



# CHAPTER 3 >>





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# 3

## COMMUNICATION: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

### OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we consider why communication is significant. A person's answer to this question is influenced by his or her worldview, his or her most basic beliefs about the world as it really is. This chapter reviews a couple of autonomous (humanly devised) approaches to making sense of things and pauses to consider their limitations. We then review how Biblically Christian thinking answers the same basic questions and how these answers enhance its merits as an alternative to human-centered models.

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## ➤ A CLOSER LOOK

As has been explained, communication is the transmission of meaningful information from one person or group of persons (the sender) to another person or group of persons (the recipient) in a way that generates shared attitudes, values, beliefs, feelings, or behaviors between the sender and recipient. People use verbal and nonverbal forms like the ones presented in the previous chapter, sometimes intentionally and other times unintentionally, to create these shared understandings.

Important as these basic concepts are, they merely set the stage for larger questions that the serious student of communication must consider before exploring what it takes to excel as a communicator. Among these more basic questions are the following: Where did communication come from? What is its purpose, if indeed it has a purpose? What meaningful difference can it make in individual lives and in the world? What, if anything, makes a communicative act or a communicational message moral or good? What, if anything, makes it immoral or evil? Unless it factors foundational questions like these, the study of communication has little value.

A person's answers to questions like these, about communication's significance, will be powerfully influenced by his or her *worldview*—an individual's most basic assumptions about the way things truly are. Your worldview is a composite of your beliefs about human origin (where we came from), human nature (what makes us human), human purpose (why we are here), and human destiny (where we are going). It also involves your beliefs about moral values (the rightness or wrongness of things) and aesthetic values (the desirability or undesirability of things). Most thinking people have at least a basic set of answers to these questions, and these answers impact what they value in life and how they interact with other people. These beliefs are so basic to your way of viewing life that you instinctively just assume them unless something presses you to critically evaluate or to justify them.

## ➤ WORLDVIEWS AND THE VALUE OF COMMUNICATION

What is your worldview? Your behavior does more to answer this question than the words you offer when you are asked to state your beliefs. A person who professes to be a follower of Jesus but who lives in a way that contradicts what Jesus taught may profess the Christian worldview, but this person's behavior may imply that his or her worldview is more hedonistic than it is Christian. Indeed, a worldview is the belief system that you practice in daily life, not just the set of belief statements that you offer when asked to do so. If the beliefs a person professes contradict the beliefs he or she actually practices, one may reasonably infer from this that the person is hypocritical, delusional, or else ignorant of his or her true belief system. A *hypocrite* is someone who is aware of and content to live with an inconsistency between the belief system he or she professes and the one he or she



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If your parents warned you to avoid the wrong crowd or to avoid watching certain types of TV programming when you were young, they likely did so because they recognized the powerful impact one's socialization experiences can have in fashioning what one becomes.

practices. A *delusional* person is someone who does not know that such an inconsistency exists because he or she chooses to disbelieve in its existence, even though this person has reason for believing that it does. An *ignorant* person is someone who does not know that such an inconsistency exists because he or she has no reason to know that it exists.

People whose walk and talk are inconsistent are often unaware of this disconnect because they thoughtlessly assume that they truly believe in what they say they believe. Blind assumptions of this type can harm them in a number of ways. Besides preventing them from seeing themselves as they really are, this misconception can persuade those who notice the inconsistency that they are untrustworthy because of it. Biblically Christian thinking recognizes an even greater potential consequence of inauthentic statements of belief: “Just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions. Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter” (Matt. 7:20–21).

## ▲How Worldviews Develop

How does a person's worldview develop? Several factors contribute to this. Perhaps the most obvious of these is his or her lifetime of *socialization*—the person's history of interactions with people whose input helps to shape the way he or she sees and acts toward the world. Parents, spiritual leaders, teachers, friends, and media personalities are the most obvious examples of these influential others. Through formal and informal interactions with other people, we derive our verbal and nonverbal languages, our behavioral patterns, our group and individual identities, and many of our values and beliefs. If your parents warned you to avoid the wrong crowd or to avoid watching certain types of TV programming when you were young, they likely did so because they recognized the powerful impact one's socialization experiences can have in fashioning what one becomes.

A second factor that may impact a person's worldview development is *physical constitution*—the bodily dynamics, like neurological and biochemical processes, that help to shape the individual's personality and, by extension, his or her openness to certain types of ideas, feelings, and behaviors. Volumes of scholarly research affirm that a person's physical constitution can impact his or her levels of aggressiveness, agreeability, sociability, and impulsiveness, among other belief-expressive behaviors. The research also shows that when a person's physical constitution changes, his or her personality can change, too. Perhaps you have witnessed such a transformation in someone who has suffered a brain injury or whose brain arteries have hardened (a condition called “atherosclerosis”) as he or she has aged.

