_{ef} as the source of social strife deteriorates into paradox; and both Connor’s and Honneth’s theses fail to accommodate all the data—as will be pursued in later sections 3 and 5.

In contrast ‘worldview_{ic}’ connotes a purposefully produced and revisable ‘ideal construction’ (= ic) *about* one’s way of life which undergoes conscious revision in the light of new evidence and changing normative principles that one selectively gains throughout one’s life. The ideal construction is a development and elaboration out of the empirical foundation, but some aspects diverge. This contrast between ‘worldview_{ef}’ and ‘worldview_{ic}’ is consistent with a measurable hypothesis widely received by social psychologists, viz. what people actually

⁶Paul Snowdon’s (2003) analysis of Ryle’s (now tacitly) received distinction between ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’ inspired this caveat. Perhaps we will discover that descriptions of ‘pure’ and ‘practical’ reasoning are two ways of denoting the same cognitive processes in certain incidents of reasoning, as it was discovered that the ‘the Morning Star’ is identical to ‘the Evening Star’.

⁷Varieties of meaning or cognitive holism, and internal assumptions of such theses, have received considerable opposition. See Davidson’s criticism of distinguishing an overall structure for all one’s thoughts from their particular contents, in his seminal ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ ([1974] 1984). And for a more vehement, sustained objection to various semantic and conceptual holism theses including Davidson’s, see Fodor and LePore (1992, 1993).

⁸I allude here to the form of transcendental argument characterized by Jerry Fodor and Ernest LePore (1992: 261) as follows: “Any argument of the form ‘F-ing is impossible unless P; F-ing actually occurs; therefore P.’”

⁹Speculative controversy surrounds the source of this variety: are these differences genetically encoded or learned with language? (Du Plessis, 2001) Are there logical differences between worldviews_{ef} or do they follow from laws of physics? If so, which logical laws; which laws of physics? (Aerts 2000; Penrose 1990; Stapp 1993)

think and do diverges from what they say when asked about what they think and do.¹⁰ In this second sense, a worldview_{ic} “is a framework that ties everything together, that allows us to understand society, the world, and our place in it . . . help[ing] us to understand, and therefore to cope with, complexity and change . . . and help[ing] us to make critical decisions which will shape our future” (Heylighen 2000: 1). It is often supposed not only that worldviews_{ic} *can* be revised, but that they *should* be revised—to enhance human welfare, or to fulfil other identifiable goals. For instance Walker Connor (1972) advises homogenizing every individuals’ worldviews_{ic} to improve national (and thereby global) stability. The African moral philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1997) advocates Walker Connor’s proposal (1972) to foster in a population’s worldview_{ic} a sense of “meta-nationality” to reinforce a nation-state’s prospects for stability by ensuring that through language unification and other measures, the entire population shares a “single psychological focus” (Connor, 1972: 353). Not all theorists share this optimism about the feasibility of harmonizing national policies designed specifically to dissipate destabilizing influences in society. Some political theorists hold a contrary *a priori* assumption that volatile schisms between group identities are endemic to the very process of socialisation. Perhaps the most influential popularisation of this position is Samuel P. Huntington’s (1993) ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis.

At first glance, the suggestion that we can and should be encouraged to reconstruct our worldview_{ic} begs the question of why we are having so much trouble getting along together in the first place, if indeed both the room for improvement and the direction for achieving it are ostensibly ready to hand. This may be a version of the ancient Greek problem of *akrasia*: as socialised agents we are presumed to harbour all the capacities required to move towards perfecting the human quality of our collective lives overall; and yet we do not. Does the rich imagery of ‘contrasting worldviews_{ef}’ contribute to our understanding of why there appears to be a propensity within some cultures to foster provincialism and xenophobia, while other societies encourage equanimity and appreciative confidence in diversity?¹¹ If worldviews_{ef} do play some causal or mediating role in the formation of intentions, then where do they figure in an accurate map of the social realm? Are worldviews_{ef & ic} properties of individual agents; or rather do they exist as features of a social field emerging as and when agents interface? Or do worldviews_{ef & ic} belong to enduring loosely cohesive social units transforming over generations?

