When Worlds Collide: The Source of Intractable Value Problems

Anthony O. Putman
Descriptive Psychology Institute

Abstract

People differ, much of the time, on matters ranging from the trivial to the profound. Some differences appear intractable, in that none of our known ways of resolving them work, no matter how long or hard we try. This paper uses the conceptual resources of Descriptive Psychology, including "community", "worlds" and "ultimate satisfaction" to shed light on intractable value problems. These value problems are at core intractable problems of significance. Such problems are not the rare exception; they are inherent and pervasive. Participants in such disputes literally live in significantly different worlds. What ultimately keeps these worlds apart is what ultimately holds each one together.

Keywords: Community, world, person, ultimate satisfaction, intractable value problems

It's a simple fact: people differ, much of the time, on matters ranging from the trivial to the profound.

Vanilla or chocolate? Coffee or tea? Issues of personal taste are not actually issues at all since one can't be right or wrong in such choices; as the ancient maxim reminds us, "De gustibus non disputandum est." Upping the stakes a bit, we encounter myriad everyday disputes: Shall we invest the IRA in stocks or in bonds? Is midnight too late for a 16 year-old's curfew? Was the receiver out of bounds when he caught the touchdown pass? People of good faith, looking at the same situation, come to different conclusions, and we have a reliable stock of practices to resolve the differences, e.g. consulting advisors, negotiation, instant replay. No guarantee of success is offered for most of these practices other than the practical one: we often succeed in resolving such conflicts, and so it's at least worth a try.

Some disputes are not so easily resolved, such as bargaining between labor and management, passing budget legislation, and carving up the assets in a hotly contested divorce. Appeals to shared standards and interests may not be enough to

overcome the simple fact that resolution requires someone – perhaps everyone – to lose something they hold dear. Such negotiations can be bitter, drawn out and in the end unsatisfying to all parties – but typically negotiations *do* end, and everyone makes the best of the world they now find themselves in.

But not all disputes can be resolved. Some differences appear intractable, in that none of our known ways of resolving them work, no matter how long or hard we try.

Consider:

- Islamic fighters in Pakistan routinely strap on vests filled with high explosives and detonate them in crowded places, killing themselves and as many others as possible. Sometimes these are strategic targets, resulting in military, police or American casualties; other times the target seems to be random. Western journalists call them "suicide bombers" or "terrorists"; their cohort calls them "jihadists" or "martyrs". Like the terms used to describe the events, the gulf of mutual incomprehension between the two groups could hardly be wider. They literally, essentially, make no sense to each other. There are no apparent first moves to begin to bridge the gap.

- "Evolutionary psychologists" like Richard Dawkins insist that science allows no place for a "creator" or "designer" of nature. Instead they offer an elegant view of evolutionary algorithms which provide for "design without a designer". This view has become so prevalent in Western intellectual circles that questioning it invites being dismissed as naïve or ignorant, but few spiritual leaders or people of faith take it seriously. It is literally nonsense to people for whom God or "the Creator" is real, just as the idea of "creation" is nonsense to evolutionary psychologists. Unlike the jihadist/terrorist dispute, both sides here typically believe that they understand the other's point of view. They simply, often disdainfully, reject it.

- Teachers, principals and School Board members were terminally deadlocked over an extremely thorny curriculum issue, with three absolutely incompatible views on what to do. Each group was asked one last question: "What makes your solution the right solution?" All three groups responded without hesitation: "It best serves our customers" (this district used a briskly business-like way of talking where all agreed that the school's "mission" was to "serve the customers"). All three groups were right, because all three had *different* "customers" in mind. For the teachers, the ultimate customers were the students; the ultimate customer for the principals were the state and district administrators who set policy and guidelines; and the School Board members took as their ultimate customers the parents and local taxpayers who ultimately paid everyone's salaries. With such diverse "customers", the best curriculum looked very different to the three groups. As one observer remarked, they might as well have been living in three different worlds.

- Kyle is a 15-year-old student whose parents have just discovered he is selling marijuana to his friends. His father, a policeman from a family of policemen, knows exactly what to do – the boy needs a wake-up call from the criminal justice system. He has seen too many boys escalate from dealer to career criminal. Kyle's mother, a social worker from a family of teachers and therapists, is horrified at the thought of turning her own son in, even if he does get off with juvenile detention – she has seen too many young men who have been permanently scarred by "juvie". She insists on taking Kyle to family counseling and working out a behavioral contract to keep him out of further trouble. Both parents are adamant in opposing the other's plan; each sees the other as being rigid and out of touch with the real world.

One could cite myriad other examples, but let these four stand for the whole. This paper intends to offer an extended exploration of intractable value problems. We will suggest that:

- These value problems are at core intractable problems of significance.
- Such problems are not the rare exception; they are inherent and pervasive.
- Participants in such disputes literally live in significantly different worlds.
- What ultimately keeps these worlds apart is what ultimately holds each one together.

We begin by elaborating the concept of "worlds".

Worlds

We customarily think of "the real world" as singular and existing independently of any view of it. This is one reason why intractable value problems are so baffling: We take it that, in the real world, when we carefully determine the facts of a matter and assess them correctly we can see what is so and what to do about it. Disputes in this view are a matter of someone missing a relevant fact or two, or giving too much or too little weight to the facts at hand. It can be tricky to negotiate differences like this, but we generally know how to do it because we've seen it done.

But one of the great and useful insights of Descriptive Psychology is that this common "one-and-only-one real world" idea is a very partial view. You can't do justice to the reality of persons and behavior within it, any more than you could do justice to the motions of planets within a view that puts the earth at the center of the universe. To understand intractable value problems we must abandon the comforting view that "we all live in the same world" in favor of the more complex recognition that, in reality, people can and often do live in different worlds – *literally*, in different worlds. Within their worlds, their circumstances and behavior make sense; across worlds, they may make no sense at all.

This is a breath-taking assertion which, without extensive elaboration, might reasonably be dismissed out-of-hand. Fortunately, such elaboration has been accomplished (Ossorio, 2006, Roberts, 2009a), most recently in my paper in this volume "At a Glance and Out of Nowhere: How Ordinary People Create the Real

World" (Putman, 2013a). Rather than repeat that material here, we will instead take it as given and build upon it. (See also "Person and Worlds", below.)

To reiterate: People live and act within their real world, where their actions make sense. Some of these actions may not make sense to other people who are acting in their own, different, world, and this can lead to intractable disputes.

"OK. So you're saying everyone has his or her own 'real world' which differs from everyone else's. The classic term for that is solipsism. And since it's my private world there's just my word for what it's about, right?"

No, but the point is well taken. This would be just solipsism rebottled but for one thing: worlds are not essentially individual matters. A world requires a community, a community is made up of members (note the plural) and to act in that world in a way that makes sense requires a person to be a member of that community.

The remainder of this paper articulates the conceptual connections required to flesh out this bald assertion, and then uses them to shed new light on intractable value problems.

World and Descriptive Psychology

Descriptive Psychology is essentially one big concept – the Person concept, as it is most frequently named – in which all the component concepts are connected in highly complex ways. (Some prefer to call this a conceptual network; it doesn't matter how we refer to it so long as we keep in mind the complex connections and the fact that it is all of one piece.) To articulate individually the concepts of person, behavior, world and community requires the use of all these concepts (and others as well); much of the canonical literature of Descriptive Psychology consists of such articulation. A complete and canonical articulation of the Person concept and its constituent concepts can be found in Ossorio's final magnum opus, *The Behavior of Persons* (Ossorio, 2006).

For example: "A Person is an individual whose history is, paradigmatically, a history of Deliberate Action …" (Ossorio, 2006, p. 69). The concept of behavior (Deliberate Action) here has a central place in articulating the concept of Person. In the Intentional Action paradigm – Descriptive Psychology's canonical articulation of the concept of behavior – one of the constituent parameters is "PC" – the Personal Characteristics of the person engaging in the action. Here the concept of Person has a central place in articulating the concept of behavior. Without the concepts of behavior, community and world, the concept of person is hopelessly incomplete – and so it goes, with each of these concepts. They are not merely connected; they are radically, inextricably, *reflexively* connected in a singular whole. Keeping this in mind is one of the keys to working with Descriptive Psychology.

World and Community

Community is an inherent part of Descriptive Psychology's conceptual network and has been from its beginning, as witness Peter G. Ossorio's use of "social practices" in his landmark first book, *Persons* (Ossorio, 1966/1995). The paradigm of Community was first articulated in "Communities" (Putman, 1981), expanded

and built upon in "A Multi-Cultural Psychology" (Ossorio, 1982/1983) and refined in many subsequent applications, e.g. Orvik, 1985; Orvik, 1990; Putman, 1990; Putman, 1998; Peek & Heinrich, 2006.

