

BOOK REVIEW

Landscapes of the Mind: The Faces of Reality by Lawrence LeShan.
Guilford, CT: Eirini Press, 2012. 216 pp. \$15.00. ISBN 978-0979998980.

This book is a study of what may be called “worldview-making.” I use the gerund here because no one’s worldview is static. Our picture of the world is constantly changing because our context of experience is constantly changing. The way we experience the world and each other depends on our assumptions at a given moment of how the world looks, feels, and works. To understand any given individual, cultural event, or epoch of history, we need to take into account the operative myths, attitudes, and worldviews, which are bound to have deep and hidden roots.

LeShan dedicates his book to Giambattista Vico as his forerunner and inspiration, an eighteenth-century philosopher and founding father of the human sciences. Once we see the key role of our “world pictures,” as LeShan does, it becomes clear that each of us lives in a world conditioned by the dominant reality-pictures whose spell we labor under at any given time.

An educated person today out for a summer stroll suddenly hears a blast of thunder, and thinks, “Damn, forgot my umbrella.” Vico reminds us that the same blast of thunder heard by a person in a pre-scientific, pre-rational culture is heard as the voice of a god and fills the one who hears it with sacred terror. Vico understood, as I am sure LeShan would agree, that worldviews mediated by mythic imagination generate totally different kinds of experiences than worldviews mediated by modern science. In general, the scope and quality of our experience is always mediated by a particular worldview. This seems to me the vital (and challenging) premise of this book.

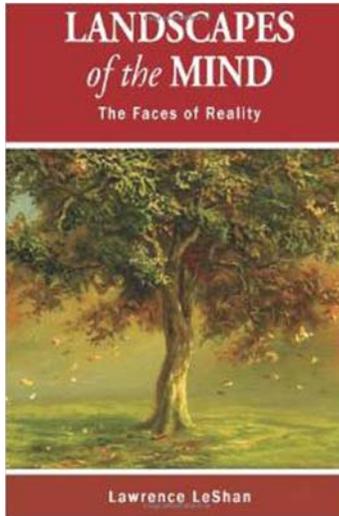
LeShan begins with a chapter entitled, “You and Your World Pictures,” and takes us through the various experiences of a kind of Everyman he calls “John Psmith,” a “consulting engineer.” He shows us Psmith in changing situations and explains how the different situations evoke different world pictures and their corresponding values, attitudes, and emotions. While on the job in his world as engineer, Psmith is cool and analytic; but when he learns that his daughter may be in mortal danger he’s prostrated by fear, drops the analytic façade, and switches into a mode of prayer. “This is a far cry from how Psmith perceived the world and reacted to it during his day at the office,” LeShan remarks.

Later, after realizing the danger wasn't real, he finds himself dancing with his wife (where his picture of things regains a rosy hue, and later still, he retires and has a beautiful dream, thus encountering yet another reality with still other working assumptions and reality-defining properties. The author sketches a few more pairs of world pictures, i.e. ways of constructing reality, for example, between people during peacetime and people at war, and between childhood and adulthood. In short, the fate of every person is to continually go through different phases of life in different contexts and situations, all of which force us to adopt, more or less skillfully, different personas and styles of existential response. Life for LeShan appears then rather like an improvisational art form; some of us negotiate the twists and turns more gracefully and effectively than others. This may have something to do with the degree of elasticity with which we wear our worldviews.

To explore this new art form more effectively, LeShan suggests we need to model ourselves after Linnaeus and get serious about devising a taxonomy of worldviews. LeShan's sketch is fourfold, based on two sets of contrasting ideas: quantitative and non-quantitative; discrete and continuous. We have a world picture that is 1) quantitative and full of discrete particulars—call it unvarnished workaday materialism; 2) its polar opposite, non-quantitative and continuous—i.e. spiritual and unbounded, which is to say, mystical; 3) non-quantitative and discrete—which our taxonomist marks as defining the world of fairytales and mythology; and lastly, 4) the quantitative and continuous, cosmic physicalism, i.e. relativity theory—in general, the worldview of the modern physicist.