A third factor that may impact a person's worldview development is his or her *spiritual constitution*. While mainstream communication scholars disregard this as a factor in someone's worldview development, Biblically Christian thinking does not. The Bible teaches that people enter the world in a state of spiritual brokenness. Although we are inclined to seek something God-like, we are not inclined, on our own, to seek for God



himself (see Rom. 3:9–26). Despite this tendency, God, in ways not necessarily understandable to humans, can open a person’s eyes to otherwise indiscernible spiritual truths and use this revelation to transform a person’s understanding of life’s purpose and the right approach to living (see John 6:37–40, 44, 63–65). Thus, divine intervention, no less than socialization and physical constitution, can impact a person’s worldview development and the communicative behaviors that flow from it.

## ▲Basic Worldview Types and Truth Standards

Worldviews can be distinguished from each other in lots of ways. At the most basic level, worldviews can be broken into two major categories. *Autonomous worldviews* are systems of belief that people develop on their own, primarily in response to what human standards have taught them to deem believable or acceptable. The autonomist’s defining belief, in words from the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras, is that “Man is the measure of all things.” A *theocentric worldview*, by contrast, recognizes that God, the timeless, changeless source and sustainer of the universe and the source of all knowledge, discloses otherwise indiscernible foundational truths through Scripture, and that these otherwise hidden disclosures rightly frame and give direction to human quests to make sense of anything, including communication.

In their quests to determine what is believable, acceptable, or true, autonomists test beliefs through the use of several types of human-centered proof standards. Rationalistic and empirical truth standards, for example, hold that a belief, feeling, or behavior is unacceptable if it is illogical or if it is at odds with what common human observations tell us is true. To the rationalistic/empirical mind, Biblical accounts of miracles—such as Jesus’s feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes, or His walking on water (Mark 6)—are difficult to accept since these accounts go against commonly observed, supposedly unchangeable laws of physics.

Pragmatic truth standards, by contrast, hold that a belief, feeling, or behavior is acceptable if it simply “works” for the person who holds it, regardless of whether it logically consists with anyone else’s experiences and standards. The twentieth-century libertarian Ayn Rand expressed this way of thinking when she claimed that “man must be the beneficiary of his own moral actions” and that the “actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own rational self-interest.”<sup>1</sup> Many pragmatists deny the idea that people come to know things in exactly the same way, so they reject the use of supposedly objective criteria, like rationalistic or empirical rules, for the purpose of determining whether a person’s beliefs, feelings, or behaviors are acceptable. What matters to these pragmatists, at least in theory, is that individuals are free to discover or to create truth for themselves without being sidetracked by other people’s standards. To the pragmatist, others’ moral standards are little more than tools for manipulating other people, or what nineteenth-century nihilist Friedrich Nietzsche’s more cynically called “the best of all devices for leading mankind by the nose.”<sup>2</sup>



Friedrich Nietzsche.

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Utilitarian truth standards, like pragmatic ones, hold that a belief, feeling, or behavior is acceptable if it “works,” but differ radically from pragmatists in how they determine what works. For the utilitarian, a belief, feeling, or behavior that works is one that promotes the greatest good not for the individual, but for humanity as a whole. As Jeremy Bentham, an eighteenth-century formulator of this model, put it, “Ethics at large [for the utilitarian] may be defined as the art of directing men’s actions to the production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness, on the part of those whose interest is in view.”<sup>3</sup> For a modern example of how utilitarian thinking works, one can review the writings of Peter Singer, a controversial ethics professor at Princeton University. Like a pragmatist, he rejects universal moral rules, such as the Biblical teaching that all human life is valuable. Instead, he uses utilitarian logic to argue, shockingly, that killing some birth-defected babies is morally justified for utilitarian reasons. The following quote illustrates how his thinking operates: “When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore, if killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him.”<sup>4</sup> This is the utilitarian thinking in its rawest form.

Before presenting the theocentric approach’s truth standard and contrasting it with the autonomous standards just presented, we must briefly review a couple of the autonomous approach’s especially prominent worldview traditions—physical determinism and social constructionism. In doing so, we contrast what these subsystems say about human origin, purpose, destiny, and values and consider the implications of these views for their adherents’ answer to this chapter’s guiding question, “Why does communication matter?”

## ▶ AUTONOMOUS WORLDVIEWS AND COMMUNICATION

How many worldviews are there? Scholars differ in their answers to this question. Dennis McCallum, in his book *Christianity: The Faith That Makes Sense*, identifies five systems—physical determinism, pantheism, theism, spiritism and polytheism, and postmodernism. David Noebel, in his book *Understanding the Times*, highlights six—Christianity, Islam, secular humanism, Marxism, cosmic humanism, and postmodernism. Anthony Steinbronn, in his book *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*, lists seven systems—Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, tribalism, modernism, and a Biblical view. In the latest edition of his *The Universe Next Door*, a work that has sold more than 300,000 copies since its first edition, James Sire profiles nine worldview traditions—Christian theism, deism, physical determinism, nihilism, existentialism, Eastern pantheistic monism, New Age spirituality, postmodernism, and Islamic theism.