There are good reasons for regarding the core or central beliefs of a worldview_{ef} and its brighter normative ‘-ic’ version as the social ‘identity_{ef}’ and ‘identity_{ic}’, respectively, of those individuals sharing those worldview_{ef & ic}. For it is uncontroversial that having any identity at all includes thinking sometimes about one’s interactions with other people. Such thinking about human interactions, real or potential, presumably involves sharing or refusing to share certain attitudes, beliefs, preferences and repulsions of other people with whom one most frequently interacts. This is why having one or more specifiable identities seems integrally linked to sharing one or more worldviews_{ef} with other people. And of course if we are to learn from one another—for instance to be introduced to wholly new ideological perspectives which will inspire us to change our outlook on the world, maybe even to yield an outright conversion

¹⁰Social psychologist David Matsumoto (2006: 35) demonstrated empirically that a person’s “culture” (way of life, practices and ideologies as well as knowledge traditions, political organisation and everyday habits) is distinct from his “cultural worldview” (belief system *about* his culture) which is comprised of “social construction of reality expressed in consensual ideologies . . . learned through the media and cultural elites, authority figures and opinion leaders.”

¹¹Kwasi Wiredu (1998) argues convincingly that in West Africa, indigenous institutions of democratic governance foster and reinforce the political will to cooperate and accommodate, which is structurally pre-empted by the multi-party electoral systems in the traditions of western republics.

of faith—we must be able to share more than one worldview_{ic} together. Correlatively, we can create together an image of our ideal self—so there must be an identity_{ic} which in some respects can be shared; presumably this is what makes it possible for life coaches to do business.

More pertinent to the matter of evaluating explanatory models of group behaviour is the question of how we might speak of individuals' sharing a worldview or social identity (either the -ef or the -ic sense of these notions) in a way which doesn't boil down to saying something which is either vacuously true or plainly false. On inspection, this image of a shared worldview_{ef} containing the social identity of group members will not do at all for real life. To begin with, it gravely distorts social reality by failing to concede the variety of obligations, expectations, contrary and contradictory beliefs and priorities attributable to a whole community, no matter how small or how closely knit it is (Crehan 2002). Even when people are elected deliberately to function as representatives and endeavour to speak and act consciously on behalf of their group, individuals' knowledge sets will have to diverge. (For instance you may know, as your neighbours may not, how many of your siblings abroad have children.) Some individuals, located in a certain kind of cross-cultural "frontier or boundary situation," may be privy to two or more worldviews_{ef} simultaneously (MacIntyre 1987: 388). Such might be the case for formally educated people leading complicated, cosmopolitan lives in postcolonial cities. So here a different theoretical problem arises: there seems no principled way to set any upper limit of worldviews_{ef} or worldviews_{ic} and identities that might belong to one such individual, nor to distinguish among the variety that might be shared between two such individuals.

Reflecting on these situations, it is obvious that overall replication of individuals' thought sequences is not a prevailing feature of shared worldviews_{ef} anywhere. So the mere absence of mirror imaging between our priorities and projects cannot by itself account for the kind of reasoning that leads us to resort to violent conflict. Talking about agreement between our beliefs obviously cannot mean a literally perfect match; so *similarity* of our beliefs must be all that is intended by saying that we share a worldview_{ef}. But pressing upon the 'similarity' of our beliefs cannot warrant presuming that people risk misunderstanding each other to the point of violent animosity, if their beliefs are not similar enough to say that they share a worldview_{ef}. If belonging to the same worldview_{ef} is required for us to understand each other, and if belonging to the same worldview_{ef} means by definition that we must share similar beliefs, then I could never learn anything totally new from you. And in fact people routinely do learn very new things from one another, whether they have lived at close quarters or at very different times or places from each other. This becomes more obvious as the phenomenon called globalisation accelerates. Given today's telecommunication technology, the same worldview may be exposed in some sense to an indeterminable number of individuals everywhere at once. To be publicly accessible to the extent that a single coherent belief system has the degree of global influence apparent nowadays, a worldview_{ic} must be timeless and borderless, and without any fixed location. But then it is not clear how to attribute distinct and wholly incompatible worldviews to individuals or to groups in violent conflict, except as just another way of saying that they are in obvious (if only because violent) conflict.

