Meaning in History

The theological implications of the philosophy of history, traced through the works of

BURCKHARDT
MARX
HEGEL
PROUDHON
COMTE
CONDORCET
TURGOT
VOLTAIRE
VICO
BOSSUET
JOACHIM
AUGUSTINE
OROSIUS
and
THE BIBLE
AFTER I had finished this small study of the large topic of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte,* I began to wonder whether the reader might not be disappointed by the lack of "constructive" results. This apparent lack is, however, a real gain if it is true that truth is more desirable than illusion. Assuming that a single grain of truth is preferable to a vast construct of illusions, I have tried to be honest with myself and, consequently, also with my reader about the possibility, or rather the impossibility, of imposing on history a reasoned order or of drawing out the working of God. History as a partial record of human experience is too deep and, at the same time, too shallow to put into relief the humble greatness of a human soul which can give meaning, if anything can give it, to what otherwise would be a burden for man. History no more proves or disproves the incomparable value of a single man’s righteousness and heroism in the face of the powers of the world than it proves or disproves the existence of God. Of course, individuals as well as whole nations can be hypnotized into the belief that God or some world-process intends them to achieve this or that and to survive while others are going under, but there is always something pathetic, if not ludicrous, in beliefs of this kind. To the critical mind, neither a providential design nor a natural law of progressive development is discernible in the tragic human comedy of all times. Nietzsche was right when he said that to look upon nature as if it were a proof of the goodness and care of God and to interpret history as a constant testimony to a moral order and purpose—that all this is now past because it has conscience against it. But he was wrong in assuming that the pseudo-religious makeup of nature and history is of any real consequence to a genuine Christian faith in God, as revealed in Christ and hidden in nature and history.

More intelligent than the superior vision of philosophers and
Meaning in History

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vii
mental quest; for there would be no search for the meaning of history if its meaning were manifest in historical events. It is the very absence of meaning in the events themselves that motivates the quest. Conversely, it is only within a pre-established horizon of ultimate meaning, however hidden it may be, that actual history seems to be meaningless. This horizon has been established by history, for it is Hebrew and Christian thinking that brought this colossal question into existence. To ask earnestly the question of the ultimate meaning of history takes one's breath away; it transports us into a vacuum which only hope and faith can fill.

The ancients were more moderate in their speculations. They did not presume to make sense of the world or to discover its ultimate meaning. They were impressed by the visible order and beauty of the cosmos, and the cosmic law of growth and decay was also the pattern for their understanding of history. According to the Greek view of life and the world, everything moves in recurrences, like the eternal recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption. This view was satisfactory to them because it is a rational and natural pattern of the universe, combining a recognition of temporal changes with periodic regularity, constancy, and immutability. The immutable, as visible in the fixed order of the heavenly bodies, had a higher interest and value to them than any progressive and radical change.

In this intellectual climate, dominated by the rationality of the natural cosmos, there was no room for the universal significance of a unique, incomparable historic event. As for the destiny of man in history, the Greeks believed that man has resourcefulness to meet every situation with magnanimity—they did not go further than that. They were primarily concerned with the logos of the cosmos, not with the Lord and the meaning of history. Even the tutor of Alexander the Great depreciated history over against poetry, and Plato might have said that the sphere of change and contingency is the province of historiography but not of philosophy. To the Greek thinkers a philosophy of history would have been a contradiction in terms. To them history was political history and, as such, the proper study of statesmen and historians.

To the Jews and Christians, however, history was primarily a history of salvation and, as such, the proper concern of prophets, preachers, and teachers. The very existence of a philosophy of history and its quest for a meaning is due to the history of salvation; it emerged from the faith in an ultimate purpose. In the Christian era political history, too, was under the influence and in the predicament of this theological background. In some way the destinies of nations became related to a divine or pseudo-divine vocation.

It is not by chance that we use the words "meaning" and "purpose" interchangeably, for it is mainly purpose which constitutes meaning for us. The meaning of all things that are what they are, not by nature, but because they have been created either by God or by man, depends on purpose. A chair has its meaning of being a "chair," in the fact that it indicates something beyond its material nature: the purpose of being used as a seat. This purpose, however, exists only for us who manufacture and use such things. And since a chair or a house or a town or a B-29 is a means to the end or purpose of man, the purpose is not inherent in, but transcends, the thing. If we abstract from a chair its transcendent purpose, it becomes a meaningless combination of pieces of wood.

The same is true in regard to the formal structure of the meaning of history. History, too, is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts. But, since history is a movement in time, the purpose is a goal. Single events as such are not meaningful, nor is a mere succession of events. To venture a statement about the meaning of historical events is possible only when their telos becomes apparent. When a historical movement has unfolded its consequences, we reflect on its first appearance, in order to determine the meaning of the whole, though particular, event—"whole" by a definite point of departure and a final point of arrival. If we reflect on the whole course of history, imagining its beginning and anticipating its end, we think of its meaning in terms of an ultimate purpose.
gists and astronomers which have vastly changed our time-scale, on which the beginning of the Christian era is an extremely recent date.

On a time-scale in which nineteen hundred years are no more than the twinkling of an eye, the beginning of the Christian era is only yesterday. It is only on the old-fashioned time-scale, on which the creation of the world and the beginning of life on the planet were reckoned to have taken place not more than six thousand years ago, that a span of nineteen hundred years seems a long period of time and the beginning of the Christian era therefore seems a far-off event. In fact it is a very recent event—perhaps the most recent significant event in history...17

But how can one infer from an astronomical "fact" a historical and even religious "significance"? It is sheer belief, quite apart from astronomical evidence and likewise apart from an empirical study of history, which prompts Toynbee to assert that Christianity is still new and that it will not only survive our Western civilization but even become the world religion. He thinks that the technical unification of the modern world may serve its historical purpose "by providing Christianity with a completely world-wide repetition of the Roman Empire to spread over."18 What may happen is that "Christianity may be left as the spiritual heir of all the other higher religions... and of all the philosophies from Ikhnaton's to Hegel's; while the Christian Church as an institution may be left as the social heir of all the other churches and all the civilizations."19

Thus Toynbee's universal history of twenty-one civilizations issues in the ecumenical prospect of a progressive realization of a very particular church, in spite of his other concern with the empirical demonstration of recurrent cycles in man's secular fortunes. One wonders how these cycles can be integrated into that progression and how the dismal results of Toynbee's historical study can be harmonized with the hopeful assumptions of Toynbee as a believer.

Toynbee's belief has no bearing upon his historical consciousness, for he is much more under the spell of naturalistic and secular thinking than he realizes. It is mainly on this account that he
BURCKHARDT

claim to historical “ideas.” The philosophy of history is to him a contradiction in terms, inasmuch as history co-ordinates observations, while philosophy subordinates them to a principle. He dismisses likewise a theology of history. “The amelioration offered by religion is beyond our scope.” The religious solution of the meaning of history belongs, he says, to a “special faculty” of man—to faith, which Burckhardt did not pretend to have.

He refers to Hegel and Augustine as the two who made the most outstanding attempts to explain history systematically by a principle: by God or the absolute Spirit, each working out his purpose in history. Against Hegel's theodicy, Burckhardt insists that the reasonableness of history is beyond our ken, for we are not privy to the purpose of eternal wisdom. Against Augustine's religious interpretation he says: “To us it does not matter.” Both transcend our possible, purely human wisdom. Philosophy and theology of history have to deal with first beginnings and ultimate ends, and the profane historian cannot deal with either of them. The one point accessible to him is the permanent center of history: “man, as he is and was and ever shall be,” striving, acting, suffering. The inevitable result of Burckhardt's refusal to deal with ultimate ends is his complementary resignation concerning ultimate meaning. He asks himself: “How far does this result in skepticism?” and he answers that true skepticism certainly has its place in a world where beginning and end are unknown and where the middle is in constant motion.

