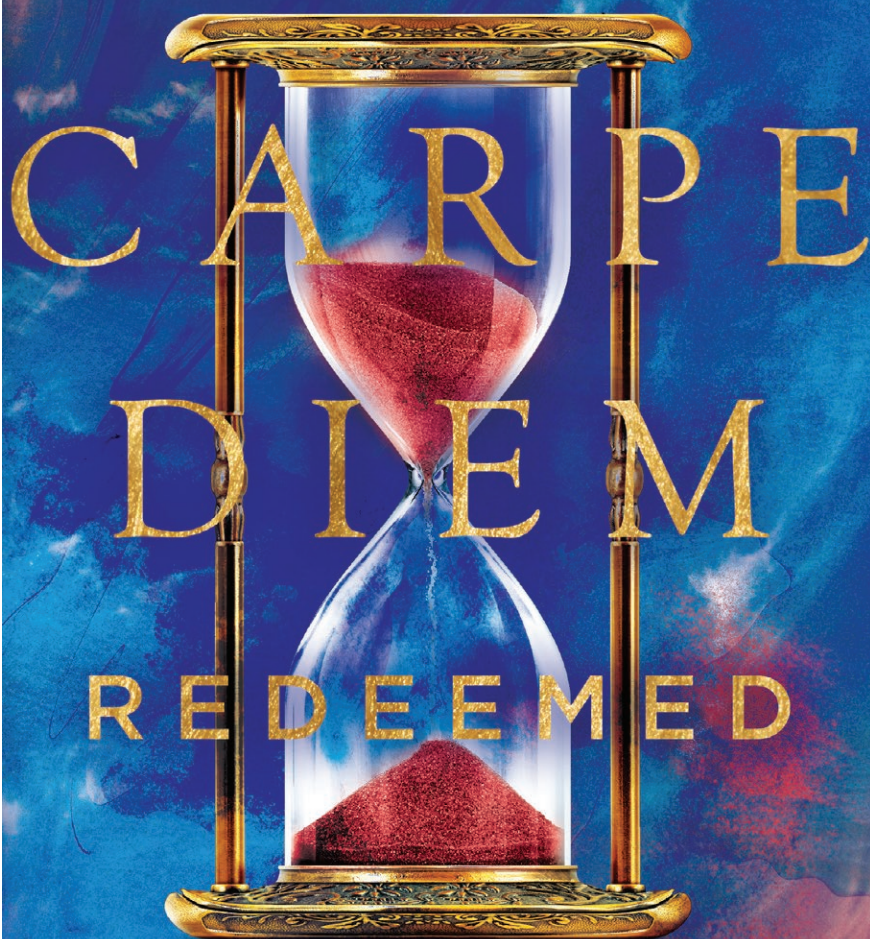


OS GUINNESS

SEIZING THE DAY,  
DISCERNING THE TIMES



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# SINGULAR, SIGNIFICANT, AND SPECIAL

**THERE IS AN OLD CHINESE PROVERB**, “If you want to know what water is, the fish is the last thing to ask.” Rudyard Kipling wrote similarly in his poem “The English Flag,” “And what should they know of England who only England know?” Those two sayings turn on a common fact that also makes the challenge of time such a mystery to us as humans. Fish that can only live in water will never be able to understand the water that is their sole environment, and the English in Kipling’s generation who had never been abroad were incapable of understanding their empire and were blind to the worst of its consequences.

In the same way, we humans are so immersed in time that we will never be able to see and understand time objectively. Time is at the heart of existence. Time is the all-embracing medium of our lives, within us as well as around us, which means that we have no counter environment from which to look at time with detachment and perspective. Indeed, along with evil, time is one of the greatest mysteries in human life—evil being impenetrable

through its darkness, and time being mysterious to us because of its closeness. What time is may seem obvious—obvious, that is, until we are asked to explain it. St. Augustine put it memorably: “What then is time? If no one ask of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not.”<sup>1</sup>

What was there before the beginning of time and the beginning of the world? What will it be like when “time shall be no more”? What might it be like to be outside of time? If we have to answer such questions by ourselves, there is simply no way to know or to say. Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking once remarked that such questions are like standing at the South Pole and asking which way is south. We are in time, and time is in us, so questions about what time is and what is beyond time are unanswerable from our vantage point alone.

If you are completely baffled by the mystery of time, you are not alone. An eminent twentieth-century physicist put forward a profound-sounding statement, “Time is nature’s way to keep everything from happening all at once.”<sup>2</sup> But he then admitted in a footnote that the quotation did not come from Albert Einstein, Kurt Gödel, or any philosopher or scientist, but from graffiti in the men’s room at a café in Austin, Texas.

In an early entry in his journal, the eminent analytical philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that the meaning of a system lies outside the system, and his point is true above all of life, the world, and time and history. Their full meaning, if indeed there is such a thing, does not lie within them but must come from outside them. The mystery of time will always be insoluble if considered from within time alone. What helps us make a beginning, however, is that humans have long attempted to understand all they could of time, from within time, and their different pictures

illuminate time in contrasting ways. With time, as with almost all of the big questions of life, there are three major families of faiths offering answers—extended families of faiths in the sense that there are common family resemblances, although with differences, between philosophies or faiths that share a common notion of what is ultimately real. Viewed from this vantage point, the three major families of faiths are the Eastern, the Abrahamic, and the secularist, and out of them have grown three dominant and very different views of time and history—the *cyclical*, the *covenantal*, and the *chronological*.

Each extended family of faiths gives a dramatically different answer to the big questions of life, one of them claiming to have a view that comes from outside time, but they all start by facing up to the same existential challenge of time and history. In historian Mircea Eliade's words, we humans are all confronted by the same "terror of history, with its randomness, its contingencies, its apparent meaninglessness."<sup>3</sup> Born into the world, we are each given a short life to live, but nature and the world around us do not by themselves inform us of the rhyme and reason to life. And as we look around, there is no obvious meaning to things as they are. We can see both beauty and brokenness, disasters and serendipities, random acts of cruelty as well as kindness, and always endings, endings, endings.

This too shall pass. Time flies. Nothing lasts forever. You cannot step into the same river twice because the river is different and so too are you. The grandest and most magnificent human endeavors are only sandcastles washed away by time and tide. And our own small enterprises and endeavors appear to be whistling into the winds of history. In the end, the sands of time will cover everything without a trace of who we are and what we have done.

Or so it seems. And if that is so, what is the meaning of it all? Why does anything matter? And how are we to live if we are only here once, and the time we are here is so short?

## CYCLICAL TIME

The first major family of faiths responds by concluding that though life is short, we are not here only once. It then sets out an entirely different picture of existence based on that assumption. Its view is that time and history are *cyclical*, that we all experience successive reincarnations, that everything comes back to the place from which it started, and that our only hope for freedom is to *escape from the perplexity of history and the illusion of reality altogether*—into the realm of the changeless beyond this world of flux and change.