Again from the beginning, Peter Ossorio acted on a firm commitment to use ordinary language in his formulations – he was a mortal foe of made-up technical language when it came to talking about persons – while not being slavishly limited to all the connotations of these terms. Conceptual articulation usually reveals the need for ignoring some common usages of a term while highlighting others, in order to make the conceptual essence clear and readily available. Thus, like many of our core concepts, "Community" has a specific meaning and usage in Descriptive Psychology, which largely parallels common language usage but differs in some important details.

For instance, "community" in common usage refers to a specific geographical location in which its members live and tend to their affairs. This geographical specificity is explicitly *not* part of the paradigm of Community. In articulating the paradigm case of Community, Descriptive Psychologists stand mute on geography – the Community may or may not be associated with a specifiable location – and that is the concept used throughout this paper. (See Note 1.)

Fortunately, we don't have to review all of Descriptive Psychology in order to proceed with our task. The important essence of this prior work on Community can be readily seen. In his book of behavioral maxims, *Place,* Peter Ossorio pithily summarized some key connections regarding Community and World:

> A1: A person requires a world in order to have the possibility of engaging in any behavior at all.
> A9: A person takes the world to be as he has found it to be.
> D11: The world is subject to reformulation by persons.
> E1: A person requires a community in order for it to be possible for him to engage in human behavior at all.
> E3: A community is characterized by a common world, a language, a structure of social practices, statuses, way of living, choice principles and individual members.
> E4: A person's place in the community provides reasons and opportunities to engage in one behavior rather than another.
> E5: To engage in a deliberate action is to participate in a social practice of the community.
> F1: The behavior of one person with respect to another is a participation in [at least one of] the social practices of his community.
> H3: A person's world is made up of possibilities and non-possibilities for acting.
> H5a. Status takes precedence over fact.
> I9: If a person engages in an intrinsic social practice, that calls for no further explanation. (Ossorio, 1982/1998/2012, pp. 11-19)

One is tempted to say: QED.

But rich as the above is, our inquiry into intractable value problems requires additional pieces of the Descriptive Psychology canon, along with some new custom-built conceptual articulations. I do not intend to elaborate here on Ossorio's maxims (he does that himself in *Place*) but rather I will use the concepts as articulated, referencing them as seems useful. My intent in this paper is not mainly scholarly, but creative.

Person and Communities

The conceptual and pragmatic links between person and community are articulated within Descriptive Psychology in distinctive and powerful ways – distinctive, in that they are found only partially if at all in other approaches to behavioral science, and powerful in that they enable us to make clear sense of observable facts that are otherwise obscure or puzzling. Here is something close to a mere recital of those links, which we will use in the present endeavor.

1. E1: A person requires a community in order for it to be possible for him to engage in human behavior at all.
2. E5: To engage in a deliberate action is to participate in a social practice of the community.
3. Members of a community participate in its social practices.
4. Participation means the person knows and shares the intrinsic value of the social practice, by contrast with merely going through the motions.
5. A member – and only a member – participates as "one of us".
6. The core practices of a community are participated in by every member; indeed, that is the main way by which persons demonstrate they are "one of us".
7. The significance of a person's behavior is "what he is doing by doing that." In every case this includes participating in a community's social practices (E5); thus the significance of a person's behavior always includes "acting as one of us." In some cases this is a relatively unimportant fact regarding the behavior; in the case of core practices, it is an essential fact.
8. Satisfaction accompanies participation. Without the one you do not have the other.
9. Thus, satisfaction accompanies significance.
10. A person participates in a social practice *as* a member of a community. Paradigmatically he also participates *as* one of the statuses available to him in that community.
11. A person is conscious *as* whatever status he acts as. What he sees in the world around him, in particular what he sees as possibilities and non-possibilities for acting, differs according to his status. ("When a thief looks at a saint, he sees pockets.")
12. What a person is conscious *of* depends largely on what he is conscious

as. To expand a bit: Being a banker, I am conscious *as* a banker. I look for opportunities to do what a banker does; I pay particular attention to those states of affairs of interest to a banker; I appraise and respond to a situation in one of the ways a banker does. As the third baseman on our softball team, I am conscious of a very different set of things because I am conscious *as* a third baseman – not as a banker. This is an ordinary, everyday fact about persons: what we are conscious *of* depends largely on who we are conscious *as*, and this changes routinely and dramatically as we change who we are in which community.

World and Ultimates

A community has a shared, specific view of the world. Our world is a world in which … (fill in the blank) – the spontaneous creation of art is the only worthwhile occupation; the spirit of God manifests in every particular; we make automobiles which are accessible to the masses instead of just to the rich; we recreate as closely as possible the life and times of medieval Europe without the nasty bits; etc. *ad infinitum*. It is easy to talk about the world as being a particular way; what makes a group of people a community is that these people actually *see* the world this way and succeed in treating it that way. Thus, they share this view of the world; they have ways of talking about their world in which they can make the relevant distinctions; they have shared practices, ways of treating the world and each other, that are cases of acting upon their view of the world; and they choose to participate in these practices with no further end in mind. (An elaboration of these points can be found in Putman, 1980 and Putman, 1998).

Note that it is not necessary for members to be capable of *articulating* the community's view of the world; it is only necessary that they be competent in seeing the world as we see it, and acting accordingly. Comparably, while a baseball player must act in accord with the rules of the game, he does not need to articulate how he swings the bat (in fact, trying to do so is a known way to lower your batting average); he just needs to be competent in hitting the ball. Or as Ossorio pointed out, a native speaker knows how to speak grammatically without also being able to articulate the rules of grammar. (Ossorio, 2006).

What distinguishes one world from another fundamentally are the ultimates of that world. Formally, each world is comprised of ultimate objects, processes, events, states-of-affairs and relationships (Ossorio, 1971/1975/1978/2005), although we frequently allow the ultimate object to stand in for them all in discourse. Thus, the ultimate objects in the chess community are pawns, rooks, etc; in behavioral science, persons; in physics, muons, bosons and other "zilch particles" as Ossorio once jokingly termed them; in accounting, numbers; in traditional economics, "utility-maximizing agents." These are ultimates in their communities not because they posses some transcendent quality, but simply because in that community no further breakdown into more basic objects can occur. A pawn arguably is made up of zilch particles, but that's physics, not chess. For chess players, the pieces are ultimate objects.

Ultimate objects are used in ultimate processes and stand in ultimate relationship to other objects in ultimate states-of-affairs. All of this fits together in a particular and distinctive way – a kind of logic – which is known to members and is part of their competence in participating in the community's practices. (These conceptual connections are extensively elaborated in canonical Descriptive Psychology papers, including Putman, 1990 and Peek & Heinrich, 2006)

As we shall see, some additional ultimates are required to understand what holds worlds together.

Person and Worlds

A person as Observer/Critic has knowledge of a publicly shared, describable, negotiable world within which his actions take place. As Actor, a person knows a very different world, described at length by Ossorio as follows:

> As an Actor I see the real world as a field of action, as the domain within which I live my life. In it are givens and possibilities, opportunities and non-opportunities, hindrances and facilitations for behavior. In it are reasons for acting one way or another. I am sensitized to behaviors that are available and ways of being that are available. There is no question of who or what I am – I am *me*. There is no question of my inclinations and proclivities; I do not need to *know* what they are, although I often do – what is primary is that I *have* them, and my having them is not something different from being me. In particular, they are not peculiar entities or forces that *cause* me to do what I do. Ideas come – I do not send for them nor do I receive them as information. Theories come. Visions and inklings of the future come, and their coming is not something different from *being* me. All of this is embedded in my actions and in the short term and long term structures of action and being that I compose, sometimes ad lib, sometimes without realizing it until later, and sometimes upon casual or serious reflection. (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 254)

Actor's world and Actor's knowing are at the heart of understanding world collision and the intractable problems that arise from them.

Descriptive Psychology's complex articulation of the conceptual connections among "person" and world can be summed up in two statements:

1. A person exists within the real world.
2. The real world exists within a person.

The first, to just about anyone, is inarguably true, an almost trivial statement of the fundamental reality of the real world. The second, to very many, may seem to be mystical nonsense or actual psychosis.

Both statements are equally true. Both are required to understand persons and the world. But they differ in one important respect: "within" does not mean the same thing in both statements.

The first "within" is a space-time-location relationship – person and world as

physical objects. The second "within" is a conceptual-formal-behavioral relationship: the world as stage or Dramaturgical pattern, constructed from the elements at hand by the person as Actor. [See Note 3.]

