and entire civilizations for either good or ill. If all cultural phenomena can and perhaps should be explained semiotically, then worldviews should be no exception. One reason why these signs making up a worldview are so powerful individually and culturally is because of the particular shape they assume: they have been formulated and received internally as a set of narratives or stories that establish a particular perspective on life.

Worldview and Narrative

Semiotically constituted human beings in want of a solution to the riddles of the universe primarily fulfill this need in their trademark activity of telling stories that form a symbolic world for which people are inclined to live and even die. Indeed, the power of stories to establish a context for life has been recognized since time immemorial. No one in antiquity saw this more clearly than Socrates and Plato. They knew well that the kinds of stories the future rulers of their ideal republic would encounter, especially in childhood, would be particularly influential both cognitively and morally, with ultimate public and political implications. Therefore Socrates and Plato, and later on even Aristotle, recognized the importance of the narrative education of the young, as fairy-tale expert Bruno Bettelheim explains: “Plato — who may have understood better what forms the mind of man than do some of our contemporaries who want their children exposed only to ‘real’ people and everyday events — knew what intellectual experiences make for true humanity. He suggested that the future citizens of his ideal republic begin their literary education with the telling of myths, rather than with mere facts or so-called rational teachings. Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: ‘The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.’”

Thus the wisdom of the ages, going all the way back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, would suggest that the development of the human mind and consciousness is a function of the weightiness of stories and their plots, their characters, their denouements, and their overall explanations of things. As a proponent of this perspective, Bettelheim has argued that fairy tales and myths are the basic means by which children fashion and refashion their worlds. This is largely true because, in his estimation, such tales and myths are concerned with

16. For Socrates' and Plato's views on the role and power of stories, see especially bks. 2, 3, and 10 in the Republic. For Aristotle's reflections on the same, consult his Poetics.
basic questions of life: “Who am I? Where did I come from? How did the world come into being? Who created man and all the animals? What is the purpose of life?” He is convinced, however, that children ponder these issues, not philosophically, but in a childlike way as they pertain to a specific boy or girl and his or her individual well-being. “He [the child] worries not whether there is justice for individual man, but whether he will be treated justly. He wonders who or what projects him into adversity, and what can prevent this from happening to him. Are there benevolent powers in addition to his parents? Are his parents benevolent powers? How should he form himself, and why? Is there hope for him, though he may have done wrong? Why has all this happened to him? What will it mean for his future?”

For Bettelheim, myths and fairy tales provide the answers to these pressing questions which children become aware of only as they are exposed to these stories and follow their plots all the way through. The answers given by myths are definite, says Bettelheim, while the responses of fairy tales are suggestive. The content of fairy tales, in particular, fit the nature of children and their childlike outlook on the world, and this is why they are so convincing to and comforting for them. They reflect and order their world.

Rollo May has affirmed something similar, but with application also to adults. He believes that myth, which may be compared to the hidden framework of a house, is the very structure that imparts meaning to life and thereby holds it together. “A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Whether the meaning of existence is only what we put into life by our own individual fortitude . . . or whether there is a meaning we need to discover . . . , the result is the same: myths are our way of finding this meaning and significance. Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it.”

Another place where worldview and narrative intersect is in the context of the folktale. Linda Dégh notes that although the term “worldview” is rather vague, and though it seldom appears as a major research goal in folk narrative study, “one way or another it is addressed in all descriptive and analytical studies of stories and their tellers.” When folklorists speak about Weltanschauung, she says they mean the subjective, individual interpretations of the totality of reality according to the way it is perceived and experienced. She believes that all

human thought and action are affected by worldview perception and interpretation. Consequently, she asserts that worldview “permeates all cultural performances, including folklore.” “Narratives, in particular, are loaded with worldview expressions: they reveal inherited communal and personal views of human conduct — this is their generic goal. Bearers of narrative tradition, as much as seasoned researchers, know and anticipate how a joke, an exemplum, or a ballad to be performed is going to characterize the world, yet we cannot single out one type of worldview or deal with all that is expressed in one narrative or one telling.”

Dégh contends that worldview motivates and defines all human attitudes and behaviors, and that human action is unintelligible without it. Hence her argument is that the study of the folktale “as a human product and its specific versions as personal acts of creation can show how the world is featured by this genre: what is the genre specific image of the world?”

