

4<sup>th</sup> Semester / Spring 2025

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The topics this week are nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism.

Some rival worldviews are competitive rivals that challenge a biblical worldview outright, while others are invasive rivals that can infiltrate and alter other worldviews. Worldviews are not so much systems as they are stories, so every worldview is telling us a different story about the world and our place in the world. Some worldviews offer grand narratives that can influence entire cultures or communities, while others are derivative worldviews that borrow elements from one of more other worldviews.

Naturalism is a grand narrative sort of worldview that arose out of the more skeptical stream of the Enlightenment. Naturalism has given birth to a number of derivative worldviews, one of which is arguably its most logical development: nihilism (Lat. *nihil* = nothing).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is the father of nihilism. Nietzsche is often considered an atheist, but it would be more accurate to say he was a hostile agnostic. Nietzsche is best known for three ideas: (1) belief in God is now unbelievable (the "death of God"); (2) the primary motivation for human actions is the "will to power"; (3) the destination humanity should be striving for is becoming superior *Übermensch* (German = "over man"). The latter two ideas influenced the development of Nazism. The first idea became a key assumption of nihilism.

If there is any such thing as absolute truth, nobody can know it perfectly. Our understanding of the truth is always

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captive to our individual perspectives. The closest we can get to the truth is understanding all the different perspectives and determining which ones seem most plausible.

(2) Is there some higher power?

It doesn't matter if there is a God or gods. The modern world is really too advanced scientifically and philosophically to spend too much effort thinking about the supernatural.

(3) Where do we come from?

Nihilism is a form of naturalism, so in general the answers to this question are the same as naturalists (the Big Bang and evolution). However, it really doesn't matter. We are here, and the fact that we are here has no higher or ultimate meaning. This is just how it happened.

(4) Why is the world so messed up?

The world has always been messed up. Humans have always been messed up. Any attempt to find some meaning in the brokenness of the world is not worth the effort. It's better to just accept reality and not try to invent myths to give some higher meaning to it all.

(5) Can things ever get better?

Nihilists are pessimistic naturalists. As such, they believe that humans are prone to make the world worse because our species is selfish, prone to self-destruction, etc. There is no such thing as redemption in the spiritual sense. Myths are intellectual crutches to help us make sense of the meaninglessness of life.

(6) What is the good life?

You should just embrace reality rather than fantasy. Be a good person who does good things. Of course, goodness is really a matter of one's perspective. Try not to despair, though it is perfectly natural to look at the meaninglessness of the world and want to despair. Life has no meaning.

(7) Where is the world headed?

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(1) Is there truth and can we know it?

Christian existentialists believe in absolute truth, even if we cannot fully know it, while naturalist existentialists reject absolute truth in principle. All existentialists emphasize subjective truth rooted in personal experience.

(2) Is there some higher power?

Christian existentialists believe in God, while naturalistic existentialists reject supernaturalism.

(3) Where do we come from?

Christian existentialists believe in some sort of theistic creation, while naturalistic existentialists affirm naturalistic views of origins.

(4) Why is the world so messed up?

Christian existentialists believe in the fall, while naturalistic existentialists do not. But all existentialists emphasize that a lack of authenticity and the limitation of reasonable freedom for individuals is at the root of many, and perhaps most, human problems.

(5) Can things ever get better?

Christian existentialists affirm doctrines like the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection, though theological liberals might redefine them in various ways. Naturalistic existentialists tend to focus on personal morality rooted in their notions of personal authenticity and freedom.

(6) What is the good life?

For Christian existentialists, the answer is to love God and neighbor, pursue spiritual maturity, reach the lost and serve those in need, etc. For naturalistic existentialists, the good life is characterized by being a good person, experiencing personal fulfillment, and doing what you can to make the world a better place. Of course, what that actually means is highly subjective.

(7) Where is the world headed?

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(1) Is there truth and can we know it?

There is either no such thing as absolute truth, or if there is, it cannot be known. What matters is individual perspectives rooted in personal experiences. It is really a power play to argue for any absolute truth that is binding on all people.

(2) Is there some higher power?

If there is, we cannot be sure what that power is. For all practical purposes, the only power that matters is the power wielded by humans as individuals or in community.

(3) Where do we come from?

Most postmodernists are naturalists and default to a combination of the Big Bang and evolution to explain origins.

(4) Why is the world so messed up?

Primarily because of the misuse of power. Humans have evolved in such a way that individuals compete with each other, communities compete with one another, majorities oppress minorities, etc. Instead of embracing relativism and multiculturalism, humans are always trying to impose their own values on other humans.

(5) Can things ever get better?

The only way things will get better is if everyone concedes that truth is relative, if we eliminate all misuse of power, and if we come to some provisional moral consensus. There is no spiritual redemption. Something like an earthly redemption can be experienced when we let go of our own preferences and prejudices and privileges, which are really all about power. This is especially true of individuals who are part of majority communities.

(6) What is the good life?

For the most part, postmodernists follow existentialists in this area. The good life is characterized by being a good person, experiencing personal fulfillment, and doing what you can to make the world a better place. Of course, what that actually means is highly subjective.