In this outline, we can see the debt to Vico who, in a different vein, related different ways of constructing reality to a tri-phase developmental model. It begins with the age of the gods, which is based on mute signs of creative power in which spiritual imagination is king; this (I would say) corresponds to LeShan's mystical mode of world picture, the continuous non-quantitative. Next for Vico is the age of heroes, still ruled by the power of myth and imagination, but in the realm of reason, which tames but does not destroy the mythic imagination; this corresponds to LeShan's world of fairytales and mythology, and brings danger, as suggested in his discussion of terrorism; and, finally, we come to a stage of development in which reason occupies a central place under the aegis of a kind of civic rationalism. Ideally, rationalism and mythology cohabit during this stage of the developmental model.

But for Vico there is a final stage of possible cultural evolution. This is the point where rationality overpowers the mythical and the mystical; when this happens, we are witnessing the dawn of cultural death, and Vico calls this fatal juncture the "barbarism of reflection." At this point, reason



becomes the servant of *malizia* (malice and self-interest), the *sensus communis* breaks down and people oppress each other and finally turn to civil war. This might be the capitalistic rationalism of LeShan's quantitative and discrete (ego-driven) worldview, where dog-eat-dog is the reigning ethic, compassion and imagination are dead, and the mechanization of life tends toward mutual annihilation.

In terms of LeShan's taxonomy of worldviews, we can see what the two dangers are; fortunately, LeShan has a plausible plan for recovery. The first of the two dangers is the terrorism of the simplistic mythical imagination, the worldview that justifies the massacre of innocents and the apocalyptic destruction of the other. This is a recurrent temptation that afflicts those who have been trampled on and humiliated by alien powers.

The second danger comes from within our own malice-ridden rationalism, a system in which small dehumanized cabals manipulate rules, laws, finances, and rhetoric to consolidate and increase their power, with indifference to the many. Not by overt violence but by cunning and deception they achieve their ends; in the end sapping the strength of the body politic. Because these agents of corrupt rationality are devoid of social responsibility (*sensus communis*) and are without empathy, compassion, or imagination, they can only alienate humanity and must in the end self-destruct. Amid the ruins, the stage is set for a new age of the gods, and the poetic rebirth of a culture or civilization.

It can therefore be argued that some pictures of reality harbor the seeds of their own destruction. But it is possible to devise strategies for transforming the trajectory of worldviews consumed by apocalyptic vendetta or the barbarism of reflection. LeShan rightly emphasizes the grip a certain worldview may have on people, but he also understands that human beings can resist the spell of their own beliefs.

"World pictures are tools," he writes, "each adapted to specific types of problems and needs and using different methods" (p. 60). But "new refinements" are sometimes introduced as a culture evolves. The danger—and this is the challenge posed to readers of this book—is that we become uncritically absorbed in a world picture and allow ourselves to become *its*

tool. “The trouble is we have a basic commitment to the idea that there is one true valid concept of reality (ours, of course) and that all others are primitive, childlike, mythological, or pathological” (p. 61).

The practical upshot of all this is that as students of the varieties of human experience *and* as flawed human beings trying to get along with other flawed human beings, we need to do everything in our power to break free from the conceits that keep us trapped in a blinkered cultural narcissism. Vico wrote that he labored hard and long to enter the mentalities of those who at first seemed alien, primitive, and savage; but he argues that it can be done by exploring the “modifications” of our own minds. The tool here that needs to be cultivated—historical imagination—is discussed at length by Isaiah Berlin in a book that LeShan cites.¹

It is the rare philosopher or psychologist these days who takes the power of imagination as a crucial starting point. LeShan’s contribution in this book is precisely to do this. For scholars and scientists interested in engaging paranormal and mystical realities, *fantasia* (imagination), although underrated by rationalists, is the primary instrument. For anybody in any situation facing human difference and opposition, and for the student of comparative worldviews and worldview-making, the poetic faculty of emptying oneself and entering imaginatively into the interior world of the other is the first step toward a new model of enlightenment. Such is the message of wisdom I take from Lawrence LeShan’s probing *Landscapes of the Mind*.

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Note

¹ Berlin, I. (1976). *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*. New York: Vintage Books.