

# What Happened to Truth?

## *Part 2: Decline of Enlightenment Values*

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# Decline of Enlightenment Values

**French Revolution**  
**Challenge of Modern Science**  
**Religious Fundamentalism**  
**Logical Positivism**  
**Wittgenstein on Language**  
**Frankfurt School**  
**Arendt on Totalitarianism**  
**Marcuse & One-Dimensional Society**

# French Revolution

The French Revolution was the **first major stumbling block** to implementing Enlightenment values. It was a **disaster**.

The initial impetus was **extreme class inequality**.

- The **First and Second Estates** (clergy and nobility) were well off and largely exempt from taxes.
- The **Third Estate** (everyone else) struggled to survive.

Marie Antoinette never said  
“Let them eat cake”  
(*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*),  
but we get the point.



Marie Antoinette  
1755-1793

# French Revolution

French Revolution set out to dislodge the *ancien régime* (monarchy) and **install a republic**. This meant:

- *Liberté* – Lockean rights.
- *Égalité* – Equality before the law, without nobility or feudalism.
- *Fraternité* – Popular solidarity and loyalty to the republic.

French law today requires the motto to be displayed in every elementary and secondary school classroom.



# French Revolution

**1789** - Third Estate forms the National Constituent Assembly.

- Louis XVI recognizes authority of the Assembly after **storming of the Bastille** on July 14.
- Assembly adopts *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*.

**1791** - National Assembly creates a constitutional monarchy.



# French Revolution

1793 - Inspired by Rousseau's ideas, **Jacobins** seize power after failure of the economy and **high food prices**.

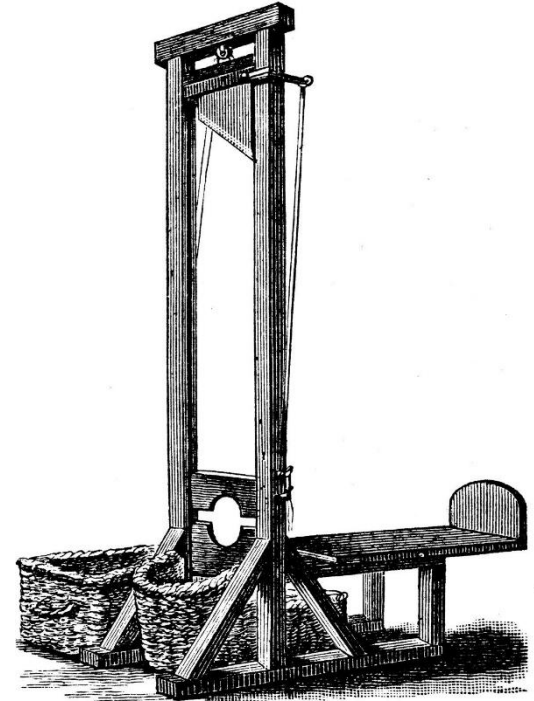
- Robespierre initiates the **Reign of Terror**.
- Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette executed.
- 17,000+ citizens **guillotined**.



Louis XVI  
1754-1793



Maximilien  
Robespierre  
1758-1794



Guillotine

# French Revolution

**1794** - Robespierre executed, Jacobins lose power.

**1795** - The Directory, based on an unstable **oligarchy**, takes over.

**1799** - **Napoleon Bonaparte** takes control, becomes emperor in 1804



Death of Marat  
by Jacques-Louis David, 1793



Napoleon Bonaparte  
1769-1821

# French Revolution

1814,15 – Napoleon abdicates, returns to power, is **defeated** at Waterloo, exiled.

- Bourbon **monarchy restored** under Louis XVIII.
- Napoleonic Code adopted.

1830,32 – Unsuccessful rebellions

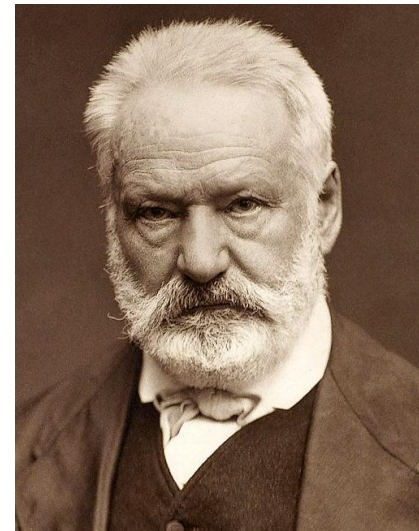
- The latter is climax of Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

1848 - **Second Republic** established, lasted 4 years.

