

## 1 Worldviews in World Politics

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The fact that financial markets went markedly into shock has to be attributed to a lack of confidence in policies and leadership. It's a failure of worldview.

Adam Posen, March 2020<sup>1</sup>

I found out to my intense surprise and disappointment that my father did not have, what I then thought was a basic necessity for any real person – a “Weltanschauung”! The subsequent history of my life and thought could probably be written in terms of the progressive discovery on my part how right my father had been.

Albert O. Hirschman, March 1993<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes we get overwhelmed by the uncertainties of life and the open-endedness of the future. The pandemic gripping the world in 2020/21 is one such instance. As the virus spread, a sense of personal vulnerability and radical uncertainty spread as well, barely masked by incessant talk about changing risk calculations.<sup>3</sup> In such moments many of us do not turn to theories, models, or hypotheses. Instead, we turn to worldviews to give us some traction in a world suddenly turned upside down. President Trump's worldview valued national borders that could be closed to foreigners. Early on, he imposed a ban on travel from China. The World Health Organization and many others were aghast. Their worldview valued open borders and unobstructed travel. In January 2021, during his last day in office, President Trump lifted travel bans his administration had previously imposed, only to have the incoming Biden administration immediately reverse his decision. This is not to deny the obvious. After four years in office, President Trump's general

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips 2020: B4. <sup>2</sup> Meldoiesi 1995: v. <sup>3</sup> Roberts 2020; Fisher 2020.

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worldview had affected state and local officials of the Republican party, not to mention tens of millions of his supporters.<sup>4</sup>

The 2020/21 pandemic is merely the latest example of the kinds of uncertainties students of world politics confront on a daily basis.<sup>5</sup> On March 3–4, 2020, for example, it was unclear how the stock market would react to the biggest emergency rate cut of the Federal Reserve since the Great Recession of 2008. Most market analysts expected a bounce in stock prices; instead, the market tanked. A few weeks later – again to everyone’s total surprise, as the real economy cratered and the number of unemployed topped 30 million – April 2020 turned out to be the best month Wall Street had recorded since 1987. Politics is similarly unpredictable. For example, the outcome of the Super Tuesday Democratic primary of March 2020 was entirely uncertain. Nobody had a clue how it would affect the relative standing of the main contenders. In the event, Joe Biden’s string of victories stunned analysts and practitioners alike. Shomik Dutta, a veteran of Obama campaigns, lamented: “It’s a bizarre feeling to realize that all the things I obsess over in politics . . . did not seem to matter very much at all.”<sup>6</sup> Eight months later, most pollsters agreed that Joe Biden would win the 2020 US Presidential election comfortably, and perhaps with a blow-out. Pollsters had tweaked their models, learning from their 2016 mistakes. All the hard work was to no avail. The cliff-hanger election disproved a tsunami of surveys.<sup>7</sup>

With its unexpected turns and twists, time and again world politics has stumped participants and analysts with momentous events. The end of the Cold War, German unification, the peaceful disintegration of the Soviet Union, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath, the Arab Spring, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the surge of protest across the United States after the murder of George Floyd, the coronavirus pandemic, and the wildfires engulfing the American West coast in 2020 were all big surprises. Insider knowledge and the political intuition of central protagonists are of little help. Chancellor Kohl’s 1989 predictions about the process of German unification were wrong, as were those of Prime Minister Cameron in 2016 about the outcome of the Brexit referendum. And so too were the well-considered judgments of leading American international relations theorists. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kenneth Waltz bet that the Soviet Union would last another century, Robert Keohane that the era of American

<sup>4</sup> Lerer and Epstein 2021. <sup>5</sup> Jervis 2017: 175–82.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Gamio and Goldmacher 2020.

<sup>7</sup> For a rare exception, see Enns and Lagodny 2021, who predicted a Biden victory with 54.5 percent of the popular vote and who accurately predicted 49 of 50 states, missing only Georgia. Their forecast incorporated operational uncertainty by running 70,000 simulations, analysis of which suggested that the probability of a Biden win was 60 percent.

hegemony had passed.<sup>8</sup> When the unexpected undermines or overturns our most respected theories, we often fall back on our worldviews for guidance.

