

WORLDVIEWS

and the Five Components



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What is it?

Individualism is the conscious or subconscious belief that we are the center around which life orbits. It is the logical outworking of postmodern thought that places disproportionate value and focus on the self. Individualism, then, has significant implications for how we view our thoughts, feelings, and desires. Specifically, in contrast to viewing an outside source or greater power being the ultimate guide through which we inhabit life, our thoughts, feelings, and desires become the ultimate grid by which we see life.

How does individualism speak to the following?

God. Depending on a person's faith or religious belief, individualism can allow room for acknowledging the existence of God, but it does not view Him as the ultimate source for life. God is located in a person's long inventory of priorities that fall behind the ultimate priority of the individual. In individualism, one experiences "the enthroning of the self as the greatest authority. God is increasingly relegated to the role of servant, and massager of the personal will."¹

Creation. Regarding the origin of things within individualism, there is some complexity here. Individualism places the self at the center of all things, so viewing God as the creator of all things and thereby the one who endows humanity with purpose is a type of oxymoron. This is because purpose, meaning, and value do not ultimately come from God but from the self. Yet things are indeed complex here because individualism is no respecter of beliefs. Contrary to a belief like postmodernism, individualism does not require a person to eliminate God from life as much as simply ensure that God is not the ultimate driver in the everyday affairs of life. He may or may not have created the world; the priority with individualism is to make sure the self is at the center of all things. Sure, God can play a role as long as we remain in the driver's seat.

Humankind. Individualism reflects the belief that humanity is inherently good. This produces lines like "follow your heart," "you need to do what you feel is best for yourself," "you be you." In a sense, all these statements are not necessarily bad or flawed in and of themselves. It's just that they reflect the sharp focus on the self and the belief that the most trustworthy person we can trust is ourselves. But more than anything, in contrast to the Christian faith, individualism holds to the belief that human beings are inherently good, not necessarily in need of a Savior.

Moral Order. Morality within individualism centers around the self. Therefore, anything that helps or affirms the self is logically seen as good, while anything that contradicts a person's thoughts, feelings, and desires is perceived as being wrong. What is important to note is how the closely linked *morality* and *ethics* have now become intertwined with a person's identity. Since a person's thoughts, feelings, and desires are given ultimate value within individualism, instructing a person to abstain from doing something deemed to be wrong when the person being instructed *feels* it is right is therefore keeping that person from freedom.

Purpose. Similar to postmodernism, individualism places a disproportionate value on the capability and capacity of the human being. If we set our mind to it, says individualism, we can do anything. There is no limit. This is one reason why we still find ourselves shocked when experiments in innovation or adventure go fatally wrong; our default thinking is that we are boundless in what we can achieve. Individualism breeds the idea that above all else, we are to love ourselves, regardless of whether we believe in God. But to be sure, the individual takes precedent over and above the priority of God.

Where do we see these things in culture?

There are so many ways in which individualism is seen in culture:

Human Sexuality. These conversations are rife when it comes to sexual ethics today. Carl Trueman writes that the way in which many groups place priority on sexual desire and inner feelings relating to personal identity “is part of this broader accent on the inner, psychological life of Western people that shapes us all.”²

Millennials and Faith. In her book *Generations*, Jean Twenge, psychology professor at San Diego State, focuses on the formidable power that individualism has on millennials. I would argue that what is cited below pertains to millennials and to other generations as well:

Why is religion less popular with Millennials? In short, because it is not compatible with individualism—and individualism is Millennials’ core value above all else. Individualism promotes focusing on the self and finding your own way, and religion by definition promotes focusing on things larger than the self and following certain rules. One Millennial said of her beliefs, “[W]hatever you feel, it’s personal. Everybody has their own idea of God and what God is.... You have your own personal beliefs of what’s acceptable for you and what’s right for you personally.” Another described leaving his church because “I was not being encouraged to think for myself. [Religious rules are] literally, ‘This is black. This is white. Do this. Don’t do that.’ And I can’t hang with that.”³

Discussion Questions:

1. One of the strong appeals of individualism is the authority it places on us as individuals. Take a few minutes to explore positive and negative ways in which we view ourselves, regardless of whether we'd attribute it to individualism. After that, write down what we believe God says about us. Reflect on how God sees us through the lens of Scripture; then write down 3 to 5 descriptions of what God says about us.
2. Contemplative exercise: Take 30 seconds to close your eyes and imagine Jesus Christ sitting next to you. If you were to ask Him what He thought of you, what do you imagine He would say? Given what you know of His character in the Bible, how would He describe you?