Obviously, some of these works are more meticulous than others in their approach to parsing the world’s major, basic belief systems. Despite differences, each of these treatments, and others like them, helpfully demonstrates how our fundamental assumptions about the world impact the way we distinguish things that matter from

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Scholars differ in their answers to this question.



things that do not matter. Rather than pointlessly deeming one of these treatments to be better than the others—each affords an interesting, informative approach to the topic—I reduce their distinctions to two clearly distinguishable, autonomous classifications and then contrast these with their theocentric alternative. My goal in an introductory text like this one is not to catalog every autonomous way of thinking or every worldview subsystem, but briefly to describe the overarching systems—physical determinism and social constructionism—that have most profoundly impacted Westerners’ ways of thinking about life and about the significance of anything in life, including communication.

### ▲Physical Determinism

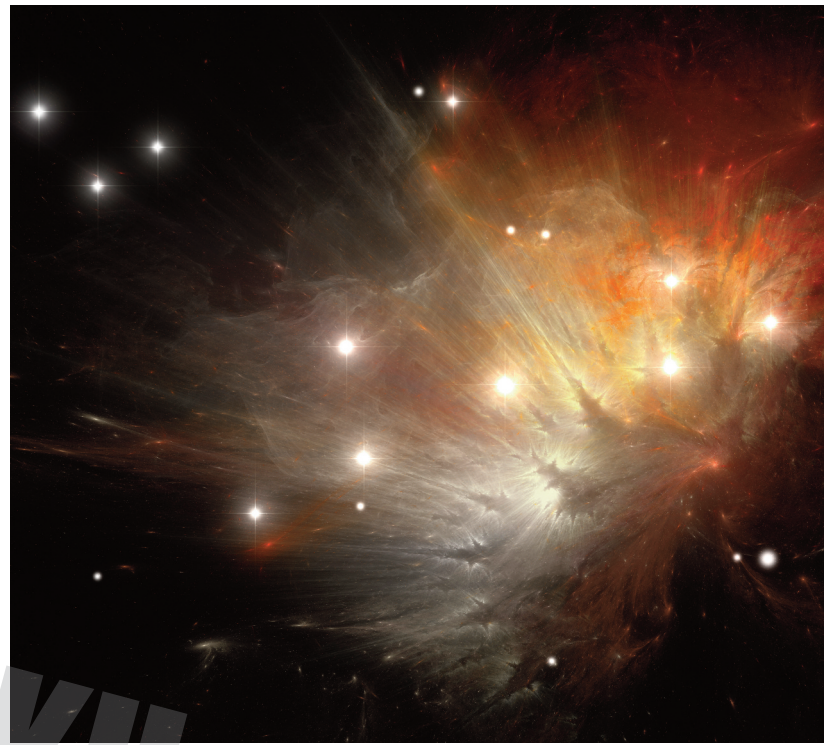
The late astronomer Carl Sagan’s quip that “the Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be” aptly expresses this belief system’s guiding assumption.<sup>5</sup> Physical determinists see the universe as a self-created, self-sustaining machine, consisting of material particles and processes and nothing more than these, that invariably follows the course that physics has blindly programmed it to follow. Everything that happens, this view holds, happens because nature has programmed it to occur. History follows an inevitable course, and nothing can alter this.

Physical determinism denies the existence of a separate spiritual realm and of a Creator Who can alter history’s course as He wills. The beliefs that God or spiritual beings exist and that life has an overarching spiritual purpose, it maintains, are little more than biochemically conditioned illusions that the human brain creates to enable people to cope with the harsh realities of a hostile world. These determinists hold that although the universe appears to be an infinitely complex yet remarkably functional machine, it was not intelligently created. As one prominent evolutionary biologist reportedly expresses this, “It is all accident, all a matter of chance. No reason, no end, no purpose at all.”<sup>6</sup>

#### Its Modern Western Origins

This view has become increasingly popular in Western culture since the beginning of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, when European scholars began to investigate and to explain the world independently, inspired but not necessarily guided by Biblical precepts. Ironically, a number of this movement’s early trailblazers were outstanding Christians who aimed, through their direct investigations of the material world, simply to use their logical and observational powers to better understand the universe they realized God had created. They visualized their task, in words commonly attributed to astronomer Johannes Kepler, as being simply to “think God’s thoughts after Him.”