Defining a worldview_{ef} in the loose and familiar way proposed above, prompts the question of how to tell when our beliefs have become *dissimilar* enough to say that there obtains not one worldview between us but two. There appears to be no fixed worldview-neutral standpoint from where a referee could distinguish which beliefs are shared by different groups of people, in order to select which statements of fact and descriptions of events belong to one particular worldview_{ef} and not another. Even with respect to the one worldview_{ef} that we share, it is

not obvious how to sort those beliefs and principles that are essential to our maintaining the same perspective from those convictions that are negotiable without our risking a breach in our worldview.¹² In sum, it is appropriate to wonder whether the notions of ‘shared’ and ‘contrasting’ worldviews_{ef} or worldviews_{ic} really amount to anything more than observing that between certain people there is broad agreement, and between others broad disagreement, on many topics. Because, contrary to what is assumed by the theorists studied in sections 2–4, it is by no means obvious how to trace the sole cause of unwieldy group behaviour directly to the fact that members share one *type* of worldview_{ef} or social identity and not another, as if it were the type of worldview or identity *itself* which is causing them to be cantankerous or belligerent.

Before moving away from the definition of terms, it is important to justify analysing the terms ‘worldview’ and ‘identity’ as intimately related—either as empirical givens or normative constructions. I can leave off the subscripts now. Because human lives are so interdependent, there are many contributors to the literature on social and political identity who see some sense of group or national identity as interdependent with having a personal identity (see Mišćević 2000).

Still, one might take exception to treating the terms ‘worldview’ and ‘identity’ as interchangeable. Somehow one expects more of the notion of identity. Yet with respect to the sense in which an identity and a worldview are properties we can share as members of the same social group, the best that it seems one can do by way of distinguishing them is to suggest that one’s identity is somehow the most basic and fundamental or the core part of one’s worldview. But this distinction is very brittle. Because if we start making rigorous demands about how to tell in a principled way when to count one thought or subliminal experience as *more basic* than another, then the contrast between the core of a belief system, vs. its midfield or periphery, threatens to break down. Thus the insistence by social psychologists upon distinguishing ‘identity’ from ‘social identity’ (Cantwell and Martiny 2010: 319–320) is suspect. The same problem of essential contestability arises when trying to demarcate the difference between which choices are personal vs. which to count as public, or for that matter what counts as a physical fact in contrast with a social fact, as Hacking (1997) and Turner (1999) have noted in reviewing Searle’s doctrine of social reality. The ambiguity of the first dichotomy is pertinent to whether the notion of a worldview (which is public) must be kept distinct from the notion of one’s identity (which is personal); so an example is called for to illustrate the essential contestability (MacIntyre 1973) of such a contrast: Consider one’s choice of a life partner, and how one manages one’s sexual gratification as an adult. Nothing could be more personal and profoundly intimate as choices go in American society; but for most people throughout contemporary West Africa such concerns are at the heart of social life and remain of central importance to the entire community. For many female individuals worldwide, relinquishing sexual gratification altogether is not even remotely a matter of personal choice; it is a rigid standard of proper breeding and of becoming socialised as a marriageable member of a reputable family within the community (Shweder 2004). But I will not pursue these provocative issues here, least of all the more trenchant epistemological problem of systematically ordering beliefs according to their apparent relative *basic-ness*.¹³

¹²If we start making rigorous demands about how to tell in a principled way when to count one thought as *more basic* than another, then the contrast between the core of one’s belief system *versus* its midfield or its periphery threatens to break down. In this paper there is no space to deal adequately with the dense difficulty of ordering thoughts according to their apparent relative *basic-ness*.

¹³The problem is taken up in Nicole Note *et al* (eds) 2009. In these considerations it is sufficient to regard a thought A as more basic than B in the sense that psychologists indicate that having the thought A is somehow causally responsible

3 Citing worldviews as primary causes and the risk of circularity

Vagueness is not the cause of the vacuity that emerges when we refer to an inscrutable worldview in order to explain why the people who share it are acting for inscrutable reasons. Generally, vagueness in itself is not a fault of key terms used in social studies. Many concepts related to the description of human affairs are irredeemably vague ('family', 'gift', 'virtuous', 'self-evident'). They must be so; otherwise their intended versatility will fall short of applying to the full range of divergent value systems and knowledge traditions (MacIntyre, 1973). Even if we could specify precisely a set of parameters to determine when a worldview should count as shared, and therefore accessible to whom, the problem of vacuous question begging claims will remain if we try explaining the reason for an action by citing the agent's worldview as its primary cause. To show this, briefly: Suppose you are identified as being a member of community X because you clearly share the X worldview. As a social scientist I have systematically observed that you do Y and not Z on Mondays, and thus I can document your belonging to the X community, as I can cite background studies which establish that to do Y and not Z on Mondays is a defining trait of the X-centric worldview. But then to explain *why* it is that X-centric people go for Y and always refrain from doing Z on Mondays, nothing is illuminated by my referring to the fact that this is a key feature of the X-centric worldview.¹⁴

