Project 5. The University and the Meaning of Life
Dr. Emanuel Rutten (0.2 fte)

What is the meaning of life? This life-shaping question is hardly ever raised in academic teaching. Yet, being able to cogently reflect on what is significant, worthwhile, and valuable to pursue in life is indispensable for personal growth and development. It is an epistemic responsibility of universities to educate their students on how to deal with this grand question.

> *This project's aim is to elucidate how reflection on existential questions, such as 'What is the meaning of life?', can be undertaken. Can it be approached by purely scientific means, or is there a need for a more inclusive model of rational deliberation?*

This project will argue for and develop the latter option as follows.

1. The first step will be to argue that the proper object of deliberation for answering such deep questions is a *worldview*. (Underhill 2009; Naugle 2002) A worldview is a broad picture of the nature of reality. People inevitably shape their lives by adopting some worldview, either explicitly or implicitly. Examples include materialism, humanism, and theism. Adopting a worldview enables us to attribute meaning to our experiences. A worldview guides our lives and informs the way we understand ourselves and the world that surrounds us. (Griffioen 2012; Holley 2010; Stenmark 1995; Underhill 2009; Hiebert 2008) This project investigates the peculiar nature and function of a worldview. Which elements are constitutive of it? How do these relate?

2. For a long time philosophers of science have been developing criteria for the rational evaluation and comparison of scientific theories. (Stenmark 1995) This project aims to do the same for worldviews. Advocates of purely scientific approaches to the evaluation of worldviews often ignore a crucial question that should be asked *before* starting to assess the rationality of a given worldview, namely: what model of rationality should be invoked for assessing a life-orienting worldview? Should it be similar to the model of rationality used in science? Or do we need a different one? (Stenmark 1995; Deutscher 2011)
    The project develops an inclusive model of rationality that is specifically suited to evaluate the reasonableness of worldviews. (Below, it will be explained which methodology will be used to develop this model.) It will be argued that such an evaluation must *simultaneously* take into account cognitive-theoretical as well as existential-practical reasons people may have for their worldviews. This idea will then be further developed by identifying *criteria* for the rational evaluation of worldviews. (Vidal 2012; Stenmark 1995) In doing so, the project deploys insights from philosophers from both the continental and analytical tradition, such as Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, David Holley and Mikael Stenmark, who have been working in the same or related areas.

3. It is safe to say that the majority of educated people require their worldview to be compatible with generally accepted scientific theories. The proposed criteria for the rational evaluation of worldviews thus must at least partially overlap with the criteria proposed by philosophers of science for the evaluation of scientific theories. Yet, a worldview is not a scientific theory. The differences between both are mapped by the project in order to clarify how rationality within the context of worldviews differs from that in the sciences, and to show that equating them would be an unwarranted and even harmful form of *scientism*. This flavor of scientism is specific to the theme of worldview

evaluation. As such the project *adds* to insights obtained within the WCTF project 'Science beyond Scientism'.

  By working out the similarities and differences between worldviews and scientific theories, the project leads to a balanced view on the relationship between both.

   Moreover, by developing specific criteria for worldview evaluation, the project aims at delivering a constructive approach for comparing different worldviews. This approach amounts to a tool or set of guidelines for deliberating on existential questions such as 'What is the meaning of life?' In cooperation with an expert in pedagogics, this tool will be developed in such a way that it can be effectively integrated into the curriculum of universities. By doing so the project supports universities in living up to their responsibility for character formation and cultivating existential or 'deep' learning.

Project methodology

The methodology of the project is threefold. *First*, conceptual analysis will be used to precisely identify (i) the notion of a worldview and its main constituents and interrelations, (ii) an inclusive model of rationality to evaluate worldviews and (iii) corresponding criteria for worldview comparison. *Second*, a comprehensive literature study is undertaken to inform the aforementioned analysis where needed. (Literature list provided below) *Third*, given that worldviews are to a large extent interpretations of the world in which we live, the project appeals to hermeneutical principles. (Gadamer 1989; Thiselton 2009)

Project planning

  The project is planned as follows. In the *first year* a conceptual analysis is undertaken to elucidate the notion of a worldview. This includes an analysis of its main constituents and interrelations. As part of the analysis various definitions of a worldview as available in the contemporary literature are taken into account. At the end of this year a peer reviewed academic paper is submitted in which various notions of a worldview are analyzed and based on this a hermeneutically adequate conception of 'worldview' is developed and defended.

