

INTRODUCTION

Why Does This Topic Matter?

The current debates on gender and sexuality are the pressing issue of our day. It is impacting our social and political discourse and is becoming an increasingly divisive issue in the church. This is a subject that cannot be ignored and one we do well to understand and have an informed opinion about.

Additionally, as you investigate the debate that is taking place in the church you find that the competing views on the questions of gender and sexuality are not only different, but irreconcilable. On one side you have what we will, for simplicity's sake, call the '**Traditional View.**'

This view believes there are only two biologically determined sexes or genders, male and female, and that sexual activity is only morally good within the context of a marriage between a husband and wife, meaning a covenantal and life-long monogamous union between a man and woman.

On the other side what we will call the '**Revisionist View.**'

While there are various takes, there is a shared view that sex or gender are social constructs and our internal sense of self rather than a person's biological sex at birth is what determines one's gender. There are differing views regarding what is morally good expressions of sexuality on this side. The more conservative on this side uphold the principle of monogamous lifelong unions while the more progressive argue there are many forms of morally good sexual activity, so long as there is mutual consent.

While the above descriptions are oversimplifications, they help to highlight the irreconcilable nature of this debate. What the *Revisionist View* is arguing for is understood to be sinful by the *Traditional View*. Now, the question of whether the revisionist views on gender and sexuality are sinful or not is something you will have to decide over the course of this study. But this is no insignificant matter as the Scriptures repeatedly warn that sexual immorality is no small matter. For example, one such warning is found in Revelation where we are told that the sexually immoral have no place in Christ's Kingdom:

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the **sexually immoral** and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” Revelation 22:12–15

The Purpose and Process of This Study

To help you come to an informed decision we will be looking at the *Traditional View* as well as the best arguments the *Revisionist View* has to offer. This way you can make an informed and educated decision as to which view you think best reflects the views that the biblical text seems to express.

But, before jumping into the exegesis of the text, we must do a little history to situate ourselves.

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN (TRANS)GENDER THEORY

To understand some of the *Revisionist Arguments* we will be looking at in our next session, it is first important to know the origins of some of the key underlying assumptions that are foundational to their position. One essential aspect of this is the view that gender is a social construct.

Historically, gender was understood to be the *same thing* as one's biological sex, which was determined biologically. However, over the last few decades gender and sex have been treated as though they are *different things*. Gender is a social construct that is based on cultural notions and norms about what it means to be a man or woman. Additionally, one's sexual identity is no longer determined by biology at birth and is now determined by how one *internally feels or identifies*.

These are profound shifts in how we think about ourselves, and the most pronounced expression of these views is found in the Transgender movement. The question is, *How did we arrive at these conclusions?*

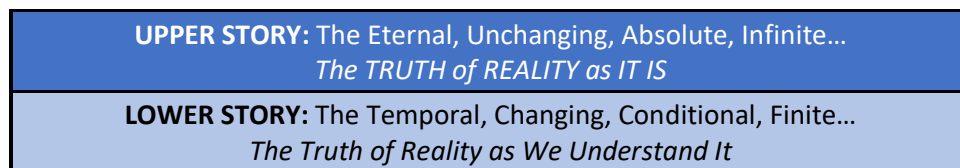
An Abbreviated History of Philosophical Thought

What follows is a *very* abbreviated survey focused only on the salient ideas that contribute to the current or modern notions of gender and sex. But, as there is nothing new under the sun, the ascendant ideas regarding gender and sex are not really anything *new*. Rather, they are contemporary instantiations of old ideas wearing a new set of clothes.

Our Two-Storied Reality

This conceptual framework is derived from Francis Schaeffer's work, *Escape from Reason*. The basic Christian idea is that there is a distinction between the Creator and the Creation and that knowledge or the truth is something that is *both* revealed by God and discovered through our interactions with the world. Central to this conception is that reality is something that exists outside of us and knowledge, truth, understanding, wisdom, etc. are found in *conforming ourselves to reality as it presents itself to us*.