The question begging illustrated in this abstract narrative might seem to be just an artifice, until one considers the following political scientist's depiction of how psychological affiliation causes ethnic hostility of all kinds. Donald Horowitz (1989) explains the structure and strategy of ethnic conflict by illuminating a particular property as unique to ethnic group identity. Horowitz claims that belonging to an ethnic group means that one is "thinking of oneself in a special way." That is, ethnic identity entails thinking of oneself as "possessing properties that are characteristic or representative of the social category that [one's] group embraces" (Horowitz 1998: 16). This identification with others in the group is what "leads" individuals to "submerge" themselves into the "collective identity" of other people in whom "they see themselves." Horowitz cites psychological studies confirming this tendency to engage in self sacrificing behaviour for those whom I see as extensions or images of myself (Horowitz 1998: 16). He cites further studies showing that it is members of my own group that I am most likely to assume share my tastes, aptitudes, values and beliefs, even in the absence of relevant facts about them. And he stresses that the converse is also true. Horowitz cites even more studies displaying that my being attracted to a person tends to make me exaggerate what I have in common with that person. So Horowitz concludes that a tight interdependence has been empirically established as existing between my being attracted to you and my treating you as belonging to my ethnic or social group. Now since my being attracted to you causes me to be "biased in your favour," then all the fundamental elements of a psychological account are at hand to explain how my ethnic identity can cause me to indulge in self destructive behaviour.

To illuminate the essential content of this explanation let us review it in outline: I am disposed to feel an affinity with you because I am attracted to you; and my thinking of you as belonging to my group causes me to be attracted to you all the more. This is because my being attracted to you causes me to exaggerate our similarities; so I see you as belonging to my

for an individual's thinking B, to paraphrase a connotation of basic-ness suggested by David M. Rosenthal, Coordinator, Interdisciplinary program in cognitive science of the Graduate and Research Center of the City University of New York. In conversation, 2006.

¹⁴I owe the substance of this point to Bernard Williams (1972: 35) where he complains about a standard functionalist defence of ethical relativism.

group just in case I find you attractive. And that is what the empirical data confirms: that I am inclined to find you attractive because I think of you as part of my group, and it is because I see you as part of my group that I am inclined to find you attractive. Which presumably means I am prepared to fall for you literally as well as figuratively. So we have the structure of Horowitz's portrayal of the psychological structure of ethnic conflict. A tighter and more ineffectually question begging circle would be hard to imagine.

Apart from the emptiness of this account, it is difficult to avoid evidence that contradicts Horowitz's cited studies. Many people are habitually attracted to others all the more because of their obvious and blatant differences—culturally, temperamentally, and physically. More germane is the conceptual problem of how to differentiate people into groups based on their *perceived* similarities and differences; for then the criteria determining whether someone belongs to ethnic group A and not B will necessarily shift and vary depending upon who you ask.

Nevertheless, for a good number of social and political commentators following Walker Connor (Conversi, ed. 2003), it is the sheer perceived variety of identities or worldviews that remains the prime cause of destabilizing conflict in the world today. Walker Connor (1972) has grown influential through declaring that statistically, when it comes to the instability of nation states, it is “multi-ethnicity” in the *intangible* sense, that trumps all other “tangible” factors (including religion, culture, GDP, geography, climate, population size, historical impact of colonisation, type of economy, style of governance). This leads him to declare that “the prime cause of political disunity is the absence of a single psychological focus shared by all segments of the population” (Connor 1972: 353).