Notes

¹ Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From cultural relevance to gospel resilience* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), p. 11.

² Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How thinkers and activists redefined identity and sparked the sexual revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), p. 24.

³ Jean Twenge, *Generations: The real differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and what they mean for America's future* (New York: Atria Books, 2023), p. 301.

What is it?

Postmodernism is best understood as being a reaction against modernism. One of the main characteristics of modernism was reason. Postmodernism rejects reason as well as boundaries and absolutes. It's important to note that postmodernism was profoundly shaped by the philosophy of existentialism. In a nutshell, existentialism is the idea that "our existence precedes our essence."¹ When carried out into everyday life, existentialism implies that what you do, feel, or experience can determine who you are and give your life meaning.

Postmodernism, then, could be understood as a type of mood as opposed to a philosophy. In postmodernism, feelings and experiences are the major drivers when it comes to the big questions of life.

How does postmodernism speak to the following?

God. Postmodernism is the outworking of life detached from the transcendent. In postmodernism, there is no God. Therefore, when we think carefully about this, it's not as though life without God means that no one replaces the function of God, not by a long shot. In all sorts of ways, postmodernism provides the way for the self to take the place of God. God has been removed from His throne, so to speak, and human beings have inserted themselves into that spot. *As we'll see, this has major (and grim) ramifications for moral order and purpose.*

Creation. In postmodernism, the origin of things is not theistic. In other words, God is not the source of life in our world according to postmodern thought. Who or what brought things into existence could be an amalgam of things, but it was not God. Generally speaking, the recurring words used to describe the beginning of things here is that it was a set of evolutionary processes that caused the world into existence. To be clear, the postmodern perspective does not view God as the creator of the world.

Humankind. In line with the thinking on creation, postmodernism posits that humankind has no exact creator—certainly not God—nor does humankind have a designed purpose. The words of existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre capture this thinking more precisely: "There is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it.... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."² In her book *Love Thy Body*, Nancy Pearcey comments on Sartre's words: "Just as species are constantly changing and evolving, so individuals must leave behind all stable standards of behavior and immerse themselves in the ceaseless flux of life, constantly creating and re-creating themselves."³

Moral Order. Just mentioning the term *moral order* within postmodernism is actually misplaced. In postmodernism, there is no objective point of reference (no objective standard) by which a person can call something right or wrong. This stands in stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian faith in which God is the objective point of reference by which we judge right from

wrong. But within postmodernism, there is no objective point of reference over which moral conversations are ruled or dictated. So, in the end, morality becomes subjective and relative in meaning. Morality and ethics slowly move away from being placed in objectively right or wrong categories to being mere matters of preference.

Purpose. In postmodernism, there is no ultimate plan or aim for our lives. We create the plan. Although this can strike an energizing note, as in “we get to drive the plan for our lives,” this also means that there is no ultimate meaning or purpose in our lives. So when we search for meaning and purpose in life, education, work, friendships, highs, lows, successes, failures, and crises, postmodernism will tell us that we are *the source* to make sense of it all. The reality is that many people live out this framework. And in some ways, it is livable ... until it’s not. When tragedy, loss, pain, or suffering come, the desperate human search and longing for meaning will go out into an empty space. Postmodernism will answer back with something like “everything happens for a reason.” But without an appeal to the transcendent or to God, our hope for finding ultimate meaning is not answered within the postmodern framework. On those terms, postmodernism has no answers. It is in that lonely place of pain where the postmodern worldview is found wanting, if not crushing.

Where do we see these things in culture?

The difficult reality of identifying the postmodern perspective is the fact that it is the cultural air of which we breathe every day. So, in a sense, it is like asking a fish what water is like. Since postmodern thinking is all-pervasive, it can become increasingly difficult to discern it.

But to be clear, this postmodern way of thinking—particularly concerning the aspects of God, creation, humankind, moral order, and purpose—is indeed important to be aware of. The examples come to us at many levels within culture. In a 2009 commencement speech to graduates, media personality and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres spoke these words to students: “My advice to you is to be true to yourself and everything will be fine.”⁴ In a few words, this captures the spirit of postmodernism. The logical outworking of postmodern thinking is to let our feelings and how we view ourselves be the guiding compass in our lives. Our meaning in life can be derived by what we feel and experience.