  During the *second year* a specific inclusive model of rationality is developed to evaluate the reasonableness of a worldview. It will be argued that worldviews are not to be equated with scientific theories, so that the appropriate model of rationality for worldview evaluation differs significantly from the model of rationality used in the sciences. Neglecting this difference leads to an unwarranted harmful form of scientism, as shall be argued. Here the project *builds further* upon previous insights from the 'Science beyond Scientism' project.

  Further, specific criteria for the rational comparison of worldviews are developed. At the end of the second year a peer reviewed academic paper is submitted that presents the proposed model of rationality for worldview evaluation, and the corresponding relevant criteria for worldview comparison. The paper will explicitly oppose the view of philosophers and scientists who argue that *only* scientific criteria should inform worldview assessment.

  The *third year* is focused on developing a comprehensive toolset or set of educational guidelines on how the identified criteria for rational worldview comparison can inform teaching at universities. The focus is on seeking new feasible ways to resuscitate discussions about the Big Questions, and in particular the meaning of life, in universities. The toolset or guidelines will be developed in cooperation with an expert on academic teaching from *The Academic Teaching Center* of the VU University Amsterdam. Moreover, the conditions for embedding the guidelines in the construction of academic curricula are identified and fleshed out. In this way universities can fulfill their responsibility to address existential and character formation needs in academic teaching.

Relationship with other projects

This project relates in a number of different ways to the other projects. First, with respect to the *epistemic values of academia* (project 1), the project elucidates which epistemic values that are distinguished in project 1, such as wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, are especially relevant for the rational evaluation and comparison of worldviews.

Project 2 investigates which aspects of research culture promote or hinder *research integrity*, and which are the most important barriers to responsible conduct of research. A crucial question in this respect is whether having a worldview counts as such an aspect or barrier. As part of the project it will be argued that that is definitely not the case. The thesis that all academic pursuits ought to be neutral or worldview independent is hard to maintain. Science is to some extent also influenced by the worldviews scientists adopt. And this is certainly not wrong or misguided. Having a worldview should not count as a barrier for research integrity or responsible conduct of research. Or so it will be argued.

The art of critical judgment is investigated by project 3 as part of the question of how to *inculcate wisdom, intellectual virtue, and critical thinking*. Informed judgment also plays an important role in the rational evaluation and comparisons of worldviews. In fact, as will be argued in the project, the act of critically evaluating a worldview can to a large extent be considered as performing an act of informed judgment. Therefore, the project draws from insights obtained in project 4 on the art and nature of critical informed judgment.

The central question of project 5 is how groups can be intellectually virtuous and how to teach *collective intellectual virtues*. Now, people rarely adopt a worldview in isolation. They do this predominantly as member of some social or cultural collective. Therefore the project must take into account as well the *social or group dimension* of worldview adoption in order to arrive at a suitable model for assessing worldviews. This is partially done by drawing from insights obtained by project 6 on the cognitive performance of groups of individuals.

Project 6 asks whether there is a unity to be found underneath the *wide-ranging spectrum of different academic disciplines and pursuits*. One way of approaching this question is to ask whether the concept of a worldview, that is, an integrated picture of the world, provides the proper means for identifying and charactering such unity. The idea here would be that each academic discipline is responsible for informing a specific part of a worldview. This way of characterizing the unity of the academic disciplines and pursuits is critically compared to the options for envisioning such a unity as identified in project 7.