These two statements will be useful to bear in mind as we examine how persons, in communities, create and inhabit their worlds.

Making Sense

The world makes sense, and so do people.

This is the first of four slogans [See Note 2] offered by Peter Ossorio in 1985 "to portray the spirit in which the initial work of Descriptive Psychology was undertaken …". He reminded readers that "slogans are apt for saying what you live by, and .. that is quite different from saying what you happen to believe or what happens to be true." (Ossorio, 2006 p. 2) As slogans go, these four have stood the test of time; Descriptive Psychologists have productively lived by them for the past fifty years.

But over those fifty years Descriptive Psychology has grown, expanding its work and conceptual scope, such that a variation of this slogan is both appropriate and useful to orient us to the present work:

Worlds make sense, and each world makes sense in its own particular way.

I want to be clear that this in no way conflicts with Ossorio's original slogan. Ossorio referred to "the world", which in a different context he called "the state-of-affairs that includes all states-of-affairs". (Ossorio, 1971/1975/1978/2005). Ossorio's "the world" is a formal, totality concept; it includes all other worlds, explicitly all worlds within which persons participate in social practices, that is, the worlds of communities.

Putting together some of the conceptual background referenced above, a key insight emerges: to the person as Actor the world in which she is acting is the world of the community within which her participation takes place. This is true of every action by every person. Explicitly, there are no actual privileged persons who can act within "the totality world" by contrast with merely acting within the world of a community. With this in mind, we can see that Ossorio's original slogan covers the present case as well, so long as we remember that "the world" being referred to is now understood to be the world of a specific community. [See also Note 3].

In short, the world makes sense and so do people, both formally and behaviorally.

So what does it mean to say, "the world makes sense?" Initially we can simply point to the observable "clustering" of social practices; as Ossorio pointed out, it's not like a cafeteria line of behaviors, where you go through and pick out whatever you like. Behaviors – social practices – clearly go together in a manner that is hard to specify. It's not as simple as all practices share certain characteristics, or each derives from a small set of organizing principles; while we can often find some regularities of that sort, they are notoriously incomplete "stereotypical" outsider's view.

Worlds make sense, not analytically as known by the Observer/Critic, but rather behaviorally, as experienced by the Actor. It's an inside job, so to speak. You

have to be, and participate as, one of us to actually know how our world makes sense. It is Actor knowing rather than Observer knowledge. As Actor knowing, it is direct, first-hand and produced by the Actor as author.

In other words, the sense the world makes is not inferred or believed by the Actor. It is created and maintained on the fly by someone who knows what it means for something to be part of our world. And again, that "knows what it means" is not Observer's knowledge; it is Actor's competence.

So the world makes sense because it is created to make sense by a competent member of the community whose world it is.

Since "a person requires a world in order to have the possibility of engaging in any behavior at all" [A1] and the person creates that world on-the-fly, we will not be surprised to find that direct, first-hand knowing is required to bring it off. An important type of direct, first-hand knowing is feeling (Actor's knowledge of relationship), and in the core feeling of ultimate satisfaction we will find a clear path to understanding (and perhaps resolving) intractable value problems.

Let's take an extended look at ultimate satisfaction.

Beyond Beauty and Elegance

A confession: I am a recovering mathaholic, in recovery from addiction to elegance.

It began when I was 16, at a summer National Science Foundation program for high-school students. One day I was working through the proof that the infinite set of real numbers is larger than the infinite set of integers. The proof builds and builds through logical steps until – all at once, in a single move – it all comes together into a single irrefutable whole. The conclusion was not only true, it was profoundly, *necessarily* true. Words fail in describing the almost ecstatic *rush* of joy that accompanied that insight. It was just so beautiful, so … *elegant*!

That was my first taste, but it soon became a requirement – more insight! More elegance! I plowed through every university math course I could find; I began to mainline pure math, starting with rings and fields and moving on to the most abstract algebras. This went on until I got a wake-up call: I had two years to go in University and I had already taken all the math courses I could count toward graduation. I could feed my habit a little, but most of my time had to be spent studying … things that aren't so elegant. Slowly I began to taper off: I still loved elegance, but I no longer *needed* it. That began a long journey that continues to this day; as any addict knows, one is always recover*ing*, never recovered. The deeply satisfying rush attendant on *getting* a beautiful proof never goes away.

What I am referring to is a profoundly real aspect of the world of mathematicians which in fact is at the core of being "one of us": a real mathematician gets profound aesthetic satisfaction from insights that accompany the best mathematical work. The word used to describe this is "elegance"; the famous 20th century mathematician Paul Erdos referred to it as "reading from the book of God" and it is not clear that he meant that purely as metaphor (Shechter, 2000). It is how mathematicians recognize real math. Mathematics without elegance is just computation;

useful, sure, but not what it's all about.

If you are not a mathematician, most of what I have written here will likely be incomprehensible to you – unless you've experienced it yourself, it's virtually impossible to credit the power of the direct experience of elegance. I hope the mathematicians reading this got at least a chuckle of recognition in the tongue-in-cheek dramatic presentation.

Now, let's put aside the metaphor and use Descriptive Psychology's conceptual network to say directly what all this means.

Again recall [A1]: "A person requires a world in order to have the possibility of engaging in any behavior at all." This is a strong statement. Couple it with "a person is an individual whose life is, paradigmatically, a history of Deliberate Action in a Dramaturgical pattern" (Ossorio, 2013, p. 69) and we see that a person requires a world in order to have the possibility of *being a person*. If we were to make a list of the basic human needs, the need for a world would have to be very near the top.

Accordingly, a person must recognize a world that makes sense and how it makes sense. This is an essential human competence. But that "sense" is not somehow inherent in the objective make-up of the world; it is created by members of communities and embodied in their practices. It has to do with how the ultimate objects, processes and states-of-affairs of that world fit together into a coherent whole.

That the world makes sense, in just the way it does, is inherent in participation in a community's core practices. *How* the world makes sense is recognized directly as first-hand, Actor's knowing. And since it is so essential to the person, the recognition takes the form of a strong feeling with a built-in appraisal, much like fear, the recognition of immediate danger that comes as a strong feeling with a built-in appraisal. We can refer to this feeling – the direct recognition that the world makes sense in just the way it does make sense – as "ultimate satisfaction".

Why "ultimate satisfaction"? Two reasons: (1) As illustrated in the elegance and mathematics example above, the experience is in fact deeply satisfying, and is the sort of thing one seeks opportunities to experience. (2) More technically, ultimate satisfaction arises from participating in a community practice which *requires* acting on the way the world makes sense. Not all community practices are of this sort; indeed, practices that directly involve how the world makes sense are a special set, which we could call "ultimate practices". These are practices that affirm the community's world. Satisfaction accompanies participation; ultimate satisfaction accompanies participation in ultimate practices.

By way of illustration, let's take a closer look at my initiation into the world of mathematics at age 16. What was I doing?

- A mere description is: I was reading a proof in a math book.
- The proof had been recommended to me by a professor in the program, so one thing I was doing by reading the proof was being an apprentice mathematician, one of the known ways to become "one of us".

- By reading the proof I was not just grasping the meaning of the words; I was *checking* the proof of the theorem. One could read each step of the proof and believe it, but that's just "going through the motions"; actually *participating* in the practice requires more. Specifically, I mentally tested each assertion to determine that is was true and that each conclusion in fact followed from what had already been established. These judgments were not "built-into" the proof; I had to see them myself. This – checking theorems – is a core practice of mathematicians, and it depends on the person's competence with how math makes sense.
- The proof of the theorem came with the final statement, when I recognized the irrefutability of the entire proof. That recognition – experienced as a flash of insight when it all came together – was deeply, almost ecstatically satisfying. It was the ultimate satisfaction of a mathematician participating in an ultimate practice.

To summarize: The term "elegance" is commonly used to refer to the ultimate satisfaction of mathematics – the direct experience of the sense mathematics makes. To experience elegance requires participating in a math practice that involves acting on the way the math world makes sense (for example, proving theorems). Participation in math practices does not always evoke ultimate satisfaction (otherwise mathematicians would go around in a perpetual swoon of elegance), but that does not change the fact that the math world always makes sense in just the way it does make sense, to those who are competent to recognize it, i.e. mathematicians.

Now: What is true of the community of mathematicians is true of every community. Drop the specific experience of "elegance" and what remains is this:

- Every community has a shared world that makes sense to its members. The sense it makes is particular to each community's world. This "making sense" is inherent in participation in the community's core practices.
- Every community has a set of ultimate practices, participation in which affirms their world and is accompanied by ultimate satisfaction.
- Ultimate satisfaction is a strong basic human need. Persons are powerfully, inherently motivated to seek it. (See Note 4).
- The specific experience of ultimate satisfaction differs from community to community. Its importance to maintaining the community and its world does not.

