

WEEK 8 | REVIEW

We covered a tremendous amount of ground over the past couple months, both in terms of content and history. We've finally arrived at the present and we can begin to assess some of the dominant worldviews being proffered by our culture. That is what we will spend the final three weeks of class doing. Before we do that, however, it will be worth our time to review what we have already learned. Remember, worldviews do not arise in a vacuum—they are the outgrowth of previous ways of thinking, attempts to address the shortcomings of earlier philosophies and make revisions. This is done in pursuit of a solid foundation upon which to build a meaningful life. We'll begin this review with a time line so we can visualize the evolution of thought in history. Then, we will examine how thought in our four broad categories—ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and ethics—has developed over time.

TIMELINE

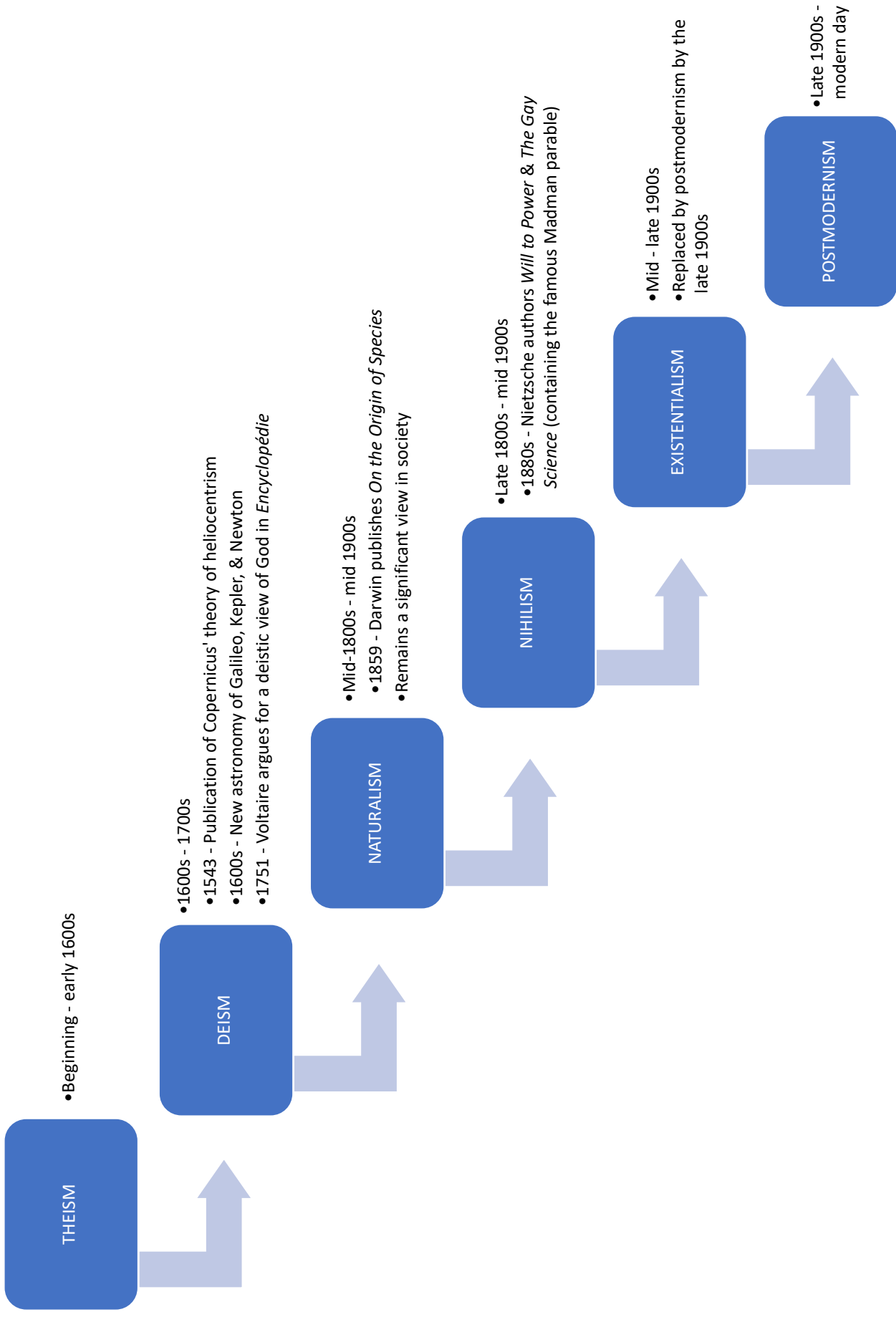
On the following page is a timeline that traces worldview developments in history. We should note that this graphic primarily follows the change in worldviews in the west over the course of the last few centuries. These are the worldviews that have had the greatest impact on western civilization and are most relevant to our cultural context.

While a visual aid like this helps us picture the grand sweep of philosophy, we should note that it has its shortcomings:

- Generalized time periods – determining when one worldview “began” and “ended” is virtually impossible. Some permutation of each of these worldviews has probably always been around. What we are trying to do is track when it became prominent, first in intellectual circles and then in society at large.
- Lack of attention to geography – these worldviews did not pop up in all places in the west simultaneously. Typically, a new philosophy takes root in an intellectual circle in one country through a small group of influential thinkers, and it slowly spreads as literature is disseminated. This nuance is lost in a timeline.
- Transitions are not clear-cut – the transition from one worldview to the next isn't clear cut, as though when a new worldview ascends the formerly dominant fades from the scene. These worldviews—or, at the very least, elements of them—coexist. When a new worldview comes on the scene it typically becomes one of many options.
- Generalized worldviews – these world views are exemplary, but in reality there are as many worldviews as there are people. Individual worldviews are often the combination of elements from several streams of thought.