This cyclical view starts with observations from nature, and its underlying picture is of time as a wheel. The immediate appeal of this view lies in its reflections on what we all see in the natural world around us. The planets revolve in the heavens, and the seasons of the year come and go. Spring leads to summer, summer to autumn, autumn to winter, and winter to spring once again. In the same way, the clouds come down as rain, the rain washes down to the river, and the river to the sea, and the sea evaporates in its turn to form clouds, which once more come down as rain, and so the cycle continues endlessly. Aristotle summed up the cyclical view as the classical Greeks understood it, “Coming to be and passing away, as we have said, will always be continuous and will never fail.”<sup>4</sup>

On one level, we humans seem to fit this cyclical picture in that we too are subject to the processes of nature. Like all animals, we go through a succession of seasons or passages in our lives. We wake and we sleep. We are born, we grow, we decline, and we die.

The classical authors described these *age stages* differently. Generally, there were three (youth, maturity, and old age), but Pythagoras and Horace divided them into four, Hippocrates into seven, and Solon into ten. The most famous description in English is William Shakespeare's immortal seven ages of man: "At first the infant, mewling and pewking in his mother's arms" moving through five more seasons of life to the "Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare, of course, wrote from within the second family of faiths, not the first. He did not believe that the entire universe moved in cyclical time. Today the two main proponents of the grand cyclical view of time are the Hindus and the Buddhists, but in the ancient world there were many who held this view. Buddhism is in essence a reform movement of Hinduism, so there are important differences between the two views and their ways of life, just as there are many differing traditions within each religion. But they share the overall view of the radically cyclical view of time. Indeed, they go beyond the evidence of the cycle that lies before our five senses and project the notion of the cycle onto the very cosmos itself in the form of reincarnation. Everything goes around and around, and then returns to where it began, as a matter of what the Eastern religions call "reincarnation" and Friedrich Nietzsche called "eternal recurrence."

Seen this way, time is an ever-moving wheel. Human life in time is life bound to this wheel, as desire leads to craving, which leads to attachment, which leads to death, which leads to reincarnation, and so it goes. Ethics, then, is a matter of *karma* and a question of what each of us has done in some previous incarnation. History, like a wheel spinning in place, goes nowhere, and freedom (*moksha*, "release" or salvation) can be achieved only as

an escape from the wheel and so from history and the world that we take to be real but is in fact only an illusion (*maya*). Importantly, there is no way to stop the cycle from within the cycle, so the only way to be free is to escape the cycle itself—by adopting one of the recommended paths to salvation, such as yoga for the Hindus and “right mindfulness” for the Buddhists.

Unquestionably, the cyclical view of time does justice to an enormous part of our experience of life and to many of the operations of nature that we can observe. Recognizing that part is vital to realism and wisdom, but at what price do we make it the whole story of life? Does the cyclical view do justice to the whole reality of human existence and provide an adequate answer to the significance of humans and the challenge of time? And what are the consequences of holding this view? If everything goes around and around and around, and always returns to where it began, is there any escape from the oppressive weightiness of remorseless *karma*, fate, and destiny? And if everything goes around and around and comes back to where it started, what does that say of our actions in history, especially if history and the world that we know are only an illusion? (“What history relates,” Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, “is in fact only the long, heavy and confused dream of mankind.”)<sup>6</sup>

Why is there a striking absence of any call to “change,” to “reform,” or to work for something that is truly new? Why is there so little of the “novel” and the “revolutionary” within the cyclical view? If all that is once was and will be all over again, how do we escape such a natural reinforcement of passivity and the status quo? If everything is ultimately unchanging, is it also unchangeable? Do our actions have significance here and now, or—as a Zen saying expresses it—are humans only as “a stone thrown in the pond, who causes no ripples”?



## COVENANTAL TIME

Today, the cyclical view of time is mainly associated with Eastern religions. Many people think it must be a minority view because it differs from the mainstream modern view that has shaped the West, but from the vantage point of history that conclusion is seriously skewed. The cyclical view was nearly universal in many periods of history, and it is likely to emerge strongly again if the views that succeeded and eclipsed it falter in their turn—witness, for example, Nietzsche’s rejection of God and his turn towards “eternal recurrence.” In other words, many people in the West take their view of time and history for granted and do not realize how radically unique it was when first it burst upon the world through the Bible and the Jewish people.

The Abrahamic family of faiths sees time and history quite differently from the very beginning, at creation, and it has important differences from the purely cyclical view all the way down the line. Crucially, it is the one family of faiths that does not claim to be an understanding of the system from *within* the system—and therefore qualifies at once to be assessed in light of Wittgenstein’s claim that the true meaning of the system must come from outside the system. In contrast to the Eastern views (and as we saw with Bertrand Russell and Roman Krznaric, all later secularist views too), the Abrahamic view claims to be the result of *revelation* rather than reflection, a matter of *divine disclosure from the outside* rather than discovery through the quest of some religious genius such as Siddhartha Gautama or Shankaracharya. And the differences proliferate from there.

According to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and in strong contrast to the surrounding cultures of Babylon and Egypt as well as the Eastern religions, time and history are viewed not

only as cyclical but as *linear and covenantal*. The truth behind this truth is the sovereign freedom of God and the fact that human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are also free. They are free with a freedom that is unfathomable but precious and unique among the life forms on the earth. Many implications flow from this foundational idea of created freedom, but at their core is a titanic truth and a momentous message that completely transforms the meaning of life: *Time and history have meaning. Under the twin truths of God's sovereignty and human significance, time and history are going somewhere, and each of us is not only unique and significant in ourselves, but we have a unique and significant part to play in our own lives, in our own generation, and therefore in the overall sweep of history.*

One might stop right there and ponder the marvel of that truth. *Once again, contrast is the mother of clarity.* Time and history are not an illusion or *maya*, as Hinduism and Buddhism see it. They are not meaningless or, as Shakespeare's Macbeth put it, "a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."<sup>7</sup> We are not dust blowing in the wind. We are not a freak accident lost in a universe that came to be without meaning and one day will cease to be without meaning. Paul Johnson captured the stunning contribution of this Hebrew view in the opening pages of his *A History of the Jews*: "No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny. . . . The Jewish vision became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both divine and man-made. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."<sup>8</sup>

The result is an immense and magnificent transformation. What Mircea Eliade called the "terror of history," history viewed

as random and meaningless, is transformed into the “task of history,” filled with significance and meaning. What the Eastern religions advocate as a freedom that is an “escape from history” becomes, within the biblical view, a freedom and responsibility that is an “engagement with history,” and a commitment to work for freedom, justice, and shalom in this life and in this world.

In the Bible’s view, this radically different view of time, history, and human freedom goes back to the radically different understanding of God and the radical difference it makes. God, as we encounter him in the Bible, is completely different from all other conceptions of the gods. God is not a superman or a demigod projected onto the skies by humanity. He is not the personification of any of the forces of nature, such as the sun, the sea, or the storm. He is not another name for the spirit or sum total of the very cosmos itself, as in pantheism, monism, or notions of Being. According to the Bible and the Abrahamic family of faiths, all such notions of God are a false projection and inflation of what is merely a part of the universe and not God at all, and therefore an idol or a nothing.