4 Citing worldviews as incommensurable and the risk of paradox

We must assume that people ordinarily do share worldviews to some extent, even if they are diametrically opposed to each other; because to expose the divergence between two contemporary opinions or perspectives or agenda, there must be some common landscape or backdrop against which the opposing views and projects can be set in order to expose their glaring contrasts. So for instance consider the antagonism of worldviews in South Africa before 1994. It seems it would have been obvious to assign mutually exclusive mental universes to the presiding president at that time F. W. de Klerk, and the succeeding president Nelson Mandela (1994) who was then being shunted in and out of solitary confinement cells—on the grounds that their beliefs and values were so totally polarized for their lifetimes. But attributing to these two South Africans strictly isolated, mutually exclusive worldviews would be mistaken. It's not as if during his 27 years of maximum security imprisonment Mandela never shared with his oppressors any factual beliefs at all about the apartheid system. Mandela knows far more intimately about the life-threatening effects of apartheid law than those who enforced it. The worldviews of the ANC militant and of the last apartheid chief executive did intersect—indeed they collided—in the most penetrating and horrifically graphic ways. A crucial moment in world history was Mandela's insisting that he would die before he would acquiesce to the injustice of the very same system over which P. W. Botha and later de Klerk held executive authority.¹⁵ Mandela was not condemning some other parallel government system in an incommensurable worldview, in

¹⁵In the internationally renowned Rivonia trial, Nelson Mandela declared on Monday 20 April 1964, in Pretoria's Palace of Justice: “During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope

which even the names ‘President Botha’ and ‘President de Klerk’ could have no conceivable significance or meaning remotely like the one understood in the world of his oppressors. In stark contrast, when it came to the crunch, Pieter Willem Botha finally resigned from office; and after him Fredrick Willem de Klerk did nothing to defend the system which since 1989 had vested in him so much prestige and power. On the contrary de Klerk has even been credited with dismantling those same institutions without a blink when it appeared most prudent to him and his kind to do so. Unless we recognise that it was *the same set of material conditions and legal statutes* about which the convictions, feelings, intentions, character traits and actions of these three personalities crossed each other so diametrically, we will not capture the extent of contrast between them as moral agents and as historical figures. Permit a simplistic analogy: you and your neighbour may share faith in the same Lord Jesus even though you are prepared to die by the Holy Word, while he carries it around and quotes from sacred scripture strictly to win friends and influence people. But you both share the same faith in some crucial—if only nominal—sense; were it not the case then there would be no way that your sincerity could contrast so severely with his hypocrisy, as it surely and objectively does.

So far we have been considering that worldviews at their outer reaches appear to be very flexible; one worldview may have to be distributed among contemporaries interacting with each other no matter how insuperably different their political, social and personal value orientations may be. Yet some of the same theorists we are discussing (Conversi (ed.) 2003; Connor 1972; Fraser and Honneth 2003) who recognise worldviews as malleable and receptive to reform, are also impressed by the ineffable tenacity of the central beliefs of a person’s worldview called his or her (ethnic or social) identity.

One’s ethnic identity cannot be defined by legal statute nor political party allegiance nor religious ordinance. Walker Connor stresses that ethnic identity is not an essentially “cultural assimilation;” it is rather “profoundly psychological” (Connor 1972: 341-342). He says an individual can “shed” all the customs and mannerisms that count as “tangible” or “overt cultural manifestations,” but that does not rid the person of who he or she really is. Connor chides us that it is:

... superficial ... to predicate ethnic strife upon language, religion, customs, economic inequity, or some other tangible element ... what is fundamentally involved in such a conflict is that divergence of basic identity which manifests itself in the ‘us-them’ syndrome. (Connor, 1972: 341, 344)

Connor stresses that “the idea of ‘us’ requires ‘them’.” If having a sense of belonging would be impossible without a sense of not-belonging, then the ‘us *versus* them’ dichotomy is uneliminable and polarization is fundamental to a person’s “basic identity” (Connor, 1972: 341). And if knowing who I am requires knowing who I am *not*, polarization will be seen as intractably, unavoidably and incorrigibly personal. Quoting Connor again: “the ultimate answer to the question of whether a person is one of us or one of them seldom hinges upon adherence to overt aspects of culture” (Connor, 1972: 341). He urges that we realise the “primary cause” of ethnic conflict is not a matter of culture or economics or politics but of this polarity which is *sui generis* and “fundamental” to personhood. “The prime cause of political disunity is the

to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.” That day he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Quoted by Helen Joseph, ed. (1981).

absence of a single psychological focus shared by all segments of the population" (Connor, 1972: 353).¹⁶