And yet there is some kind of permanence in the very flux of history, namely, its continuity. This is the only principle discernible in Burckhardt's Reflections on History, the one thin thread that holds together his observations after he has dismissed the systematic interpretations by philosophy and theology. The whole significance of history depends for Burckhardt on continuity as the common standard of all particular historical evaluations. If a radical crisis really disrupted history's continuity, it would be the end of a historical epoch, but not a “historical” crisis.¹

Continuity as understood by him is more than mere going on, and it is less than progressive development. It is less than progres-
question of the historical significance of epigonic philosophies. He compares the Epicurean, Stoic, and Skeptic schools, after Plato and Aristotle, with the modern schools of Feuerbach, Stirner, and B. Bauer, after Hegel, interpreting the historical significance of these subjective and moralizing sects as a necessary consequence of the preceding consummation of an objective philosophy of pure contemplation; for, if the abstract principle of a classical philosophy has been worked out to an all-embracing totality, as with Aristotle and Hegel, further progress in the traditional line is no longer possible. At such historical turning-points a new attempt has to be made by a definite break with the philosophical tradition. "This storm in which everything totters occurs with historical necessity at such a junction. Those who do not understand the necessity of a new beginning will have to resign or to copy [like the conservative pupils of Hegel] in cheap plaster what has been created in costly marble by the master." Only by accepting the necessity of a revolutionary change can one understand why a Zeno, an Epicurus, and the Skeptics could arise after Aristotle; why "bottomless poor attempts" of new philosophers could come into being after Hegel.

The half-hearted minds have in such critical times the opposite view of wholehearted generals: they believe that they might repair the damage by diminishing their forces ... by compromise and appeasement ... while Themistocles [i.e., Marx], when Athens [i.e., pure philosophy] was threatened by disaster, boldly advised the Athenians to give up their city completely and to found a new Athens [i.e., a new kind of philosophy] on the open sea, in another element [i.e., in the element of political-economic praxis].

The time which follows such catastrophes is an iron age, either marked by titanic struggles or merely imitating bygone epochs of historical greatness. This iron age is unhappy, for the old gods are dead and the new god is still invisible and ambiguous like the twilight, which may turn to utter darkness as well as to full day. The core of the unhappiness in such times of crisis is that the spirit of the age cannot sincerely accept any given reality, while its relative happiness consists in the subjective forms of philosophical consciousness as represented by the private philosophies of late antiquity and late Christianity, respectively. The "universal sun" has set, and what illuminates the darkness is only the artificial light of "private lamps." But, since Marx himself had already settled his accounts with the "German ideology" of post-Hegelian philosophy, he felt confident in anticipating the future philosophy which realizes the unity of reason and reality, of essence and existence, as it was postulated by Hegel. But, if reason becomes really realized in the whole realm of material reality, philosophy as such is annihilated by becoming a theory of practice. While with Hegel the world had become philosophical, a realm of spirit, now, with Marx, philosophy has to become worldly, political economy—Marxism.

This "now" is the decisive "instant," to use a term of Kierkegaard, which divides all meaningful history, not into a pagan B.C. and a Christian A.D., but, no less radically, into a "prehistory" and a future history which leads through the dictatorship of the proletariat from the realm of necessity to that of freedom from all prehistoric antagonism; for the present capitalistic society is the "last" antagonistic form of the social process of production, developing in its own womb the conditions for the final solution of the antagonism between capital and labor, between oppressors and oppressed. The bourgeois-capitalist society constitutes "the closing chapter of the pre-historic stage of human society."

In an early outline of the future society Marx describes this earthly Kingdom of God thus: "In all history up to now it is certainly an empirical fact that single individuals, with the expansion of their activity to a world-historical scale, have become more and more enslaved to an alien power," i.e., to capital or, more precisely, to the capitalist mode of production which in the modern world represents the ancient fate. This fatal power has become steadily more massive and apparently inescapable.

But it is just as empirically grounded that through the overthrow of the existing social order, through the communist revolution, i.e., the abolis-
eration and was dogmatically satisfied with the abstract formula that the new man is the Communist, producing commonwealth, the *zoon politikon*, or “collective being,” of the modern cosmopolis.

The matrix of this new man is, according to Marx, the most wretched creature in capitalist society, the proletarian who is alienated from himself to the extreme, by being forced to sell himself for wages to the capitalist owner of the means of production. Far from having an all-too-human compassion for the individual destiny of the proletarian, Marx sees in the proletariat the world-historical instrument for achieving the eschatological aim of all history by a world revolution. The proletariat is the chosen people of historical materialism for the very reason that it is excluded from the privileges of established society. Just as Sieyes, before the outbreak of the French Revolution, had postulated that the bourgeois was “nothing” and *therefore* entitled to become “everything,” so Marx, fifty years after the victory of bourgeois society, postulated the universal mission of the proletariat which had developed from it. The proletariat has a total claim because it is totally alienated from human existence. Being an exception to existing society, by living at the fringe of it, it is the only class which has in itself the potentiality of becoming normative; for, though the disintegration of existing society is represented by bourgeoisie and proletariat alike, the latter alone has a universal mission and a redemptive significance because its uniqueness lies in a total privation of the privileges of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat is a class not within but outside existing society, and therefore it is the potentiality of an absolute, classless society. Concentrating and summing up the antagonisms of all social spheres in their human summit, the proletariat is the key to the problem of the entire human society; for it cannot emancipate itself from the bondage of capitalism without emancipating thereby the totality of society.

In *German Ideology*, Marx defines the universal significance of the proletariat thus: “Only the proletarians who are completely excluded from all spontaneous exercise of their human
III

HEGEL

IN HIS Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of History (1830) Hegel describes world history as it appears at a first glance:

...we see a vast picture of changes and transactions; of manifold forms of peoples, states, individuals, in unresting succession.... On every hand aims are adopted and pursued.... In all these occurrences and changes we behold human action and suffering predominant; everywhere something akin to ourselves, and therefore everywhere something that excites our interest for or against.... Sometimes we see the more comprehensive mass of some general interest advancing with comparative slowness, and subsequently sacrificed to an infinite complication of trifling circumstances, and so dissipated into atoms. Then, again, with a vast expenditure of power a trivial result is produced; while from what appears unimportant a tremendous issue proceeds ... and when one combination vanishes another immediately appears in its place. The general thought—the category which first presents itself in this restless mutation of individuals and peoples existing for a time and then vanishing—is that of change at large. The sight of the ruins of some ancient sovereignty directly leads us to contemplate this thought of change in its negative aspect.... But the next consideration which allies itself with that of change, is that change, while it imports dissolution, involves at the same time the rise of a new life, that while death is the issue of life, life is also the issue of death.¹

The most effective springs of historical action and suffering seem to be human interests, passions, and the satisfaction of selfish desires, disregarding law, justice, and morality:

When we look at this display of passions, and the consequences of their violence; the Unreason which is associated not only with them, but even (rather we might say especially) with good designs and righteous aims; when we see the evil, the vice, the ruin that has befallen the most flourishing kingdoms which the mind of man ever created; we can scarce avoid being filled with sorrow at this universal taint of corruption; and, since this decay is not the work of mere Nature, but of the Human Will, a... revolt of the Good Spirit... may well be the result of our reflections. Without rhetorical exaggeration, a simply truthful combination of the miseries that have overwhelmed the noblest of nations and polities, and the finest exemplars of private virtue, forms a picture of most fearful aspect, and excites emotions of the profoundest and most hopeless sadness, counterbalanced by no consolatory result. We endure in beholding it a mental torture, allowing no defence or escape but the consideration that what has happened could not be otherwise; that it is a fatality which no intervention could alter.... But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimised—the question necessarily arises: to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered?²

We all know this “panorama of sin and suffering” which history unfolds. It is the same that Burckhardt has in mind and that Goethe describes. History, Goethe says, is “the most absurd of all things,” a “web of nonsense for the higher thinker.”³ “What one can observe on the whole,” he writes in a letter to Schilller (March 9, 1802), with reference to Napoleon, “is a tremendous view of streams and rivers which, with natural necessity, rush together from many heights and valleys; at last they cause the overflowing of a great river and an inundation in which both perish, those who foresaw it and those who had no inkling of it. In this tremendous empirical process you see nothing but nature and nothing of that which we philosophers would so much like to call freedom.” We encounter the same vision again in Thomas Hardy’s great drama of the Napoleonic wars, commented upon by the choruses of the years, of the pities, of sinister and ironic spirits, and of rumor. The angels are only recording what happens. What Burckhardt, Goethe, and Hardy thus describe, is it not history as it is? And why not stop here, instead of asking Hegel’s question: To what final purpose are these enormous sacrifices offered time and again? Hegel says that this question arises “necessarily” in our thinking. The implication is, however, that it arises in our occidental thinking, which is not satisfied with the pagan acceptance of fate.