In short: ultimate satisfaction holds the world together.

It is also what keeps worlds apart. Let us return to our original examples of intractable value problems to see how this works.

Making Sense of "Senseless" Acts

A young Pakistani man straps high explosives to his body, goes into a public place and detonates the bomb, killing himself and many others. In the American English-language media in the 21st century, the act is reported as "a senseless terrorist act by a suicide bomber." As readers of that media report, we can make up a story about his desperate situation and real motives, but we're just making it up and, if

honest, we admit it's not convincing – to us his act *is* senseless. What is he, nuts? We do not see the ultimate significance of his act let alone appreciate his ultimate satisfaction in performing it.

But as Descriptive Psychologists we take it as given that, in fact, the act makes sense in the world of the bomber and to the bomber himself. And the fact it seems senseless to us is a strong clue that we are dealing with a person in a community whose world is ultimately different from ours. Let's use what we know to unpack that difference and see where it leads us.

We start from a mere description of the act: he detonated a bomb in a public place, killing himself and many others. We have no reason to believe he didn't know what he was doing, so we take it that he intended to detonate the bomb and to kill himself and others. What we need to understand is what was the significance of the act: What was he doing by doing that?

(Let me be clear that I can answer that question with some confidence as a member of a community served by the media; I can speak as an insider, as "one of us" as can all readers of this paper. I can attempt to answer it from the point-of-view of the bomber's community, but this is at best informed speculation: I am not a member of the jihadist community and do not claim to speak with the authority of an insider. This is not an uncommon situation when dealing with intractable value problems. In the following whenever I say "In his world …" assume that to be short for "In his world, as best I understand it …"; "our world" refers to the world shared by consumers of English-language media in the 21st century.)

The media answer is: he was committing suicide and murdering innocent people. To most of us this just seems to be a straightforward elaboration of the initial description – of course that's what he was doing, what's your point? In the bomber's world, characterizing what he did as suicide would seem both insulting and demeaning of the central point of his act. In his world, what he was doing by detonating the bomb was sacrificing himself, and that's not just a semantic difference – it is a profound difference.

In our world, the individual person is an ultimate object, and living one's life an ultimate process. Our world does not require or readily allow for something more fundamental. A person living his life in his own way is not typically remarkable to us – that's what people do, after all. To kill yourself is an ultimate violation in our world; only under very special circumstances, like insanity or a painful fatal disease, can we understand it at all. It's senseless.

In the bomber's world, Allah is the ultimate object, and a person has meaning only in relationship to Allah. The ultimate process is service to Allah; the details of one's personal life are just details, not fundamentally important. Participating in ultimate practices of this community, affirming its world, is a matter of acting in service to Allah; the ultimate satisfaction that accompanies this participation can be described as "righteousness". This is not the much-maligned "self-righteousness" of our world; it is the powerful experience that accompanies faithfully serving Allah, and it is as strong and compelling to the faithful as elegance is to mathematicians.

Here we see two different worlds, looking at each other in mutual incomprehension. This is often framed as a values conflict; our commentators say "They just don't value individual life the way we do". The jihadists find such statements deeply offensive and wrong-headed. Of course they value individual life, greatly, but life isn't worth living when it is bereft of righteousness; Allah, not the individual person, is ultimate. Thus, what seems initially as an intractable values conflict is seen as something even more fundamental: a collision between two different worlds.

And what of those innocent murdered bystanders? In our world, where the ultimate process is individual action, anything that happens to a person is either the result of someone's intentional act, or a matter of random chance. Those bystanders had done nothing to "deserve" their death in the bomb blast; thus they are innocent, the victims of both the bomber and sheer bad luck.

To the jihadist, everything happens through the will of Allah. Everyone dies, and the time and manner of death is determined by Allah, not by a person or chance. The bomber was merely a servant, carrying out Allah's will; everyone died in their appropriate place and manner. Especially if they were among the faithful, their deaths call, not for mourning, but for rejoicing, and the bomber goes out in a state of ultimate, righteous satisfaction.

One final issue: Where did the bomber get the idea that the way to serve Allah was to strap on a bomb and detonate it in a public place? Answering this requires a great deal more insight into the jihadist's world than I have. It is certainly possible, as members of other Islamic communities have suggested, that these bombers are wrong about their act being service to Allah. It is well known that mathematicians sometimes experience the ultimate satisfaction of an elegant proof, only to find later that they missed a step and the theorem was not proved after all. This does not mean ultimate satisfaction is an illusion or the world does not in fact make sense; it just means that, sometimes, we are wrong. That's also an inherent part of being a person.

When Science Meets Enlightenment

Some communities have a shared world that includes an ultimate creator; others do not. This significant difference shows up in many important ways when such worlds collide, as we noticed in the jihadist discussion above. The difference is especially problematic in the collision between the scientific world and spiritual world. (I use the term 'spiritual' as a content-neutral reference to communities whose world includes an ultimate creator.)

The World of Science

That the scientific collides with the spiritual world is not surprising, of course. Science as a community began centuries ago as an explicit rejection of explanations that make sense of the world by saying, essentially: "It's this way because that's how God made it." The scientific enterprise set out to make sense of the world by making careful observations of what there is in the world and giving formulations of how things work. These formulations were *required* to fit together without the need for external support. From the beginning and by intent, science has had no need

or place for a supreme being; indeed, any explanation that invoked a supreme be-ing was properly rejected out-of-hand as "unscientific" (i.e. not an explanation that counts as such in the world of science.)

In science things fit together, not just on the surface or in any old way, but in a rigorous way that reveals a deeper structure if you have the eyes to see it, that is, if you are a scientist. Seeing how the world makes sense in this way is deeply aes-thetically satisfying to scientists; indeed, it is the ultimate satisfaction that affirms the world of science to scientists. In these ways the community of science is exactly like every other community: Its members share a world in which the ultimates fit together in a way that is discernible to anyone who actually participates in its prac-tices, and which is deeply, ultimately satisfying.

Science is like other communities in another important way: Scientists see their world as *the* world. Scientists acknowledge that others may not share their view, but they take this as evidence that those others are *wrong* (misguided, mis-informed, primitive, uneducated, stupid, delusional, too weak to face reality with-out the crutch of faith – as it turns out, "wrong" comes in a remarkable variety of flavors.) To be clear, again, this is not specific to the scientific community; *every* community sees their world as *the* world. For example, spiritual communities take the scientist's view as wrong (misinformed, egocentric, arrogant, faithless, impov-erished, ignorant, naïve, childish, pitiful for their obvious lack of spiritual experi-ence.) I wish I could say I was exaggerating the matter here for effect; in fact, a brief glance at internet sites regarding science and religion will reveal that I am, if anything, understating it. We are talking about people's *world* here, and people will do whatever it takes to defend and preserve their world.

For centuries science and spiritual communities lived together in a more or less uneasy accord but that has shifted in recent decades. The world of scientists has arguably become the *de facto* official world of English-language media in the 21st century, as witness the daily reports of how scientific experiments explain what's really going on with (fill in the blank). And this is not some quirk of the media; we consumers of these reports do, in a certain sense, share in the view. We feel that we have a better insight into some matter because we have an account that makes sense of it in scientific terms.

This remarkable success in promulgating the scientific worldview has lead some scientists to rather imperious behavior. Their claim is not just that science does a great job of making sense of the world; they assert that the scientific view is the *only* valid view. Any view that conflicts with or contradicts the scientific is at best outdated, at worst pernicious. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins is among the more blatant examples of this. His books, including the archly-titled *The God Delusion* (Dawkins, 2006) assert that complex structure emerges from the natural operation of specifiable rules ("algorithms") such as evolution; science has no place for an "intelligent designer." (Of course it doesn't; that was built into sci-ence at its core from the beginning.)

At this point a sort of "science-lite" is well-established as a *de facto* worldview – all the scientific results and the reassuring awareness that the world makes sense, without all the hard bits like actual math or experimental design. In that sense scientists today ironically serve essentially the same function as the priests they set out to displace centuries ago: speaking to us the truth that is known to them but to which we do not have access directly. (That's OK; they are trusted sources and we take their world for it. More on this crucial point later.) As a result science has the "home-field" advantage in any contest with other communities; we may not all participate in the scientific world (only actual scientists do that) but we are knowledgeable observers of that world and it makes reassuring sense to us. If we are to get traction in understanding the science vs. spiritual conflict we need a good insider's account of their world from people who participate as members of spiritual communities. For most of us, this is unfamiliar territory.