As God reveals himself in the Bible, he is absolutely unique in two foundational ways. On the one hand, God is transcendent and utterly Other—the One who is “only, outside, and over all” (radical monotheism) and therefore sovereignly free. At the same time, God is personally and passionately engaged with his creation and on behalf of his creation, and especially committed to and concerned for the human creatures he has made in his image and likeness. God loves us and believes in us as humans even more than we love and believe in ourselves.

Together, these two features radically distinguish “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” from both “the gods of the ancients” and

from what Blaise Pascal, in his famous “night of fire,” called the god of “philosophers and scholars.”<sup>9</sup> As the creator of the cosmos and everything that is in it, God transcends nature and nature’s ways of operating (or laws), and he is not bound by what he has created. As creator of time as well as space, God is outside time. But unlike Aristotle’s “prime mover” who is the “unmoved mover” of so much philosophy, or the remote “clockmaker” or absentee “designer god” of deism, God is personal and therefore engaged in history and with humanity. He alone is sovereign and therefore absolutely free to express and execute his will without restraint or interference. Limited only by his character, he is unlimited in his freedom and power to act and to intervene in time and history. “I am who I am,” or “I will be who I will be” (Ex 3:14). God speaks and acts solely because he wills to speak and act, sovereignly and freely, but with the mercy and compassion that express who he is. Unmoved mover? No, Rabbi Heschel counters. God is “the most moved mover.”<sup>10</sup>

Made “in the image and likeness” of God, we humans are exceptional, responsible, and consequential. We are free and capable of real choice—“I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life” (Deut 30:19). Being free, we could always do otherwise than we have chosen and done, so we are responsible for what we have chosen and done. We are therefore significant and responsible, though we are not sovereign as God is, and we are always limited by our finiteness and by our proneness to corrupt freedom and so to go wrong, do wrong, and even to become prisoners to our freely chosen wrongdoing. Formed from “the dust of the earth,” we are part of nature and nature’s laws, and there is definitely a cyclical element to our lives—we too experience the seasons and passages of life, from birth through growth to decline and death.

But made in “the image and likeness” of God, and given “the breath of life” by God, we are exceptional because we are different from the other animals. We have a consciousness that is both self-conscious and thus aware of ourselves (“I am I”) and a consciousness too that, aware of the reaches of time, can stand back and view time with a certain perspective—including the remote past, the immediate present, and the distant future.

When it comes to our awareness of time, this human freedom depends crucially on three faculties. Together, they allow us to go beyond the world that is right in front of us and beyond the immediate moment. We can therefore engage the vast reaches of time and history, and to a significant extent gain greater mastery over time than the rest of creation. Animals have time wired into them, as we can observe from the hibernation of animals and the migration of birds, but our human grasp of time is far richer.

First, our awareness of time includes *memory* of the past, which brings the vast expanse of the past to our consciousness and makes the past a living factor in the present. Second, our awareness of time includes *imagination and vision*, which opens up the future to our consciousness, and brings in the future as a living factor in the present. And third, our awareness of time includes *will*, which expresses the freedom of our human agency and allows us to bring our consciousness of the past and the future to bear on the choices by which we act into the present.

## TIME AND FREEDOM

These points are worth pondering further. For example, our age is so obsessed with the future and so impatient with the past that we need to remind ourselves of the liberating role of memory. If you think about it, the stories of the remarkable decisions and

heroic deeds in the past make history memorable, and they in turn can inspire the present and rescue it from the stifling impression of inevitability. The truth is that well-taught history and well-written biography are both vital to freedom and anything but boring. As we remember the story of Moses, or Francis of Assisi, or Abraham Lincoln, or Florence Nightingale, or Winston Churchill, or Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa, the past can inspire us to rise above our present moment, just as the heroes of the past rose above the lethargy of their own present and its seemingly ironclad circumstances.

The “dead hand of the present” may be every bit as oppressive as the “dead hand of the past.” Some of the forces from the past, such as language, tradition, and law, will always act as powerful shapers of the present, but the memory of the past can also inspire and liberate the present so that inevitability gives way to innovation. In Reinhold Niebuhr’s words, “Memory is, in short, the fulcrum of freedom for man in history.”<sup>11</sup> Complacency makes the past appear unchallengeable. Haven’t things always been this way? But freedom summons up creativity, innovation, change, growth, and discontent, and it challenges the aura of inevitability that the past lays on the present.

Unquestionably, the human will is central to the biblical view of human freedom and responsibility, but for both good and ill, for creation and destruction. According to the Bible, an inclination to evil through the corruption of the will now lies at the heart of human nature and its use and abuse of freedom. Humans can willfully defy God and the structures of their existence, and through their abuse of freedom bring evil into the world. Indeed, far from diminishing as time goes by, as the progressives fondly believe, this willful defiance will rise to a crescendo at the end of days in the person of the Antichrist. At times, this evil can be so

potent that it can be countered only by the backstop of God's providence. Thus "under God" is no cliché. Providence is the ultimate check and balance, the final moral limit to human power.

Without a doubt, this insistence on the open-ended potential of human freedom is sobering—the freedom that is the source of sublime creativity (in a Michelangelo statue, a Shakespeare sonnet, or a Mozart concerto) is the very source of destructive power that destroys other humans (in designing and running a death camp) and could one day be the ruin of the planet. Such an open-ended view of freedom is enlightening and encouraging, but mention of the freedom at the heart of evil is also offensive and sobering. Pascal noted in *Pensées* that "Nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine; and yet, without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves."<sup>12</sup>

Alongside the open and willful defiance of God, it is also true that people can drift and slowly lose their freedom without realizing it. Almost imperceptibly they can bow before other people and their opinions; before outside forces such as drugs, alcohol, and pornography; or slide into slavery before the accumulated power of their own bad choices (the "habits of the heart" in a negative form). They then become children, slaves, or addicts, and they are no longer free. In the biblical view, the end of the line for both willful wrongdoing and the slow self-enslavement through bad choices and bad habits is the "hardened heart," the condition through which once-free people lose their independence and become the prisoners of their own stubbornly proud but wrong choices.

Together, the triple impact of memory, imagination, and will enlarges what we mean by the present. Far from a fleeting nanosecond that has gone almost as soon as it arrives, the present is a moment rich with the meaning of the past and the meaning of the future and their combined potential for meaningful action in the present.

Thus, under this very different understanding of God, the Bible opens up a view of time and history that is not only cyclical but linear and covenantal. Emphatically, the biblical view is neither purely cyclical nor ultimately cyclical. Humans are certainly part of nature, and the cyclical element is obvious and inescapable. But created in the image and likeness of God, we humans are free, active, responsible, creative, innovative, and consequential. We have a unique agency in the world around us, and we are called to a unique task: partnership with God on behalf of his world, which is what makes time not only linear but covenantal. We are both created and creative. We humans have both the freedom and the responsibility to live and to act into time and into history.