After describing history as permanent change, wherein death

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is the issue of life and life the issue of death, Hegel goes on to say that this is an "oriental" conception, representing the life of nature which, like the mythical phoenix, eternally prepares its own funeral pyre and is consumed upon it, rising from its ashes in a new life. This image, he says, is not occidental. To us history is a history of the Spirit; and, though it is also self-consuming, it does not merely return to the same form but comes forth "exalted, glorified," with each successive phase becoming, in turn, a material on which the spiritual history of man proceeds to a new level of fulfilment. Thus the conception of mere change gives place to one of spiritual perfection, though involved with the conditions of nature.

This occidental conception of history, implying an irreversible direction toward a future goal, is not merely occidental. It is essentially a Hebrew and Christian assumption that history is directed toward an ultimate purpose and governed by the providence of a supreme insight and will—in Hegel's terms, by spirit or reason as "the absolutely powerful essence." Hegel says that the only thought which philosophy brings to the contemplation of history is "the simple concept of reason" as the "sovereign of the world"; and this statement (which was so irritating to Burckhardt) is indeed simple if, as in Hegel, the historical process is understood on the pattern of the realization of the Kingdom of God, and philosophy as the intellectual worship of a philosophical God.4

Having discussed the defects in the classic concept of reason, Hegel deals with the Christian idea of providence. To him providence is a truth that consorts with his own proposition that reason governs the world. The common belief in providence, however, has the philosophical weakness that it is at once too indefinite and too narrow to be capable of application to the entire course of human history. The plan of providence is supposed to be concealed from our understanding. Only in isolated cases, in particular circumstances, is this plan supposed to be manifest—for example, when help has unexpectedly come to an individual in great perplexity. But in the history of the world the individu-
himself loyal to the genius of Christianity by realizing the
Kingdom of God on earth. And, since he transposed the Chris-
tian expectation of a final consummation into the historical
process as such, he saw the world's history as consummating
itself. "The history of the world is the world's court of justice"
(Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht) is a sentence which is
as religious in its original motivation, where it means that the
world's history is proceeding toward its judgment at the end
of all history, as it is irreligious in its secular application, where
it means that the judgment is contained in the historical process
as such.

Hegel himself did not feel the profound ambiguity in his
great attempt to translate theology into philosophy and to real-
ize the Kingdom of God in terms of the world's real history. He
felt no difficulty in identifying the "idea of freedom," the realiza-
tion of which is the ultimate meaning of history, with the "will
of God"; for, as a "priest of the Absolute," "damned by God to
be a philosopher," he knew this will and the plan of history. He
did not know it as a prophet predicting future catastrophe but
as a prophet in reverse, surveying and justifying the ways of the
Spirit by its successive successes.

It would be easy to point out, a hundred years after Hegel, the
limitations of his historical vision and the oddity of some of its
applications—for example, to the Prussian monarchy and to
liberal Protestantism. His world was still the Christian Occi-
dent, old Europe. America and Russia, to whom he dedicated
only a few pages, though pages of remarkable foresight, were
only on the periphery of his interest. Furthermore, he did not
foresee the effects of the technical sciences on the unity of the
historical world, united now by all means of rapid communica-
tion and yet much less universal in spirit than during the Roman
Empire or the Middle Ages.

More decisive than the material limitations of Hegel's vision
is the inherent weakness of his principle that the Christian reli-
gion is realized by reason in the history of the secular world—
as if the Christian faith could ever be "realized" at all and yet
tinction between “moderns” and “ancients” apparently ignores the question of whether the moderns have progressed beyond Christianity also. A careful reading of these all-but-harmless discussions shows, however, that their crucial problem was the basic antagonism between antiquity and Christianity, between reason and revelation. And with the full development of the modern idea of progress into a sort of religion, the assertion of the superiority of the moderns was openly applied to Christianity. Modernity became distinguished from classical antiquity as well as from Christianity. With Condorcet, Comte, and Proudhon, the question of whether the moderns have advanced beyond antiquity is no longer serious; the problem is now how to replace and supersede the central doctrines and the social system of the ancient Christians. At the same time, they realized, though only dimly, that the progress of the modern revolutionary age is not simply a consequence of its new knowledge in natural science and history but that it is still conditioned by that advance which Christianity has achieved over classical paganism. Hence the ambiguous structure of their leading idea of progress, which is as Christian by derivation as it is anti-Christian by implication and which is definitely foreign to the thought of the ancients. While the starting-point of the modern religions of progress is an eschatological anticipation of a future salvation and consequently a vision of the present state of mankind as one of depravity, no similar hope and despair can be found in any classical writer describing Athens’ or Rome’s decay. The eschatological interpretation of secular history in terms of judgment and salvation never entered the minds of ancient historians. It is the remote and yet intense result of Christian hope and Jewish expectation.

1. PROUDHON

Proudhon had the keenest insight into the anti-Christian implications of the modern religion of progress. He is the theologian of progress and, as such, the most radical critic of providence; for he understood that the recognition of and submission
to either pagan fate or Christian providence is incompatible in principle with the faith in progress, which is essentially revolutionary and worldly. Christianity, “the great revolt against pagan fate,” replaced impersonal fate by personal providence; the task of the modern revolution, according to Proudhon, is the défatalisation of the latter by taking into the hands of man and of human justice the direction of all human affairs. Man has to replace God, and the belief in human progress has to supplant the faith in providence.

At first, however, it seems impossible to reduce the working of God to the labor of man; for all traditional understanding of history depends on the distinction between the will of God and the will of man, between hidden designs and visible agencies, between prompting necessity and personal freedom of choice. In the theology of history the hidden designs which work themselves out with providential necessity has to replace God, and the belief in human progress has to supplant the providence of God to the labor of man; for all traditional understanding of history, to a hidden design of nature. Proudhon tried to solve this antagonism by a sociological transposition. He distinguishes man as a social or collective being from man as an individual person. While the latter acts consciously with rational deliberation, society seems to be acted upon by spontaneous impulses and to be directed by a superior counsel, apparently superhuman, driving men with irresistible power toward an unknown end. Hence the religious customs of questioning oracles, of public prayers and sacrifices, to safeguard historical decisions; hence, also, the philosophical explanation of history (Proudhon refers in particular to Bossuet, Vico, Herder, and Hegel) by a providential destiny presiding over the movements of men. Against these religious or semireligious interpretations of history, Proudhon argues that it is man's privilege to apprehend the apparent fatality as a social instinct, to penetrate its promptings, and to influence it. The providence of God is nothing else than the “collective instinct” or “universal reason” of man as a social being. The god of history is but man's own creation, and “atheism (i.e., humanism) the foundation of every theodicy.”

This “humanitarian atheism” is the last term in man's intellectual and moral liberation, and at the same time it serves “the scientific reconstruction and verification” of all those dogmas which have been demolished by rational analysis, the “indefatigable Satan” who inquires incessantly.