Thus, from Plato to the present, the human relevance of the narrative genre with life-defining power seems self-evident. Yet despite this all-times, all-places recognition of stories as the bearers of a symbolic world in which human beings might find a secure, cognitive home — what Stephen Crites has called the “narrative quality of experience” — the architects of the modern project did their best to rid homo narrator of their troublesome tales and banish them from cultural significance. Because the presence and influence of competing mythologies engendered enormous sociocultural conflict, and even warfare, especially of the religious variety, their solution was to exterminate the narrative-infested polis and fill it with ratio-scientific objectifications. Relegating the category of narrative to private life and the domain of values, their goal was to provide an allegedly neutral and hostility-free way of ordering public life. Human existence established upon a new, scientific foundation betokened modern man come of age, who no longer had need for the primitive mythologies of bygone religious or metaphysical eras.

But Enlightenment denarrativization came at a high human cost, and nobody has understood that cost better than Friedrich Nietzsche. In The Birth of Tragedy he writes, “But without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a

22. Dégh, p. 247.
23. Dégh, p. 250. See also the follow-up comments to Dégh’s study by Alan Dundes, “Worldview in Folk Narrative: An Addendum,” Western Folklore 54 (July 1995): 229-32.
Nietzsche knew, however, that the Western world had been drifting slowly toward the destruction of its narrative resources—a kind of “mythoclasm” — by its intoxication with scientific rationalism. Consequently, modern humanity, “untutored by myth,” is famished and in search for any narrative morsel on which to feed itself, as the frenzied activities and compulsions of contemporary life indicate. “And now the mythless man stands eternally hungry, surrounded by all past ages, and digs and grubs for roots, even if he has to dig for them among the remotest antiquities. The tremendous historical need of our unsatisfied modern culture, the assembling around one of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, the mythical maternal womb?”

Nietzsche perceives that the “feverish and uncanny excitement” of modern culture—its incessant pace, its quest for exotic traditions, its passion for knowledge—must be interpreted as nothing other than a hunger for myth, “the greedy seizing and snatching at food of a hungry man.” No matter how much it devours materialistically or otherwise, a storyless world and mythless culture cannot and will never be satiated. The only solution to narrative starvation is the preparation and consumption of primordial, explanatory tales that nourish and satisfy the mythological cravings of human beings.

Because of this inescapable narrative need built into the human soul, recent cultural history has proven that the modern attempt at extirpating narratives was muddleheaded and vain. Indeed, a deep irony has characterized this crusade against narratives, for it has been based on an unconscious Cartesian story featuring heroic human reason as the protagonist of a master plot to take possession of the world by scientific prowess. As Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh point out, “[T]he very notion that in modern times we have outgrown the childish, prescientific stage of mythical thinking and progressed to the maturity of scientific reason and technological mastery is itself a story. It is, therefore, only by telling its own ‘tall tale’ that modernity can claim to have surpassed the need for stories.” In other words, the antinarrativity of Enlightenment modernism is self-referentially incoherent.

Perhaps more than any other contemporary thinker, Alasdair MacIntyre

27. Nietzsche, p. 136 ($23).
Philosophical Reflections on “Worldview”

has argued most persuasively for a recovery of the narrative foundations of human existence. In his celebrated After Virtue, he notes that because of social and philosophical forces, the narrative unity of life, or of an individual life, was destroyed in the context of modernity.\textsuperscript{29} A human self, nonnarratively conceived, cannot be the bearer of Aristotelian virtues, which is MacIntyre’s primary concern. On the contrary, a virtuous life is possible only to the extent that it is conceived, unified, and evaluated as a whole. Hence MacIntyre seeks to recover a concept of an integrated human existence grounded in the integrity of a narrative which links birth, life, and death, or beginning, middle, and end, into a singular, coherent story embraced communally. MacIntyre argues that it is natural to think of the self in the narrative mode, and that all human conversations and actions are best understood as “enacted narratives” (p. 211). Narrative, not free-floating, independent selves, is the most basic category. Stories are necessary to make sense of one’s own life and the lives of others. MacIntyre focuses on the stories of a lived tradition, but he also recognizes that the wellspring of these narratives is located at a deeper, mythological level. “Hence,” MacIntyre writes, “there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things” (p. 216). In other words, the narrative stories which are lived out in the world of human experience are a product of bedrock, first-order myths that essentially constitute a worldview. MacIntyre’s fundamental proposal essential to his revival of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics is this: “A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (p. 216).