For Theodore White, “It is the nature of politics that men must always act on the basis of uncertain facts . . . Were it otherwise, then . . . politics would be an exact science in which our purposes and destiny could be left to great impersonal computers.”<sup>9</sup> Putting aside the concept of uncertainty, most students of world politics have followed economics in focusing their attention on calculable risk.<sup>10</sup> For example, in her authoritative and sophisticated analysis of risk and uncertainty in international politics, Rose McDermott writes that risk and uncertainty comingle.<sup>11</sup> She thus combines both as she identifies mechanisms of risk propensity that occur under conditions of “high” uncertainty. In the remainder of her book, however, she puts aside the problem of uncertainty and focuses exclusively on the domain of risk.

While it is not possible to scale the magnitude of uncertainty, it is possible to distinguish between two types: operational uncertainty and radical uncertainty. Known unknowns create operational uncertainty which, given more or better information, may transform into calculable risk. This, however, is not a panacea. Under conditions of operational uncertainty, better and more information and knowledge, as in the squeezing of a balloon, can simply push radical uncertainty into some other, unrecognized part of the political context.<sup>12</sup> On questions of security and political economy, this is standard practice in the analysis of world politics.<sup>13</sup> Uncertainty is conflated with the concept of risk and thus remains invisible.<sup>14</sup> McDermott acknowledges this fact. “It is impossible,” she writes, “to predict the characteristics of many different variables simultaneously in advance, especially when they may have unknown interaction effects. Even the nature of many of the critical variables may be unknown beforehand.”<sup>15</sup> Analysis proceeds based on the unrealistic assumption that, separated by different information, parties to a conflict in world politics share in the same understanding of how the world works. New information leads to revised risk calculations and thus offers a way forward.

Withdrawn from the precarious domain of uncertainty, the future is domesticated into the more agreeable form of risk, thus retaining a family

<sup>8</sup> Waltz 1979: 95; Keohane 1984: 244. <sup>9</sup> White 1961: vii, quoted in Lepore 2020: 18.

<sup>10</sup> Classical realists are a notable exception. See Kirshner 2022 for a far-ranging, critical discussion of structural realism and bargaining models and their neglect of uncertainty and contingency in world politics. For longer discussions of uncertainty and risk, see Wenger, Jasper, and Cavelti 2020; Beckert and Bronk 2018; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b: 41–50; Katzenstein and Nelson 2013a: 234–35, 238–42; Katzenstein and Nelson 2013b: 1103–109; Nelson and Katzenstein 2014: 361–69.

<sup>11</sup> McDermott 1998: 3–5, 30. <sup>12</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018c: 276–78.

<sup>13</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b: 42–50. <sup>14</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b: 45–46.

<sup>15</sup> McDermott 1998: 5.

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resemblance with the present and the past. Measurable confidence intervals strip the future of the deep anxiety that attends the unknown. We live life forward while understanding it backward. The malleability of the world is reflected in the multiple ways we have convinced ourselves of knowing the future. Prediction becomes a specific technology of “future making and world crafting,” made possible by severing the link between a man-made future and religion.<sup>16</sup> This offers us an avenue for managing expectations and thus to exercise some control over time. But such efforts can run up against manifestations of uncertainty such as technological breakthroughs, authority crises, consensus breakdowns, revolutionary upheavals, generational conflicts, and other forces that restructure the political landscape.<sup>17</sup> Theories and models are thus defeated by the unpredictable as world politics moves beyond control.<sup>18</sup> And, as Ernst Haas observed long ago, theories and models can unwittingly exacerbate problems of turbulence by pretending to create predictability for parts of political reality while weakening our understanding of the whole.<sup>19</sup>

Worldviews differ in the salience they assign to risk and uncertainty. Approaches such as subjective probability theory explore ways of thinking about rationality and its relation to risk and uncertainty.<sup>20</sup> Rationality can take the form of different, situationally specific kinds of reasonableness. Since total chaos and existential uncertainty are terrifying, concepts such as ontological security probe different forms of reasonableness under conditions of risk and uncertainty.<sup>21</sup> And reasonableness differs in worldviews populated by different cosmologies, memories, imaginaries, emotions, and moral sensibilities: “It is not the information but the worldview that drives actors.”<sup>22</sup>

