

# ANCIENT CLASSICAL ALTERNATIVES AND APPROACHES TO THE IDEA OF PROGRESS\*

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**T**HE GREEKS DID NOT HAVE a historical view of the life of mankind as a progress of advancing achievement, realization and expansion of values. Their greatest historian, Thucydides, did not contemplate the events of his time in their rhythm with the ongoing march of bygone ages. On his first page he tells us that his inquiries into remote antiquity and into his more recent past had not revealed to him anything “on a great scale, either in war or in other matters.” Where does a Classical poet sing: “I, the heir of all the ages?”

Shall we, then, follow the example of the chronicler who was content with the bare statement that there are no snakes in Iceland? But we shall be failing to realize the ancient Classical alternatives to the belief in progress, and also some significant

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approaches to this idea. These contending views reveal important characteristics of the Classical temper which any student of the modern ideas of progress should grasp and keep in mind.

Before tracing some of the ancient Classical approaches to the idea of progress we should examine the Greek alternatives to it which in some measure persisted also in Roman thought. They are mainly two: the view of a series of world ages marked by an increasing degeneration, and the view of the cosmic process as eternal recurrence. The first of these ideas pervaded Greek mythology and persisted in the world outlook of some poets and philosophers. The second was a theory of cosmological speculation, with disturbing inferences.

It should be stated clearly at the outset that neither one of these two ideas commanded general acceptance. We cited the first page of Thucydides, but as we read beyond the first page we can follow his account of the rude early beginnings of the Greek tribes, unsettled in habitation and in customs, many of them pirates and lawless nomads. While he unrolls before us the tragic events of the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides is not marked by any nostalgia for bygone primitive glories. Even in her disaster his Athens could not lose the memories which he engraved in his version of Pericles' funeral oration. And he appealed to the undoubted judgment of posterity: "I have written my work . . . as a possession for all time."<sup>1</sup>

The issue between the doctrines of historical degeneration and eternal recurrence was not always drawn sharply. Both were held by many minds in ambiguous indecision. And alongside of them there were also some approaches to the belief in progress.

The view of a world series of periodic degeneration has been called the doctrine of cultural primitivism. In our time it has been studied by Professors Lovejoy and Boas with thorough analysis and the most extensive and detailed documentation

<sup>1</sup>Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 15, transl. Richard Crawley, Everyman's Library ed.

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across the entire range of Classical literature. Tradition has called it the belief in a bygone Golden Age. Hesiod gave us an early version of it in his *Works and Days*. The deathless Olympian gods made first of all "a golden race of mortal men who . . . lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief."<sup>2</sup> The portrayal of their blessed light of existence is in sharp contrast to the series of lower and lower types of humanity which darkened the succeeding ages. Physically and mentally the men of the Silver Age were inferior to their predecessors. And down the scale of baser metals, the Age of Bronze and the Age of Iron marked the spreading degeneration of mankind.

The golden men lived in justice and joy and ease. Peaceful were their lives, and their death was as a gentle sleep. The silver men were slow-witted and insolent, without piety, so that they angered the gods, who did away with them. The brazen men were a race of terrible warriors, violent and hard of heart. They crushed and destroyed each other and without any abiding achievement sank into the chill muck of Hades. Ours is the age of the men of iron; in toil and grief we grind out our days; wrangling and trickery sully our home life and our dealings with each other. Neither justice nor reverence is to be found among us, but "envy, foul mouthed, delighting in evil."<sup>3</sup>

Hesiod bewailed his lot, that he had to be born in the Age of Iron. He interrupted his account of the steady deterioration of the human stock by his chant of a great Age of Heroes, between the brazen and the iron men. Some of them were warlike like the men of bronze and perished in dread battles; but others, nobler and more righteous, still live without grief or want in the Islands of the Blessed. Was Hesiod's heroic episode in the dismal tale of human degradation a hint of possible future hope of restoration, or was it a note of added dismay? Zeus the far-seeing that lets us live in the miserable iron age

<sup>2</sup>Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 109ff., transl. H. G. Evelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library ed.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 195f.

might just as well have allowed us to be born in the heroic mould.