1870 – Stable **Third Republic** finally established.



Waterloo, 1815



Victor Hugo, 1802-85

# The Challenge of Modern Science

By and large, Enlightenment thinkers **did not reject religion**.

- They wanted a unified rational philosophy for all of life.
- However, they preferred some form of **deism** and rejected **traditional religion** as irrational.
- At the time, this rejection was confined to elites.



Baruch Spinoza  
1632-1677

*“Proposition XI. God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists.”*

-- Spinoza, *Ethics*

# The Challenge of Modern Science

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Yet in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Enlightenment-inspired **science** gradually **challenged traditional religion** in a way no one could ignore.

In North America, this led to a religious backlash: **fundamentalism**.

# The Challenge of Modern Science

Age of the Earth contradicts Biblical account.

18-19<sup>th</sup> century geologists realized that strata were laid down over millions of years, not ~6000 as suggested in *Genesis*.



James Hutton  
1726-1797



Charles Lyell  
1797-1875

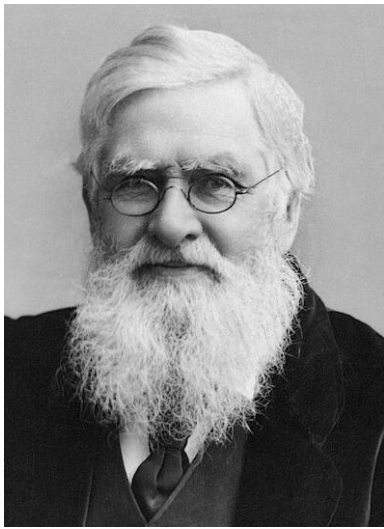


Grand Canyon  
2 billion years of Earth's  
history on display 11

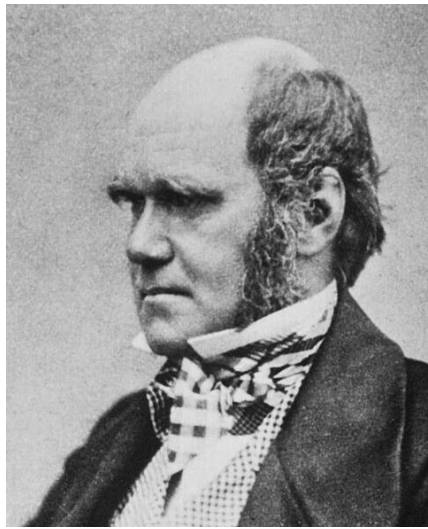
# The Challenge of Modern Science

**Humans are accidental.**

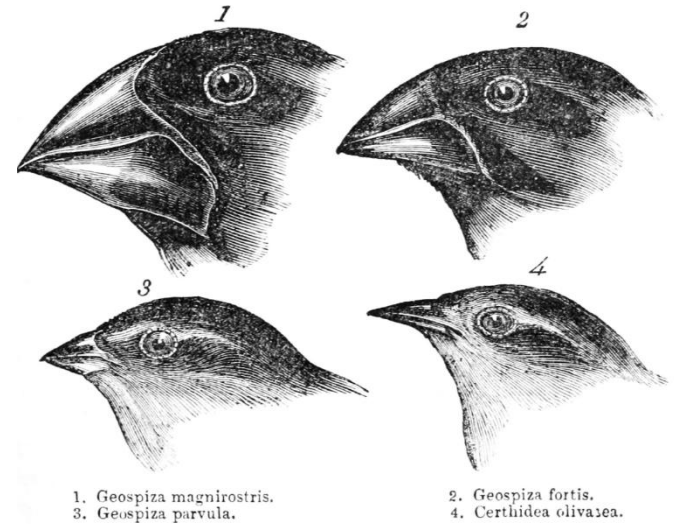
Darwin and Wallace determined that humans are the apparently accidental result of natural selection over eons.



Alfred Russel Wallace  
1823-1913



Charles Darwin  
1809-1882



Evolving finches  
on Galápagos Islands

# The Challenge of Modern Science

**Human insignificance in a vast universe.**

19<sup>th</sup> century astronomers learned that our sun is one of millions, even if it supposedly lies near the center of the universe.

In the 1920s, Edwin Hubble discovered an inconceivably vast and expanding universe of many galaxies.