The concept of a risk-inflected control of nature and society is so reassuring that we simply close our eyes to the self-evident: the ineluctability of the uncertainties of life. Why we do so is not self-evident. To be sure, the idea of risk is profound and has been immensely beneficial in human affairs. Indeed, a couple of centuries ago it was revolutionary to think that the future could serve the present, and that the chance of loss is an opportunity for gain.<sup>23</sup> But these important insights should not make us deny the obvious: uncertainty and an open future are important aspects of world politics. Uncertainty results in part from people holding different theories of how the world works. The financial meltdown of 2008 showed widely accepted risk models to have been utterly useless in

<sup>16</sup> Andersson 2018: 6, 75–97, 216.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenau 1990: 8; Rosenau and Durfee 1995: 33–44. <sup>18</sup> Ridley 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Levine and Barder 2014, 873. <sup>20</sup> Friedman 2019, further discussed in Chapter 10.

<sup>21</sup> Daston 2019: 45–53. Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, further discussed in Chapter 10.

<sup>22</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b: 45. <sup>23</sup> Bernstein 1996: 1, 337.

predicting the crisis. Very little has changed either in the specific field of finance or in the broader analysis of world politics. We have been so fully seduced by the Hobbesian notion of control that we overlook the surprises Machiavelli writes about. We have placed all of our bets on the all-controlling Leviathan, while forgetting about the jolts fortuna administers regularly.<sup>24</sup>

This is not to argue that uncertainty is the only factor shaping political life. Social science and common sense offer tools that equip us to cope with “knowable unknowns” and the risky aspects of life in a partly orderly world.<sup>25</sup> However, “unknowable unknowns” also exist, and these radical uncertainties shape a reality not amenable to risk analysis. Compared to the Great Recession of 2008, the 2020 pandemic raised broader uncertainties, thereby linking challenges in public health to escalating individual and social fears, and to collapsing economies. And this global pandemic is mild compared to the dramatic environmental changes that may well be unfolding under conditions of global warming. That crisis, Scott Hamilton writes, may pose “an unprecedented existential and temporal *uncertainty* concerning the future of human subjectivity, and of the Earth itself.”<sup>26</sup>

The first typical reaction to our encounters with uncertainty is bafflement at the unexpected, and subsequently a labored process of normalizing the abnormal, followed by amnesia. Metaphors help. Echoing George Kennan’s insistence that we are gardeners, not mechanics, former Secretary of State George Shultz once remarked that “diplomacy is like gardening. The layout of the garden is set. It just has to be tended.”<sup>27</sup> But times have changed. For many students of politics, today’s world looks and feels like a jungle. Robert Kagan, a prominent neoconservative public intellectual, captures this mood in the title of his book, *The Jungle Grows Back*.<sup>28</sup> He explains that liberalism “took root, spread and evolved” in an order that “was always artificial and tenuous, challenged from within and without” by the natural forces of an anarchic geopolitics. “Like a garden, it can last only so long as it is tended and protected. Today, the US seems bent on relinquishing its duties in pushing back the jungle.”<sup>29</sup> Susan Rice, who served as National Security Advisor under President Obama, concurs

<sup>24</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Seybert and Katzenstein 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Putting aside the question of unknowable unknowns, the most creative and important work on operational uncertainty and risk focuses on combining specific forecasting question clusters about the short term with broad scenarios about the long term, thus giving decision-makers an evolving sense of plausible futures that leaves unanalyzed inescapable, radical uncertainty. Scoblic and Tetlock 2020: 16–18. See also Tetlock and Gardner 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Hamilton 2019: 610 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>27</sup> Kennan 1966/1954: 93; Shiraishi 2020: 3. <sup>28</sup> Kagan 2018a. <sup>29</sup> Kagan 2018b.