Despite these shortcomings, a timeline enables us to see that there has been a progression of thought in the west. The “death of God” wrought by the rejection of Scriptural authority and elevation of human reason was the first domino to fall. Since the Enlightenment, man has sought to apply his own reason (what the Bible would probably call man's own “wisdom”) to explain

the world. Each successful explanation has become increasingly bizarre. This is expected—when you abandon God, the source and foundation of all wisdom, you can only descend into irrationality.



EVOLUTION OF ONTOLOGY

MAJOR SHIFT: from God as the personal, self-existent, independent source for all that exists to a view that the material universe is all that there is. This necessitates that the universe itself must assume some characteristics of God, like His eternality and independence, for otherwise the existence of the universe is unexplainable (despite the best efforts of modern science). In theological terms, the creation has been elevated to the status of creator (Romans 1:23).

This shift in ontology has had devastating consequences on the other philosophical categories we've been examining. Once God was removed from the picture, all meaning, morality, and purpose was lost. In many ways each successive worldview has been an attempt to overcome the nihilism that the naturalistic worldview leads to. The basic ontology has not really changed, just mankind's efforts to cope.

Predominantly, attempts to cope with the harshness of external reality has occurred by retreating within oneself, into the realm of the mind. Existentialism drew a sharp distinction between objective and subjective reality and gives primacy to the subjective as the place where people can create meaning and purpose. Postmodernism takes this one step further through a radical skepticism of our ability to access and know objective reality. All we are left with is the subjective world we create—this becomes reality.

From a theological perspective, it is no surprise that sinful man naturally turns inward the further he moves from God. The root of sin has always been pride, an idolatry of self that seeks to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

EVOLUTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

MAJOR SHIFT: from man as a personal being made in God's image to man as the outcome of chemical processes plus time plus chance. In a theistic worldview, what it means to be human is something externally defined. That is, God imbues all of us with a human nature that is universal and gives every individual person inherent dignity and value. Who we are and what our purpose is, is ultimately defined by God. When we seek to define these things for ourselves, we are in rebellion against our Creator.

The loss of God was eventually followed by the loss of this universal human nature. Because God is not there to define who we are and why we are here, each individual must assume the responsibility of answering these questions for themselves. Thus, existence precedes essence—each individual “creates” themselves through the choices they make. Postmodern adds to this the dominant impact of our situatedness in society. This impact, itself dictated by power dynamics in society, determines how we view ourselves, is oppressive, and must be deconstructed to liberate

the individual to create his/herself. Without God as the source and foundation of human value and dignity (Genesis 9:5-6; James 3:9), humanity becomes nothing more than an animal, a part of this material universe with no more intrinsic value than anything else. We are only chemistry.

EVOLUTION OF EPISTEMOLOGY

MAJOR SHIFT: from affirming that human beings made in God's image can access truth about God and reality through both revelation and the application of our God-given senses and rationality to the notion that objective truth is either inaccessible to us or simply a figment of our collective imagination. Radical skepticism reigns; both knowledge and the ability to know are doubted. We are left in a state of uncertainty, unable to extricate ourselves from circumstances and unable to transcend our limited perspective. For anyone to claim objective truth is just a power grab.

The Bible describes the noetic effects of sin vividly. Paul tells us that when we reject God, we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” and our “foolish hearts are darkened” (Romans 1:18, 21). Solomon writes that “the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live” (Ecclesiastes 9:3). Indeed, without God all we are left with is epistemological madness. Because men love the darkness rather than the light (John 3:19) they are “darkened in their understanding” (Ephesians 4:18). Only by rightly assessing and revering God can we gain wisdom (Job 28:28; Proverbs 9:10). Mankind, however, has played the fool, who “says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). Fools think irrationally, illogically. . . foolishly.

EVOLUTION OF ETHICS

MAJOR SHIFT: from acknowledging a universal moral law instituted by God to which we are all accountable to a rejection of moral absolutes and an embrace of moral relativism. The universe as a closed system does not provide any means of establishing moral norms. Mankind, being unable to transcend their social situation, is unable to establish moral norms that can be binding on all people at all times in all places. Thus, morality is localized either in society or in the individual, with no objective means of comparing different ethical systems. In this situation where anything can be “right” or “good,” in truth there ceases to be such categories as “goodness” or “rightness,” as does the possibility of assigning guilt. Ethics as a category collapses altogether.

This is not a new problem. When mankind refuses to submit to the Lordship of Christ and seeks to establish their own kingdom, ethical chaos always ensues. Good becomes evil, and evil becomes good (Isaiah 5:20). This was the problem in ancient Israel, where “there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). We are all rebels seeking to dictate our own morality based on our own sinful desires.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS | In groups, work through these review questions together

- 1) Define what a worldview is? What role do presuppositions play in a worldview?
- 2) What were/are some areas where your own worldview was deficient before this class?
How has your own worldview developed through our study?
- 3) If you could boil down the issue with all false worldviews to one thing, what would it be?
What are the implications of this for your own worldview and how you live?
- 4) What has been the most helpful part of this class so far?
- 5) How will the information in this class affect the way you live? How will it affect your evangelism?\