Buoyed by these trailblazers’ discoveries and successes, emboldened new scholars



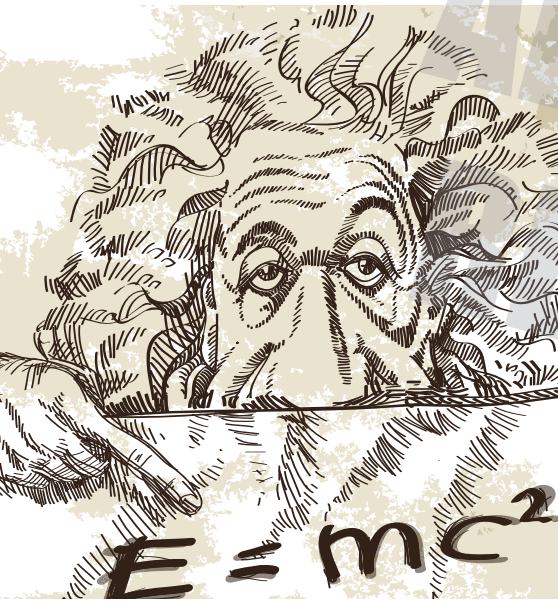
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emerged during the centuries that followed who saw in the human powers of observation and reasoning the key to answering questions not just about the physical universe's elements and operations, but about virtually anything. The Biblical precepts that inspired and framed many of their predecessors' investigations ceased to be revered as divinely disclosed and rightly authoritative, and were themselves subjected to rationalistic and empirical truth standards for the purpose of judging their validity. The new thinkers recognized human experience as most people know it or can come to know it through observation as the standard for determining whether something is believable. Thus, they produced works like Thomas Jefferson's *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, a New Testament that retained Jesus's moral teachings but removed references to His miracles. This human-centered way of making sense of the world gradually emerged as the accepted way of determining whether something is true, not just among intellectuals but among people in general. It remains especially popular today in scientific circles, where quests for understanding typically disregard Biblical precepts to explain the world, including such God-initiated earthly wonders as human communication.

Why then do people communicate as we do? Inspired by ideas that biologist Charles Darwin popularized during the mid-nineteenth century, physical determinists assume the drive to survive is fundamentally what moves individuals to interact with each other. As these theorists see it, human history is primarily the story of people working with or struggling against nature and each other in each individual's quest for self-preservation. Nature, they say, has somehow wired people to operate in this way. Physical determinists believe an individual instinctively communicates with other individuals to establish connections that boost his or her likelihood for survival. This, in a nutshell, is the naturalist's explanation of what makes human communication significant. It is seen as little more than a lifeline in a turbulent Darwinian ocean in which only the fittest survive. When they sink beneath the waters and drown, this view supposes, they simply cease to exist. As noted earlier, there is no spiritual afterlife in the physical determinist's way of seeing things.



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"Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control."  
- Albert Einstein

One more point about physical determinism is noteworthy in this brief description because of its relevance to communication. Physical determinists hold that people are essentially machines—that because they are wired to behave as they do, they are unable to choose their actions freely or to determine what they will become. Instead, these theorists posit, people become only what genetic and environmental variables combine to dictate that they shall become.

Determinists dismiss a person's belief that he or she is free to define his or her own destiny as a biochemically induced illusion. As the eighteenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza expressed this fatalistic notion, "In the mind there is no absolute or free will; but the mind is determined to wish this or that by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause, and this last by another cause, and so on to infinity."<sup>7</sup> More recently, Albert Einstein expressed the same assumption in the following words: "Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect as well as the star. Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper."<sup>8</sup>

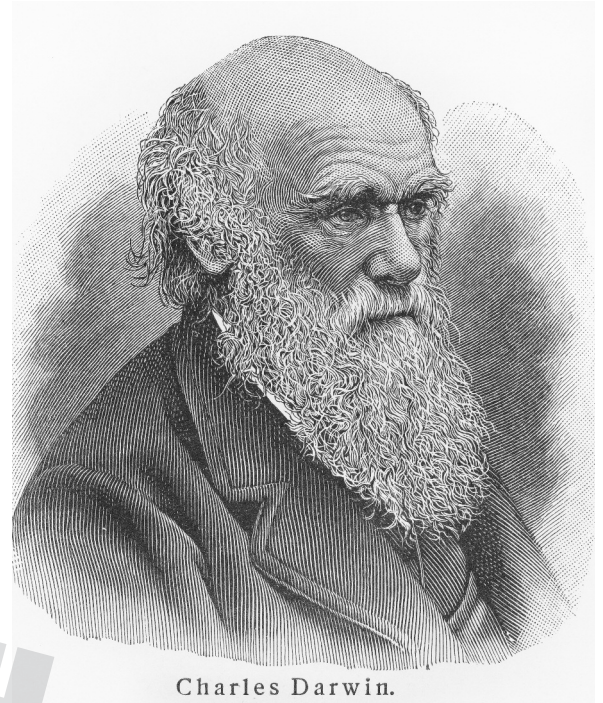
## A Critique

A critical look at this way of thinking is in order at this point. If the universe and all it comprises is an accident with no overarching purpose, as physical determinists assert, then people can have no more value, significance, or purpose than mice, fleas, or amoeba, because each is a product of the same accidental yet supposedly self-directed creative process. Physical determinism assigns humans no special status or significance in the universe. Thus, people's religious rituals and their charitable acts toward others are seen as biochemically programmed quests for self-preservation that have no eternal value. Human abuses, too—whether genocide, rape, or child molestation—are trivialized as little more than culturally relative, socially unaccepted acts in the ongoing struggle among living beings for survival. Physical determinism does not see the abuse of another person as being wrong in the principled, absolute sense that theocentrists do when they criticize the abuse as wrong.