William Herschel  
1738-1822



Edwin Hubble  
1889-1953



Andromeda Galaxy (M31)<sup>13</sup>

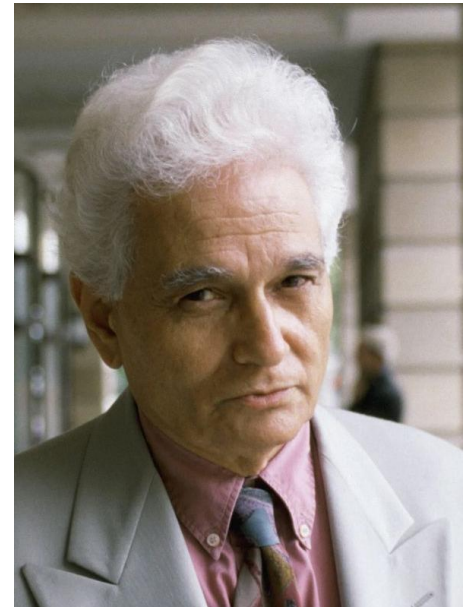
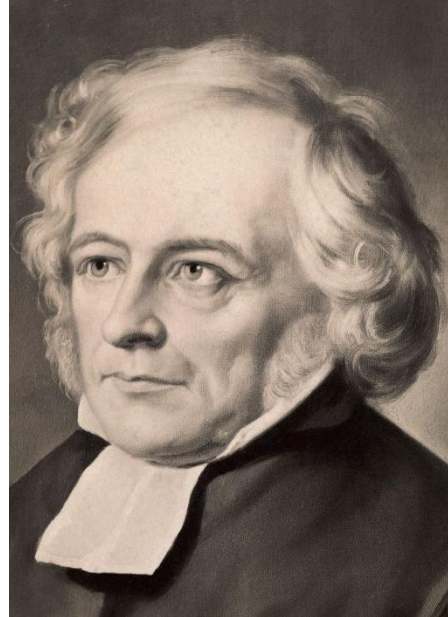
# The Challenge of Modern Science

## Deconstruction of the Bible

19<sup>th</sup> century Biblical hermeneutics revealed historical sources and internal contradictions of holy scripture.

Its techniques laid the foundation for deconstruction of **all text** in the postmodern period.

Friedrich Schleiermacher  
1768-1834

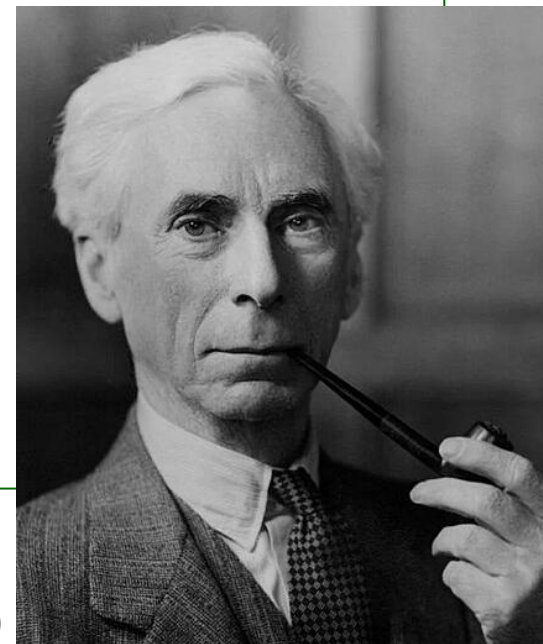


Jacques Derrida  
1930-2004

# The Challenge of Modern Science

“That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins... Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.”

-- *A Free Man’s Worship*



Bertrand Russell, 1872-1970

# Religious Fundamentalism

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, **Protestant fundamentalism** was a reaction to the challenge of modern science – and the **beginning of science denialism**.

It rejected critical hermeneutics and insisted on a **traditional Biblical worldview** that incorporates the natural world and thus **restores meaning to our existence**.

Another motivation was to re-assert Protestantism as the religious basis of U.S. society in an era of **mass immigration**.

Ark Encounter Theme Park  
Williamstown, Kentucky



# Religious Fundamentalism

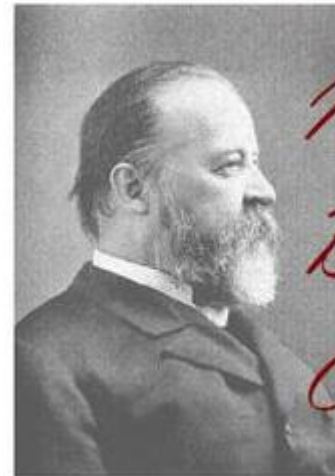
The North American Fundamentalist movement began in 1875\* at the **Niagara Bible Conference** in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.