Visually it could be depicted as such:



Under this framework we had true knowledge because God had *revealed truth to us and because we discovered things in the world that God made, upheld, and governed over*. But our knowledge was considered real and true insofar as it accorded with God's purpose and will as revealed to us through God's Word (Special Revelation) and the Creation (Natural Revelation). Schaeffer writes:

"...the biblical presentation is that, though we do not have exhaustive truth, we have from the bible what I term 'true truth.' In this way we know true truth about God, true truth about man and something truly about nature. Thus on the basis of the Scriptures, while we do not have exhaustive knowledge, we have true and unified knowledge"¹

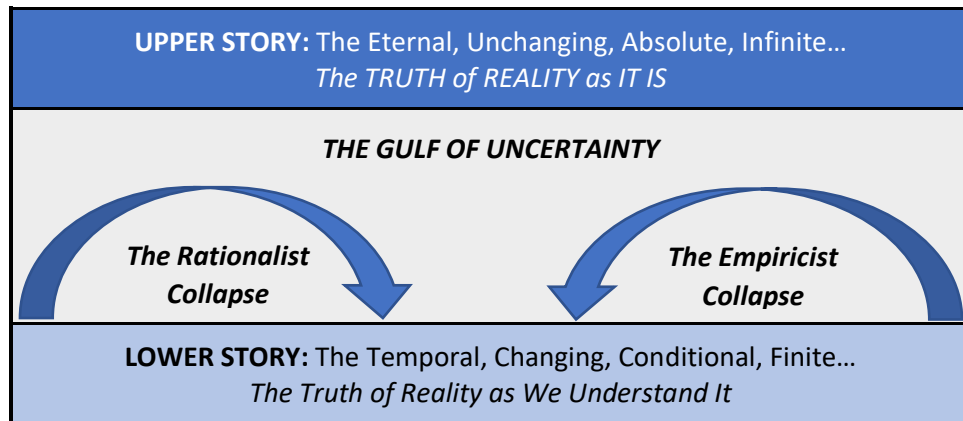
¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason: A Penetrating Analysis of Trends in Modern Thought*, IVP Classics (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2006), 29.

True, But Not Exhaustive Knowledge – is an important description to keep in mind. Because of human hubris the bent in philosophy is to acquire an exhaustive understanding, a *unified theory of everything*. A system of thought that encompasses *all of reality*. But given our limits as finite creatures this is an impossibility. Nevertheless, this has not stopped us from trying. And as we increasingly sought to ground our knowledge *in ourselves apart from God*, we wound up trapped in our own heads.

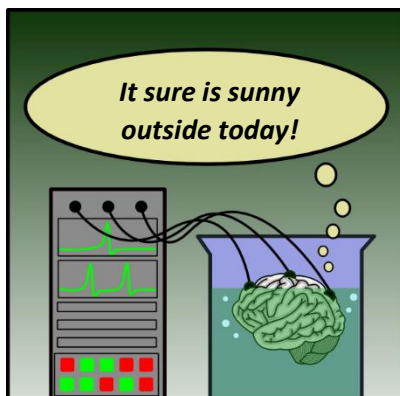
The Enlightenment Tower of Babel

During the period of time known as the Enlightenment, from 1650-1800, effort was made to establish an epistemological foundation (theory of knowledge and how we know what we know) apart from God’s revelatory self-disclosure through Scripture. We jettisoned the notion of God’s revelatory self-disclosure and sought to construct a tower of ‘knowledge’ on our terms via rationalism (the use of human reason) and empiricism (the use of human sensory experience).

The problem was that because we exist in the Lower Story it was impossible to architect a unified theory of everything. Both the rationalist and empiricist effort to ascend collapse into skepticism. The only way move beyond uncertainty is to have a comprehensive knowledge of *everything*. But because we lack omniscience, our efforts apart from a reliance on the revelatory self-disclosure of God always collapse into subjectivism (the notion we can only be sure of our own thoughts/experience).



Again, this is selective simplification, but because we are finite, we cannot transcend the gulf of uncertainty. We are trapped in our own heads and **cannot know anything about the truth of reality as it is with any sort of certainty**. This is where the *solipsism problem* arises, which is the conundrum that one can never truly know whether anything exists beyond one's own mind or experience.



If you’ve heard the question, ‘How do you know you’re not a brain in jar?’ before, this is where that question comes from.

In more contemporary times, this question is often asked in terms of how we can know for certain that we are not living in some sort of complicated simulation. For example, this was a key premise of the movie series, *The Matrix*.