But this kind of analysis leads to paradox. The sort of groups that depend for their allegiance upon this polarizing feature of their members' basic identity might be called *exclusionary groups*. To belong to an exclusionary group means to regard every member of any other group as being one of 'them' and not 'us'. Now consider building a coalition or confederation of all such exclusionary groups; let us call this Exclusionation, or E for short. You can belong to confederation E provided that you do not feel that you belong to it. That is because recognising yourself as belonging to any other group besides the one which is essential to your basic identity must mean that you do not really belong to an exclusionary group in the first place, and so you would not properly qualify for membership in confederation E either. But according to Connor, subscribing to the *us versus them* polarity is essential to having any basic identity at all. Thus, everybody must belong to some exclusionary group. And so, hypothetically, each and every one of us would have to belong to such a confederation E, on the sole condition that we refuse to recognise that we do. Such a paradox appears to follow from Connor's positing the "us versus them syndrome" as an intrinsic feature of our basic identity.¹⁷

5. Primordialist claims¹⁸ about ethnic identity and the risk of provincialism

As mentioned in the introduction, another influential social commentator besides Walker Connor has proposed a quite different psychological feature as requisite for social identity, which also appears mistaken although it does not degenerate into blatant paradox. Axel Honneth (1992, 1995, 2001, 2007) is widely appreciated in political philosophy for positing a primordial human need for recognition as the primary root cause of all struggles against social, economic and political injustice. Honneth claims that our sense of self respect and integrity generate initially from our receiving social approval from significant others, and that to maintain self respect throughout life we must constantly seek facsimiles of that primal acceptance upon which our survival and security depended in our infancy. He cites as primary evidence the direct injury that we all feel from degrading treatment or from public humiliation, from belittling verbal abuse or from outright physical assault. Indeed we all know first hand that self esteem can be damaged by receiving poor treatment. So Honneth argues the contra-positive equivalent must also be self evident. That is, since the absence of respect from others can trigger the experience of injury to our self esteem and personal integrity, then it must also be the case that sustained self-esteem and personal integrity depend upon our sensing that other people recognise us as worthy of their respect. Thus he regards the primal need for recognition as essential in all fights for social justice.

But Honneth's psychoanalytic template for the foundation of social morality seems to apply to only a narrow range of society where individuals learn to view their welfare as entailing the obliging deference of others. He seems to overlook the possibility that individuals can harbour self-esteem and personal integrity even though from birth their subordinate status does not

¹⁶Connor brings to mind the poignancy observed by a BBC correspondent Matthew Price who remarked ruefully, "Neither side understands the other," when reporting an Israeli tank raid killing 12 Palestinian civilians in their residential neighbourhood in the Gaza Strip. The quote was broadcast on the *BBC Worldservice* from Beit Hanoun in Gaza, November 12, 2006.

¹⁷I owe this initiative of applying the Russellian paradox to explore the consequences of positing a polarizing component as essential to our 'basic identity' to the example set by Romane Clark's (1980) elegant criticism of the view that belief contents must have a propositional structure.

¹⁸I owe to Anton du Plessis (2001) the summary classification of causal theories explaining ethnic conflict into "primordialist" and "constructivist," which I understand as jargon in the literature of international relations (IR) reflecting the more general social scientific dichotomies, 'nature *versus* nurture' or 'innatist *versus* behaviourist'.

entitle them to expect that significant others will recognise or treat them as worthy of respect. Women generally occupy such a position in most societies. And both men and women in South Africa, who forged a new definition of citizenship through the second half of the 20th century, did so despite the annihilating, profoundly abusive conditions that prevailed throughout their lives and which had been legalised long before their birth.

