

Worldviews and Inclusive Education:
Three Ontological Positions

Presentation by

Prof. Dr. John Valk
University of New Brunswick (Canada)

Prof. Dr. Anne-Dore Stein
Protestant University of Darmstadt

University of Heidelberg
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Introduction

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah, in his frequent reprimands to the wayward people of Israel, reminded them that the God they followed, albeit reluctantly at times, was a God of justice, seeking from the people not pious acts of worship or reverence but social, cultural and political actions that aimed at equality and inclusion. In fact, contrary to how other nations judged themselves, Isaiah indicated that God would judge the nations by how well they took care of the widows and the orphans, that is, the most vulnerable among them. Isaiah's reprimand must have resonated with the German poet and novelist Goethe who echoed similar sentiments when he stated that "You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him."

The poignant words of Isaiah and Goethe expose the underbelly of a society's dominant worldview and no less its approach to education, especially that of Inclusive Education. Investigating the link between worldviews and Inclusive Education will reveal something important about our character and interests, individually and collectively. To put it most succinctly, "knowledge about our worldviews can reveal important insights in regard to what we say and do concerning the most vulnerable among us." Hence the issue we would like to address is the impact of worldviews on Inclusive Education, and most specifically, ontological implications for the disabled. We might also ask further if there might be some worldviews that would better support or ground Inclusive Education than others.

A Worldview Framework Approach

What we understand to be the nature of the human, how we treat others, especially those who are different than us, and the place we accord them in society comes from how we define the human and our understanding of community, who we include and exclude and for what reasons. Our sense of responsibilities to others, particularly those who are disadvantaged, and the public policies we put in place in that regard, come from some sense of how we should live in the world, especially our particular place in the world. All of these notions – the nature of the human, our treatment of others, our sense of community, our responsibilities, and our place in the world – come from some philosophy of life, some worldview that we embrace, either individually or collectively. What might they be?

Philosophies of life or worldviews are *visions of life* and *ways of life*. They are our bigger stories or narratives – our metanarratives – of how we view life and how we should live our lives. Our worldviews inform us, directly or indirectly what is important, what is expendable, and on what we should focus our time and attention. In this vein, our worldviews also inform us about the meaning of education, who should be educated and for what purposes. By extension, our worldviews inform us about Inclusive Education and why it is important, if at all.

In this presentation we will look at three worldviews that have considerable influence in our Western societies. They are Utilitarianism, Liberalism/Individualism and Christianity. These three worldviews have considerably different notions of what it means to be human, our responsibilities to self and others, and the purpose of education. As such, they also have views and positions that shape and influence Inclusive Education, directly or indirectly.

Mapping out or describing these worldviews requires a fully worked out framework that I have developed. In the interests of time we will be quite general and highlight only a few aspects of each of these three worldviews, focusing largely on their major views, and specifically on their notions of the nature of the human.

A Utilitarian Worldview

Utilitarianism asserts that the proper course of human action is to maximize utility, generally understood as maximizing the benefit or happiness of the largest number of people by reducing their suffering, anxieties and hardships. Jeremy Bentham, considered the Father of Utilitarianism, stated that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the measure of right and wrong.” Peter Singer, moral philosopher, ethicist and now recently, neuro-philosopher, is well entrenched in utilitarianism, which has led him to develop views on the nature of the human and his now notorious views regarding the severely disabled. Let’s briefly explore these.

According to Singer belonging to the species *homo sapiens* does not render one a human. It is characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness that elevate a species member to the category of a human or a person (p. 5). Thus a human person is one who is freely able to think, reflect and be self-aware. Those not able to do so, that is, those with severe mental disabilities, become dispensable or disposable. Whether they should live or die is determined not on the basis of any right to life but on the basis of the benefit or happiness gained for those around them.