Immanuel Kant And His Solution of Tossing Out the Upper Story

Kant lived from 1724–1804 and is probably the single most influential person upon modern philosophy. His solution to the problem of the gulf of uncertainty was to argue that all the things hitherto in philosophy that were being debated are actually *Categories of the Mind or Understanding*. These categories are innate and inherent functions of the human mind. They provide a framework through which we organize and understand our sensory experience as we interact with the world.

Thus, Kant argues that there is a world out there we are interacting with. This is the *Noumenal world*, or reality as it exists apart from human perception. But we only know the world as it comes to us through the categories of understanding. This is the *Phenomenal world*, or reality as we perceive it.

The Noumenal world is ultimately unknowable to us as we can only know the world *as we perceive it*. In essence, the solution was to jettison the Upper Story as having any ongoing significance for philosophical discourse and eliminate the Gulf of Uncertainty by situating things entirely within the realm of our perception.

***The Upper Story is Unknowable So It's Pointless Talking About It!
The Noumenal Is There But Behind an Impenetrable Veil***

**THERE IS ONLY ONE STORY: The Temporal, Changing, Conditional, Finite...
The Truth IS Reality as WE UNDERSTAND IT – The Phenomenal**

Of course, this solution was no solution at all. It was merely another step away from God in hubris and paved the way for ever more pessimistic and destructive ideas to emerge. What is critical to understand, however, is that Kant marks a dividing line that has since shaped everything in the realms of philosophy and theology, and thus society and culture as a whole after him.

“[Earlier thinkers] had tried to reason autonomously, without the constraints of divine revelation. But it was Kant who developed a comprehensive *rationale* for autonomous reasoning. It was Kant who argued we *must* reason autonomously and must never reason in any other way. These arguments so persuaded mainstream philosophers and theologians as to transform those disciplines in radical ways.”²

The Downward Spiral Following Kant

Again, what follows is a major simplification of the history involved. But the following thinkers crystallize important ideas that have grown to dominate our social and cultural discourse. Some will be looked at in more detail than others but the focus here is not on their philosophy as a whole, but on the key ideas they espoused that have come to shape our current culture.

Also, note that the ideas we will be highlighting originate *from* atheist worldview systems. This is not insignificant and will become important as we shift towards discussing the various arguments in coming weeks. Reason being, if one’s fundamental assumptions about *how* to read and interpret the biblical text are shaped by atheist assumptions and assertion, you could be drawing water from a poisoned well.

² John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015), 251–52.

Karl Marx and Class Struggle – Atheist

MUCH could be said here and in order to really understand the dangers of Marx's thought you have to also understand Hegel. But what is important is that Marx (1818-1883), asserted *the central* problem with humanity was the *material struggle over wealth* and the *oppressive structures of society* that the wealthy and ruling elites built and maintained. He argued that a utopian society would emerge as the poor working class overthrew the wealthy and a communal or shared ownership of the means of production emerged.

Key Ideas: Society is made up of oppressors and oppressed and the solution is material redistribution by the removal of those currently in power.

Frederick Nietzsche and the Death of God - Atheist

Nietzsche lived from 1844-1900 and his philosophy casts a wide shadow over our modern society. Building on Kant's argument that we can't know the Noumenal, he argued that there were no universal categories of understanding either. The jettison of the Upper Story is the death of God, and with a biting and unrelenting wit Nietzsche laid out all the implications or consequences of this development.

He argued that truth *itself is THE illusion*. There is only the will – our desires and the resolve to pursue them. John Frame describes this well, writing:

“What we call *knowing* is, in the end, an invention of the will. It is a tool to achieve our interests and to get along with other people. The honored *desire for truth* is never disinterested. We do not desire knowledge for the sake of knowledge, only for our own success, for a pleasant life, for an aesthetically pleasing way to look at the world. So claims to knowledge are self-serving lies, illusions.”³

Nietzsche argued we should recognize the emptiness of all moral systems as they merely hinder us. We should cast them aside and seek greatness by shaping the world in accordance with our desires. He is *the* honest atheist. All atheists since have tried to argue for or from some sort of moral position and are thus self-contradictory.

Key Ideas: There is no such thing as truth, only desire or will. Moral systems are oppressive and prohibitive. Freedom and the courage to be and do what one wants is the only 'good.'