Physical determinism is autonomous because it begins with the blind rationalistic/empirical assumption—and it is just an assumption—that people can credibly believe only in that which common experience deems objectively believable. If most people can see, hear, smell, taste, or feel something, it is sufficiently believable for the physical determinist. He or she then tries to make sense of this something by examining and explaining it as if it were a purely physical phenomenon.

This way of thinking is questionable for a couple of reasons. First, physical determinists can offer no physical evidence—the only type that counts, they say—to support their belief that everything in existence is entirely physical and that there is no separate spiritual dimension. This is a faith-based assumption, not a scientifically provable premise. Darwin himself, in a letter to a Harvard biologist, admitted that his attempt to explain life's origin in purely naturalistic terms relied heavily on guesswork: "I am quite conscious that my speculations run quite beyond the bounds of true science."<sup>9</sup> Second, physical determinists can offer no physical evidence to support their assumption that humans' sense perceptions give accurate pictures of things as they really are. Even if we assume that our sense perceptions are demonstrably accurate, determinists fail to show why we should also assume, as they do, that our senses can actually grasp and that our brains can accurately process the volume of data one would need in order to formulate accurate answers to the questions we autonomously explore. This, too, is a faith-based assumption.

Because it rests on speculations like these, physical determinism is not the obviously best way of looking at the world that its proponents believe it to be. Many people who recognize this have compared physical determinism to its worldview alternatives and have criticized it for being one of the worst belief systems, mainly because its portrayal of human existence is so bleak and its ethical implications for it are so dark. Indeed, this system's logic has been used throughout modern history to justify racism, sexism, and



Charles Darwin.

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even mass murder. Peter Singer, who has argued for euthanasia, admits such evils are a consequence of atheistic naturalistic thinking::

The view that [voluntary euthanasia] can never be right gains its strongest support from religious doctrines that claim that only humans are made in the image of God, or that only humans have an immortal soul, or that God gave us dominion over the animals—meaning that we can kill them if we wish—but reserved to himself dominion over human beings.

Reject these ideas, and it is difficult to think of any morally relevant properties that separate human beings with severe brain damage or other major intellectual disabilities from nonhuman animals at a similar mental level.<sup>10</sup>

This treatment of physical determinism is necessarily brief in a text like this one. Suffice it to say, for these reasons as well as for others that have been explained in greater detail by other critics, that physical determinism falls short as a model for making sense of human origin, nature, purpose, and destiny and, therefore, as a framework for explaining human communication.

### ▲ Social Constructionism

If *physical determinism* places too strong an emphasis on physical factors as shapers of what people do and what they can become, social constructionism places too heavy an emphasis on each person's unique experiences as determinative of what he or she can do or become. Like physical determinism, social constructionism is autonomous because it appeals primarily to humanly devised standards, rather than divine precepts, in its attempt to answer questions about human origin, nature, purpose, and destiny. However, unlike physical determinists, who use a rationalistic and empirical truth standard when validating or invalidating answers to such questions, social constructionists typically use a pragmatic truth standard. This is so because constructionists reject the ideas, popular among physical determinists, that people can come to see the world in the same way, despite their different conditioning experiences.

Social constructionists assume that because each person experiences the world in a unique way, no two persons can come to see the world in exactly the same way, no matter how hard they try to do so. They believe a person becomes what his or her socializing experiences precondition him or her to become. Whatever else it may be, a person's way of communicating is seen as an artifact of these unique experiences and is deemed appropriately interpreted as little more than this.

What motivates people to communicate as they do? Social constructionists provide a variety of answers to this question. Many of them share the Darwinian notion that human behavior is motivated primarily by the drive to survive. Some place a greater emphasis on the Nietzschean idea that human behavior is fundamentally motivated by the individual's appetite for power. Others subscribe to the Marxist idea that human behavior is primarily conditioned by the person's status in the ongoing struggle between society's haves and its have-nots. Some adopt the Freudian notion that human behavior is driven, above all, by sexual impulses. Still other constructionists are more agnostic about

questions like these and assert that we cannot know whether human behavior has a primary motive or, if so, what the motive might be.

### Existentialism

Social constructionists also disagree with each other about the question of whether people are free to choose their behaviors and their destinies. Two recent subtraditions—*existentialism* and *postmodernism*—are noteworthy for their contrasting views about this. Existentialists believe that although the material world may exist in a fixed form, with all its particles and processes, it is nonetheless removed from us, and we cannot have direct contact with it. All we can know about the world, they say, is what our perceptions tell us about it. Whether our perceptions of it are accurate or not, existentialists believe we come to see the world as we do by the people who influence us through socialization. They believe this neither has to be nor should be so, arguing that individuals are radically free to take control of their minds, to break away from stifling social influences, and to free themselves to see the world in authentic, uninhibited, self-directed ways. This movement's dislike for other individuals' socializing influences on our ways of thinking is aptly expressed in the late, leading twentieth-century existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's famous literary line: "Hell is other people!"