- The conference was a sequel to the **Believers' Meeting for Bible Study**, which began 1868 in New York.

Promulgated the **5 Fundamentals**:

- Inerrancy of scripture
- Deity of Christ
- Virgin birth
- Substitutionary atonement
- Second Coming

The annual conference ran until 1897 and resumed in 2022, in Niagara Falls, Ontario



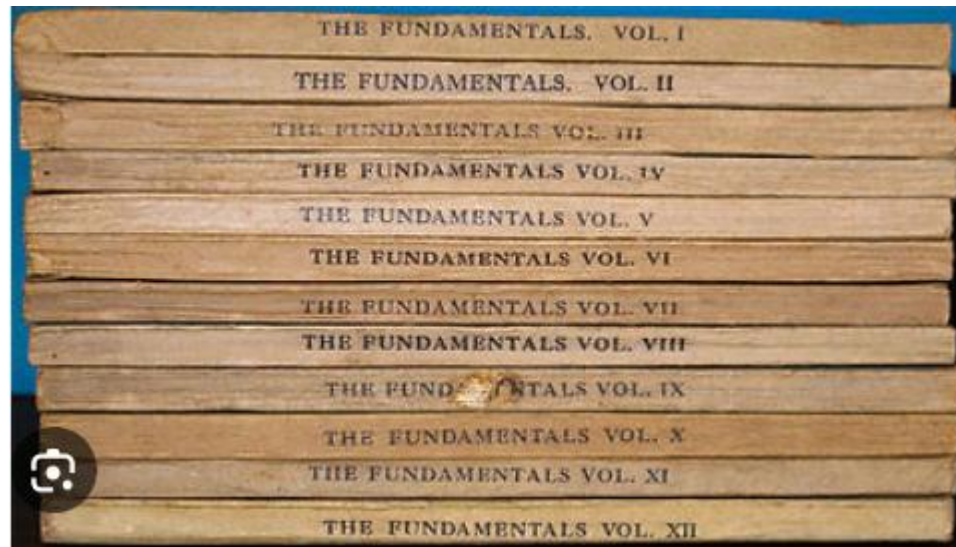
*Niagara  
Bible  
Conference*

\*Fundamentalism became a major focus in the 1880s.

# Religious Fundamentalism

The term **fundamentalism** can be traced to a collection of 90 essays: *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, published after the Niagara conference in 12 volumes, 1910-1915.

The primary target of the essays is “higher criticism” of the Bible.



# Religious Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism accepts the Enlightenment project of joining science and religion to obtain a **unified worldview**.

As opposed to the **neo-orthodoxy** of the 1950s, which attempts to separate science and religion into different pursuits that have different purposes.



Karl Barth  
1886-1968



Reinhold Niebuhr  
1892-1971

Fundamentalists  
reaffirmed their  
rejection of  
neo-orthodoxy  
with introduction  
of creation science  
in the 1960s

# Religious Fundamentalism

**Fundamentalism** departs from the Enlightenment by pre-judging the findings of empirical science.

**Neo-orthodoxy** departs from the Enlightenment by failing to incorporate religion into a unified worldview.

**Both** are part of the decline of Enlightenment values.

Is it possible, even in principle,  
for religion to be genuinely  
evidence-based?

We will return to this question  
at the end of the course.

# Logical Positivism

**Positivism**, introduced by August Comte, is an outgrowth of the **scientific worldview** often attributed to the Enlightenment.

It argued for strict adherence to **scientifically verifiable** data and a **quantifiable basis** for human sciences (e.g. sociology) and decision making.

