Are Your Beliefs Rational? Four Tests to Evaluate Your Worldview

Theologian and philosopher Richard J. Mouw [recounts](#) once seeing a car with a *Playboy* bunny sticker on the rear window and a statue of the Virgin Mary on the front dashboard. He initially assumed that there was a reasonable explanation to the apparent contradiction: a Catholic wife and a brazen spouse, perhaps? Only later did he realize that the dichotomy might not have had a rational explanation. The car's owner may have neglected, as many do, to critically examine his worldview.

A worldview, as the name implies, is simply the way in which one person views the world. It generally encompasses five main areas: theology (beliefs about God), anthropology (beliefs about man), epistemology (beliefs about acquiring knowledge), metaphysics (beliefs about the nature of reality), and ethics (beliefs about morality).

Everyone *has* a worldview: We all have beliefs about God, man, knowledge, reality, and morality. However, some worldviews fail to make sense of [central aspects of truth](#). And yet, it's important to have a worldview that can stand up to scrutiny. From philosopher Ronald H. Nash's book [*Life's Ultimate Questions*](#), here are four tests to verify the validity of a worldview.

1. The Test of Reason

Intellectually inclined types tend to apply the test of reason first, which is generally a good technique. This test approaches worldviews at their simplest level, asking, "Is this worldview logically coherent?"

This test appeals primarily to logic, the reasoning behind why we believe what we believe. It especially seeks to evaluate the consistency of a worldview, checking to ensure that one part of the belief system does not contradict another. Nash (rightly) points out that "Inconsistency is always a sign of error, and the charge of inconsistency should be taken seriously."

For an example of a worldview that fails the test of reason, consider [relativism](), a belief system that (in its simplest form) asserts that there is no objective truth. We must ask, then: "Is it objectively true that no truth is objectively true?" Relativism fails its own test: It arrives at a contradiction.

2. The Test of Outer Experience

Just because a worldview is internally consistent doesn't mean it is legitimate. Worldviews also need to pass the test of outer experience. This test asks, "Is this worldview consistent with the external world?"

The test of outer experience might challenge worldview beliefs that say change is impossible or pain doesn't exist. While we can hold these beliefs in theory, they are very hard to reconcile with what we actually know about the world: The external world constantly changes, and pain is consistently an imminent reality. In Nash's words, "No worldview deserves respect if it ignores or is inconsistent with human experience."

3. The Test of Inner Experience

While the test of outer experience deals with the external realities of existence, the test of inner experience deals with consciousness. It turns analysis inward, making sure that a worldview works well with what we know about ourselves.

A friend of mine once told me she was a materialist: In other words, she didn't believe that anything existed but physical reality. "Doesn't that make us a bunch of chemical reactions?" I asked her. "And, if we're only chemical reactions, how can we speak meaningfully about morality?" We don't accuse baking soda of wrongdoing when it is combined with vinegar and bubbles over. The soda and vinegar can't help it: They're chemicals. While my friend had a moral sense of right and wrong, her worldview could not account for it. Materialism failed to align with her inner experience and thus failed this third test.

4. The Test of Practice

It's all well and good if we can parse out our worldviews within the walls of a philosophy classroom, but if a set of beliefs isn't livable, it falls short of making a good worldview.

I once got into a philosophical conversation flying home from a family vacation in Maryland. The older man seated beside me mentioned that he was an agnostic. "I don't think we can know anything for certain," he said.

I politely pointed out to him that living life requires us to regularly *assume* that some things are certain, even if we don't think they are. The [law of non-contradiction](#), for instance, serves as the basis for all rational communication. This law says that contrary things cannot be true at the same time—something that we intuit. For instance, when we tell children, "Don't touch that," we don't also mean its contradiction, and we assume kids know this. Therefore, we rightly discipline kids when they *do* stick their finger in the wall outlet. Agnosticism, in my opinion, works against what we intuitively know about the external world, and as a result, it fails the test of practice.

At the end of the day, whether we're explicitly religious or

not, we all have a worldview. And that belief system—our convictions about God, man, knowledge, reality, and morality—plays a central role in our interactions with the world. Let's make sure that system is a rational one.

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