

PIEPER: THE END OF TIME



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JOSEF PIEPER

THE END OF TIME

*A Meditation on the Philosophy
of History*

translated by

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meanings: leading up to = end of history = end of time! → What a can become!

fore asking a question which is by no means of the past, but very much of the present, indeed of the future: the question of what the historical process is 'leading up to'. For the man who is spiritually existent, who is directed upon the whole of reality, in other words, for the man who philosophizes, this question of the *end of history* is, quite naturally, more pressing than the question of 'what actually happened'.

It is no less natural that this question (what it is leading up to), now operative on a widening front, should attain an all the more painful topicality the more historical happening itself shakes man's foundations—and so make it necessary, indeed for the first time possible, for him to ask philosophical questions. Everyone is aware of the extent to which the question of the end of history is today exercising the minds of men. This results in a multiplicity of abortive answers, which win equally premature approbation and support—all of which in conjunction leads to those particular forms of sectarian apocalyptic which must be regarded as typical 'phenomena of the age', whose pronouncements are, for the most part, beyond discussion, but which must undoubtedly be taken seriously as a symptom.

We shall, of course, do well to oppose to this kind of overheated interest in 'eschatological' questions an especially high measure of sobriety and exactitude, indeed the explicit renunciation of any answer.

The most sober rejoinder that can be given to the question as to the end of time is this: Should the question not be left alone altogether, since it is scarcely possible to answer it?

This demand presupposes that such an enquiry can simply be dropped. There is, however, a great deal to suggest that the question of the end of history cannot be suspended at all, that it will 'in any case' be asked, and indeed answered. This seems at least to be true of the Christian aeon, of the period *post Christum natum*. Aristotle was still able to hold the opinion that the process of history, like that of nature, is a cycle that continually repeats itself—so much so that, as he explicitly states,¹ even men's opinions are identically repeated, 'not once or twice, not a few times, but an infinite number of times'. It is no longer possible however, *post Christum natum*, seriously to think thus. We can 'omit' neither the concept of the beginning, of the creation out of nothingness (nor this concept of nothingness itself, which is the truly radical one), nor the concept of the end. This, it seems to me, is to be numbered amongst the changes which entered into the world of man on the basis of the event 'revelation in Christ'. To render conceivable the idea that history is *not* a directed happening, that it is *not*—however manifold its stratification—a process with a beginning and an end, it would be necessary to accomplish the task, seemingly impossible, however great the will to it, of entirely abandoning the spiritual area of that tradition which has

*no -- only the story has beginning and end. History
on the contrary does not have it.*

First: History is a process, a happening that runs through time; it 'goes its way'. Now this 'way thither' is inconceivable without a notion of whence and whither; every view of history, whether explicitly or not, is determined by some sort of conception of beginning and end; even the doctrine of eternal recurrence (that there is neither beginning nor end) is an assertion of this kind. Concerning the beginning and end of history there are, however, no human experiences; beginning and end cannot be apprehended in the concrete course of history. On this point there can be no assertions that are the result of an intellectual investigation of reality. The beginning and end of human history are conceivable only on acceptance of a pre-philosophically traditional interpretation of reality; they are either 'revealed' or they are inconceivable. If on the other hand, however, the possibility of philosophical enquiry into the nature of history depends upon the beginning and end of the historical process somehow entering the field of vision of the enquirer, and upon history becoming apprehensible as a 'going' from a beginning towards an end—then it is perfectly clear why the philosophy of history must find itself especially dependent upon the theological counterpoint anterior to it.

Second: The question of the man who philosophizes about history, that is, of the man who looks at the whole and at the roots of things, runs: What is it that really takes place there?—Now, if someone were to answer: the disintegration of a culture takes place,

NOTES

The first prefatory quotation is to be found in Hamann's *Kreuzzüge des Philologen*, in the piece entitled *Kleeblatt hellenistischer Briefe. Hamanns Schriften*, publ. Friedrich Roth (Berlin, 1821-43) ii, 217.

The second quotation comes from a posthumous essay by Konrad Weiss, entitled *Logos des Bildes*.

CHAPTER I

Arist. x
1 *Meteorologica*, i, 3.

2 M. Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* (Frankfurt, 1943), p. 13.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

4 Fedor Stepun reports (in his memoirs *Vergangenes und Unvergängliches*, Munich, 1947, *Bd. I*, 122 f.) an experience from the philosophical seminary of Wilhelm Windelband, which is very characteristic in this respect.

5 Plato, *Phaidon*, 98.

6 *Summa theologica*, i, 106, 4 ad 3.

7 Fritz Kaufmann, *Geschichtsphilosophie der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1931).

8 As regards Heidegger's category of 'historicity', this is certainly a philosophic category in the strict

*Chest. pos. for in history; only one
verb, Chestwandy; after that; only
secularization.*

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