But where shall we find these spiritual insiders? We might be inclined to look in a lamasery in Tibet, or among monks on Mt. Athos for spirituality in a "pure" form, but that is neither necessary nor useful. Most of us find such "exotic" testimony fascinating, but very difficult to relate to our own world. If we are to come to a useful understanding of the spiritual world and what holds it together, we need to look closer to home, for people like us who are also insiders in a spiritual community. Fortunately, in 21st century America such people are relatively easy to find if you know where to look – and some of them are, perhaps astonishingly, also full-fledged scientists! (How they bring this off is addressed in "Good Cop Bad Dad" later in this paper; for now let it suffice to note that they thrive and are adept within both worlds.)

What follows is my report and reconstruction of the world of an actual spiritual community, as shared with me by some of its members. I checked the report with members of another, different spiritual community; although there were, as expected, differences in terminology and practice, the second community confirmed that the ultimates, as reported here, are the same. To protect their privacy the identity of these communities and individuals is concealed.

The World of Satchitananda

Eastern spiritual traditions talk about – and their practitioners report experiencing – an ultimate experience that accompanies the direct recognition of the Truth. A commonly used word that refers to that experience is "bliss" ("ananda" in ancient Sanskrit) and it is said to be incomparably ecstatic. This bliss is held to be inherent in all things, times and places. The spiritual practitioner experiences it in a flash of insight in which the Truth of the universe – how the world and everything in it holds together – is revealed. This is the ultimate satisfaction that accompanies participation in spiritual practices of an actual spiritual community.

As a mathematician I am struck by the similarity between the description of the experience of "bliss" and my own experience of elegance. Both initially accompany a flash of insight, in which important truth is revealed. Both are powerful, even ecstatic experiences, that seem somehow inherent and a matter of recognition

– the truth was there all along, but I just now saw it and it's beautiful! Once experienced, both can be intentionally sought and experienced again, and one is strongly motivated to do so. I am not suggesting that elegance and bliss are the same (neither am I asserting they are not); just that, given the ultimates of their respective worlds, both mathematicians and spiritual practitioners experience ultimate satisfaction. (As Mary Roberts points out in her canonical paper "Worlds of Uncertain Status", so do Descriptive Psychologists. Her delightful term is "pattern bliss – the thrill of recognizing a pattern and its real world applicability." (Roberts, 2009b, p. 301.))

What are the ultimates of this spiritual world? They are encoded in an ancient Sanskrit word: *satchitananda*, which among other usages commonly refers to the ultimate creator. This is actually three words together: sat, which means being; chit, which means consciousness; and ananda, which means bliss. Roughly (always bearing in mind the slippage inherent in translating fundamental concepts between languages) these can be seen as the ultimate object (sat), ultimate process (chit) and ultimate satisfaction (ananda) of the world of the spiritual community. (In a prior paper I offered some speculations about how these concepts might connect to some core Descriptive Psychology concepts (Putman, 1998); in this paper I intend as best I can to take them at face value as used in the spiritual communities.)

All the above is Observer talk about the community – what is said by them or about them. This only gets us so far and it's not nearly far enough. An engineer friend of mine commonly dismisses such talk out-of-hand as "that Zen bullshit" and his response, while perhaps extreme, is not uncommon. None of this talk refers to anything at all that we ourselves have experienced; it might as well be from a fantasy novel for all the connection it has to our world. We need to experience it for ourselves; failing that, we need to hear accounts of the actual experience from credible sources, people like us who have had these experiences and can tell us about it.

I have heard from a large number of spiritual practitioners about their experience. I know some of these people personally and I have no reason to believe what they say is anything other than the truth of their lives as best they can tell it. Here, from some such accounts:

- Is "bliss'" just a metaphor, or an aspiration – something promised and strived for but never attained? Literally hundreds of people have told me that they have personally had direct experiences of bliss, and many say it has become a reliable part of their day-to-day life.
- But is "bliss" all it's cracked up to be? Overwhelmingly they report their experience of bliss to be ecstatic – "it far exceeds even my wildest fantasy of what it would be like" is a common remark – and say it is incomparable. A few made a point of remarking that they were experienced with LSD and other psychedelics. Some said that "bliss" is like the best LSD high they ever had; others say there is simply no comparison, bliss being incomparably greater.
- Is "bliss" a one-time thing that leaves you "enlightened"? No, and no. The large majority report that, like elegance, once you experience bliss you are

motivated to experience it again and to make it a part of your on-going life. Many say this is an on-going process, even a struggle, and evolves over time; they mostly just laugh at the idea that they are enlightened – often accompanied by "Whatever *that* means!"

- What's it like to experience bliss on a regular basis? Accounts of this are as varied as the lives and people reporting on them. Let's close this section with a verbatim report from one person I know well who has been participating in the spiritual practices of her community for over 40 years:

"Years ago I heard a great teacher say: 'You can see the light anytime you like.' I decided to take that, not as an aspiration or mere teaching, but as a personal gift from someone capable of bestowing it. I contemplated this, and as I did the world around me began to change very subtly but powerfully. As I looked around me I literally saw light shining through everything; the table and chairs and my tea cup and the trees – *everything* appeared to be covered with the thinnest of skins, barely containing this light, this luminous energy of which they were made. As I saw the light, my heart was filled with pulsing, ecstatic joy and I was aware that I was directly experiencing the truth of the world; it is Satchitananda – being, consciousness and bliss.

"The best part is that the teacher did not just say 'you can see the light'; she said 'you can see the light *anytime you like*'! To this day all I have to do is remember "The light!" and I once again am immersed in that experience of light and bliss. I do this frequently. I have learned to dial the experience back, so to speak, so that it's not always so overwhelming, but that's my choice; I can also experience satchitananda in its fullness any time I like."

The intent of this account is *not* to persuade or convince anyone that the spiritual world is real, but rather to give readers good reason to conclude that communities exist in which the spiritual world *is* real to its participants, as real to them as the world of science is to scientists. Our purpose here is not to declare a winner; it is to make clear how and why the notion of "winner" in these cases simply does not apply. Worlds coexist (literally) and sometimes collide. If we are to gain any traction in understanding and resolving these collisions, we are well served to see how the world makes sense in *both* communities rather than declaring one right and the other wrong.

Let's dig a little deeper into the science-spiritual collision as it plays out in our public discourse. Even though it's not fundamentally a matter of determining which world is right, it often looks that way, and that appearance leads to conflict and dead-ends. Science advocates commonly play what they consider to be a trump card in this discourse: Unlike science, spiritual communities are based on faith, which is "belief that is not based on evidence." This statement, as it turns out, relies on unreliable usages of the concepts of belief, faith and evidence. Descriptive

Psychologists follow a careful discipline in using such concepts, which we will find helpful in sorting out these claims.

Beyond Belief and Faith

In developing Descriptive Psychology in the 1960's Peter G. Ossorio found it necessary to deal with a number of "ways of talking" that could not bear the weight of being taken seriously as meaning what it said. Prominent among these was the very popular: "It's all just belief. What you think you know is just *your* belief. I have my own beliefs; we all have our own beliefs, and nobody has any claim to have their beliefs taken more seriously than anyone else's." In other words of the '60's: "Don't lay your trip on me, man!"

This conceptual confounding of knowledge and belief hardly bears a second look; Ossorio just cleaned it up and built from there. But its sibling is still common: "The essential difference between cultures is their beliefs." I take this to be a good-faith effort to articulate something important without the conceptual framework required to do it justice. What differs between cultures is worlds, as we have seen. Let's see more clearly where belief enters into it.

First, let's revisit the conceptual clean-up Ossorio achieved. To do justice to persons and their actions we need *both* concepts, knowledge and belief. (For simplicity I will use the term "knowing" interchangeably here with knowledge; please be advised that they are distinct but related concepts in the Descriptive Psychology lexicon.) For instance, I know that my coffee mug is sitting on my desk just to the right of my keyboard. I see it there; I recognize my own mug; I know I can reach out, pick it up and take a sip. None of this is a matter of belief because I have no actual doubt about it. That doesn't mean I can't be wrong: someone may have slipped in a mug that looks just like mine as a prank; I may suffer a bicep cramp that prevents me from picking it up; I might even be having a brief hallucination of a mug that's not actually there. Unlikely as these might be, they are possible things that happen in the world I live in, but that does not mean I only *believed* my coffee mug was there. I knew it was, and in the case of the prank I was wrong. This is perspicaciously expressed in the first maxim Ossorio articulated: "A person takes it that things are as they seem unless he has reason to believe otherwise."