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when she speaks of “Trump’s Hobbesian jungle.”<sup>30</sup> And an unflappable, rational former physicist, Germany’s Chancellor Merkel, watches as the liberal multilateral world she helped sustain is “shoved aside by the law of the jungle.”<sup>31</sup> Like Germany, Canada too must learn how to navigate a “jungle-like world.”<sup>32</sup> Today, the jungle has become a common metaphor for the many disruptions and weirdnesses of the unpredictable.<sup>33</sup> Jungle and garden metaphors are stand-ins for worldviews that often remain unspoken while helping us navigate the turbulent currents of world affairs.

We should be wary, though, of loading the dice only on the side of looming threats. Jungles and forests are not only places of dread but also sites of hope. Uncertainty can reveal vulnerabilities that lead to creative responses and empowerment of the disempowered. Such bigger issues could be environmental or social. Viewed in a broader context, Jared Diamond argues, a “successful resolution of the pandemic crisis may motivate us to deal with . . . bigger issues that we have until now balked at confronting.”<sup>34</sup> Aided by the shocking vulnerabilities of African Americans revealed once again by the pandemic, the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement in America in the summer of 2020 created a powerful multiracial coalition that vented its fury at police violence as one among many instances of systemic racism. This was the latest installment of a rights revolution that has spread globally during the last half-century, in fits and starts to be sure, and often in unpredictable directions.

Although they provide important anchors at many moments of uncertainty, the lack of attention to worldviews in the analysis of world politics is striking. Measured by Google Books Ngram Viewer, in sharp contrast to the concepts of “theory” and “model,” Figure 1.1 shows that the concept of “worldview” is barely used.<sup>35</sup> Two decades ago, Peter Haas popularized the concept of epistemic communities, writing in the most cited article of *International Organization*, the highest-ranked journal of world politics in the United States, that epistemic communities refer to networks of knowledge-based individuals “who share the same worldview.”<sup>36</sup> While many scholars have followed his lead in developing the concept of

<sup>30</sup> Rice 2020. <sup>31</sup> Barber and Chazan 2020. <sup>32</sup> The Economist 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Liik 2019; Erlanger 2018; Le Vine 2018; Wainer 2016. <sup>34</sup> Diamond 2020.

<sup>35</sup> The *Ngram Viewer* is a research tool for “quick-and-dirty heuristic analysis” (Chumtong and Kaldewey 2017: 8). It is worth remembering that this tool does not measure what people are talking about but what they are publishing about, only in English, and only in texts that Google has digitalized.

<sup>36</sup> Haas 1992: 27.

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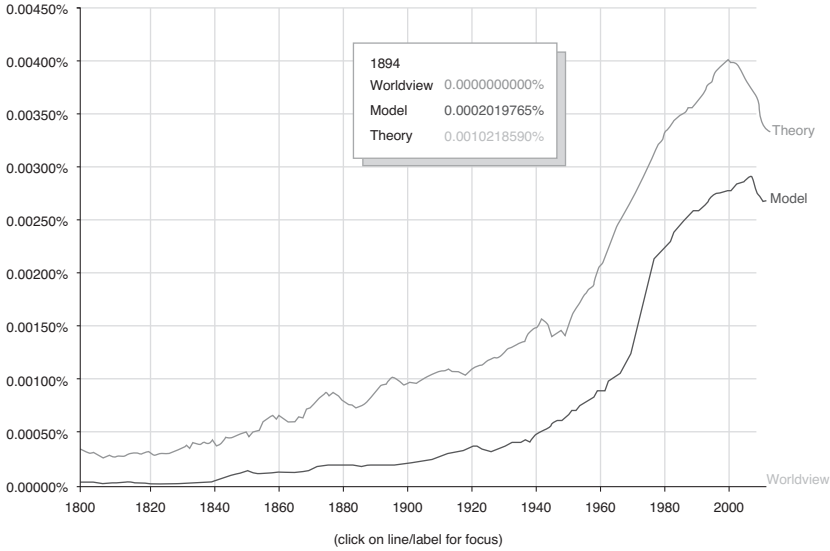


Figure 1.1 Ngrams: worldview, theory, model

epistemic community, none, to my knowledge, has followed up to inquire into the concept of worldview. While we might be vaguely aware of uncertainty's role in global politics, we seem to prefer not to look this challenge in the face by examining our worldviews.