**Logical positivism** is a more rigorous form of positivism advocated by the **Vienna Circle** (*Wiener Kreis*)...



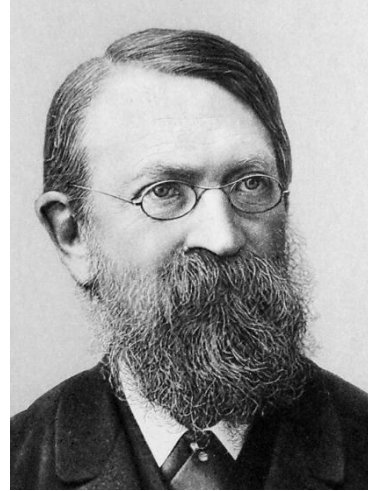
August Comte  
1798-1857

# Logical Positivism

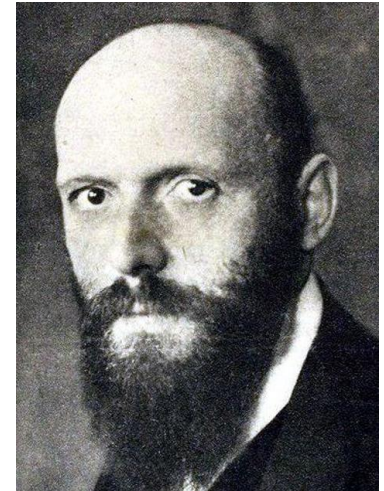
**Some leading figures of the Vienna Circle (1924-1936)**



Moritz Schlick



Ernst Mach



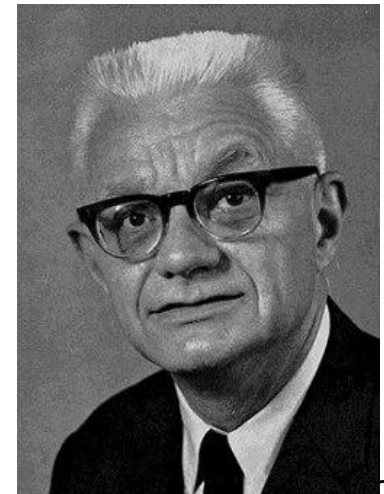
Otto Neurath



Rudolf Carnap



Kurt Gödel



Karl Hempel\*

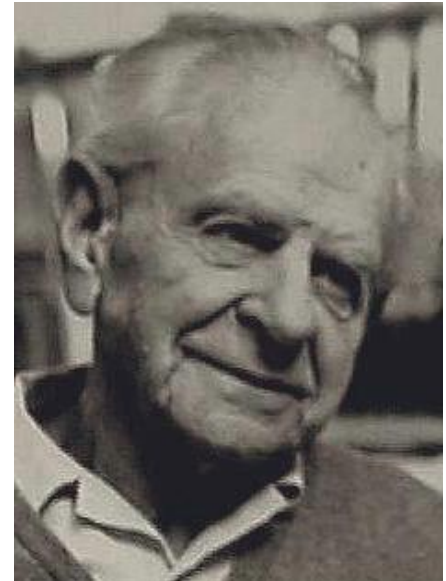
\*Hempel was also associated with the Berlin Circle. He joined the Pitt faculty after retirement from Princeton.

# Logical Positivism

**Theory of Meaning.** Logical positivists argued that a statement has **cognitive meaning** only if it can, in principle, be **verified by empirical observation**, or deduced by logic (as in mathematics).

Karl Popper later insisted that meaningful claims must, in principle, be **falsifiable** (since observation can't prove them).

Example: Psychological egoism



Karl Popper  
1902-1994

# Logical Positivism

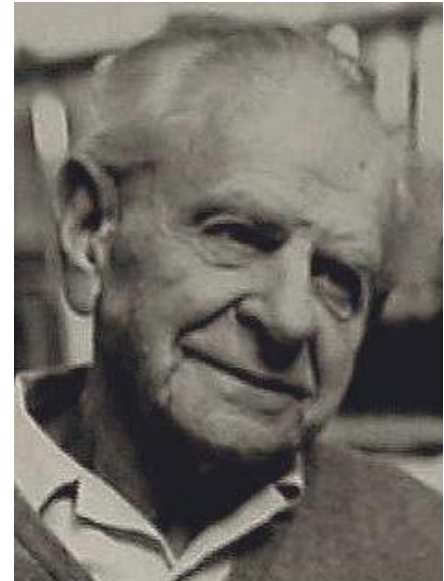
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Example: Psychological egoism

In particular, **ethical** and **religious** claims have no cognitive meaning (i.e., they are **neither true nor false**). They serve other purposes. This is the **beginning of truth decay**.

For example,  
“Lying is wrong” = “Don't lie!”