Back to that coffee: on the other hand, I *believe* that the sip I take will be hot, tasty coffee. I don't know that with practical certainty because I haven't tasted it yet. It might be cold, or yesterday's leftovers or those cut-rate beans a friend gave me. I don't know, and this sort of thing happens often enough that, were you to ask me if I know the coffee is good, I would have to say "Hold on a minute ... (sip) … yeah, good coffee though not quite as hot as I like it." I'm willing to act on my belief, just as I'm willing to act on my knowledge.

Notice that what I believe – that the cup is filled with hot tasty coffee – is in fact something my wife *knows*. As it turns out, on this occasion she has brewed the coffee with good beans, poured herself a small cup, filled my mug and kindly brought it to my office before she left for a meeting. For her there is no actual doubt

about it. She *knows*; I *believe*; and the difference is not in the situation, it is in the person's relationship to the situation.

And that difference matters. Perhaps I look at my coffee mug and see it is filled with an odd-smelling green liquid. My wife knows what it is; she brewed it, tasted it, filled my mug and brought it to me, knowing that in the past I have said I liked yerba mate. But I'm not sure what this stuff is, only that my wife brought it to me. I may believe I will like it, but I don't know, and in this case I'm not willing to act on that belief. I take it back to the kitchen, pour it out and make myself a cup of coffee.

In short, the difference between knowledge and belief is: A person is willing to act on what they know (unless they have stronger reason not to – another maxim.) They may or may not be willing to act on what they believe. Since it is the paradigm case of intentional action, we have no special term for acting on what a person knows; acting on what a person believes is referred to as acting on *faith*. To put it succinctly: a person's action is an act of faith when they *believe*, but do not *know*, how their behavior will turn out. (Again, "know" implies a pragmatic guarantee of success rather than some impossible absolute certainty.)

One more clarification: While it is tempting to distinguish "know" from "believe" on the basis of evidence or direct experience, this is not in fact where the difference lies. What a person knows about the world is largely determined by what trusted sources have told them about it. As Ossorio once pointed out, if a child at age 5 is told by her father that polar bears are dangerous, that becomes part of what she knows about the world, so much so that, with no intervening history of encountering polar bears, should she write down at age 30 everything she knows about polar bears, we can be sure that "dangerous" will be high on the list. To say she knows it rather than believes it is to say it requires no faith on her part to act on it.

With these distinctions in hand, we revisit the worlds of science and spirituality.

Belief and Faith in Science

Belief and faith are obviously important in spiritual communities. Indeed, that fact is often used by science advocates as a degradation: "Our scientific world is based strictly on knowledge and evidence, with no room for faith and belief; their spiritual world is based in faith and belief for which there is no evidence." At this point we can see that such statements are simply wrong on both counts, reflecting the fact that, while physics does a great job of understanding the physical universe, it is woefully ill-equipped to make sense of what people – including scientist people – do.

Let's sort this out.

Belief and faith are central to a spiritual community. Perhaps less obviously, knowledge is also central. For example, knowing what meditation is, how it's done, where and when is a requirement for participating in many spiritual communities. There is no doubt about any of these; they are known by members, not believed. That meditation leads to a state of bliss is, for most members, a belief; they meditate as an act of faith. But for adepts in the community, meditation leading to bliss is a

known fact; they've seen it, they routinely experience it and there is no actual doubt that it works that way. For them meditation requires no beliefs nor faith; it's just the done thing among us.

In sum: participation in a spiritual community requires knowledge, belief and faith. But as we shall see, participation in a scientific community requires exactly the same: knowledge, belief and faith. The content of the beliefs and the acts that require faith differ between the two; the central requirements are the same.

Two examples of belief and faith in science readily come to mind: the Higgs boson, and string theory.

As this paper was being written, the media reported big news in the world of science: at long last, data from the CERN labs had confirmed the existence of the Higgs boson! This was reported as the final, crucial piece in confirming the "standard model" of elementary particles, which is a very big deal indeed in physics. Physicists can now say confidently that they *know* the Higgs boson is real, and the standard model works as intended. (Or so we are told. I wager that nobody reading this paper is in fact competent to participate in the practices required to conclude for themselves that the data in fact confirms the Higgs, nor for that matter knowledgeable enough to say what the Higgs actually is and does. But that's OK; reliable sources tell us this is real, and important, and we have no reason *not* to take their word for it.)

A small question: before the data was in, did physicists *know* the Higgs was real? Of course they didn't. They *believed* it was real. Their belief was strong enough, and the issue important enough, that they were willing to invest literally billions of dollars and thousands of years of professional effort to find out if what they believed is true. Did they know with pragmatic certainty how the research would turn out? Of course not; that's why they call it research. Clearly, then, the CERN research program was an act of faith, and as it turned out, the faith seems to have been fully justified.

Please note that this is not meant as a jibe at scientists, nor is it intended to embarrass or degrade scientists in any way. Pointing out that the practices of the scientific community require belief and faith is nothing more than stating the obvious: Science is a community of persons, who share a world and a set of practices. *All* communities of persons require knowledge, belief and faith whether they are comfortable admitting it or not.

But what of the scientists who say: "What we do is rooted in solid evidence; what they do is based on blind faith." I would first suggest that a scientist interact for a while with someone who lives constantly in the world of satchitananda before concluding that the spiritual world's faith is "blind" and based on no evidence. But more cogently, I would point to the remarkable and embarrassing history of string theory in physics and ask the scientist to tell me what evidence it is rooted in.

As explained at length by the eminent physicist Lee Smolin in his book *The Trouble With Physics* (Smolin, 2006), string theory has captivated an enormous amount of attention and effort in theoretical physics over the past 25 years, but

it has yielded *no* new predictions that can be tested in research. None. Not one. Perhaps worse, string theory has not converged into a single coherent model; in fact over time it has diverged into a number (perhaps even an infinite number) of different versions. By ordinary standards of science this is a colossal failure, and would lead to abandoning the whole enterprise as a dead end. But in fact, practitioners of string theory charge on, saying that the theory is too beautiful to not be true, it's so … *elegant!* Some of its defenders have actually said that string theory is a true theory of the universe(s), but humans are not yet intelligent enough to comprehend it; we can only catch glimpses of its majesty.

If that's not blind faith, I'm not sure what is.

In a World of Science and Enlightenment

To conclude this section, let's review what we have accomplished:

- We have seen that both the science world and the spiritual world make coherent sense to their members. The way they make sense is different; *that* they make sense is the same.
- We have seen that both worlds require knowledge, belief and faith from their participants – indeed, this is true of every world of every community.
- We have seen that neither science nor spirit "win"; worlds coexist and sometimes collide, but it is not in any meaningful (by contrast with rhetorical) sense a contest.

The purpose of this section is not to persuade or convince scientists or spiritual practitioners of anything, although I hope some might find it at least thought-provoking. Nor is the purpose to resolve the intractable significance problems between worlds; resolution requires appeals to shared practices and standards, and those are exactly what the worlds of science and spirit do *not* share.

The purpose of this section is to support the *rest* of us – the many readers who are not hard-core scientists nor full-fledged spiritual practitioners – in understanding how these conflicts come about and what we can do about them. Perhaps what emerges as the best advice is the old physician's adage: "First, do no harm." Don't take sides or encourage rhetorical conflicts between worlds. Embrace scientists talking about science and spiritual communities talking about spiritual matters; turn a deaf ear to outsiders commenting on insider matters. Most of all, perhaps we should see the importance of maintaining (some would say restoring) civil discourse in our media, allowing for and appreciating differences rather than criticizing them with inflammatory rhetoric.

Of course, not all worlds are as distinct from one another as are science and spirit. Some exist side-by-side, within the same institutions, but the collision of their worlds is no less problematic. We will explore such collisions in the next section.

Worlds Within Worlds

The membership of the jihadist community overlaps barely at all with the membership of the 21st century English-language media. Some scientists are also

spiritual practitioners and vice versa, but by and large there is little common interaction. Accordingly, we can see how they might inhabit different, colliding worlds.

But what about someone in the office next to you, in the same organization or academic institution? Is it really possible for your world to collide with someone you see daily, perhaps even someone you meet for a drink after work? It is not only possible; it is common. It happens with most of us many times a day, and how we deal with it determines in large part our success in navigating our complex world of persons and their ways.

Let's revisit our school curriculum example for illustration. Recall that three groups – teachers, principals and School Board members – held three incompatible views on thorny curriculum issues. What looked like the best curriculum to one group was a weak compromise to another, and some proposed solutions were plainly anathema to everyone except the group proposing them. Each group saw their solution as best serving the needs of the school's "customers" – but each group had a different set of customers in mind! Teachers saw students as their customers; to principals it was the state and district administrators who set policy and guidelines; and the School Board members took as their ultimate customers the parents and local taxpayers who ultimately paid everyone's salaries. By now we should recognize all the earmarks of worlds in collision: the other side's argument just doesn't make sense!