The Golden Age doctrine persisted as an alternative view of the course of human existence in the thought of both philosophers and poets, but it was slanted differently in various cosmic outlooks. We may overlook minds of lesser note, for Plato and Vergil and Ovid claim our attention. Plato did not specifically favor a theory of golden primitive perfection followed by a periodic series of increasing degeneration. He seems to have regarded the myth of the Golden Age, along with some of his own myths, as an imaginative version of a deep truth. The truth here seems to be this, that human well-being and perfection are directed by Divine guidance; but if or when God's hand is withdrawn, men left to themselves go astray, and the whole world reverts towards confusion and evil. This world-view, which we may call pendular, has kinships with the doctrine of eternal recurrence. It is also involved in Plato's approach to the abysmal problem of evil. That evil can in any way be attributed to God, Plato rejected emphatically as an impious error. God is the author of good and of good only. But there is in the constitution of the world a corrupt material strain, and in the very nature of things "there must always remain something which is antagonistic to good."—"God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable;" but left to our own devices, we men let our lower impulses prevail.<sup>4</sup> In this Platonic perspective of theodicy the myth of the Golden Age expressed deep significance.

We noted the possible hint of hope in Hesiod's interposition of the Heroic Age between the Ages of Bronze and Iron. The legend of the Golden Age was given an optimistic turn in the prospect of its possible return, as in Vergil's *Fourth Eclogue*. This chant of divine restoration of mankind to a high estate was reinterpreted by Christian theologians in Messianic, Providential terms. A closer echo of Hesiod's myth in Roman poetry is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid glorified especially the

<sup>4</sup>*Theaetetus*, 176; *Timaeus*, 30; transl. Jowett.

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primeval perfection of mankind: "Golden was that first age, which, with no one to compel, without a law, of its own will, kept faith and did the right."<sup>5</sup> He also sang in Latin verse the old story of the several ages, but proceeding from the silver and the brazen directly to our age of hard iron, in which "modesty and truth and faith fled the earth, and in their place came tricks and plots and snares, violence and cursed love of gain."<sup>6</sup>

The poetic vision of the return of the Golden Age was not only a vision of eventual restoration. It also mediated between the doctrine of cultural degeneration and the cyclic cosmology of eternal recurrence. This second doctrine finds many expressions throughout the entire course of Greek thought, from Heraclitus to Plotinus. Like a treadmill of cosmic spread and duration, the world process goes through the entire scale of possible conditions or events, and then returns to retrace its course to the least detail, aeon after aeon.

The basic idea of eternal recurrence was not exclusively or originally Greek. Its various versions may be studied in Babylonian, Brahmanic, and Buddhist cosmogonies. It stimulated the Oriental zeal for vastness and infinitude, of which Buddhism provided the most overwhelming expressions. The Buddhist *kalpas*, or aeons of world-destruction and world-restoration, were regarded as incalculable cosmic epochs, how incalculable, Buddhist speculation taxed its resources to conceive or imagine. Are we informed that the monsoon rains of the Bay of Bengal discharge in some four months thirty to forty *feet* of flood? The Buddhist imagined a downpour of three years' duration; the total sum of raindrops would still come short of the number of years in an *asankhyeya kalpa*. And these cosmic aeons return cyclically, marked by the alternate destruction and restoration of the world. Our folk tales begin with the familiar "once upon a time;" but the Buddhist legends were more expansive: "Ten quadrillion times a hundred quadrillions of *kalpas* ago, there lived a righteous king." A dim

<sup>5</sup>Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I: 89ff., transl. F. J. Miller, Loeb Classical Library ed.  
<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, lines 127ff.

recollection, and scarcely a faint hope!—yet Buddhist piety sought to sustain its serene prospect. Even though in this kalpa no lotus flower may appear on the primordial deep, and so no Buddha will come to teach men deliverance from misery, yet in some incredibly distant future, salvation and enlightenment will again return to wretched mankind. Even this brief passing mention of Oriental speculation may enable us to keep in mind the world-wide spread of the idea of eternal recurrence, as we consider more directly some of its Greek versions.