Along with all life and along with the cosmos itself, we humans are created. But uniquely we are not only created but creative. We have the freedom and responsibility to live and to act into time and history, and to bring into being what has not yet been. Above all, our creativity is the creativity to create ourselves—through the myriad of choices that form the habits of the heart that form the people we become. Freedom, as C. S. Lewis argued in *The Great Divorce*, is the gift by which we humans most resemble our Maker. Freedom is therefore the grand assumption of human history, just as history—both for better and for worse—is the grand demonstration of human freedom.

We must never allow words such as *freedom* to become civic or pious clichés. The stakes are too high to treat freedom casually. *The Bible's view of humanity is the highest and most balanced humanism in all history, and the implications for freedom and responsibility are momentous.* Humans are exceptional among all the forms of life on earth: created to be both free and responsible, we are exceptional in that we alone can exercise our memory, our



vision, and our will to make choices that make a decisive difference for good or ill, for order or for chaos, for justice or injustice in our planet home. Countless millennia after creation, we humans are still exceptional, we still have choices, and our choices still have consequences—now more consequential than ever. To a large extent we humans become what we choose, and to that extent we are in part, but only in part, self-created (or self-ruined).

### THE DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Many important points follow from this understanding of freedom. But the basic implication is revolutionary: *the past influences but does not close the circle in determining the future, so freedom means that the future may always be different from the past.* There is no fate, inevitability, necessity, or historical determinism in the Bible's view of history. There is no Nietzschean "eternal recurrence" or any cosmic equivalent of Yogi Berra's "déjà vu all over again." Freedom means that real choice, real creativity, and therefore real change and real innovation are always possible. We can learn from our experiences and decide to do differently the next time. Things can always be otherwise. What will be can be different from what was. We can change social and political circumstances that appear massive and immovable, but far more importantly, we ourselves can change. We can be other than we were or other than we are. Real change, real reform, real growth, and real development are all possible, as freedom gives them a potential that is unimaginable.

The Bible's view of human freedom is completely different from all the numerous forms of determinism, whether ancient or modern, and many simple but revolutionary truths follow from this basic truth. First, freedom requires humility and defies the arrogance of

rationalist certainty. Our human freedom is always and ultimately mysterious and partially unpredictable, even when it comes to ourselves, and more so when it comes to others. No one knows exactly why other people are acting and how they will act and therefore what the next moment will bring when they act freely. The future will always contain suspense, surprise, and shock. Absolutely no one—not the most confident pundit; the wisest, most experienced, and highest paid consultant; or the best data-driven analyst—will ever be able to close the circle and tell us with certainty all that will happen next in history. Freedom demands humility, and the intellectual arrogance that is a key feature of the modern managerial elites is a fatal handicap for enduring freedom.

Second, freedom is truly creative in relation to the future. Freedom and choice mean that history is the arena for creativity and change, and humans can be the agents of protest, innovation, transformation, growth, renewal, and reform. Like freedom itself, the notion of reform is surrounded with confusion and controversies today because of the massive differences between revolutions inspired by the Bible (such as the English, 1642, and the American, 1776) and revolutions inspired by the French Enlightenment (such as the French, 1789, the Russian, 1917, and the Chinese, 1949). The roots of constructive reform lie in the vision and truths of the Bible. God calls Abraham to break with the gods and practices, the worship and ways of life of the surrounding nations, which in turn becomes an ongoing protest against all that distorts the understanding of God and all that dehumanizes the treatment of persons made in his image and likeness. The result is the calling of prophets as social critics who address wrongs and promote justice. The result is a commitment to creativity, change, renewal, and reform that repairs humanity and keeps alive the human dream of freedom, justice, and peace.

Dead religion has all too often become the mainstay of the status quo and of oppression, but a living faith in God is the automatic refusal to accept the world as it is and a restless quest to make it what it should be under God and one day will be again. There is no dropping out, no settling back, and no withdrawing in the life of faith. Faith is a lifetime commitment to an ongoing journey toward the renewal and restoration of the world.

Third, freedom is potentially redemptive in relation to the past. If freedom means genuine choice, then not only can the future be different, so also can the past be different in a significant way. Thus wrongdoing in the past need not have the inevitably disastrous consequences it would have otherwise. This point is profoundly important today, when we are seeing a widening chasm between the Bible's way of righting wrong and many current ways, such as that of postmodern and power-driven, left-wing progressivism. Not long ago, Stalinists on the left and McCarthyites on the right both used the malignant tactic of destruction through accusation. But now we have what *New York Times* columnist David Brooks calls "the cruelty of call-out culture." Instant social media mobs destroy people at the mere unearthing of a sin from the past or the slightest accusation of any sin in the present—with no right to a hearing, no sense of context, no checking of the facts, and no allowance for change and growth, let alone repentance and forgiveness. The result is "a vengeful game of moral one-upmanship in which social annihilation can come any second."<sup>13</sup>

Jews and Christians are no less realistic about the evil of past evils. But in the biblical view, human freedom means the past can be significantly changed, even after blatant wrongdoing. For, quite apart from God's intervention in time, there is always the double possibility of an evildoer's decision to repent and be sorry, and a victim's decision to forgive rather than retaliate. When

either or both of these human responses happen, and both are the fruit of freedom as well as grace, they short-circuit the natural course of dark responses and open up a brighter future.

That is the freedom expressed in the second half of Oscar Wilde's famous saying, "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future." It is also what makes it both realistic and constructive to "hate the sin, but not the sinner." The sin is always and forever wrong—in the past, the present, and the future. But the "sinner" need not be stuck in the past, for there is a difference between the act and the person who did the act. Repentant, forgiven, and transformed, yesterday's sinner may be freed from the past to become tomorrow's saint. In strong contrast to the secular view, no past is irredeemable in the biblical view, which is a vital step in the overall task of "redeeming the time" and growing through the whole course of life.

Fourth, freedom always necessitates living with risk and insecurity. This is an inescapable implication of covenantal time and history: the human story will always be open-ended. It may go one way or another way. By its very nature, freedom can never be finally and ultimately secure and permanent. Trust, risk, daring, and insecurity are all part of the price of freedom, and any attempt to create false security and an illusion of permanence will be a sure road to killing freedom. The United States and the West are learning this old lesson again, but it is an enduring lesson of history. However strong or free individuals or nations may be, whether Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, Britain, China, Russia, or America, there is no ultimate security or permanence in wealth, power, weapons, monuments, boasting, or even self-chronicling. Freedom is open-ended, so the strong and free are free to squander their strength and freedom, and other individuals and nations are free to rise and challenge them too.

Sustaining individual and political freedom is an art that is demanding and all too rare.

Add these four points together and it becomes clear why the Bible's view of time, history, and human freedom finds itself the odd man out among modern ideas, just as it has done down through the ages. Today it flies in the face of numerous attempts to deny human freedom in one way or another or to sustain it in ways that are counterproductive. Biblically based freedom confounds the smug assumption of scientism that science and scientific knowledge are the sum of all that there is to be known. Freedom defies the imperial overreach of the business manager and the socialist planner who presume that they know all the factors to be taken into account in decision-making for a company or a society. And soon, freedom will make a mockery of the totalitarian tendencies of the futurists who assure us that we can rest secure, trusting in the all-encompassing algorithms of tomorrow, for they will know us better than we know ourselves. Against the handcuff logic of all such views, human freedom will never fail to show that, for better or worse, choice, creativity, and change will always turn out differently than the most confident and certain of predictions.

