



Raymond Geuss, "Who Needs a World View?"

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Raymond Geuss. *Who Needs a World View?* Harvard University Press 2020. 208 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover 9780674245938)

The political philosopher Raymond Geuss holds that 'political philosophy must be realist' (*Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton University Press 2008, 9). For him, this means accepting the messy realities of life, the many contradictions and inconsistencies in humans' private dealings and public affairs. If, for instance, people are motivated by a bundle of changing goals that cannot be subsumed under an ultimate end and may even internally conflict, there is no point in having tidy theoretical systems that suggest otherwise. How will someone who, like Geuss, rejects the notion of universally true propositions (in politics, ethics, and elsewhere) and emphasizes that meaning is necessarily context-dependent, how will someone who is so critical of any comprehensive system of thought write about 'world views'? We should not expect a linear sequence of arguments woven into a consistent theory. The texts collected in Geuss' 2020 book *Who Needs a World View* include many different topics that hardly appear connected at first glance, from Kurt Gödel's view of mathematics to Antonin Artaud's artistic polemic against the belief in God. A second glance, however, reveals a theme common to all the book's diverse pieces: the attempt to show how various efforts to 'get a 'full' and 'complete' view of the world or of our own individual lives are, in Geuss's understanding, as omnipresent as they are misleading (xiv).

For the attempt to dismantle 'the idea of a single, coherent, unchanging philosophical doctrine about the world as a whole and our place in it', the genre of the essay proves congenial (xviii). Apart from the short preface, and a brief concluding chapter, the reader has a hard time figuring out what their author is getting at. In the course of the essays, Geuss illuminates possible meanings of a topic or term, producing passages of crystal-clear analytical philosophy in the process. The author then questions the just-developed interpretation, gleefully tearing down the building of thought he has erected. While one is still trying to figure out which of the views offered is reflecting Geuss' own, he suddenly jumps to an (apparently) utterly new topic. All this, however, is no sign of Geuss' inability to communicate his points clearly, but must be understood as a performative way of emphasizing the book's main point.

Only at the very end of the book, in a chapter aptly called 'context,' does Geuss reveal his positive doctrine. According to this, 'meaning (and consequently knowledge) is essentially contextual;' 'meaning must be a collective, that is a social phenomenon;' 'there is no final all-encompassing framework which puts everything together;' and 'the absence of such a framework, and thus of any 'final' meaning visibly does not entirely destroy the phenomenon of local meaning' (163).

Against the backdrop of those positions, the essays can be understood as various attempts to deconstruct (often widespread) ideas, such as that 'life is a game,' that each express and help maintain what Geuss sees as misleading beliefs about human life. (The point of the example above is that games, like football or chess, usually have a fixed set of rules whereas life does not).

Geuss' conviction that all meaning is context-dependent is most visible in the third essay, entitled 'Enlightenment, Genealogy, and Historicity of Concepts' (163). Here Geuss critically engages with enlightenment thinking, especially with historical works of that epoch. 'Reason,' those thinkers of the enlightenment thought, 'was absolutely universal, unitary, unvarying in space and time, and irresistible, and it gave one a clear and certain criterion for judging any situation, action, desire, belief, practice, or institution whatever' (57). This is a view Geuss dismisses wholeheartedly as misleading.

The theme of context-dependence is taken up and addressed from another angle in chapter seven, which deals, among other things, with Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Illych." Here, Geuss addresses the question of whether we can evaluate a life as either a success or a failure in any

objective sense. He makes the point that "'success" and "failure" are inherently contextual concepts' (142). Thus, I will give different answers to whether my life is a success at different stages of my life; and in any case, the answers are bound to be tentative, as I can only give them so long as my life is still ongoing.

Even when judging the life of another (dead) person as a whole, we *construct* this 'whole' (while alternative, equally plausible constructions would be possible), and we measure the respective life against standards that are bound to change over time. Here we have the idea that meaning is socially constructed, Geuss' second central claim (cf. 163). The conviction that there is 'no final all-encompassing framework' underlies the reflections in chapter two, where Geuss uses Nietzsche's claim that one should 'make one's life a work of art' to show how life necessarily *differs* from a work of art, for instance, a painting (163). Once finished, a painting remains the same. It forms—varied and changing interpretations aside—a coherent whole, sometimes limited quite literally by a framework. In this respect, art does not (and cannot) resemble life. 'As long as I am alive, my future is to some extent open and indeterminate, only accessible to me through speculation and planning, but equally, my past is a constantly crumbling papyrus, on which a full text was never written and to which, in memory, I have only partial and prospectively skewed access' (53).

The last of Geuss' assertions, as he states them explicitly at the end of his book, is that the absence of an all-encompassing framework, and thus of universally valid meanings, does not exclude 'local meaning' (163). While Geuss rejects 'the idea that there is any such thing as a freestanding individual 'ethics' (xiv) that could be explored, put into a coherent system, and then applied to individual cases across time and space, it would be premature to identify his position with moral relativism. His view, Geuss emphasizes, 'does not imply that there might not be better and less good ways of dealing with some given [ethical] problem, or that certain people might not be better at giving advice than others are.' However, 'those who are good advisers are not "good" by virtue of mastery of a separate intellectual discipline called "ethics"' (XV).

But what *does* make those people, of whom we say that they possess good judgment, good at what they are doing? Regrettably, this important question does not get more attention in the book. However, some hints suggest that Geuss takes a pragmatist position on this question. The first essay, 'Who Needs a World View,' from which the entire book takes its name, is different from most others in that Geuss here deals with ideas he actually endorses rather than wishes to demolish. Here he tells us about two of his teachers, both of whom were at one point serving him as intellectual father-figures: Father Krigler alias Béla, a refugee from Hungary, and the more widely known Sidney Morgenbesser, an expert (among other things) on the history and philosophy of American pragmatism (cf. 14). As Geuss reports some of his teachers' doctrines, it becomes clear how much his thinking has been formed under their tutelage. For instance, we learn about Morgenbesser's pragmatist assertions, which Geuss seems to have made his own. When confronted with a practical problem, Morgenbesser held, I do not look 'for an idea or theory that correctly mirrors the world, the "truth," but for something that "works," that gets rid of the obstacles I have encountered and allows me to go ahead with what I am trying to do' (17). It seems then that those who are good at giving ethical advice owe their ability, according to Geuss (interpreting Morgenbesser), to context-relevant know-how acquired through relevant experiences.

Anyone looking for a systematic treatment of the concept of 'world view' and the advantages and downsides of people hanging on to one will be disappointed. The book is – programmatically – unsystematic. There is, moreover, no attempt to locate the book in contemporary philosophical discourses. There is, for instance, no mention of authors such as Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, or Bernhard Williams, all of whom share many of Geuss' assumptions and have recently been made the heroes of a book claiming a 'Realist Revival in Political Theory' ([*Value, Conflict, and Order: Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory*](#), University of Chicago Press 2020).

On the other hand, the book will unquestionably interest anyone curious about Raymond Geuss as a philosopher. It provides valuable insights into his intellectual development by exploring the ideas of his two most influential teachers – Father Krigler and Sidney Morgenbesser – and by making visible other essential influences, most notably Nietzsche, Marx, and Hegel. But also, those who are not Geuss-enthusiasts or specialists will find plenty of insightful and provocative ideas. All of which are designed to undermine our confidence in timeless, holistic, and internally coherent systems of meaning – may they be called philosophies, ideologies, or world views.

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