Singer states that “a life of physical suffering, unredeemed by any form of pleasure or by a minimal level of self-consciousness, is not worth living.” Killing a *homo sapien* species member becomes an option. Hence, he uses terms such as “total version utilitarianism”, “preference utilitarianism”, “replacement argument”, and “consequentialist ethics”, to determine right or ethical actions. Eradicating those not considered to be human persons is justified on the basis of the utility, or rather disutility, they render to those around them. Singer is actually extending a practice already in place in our Western society: aborting fetuses known to have severe disabilities to killing them shortly after birth. His preference is for the latter practice because prenatal testing can be flawed. Singer is not a strong advocate for abortion for it might entail aborting a healthy fetus. Nonetheless, the utilitarian point holds. Those born of human mothers are not necessarily human persons and their right to life is determined by their ability to think, reason and have self-reflect, or their utility to others. Those with severe mental disabilities could be eliminated. Those with severely curtailed levels or abilities to think, reason, and self-reflect would, of course, have a right to live if their parents or guardians wanted or desired them, that is, if they served a utility to the parents or guardians. Otherwise they could be euthanized because they do not fit the description of what it means to be a human person. But here lines can easily shift in the sand. What utilitarian criteria will be used to determine the severely disabled

(and hence death) from the moderately disabled (and hence a right to life)? Further, who will determine that criteria and where will the line be drawn?

A utilitarian worldview is not necessarily opposed to Inclusive Education. Utility or benefit can be gained by educating people with certain degrees of disability, though clearly not the severely disabled. But it is unlikely that Inclusive Education would receive huge support from and be grounded in this worldview perspective for it could easily be considered a disutility for others, that is, less than beneficial for a maximum number of people. If Inclusive Education implies special institutions for the disabled it might receive *some* support. If it means full inclusion in existing classrooms it is unlikely to receive *any* support – it would be viewed as a disutility for the maximum benefit of the greatest number. A utilitarian worldview, which can clearly be seen as influential in our modern Western society, is less than likely to support, let alone ground, Inclusive Education.

A Liberal/Individualistic Worldview

Liberalism/Individualism is another influential if not rampant worldview in our modern Western society. Born out of the Enlightenment liberalism sought to free people from the constraints of what were considered stifling traditions, overbearing governments and rigid communal life. Championed by philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Thomas Paine (1737-1809), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and others, it affirmed and promoted the ethical primacy and moral worth of all humans, individual freedom and autonomy, reason and science, natural rights and property rights, laissez faire economic policies and limited constitutional government, and insisted on the separation of church and state. All of these radically altered the history of Europe, freeing it from what was considered to be the restraints of previous eras. Though in more nuanced forms, liberalism's values continue to shape Western society bringing with it freedom and dignity for many – politically, economically and culturally. Few would conceive of doing without the freedoms advanced by liberalism.

Yet, liberalism has also promoted and advanced a rampant if not perilous individualism. Individualism fuels self-interest. Radical individualism rejects any demands of personal sacrifice for the greater benefit of society or for higher social causes. Liberalism or individualism views humans as independent and autonomous beings, free to pursue their own individual and economic self-interests, with government and society providing the means and security for the promotion of individual self-interest. Freedom, not restraint, is the order of the day.

In a society influenced if not shaped by liberalism/individualism would the rights of persons with disabilities gain more traction? At first glance, this might seem the case. Liberalism has championed the rights and freedoms of the individual. One can see its imprint on documents such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights. One might even see its hand in drafting the 2006 UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. But entitlement to certain rights and implementing those rights can often be two entirely different matters, especially when the rights of different groups clash in a society where individualism runs rampant, for the questions always arise as to whose rights should trump. We see this matter arising with every major social issue: sexual freedom, abortion, gay marriage, and more. Social conservatives are always pitted against social progressives.