Open-endedness is sometimes taken as a sly guarantee that things will turn out for better rather than for worse, but that too is wrong. There are no guarantees, and leaders, governments, and others who promise what they cannot guarantee will pay for their hubris in the end. Human open-endedness includes the possibility of stupidity, error, cowardice, ingratitude, backsliding, disobedience, revenge, and hubris as well as bravery, generosity, loyalty, and good faith. In the covenantal perspective on time, nothing is written, but we ourselves are free to write badly, irresponsibly, or not at all. There is no determinism compelling us—

we are responsible, though we ourselves may be determined to do wrong rather than right. If we choose rightly, anything can be reformed and improved, yet there can be no prospect of perfectibility short of the messianic age. We are never surprised when the open-endedness of the human story demonstrates either *the better* or *the worse* with equal clarity.

All this hammers home the need for humility and responsibility rather than hubris. We humans must always be grateful for freedom, and we must respect its mystery. We must be humbled by the power of our freedom and our proneness to corrupt and lose freedom altogether. There is more to knowing than knowing will ever know, and our deepest motives will always be unfathomable, even to ourselves. But at the same time, our choices will always be consequential, so we must stand humbly responsible before God and before the bar of history. The future is partly ours to be made or unmade, and ours is the responsibility for it. Alongside the Jewish people, Christians are called to enter and act in the arena of history, with all the blood, sweat, and tears that such engagement demands. They must have one eye on the world and their times, and another on a hope beyond history.

May I say it again? The glory of time, history, and human freedom in the Jewish and Christian understanding is quite different from almost all other views of human life. We humans are never finally determined by fate, by our stars, by *karma*, by *kismet*, by our genes, by chance or luck, or by any purely scientific determinism or external necessity of nature that becomes “our lot in life.” There is no ultimate *déjà vu* to our existence and no reincarnation or “eternal recurrence” in our lives. To say we are born this way is never a full excuse for what we do. To be sure, we are never completely free, because we are shaped by countless external forces as well as by our own previous choices that have

become the habits of our heart and thus our self-chosen character. But because we are never simply *caused*, though strongly influenced, we are still truly and decisively free if only in how we choose to respond to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. History in its flow is singular, and we in the freedom of our lives are significant.

If this view of freedom is a gift and we are consequential and responsible, the downside must clearly be held in mind. Freedom can be used for good or ill, and even corrupted and lost entirely—which means that humans should assert and exercise freedom gratefully, humbly, and responsibly. There is a striking paradox of freedom: freedom can become the greatest enemy of freedom, for the corruption of freedom means that free people can start as masters but end as slaves to their own self-chosen obsessions (addiction to ideas) and to their own self-chosen addictions (obsession with behaviors). Above all, human freedom must never be inflated into hubris. (We are “the Gods of planet earth,” says Yuval Noah Harari.)<sup>14</sup>

This need for constant responsibility and humility is exponentially magnified today as we approach the arrival of what C. S. Lewis called “the master generation”—the generation whose choices through genetic and social engineering can shape all future generations *without their knowledge or consent*.<sup>15</sup> Soon, with gene editing and the arrival of advanced artificial intelligence or ultra-intelligence, the consequential character of freedom will be brought into the sharpest possible focus. Soon we will have the power, we are told, to create people according to our will, and to create machines “in our image” that will far transcend the power of our own human intelligence. These machines, the work of our own minds and hands, could then be as free, inscrutable, and unpredictable to us as we are to each other and to the animal world.

In that sense, as long predicted by Irving Good and other experts on artificial intelligence, our humility, our responsibility, and our capacity to corrupt freedom will be exposed as never before. What will be our attitude to such ultra-intelligent machines, and what will theirs be to us? For better or ill, they could indeed be “the final machines” and “the last invention that man need ever make.”<sup>16</sup>

### THE HIGHEST HUMANISM OF ALL

The Bible’s portrayal of humanity is the highest form of “humanism” in the sense of the portrayal and protection of supreme human worth. It stands over against all contemporary expressions of humanism, which either exaggerate or minimize the significance of human beings—of which we have four main varieties today: *secular humanism* (“God is dead” and “man is the measure of all things”), *antihumanism* (movements explicitly rejecting secular humanism as sexist, colonialist, species chauvinist, and so on), *posthumanism* (taking the rejection of secular humanism in the direction of oneness with animals and with nature), and *transhumanism* (taking the rejection of secular humanism in the direction of oneness with technology). In strong contrast to these views, the Bible portrays humanity, even after the fall, as still central to God’s high purposes in time and history.

The high humanism of the Bible’s view of humanity can be explored from several angles, as a series of trios. First, we humans are uniquely relational and conversational. We live our lives in constant dialogue with *ourselves*, with *others*, and with *God* (even if replacing him with substitutes or seeking to reject him altogether). Second, we humans are uniquely consequential on the earth, because of such qualities as our *awareness*, our *agency*, and our *accountability*. And third, we humans are uniquely central in creation as partners with God in his ongoing purposes in time and



history. We are always small and uncertain junior partners, but our response to God's call opens up the interplay between God's *sovereignty*, our human *significance*, and history's *singularity*.

As creator of time, God is always outside of time and sovereign over time. Under God, there is a distinctive singularity about time and history that parallels the distinctive significance of humans created in the image of God. Human agency and the singularity of history mean that no moment in time will ever be the same as any other moment, which is another reason why the sequence of time is not an ever-repeating cycle. It is a nonrepeating sequence that forms a story with a beginning, a development, and an end. And as with all stories, there will always be surprises and suspense as to how the story twists and turns.

Scientists of all sorts may keep on analyzing the various factors that influence us from the inside and the outside, and pundits and consultants of all sorts will offer fancier and fancier forms of business and political predictions. But forces that influence are not ironclad causes. They need not mean control or compulsion. Nor will they ever lead to complete explanation, so no analysts will ever be able to excuse irresponsibility and no forecasters will ever close the circle and deliver certainty. The freedom (and perversity) of human agency means that we will never fully know what happens until it happens. The outcome is never written. Tomorrow will always be partly unknown. It still remains to be written partly through our choices, and such is the paradox of knowledge that the more we claim to know, the less certain we often become about what will happen next.

This covenantal partnership of human beings with God is awe-inspiring, but it is always under God. "I am I" is the awareness that precedes our human agency, and "under God" and "but God" form the accountability that precedes, overarches, and follows it.

The latter are the backstop behind all our human pretensions, for as always “Man proposes, but God disposes.” As Joseph says to his brothers, who did not believe that he had really forgiven them for all the troubles they had caused him, “Therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen 45:8). Or in the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.”<sup>17</sup>

This linking between divine providence and human partnership, divine initiative and human consent, opens up the view of time as covenantal. Time is covenantal in the sense that those who respond to God’s call enter into a binding covenantal agreement with him. God’s providence overarches history and reins in human pretensions, but under providence, however small and insignificant we seem, we humans are significant agents for either good or ill. Thus those who respond to God’s call, who come to know God and walk with him, become entrepreneurial partners with him in advancing his purposes in the world. We are never more than junior partners, of course, but providence ensures that history has a purpose and a point. The meaning of history is therefore the working out of these covenantal purposes in time, though always far beyond any single generation and far beyond our human understanding.