Significant in this regard is the title chosen for the chronicle of an articulate ANC activist, Naboth Mokgatle (1971): *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African*. Mokgatle vividly describes his regimen for cultivating Black Consciousness which inspired his powerful contribution to the success of the anti-apartheid struggle. He writes that he intentionally provoked abuse, contriving to routinely expose himself to the worst excesses of physical brutality and psychological humiliation by breaking pass laws conspicuously so that he would be caught by authorities and dealt with in the degrading way apportioned to his identity under apartheid law. He says this discipline taught him to lose his fear of police and prison (Mokgatle, 1971: 216-224). Contrary to Honneth's theory, Mokgatle's self respect and esteem that fuelled his fight for justice was strengthened precisely as he focussed his awareness on the abuse, insults and injuries perpetrated by significant authorities who actively deprived him of respectful recognition and intentionally disqualified his moral worth. Nor was this a one-off peculiarity unique to the psychology of one South African. The ANC ideology deliberately schooled activists in the anti apartheid struggle to divorce themselves from interaction with liberal whites eager to offer them recognition and political reverence, precisely because such recognition and approval was regarded as a weakening influence that threatened to undermine the uncompromising autonomy of the Black Consciousness Movement, an autonomy which was necessary to genuinely overturn (rather than to subtly perpetuate by colluding with) the white supremacist status quo.¹⁹ It can be argued that the political unity that was achieved for one brief but glorious historical moment in 1994 for all South Africans was made possible because the prevailing mood was to embrace with unrestrained admiration the variety of worldviews and identities that reflected the whole population, celebrated as a multi ethnic rainbow. The transcendent political unity did not emerge by eliminating or sublimating the population's multiple psychological perspectives, nor by erasing from people's thoughts their awareness of their diverse ethno-nationalist identities and loyalties, as Walker Connor and others following him have prescribed.

5 Conclusion

Among those who regard social engineering as a feasible way of improving community relations, it is popular to suppose that the best way to influence group behaviour (e.g. to dismantle sectarian or ethnic hostility) is to reconstruct and expand the worldviews and identities of the population directly engaged in and victimized by the conflict. Walker Connor is widely influential in propounding the view that worldview reform will directly yield a safeguard against destabilizing elements for a nation state, even if adjustments of all the other superficial or "tangible" elements have failed—be they efforts to revise economic conditions, cultural prejudices, political affinities, or religious exclusions (Connor 1972: 353).

¹⁹This was spelled out to me in conversation by one of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement, the ANC activist and colleague of the late Steven Biko, Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, New York City, August 1984. This approach of renouncement has served both Dr. Ramphele's nation and her global recognition very well; among many other accomplishments including honorary doctorates and various influential World Bank posts, in 2004 she was voted 55th of the Top 100 Great South Africans.

In closing, I propose that the foregoing considerations of sections 1–4 cumulatively suggest that this approach reveals a version of Ryle's fallacy of misplaced concreteness (1949), encouraged by the worldview and intrinsic identity model of group conflict. I don't mean to go too far with the allegory, lest it detract from the point here: Purportedly distinct, geographically remote worldviews_{ef} and worldviews_{ic} seem to intersect with each other in countless unpredictable ways.

Indeed worldviews understood as conditioned belief systems and as normative schedules of voluntary commitment are frighteningly telekinetic and porous. For a graphic illustration, recall in 2006 when the life of a young Lebanese woman was jeopardized in a quiet residential neighbourhood of Baalbeck in the Bekaa Valley of her country (Spector 2009). Her home and school and her future were destroyed, not because of the way she perceives herself or her world, but because of the way her identity and her world were perceived by an evangelical preacher in Texas who successfully lobbied the US House of Representatives to escalate the weapons of mass destruction being sent to support America's proxy war using Israel's defence forces in the Middle East (Kurtzer 2010). The example highlights graphically the drawback in focussing on the content of individuals' worldviews *as such* in order to explain their behaviour: talk of worldviews suggests that people's primary reasons for acting depend ultimately upon how they *perceive* their world and not how their world is in fact. It is true that people in a conflict zone (or after a trauma) often act out of exaggerated anxiety over imagined threats. Nonetheless it is typically the case that a girl who runs away hysterically from a moving army tank that is firing shells does so in order to avoid getting hit by explosive shells, not because she fears the sensation of getting hit by explosive shells, nor because she is upset by her *perception* of a moving army tank firing shells.

In turn, the Texan preacher's success in mobilizing three and a half thousand Christian Zionists to rally in Washington DC to export more explosive shells had such a devastating impact in Lebanon not because of the accuracy of his beliefs about the Lebanese; but because of the war mongering climate dominating America in June 2006, and the inevitable vulnerability of US Congressional representatives to pressures of public opinion (Chafets 2007). The point here is that the priorities and beliefs—that is, the identities and worldviews—of politicians half a world away might have to be considered to make sense of why Lebanon was set on fire in August 2006. Quizzing those caught up in defending against the relentless bombardment, or speculating about the structure of their thinking, might illuminate first hand experiences and perspectives of the latest war in Lebanon, but there is no reason to suppose that this line of inquiry will necessarily reveal the cause of that conflict.

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