



Humanistic and normativistic metaphysics, epistemology, and conative orientation: Two fundamental systems of meaning[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Polarity Theory suggests that worldview controversies spanning areas such as morality, politics, epistemology, and metaphysics are ultimately rooted in the clash between humanism, which portrays human nature as intrinsically good and valuable, and normativism, which portrays human goodness and value as contingent upon conformity and achievement. Previous research has shown that humanism and normativism are factorially distinct, rather than polar opposites, but has not clarified exactly how they differ. We report results from six samples of Swedish, U.S., and mixed nationality participants, suggesting that normativism is associated with an implicit metaphysics of essentialism and determinism, an absolutist epistemology, and moral intuitions, values, and aspirations pertaining to conformity with norms and the pursuit of excellence, whereas humanism is associated with an anthropocentric metaphysics, a subjectivist epistemology, and moral intuitions, values, and aspirations pertaining to intrinsic preferences and the pursuit of human well-being. The results demonstrate that humanism and normativism contribute independent of each other to the cohesion of personal worldviews, across the domains of metaphysics, epistemology, and conative orientation.

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1. Introduction

There are few other psychological phenomena as central to personality, yet as scarcely researched, as the personal worldview. Our personal worldviews serve as the foundation for our daily – conscious and unconscious – meaning-making activities, which shape our experiences and actions. They are the medium through which we entertain dreams, fears, and wants, experience distinctly human forms of well-being and suffering, reason abstractly about what is and what ought to be, and engage actively with the world. Although personality psychologists frequently address, for example, values (Schwartz, 1992), moral intuitions (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), view of the social world (Duckitt, 2001), and assumptions about human attributes (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998), a personality psychology that fully accounts for the person as a meaning-making creature must also address the broad patterns of meaning spanning different worldview domains and seek to identify their sources – the foundational assumptions, constructs, and narrative scripts upon which the worldview rests (Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Nilsson, 2013, 2014c).

Polarity Theory, proposed by Tomkins (1963, 1965, 1987), is one of the most ambitious attempts to do this. Its central premise is that human worldviews are universally structured and permeated by a

basic conflict between *humanism*, which portrays human nature as intrinsically good and valuable – as an “active, creative, thinking, desiring, loving force in nature” – and *normativism*, which portrays human beings as devoid of intrinsic goodness and value but capable of becoming good and acquiring value through “struggle toward, participation in, conformity to a norm, a measure, an ideal essence basically prior to and independent of man” (Tomkins, 1963, pp. 391–392). Among the derivative implications, humanistic worldviews urge unconditional love and warmth toward others, openness to affect, and satisfaction of desires, and they portray imagination, creativity, and excitement as crucial to the pursuit of knowledge, and promotion of human well-being and rights as the core purpose of society. Normativistic worldviews urge discipline, punishment, respect upon achieved value, control of affect, and restraint, and they portray observation, rigor, and minimization of error as crucial to the pursuit of knowledge and maintenance of law and order as the core purpose of society. Past research has demonstrated that these different elements of humanistic and normativistic worldviews, respectively, are indeed associated with each other (Nilsson, 2014b; Tomkins, 1965).

Research has, however, also shown that humanism and normativism are factorially distinct and potentially compatible worldviews rather than opposite endpoints of a single bipolar continuum (Nilsson, 2014b), but it has not clarified exactly *how* they differ or how they can be compatible. To do this, it is necessary to demonstrate that they are systematically related to distinct sets of psychological constructs. In the current research, we therefore sought to clarify differences between

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their metaphysical, epistemological, and conative dimensions in terms of their relations to other worldview constructs. We hypothesized that normativism but not humanism is associated with an implicit metaphysics of essentialism and determinism, an absolutist epistemology, and moral intuitions, values, and aspirations pertaining to conformity with norms and the pursuit of excellence. We hypothesized that humanism but not normativism is associated with an anthropocentric metaphysics, a subjectivist epistemology, and moral intuitions, values, and aspirations pertaining to intrinsic preferences and the pursuit of human well-being.

2. The humanism–normativism polarity in previous theory and research

Tomkins (1963, 1965) originally described the polarity between humanism and normativism at a socio-cultural level of analysis, as it is manifested in, for example, politics, philosophy, science, religion, jurisprudence, art, psychotherapy, and child rearing practices. He argued that ideology “is found in its purest form in those controversies which are centuries old, and which have never ceased to find true believers” (1963, p. 389) – controversies which ultimately boil down to the clash between humanistic and normativistic worldviews. He suggested that this clash of worldviews is universal and provided examples of its recurrence across cultures and historical eras, including ancient Greek civilization, Buddhist and Confucian China, and contemporary American society (Tomkins, 1963, 1987).