In conceiving and contributing to this book, I have ventured for a third time off the conventional garden path of international relations scholarship. As was true of all other scholars of world politics, the end of the Cold War caught me by surprise. I wanted to understand why and turned to cultural sociology for new insights. *The Culture of National Security*,<sup>37</sup> mainstream realists and liberals thought in the mid-1990s, was no more than a futile exercise in postmodern flim-flam that had nothing to do with respectable social science. It turned out, however, that cultural sociology was central to the constructivist theories of international relations that quickly secured for themselves seats at the high table of theory. Seeking to understand the Great Recession of 2008–09 two decades later, I tracked the broader political implications of uncertainty and developed a conceptualization of power that was less materialist and less focused

<sup>37</sup> Katzenstein 1996.

on Hobbesian notions of control. Film and cultural studies provided me with valuable insights into the dynamics of unpredictable possibilities and potentialities of what Lucia Seybert and I called *Protean Power*.<sup>38</sup> The evident difficulty that book's argument created for many of my colleagues, as it forced them to come to terms with uncertainty and potentiality, has led me in this book to turn to the natural sciences, which for more than a century have been no strangers to these two concepts. *Uncertainty and Its Discontents* seeks to show the deep Newtonian roots of the firm convictions of what a scientific study of world politics entails, and our never-ending amazement when the unexpected derails those scientific endeavors. I will argue that "the relational revolution" in twentieth-century physics, and many of the natural sciences more generally, can enrich sociological relationalism in the social sciences.<sup>39</sup> It embeds risk-based, Newtonian thinking about a "world of being" in an uncertainty-inflected, Post-Newtonian thinking about a "relational world of becoming." Thus, it explicitly acknowledges uncertainty and the open-ended potentialities of world politics.

This chapter seeks to better understand the scientific worldviews that make us overlook uncertainty as a central aspect of world politics. It examines the concept of worldview (Section 1.1); considers for the field of world politics the substantive and analytical formulations of worldviews in the form of political and analytical paradigms, as well as substantialist and relational ontologies and epistemologies that are embedded in them (Section 1.2); differentiates between Newtonianism and Post-Newtonianism (quantum mechanics) and humanism and hyper-humanism (scientific cosmology) as two dimensions structuring different worldviews (Sections 1.3 and 1.4); exemplifies the resulting four worldviews as presented in greater detail in Chapters 2–5 (Section 1.5); and concludes briefly with two illustrations (Section 1.6).

This chapter's presentation of four strikingly different worldviews is balanced in Chapter 10 by a discussion of some workarounds and commonalities that provide a shared intellectual space for Newtonianism and Post-Newtonianism. Newtonianism prefers sharp distinctions. Philosophically, Post-Newtonianism does not. Chapter 10 thus adheres to Samuel Beckett's admiration of "greyness."<sup>40</sup> Moving from clearly demarcated "either–or" conceptual spaces in Chapter 1 to entangled "both–and" spaces in Chapter 10 suggests a radical reconceptualization

<sup>38</sup> Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a. <sup>39</sup> The term is coined by Smolin 2013: xxviii.

<sup>40</sup> "Whether all grow black, or all grow bright, or all remain grey, it is grey we need, to begin with, because of what it is, and of what it can do, made of bright and black, able to shed the former, or the latter, and be the latter or the former alone. But perhaps I am the prey, on the subject of grey, in the grey, to delusions." Beckett 1958: 17.



of conventional understandings of science operating at both macro- and microlevels. Specific approaches in the field of scientific cosmology and quantum mechanics put the individual human experience rather than objective laws of nature at the center of the universe. This eliminates the traditional insistence on the difference between the natural and social sciences and holds forth the promise for the analysis of uncertainty *and* risk, rather than the insistence that world politics is marked simply by risk.