Jean-Paul Sartre and Self Creation - Atheist

Living from 1905-1980 he was an influential existentialist. While his entire project collapses under the weight of Nietzsche's critique, his notion that *existence precedes essence* is a critical idea for understanding our modern world.

Basically, with the Upper Story gone our existence is nothing more than a fact that presents itself to us without any explanation, purpose, or meaning. We exist, and what we do with that is up to us as there is no essential purpose to our existence.

Key Idea: Our existence is the only fact. There is no essential meaning or purpose to our existence and we are responsible for determining who and what we are.

³ Frame, 330–31.

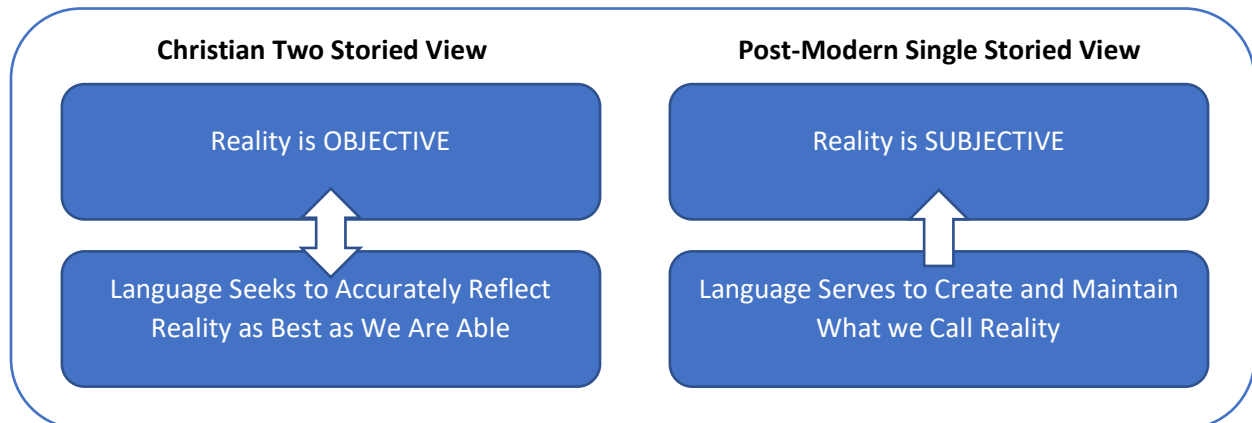
Michel Foucault and the Post-Modern View of Language as Politics - Atheist

Living from 1926-1984, his ideas about the function or role of language in society are *critically important to understand*. Foucault was a Marxist early on, so he adopted the oppressor/oppressed framework. But influenced by Nietzsche he came to reject Marxism because it was also restrictive of the pursuit of absolute freedom Foucault was committed to.

Foucault basically took Nietzsche's worldview and used it as a framework to critique history and society. Recall, there is no objective truth as the Upper Story is *gone*. There is only the will or desire and the ability or power to pursue what one wants. Thus, the predominant or formative stories, organizations, and laws that make up our society are not true, right, or good in any objective sense. They are merely the *institutionalized desires of those who are currently in power*.

Further, he argued that language is not a neutral tool for communication, but rather a medium through which power is exercised and the social hierarchies are constructed and maintained. Language works in this way by shaping and limiting our understanding of reality through the imposition of specific categories, classifications, and discourses that define what is considered normal, acceptable, and intelligible.

A very important thing to grasp here is how language has shifted from something that is a mirror of reality to that which creates reality. Language is no longer a reflection of some objective reality about the world we are seeking to understand. Rather, language is what *creates reality* and those in power define reality for everyone else. The diagram below seeks to emphasize this difference:



While this may seem abstract, it is important to understand that this effectively *politicizes language*. If I make an assertion, I'm not saying something that is either true or false. The Upper Story is gone and there is not such thing as 'objective truth.' My assertion is merely a statement of what I want and an attempt to gain or maintain power or control that benefits me or my group.

The politicization of language and its effect on debate and the interpretation of the biblical text is an important concept that will come up as we look at the biblical arguments in the coming weeks, but we will see shortly how they undergird 3rd Wave feminist arguments regarding gender.

Key Ideas: The societal structures, organizations, and laws are not reflections of truth but the institutionalized desires of those currently in power. Language itself is a political tool used by those in power to define reality by establishing and maintaining social hierarchies that are beneficial to them.