Far from being directed by providential destiny, history advances by revolutionary crises that give birth to new conceptions of justice. The first crisis was provoked by Jesus when he proclaimed man's equality before God. The second was inaugurated by the Reformation and Descartes, achieving equality before conscience and reason. The third began with the French Revolution and established equality before the law. The coming revolution, which is economic and social, will mark the end of the religious, aristocratic, and bourgeois age. It will bring about final equality by the “equation of man with humanity.” To effect this ultimate advance, man has to take up the eternal fight between man and God and decide it; for God, or the Absolute, is the one great obstacle to human progress and the one great source of all kinds of absolutism—economic, political, religious.

While Voltaire and Condorcet were anticlerical and anti-religious by temper and policy, Proudhon prides himself on being radically “anti-theistic.” “The veritable virtue which makes us deserve life eternal is to fight against religion and God himself,” for “God is the evil.” As a providential creator-God, the Christian God is depriving man of his own creative power and prevision. Instead of saying with Voltaire: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him,” Proudhon says that “the first duty of a free and intelligent man is to chase the idea of God out of his mind and conscience incessantly”; for, if he exists, he is essentially hostile to our nature. “We attain to science in spite of him, to well-being in spite of him, to society in spite of him: every progress is a victory in which we crush the deity.” By and by man will become the master of creation and thus equal God. Instead of man's being created in the image of a providential God, God is created in the image of man's power of foreseeing and providing. “Take away this providence and God ceases to be
sight and sincere sadness with regard to the disintegration of the Christian Occident.

In 1843, describing the decline of old Europe, Proudhon, in “this last hour of Christianity,” gratefully remembers its blessings and inspirations; for it is Christianity, he says, which has laid the foundations of our society, sanctioned its laws, unified the nations, and inspired generous minds with the passion for justice. And when, twenty years later, he analyzed once more the social dissolution, he understood the crisis of the nineteenth century again as one which is bound up with the decay of the Christian foundations of our Western civilization:

Today civilization is indeed in a critical stage which has only one historical analogy: the crisis caused by the rise of Christianity. All traditions are used up, all beliefs abolished; on the other hand, the new program is not ready, that is, it has not yet entered the consciousness of the masses. This is what I call “dissolution.” It is the most atrocious moment in the existence of societies. Everything contributes to sadden people of good will: prostitution of conscience, triumph of mediocrity, confusion of truth and falsehood, betrayal of principles, baseness of passions, cowardice of morals. I have no illusion and I do not expect to see... reborn tomorrow in our country liberty, respect for law, public decency..., reason among the bourgeois, and common sense among the plebeians. No, no, I cannot see the end of decadence: it will not decrease within one or two generations. That is our lot. I shall see the evil only and die in utter darkness, marked by the past with the seal of rejection... Mass killings are going to come, and the prostration following the blood bath will be terrifying. We shall not see the work of the new age. We shall struggle in the night, and we must do our best to endure this life without too much sadness. Let us stand by each other, call out to each other in the dark, and do justice as often as an opportunity is given.16

There sounds a note of such hopeless despair as only a believer in progress could feel, but not a Christian. And yet it is the faith in a coming Kingdom of God which inspired Proudhon’s fight against God and providence for the sake of human progress.

The only great counterpart to Hegel’s philosophy of history in comprehensiveness, though not in depth, is Comte’s (1798-1857) Cours de philosophie positive.18 Both works are, first of all, not only philosophies of history but intrinsically historical philosophies, permeated in their very method by the historical sense, whatever the special subject of their studies may be. Like Hegel, Comte is convinced that no phenomenon can be understood philosophically unless it is understood historically, through a demonstration of its temporal derivation and destination, its function, significance, and relative right in the whole course of history. This historical viewpoint became predominant only in the nineteenth century, but its roots stretch back into the Christian understanding of the universe as a creation, that is, as a universe created once for a final purpose and end. Only within such a supra-historical and yet temporal scheme can and must all events be related to their beginning and end, apart from which historical continuity does not make sense.

In consequence of this historical pattern, both works are also a theodicy, explaining and justifying every epoch as a “necessary” and “salutary” phase in the whole course of history. “Tout concilier sans concession,” to reconcile the world to God in and by history, is the common maxim of Comte and Hegel. They convert the disturbing spectacle of apparently contradictory systems of thought and action into “a source of the firmest and most exclusive agreement,” under the general viewpoint of a continuous “evolution” directed toward an end. This evolution is so far from being a merely biological category that it indicates rather the kind of teleology which is inherent in the Christian concept of a purposeful process of unified history.

With Comte, as well as with Hegel, the historical evolution of mankind is not vaguely universal but originates and is concentrated in the white race and the Christian Occident. Western
tific view of social progress; for any such view was at once barred by Christianity's claim to be the final stage at which the human mind must stop.

The first satisfactory view of general progress was proposed by a great Christian believer who was, at the same time, a great scientist—Pascal. He viewed the entire succession of man through the whole course of ages as "one man always subsisting and incessantly learning." But, even so, the idea of continuous progress had no consistency until after the memorable controversy, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, over the "ancients and moderns." The greatest advances toward an adequate understanding of social history were made by Montesquieu and Condorcet. In particular, the latter's Introduction to his work on *The Progress of the Human Mind* anticipated clearly the continuous progression of the race. "These few immortal pages," Comte states, "leave really nothing to be desired in regard to the position of the sociological question at large, which will, in my opinion, rest through all future time, on this admirable statement." Still, even Condorcet's project was imperfect and premature because of his exclusion of moral phenomena from treatment by the positive method. He lost himself in chimerical anticipations and wanderings after an indefinite perfectibility.

**HIS APPRAISAL OF CATHOLICISM AND PROTESTANTISM**

In a revealing footnote Comte states that his "systematic preference" for the Catholic "system" as a social organization does not depend on the accidental fact of his having been reared a Catholic. The affinity of the Catholic and the positive systems rests rather on their common aim and on their ability to create a veritable social organism, though on different bases. They are also united by their common opposition to the social sterility of the Protestant philosophy, which is "radically contrary to any sound political conception." Protestantism's pretense of being able to reform Christianity actually destroyed the most indispensable conditions of its political existence. Thus we find throughout Comte's work not only many remarks of apprecia-
concentrated in the same leader. It is true that science, too, renders great services to the military art; but, resting on rational discussion, it is in principle incompatible with military discipline and authority. Modern scientific industry is basically hostile to the theological, as well as to the military, spirit. Even the maintenance of a vast military apparatus of standing armies through conscription cannot prevent the decline of the military system; for modern conscription destroys the specific character and honor of the military profession by making of the army a multitude of antimilitary citizens, who assume their duty as a temporary burden, and by reducing the military system to a subaltern office in the mechanism of modern society. "Thus the time has come when we may congratulate ourselves on the final passing away of serious and durable warfare among the most advanced nations." Blinded by his evolutionary optimism, Comte foresaw neither the rise of "industrial armies" (Marx) nor that of a militarized industry (Burckhardt). Moreover, he believed that "the scrupulous respect for life" would necessarily increase with our social progression, in proportion as the chimerical hope in immortality faded away, a hope which cannot but disparage the value of the present life. The finality of individual death, far from obstructing the course of general evolution or diminishing the rate of progress, is the condition of progress. Discussing "social dynamics," Comte says that the most important among the permanent influences which affect the rate of progress is the limited duration of human life. "There is no denying that all social progression rests essentially on death" because progress requires the steady renewal of its agents by the succession of generations. An indefinite duration of human life would presently put a stop to all progress whatever. Even if human life were lengthened tenfold only, progress would be slowed down because in the stimulating contest between the conservative instinct of age and the innovating instinct of youth, the conservative age would then be much more favored. If, on the other hand, life were reduced to a quarter of its normal duration, the effect would be as mischievous as in the case of a too protracted dura-
mate concern of the gospel—however “social” it might be. In consequence of this neglect of individual destiny, death is to Comte a merely statistical phenomenon, just like the increase in population. Apart from this positive, but utterly inadequate, viewpoint, death is, however, not a stimulant to a continuous social progress but the veritable end which discontinues all personal human progression. It is a source of ultimate hope or relief in the face of man’s disastrous evolution to such a degree of “scrupulous respect of human life” as we have witnessed recently in both the aggressive and the peace-loving nations. In our positive age it is one of the strangest, though most obvious, dialectical contradictions that we take care for the preservation of individual life as never before by all means of scientific devices and, at the same time, destroy it en masse by means of the same progressive inventions. Indoctrinated with the modern doctrine of man’s natural goodness, Comte never realized that each advance in man’s rule over the world brings with it new forms and levels of degradation and that all our means of progression are just so many means of regression as long as mortal man is involved in the historical process.