Karl Popper  
1902-1994

# Wittgenstein on Language

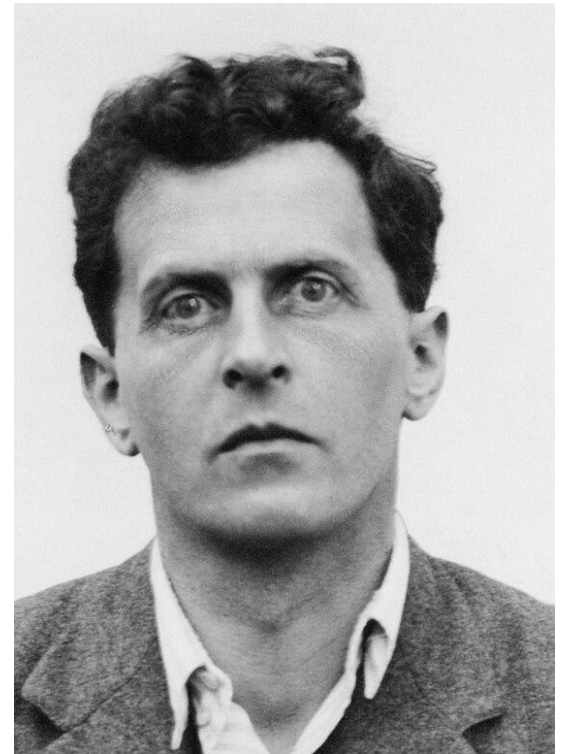
Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was not a member of the Vienna Circle but strongly influenced its members, as well as practically every philosopher to follow.\*

After working with Bertrand Russell at Cambridge and writing *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*\*\* (1921), he decided he had solved all philosophical problems.

He quit philosophy, returned to Austria, and became an elementary school teacher and gardener.

\*His pianist brother Paul is also famous, mainly for commissioning Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand in D major*.

\*\*A deliberate reference to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*



Ludwig Wittgenstein  
1889-1951 25

# Wittgenstein on Language

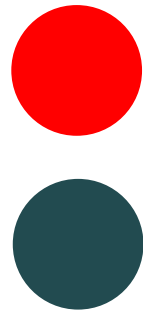
At some point (about 1929) he revisited the **color exclusion problem** he considered in the *Tractatus*.

How do we explain the fact that an object **cannot be red and blue** at the same place and the same time?

We “define” red and blue by **pointing** to red and blue objects (*ostension*), not by dictionary definition.

But the **incompatibility** of red and blue **must** be part of a dictionary definition.

This problem forced Wittgenstein to discard the *Tractatus*, return to philosophy,\* and **start over**.



\*With encouragement from Moritz Schlick

# Wittgenstein on Language

His eventual response was a totally new philosophy of language, presented in *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953.

Think about how children learn *red* and *blue*.  
Not by seeing someone point at red and blue things.  
But by learning when it is proper to **use the words**.

The meaning of a words consists entirely in how they are used in a **language game**.

Think about what “strike out” means in baseball.

Dictionarians don't define language, they play their own language game.



# Wittgenstein on Language

Postmodernists will **seize on the metaphor** of a language game, as it suggests that we can just make things up. But it doesn't follow that there is **no truth or falsehood**.

“He struck out” is either **true or false**.

Its meaning derives from a game that governs how human speech **interacts with natural events** (what happens to the ball).

Similarly for “This raven is black.”

Of course, the rules of a language game evolve in human culture, and this may give postmodernists an opening.



# Frankfurt School

Known for developing **Critical Theory**, members of the Frankfurt School (founded 1923) criticized capitalism and what some saw as the Enlightenment's role in the **rise of facism**.



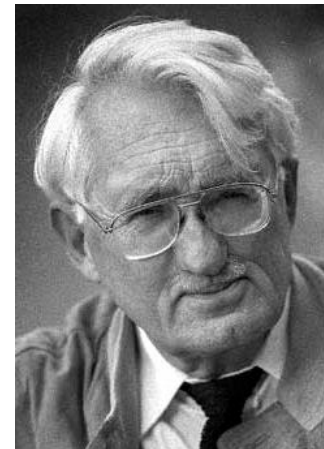
Theodor Adorno  
1903-1969



Max Horkheimer  
1895-1973



Herbert Marcuse  
1898-1979



Jürgen Habermas  
1929-2026



Erich Fromm  
1900-1980

# Frankfurt School

Adorno and Horkheimer struggled to explain how Western civilization, at the pinnacle of its success and achievements, could give rise to the **total moral breakdown of Stalinism and Nazism.**