Here's where this gets really interesting: These are all members of the same school district, disputing among themselves! They work in the same schools and administrative buildings, attend many of the same meetings, take responsibility for the education of the same children; their paychecks are all drawn on the same bank accounts. Surely the fact that they share an organization means they share a common world, doesn't it?

Well, yes, it does but no, that's not all there is to it. They all participate as members of the school district (which is an institution, a type of community) and as such share that world. But their participation is fundamentally *as* a member of a specific community of practice (teachers, principals, etc.) each of which has its own specific world. In short, they all participate in the practices of one community by participating in the practices of another community.

Hold on here – communities within communities? Yes, that's exactly what we have here. Not only that: communities within communities turn out to be the rule rather than the exception. Let's pause for a moment to flesh out some important implications of this assertion.

Begin by recalling that "community" in Descriptive Psychology does not refer to any particular place-in-time, nor does it refer to a group of specific individuals. In that sense, community is almost endlessly and instantly portable. At any given time or place, all it takes to create an actual chess community is a few people who are genuine chess players along with a board and some chess pieces (although in a pinch you can just draw an 8x8 grid on the floor and use pennies for pawns, nickels for knights, etc. – you need the players, you can usually improvise the props.)

Obviously, people recognize and participate in communities all the time. This is a core part of a person's competence. A perhaps less obvious but equally central part of being a person is the competence to create new communities and the world that goes with them, and then inhabit that world as a native. Briefly, what it takes is someone seeing the world in the light of some ultimates (objects, processes, and/or states-of-affairs), getting a few people to share that view, finding ways to talk about and act on these ultimates and recognizing that this world makes sense in a specific, different way from the world we started from. (For an extended discussion of community and world creation, see Putman, 1998.)

It's Different In Organizations

Sometimes communities are created "from scratch", as it were, like the "Children of God" community referenced in Putman, 1998. Before its members created it, there was no such community nor world. But this is the exception, albeit an important one. In most cases, we see people creating an actual community with ultimates, practices, statuses and so forth known to them from their prior participation in just such communities. Chess players already have all they need to form a chess community anywhere; all they require is an opportunity – a few other players and some time to play. Likewise, software engineers, marketers, accountants and so forth move from organization to organization, taking their world with them; they either join the existing actual community, or start a new one based on their prior participation. Again, this is so common that we scarcely notice it; it's just part of being a person in a community.

An organization is a community with a shared mission, and as such is a particularly interesting example of communities within communities (see Putman 1990 for an extended articulation of this). Members of an organization view their world from the point of view of their place in the organization, which includes their place within a community of practice (software engineering, marketing, etc.) These communities of practice have worlds with very different ultimates; as a result, collision among organization members about what is important and how to make sense of the current situation is built-in.

But unlike the colliding worlds of our prior examples, organization members cannot just act on what they see and how things makes sense to them; they must also *simultaneously* act in service of the shared mission. (Generically, that mission is to create value in the lives of a specific group of individuals; each organization has its own specific version.) That is, what they do will be a case of acting on how the world makes sense to them right now, while also being a case of contributing to the organization's mission. This dual requirement is, again, the rule rather than the exception in organizational life; as we shall see in the next section, it is common in day-to-day life as well. In each case it can be problematic because it seems to require a person to simultaneously see two different worlds from two different places (e.g. engineer and Ford employee). People are amazingly competent at many things (Putman, 2009); being in two places at once is not among them.

Accordingly, organizations have developed managerial and leadership

practices to support members in this seemingly impossible feat. This gives us leverage on resolving some of these intractable value problems: So long as the collisions occur within the shared context of a larger community, it may be possible to find resolution of sorts. Let us return to that warring school district for an example of how this can work. (This "war" and its resolution are real instances drawn from the consulting work of the author.)

We were dealing with three distinct *views* of the world, and therefore of the value the organization exists to create. This situation is depicted in Figure 1.
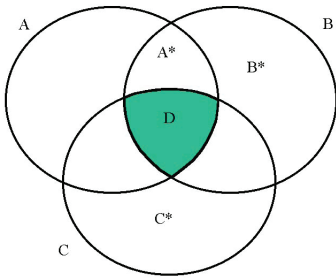
Each circle represents the set of good answers to the question, "What should our curriculum be?" from the viewpoint of (A) teachers, (B) principals and (C) School Board members. The best answer from each group's viewpoint is represented as A*, B* and C*, respectively.

Note the obvious:

- The best answers are not the same from group to group.
- The best answer from the School Board's point of view, C⋆, is not even among the good answers for the other two groups.
- No "best answer" is a good answer for all three groups.
- Any answer that does not fall into the "good answer" category for one group will not receive commitment and participation from that group.

Notice also that there is a small area, D, which falls within the "good answer" category for all three groups. Resolution in this situation can be found by directing the group's attention to D and helping them choose a path from among the D answers – because all three groups can commit to and participate in D. And note that not just any answer will do – it must be one that looks good to all three.

This strategy – looking at the issue from all viewpoints and searching only for answers that look good from all viewpoints – can give all the participants what they require. With hard work and good will, it enabled the curriculum trouble-shooting session to come to an unexpectedly productive conclusion. (Further elaboration is found in Putman, 2013b).

In sum, resolution of colliding worlds is not only possible in organizations, it is necessary and common.

This may give us hope as we examine our final example of intractable value problems, in which we leave behind the structure provided by differing cultures, communities, professions and organizations and look directly at how worlds collide in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people like you and me.

Personal Worlds

Recall our final example of intractable value problems:

> Kyle is a 15-year-old student whose parents have just discovered he is selling marijuana to his friends. His father Bill, a policeman from a family of policemen, knows exactly what to do – the boy needs a wake-up call from the criminal justice system. He has seen too many boys escalate from dealer to career criminal. Kyle's mother Linda, a social worker from a family of teachers and therapists, is horrified at the thought of turning her own son in, even if he does get off with juvenile detention – she has seen too many young men who have been permanently scarred by "juvie". She insists on taking Kyle to family counseling and working out a behavioral contract to keep him out of further trouble. Both parents are adamant in opposing the other's plan; each sees the other as being rigid and out of touch with the real world.

(Let' start by acknowledging that this is not a gender issue: Mom could be the cop, and Dad the social-worker and the dilemma would be the same.)

We have now removed the comforting distance provided by differing cultures or professions or organizations and brought world collision down to our most personal context: the family. By now it should be evident that this is not just a matter of differing values (e.g. discipline vs. compassion). What we have here are two distinct worlds in collision. Bill is a core member of a law-enforcement community whose ultimates include criminal acts, perpetrators, victims, evidence, arresting officers, trial, justice and sentencing. Linda is a full-fledged member of a social-work community whose ultimates include clients, family background, advocates for the disadvantaged, protecting clients from institutional abuse, counseling and rehabilitation. What Bill suggests for dealing with Kyle simply does not make sense in Linda's world, and vice versa.

Ah, but they are both parents! They share a family and that's a type of community, isn't it? After all, we routinely resolve world collisions in organizations; why not here? Isn't that the avenue to resolving the problem?

It might be, but let's not get our hopes up too fast. It is true that the family is a community of sorts, and therefore shares a world of sorts, but a family is not *just* a community and the difference matters. Unlike an organization, a family does not have an external mission that takes precedence over other considerations. And unlike a paradigm case community, one neither becomes a member nor leaves. A person is born into their family and while much about families can change, the bare fact of being family does not. Your brother is your brother no matter how you feel about him or refuse to talk to him. You can disinherit or even disown a child but

that's just a legal formality; it doesn't change the fact that she is and always will be your daughter (or was once your daughter and is now your son). The root of family is status that is neither earned nor lost; in technical Descriptive Psychology terms, neither open to accreditation nor degradation. This difference in a sense defines "family" and may make other considerations less relevant. (Further articulating the conceptual connections among family, community and culture is left to a future paper.)

Family is in effect a person's first community, where a person originally learns about the world and how to be a person in it. In particular, it's where a person learns how to be a Dad or Mom, by seeing how one's own parents did it. Again, this is Actor's knowledge, and it manifests as a direct, sure knowing of what to do in a situation calling for Dad or Mom to act. As adults we may have a very different standard for what being a good parent entails; our Critic may even abhor what we saw as children. Nonetheless, as any therapist can testify, it's a lot easier to say "I'll never be like my Dad with my kids" than it is to actually deliver on that when the chips are down. The world as you came to know it as a child remains with you throughout your life, as one of the available worlds in which you can be. It certainly may be supplemented or even essentially replaced by other worlds as we become members of different communities, but it's always there as a possible world, and it can readily become our actual world when a status we learned early on is called for.