Comte’s dogmatic belief in historical continuity and development, without creation and final end, made him blind to the perpetual possibility and actuality of historical losses, reversions, and catastrophes, which are not at all contradictory to the laws of human nature and even less to the Christian faith. While the Greek, as well as the Christian, view of history was open to the stern facts of *hybris* and *nemesis*, of pride and doom, the positive outlook on history cannot but falsify historical reality for the sake of an unattainable secular solution. Comte’s one-dimensional way of thinking levels the substance of history down to the superficial wholeness of a linear and natural evolution, the counterpart, as he realized, of supernatural creation. But the immense reality of history, which is as much human as it is inhuman, has more than one dimension. It is at least as rich in contradictions as Goethe’s *Natur* or Nietzsche’s “Dionysian world”; and the mighty river of history which breaks the dike
either Saint-Simon, Condorcet, or Turgot, for it is not by originality but by the completeness and persistency of his elaboration that Comte is superior to his predecessors. The principle of order and progress had already been formulated by Condorcet, and the law of the three stages by Saint-Simon and Turgot. All three were working out the decisive transformation of the theology of history into a philosophy of history as inaugurated by Voltaire.

The circumstances under which Condorcet in 1793 composed his Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind are extraordinary: he wrote this enthusiastic sketch down without the aid of a single book when he was an outlaw and a fugitive, shortly before he became a victim of the French Revolution which he had served so nobly. By his death he gave, to quote Comte, “one of the most decisive examples of a sublime and moving personal abnegation, combined with a quiet and unshakable firmness of character which the religious beliefs pretend that they alone can produce and sustain.”

Condorcet’s idea of progress is distinct from Comte’s positive concept of development by what Comte himself called Condorcet’s “chimerical and absurd expectations” concerning man’s perfectibility; but it is the very extremeness of Condorcet’s secular faith in progress and perfectibility which links him, more closely than Comte, to the Christian hope of becoming perfect; for the Christian faith, too, is by its very nature extreme and absolute. In men like Condorcet, Turgot, Saint-Simon, and Proudhon the eighteenth-century passion for reason and justice engendered a fervor which can indeed be called “religious,” though it was irreligious.

The object of Condorcet’s study is the development of the human faculties in the successive societies “to exhibit the order in which the changes have taken place.” The natural goal of this orderly progress is the perfection of knowledge and, thereby, of happiness. Our contribution to the natural process of progression consists in securing and accelerating it. Reasoning and facts alike show that nature has fixed no limits to our improvement. “The perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite” and “can never be retrogressive.” Its only limit is the duration of the earth and the constancy of the laws of the universe. Granted that the earth retains its position, permitting the human race to preserve and exercise therein the same faculties, we can formulate definite hopes as to our future progress in knowledge, virtue, and liberty. We can foresee how the blessings must necessarily amalgamate and become inseparable, the moment knowledge shall have arrived at a certain pitch in a great number of nations at once, the moment it shall have penetrated the whole mass of a great people, whose language shall have become universal, and whose commercial intercourse shall embrace the whole extent of the globe. This union having once taken place in the whole enlightened class of men, this class will be considered as the friends of human kind, exerting themselves in concert to advance the improvement and happiness of the species.

By inference from the progress achieved in the past, one can now safely predict its future prospects by the art of foreseeing the future improvements of the human race.

If man can predict, almost with certainty, those appearances of which he understands the laws; if, even when the laws are unknown to him, experience of the past enables him to foresee, with considerable probability, future appearances; why should we suppose it a chimerical undertaking to delineate, with some degree of truth, the picture of the future destiny of mankind from the results of its history? The only foundation of faith in the natural sciences is the principle that the general laws, known or unknown, which regulate the phenomena of the universe, are regular and constant; and why should this principle, applicable to the other operations of nature, be less true when applied to the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man? In short, as opinions formed from experience, relative to the same class of objects, are the only rule by which men of soundest understanding are governed in their conduct, why should the philosopher be proscribed from supporting his conjectures upon a similar basis, provided he attribute to them no greater certainty than the number, the consistency, and the accuracy of actual observations shall authorise?

It is pure science, experiment, and calculation, “without a mixture of superstition, prejudice, and authority,” which transform arbitrary prophecy into rational prognostication and which en-
able us to replace divine providence by human prevision. It is, in particular, the application of the arithmetic of combinations and probabilities to the social sciences which will enable us to determine with almost mathematical precision "the quantity of good and evil." The improvement which we may expect will also affect our moral and physical faculties; and then will arrive "the moment in which the sun will observe in its course free nations only, acknowledging no other master than their reason; in which tyrants and slaves, priests and their... instruments will no longer exist but in history and upon the stage." Having definitely abolished religious superstition and political tyranny, the wants and faculties of men will continually become better proportioned amid the improvement of industry and happiness, of individual and general prosperity.

A smaller portion of ground will then be made to produce a portion of provisions of higher value or greater utility; a greater quantity of enjoyment will be procured at a smaller expense of consumption; the same manufactured or artificial commodity will be produced at a smaller expense of raw materials, or will be stronger and more durable; every soil will be appropriated to productions which will satisfy a greater number of wants with the least labour, and taken in the smallest quantities. Thus the means of health and frugality will be increased, together with the instruments in the arts of production, of procuring commodities and manufacturing their produce, without demanding the sacrifice of one enjoyment by the consumer.

Eventually, the perfectibility of the human race may also affect man's natural constitution and postpone, if not eliminate, death; for Condorcet does not doubt that the progress of the sanitive art, the use of more wholesome food and more comfortable habitations, must necessarily prolong the ordinary duration of man's existence. Thus it is not absurd to suppose that a period must one day arrive when death will be nothing more than the effect either of extraordinary accidents, or of the slow and gradual decay of the vital powers; and that the duration of the middle space, of the interval between the birth of man and this decay, will itself have no assignable limit? Certainly man will not become immortal; but may not the distance between the moment in which he draws his first breath, and the common term when, in the course of nature, without malady, without accident, he finds it impossible any longer to exist, be necessarily protracted?

This indefinite prolongation of human life is, to Condorcet, progress par excellence. It is an indefinite one in two senses: by being illimitable either in itself or for our experience. Knowing only that this progress can never stop, we are ignorant in which of the two senses the term "indefinite" is applicable, and this is precisely the state of the knowledge that we have so far acquired relative to the perfectibility of the species.

Lastly, man's moral and intellectual constitution, too, might progress in a natural way by cumulative inheritance; for why should not our parents, who transmit to us their advantages, defects, and propensities, transmit to us also that part of human organization upon which understanding, energy of soul, and moral sensibility depend? It is therefore probably that education, "by improving these qualities, will at the same time modify and improve this organization itself." And "one happy day" every nation, even Orientals (who, according to Condorcet, still live in a state of infancy), will arrive at the state of civilization now attained by the most enlightened and free nations: the French and the Anglo-Americans, who will restore freedom to Africa and Asia. It is true that even those most enlightened nations have not yet arrived at the highest point of improvement and that "the accurate solution of the first principles of metaphysics, morals, and politics" is still recent, so that many questions remain to be solved before we can ascertain "the precise catalogue of the individual rights of man"; but great wars of conquest and revolutions have already become "almost impossible" and the use of firearms makes warfare much less murderous.