In a society dominated by individual self-interest, it is most often the powerful, the wealthy and the influential who gain the upper hand, who know how to use knowledge gained through science and other means to their advantage, as recognized by postmodernists such as Levinas, Derrida and others. That self-interest, when viewed through an individualistic and even consumer lens, especially concerning education, regards schools as consumer markets and certificates and degrees as commodities (Fox 2014). If it is perceived that the inclusion of persons with learning disabilities become an impediment or disutility to the learning of others, Inclusive Education may translate into little more than special institutions for the disabled. Such segregated circumstances may honour the legality of the UN Convention yet does grave dishonour to its spirit. A more robust worldview is needed that gets beyond individual self-interest and emphasizes a more communitarian approach.

A Christian Worldview

European societies have undergone a marked secularization within the past century as a variety of worldviews have gained ascendancy and influence. Christianity, once dominant in the political, religious, and social landscape, now finds itself in competition with other worldviews for the hearts and minds of the people. Pope Benedict made the claim that Europe is grounded in the Christian worldview, yet on many fronts it appears to be losing the battle. Many claim Europe is post-Christian, with only a few remnants of contested privilege remaining. Some by their vociferous actions or silent inactions would not be displeased if it faded away entirely. But such preferences might be born out of ignorance, if not altogether premature.

The (Judeo-) Christian metanarrative begins with the story of humans created in the image of God but made of the stuff of the earth. They are not cosmic accidents or autonomous beings, or defined solely by their biological, chemical or neurological components. They are rather spiritual/physical entities mandated to flourish in being stewards of the earth. Through individual and communal engagement they are called to increase the common good, enhance relationships, and become human through individually and collectively unfolding their creative capacity and potential (Vanier, 1998; Hardy, 1990; Wolters, 1985). Living well is to live in relationship with the Creator, and in harmony with others and the earth (Valk, 2012).

Christianity recognizes, however, that people do not always live well. Hence, it warns against dominating or exploiting others or the earth for personal gain. Humans are called to nurture, guide and direct the unfolding of self and others for the benefit of all. As image-bearer of the Creator, the human is sacred; special among all creatures and created life. All humans are to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their situation, circumstance or station in life. Protecting the most vulnerable and dignifying the physically or mentally challenged reflects the view that even those often left behind are still image-bearers of the Creator (Valk, 2012).

The Judeo-Christian story places a greater focus on inclusivity, even if its track record is often found wanting. The individual is not autonomous, nor does he/she stand in opposition to or isolated from community. Freedom is to be found within a communal setting, not a part from it. Meaning and purpose is not to be found in material wealth or personal prestige; it is to be found in relationship with others, great and small. As such, the unfolding of the self within a communal environment sets each person free to assist in the learning and enhancement of the other. Such a worldview not only supports Inclusive Education, it also grounds it. Everyone has

the potential to learn, however great or small that might be. Learning is a communal endeavour and responsibility and inclusion, not exclusion, is the right of all, not just the privileged and powerful. In the words of Jesus, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Conclusions

Our modern Western society is beset with many worldviews. A plurality of visions is a by-product of centuries of struggle to gain rights and freedoms for the individual. But not all advances are gains as history records. With that plurality of visions come differing views of the nature of the human, who should be valued and who is dispensable or disposable. The struggle for justice and responsible actions nets gains for some but not necessarily for all. As history also demonstrates clearly, the vulnerable are all too often left behind. This is clear in regard to the education of the disabled.

Worldviews such as Utilitarianism and Liberalism/Individualism define the human in ways that focus on specific characteristics and abilities. Defining the human is determined by others, and then largely to the advantage of those most able and most powerful. Such is also the case with education, and no less Inclusive Education. The dignity, value and opportunity given to the most vulnerable seem to fall short when it comes to Utilitarianism and Liberalism.

A Christian ontology is defined by entirely different criteria. All humans are sacred because they are created in the image of God, and as such are to be treated with dignity, regardless of levels of abilities or disabilities. Meaning is to be found in human relationships and Christians are mandated to be responsible for others, especially those who are most vulnerable. A Christian worldview appears to be more supportive of Inclusive Education and may best serve as its grounding.

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