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To the existentialist, then, communication tends to be negative. It is like a rope in tug-of-war, with the influencers who have shaped your mind pulling to keep you positioned where their lifetime of tugging has taken you. The existential response to this situation is not simply for you to pull in the opposite direction, but for you to release the rope they have assigned to you and to stop playing their game. Only by ridding yourself of external influences can you live life authentically and freely, they say. For atheistic versions of existentialism, this requires one to drop religious ideals, such as belief in God, which are dismissed as externally imposed barriers to thinking freely and to realizing, consequently, that everything is meaningless. Sartre explained his rationale for this way of thinking in the following statement:

Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself.<sup>11</sup>

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To attain this existential type of freedom, Sartre proposed, one must bravely endure the pain that comes with realizing, as he claimed to believe, that everything, including one's communications with others, is pointless. Nausea is Sartre's term for the psychological pain one feels upon authentically realizing this belief. He also used the term to title a literary work that he authored, a story in which the main character's realization that life



is meaninglessness nauseates him in this existential way. Sartre's only remedy for this anxiety—if it can be called a solution—is self-actualization, which means doing what your raw impulses tell you to do without allowing your reasoning to get in the way.

Existentialism, like physical determinism, has been criticized for several reasons over the years. First, it is self-refuting. This system's thinkers—who argued that individuals should resist having their thoughts assigned to them by other people—attempted through their writings, ironically, to assign their own thoughts to other people. Thus, their walk simply did not match their talk, a glaring inconsistency that raises questions about the believability of the ideas they proposed. Existentialism has also been criticized for providing a bleak picture of human existence by giving people so little a reason for living and so little a motive for behaving ethically toward others. Sartre himself may have realized his system's flaws later in his life. In a 1974 interview, he offered a statement, in a published interview, that implies his worldview may have shifted by that point, late in his life: "I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God."<sup>12</sup>

### Postmodernism

Like existentialism, postmodernism, the second social constructionist sub-tradition that we consider, assumes that people act as they do and become what they become primarily, if not exclusively, as a reaction to their lifetime of conditioning experiences. Postmodernists, who are also called "deconstructionists," are especially interested in the ways people use language to impact each other's ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Many of these theorists share the existentialists' belief that the material world, if it is really there, exceeds our grasp. The only reality people can know, they say, is the one their minds construct in response to the world as language filters it to them.

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How should one respond to his or her lifetime of conditioning experiences? Existentialists and postmodernists answer this question differently. Whereas existentialists urge people to rid themselves of their socially instilled ways of seeing the world and to follow their raw instincts instead, postmodernists focus elsewhere. Those with Marxist leanings explore how powerful people (the haves) use language and media as tools to suppress the weak (the have-nots) and call for solutions to this supposed problem. Those with feminist leanings investigate how men use language and media to dominate women and call for fixes to this. Many deconstructionists explore how other groups of haves (whether racially, ethnically, culturally, religiously, or politically defined) use language and media to exploit corresponding groups of have-nots and call for remedies to this. The goals for the postmodernist in any of these cases are twofold: 1) exposition—showing how social influencers can impact what people become and how privileged groups use this to promote themselves at others' expense and; 2) emancipation—promoting remedies for these supposed misuses of power. Deterministic deconstructionists devote themselves only to exposition, believing calls for emancipation to be pointless since, they believe, people inevitably become what their social conditioning has predisposed them to become.

Beneath these concerns are assumptions that clearly identify postmodernism as an autonomous, social constructionist tradition. As already noted, deconstructionists believe

there is no real world out there waiting to be discovered. Reality, they propose, is something your mind constructs in response to the language-filtered and shaped perceptions that it gathers and synthesizes throughout your lifetime. You supposedly have no way of rising above these perceptions to access and to know for certain that anything outside you truly exists. Whatever you believe to be true, real, meaningful, and right or wrong, they say, is just a mindset that you have formed in response to your conditioning experiences. Because these perceptions are unique—no one, they assert, can experience and see life as another person does—you must respect the “fact” that each individual creates his or her own truth. Accordingly, postmodernists contend, you must not try to impose your view of the world and your values on other people. Deconstructionists are especially prickly about violations of this principle in situations in which members of traditionally empowered groups consciously or subconsciously “impose” their views of the world on members of traditionally disempowered minority groups, whether they are ethnically, racially, religiously, or politically defined.

To the postmodernist, communication is a weapon that can be used to promote good or evil. The good, as he or she imagines it, is the advancement of his or her postmodern ideals and values, including the works of exposition and emancipation. The evil, not surprisingly, is the disregard of these ideas and values and the imposition of one person’s values on another or of a majority viewpoint on minorities through language and media. Postmodernists would not state this point about themselves so directly—to state anything so objectively, after all, would be contrary to the relativistic ideals they profess—but it is clearly the implication of what they write.