### 1.1 Worldviews

Worldviews offer global overviews evident in relatively constant, repetitive habits of beliefs and emotions that mediate the relations between an individual or group and the world.<sup>41</sup> They are animated by a sense of being in the world and of viewing how the world works or should work. Worldviews are neither purely descriptive nor purely explanatory. They contain both prescriptive and practical elements. Far from immutable, they are susceptible to fluctuations brought about by personal experience and change in the world. They comprise a flexible conceptual apparatus rooted in values. Relationally mediated by discourses and institutions, worldviews create narratives about what is possible, what is worth doing, and what needs to be done, as well as what is impossible, what is shameful, and what needs to be avoided. They thus have effects on the purposes and interests that shape policies and practices. Many techniques and rules, on their own terms, might be considered inadequate or too weak to justify policy and practice, yet they acquire a deeper legitimacy when embedded in a broader worldview. What Daston writes about natural orders is also apposite for worldviews: they are “long-lived, polyvalent, and evocative of powerful emotions.”<sup>42</sup> Operating at different levels of abstraction, several authors in this book point to a close relationship between worldviews and other, commonly used concepts. For example, in Chapter 5, Michael Barnett disaggregates holistic worldviews and points to the internal contradictions of their different components; and in Chapter 8 Bentley Allan considers worldviews built from more encompassing cosmologies.

Worldviews are concerned with viewing the world and understanding one’s place in it. They are suffused with epistemologies and ontologies. But in the discipline of international relations, in the words of John Ruggie, “epistemology is often confused with method, and the term

<sup>41</sup> Gollwitzer 1980: 176–77; Geuss 2020: xiii. This section has benefitted enormously from discussions among this book’s authors in a series of Zoom meetings in June 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Daston 2019: 33.

‘ontology’ typically draws either blank stares or bemused smiles.”<sup>43</sup> Today, almost without fail, social theories “posit an ontological beginning point . . . that one takes to be the foundations of the (world-) view being explored or posited.”<sup>44</sup> As epistemologies, worldviews concern the scientific or religious basis for knowing the world. Worldviews can be analytic or substantive. Paradigms, theories, models, and the explanatory constructs they deploy are analytic. Liberalism, Realism, and Marxism are substantive. Worldviews provide elastic interpretive guides to help navigate the world. They differ from both universal, trans-historical cosmologies and more specific, time-bound ideologies. The concept of worldview is contested and, for some, considered inherently contestable.<sup>45</sup> The chapters in this book provide ample material for both contestation and inherent contestability.

Because they are foundational, worldviews are important for understanding and evaluating human choice. Embodied in both views and practice, they both passively “re-reflect” and actively “re-present” the world, offering views both *of* and *for* the world.<sup>46</sup> Because “we believe what we do largely because of the way our beliefs fit into our worldview,”<sup>47</sup> our diagnoses and solutions are not cheap talk. Worldviews consist of big yet simple ideas that operate at both individual and collective levels. They reflect and shape individual ideas, experiences, memories, and imaginations that always remain open to modifications and reinterpretations.<sup>48</sup> They are also collective systems of thought that offer some measure of coherence and consistency in an often unfathomable world.<sup>49</sup> Worldviews can incorporate contradictory and tension-inducing elements. Loosely coupled, they compete, coexist, and coevolve with one another.

The growing schisms dividing “metro” from “retro” have prompted a few observers to apply the concept of worldview to contemporary American politics.<sup>50</sup> Reflecting on the partisanship of the 1990s and early 2000s, cognitive scientist George Lakoff writes that “contemporary American politics is about worldview.”<sup>51</sup> Conservatives and Liberals have a very difficult time understanding each other because they rely on different commonsense notions as they interpret what they experience. Conservatives hold to a “Strict Father,” Liberals to a “Nurturing Parent” trope. In a similar vein, and adapting Max Weber to twentieth-century America, Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood try to capture the different intuitions and modes of reasoning that distinguish American’s disenchanted and enchanted worldviews.<sup>52</sup> Marc Hetherington and

<sup>43</sup> Ruggie 1993: 170. <sup>44</sup> Arfi 2012: 191. <sup>45</sup> Geuss 2020: 22.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips and Brown 1991: 29; Griffiths 2007: 1–2; Haukkala 2011: 30–38.

<sup>47</sup> Dewitt 2004: 11. <sup>48</sup> Röscher 2015: 11–16. <sup>49</sup> Betz 1980.

<sup>50</sup> Meyer 2001: 1–2, 22–23. <sup>51</sup> Lakoff 2002: 3. <sup>52</sup> Oliver and Wood 2018: 4–5.