Feminist Theory and the Deconstruction of Sex and Gender

While the earliest feminist movement was born out of a desire for equality, especially the right to vote, it morphed under the influences of the philosophical developments we've been walking through. And because we've already walked through the key developments that took place in philosophy, we can jump right into the contemporary instantiations of feminist theory regarding sex and gender and see how all these ideas converge.

A key feminist thinker is *Judith Butler*. Born in 1956, she currently teaches at UC Berkely. She is known for saying that *gender is performative*. An example of this can be found in a recorded talk she gave for the Big Think channel that is hosted on Youtube. There Butler states,

"We act as if that being of a man or that being of a women is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start. I know it's controversial, but that's my claim."⁴

It's important to note what Butler is doing here. Recall the Upper Story is gone and there is no longer any objective truth. There is no longer any essential purpose or meaning to being human. Existence precedes essence and it is we who define what we are. Hence, gender is a social construct – it is a performative act based on nothing more than cultural conventions. But these conventions are not based on any substantive reality. Instead, they are rooted in the sorts of oppressive power structures that Foucault talks about. In her excellent book, *The Genesis of Gender*, Abigail Favale notes,

"Butler is not denying that biological sex differences exist at all. Rather, she is arguing that any categorization or meaning we ascribe to those differences is a matter of power, not of truth.... The body, for her, exists – but as a blank slate, devoid of its own meaning, upon which social norms are etched."⁵

Favale goes on to note how Butler's theories also have inherent political aim to them. Recall how we just saw that language itself is politicized because assertions are merely claims to power through an effort to shape reality. Butler's aim is "...dismantling the norms of gender and sex in order to dismantle so-called heteronormativity."⁶ She is not just doing 'philosophy.' Butler intends to bring about cultural and societal change. How?

"This postmodern understanding of truth-as-power leads to a postmodern political praxis, in which language is intentionally manipulated to institute these 'new modes of reality.' That is why there is so much emphasis on policing speech – creating new pronouns and mandating their use, constantly changing the definitions of terms like gender, continually proliferating new categories and subcategories of identity and desire. This is a concerted effort to enforce a new social truth-script through an exercise of power."⁷

⁴ *Judith Butler: Your Behavior Creates Your Gender* | Big Think, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>.

⁵ Abigail Rine Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco [California]: Ignatius Press, 2022), 75.

⁶ Favale, 75.

⁷ Favale, 76.

CONCLUSION: WHY ALL THIS MATTERS

The reason we took the time to walk through the history of the ideas leading up to modern gender theory is so we can have a better understanding of where our contemporary ideas come from. The notion that a man can become a woman or that a woman can become a man did not just arrive out of nowhere.

In tracing the origins of these ideas, we are better able to assess where they are likely to lead us. We are also better equipped to evaluate the assumptions and arguments being put forward today by those on the *Revisionist Side*. You don't get the sorts of arguments in the church that we have today regarding gender and sexuality without having first subscribed to the assertions of someone like Foucault.

And while this doesn't settle the matter, this reality is also not something that can simply be dismissed as inconsequential. Foucault's starting point is that God doesn't exist, humanity has no essential purpose or meaning, and that objective truth itself is an illusion or fiction. All assertions of truth are really an exercise in asserting, gaining, or maintaining power and dominance. This means there is no 'right' interpretation of Scripture as all interpretations are *also* assertions of power. This is why a rather common theme among Revisionists is to dismiss the Traditionalist position because it is based on *patriarchal interpretations by men* who are of course merely protecting the structures and norms that benefit them.

But, if the Christian conception of Reality is true, then God has revealed Himself to us in and through *His Word*. This Word stands *apart from us*. It is something we must come to terms with for it is *the Truth*. And we must reject notions of reality, like the one's articulated by those we looked at today for they are incompatible – not just with a biblically faithful worldview, but *reality itself*.

Christians using the ideas of Foucault as a way of interpreting the world and Scripture is like a chef deciding he would like to use arsenic as an ingredient in his cooking:

The chef is wise and knows that he can't use *too much arsenic*, because that would kill whoever eats his food. But he sees the value in arsenic as an ingredient...so he'll only use *a little bit*.

What could go wrong?