Seen this way, time and history are not an illusion, and there is no reincarnation or eternal recurrence, as there is for the Hindus, Buddhists, and Nietzsche and his followers. Rather, time and history form the stunningly real arena for human action and change, for the ongoing interactive covenantal partnership with God, and for the drama of the conflict between good and evil. The Genesis account of creation tells us that God looked at the universe he had created and pronounced it “good,” and then “very good” (Gen 1:25, 31). But God’s verdict on history is different from

God's verdict on creation. Sin has changed everything. Much of history *should have been otherwise*. It was not supposed to be this way. Things have gone wrong, badly wrong, and things are still going wrong. The world needs to be put right, and those who know and love God become his covenanted partners in repairing and restoring the world to the state it was designed to be and one day will be again.

Therein lies the striking consequence of the covenantal view of time and history. Human enterprise has significance and solidity, but as a partnership with God and under God. Apart from God, history—with all its accidents, inequalities, injustices, and its apparent meaninglessness viewed from the inside—might well represent Eliade's "terror." But under and alongside God, history is transformed from terror into task. Those who respond to the call of God are entrepreneurs of life. They follow the way of God and act into time and history, while always aiming beyond time and history. Knowing God, they act by faith in him but with a hope that looks over the horizon of history and time. Such actions are real, decisive, and consequential. Whatever their success or failure appears to be in the short-term, such enterprises and such lives are never in vain.

But once again, life in covenantal time is always "under God" and his providence. Whatever the appearances, there is always a moral limit to human power and its hubris. The effectiveness and success of living by faith is ultimately guaranteed, but the success of the outcome lies beyond the reach of the faithful. The Hebrew prophet's assurance that "The righteous will live by his faith" (Hab 2:4) sounded out not in prosperous and peaceful times but in violent and chaotic times when nothing external seemed to justify such confidence—and certainly nothing that any human could do. In our broken world, many lives may

appear insignificant, even forlorn, and many of our lives are “incomplete,” for not all the great things that are worth doing can be completed in a single lifetime. (In the words of Rabbi Tarfon, “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”)<sup>18</sup>

But success, achievement, fame, and legacy are not the goal of those who live by faith. The time frame of the *here and now* is too short to be an accurate measure. Men and women of faith act into history, all the time gazing over the edge of the horizon of history, and many times they die with their visions unfulfilled, their successes incomplete, and their legacy unachieved or unclear. But as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says of such visionaries and entrepreneurs who live by faith and look to God, “God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:16).

In short, according to the covenantal view of time, and absolutely contrary to Zen Buddhism, each of us is a stone thrown into the pond who causes everlasting ripples in the grand ocean of time and the flow of history.

## DIFFERENT CONCEPT, DIFFERENT CALENDAR

Many consequences flow from this covenantal view of time and the primacy of history. They begin with a distinctive sense of the calendar of time and the rhythms of life, but history is unmistakably essential and central to them all. Time for the pagan world and for today’s “posthumans” and all the followers of the cyclical view of time is always tied to nature, and to nature looked to as the source of fertility and prosperity. In the ancient world, and in many parts of the world today, reality was understood through myths and rituals, and the year was

marked off by festivals that were linked to nature and to the rhythm of its seasons.

Not so with the Bible's view. On the one hand, the Jewish year looked back to creation, and not to nature in any later time period. Time was marked by the Sabbath that celebrated the seventh day of creation, when God climaxed his creation by creating rest as the heart of freedom, peace, and well-being. Few modern people realize that the notion of the seven-day week is the invention of the Bible. There was no such week in the calendar of the ancients. And the theme of the Sabbath's freedom and rest continued through the seven-day and seven-year cycles that climaxed in their completion in the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee ("Proclaim liberty throughout all the land" [Lev 25:10 KJV]). Long before the time slavery of modern fast life, the link between freedom and rest was strong and central to the covenantal view of time. We humans are truly creative as well as created, but Sabbath is the time-out when we remember the one and forget the other. We cease from our human work, whether creative enterprise or mindless drudgery, in order to remind ourselves that we are neither self-created nor self-sufficient. We are created, and our highest responsibility is to worship our Creator.

On the other hand, the Jewish year looked back to history, rather than nature. The Jewish festivals celebrated the great events through which God had liberated and redeemed his people Israel in history and real time. To be sure, the Jewish festivals took over celebrations that elsewhere were tied to nature, but they transformed them into a celebration of history rather than nature. They commemorated unique, singular, one-off events in real time rather than annually repeated cycles in nature. (The Passover was originally a spring festival, but it was transformed to become a celebration of the exodus from Egypt. Similarly, the Feast of

Weeks was originally a harvest festival but became a celebration of the giving of the Torah, while the Festival of Booths was originally a celebration of the vintage turned into a commemoration of the wilderness sojourning.) In each case, Rabbi Heschel states, “To Israel the unique events of historic time were spiritually more significant than the repetitive processes in the cycle of nature, even though physical sustenance depended on the latter.”<sup>19</sup> Thus history and nature come together in the Bible’s view, but history provides the ultimate framework of meaning within which creation itself is understood.

The thrust of the Bible’s view of time is explosive. In a fallen world, freedom and power will always be abused, and the corruption of freedom will inevitably lead to the corruption of power and then to oppression, injustice, inequality, and domination. Thus the fallen world will always run according to the dark momentum of its remorseless cycles of widening inequality in generation after generation—as the bonded slaves, captive sex workers, dispossessed migrants, and the child warriors all testify in our time. And with the unprecedented fortunes of the superintelligence era, the differentials and divisions between the *haves* and the *have-nots*, the *ens* (the enhanced) and the *uns* (the unenhanced) will only widen and get worse. Among other things, this means that whatever merits are claimed for any political or economic system, whether democracy or free-market capitalism, the outcome will always follow this logic and thus disappoint its enthusiasts and confirm the suspicion and hostility of its critics.

Plainly too, the oppression of today’s downward cycle weighs heavily on our sense of time, and no less so for the wealthy than the poor. Modern people become time slaves because so much of our time is under the control of others, and we ourselves squander so much of our lives through the lure of advertising, social media,

entertainment, and such diversions as video games and pornography. Modernity makes time slaves of us all.

But whether the world in question is ancient or modern, and whether the problem is power slavery, debt slavery, or time slavery, the Bible counters this negative cycle with a positive and redemptive countercycle—the radical innovation of the Sabbath and the concept of sabbaticals and the Years of Jubilee. Many of us who are Christians, and I include myself, have to admit with shame that we have given little thought to this arrangement and the thinking behind it, and most of us have made nothing of it. Instead, we sway uneasily between almost complete neglect of the notion of Sabbath and sabbaticals and occasional spasms of legalism or guilt at the way we blur all our days in a ceaseless round of work and entertainment.