Project 7 aims to define and characterize *interpretation of texts*. Now, in fact world-views can be considered as interpretations as well, namely hermeneutical interpretations, not of texts, but of the world itself. Actually, our whole human existence is primarily a matter of interpretation. By interpreting ourselves, others, and the world, we bring unity, direction and structure in our lives. It is through such holistic interpretation that people develop their own worldview, i.e. a guiding hermeneutical frame of reference for being able to understand and cope with the world in which we find ourselves. (Taylor 1989, Holley 2010) Therefore, the project draws from insights on the nature of interpretation as obtained in project 8.

Finally, project 8 aims at answering the question what *legitimate role for theology* is left within contemporary strongly secularized and religiously diverse universities. Given that theology aims to deal with deep existential questions of meaning, there is a clear relationship between both projects. Theology, in its quest for meaning and wisdom, is in need of ways to critically assess different types of worldviews. As such project 8 is expected to benefit from insights obtained by the project on how to rationally reflect on (and compare) worldviews.

Further, mainly but not only during the *third year* of the project, the project works closely together with *Ethos*, an interdisciplinary workgroup of academics within the VU University Amsterdam. *Ethos* aims at actively promoting and revitalizing 'Bildung' in university's

teachings. By working together with *Ethos* the project aims to increase the impact of its core results. For example, such collaboration will enable the project to contribute to *Ethos*'s educational and cultural activities. Besides, working closely together with *Ethos* ensures that the vital notion of 'Bildung' is appropriately taken into account in the project's methodology and results.

Project Results

- 1 peer reviewed academic paper on the notion of a worldview (year 1) and 1 peer reviewed academic paper on rational worldview evaluation (year 2), to be submitted to such journals as *Philosophical Review*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Religious Studies*
- 1 Toolset or set of guidelines on how to resuscitate Big Question teaching at universities (year 3)
- 10 newspaper articles and popular talks. Examples of newspapers include, but are not limited to, 'NRC' (audience number: ~200.000), 'Volkskrant' (~250.000) and 'Trouw' (~88.000). Popular articles will also be published in popular magazines (e.g., 'Filosofie Magazine') and online forums (e.g., 'Geloofenwetenschap.nl', 'DeBezieling.nl', 'Joop.nl', 'Filosofie.be' and 'BijNaderInzien.org')
- Popular talks will be given (i) as part of university master courses (e.g., 'Media, Leiderschap en Filosofische taalvaardigheid' and 'Symbolisch leven I' at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), (ii) in the form of separate university lectures, (iii) at cultural events (e.g., 'Filosofisch Cafe Felix & Sofie Amsterdam', 'Arminius Rotterdam', 'Festival De nacht van de universiteit Amsterdam', 'Festival Drift Amsterdam' and 'Brainwash festival Amsterdam') and (iv) at students' union gatherings (e.g., C.S.F.R Groningen, C.S.F.R. Leiden, C.S.R. Delft and V.G.S.R. Rotterdam).
  The newspaper articles and popular talks primarily address the question of how universities can be enabled to fulfill their responsibility of teaching people to reflect on the meaning of their lives, and other existential Big Questions.

Literature
1. Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 2 vols., London, Secker & Warburg, 1978
2. Guy Deutscher, Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages, Arrow Books, 2011
3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd rev. edn., translated by J. Weinsheimer and D.G.Marshall, New York: Crossroad, 1989
4. Sander Griffioen, On Worldviews, Philosophia Reformata 77 (2012): 19-56
5. Paul Hiebert, Transforming Worldviews: an anthropological understanding of how people change, Grand Rapids, Mich, 2008
6. Martin Heidegger, Being and Event, London, SCM Press, 1962
7. David Holley, Meaning and Mystery: What It Means To Believe in God, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010
8. David Naugle, Worldview, The History of a Concept, Eerdmans Publishing, 2002
9. Mikael Stenmark, Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life, Notre Dame, 1995
10. James Underhill, Humboldt, Worldview and Language, Edinburgh University Press, 2009
11. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Harvard University Press, 1989
12. Anthony Thiselton, Hermeneutics, An Introduction, Eerdmans Publishing, 2009
13. Clément Vidal, Metaphilosophical Criteria for Worldview Comparison, Metaphilosophy 43 (2012): 306-347