Bill and Linda's views are over-determined in a sense: For both of them, the world they learned as children and the world they inhabit as professionals lead to the same, colliding views. This is not to say it's an impossible dilemma. People face and resolve this sort of intractable value problem all the time, but they also often fail to resolve it, despite strong marriages and good will all around. This is a matter of two different worlds that make conflicting sense, in a context – family – in which we ordinarily expect a deep sharing of everything of personal importance. It takes substantial work and insight to resolve this sort of problem, and it doesn't always work.

But before we look at possible avenues of resolution, let's turn the screw one final time. Family is not the most personal or even common context in which we find intractable problems from worlds colliding. For that, we must turn to a person's own life.

Good Cop, Bad Dad

Let's drop Mom from the picture for a while and focus on Dad. Bill indeed is a cop from a family of law-enforcement officers; as such, he sees clearly what must be done with Kyle. He is also a loving and supportive Dad, who has spent considerable time, with the active support of Linda, ridding himself of what he calls the "toxic residue" of how his own Dad treated Bill. As a police officer, he is proud when someone says "You remind me of your Dad"; as a father, Bill would take that as a devastating criticism and a reminder to watch himself more carefully.

So Bill doesn't even need Linda in the picture to be caught in an intractable world collision. The collision is between worlds in which Bill himself lives important

parts of his life. At the outset he faces an intolerable choice: he can be a good cop, or a good dad, but he can't be both.

This kind of intolerable collision is fortunately not a day-to-day event for most of us, but moving among incompatible worlds is. Obviously, people recognize and participate in communities all the time. This is a core part of a person's competence. They do so in a way that makes sense to them and to other participants because that's part of the world making sense (recall: "The world makes sense and so do people.")

Moreover, the communities a person moves among can differ radically in the ultimates that comprise and bound their worlds. Accordingly, what the person is conscious *of* and conscious *as* can differ radically. And it takes essentially no time at all to make the transition.

Consider, for example, a traditional economist who loves playing chess over her lunch break. As an economist she is conscious of a world of numbers expressing supply, demand, monetary velocity and other measures of economic activity, and she relates these in processes defined by quite precise equations. As a chess player she is conscious of a world of pieces, players and moves that are bounded by the rules of chess and the board. She does not make sense of her moves using precise equations or measures of any kind; instead she looks at the pattern of pieces for potential lines of attack or defense. Crucially, she does not see the chess board or think about it *as* an economist; she does not look for or even notice economic facts, and she thinks as a chess player. If economic talk spills over to the chess board, she recognizes it as purely metaphor and may find it amusing: "I have to question the marginal utility of that rook move."

Our economist is also a wife, mother, member of her church, director on two corporate boards, enthusiastic Zumba dancer and big-sister to three underprivileged girls. She moves among these communities smoothly, recognizing who she is at any given time and being conscious *of* and *as* what is appropriate. She navigates these various worlds effortlessly (doing justice to them all may strain her time and energy resources, but that's another matter) because that's simply what is involved in being a person. This is a powerful, necessary core competence. Further she has no problem keeping track of who she *really* is in all this navigation (although as we see with Bill and Linda, the demands of different communities may be very difficult to reconcile); she is always "*me*". And "me" is not yet another place in some ultimate, superordinate community: What holds everything together for "me" is *my life*. Persons live their lives in communities: The worlds of their communities make sense to them, they experience ultimate satisfaction from participating in their communities, and the ultimate significance to the person of all this participation is, "It's how I live *my* life."

"My life" provides the context Bill needs to find a resolution to his intractable value problem. It requires him to acknowledge that Cop and Dad are places in his communities; they are crucial to his identity, but they are not the whole story. As "me" he can choose actions that fit him while not violating his identity as Cop or

Dad. Here are two tried-and-true ways of doing that:

He can look to a larger community in which he is a member, and in which Cop and Dad have a place. For example, he can turn to the larger community of the Justice System, in which both law enforcement and families *per se* have places. Here he may find known ways of dealing with Kyle's situation that he can approve both as Cop and as Dad.

Alternatively, he can use a method for dealing with World Collision in organizations depicted above. As Cop, Bill decides what is the best solution to Kyle's situation. As Dad he does the same thing (but see below for a caution.) If either of these solutions looks good to both Dad and Cop, the issue is resolved. Usually, however, it's not that easy. Bill then lists every solution he can think of that, while not the best, is still a good Cop solution; he does the same thing as Dad. Typically, Bill will only get a little way into his Dad list before recognizing that he has found something that looks good to both Dad and Cop. This method can also be used to help Bill and Linda find a resolution that they can both support.

Looking for good Dad solutions may be more difficult than one might hope. Recognizing a good solution is Actor knowing, and as we noted above as Dad Bill's actor knowing may stem more from his cop upbringing that his current standards. Bill may find a second party like a counselor or therapist helpful to sort this out.

In conclusion: intractable value problems are actually intractable significance problems, which arise from the collision of the different worlds of distinctive communities. These worlds each makes sense to their participants, and are held together by the ultimate satisfaction members experience through their participation in its practices. Ultimate satisfaction also keeps world apart, in that how the world makes sense differs from community to community. These problems are difficult to resolve, but not always impossible. This is fortunate, because worlds colliding is an inherent and pervasive aspect of everyday life.

In other words, with apologies to John Dunne: When it comes to worlds colliding, send not to find for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for us.

Note 1: In this paper the author has used the community paradigm, along with some variations on it: culture, organization, profession, institution, family. These and several more are forms of community description; only a few have been formally articulated as such. With a nod to Ossorio's early and seminal paper "Notes on behavior description" (Ossorio, 1981) I am preparing "Notes on community description" for publication in 2014.

Note 2: Ossorio's four slogans are:

The world makes sense and so do people. They make sense *now*.

It's one world. Everything fits together. Everything is related to everything else.

Things are what they are and not something else instead.

Don't count on the world to be simpler than it has to be. (Ossorio, 2006, p. 2)

Note 3: Ossorio's slogan, "The world makes sense and so do people" was explicitly that of a Descriptive Psychologist. As such, he was describing the world of the community of Descriptive Psychology, which is ultimately "a world of persons and their ways." This community is unique, in that its world includes the *concept* of world and *practices* requiring the use of that concept – articulating the concepts of community and culture, world reconstruction, Actor's world vs. Observer/Critic world, formal articulation of world as state-of-affairs, etc. Most distinctively, since the world of Descriptive Psychology includes persons and their behavior *per se*, it also formally includes all other worlds by articulating what the persons in those communities do. This is articulated in great and specific depth in Ossorio's writings, most notably in "What Actually Happens" (Ossorio, 1971/1975/1978/2005) and by Mary Roberts in her paper "An Indeterminate and Expansive World" (Roberts, 2009a) and in her 2012 Presidential Address to the Society for Descriptive Psychology, "Invisible to the Naked Eye".

Note 4: Some early readers of this paper have suggested that people are "addicted to" ultimate satisfaction, making ultimate satisfaction derivative from addiction. I think that is exactly backwards. Experiencing ultimate satisfaction is a fundamental competence, required for a person to have a world, which is required for a person to be a person at all. As such, the capacity for experiencing ultimate satisfaction must be inherently provided for by a person's neurological and biochemical embodiment. Compare: the hedonic pleasure of sex exists to ensure that procreation occurs, but since it's around, it can underlie a large range of behaviors that have nothing to with procreation but everything to do with hedonic pleasure. Accordingly, the powerful experience of ultimate satisfaction exists to ensure a person's world makes sense, but it can also underlie a range of behaviors that have nothing to do with worlds, and everything to do with an experience that feels great and which one wants to repeat. Hence, we may find that addiction is in fact looking for ultimate satisfaction in all the wrong places.

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Finally, I want to repeat something I first wrote 15 years ago:

And then there is Peter Ossorio. How can one properly assess and acknowledge what he has contributed to my thought, my work and my life? Leave it at this: I am a Descriptive Psychologist. I see the world as a Descriptive Psychologist; I participate in the world as a Descriptive Psychologist. Peter Ossorio was the first to see the world this way, and he shared that view of the world with all of us. My world would not be the world it is, and I would not be who I am, without Peter Ossorio. With all my heart – thank you.

He is now the late Peter Ossorio, but his influence lives on among all of us who knew him. Thanks, Pete.

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