Condorcet frankly admits the disconcerting fact that a period of most important advances through scientific inventions, e.g., of compass and firearms, was also a period of atrocious massacres. But he does not draw from it any conclusion which could have
disturbed his rational optimism concerning the natural goodness of man, "the necessary consequence of his organization." He only states that the discovery of the new world was tainted by a degrading "prejudice" against non-Christian natives, leading to the extinction of five million human beings by Christian nations and to the enslavement of other millions by treason and robbery, first dragging them from one hemisphere to another, then purchasing and selling them like commodities. The only inference which he draws from this coincidence of progress and crime is that the result of scientific inference and evidence but a conjecture, the root of which was hope and faith. Even such a sympathetic study of Condorcet as that of John Morley cannot but admit that there is nothing scientific, precise, and quantified in Condorcet's speculations about man's future progress. It took, however, only a few generations among the most enlightened nations to realize the hopelessness of all scientific progress toward a civilized barbarism. In the midst of frantic progress by means of scientific inventions in the middle of the nineteenth century, a mood of aimlessness and despair cast its first shadow upon Europe's most advanced minds; for the very progress seemed to proceed toward nothingness. In France this nihilism found its most sophisticated expression in the writings of Flaubert and Baudelaire. Having exposed, in the Temptation of St. Anthony, all sorts of current beliefs and superstitions, Flaubert set about to disentangle and analyze the chaos of our modern, scientific culture. He made a list of human follies, intended as an ironical glorification of all that had passed for truth. The result of these absurd studies was the novel Bouvard et Pécuchet—the story of two Philistines, sincerely striving for their higher education; good-natured men of sense, who had been office clerks. In their happily acquired country seat they ramble through the entire maze of piled-up knowledge, from horticulture, chemistry, and medicine to history, archeology, politics, pedagogy, and philosophy—only to return to their copying, now making extracts from the books which they had perused in vain. The whole work leads to the conclusion that our entire scientific education is inane. Doctrines of age-long standing are expounded and developed in a few lines, then they are disposed of by other doctrines which are arraigned against them and then destroyed in turn with equal precision and passion. Page after page, line after line, some new kind of knowledge turns up; but at once another appears to knock the first one down, and then it, too, topples over, hit by a third. At the end of the unfinished sketch, Pécuchet draws a gloomy picture, Bouvard a rosy one, of the future of European mankind. According to the one, the end of the debased human race, sunk into general depravity, approaches. There are three alternative possibilities: (1) radicalism severs every tie with the past, entailing inhuman despotism; (2) if theistic absolutism is victorious, liberalism, with which mankind has been imbued since the French Revolution, will perish, and a revolutionary change will take place; (3) if the convulsions of 1789 continue, their waves will carry us away, and there will no longer be ideals or religion or morality: "America will conquer the world." According to the second picture, Europe will be rejuvenated with the aid of Asia, and there will develop undreamed-of techniques of communication, U-boats, and balloons; new sciences will be born, enabling man to place the powers of the universe at the service of civilization and, when the earth is exhausted, to emigrate to other stars. Together with human wants, evil will cease, and philosophy will become religion.

Baudelaire's intention to compose "The End of the World" dates from the same period. Some fragments of it, entitled Fusées, appeared in 1851:

The world is drawing to a close. Only for one reason can it last longer: just because it happens to exist. But how weak a reason is this compared with all that forebodes the contrary, particularly with the question: What is left to the world of man in the future? Supposing it should continue materially, would that be an existence worthy of its name and of the historical dictionary? I do not say the world would fall back into a spectral
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condition and the odd disorder of South American republics; nor do I say that we should return to primitive savagery and, with a rifle in our arms, hunt for food through the grass-covered ruins of our civilization. No, such adventures would still call for a certain vital energy, an echo from primordial times. We shall furnish a new example of the inexorability of the spiritual and moral laws and shall be their new victims: we shall perish by the very thing by which we fancy that we live. Technocracy will Americanize us, progress will starve our spirituality so far that nothing of the bloodthirsty, frivolous or unnatural dreams of the utopist will be comparable to those positive facts. I invite any thinking person to show me what is left of life. Religion! It is useless to talk about it, or to look for its remnants; it is a scandal that one takes the trouble even of denying God. Private property! It was—strictly speaking—abolished with the suppression of the right of primogeniture; yet the time will come when mankind like a revengeful cannibal will snatch the last piece from those who rightfully deemed themselves the heirs of revolutions. And even this will not be the worst.... Universal ruin will manifest itself not solely or particularly in political institutions or general progress or whatever else might be a proper name for it; it will be seen, above all, in the baseness of hearts. Shall I add that that little left-over of sociability will hardly resist the sweeping brutality, and that the rulers, in order to hold their own and to produce a sham order, will ruthlessly resort to measures which will make us, who already are callous, shudder?

Again, a few decades later, Burckhardt in Switzerland, Nietzsche in Germany, Dostoevski and Tolstoy in Russia, prophesied, instead of future progress, the decline of Western civilization. Arguing in his Diary of a Writer against the Russian enthusiasts for Western achievements, Dostoevski says that it is absurd to advise the Russians to catch up with Western progress in view of the imminent and terrible collapse of Western civilization. “The European ant-hill built up without a church and without Christianity—for everywhere in Europe the church has lost her ideal—this ant-hill on a rotten foundation, lacking every universal and absolute, is completely undermined.” What good will it do to take over from Europe institutions which will break down there tomorrow, institutions in which the most intelligent Europeans themselves no longer believe, while they are being slavishly
ventions but in the fact that our material progress fulfils and even surpasses all former expectations, without warranting any longer the hopes which were originally based on it. For Comte even death was an element of progress; we are now scared to death at the prospect that our latest progress in mastering nature might become used by us.

To return to the eighteenth-century from this excursion into the nineteenth, in accordance with our regressive scheme, we have now to consider a man who at the age of twenty-three years, composed a fragmentary view of history of which Toynbee says that it has made a greater permanent contribution to the understanding of history than Acton succeeded in making by devoting a long and laborious life to historical industry.

Turgot’s general view of history is found in what remained a brilliant sketch based on two discourses of 1750 on universal history. The leading theme of both lectures is the advancement of the human race and mind, with particular reference to the contribution which Christianity has made to progress. The course of history is directed by the simple and single principle of a one-dimensional progression, though interrupted by periods of temporary decay. At first, man lived in a natural state until Christianity and then philosophy taught him universal brotherhood. Seen from this broad viewpoint, the progress of history toward perfection is “the most glorious spectacle,” revealing a presiding wisdom.

We see the establishment of societies and the formation of nations which one after the other dominate other nations or obey them. Empires rise and fall; the laws and forms of government succeed one another; the arts and sciences are discovered and made more perfect. Sometimes arrested, sometimes accelerated in their progress, they pass through different climates. Interest, ambition, and vain glory perpetually change the scene of the world, inundating the earth with blood. But in the midst of these ravages man’s mores become sweeter, the human mind becomes enlightened, and the isolated nations come closer to each other. Commerce and politics reunite finally all the parts of the globe and the whole mass of the human-kind, alternating between calm and agitation, good and bad, marches constantly, though slowly, toward greater perfection.
scure island in the Pacific Ocean. The earth became small and, at the same time, the only real dwelling place of our race. The central importance of the human race was shown to be an illusion. The Christian scheme of creation consequently became less plausible. As J. Bury says, man had to invent a more modest theory of his meaning, confined to his little earth, and the eighteenth century answered his question by the theory of a laborious but gradual progress.

The classic essay on this radical change of perspective is Voltaire's *Le Micromégas*, i.e., literally, "The Little Great-One," a philosophical tale of the journey of an inhabitant of another star to the planet Saturn, where, incidentally, he picks up strange small animals. They call themselves "men" and are capable of speaking and curiously intelligent. They insist that they have a "soul." One of them, a Thomist, even maintains that the whole creation was made solely for man's benefit. At this speech the heavenly traveler chokes with inextinguishable laughter.