This brings us to a discussion of postmodernism’s merits as a framework for making sense of communication, or of anything else for that matter. If one assumes, as postmodernists contend, that there is no world outside our perceptions, we must ask how one could possibly know that this is so. As G. K. Chesterton once observed, “We do not know enough about the unknown to know that it is unknowable.”<sup>13</sup> If anything is unknowable, we could never learn that it exists and is unknowable unless this were revealed to us by one who, unlike us, has access to it. The same objection applies to postmodernism’s contention that no two people see the world in exactly the same way. In order to say credibly that this is so, the postmodernist somehow must escape the supposedly inescapable prison of his own perceptions in order to compare its content with the content of other people’s perceptions and to determine, consequently, that no two perspectives are alike. Postmodern theorists consistently fail to explain why we should assume that they somehow are exempt from the very limitations, such as this one, that they assign to everyone else.

Deconstructionists also fail to explain why anyone in a postmodern world should conduct himself or herself ethically toward others. If we assume that individuals create their own truth and their own morals in response to their unique perceptions, as postmodernists suggest, then we must ask whether it is fair to hold people accountable to a moral standard other than one’s own. Such an idea has ominous implications, as the Oxford literary scholar C. S. Lewis observed in an essay that he penned while the Nazis threatened to overtake his British homeland during World War II:



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Out of this apparently innocent idea comes the disease that will certainly end our species (and, in my view, damn our souls) if it is not crushed; the fatal superstition that men can create values, that a community can choose its "ideology" as men choose their clothes. Everyone is indignant when he hears the Germans define justice as that which is to the interest of the Third Reich. But it is not always remembered that this indignation is perfectly groundless if we ourselves regard morality as a subjective sentiment to be altered at will. Unless there is some objective standard of good, overarching Germans, Japanese, and ourselves alike whether any of us obey it or not, then of course the Germans are as competent to create their ideology as we are to create ours. If "good" and "better" are terms deriving their sole meaning from the ideology of each people, then of course ideologies themselves cannot be better or worse than one another. Unless the measuring rod is independent of the things measured, we can do no measuring.<sup>14</sup>

Postmodernists often argue that we must protect the beliefs and values of the have-nots from the supposedly corrupting, self-serving influence of the haves. However, if each person's moral values are personally constructed and if one person's values are not necessarily better than the next person's values, why must we protect the have-nots? Why should one not crush them instead if his or her personal values deem this appropriate? Deconstructionists provide no satisfactory answers to this question.

## ▶ THE LIMITATIONS OF AUTONOMOUS REASONING

As this chapter demonstrates, autonomous approaches to explaining human origin, nature, purpose, and destiny and to providing meaningful reasons for appreciating communication are plagued by serious limitations. Some of these problems are intellectual. Others are ethical. From a Biblically Christian standpoint, these problems, although intellectual and ethical on their surface, are fundamentally spiritual.

To understand this, one must recognize seven core principles that define the Biblically Christian worldview. First, the Bible reveals that God alone—the timeless, changeless source and sustainer of the universe and our creator—knows everything that can be known: "O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord. You go before me and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!" (Psalm 139: 1–6). Humans simply cannot attain the perfect knowledge that only God has.

Still, God has made known or knowable to us essential facts about the universe He created and our place in it, facts that must be considered in our attempts to make sense of things. This is especially vital in attempts to make sense of ourselves and why we do the things we do. Perhaps the most illuminating Biblical passage about our limited ability to make



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The Bible reveals that God alone—the timeless, changeless source and sustainer of the universe and our creator—knows everything that can be known.

sense of such things on our own is the book of Romans, especially its first two chapters. This epistle explains that “[People], through everything God made . . . can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God” (Rom 1:20). Even though people “know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them” (v. 19), people “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (v. 18).

This highlights the fact that people are corrupted by autonomy and do not seek after the God by Whom and for Whom we were created. This self-centeredness traces back to our earliest history when our ancestors autonomously quested to “be like God, knowing both good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). This decision to chase an egotistical lie had enduringly adverse effects for humanity, for “When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break” (Rom. 5: 12–13).

Thus, people live in a self-inflicted state of corruption, having divorced ourselves from the very One for Whom we were created and in Whose restored fellowship we find our completion: “No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one. Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues are filled with lies. Snake venom drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. They rush to commit murder. Destruction and misery always follow them. They don’t know where to find peace. They have no fear of God at all” (Rom. 3:10–18).

Although our Creator has given us intelligence that we can use, despite our brokenness, to make sense of some things about the universe and our place in it, this intelligence is considerably limited in its potential reach: “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9).