Many examples can be found in the top songs that are on streaming services or the radio. A popular song a while back, sung by the artist Katy Perry, is entitled “I Kissed a Girl.” The following are lyrics from that song:

I kissed a girl and I liked it
The taste of her cherry chapstick
I kissed a girl just to try it
I hope my boyfriend don't mind it
It felt so wrong, it felt so right
Don't mean I'm in love tonight

Insofar as our conversation here is concerned, this is the postmodern framework put to song. The centrality of feelings is evident: “It felt so wrong, it felt so right.” And interestingly in this song, it’s not only the focus of feelings that should catch our attention, but also the fact that feelings are the leading guide to discerning right and wrong. There is no such thing as calling something objectively right or wrong. Rather, feelings are the compass, however blurry that view might be.

Notes

¹ Quotation by Jean Paul Sartre, cited in Jonathan Sacks’ book *Morality: Restoring the common good in divided times* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), p. 81.

² Jean Paul Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism” (1946), in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (London: Meridian, 1989). This quote was cited in Nancy Pearcey’s book *Love Thy Body*, p. 206.

³ Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering hard questions about life and sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), p. 206.

⁴ Quotation by Ellen DeGeneres, cited in David Brooks’ book *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), p. 57.

⁵ Lyrics from the song “I Kissed a Girl,” written by Lukasz Gottwald, Cathy Dennis, Katy Perry, and Max Martin. Accessed 11/21/23, <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Katy-Perry/I-Kissed-a-Girl>.

What is it?

Although *relativism* is a term that reaches beyond the categories of truth and morality, it does not cover less.¹ Insofar as a person's worldview is concerned, relativism denotes that truth is "relative to the beliefs or valuations of an individual or group that accepts it. According to relativism, a claim is made true for those who accept it by that very act."² By definition, then, moral and truth claims within a framework of relativism are not linked to an objective point of reference but to a subjective point of reference. The logical outworking of this means that issues of truth and morality move from being matters of objective right and wrong acts to matters of preference.

How does relativism speak to the following?

God. It has been well argued that in order for one to make an objective moral statement—say by calling something right or wrong, or good or evil—there needs to be an objective point of reference on which such a statement is made. The Christian worldview certainly holds to this conviction. Generally speaking, the Christian moral framework holds that in order to call something evil, there must be such a thing as good. But in order to differentiate between good and evil, there must be a type of moral law that distinguishes between the two. If there is such a thing as a moral law, so the thought goes, there must be a being who bestows this moral law. For Christians, this moral lawgiver, so to speak, is God. But that is just part of the equation here. When we think of this framework in light of relativism, we immediately realize that God is absent from the relativistic framework; relativism does not include an objective point of reference (God) in its moral compass. Therefore, calling something objectively right or objectively wrong is beyond its scope.

Creation. When it comes to the creation of the cosmos, relativism, as in most cases of its thinking, takes a friendly approach. Most common is the conversational equivalent of "What's true for you is true for you. And what's true for me is true for me." Although this commonly held posture sounds appealing and compelling, it lacks intellectual grounding; and further, it runs into problems when it comes head-to-head with a contradictory worldview. As we find in the other categories of this worldview guide, relativism does in fact strike a warm tone of inclusion (e.g., you can believe whatever you want, and I can believe whatever I want, even if our views contradict each other). And while the aspect of inclusion is real, it is the incoherence of relativism that ultimately breaks its persuasive power. In other words, the belief that God created the cosmos does not cohere with the view that God did not create the cosmos. Either God created the cosmos or He did not. Therefore, a relativistic view on how creation came to be eventually breaks down.

Humankind. Within relativism there can be many purposes for which humanity was created. One option is that God has a purpose for us. Another might hold to a plurality of reasons for which we have been created; and within that plethora of thought, God or gods might not be included at all. Within relativism, the truth about humankind is relative to a person's view or conviction.

Moral Order. Perhaps the most problematic and troublesome outworking of relativism is in its view of morality. Within relativism, truth and morality are viewed as entities relative to a situation, person, or group. To be clear, and for sake of nuance, there are at least three parts to morality: the objective act, the subjective motive of that action, and the context in which that act takes place.³ It is important to note the complexity of how motives and circumstances can indeed make moral actions more gray than black-and-white. But when it comes to the objective act, relativism does not acknowledge it as such. This viewpoint can have crippling consequences at a personal and societal level if an evil act is dismissed as "cultural" or "far away." Yet, these are the remarks that relativism leads us to. In relativism, there is no such thing as good or evil. Those are objective statements that find no room within the doctrine of relativism.