Yet once again, we and our time-driven world have much to learn from the Bible and our Jewish friends. There is a link, they point out, between Sabbath and the realization of utopia. The notion of u-topia (literally “no place”) and the description “utopian” have gained a bad name because they are imaginary. They never arrive, and their advocates are forced to storm the gap between the ideal and the real through violence. The Bible’s originality comes in right there to address the interim realistically. “What is unique to Judaism is the sabbatical concept of *utopia now*, a rehearsal every seventh day and seventh year, of an ideal social order in which rest is part of the public domain, available equally to all. . . . It meant that one day in seven all hierarchies of wealth and power were suspended. No one could be forced to work: not employees, or slaves, or even domestic animals.” And why? “Those who are servants to God may not be slaves to man”—or to time.<sup>20</sup>

In short, the Sabbath is central to “redeeming the time” in terms of time present, just as repentance and forgiveness are to

redeeming the time in terms of time past. As a time-out and a rest, the Sabbath refreshes, restores, and rebalances us. For all our perks and comforts in the modern world, we are more time-driven than ever, but if we follow the threefold arrangement of Sabbath, sabbaticals, and the Jubilee Year, we can reassert rest, refreshment, well-being, and freedom back into time and history every seven days, every seven years, and every fiftieth year, after the long cycle of seven times seven years.

This characteristic break with nature and myth and the insistence on freedom and justice in history are striking and unmistakable features of the Bible. The momentous difference between the covenantal view and the purely cyclical view must never be softened. In the covenantal view, time and history are real, foundational, and inescapable; human agency is real, decisive, and consequential; and the need for an ongoing commitment to freedom and justice is essential. From daily and weekly living to such grand enterprises as science, politics, and the struggle for freedom, justice, and reform, there is no question which view of time and history has shaped the West, and which, for better or worse, has inspired the rise of the modern world and will best lead it forward tomorrow. Rabbi Sacks concludes provocatively but accurately, “Cyclical time is deeply conservative; covenantal time is profoundly revolutionary.”<sup>21</sup>

## CHRONOLOGICAL TIME

The third major view of time, which is that of the secularist family of faiths, is chronological time. In essence, chronological time is linear and covenantal time shorn of its belief in God, transcendence, eternity, and the supernatural, and thus secularized. If the advocates of cyclical time view *eternity within time*, as in the bliss of Eastern meditation, the advocates of chronological time do the



opposite. They view *time without eternity* at all. The Greek word *chronos* was used to personify time. It meant time viewed as a succession of linear moments in contrast to time as *kairos*, which meant time as the significance of a moment that is ripe with meaning and a potential for good or ill.

As a mere succession of linear moments with no inherent meaning, *chronos* is the endless, unvarying, and monotonous ticktock of clock time. It is quite different from *kairos* as the significance of the moment—as, for example, in moments of triumph or disaster that ever after are viewed as “timeless.” For some years I attended a church in London where Roger Bannister was a member. On May 6, 1954, in Oxford, he had been the first man in history to run the mile in under four minutes, and for all his later successes in medical science he was forever defined by those four minutes. For most of us, a four-minute segment of life would mean little, but Bannister made no secret of the fact that he wished he had made his name as a researcher. However, he could never transcend those four minutes. He even used to joke about it. “I don’t think many people have had the life I enjoyed for four minutes work!” At the time he had described the last few agonizing seconds as “never-ending,” but sixty years later he said it “seemed an eternity.”

Covenantal time in the Bible is rich with *kairos* moments, for *under God* the drama of history takes on its highest and deepest meaning. Like an old black-and-white film given color or a darkening room with the light switched on, everything looks different in the light of eternity. Famously, for example, Queen Esther’s cousin Mordecai challenged her in words that have become legendary, “Who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). But *kairos* time is not unique to the Bible. Shakespeare captured it in the famous words of Mark Anthony’s

funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows and in miseries."<sup>22</sup>

The crucial difference between covenantal time and purely chronological time stems from the difference between their two sources of meaning. Meaning from the perspective of covenantal time is finally meaning as God sees and knows it to be (*sub specie aeternitatis*, "under the perspective of eternity"), whereas meaning within chronological time is meaning as humans see it and seek to establish it. This difference is in fact all-important because it divides proponents of chronological linear time into two parties: the optimists who regard self-created human meaning as an entirely feasible project, and the pessimists who don't.

The optimistic party was the child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. "God was dead," as Nietzsche expressed it a century later, but there was no need for God any longer. Humanity could take over everything for which God once stood, and humans could sustain and steer their future by themselves. No longer relying on God, nature, or evolution, humanity could now control its own evolution. Human dignity, truth, freedom, reason, science, progress—all these may have been the gifts of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, but reason could replace revelation and the rest would fall into place in a new and improved secularist march of time and history. Humanity would take over from God, evolution would replace creation, progress in time and history would stand in for heaven and build a new heaven on earth, and moral progress would march hand in hand with technological progress. There would be just as much meaning, purpose, and dynamism as before, a steady human march toward broad and sunlit uplands, but now the meaning would be humanist and self-created and the progress self-sustaining.

In Bertrand Russell's words, a "scientific philosophy" could fashion a "new morality" that would "turn our earth into a paradise."<sup>23</sup> "Modern technics," he declared, "is giving man a sense of power which is changing his whole mentality. . . . It may be that God made the world, but there is no reason why we should not make it over."<sup>24</sup> Or as Lewis Mumford expressed it in *Technics and Civilization*, "Impossible? No; for however far modern science and technics have fallen short, they have taught mankind at least one lesson: Nothing is impossible."<sup>25</sup> The Promethean drive of such attitudes, or the extravagant dream of human omnipotence, is unmistakable in Joseph Proudhon: "We attain to science and society in spite of God. Every progress is a victory in which we crush the Deity."<sup>26</sup>

Humanity would steer linear time toward its own human ends and be the captain of its own fate. Whatever history may have been in the past was past. History by humanity and for humanity would be the arena for human redemption in the present and the future. History would be the story of humanity's unbroken pursuit of freedom, power, and expansion. Faith in God could be jettisoned safely. Indeed, faith in God had to be jettisoned because such notions as providence were the relics and reminders of an earlier time when human minds were still ignorant and human wills impotent.