When applying his analysis to the level of the individual, Tomkins introduced the notion of a *personal ideological posture*, defining it as a “highly organized and articulate set of ideas about anything” (1965, p. 74). Recognizing that many individuals do not have personal ideologies in this sense, he suggested that all individuals nevertheless have “a loosely organized set of feelings and ideas about feelings” (p. 74) called an *ideo-affective posture*, which may, for example, include a tolerant or intolerant attitude toward human beings and their emotions. Tomkins (1978, 1987) believed that these postures are rooted in emotion-laden episodic memories of life events, or *scenes*, which are interpreted, strung together, and imbued with subjective significance by virtue of higher-order *scripts* the most important and complex ones of which are ideological scripts (see also de St. Aubin, 1996). Tomkins (1965, 1987) suggested, furthermore, that cultural ideological scripts that are sufficiently resonant with the person’s *ideo-affective posture* will tend to become endorsed, and over time woven into the fabric of that individual’s psychology, and that the basic fault lines between socio-cultural ideologies are, in turn, structured by the underlying tensions between the psychological postures the ideologies must cater to in order to survive and propagate. He thus characterized the evolution of a person’s worldview in terms of a dynamic interplay – and increasing congruency – between life experiences, internal representations, and cultural ideological scripts, structured by the pervasive conflict between humanistic and normativistic perspectives.

Tomkins use of the term ‘polarity’ was, however, cryptic. He described “a polarity extending from the extreme left through a middle of the road position to the extreme right-wing position” (Tomkins, 1963, p. 391), where worldviews that creatively synthesize elements of humanism and normativism occupy the intermediate position. But in his research, he treated humanism and normativism as distinct constructs. Although Tomkins (1964) introduced a paired response format that juxtaposed humanistic and normativistic viewpoints on the same issue, participants were instructed to endorse one of them, both, or neither, and separate scores were calculated for these four possibilities.

Subsequent studies suggested that humanism and normativism are, in fact, best described as independent constructs rather than opposite end-points of a single bipolar continuum. Thomas (1976) found, through Q-methodology, that the worldviews of humanists and normativists form orthogonal Q-factors, which suggests that they are driven by different concerns. Other studies using the original paired

response format (Stone & Schaffner, 1997) or a Likert response format (de St. Aubin, 1996; Lindeman & Sirelius, 2001) showed no significant correlation between humanism and normativism. Recently, Nilsson (2014b) showed that humanism and normativism are not reducible to one common factor, and that they are hierarchically structured and negatively related across views of human nature, interpersonal attitudes, and attitudes toward affect but not across epistemologies and political values. Nilsson argued that these results partly vindicate Polarity Theory, suggesting that even though humanism and normativism may emerge from different psychological systems, with distinct antecedents and consequences, they tend to produce opposing beliefs and attitudes in several ideological domains.

3. Hypothesized relations to other worldview constructs

Although Tomkins (1965, 1978, 1987) described cultural ideologies and broader psychological orientations, as well as worldviews, in terms of humanism and normativism, we focus specifically on humanistic and normativistic worldviews here. The worldview domain can be broadly divided into *descriptive* ideas about what the world *is* like, including (at the most general level) metaphysical beliefs about the nature of reality and epistemological beliefs about the nature and acquisition of knowledge, and *evaluative* (or prescriptive) ideas about what the world *should* be like – what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, right or wrong – including values, moral judgments, and aspirations.¹

3.1. Normativistic metaphysics and epistemology: essentialism, determinism, and absolutism

According to Tomkins (1963), normativistic worldviews presuppose that what is real and intrinsically valuable exists prior to and independent of mankind – or, in other words, the essences of reality are independent of, and causally prior to, human perceptions, discourses, and activities. He also described normativism in terms of the common sense epistemological assumption that the world can be known “as grasped immediately by the senses” (p. 394) untainted by subjective and cultural perspectives. Given that human beings perceive the world as stable and orderly, Tomkins’ account also implies that normativistic implicit ontology portrays the basic structure of the world in terms of disparate and enduring objects and properties that represent the natural order or things.

This metaphysical core entails implicit assumptions about human attributes, including *lay essentialism* about the extent to which persons are determined by biological essences, classifiable into disparate categories, and understandable in terms of stable personality traits (Bastian & Haslam, 2006), and *entity vs. incremental theories* about the stability and mutability of personalities and the world in general (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Levy et al., 1998). The common sense empiricist epistemology is, moreover, aligned with an absolutist inclination to understand reality in determinate, non-ambiguous terms. This includes the beliefs in *certain knowledge* that can be attained through empirical means and *simple knowledge* that forms an atomistic collection of facts (Schommer, 1990).

This account of normativist metaphysics and epistemology also has striking similarities with previous attempts to identify patterns of worldview coherence emerging from core metaphysical assumptions. One of these is Pepper’s (1942) notion of root metaphors for understanding reality. The *mechanistic* worldview, which portrays the world as a machine, is particularly similar to normativism. In the words of Johnson et al. (1988, p. 833), it “assumes an ontology of stability and

¹ Our ambition was not to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of the contents of worldviews (see e.g., Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011; Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Note also that terms used to describe worldviews can be ambiguous and slippery – the ones we use should be understood as technical terms.

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