Purpose. As with all the categories listed above, a person's purpose and meaning in life is relative to what the person believes it is or should be. Within relativism, there is no objective purpose in life.

Where do we see these things in culture?

In a monograph study called *The Porn Phenomenon*, conducted by Barna (a Christian research firm) in partnership with Josh McDowell Ministry in 2016, statistical data revealed disconcerting truths about how people of different age groups and demographics think about porn. In the chapter titled "Porn & Morality," the impact of individualism and relativism were shown. The following excerpt captures some notable findings:

Nine out of 10 believe "people should not criticize someone else's life choices" (89%) and eight out of 10 say "people can believe whatever they want, as long as those beliefs don't affect society" (79%).... When it comes to the sexual expression of that desire, nearly nine out of 10 Americans believe "each person has to decide his or her own sexual boundaries" (88%).

In other words, the only moral code most people agree on is that each person is the sole moral authority for himself.⁴

Relativism is certainly not solely to blame for the morally slippery slope we find here. But it is indeed a contributing factor to the disproportionately self-oriented moral code that many live by. Later in that same chapter, there is a graph which tracked actions that teens and young adults between the ages of 13 and 24 deem to be wrong. At the top of the list is "taking something that belongs to someone else." Number 3 is "saying something that is not true," while number 4 is "not recycling." Listed down at number 9 is "viewing pornographic images."⁵

After the myriad charts, graphs, and summaries, the author concludes:

In general people find thinking negatively about someone else as morally worse than using pornography, and young people rank not recycling and conspicuous consumption of electricity or water as morally worse.”⁶

It can be easy to become disheartened at the state of morality and the impact of relativism on our thinking. But this data gathered by Barna can also be a strategic starting point for us—an important means by which we can more meaningfully understand and engage with our children on matters of truth and morality. In short, we need to know the cultural context in which we live if we are wanting to present truth, light, and ultimately the Lord Jesus into our families and communities.

Discussion Questions:

1. Thinking introspectively, what are some ways in which you believe relativism has impacted you and your family?
2. If you were asked a moral question by your son or daughter (e.g., “Mom/Dad, do you think it is okay to do x?”), how would your response vary from that of your friend who is not a Christian?
3. When it comes to matters of truth and morality, how much would you say you vary in your conviction to those of your friends who are not Christians? Is there any difference?

Notes

¹ If you are interested in looking at a more in-depth and academic understanding of how relativism is defined as a philosophical doctrine, see this *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* link: [Relativism](#) (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

² J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 132.

³ According to Thomas Aquinas, taken from Peter Kreeft’s book *Making Choices: Practical wisdom for everyday moral decisions* (Servant Books/Franciscan Media, 1990), p. 28.

⁴ Barna in Partnership with Josh McDowell Ministry, *The Porn Phenomenon* (Josh McDowell Ministry, 2016), pp. 63–64.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 69.

What is it?

Modernism is a worldview that reflects many of the great thinkers from the Modern period (the Enlightenment tradition). As far as the Christian faith is concerned, a key word to note about modernism is the huge role that *reason* played. Specifically, the nature of truth and how one views truth changed during the Modern period. Up to that point in history, the nature of truth had been viewed as objective; God (or a higher power) was understood as truth's ultimate point of reference. Reason was certainly valued before the Enlightenment, but it also held association and attachment to God or the transcendent. God was the source for truth. But during the Modern period, the ultimate justification for truth changed from being God to reason. (Reason became detached from God.) Even more strikingly, God became subject to reason.

How does modernism speak to the following?

God. Within modernism, God takes a back-seat role in everyday life. Although many thinkers in the Modern period were indeed Christian, the emerging elevated role of reason made it so that God himself was put under the scrutinizing power of reason. At its most basic level, this elevated role of reason eventually led to the belief that God is not active in daily life—a type of deistic worldview—which places God's main role as being the one who kick-starts the universe and then takes his hands off the steering wheel, so to speak.¹ This way of thinking also has implications for how we understand God as acting in the Bible and throughout history. Miracles in the Bible—for instance, the parting of the Red Sea or Christ's turning water into wine—become untenable simply because when those stories are put to the test of reason, they do not pass. Therefore, God's supernatural intervention in history becomes questionable because reason is the primary means by which we judge something to be true or not.