Russell did not go on to say how this happy vision would be achieved, and there was a simple problem with all the optimistic versions of humanly redeeming history. They didn't happen, they still haven't happened, and when secularism gained power quite the reverse happened. And there were those who saw, early on, that they would not happen. In the early nineteenth century the great Spanish artist Goya detailed his dark warning in his art: "The dream of reason produces monsters." He has been seconded in our own time by John Ralston Saul and his

magisterial *Voltaire's Bastards*. Two centuries after Goya, there is no doubt about the uncomfortable link between the Enlightenment and such monsters as racism and eugenics, Auschwitz and the Killing Fields of Cambodia. (For example, Immanuel Kant, the greatest of the Enlightenment philosophers, described the Jews as the “vampires of society” and called for the “euthanasia of Judaism.” And Arthur Schopenhauer spoke similarly of Jews as “no better than cattle.”)<sup>27</sup>

There are still notable optimists in the secularist camp, such as Harvard's Steven Pinker with the soaring hopes of his titles such as *Enlightenment Now* and *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. But the ranks of the optimists and those who believe in redeeming history are far thinner today, and the weight of evidence now favors the greater realism of other atheists. Technological progress has been breathtaking, but it appears that moral progress has been winded and left panting by the roadside. Worse still, as critics such as Reinhold Niebuhr charged, uncritical confidence in a limitless expansion of human freedom and in history as the arena for human redemption heightened the headlong dynamism of Western civilization to the point where “it became a kind of demonic fury.”<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the last best hope for a renewal of eighteenth-century-style optimism lies with transhumanism and the hopes for ultra-intelligence. There is certainly no question that the transhumanist visions for the techno-liberation of humanity in the future are soaring. For example, in his *Life 3.0*, Max Tegmark claims that superintelligence will not only transform humanity but wake up the entire universe to give it meaning and consciousness. It will transform

our Universe from a mindless zombie with no self-awareness into a living ecosystem harboring self-reflection, beauty and hope—and the pursuit of goals, meaning and purpose. Had

our Universe never awoken, then, as far as I am concerned, it would have been completely pointless—merely a gigantic waste of space. Should our Universe go back to sleep due to some cosmic calamity or self-inflicted mishap, it will, alas, become meaningless.<sup>29</sup>

Yet which is more stunning, we might ask, Tegmark's summary dismissal of any meaning in the universe over the last many billions of years or his stunningly sunny optimism that the next generation will light up all life and the entire universe with meaning it has never had until these brave new technosaviors were born to spread their beneficence throughout the cosmos?

For the moment, however, philosopher John Gray, a leading atheist himself, has delivered a triple blow to all the present varieties of Enlightenment optimism—liberal democratic, secular progressive, neo-Marxist, or whatever. First, he notes that the liberal atheism that believes in humanist progress is a “late flower of the Jewish and Christian religion, and in the past most atheists have not been liberals.”<sup>30</sup> (Atheism in its modern form, we might say, could not flourish without the church—it is either a parasite on the best of Christian truths or a protest against the worst of Christian behavior). Second, Gray argues that many of the Enlightenment thinkers were themselves guilty of egregious evils, such as the blatant racism of Voltaire, David Hume, H. G. Wells, and Julian Huxley, and the horrifying eugenics of Margaret Sanger. And third, he demonstrates the embarrassing link between secularism and the violence and oppression of the last century, and between the Enlightenment and modern anti-Semitism.

Gray's conclusion is unsparing, if provocative: “If you want to understand atheism and religion, you must forget the popular notion that they are opposites. . . . Contemporary atheism is a continuation of monotheism by other means. Hence the unending

succession of God-surrogates, such as humanity and science, technology and the all-too-human visions of transhumanism.”<sup>31</sup>

## THE PARTY OF PESSIMISM

The pessimistic party has long argued for a darker estimate of chronological linear time. If life is short, we only go around once, and time is merely a succession of moments with no discernible beginning, no known successful ending, and no given meaning, what does it add up to? What sort of story has no beginning and no end? How are we supposed to look on the journey or voyage of life if we don't know how it started, and we don't know where it is going? What would film-going be like if we were always condemned to see no more than a few minutes in the middle of a film? The best we could do would be no better than guesswork. That is the dilemma that Milan Kundera pitted against the Eastern and Nietzschean view. Karma and “eternal recurrence” mean that there is an oppressive weightiness to every action because we are condemned to repeat the actions forever, but the opposite view leads to “an unbearable lightness of being.” As Kundera's protagonist Tomas asks in his novel by the same title, “What can life be worth if the first rehearsal is life itself?” After all, “If we only have one life to live, we might as well have not lived at all.”<sup>32</sup>

Do we really have to pretend that while there is no ultimate meaning in the universe, the search itself is somehow an adequate meaning and not futile? What difference is there between such pointlessness and hopelessness? Paul Gauguin, the French postimpressionist artist, raised such questions in his famous painting from Tahiti: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Read from right to left, he portrayed his vision of the passages of life, ending with an old woman near death and a strange bird, representing the uselessness of words.

Later in the last century, the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett became the poet of the meaninglessness of chronological linear time. In his play *Waiting for Godot*, one of the two tramps made an early remark that aptly summarizes the pointlessness that pervades the play like a fog: “Nothing to be done.” The spawn of such pointlessness is not so much suicide as terminal lethargy.

In a later play, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Beckett deepens the devastation of chronological time without meaning even more fiercely. A sixty-nine-year-old man listens to tapes of himself that he recorded as a young man in his twenties and thirties. They are unrecognizable to him. He has become a different man. But then who was he, and who is he? Without any overarching meaning or continuity, the relentless flow of the succession of the moments has shattered his life and his identity into fragments. The meaningless succession of moments had smashed his identity into a thousand disconnected points in time. Heraclitus’s famous saying that “you cannot step into the same river twice” is usually only half understood. Not only will the river be a different river when you step in it again, but you yourself will not be the same person who stepped into it before.

If there is no meaning to time and history, considered purely chronologically, then Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was right all along. Life is only “a tale told by an idiot.” Or as Joseph Heller’s Bruce Gold expressed it, “History is a trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind.”<sup>33</sup> This view surely takes us back to Eliade’s random and meaningless “history as terror”—though most people simply duck the conclusion by not thinking about it. Our ancestors who believed in cyclical time may have been pessimistic in their conclusion, but at least they were realistic. Modern people, by contrast, tend to be escapist, surrounding themselves with diversions and euphemisms.

But make no mistake. Modern secular people have to be escapist because only the few really face the logic of the alternative. Art historian John Berger comments from the vantage point of the secular and merely chronological, and strikingly leaves out the biblical view: we face “the finality of modern despair.” In earlier worldviews, “time was cyclic and this meant that the ‘ideal’ original state would one day return or was retrievable. . . . With entropy and the nineteenth century view of time, we face only the irretrievable and dissipation.”<sup>34</sup>

Sooner or later the choice between these views of time will suddenly loom large for each of us and become a matter of life and death. For any who follow the wisdom of the ages regarding humanity and time, they will come to a crossroads. “Under the sun,” as the ancient Hebrew text puts it, there is only “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless” (Eccles 1:2 NIV). Brief, brief breath. Brief, brief breath. All is but a brief, brief breath and then nothing.

Do we at that point stick to the secular and chronological road to nowhere, do we turn off to the Eastern path and renounce this ever-circling world as an illusion from which we must escape, or do we turn back to the biblical view of covenantal time through which both history and our human freedom gain a peerless significance? Contrast is the mother of clarity. Entire worlds and ways of life grow out of each view. From our own individual hopes for personal freedom to the great questions surrounding the future of free societies, it is clear that the stakes are immense. Time, history, meaning, significance, and the character of civilization are all at stake in the view we choose and the view of the world that we live within.



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