Despite the stifling effects of our corruption, our sense that we are made for something perfect, unlike anything in this world, lingers in our souls. Indeed, although we do not long for God himself (cf. Rom. 3:11), a craving for this perfect something that eludes our grasp drives much of our behavior. We long to connect with it, not knowing what it is or where to find it. Instead of humbly acknowledging our limitations and turning for guidance to the all-knowing Creator Whose restored presence alone can fill this void, we often anesthetize the pain within us by chasing empty alternatives that, in some cases, temporarily create false feelings of satisfaction: “They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, Who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen” (Rom. 1:25). Among the God-made things that we worship is our corrupted human intelligence, which we sometimes centralize in our quests for worldview-related answers that simply exceed our fallen grasp—answers to questions about human origin, nature, purpose destiny, and values. We justify the answers that these generate using rationalistic/empirical,



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pragmatic, and utilitarian truth standards, among others that our minds devise, as if our minds could independently generate trustworthy answers despite their brokenness. In the end, though, these intellectual saviors disappoint and fail to deliver what we our souls truly desire. The logical implication of this pattern is clear, as C. S. Lewis explains: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>15</sup>

The only real solution to this crisis begins when we sincerely acknowledge that on our own we are hopelessly autonomous, that our hearts and minds are helplessly impaired by this corruption, and that our only hope for escaping our brokenness and seeing anything as it truly is must be God-centered (theocentric) and God-initiated. Through His Son’s redemptive death on the cross, God bridged the gap that separates us from Him and extended to us the offer of a cure for our brokenness, one that we receive when we humbly and repentantly centralize God’s authority in our lives (cf. Psalm 51:16–18; John 1:12). When we surrender ourselves in this way, we commit to make sense of anything, including ourselves as communicators, and to conduct ourselves, communicatively or otherwise, in the instructive light of His revealed Word to us (cf. Psalm 119:105; 1 Thes. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). The person who is thus redeemed does not become all-knowing like God. Nor does he or she necessarily become more knowledgeable about human experience. However, this transformation does give the person the corrective lens through which the human experience must be filtered if one hopes to avoid the logical shortsightedness and the ethical distortions that inevitably plague autonomous attempts to make sense of it.

The next chapter considers how this corrective lens impacts one’s view of the world and of human communication. An authentically theocentric vantage point impacts not only the way one makes sense of communication, but also the way one practices it. As you contemplate this book’s first three chapters and as you read through the fourth and fifth, I invite you to become a redemptive communicator—someone who sees the world as God, according to His revelation, intended it to be and who interacts with others in a way that, above all, promotes His redemptive purpose in their lives.



## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. This chapter indicates that a person’s worldview is not the beliefs he or she professes, but the beliefs his or her behavior suggests. State whether you agree or disagree with this statement in a 100- to 200-word response. Be sure to provide at least three different reasons, examples, illustrations, or other supportive material that clearly supports your stated position.
2. Read the following two poems. Then, using relevant terms from this chapter, write a 200- to 300-word response that identifies the worldview that each of these compositions appears most to express. Be sure to justify your answers with clear, logical explanations so it is obvious how you arrived at your conclusions.

FROM "PARACELSUS"

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise  
From outward things, whatever you may believe.  
There is an inmost centre in us all,  
Where truth abides in fullness; and around,  
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,  
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.  
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh  
Binds it, and makes all error: and, to know,  
Rather consists in opening out a way  
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,  
Than in effecting entry for a light  
Supposed to be without.

—*Robert Browning (1812–1889)*

OPEN MY EYES THAT I MAY SEE

Open my eyes, that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready my God, Thy will to see,  
Open my eyes, illumine me,  
Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear  
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;  
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,  
Everything false will disappear.

Open my mouth, and let me bear,  
Gladly the warm truth everywhere;  
Open my heart and let me prepare  
Love with Thy children thus to share.

— *Clara H. Fiske Scott (1841–1897)*

3. As mentioned in the chapter, Romans 1:25 states: “They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator



himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.” The chapter highlights corrupted human intelligence as one of the God-made things that we worship instead of God himself. Make a list of at least five other God-like substitutes in human experience that people “worship” or serve rather than God himself. Explain why you placed each item on your list.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), n.pag.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich W. Nietzsche and H. L. Mencken, *The Antichrist* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1920), 127.
- <sup>3</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1907, Library of Economics and Liberty, accessed 25 May 2011, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML18.html>
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 189.
- <sup>5</sup> Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.
- <sup>6</sup> *Gems from Martin Lloyd-Jones: An Anthology of Quotations from “The Doctor,”* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), 76.
- <sup>7</sup> Benedictus Spinoza and R. H. M. Elwes, *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza* (London: G. Bell, 1889), 119.
- <sup>8</sup> John Carey, *Eyewitness to Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 274.
- <sup>9</sup> Neal C. Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Singer, "Decisions about Death," *Free Inquiry* (Aug/Sept 2005): n. pag., accessed 28 May 2011, <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/200508--.htm>
- <sup>11</sup> Lawrence E. Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 171.
- <sup>12</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 252.
- <sup>13</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *William Blake* (New York: Cosimo Books, 2005), 74.
- <sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 73.
- <sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 106.

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