For MacIntyre, then, human life is governed by story. The roles which people play, how they understand themselves and others, how the world itself is structured and operates are a function of the narrative plots that reign in a human community. While MacIntyre applies these arguments to rehabilitate a tradition-based virtue ethics, for our purposes his ideas highlight the role and importance of stories that human beings employ to make sense of life in the cosmos.

\textsuperscript{29} Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 204–25. Page references in this paragraph are to this work.
WORLDVIEW

In light of the preceding reflections, therefore, it is safe to say that worldviews contain an unmistakable and irreducible narrative component. 30 As Plato once pointed out, people are concerned about “the heavens and the whole story of existence, divine and human.” 31 Thus human beings, as semiotic creatures and inherent storytellers, come to grips with themselves and the nature of life in the cosmos through the formation of worldviews as systems of narrative signs that form a basic outlook on life. They provide narrative answers to the fundamental questions about the realm of the divine, the nature of the cosmos, the identity of human beings, the solution to the problems of suffering and pain, and so on. Even the seemingly nonnarrative aspects of a Weltanschauung — its doctrinal, ethical, or ritual dimensions — can be explained by a fundamental narrative content. Middleton and Walsh support this contention in their recognition of the virtual omnipresence of narrative in faiths and philosophies worldwide.

Both Judaism and Islam . . . articulate their worldview in narrative form, appealing to the destiny of history as revelatory of God’s intent. Even Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which are often portrayed as suspicious of history . . ., have passed on a rich heritage of myths in storied form, including an epic narrative, the Mahabrama (of which the Bhagavad-Gita is a part). Myths and folktales of good, evil and redemption are also the stock-in-trade of the contemporary indigenous religions of Africa, North and South America, and Australia, as well as the classical religions of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. In each case, ultimate truths about the world, humanity, evil and salvation are communicated in terms of stories which give guidance and set the parameters for ethical action. 32

These stories that establish a symbolic world do indeed guide all forms of human activity. Worldview narratives create a particular kind of “mind,” and serve in a normative fashion as “controlling stories.” 33 The most fundamental

32. Middleton and Walsh, pp. 64-65.
stories associated with a Weltanschauung — those closest to its metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical epicenter — possess a kind of finality as the ultimate interpretation of reality in all its multifaceted aspects. Such stories are considered sacred, and they provide the adhesive that unites those who believe in them into a society characterized by shared perspectives and a common way of life. They also provide a tenacious grid by which competing narratives and alternative claims to truth are judged. Controlling stories, therefore, function in a regulatory fashion both positively and negatively, and are able to bind those who accept them into an intellectual or spiritual commonwealth. Thus the bulk of human praxis does seem to be under the jurisdiction of a worldview, including the significant activities of reasoning, interpreting, and knowing.

Worldview and Reason

The faculty of human reason has had a distinguished career in the history of Western thought. It is that capacity by which men and women have been typically distinguished from the brutes. It is an endowment in which people as thinking beings (homo sapiens) have trusted to provide a knowledge of themselves, their surroundings, and beyond. As Pascal said in the Pensées, “Man is a thinking reed. . . . It is by means of thought that . . . [one] can comprehend the universe.” But what is the nature of rational thought, and how does reason itself function? Specifically for our purposes, what is the relationship between a particular conception of the universe — a Weltanschauung — and the exercise and content of rationality? What influence, if any, does a worldview have upon the way reason works and what it says? Is rationality dependent upon or free from a semiotic or narrative context? Is there an “arch” or “Olympian” kind of rationality transcending worldviews that is homogeneous and the same for all? Perhaps three examples will illustrate the precise thrust of this inquiry regarding the relation of worldview and rationality.

First, are the beliefs of primitive, prescientific cultures less “rational” than those of the modern West? According to Peter Winch in his celebrated article “Understanding a Primitive Society” (1964), the answer must be a resounding