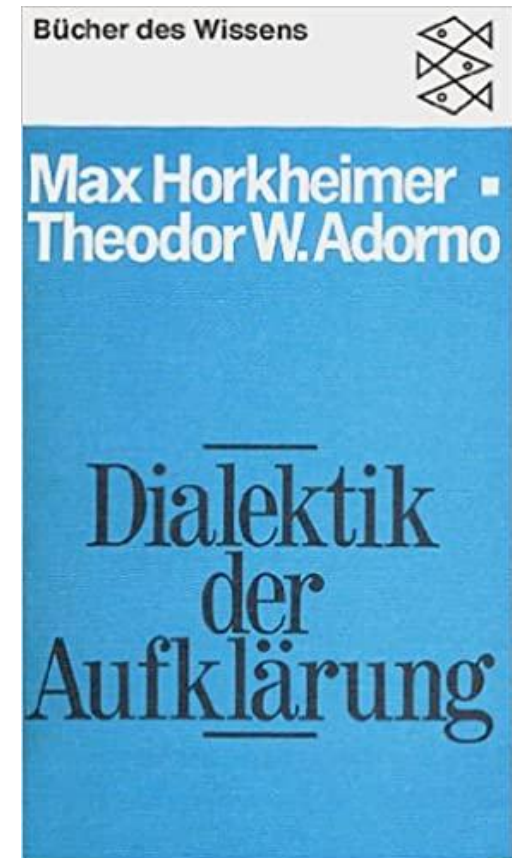


# Frankfurt School

They **blamed the Enlightenment**, saying that it carried the seeds of its own destruction.

Its emphasis on **scientific rationality** destroyed the legitimacy of values and religion.

They developed their view while exiled in Los Angeles during the Nazi era and published it in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which contains echoes of Freud and Nietzsche.



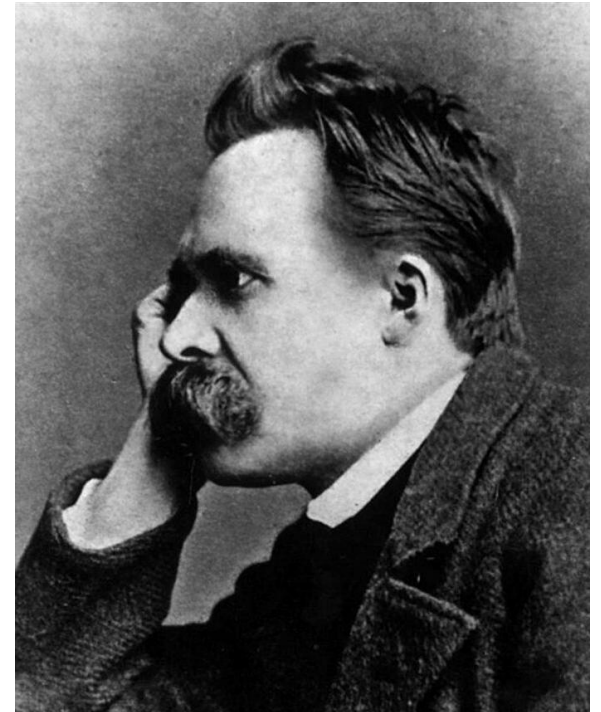
# Frankfurt School

With rational ethics destroyed, there is nothing else to do but to **seek power** through **technical rationality**.

Does this mean that we can avoid moral nihilism only by rejecting Enlightenment and returning to Burkean tradition?



Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844-1900  
Prophet of the “will to power”



# Arendt on Totalitarianism

Hannah Arendt saw totalitarianism as the distinctive political development of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, she did not view it as an **inevitable outcome** of the Enlightenment.



Hannah Arendt  
1906-1975

Arendt is best known for her coverage of the Eichmann trial but was actually a highly trained philosopher.\* The focus here is primarily on her books *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Human Condition* (1958).

\*She studied with renowned philosophers Karl Jaspers and (in a massive irony) Martin Heidegger, an unrepentant Nazi with whom she had an affair.

# Arendt on Totalitarianism

Arendt asks how we can prevent a republican government from **sliding into totalitarianism**, as happened to the Weimar Republic in Germany.

She called for a **renewal of classical republican values**.

U.S. founders were thoroughly educated in the Greek and Roman classics and turned to the **Roman republic** as a model. Even our city names and architecture reflects this.



U.S. Supreme Court building

# Arendt on Totalitarianism

Arendt claimed that Western republics have too often **reduced political discourse to economics**.

IT'S THE  
ECONOMY,  
STUPID!

The Romans sharply distinguished the **public** from the **private** realm. Economics (Greek for “household law”) belongs to the latter.