In the philosophical tale *Candide* it is in particular the Christian view of a providential design and the telological interpretation of history as presented by Leibniz (represented in the tale by Mr. Pangloss) which Voltaire subjects to his satirical criticism. Pangloss has proved that in this world everything is made for a certain purpose of man, and ultimately to the best purpose. "Observe how noses were made to carry spectacles, and spectacles we have accordingly. Our legs are clearly intended for shoes and stockings, so we have them. Stone has been formed to be hewn and dressed for building castles, so my lord has a very fine one.... Pigs were made to be eaten, and we eat pork all the year round." Upon the question as to whether he believes in original sin, Pangloss answers that the Fall of man and the consequent curse necessarily entered into the scheme of the best of all possible worlds. "Then, sir, you do not believe in free will?" "Excuse me," said Pangloss (and he could have referred to Augustine), "free will is compatible with absolute necessity for it was necessary that we should be free...." To another co-traveler, however, who has seen so many extraordinary things that nothing seemed extraordinary to him, the purpose for which the world was created is "to drive us wild." Toward the end of his adventures Pangloss happens to meet six foreigners at a supper in Venice during a carnival masquerade. They are well-known kings, now dethroned, who, by relating their personal destinies, demonstrate the aimlessness and wretchedness of human history. After having gone through many disasters, Candide and his philosophical friends settle down on a little farm near Constantinople, sometimes still continuing their disputes on moral and metaphysical philosophy. Once they consult a celebrated dervish, the best philosopher in Turkey. "Master, we are come to beg that you will tell us why such a strange animal as man has been created." "Why should you meddle with the matter?" the dervish asked; "what business is it of yours?" "But, reverend father," said Candide, "there is a dreadful amount of evil in the world." "What does it signify," replied the dervish, "whether there be evil or good? When His Highness sends a ship to Egypt, does he concern himself whether the mice on board are comfortable or not?" Yet eventually Candide discovers the purpose of his existence. It is civilization or culture in the most primitive and literal sense: he has simply to cultivate his garden as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. "That is the only way of rendering life tolerable." All the little company enters into his praiseworthy resolution, each busily exerting his or her peculiar talents in their small houses and orchards. In his last conversation with Candide, Pangloss still holds to his theodicy: "For, look you, if you had not been driven out of a magnificent castle by hearty kicks upon your hinder parts for presuming to make love to Miss Cunegund, if you had not been put into the Inquisition, if you had not roamed over America on foot, if you had never run your sword through the Baron, or lost all your sheep from the fine country of El Dorado, you would not be here now eating candied citrons and pistachio-nuts." "Well said!" answered Candide; "but we must attend to our garden.

In the background of this brilliant tale, which so forcefully opposes the justification of God in this world's history, was the
to consciousness, not to knowledge, to a mere cogitare instead of a true intelligere or penetrating insight. For man, perfect, demonstrable knowledge is attainable only within the realm of mathematical fictions, where we, like God, are creating our objects. They are, however, abstractions that cannot provide a foundation for a concrete science of nature. But what about the “common nature of the nations,” which is the main concern of Vico’s science? Is it also opaque like physical nature, or is it transparent to our insight?

In answering this question, Vico adopts and at the same time reverses the methodical doubt of Descartes, by asserting that amid the “immense ocean of doubt” there is a “single tiny piece of earth” on which we can gain a firm footing. This single piece of certain truth from which the New Science can and must proceed is that the conversion of verum and factum becomes a real possibility by the indubitable fact that the historical world has been created by man. We can know something about history, even the most obscure beginnings of history, because “in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity . . . there shines the eternal and never-failing light of a truth beyond question: that this world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles can and must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind.” The principles are not immediately given, but they can be found by an effort of constructive interpretation. Vico confesses that it had cost him twenty-five years of arduous meditation to break through the prejudices of modern intellectualism and recapture the precivilized mentality of Homeric and pre-Homeric humanity in its laws, customs, languages, and religions. Whoever reflects, he says, on this possibility of investigating ancient history through the modifications of our own human mind “cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature which, since God made it, he alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know.” The New Science, which is at
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once a philosophy and a history of humanity, is possible because the "nature" of man and nations is in itself a historical human nature, not fixed by physical properties but becoming (by \( \text{natura} = \text{nascendo} \))\(^{11} \) what it is by a historic law and development.

Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, progress, maturity, decline and fall. Indeed, we go so far as to assert that whoever meditates this Science tells himself this ideal eternal history only so far as he makes it by that proof "it had, has, and will have to be." For the first indubitable principle above posited is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also describes them. Thus our Science proceeds exactly as does geometry, which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it; but with a reality greater in proportion to that of the orders having to do with human affairs, in which there are neither points, lines, surfaces, nor figures. And this very fact is an argument, O reader, that these proofs are of a kind divine, and should give thee a divine pleasure; since in God knowledge and creation are one and the same thing.\(^{12} \)

It is this "conversion" of the true and the created, realized in the understanding of history, which liberated Vico from the starting-point of Descartes and led him toward the philosophical truth of all those "philological" certainties which appear in the human world of languages, customs, laws, and institutions. Ultimately, Vico neither restates the Cartesian ideal of geometric certainty on the level of the knowledge of history nor renounces scientific truth for the sake of \( \text{verosimilitas} \) or probable truth of experience. What he is really striving for is to overcome the whole Cartesian distinction between theoretical truth and sensuous practical probability by a dialectic of the true and the certain which anticipates Hegel's "truth of certainty" (\( \text{Wahrheit der Gewissheit} \)) in the first paragraphs of the \( \text{Phenomenology}. \) He thereby elevates "philology," that is, external historic information, treated by Descartes with such contempt, to the rank of a

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volved in particulars, do the ups and downs of historical events seem to be mere chance and fortune. In the proper perspective this mixture of chance and fate is an orderly design, where the final outcome is prepared in its remotest causes. This outcome, however, is unknown to the agents of history.

Therefore it is that all who govern, find themselves subject to a greater power. They do more or less than they intend, and their counsels have never failed to have unforeseen effects. Neither are they masters of the dispositions which past ages have given affairs, nor can they foresee what course futurity will take; far less are they able to force it... Little did Alexander think that he was labouring for his captains, or to ruin his house by his conquests. When Brutus inspired the Roman people with a boundless love of liberty, he never dreamt that he was sowing in their minds the seeds of that immoderate licence, whereby the tyranny he meant to destroy was to be one day restored more grievous than under the Tarquins. When the Caesars were flattering the soldiers, they had no intention of giving masters to their successors, and to the empire. In a word, there is no human power that does not minister, whether it will or no, to other designs than its own. God only knows how to bring every thing about to his will: and therefore every thing is surprising, to consider only particular causes; and yet every thing goes on with a regular progression.10

This descriptive analysis of the process of history agrees not only with Hegel's "cunning of reason" but, what is more, with the truth—and this quite apart from its explanation by reason or providence. "Ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink the wine thereof" (Amos 5:11). Unfortunately, Bossuet and Hegel both proved too much. What has been said concerning contemporary Christendom could also be said concerning the elaborate application of the belief in providence to the understanding of history: "the less the better": A more modest use of providence would be less questionable and more Christian.11

If Bossuet had kept the cross as "the proper law of the Gospels,"12 only one inference as to the meaning of history would have been adequate: that history is a discipline of suffering, an opportunity for the creature to return to its creator—no more and no less. Nothing else than the life and death of Jesus Christ, the "Suffering Servant," who was deserted and crucified, can be the standard of a Christian understanding of the world's history.