Creation. There are two widely held views in modernism when it comes to creation. One is the deistic view which, at a popular level, is the belief that God created the world but has not been involved in creation since that time. The other is a worldview in which God is altogether not involved in the creation of the world, reflecting the worldviews of naturalism or materialism.² Collectively, all views reject the belief that God (the supernatural) is involved in everyday life.

Humankind. With modernism, humanity is not necessarily inherently bad or inherently good. What is striking about modernism is that the view of humanity, in some ways, reflects the Judeo-Christian worldview of humanity without the Judeo-Christian anchoring. For instance, people who hold to a modernistic view of humanity might very well see all people as equal and of infinite worth. However, contrary to the biblical understanding that our worth is linked to the Scripture's teaching that all human beings are made in the image of God and therefore endowed with intrinsic worth, modernism still expresses the value of human life, but its grounding is not in God or the Bible. Instead, a human's worth is rooted in a free-floating type

of ethic (e.g., “Well, of course all people are equal! Everyone knows that!”) or in the name of reason (e.g., “It’s only reasonable to believe that all human beings have intrinsic worth”). In summary, the view of humanity might share contours of the Judeo-Christian worldview, but its anchoring is not in the Scriptures.

Moral Order. Loosely speaking, the ethic within modernism is adjudicated by reason (e.g., “Do good to others because, well, it’s the *reasonable* thing to do”). Again, as was alluded to in the above two categories, modernism smuggles in value judgments from the Judeo-Christian worldview, but when pushed to explain why a person should or should not act a certain way, modernism is hard-pressed to answer what is right/wrong or good/evil, and how a person ought to behave. For some, the justification might in fact be reason, while for others, there might simply be no anchoring of their moral compass. For instance, when asked why something is right or wrong, a common response could be, “Well, you just know. All humans know what is right or wrong.” This view is compelling, and it can actually work until two worldviews (both seemingly reasonable) clash and contradict each other.

Purpose. In modernism, the theological aspect (that is, the view of God and His involvement in our world) tends toward a deistic worldview or an atheistic worldview. To be clear, the first is a view in which God set the world in order and then stepped away, and the second, a view in which there is no God nor has there ever been a God involved in the world. Although the great thinkers within the Modern period indeed believed in a God who gave human beings purpose, meaning, and significance, the elevation of reason becoming ultimate led to the prevalent view, by default, that human beings have the power to create purpose and meaning in life with or without God. God can be, but is not, necessary to finding purpose and meaning in life.

Where do we see these things in culture?

One subtle example of where we see the complexity of modernism is in some of the statements that are put out over social media or in other cases on lawns and throughout our neighborhoods. Take, for instance, what one person has called *a secular creed*:

In this house we believe that
Black Lives Matter
Love Is Love
Gay Rights Are Civil Rights
Women’s Rights Are Human Rights
Transgender Women Are Women³

This example is just one variation of a series of statements made expressing certain convictions. To be clear, the objective for the Christian should not be to argue or to be combative here, but to simply probe further as to what makes these statements true. Although there is a great deal of complexity in these statements, not the least being the politicization of humane issues, many of the issues being discussed pertain to “rights” without discussing what makes those “rights” actually right.

It's not just the obligatory tone that is evoked in the many statements offered in our culture, but the forceful nature of moral terms/statements being made without any moral grounding. We are seeing more and more cases in sports, higher education spaces, and the corporate world in which people are shamed publicly if they do not adhere to certain moral guidelines. Words such as *tolerance* and *inclusion* are used frequently, but again, without objective moral grounding. Some of this is a result of the seeds sown in the Modern period during which truth moved from being something outside of us (objective) to something that can be determined by us (subjective). We are now reaping the unintended consequences of that time.

Discussion Questions:

1. It might be worth thinking introspectively about how modernism has impacted your worldview/faith. How would we describe the connection between moral decisions in our lives and our relationship with God?
2. If your child were to ask you how you know that Christianity is true, how would you answer that question? How do we respond?

Notes

¹ See Glenn S. Sunshine's helpful book *Why You Think the Way You Do* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 163.

² In *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), Will Durant helpfully defines naturalism and materialism. *Naturalism* is defined as "the doctrine that all reality comes under the 'laws of nature,' " with *materialism* being "the doctrine that matter is the only reality," p. 400.

³ See Rebecca McLaughlin's book *The Secular Creed: Engaging five contemporary claims* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021).