A public that cares only about prices etc. can overlook growing authoritarianism. Citizens of a republic must **stay informed** and engage with the public sphere.

Gasoline	Self Serve
Regular	7.25 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>10</sub>
Plus	7.45 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>10</sub>
Supreme	7.75 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>10</sub>

Arendt even thought that civic engagement gives life meaning.

One can accept Arendt's essential point while recognizing the importance of economics and class conflict to politics.

# Arendt on Totalitarianism

Arendt also recognized that totalitarianism rests on a tendency of **ordinary people** to **obey orders** without examining the larger consequences.

She recalled Kant's insistence that a free individual must act on the basis of **rational judgment** rather than **unthinking obedience**.

“Should any earthly legislation enjoin something immediately contradictory of the moral law, obedience is not to be rendered.”

-- Kant, *Die Religion innherhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*



“No one has the right to obey.”

# Arendt on Totalitarianism

Arendt is famous for describing the **banality of evil**. Evil can become **normalized** and socially acceptable. She characterized Eichmann as “Terrifyingly normal.”

According to Frankfurt School psychologist Erich Fromm, the individualism and lack of moral compass in modern society lead to such “escape mechanisms” as authoritarianism and conformity. The result is a **pathology of normalcy** as society accepts these behaviors.



Erich Fromm  
1900-1980

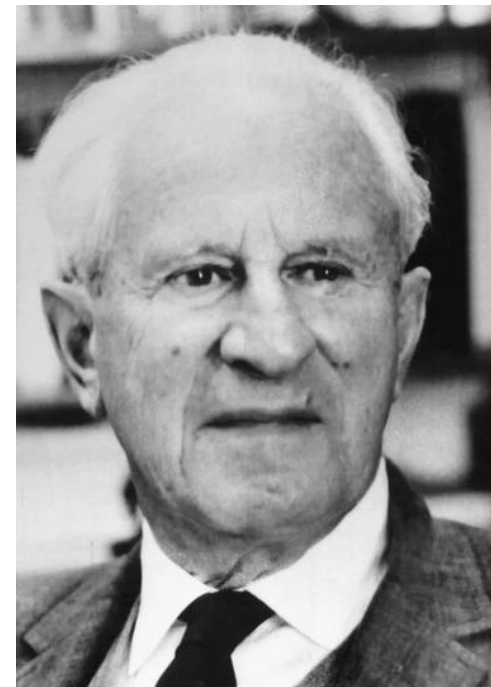
# Marcuse & One-Dimensional Society

Herbert Marcuse was the leading theorist of the New Left of the 1960s. He expanded on Arendt's critique of a society dominated by economics with his concept of a **one-dimensional society**.

Marcuse was a prominent figure of the Frankfurt School and critic of late capitalism.

He became the guru of the student movements of the 1960s.

As a neo-Marxist, he rejected Arendt's idea that economics is a private matter.



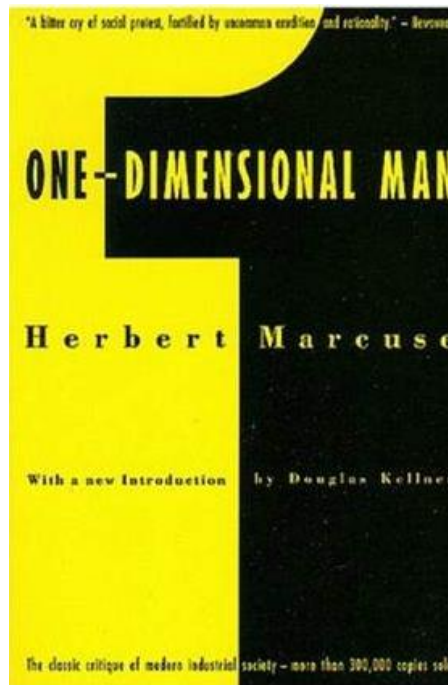
Herbert Marcuse  
1898-1979

# Marcuse & One-Dimensional Society

Marcuse argued that advanced capitalism manipulates desires and cultivates a **conformist consciousness** that lacks critical thought. It creates an illusion of freedom while actually **suppressing freedom**.

Marcuse claimed that late capitalism imposes “totalitarianism” by other means.

His critique of modern society anticipated **postmodernist** Jean Baudrillard.



Marcuse and students, 1968

## Next Session

Postmodernism's rejection of Enlightenment rationality and objective truth, and a possible return to Enlightenment.