Thus was given to the world in the person of Jesus Christ, the lively image of an accomplished virtue, which has nothing, and expects nothing upon earth; which men reward only by continual persecutions; which does not cease to do them good; and on which its own good offices draw the most ignominious punishment. Jesus Christ dies, without finding either gratitude in those who obliges, fidelity in his friends, or equity in his judges. His innocence, though acknowledged, does not save Him; his Father Himself, in Whom alone He had placed his hope, withdraws all marks of his protection; the just One is delivered up to His enemies, and dies forsaken both by God and man.13

The lesson which Bossuet draws from the fact that the Son of Man and of God died without any visible mark of divine protection is that ordinary man in his extremity should not claim what has not been granted to Christ. "Let him but love and trust, resting assured that God is mindful of him though He give him no token of it."

It is this very absence of any visible mark of providence in the history of the world which proves the need of faith in things unseen and which evokes it. Faith does not rest on objective certainty or fifty per cent probability but rather on the absence of them. It implies commitment and risk, courage and suspense. It is a belief in what is otherwise unbelievable. To make providence post festum intelligible and transparent in the political history of the world is the attempt of unbelievers, who say, like the devil to Jesus: "If you are God's son, throw yourself down" (Matt. 4:6).

For a follower of Christ there is only one mark of election: the cross.

When judges want to make somebody infamous and unworthy of human honors, they often brand his body with a shameful mark of disgrace which bears evidence of his infamy to everyone.... God has printed on our forehead... a mark, glorious before him, ignominious before men, in order to keep us from receiving any honor on this earth. This
APPENDIX II: NIETZSCHE

lations on the Christian or non-Christian meaning of life? But we cannot avoid the fundamental question of man's significance in the totality of the world, of the meaning of human will and history within the non-human universe; for is history not very casual and contingent as compared with the eternal revolution of the heavenly bodies and its cosmic necessity? Are the events of history perhaps only the dial-plate indicating the ever self-repeating movement of a hand which has no inner relation to the indicated events? Or is there an eternal cycle, comprising human decisions as well as natural occurrences? Can we conceive humanity as an inmost circle within the circle of cosmic fate, so that the hidden spring in "the great clock of being" is humanity? To conceive, however, such a synthesis of the free will which creates history with universal fate or necessity, the philosopher would have to transcend the all-too-human standpoint and look at things from beyond humanity. It is the standpoint which Nietzsche eventually found in his conception of the superman Zarathustra, "six thousand feet beyond man and time." At first, however, he states the antinomy between Will and Fate. "In the freedom of the will lies the principle of emancipation and separation from the embracing totality of being, while fate reintegrates the emancipated will into the whole of being. At the same time fate also evokes the power and freedom of willing as a countermovement to the stubbornness of necessity. Absolute freedom would transform man into a creator-God, absolute necessity into an automaton." Apparently, this problem could be solved only "if free will were the highest potency of fate."

A year later Nietzsche wrote an autobiographical sketch in which he formulated once more the problem to which the will to eternal recurrence became the answer. After a short description of his Christian-Protestant background, he discusses the stages by which man has outgrown everything which once sheltered him; and then he asks the question: "But where is the ring which will at last encompass him? Is it the World or is it God?" Interpreted in terms of Nietzsche's mature philosophy, this alternative means: Is the ultimate standard and pattern of our existence the classical view of the world as an eternal cosmos, revolving in periodic cycles, or is it the Christian view of the world as a unique creation out of nothing, called forth by the omnipotence of a non-natural God? Is the ultimate being a divine cosmos, recurrent like a circle in itself, or a personal God, revealing himself not primarily in nature but in and to humanity under the sign of the cross?

Twenty years later Nietzsche had definitely decided that it is the world
Zarathustra’s soul is “the most fated soul which out of joy flingeth itself into chance.”

Not only does eternal recurrence answer the problem of Nietzsche's first writings; it is also the fundamental thought in his latest work. Indeed, the description of Zarathustra’s “soul” is identical in structure with the “world” of Dionysos as described in the last aphorism of the Will to Power. Both represent the highest kind of being, and the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysos is also the prophet of eternal recurrence.

And just as the Will to Power has as its critical motive and aim the transvaluation of all Christian values (the Antichrist being the first book of the Will to Power), so Zarathustra is the most elaborate countergospel to the Christian gospel and its theological presuppositions, for the doctrine of eternal recurrence counteracts the doctrine of creation with all its moral consequences. Dionysos, as well as Zarathustra, is against Christ. Zarathustra’s friends celebrate his memory in utter blasphemy by the festival of the donkey, the symbol of stupidity, who repeats time and again nothing but “ye-a.”

Eternity, as the eternal Yea or self-affirmation of being which repeats itself in periodic cycles, remains, throughout, the leitmotiv of Nietzsche’s intellectual passion. In a letter written after the onset of insanity he confesses that, though he would have preferred to remain a simple professor, he had no choice but to sacrifice himself as “the buffoon of the new eternities.” The new eternity which Nietzsche rediscovered by his being an Antichrist is the old eternity of the cosmic cycle of the pagans.

If there is such a thing as a “history of ideas,” then the idea of eternal recurrence is an amazing example, considering Nietzsche’s revival of this classic idea after two thousand years of Christian tradition. Of course, the idea itself did not persist and reappear like an old relic by chance excavation; rather, the historical situation again became controversial. It is contemporary Christianity which evoked in Nietzsche the revival of an idea that was basic for pagan thinking. Placed at the final stage of an evaporated Christianity, he had to search for “new sources of the future,” and he found them in classical paganism. The death of the Christian God made him understand again the ancient world. It is of secondary importance that he knew that world through his professional studies as a classical philologist. Many scholars were familiar with the doctrine of eternal recurrence in Heraclitus and Empedocles, Plato and Aristotle, Eudemos and the Stoics; but only Nietzsche perceived in it creative possibilities for the future, in opposition to a Christianity which was reduced
un-Greek, not classic, not pagan, but derived from the Hebrew-Christian 
tradition, from the belief that world and man are created by God’s purpose-
ful will. Nothing is more conspicuous in Nietzsche’s godless philosophy 
than the emphasis on being creative and willing, creative by willing, like 
the God of the Old Testament. To the Greeks, human creativeness was an 
“imitation of nature.”

Nietzsche undoubtedly achieved the metamorphosis from the Christian 
“Thou shalt” to the modern “I will,” but hardly the crucial transformation 
from the “I will” to the “I am” of the cosmic child, which is “innocence 
and forgetfulness, a new beginning and a self-rolling wheel.”31 As a 
modern man he was so hopelessly divorced from any genuine “loyalty to 
the earth” and from the feeling of eternal security “under the bell of 
heaven” that his great effort to remarry man’s destiny to cosmic fate, or 
to “translate man back into nature,” could not but be frustrated. Thus, 
wherever he tries to develop his doctrine rationally, it breaks asunder in 
two irreconcilable pieces: in a presentation of eternal recurrence as an 
objective fact, to be demonstrated by physics and mathematics, and in a 
quite different presentation of it as a subjective hypothesis, to be demon-
strated by its ethical consequences.32 It breaks asunder because the will 
to eternalize the chance existence of the modern ego does not fit into the 
assertion of the eternal cycle of the natural world.

Nietzsche was not so much “the last disciple of Dionysos” as the first 
radical apostate of Christ. As such, however, he was what the “last pope” 
called him: “the most pious of the godless.” When he created the figure 
of the last pope, who is “out of office” after the death of God, he understood 
himself perfectly well as a religious figure. Zarathustra and the pope un-
derstand each other because both are dedicated and consecrated but not 
profane. Toward the end of their conversation the old pope says to Zara-
thustra: “O Zarathustra, thou art more pious than thou believest, with 
such an unbelief! Some God in thee hath converted thee to thine ungod-
liness.... Nigh unto thee, though thou professest to be the ungodliest one, 
I feel a hale and holy odour of long benedictions: I feel glad and grieved 
thereby. Let me be thy guest, O Zarathustra, for a single night. Nowhere 
on earth shall I now feel better than with thee!” ‘Amen! So shall it be,’ 
said Zarathustra with great astonishment.”33
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