In Pre-Socratic philosophy the world course of eternal recurrence was conceived in pendular and in cyclical terms. Heraclitus viewed nature as a process of endless change of contending activities, as the opposition of upbuilding and down-going, all things arising from cosmic fire are in due course consumed by fire, worlds without end. Empedocles envisioned a similar counteraction of love and strife, or attraction and repulsion throughout the course of existence. But he seems to have entertained also a cyclical cosmogony and was a believer in the transmigration of souls. These two beliefs found strong support in the Pythagorean school. Pythagorean influence may be traced in Plato's advocacy of these doctrines, very definite in the case of transmigration, only occasional in the case of eternal recurrence. Aristotle also conceived of the course of existence in terms of circular motion, for it alone is continuous and in accord with his view of the world as eternal.<sup>7</sup> But while one could cite from Aristotle passages from which a cyclical doctrine could be surmised, he can scarcely be listed with the definite exponents of that belief.

In Post-Aristotelian philosophy, eternal recurrence is entertained by the Epicurean poet Lucretius, finds its active advocates among the earlier Stoics, and is viewed by Plotinus in a mystical perspective. Lucretius saw in nature a mechanical scrambling and unscrambling of material particles; the world is composed of atoms-in-motion-in-space. Thus everything is an impermanent combination or cluster of atoms; and since

<sup>7</sup>*Cf. Aristotle, De generatione et corruptione, 337a.*

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the number of different combinations, no matter how vast, is yet exhaustible in eternity, there is bound to be recurrence and return, not only in general terms but in detail. To a truly cosmic survey, "all things are always the same: *eadem sunt omnia semper.*"<sup>8</sup>

The Stoic sages were more explicit. Reviving the Heraclitean belief in a Cosmic Fire, which they exalted as Directive Reason and as Deity, they conceived of nature as a tension and a contention of refining and coarsening processes of material existence. When at long last a world epoch has gone through its round of possible conditions and events, it is all consumed in a cosmic conflagration, to start another world cycle recapitulating its predecessors to the least detail. A new Socrates, like so many before him immemorially, again has his trials with his shrewish wife Xantippe and his trial at court and his final cup of hemlock. These doctrines of cosmic conflagration and eternal recurrence were held by the early Greek Stoics, but they were abandoned by Panaetius, who introduced Stoicism into Rome; the Roman Stoics entertained not a cyclical but a linear view of the world process.

The doctrines of recurrence and rebirth were revived in the closing period of ancient thought by the Neopythagoreans and the Neoplatonists. The greatest thinker of that age, Plotinus, introduced these ideas into his mystical cosmology of divine emanation. Plotinus believed that the spiritual essence of man's soul was not extinguished along with his bodily disintegration. His assurance of personal immortality, like Plato's, was combined with a view of rebirth and transmigration of souls. In a larger cosmic setting, the repeated emanation of the Soul Principle in individual embodied souls was seen by Plotinus as an instance of the cyclical recapitulation of the vast cosmic process of Deity emanating in the three zones of existence: *Nous* or Rational Spirit, Soul, and Matter. The doctrine of Rational Divine Providence, which the Stoics fused subtly and strangely with their materialistic cosmology, was expressed by

<sup>8</sup>Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, III: 945.

Plotinus in unmistakably spiritual and religious terms. The ultimate reality for him was God, emanating radiant perfection throughout the universe at different levels of being.

The legend of the Golden Age and the mythology of world-degeneration yielded a dismal view, one excluding any historical advance. The doctrine of eternal recurrence in its various forms viewed the world process either as the cyclical recapitulation of the forms of material existence, or as the periodic reenactment of the drama of Divine Providence. All of these ideas may be regarded as ancient alternatives to the belief in historical progress. But while this last belief cannot be considered as dominant in Classical thought, approaches to it are not lacking, and some of these approaches are noteworthy.

The view of an upward curve or trend to betterment in the world, manifested especially in human activity, was naturally characteristic of the rationalists, but it is interesting to note that cultural advance was recognized and the term "progress" itself was used by the Epicurean poet Lucretius. Essential to all understanding of Epicureanism is a grasp of its strict materialism. Like Democritus and Epicurus, Lucretius recognized only atomic particles of matter moving in space, and he explained the nature of everything in terms of the atoms of which it was compounded, and their motions, contacts and collisions. No divine guidance was recognized here, no distinctively rational principles, no dominant or prevailing purposes and values. All is in a flux; the mechanics of nature are ever changing the composition of things, disintegrating and recombining the masses or clusters of atoms throughout existence. And besides this mechanical reassembling of particles, there is always the unaccountable power of each atom to swerve at any moment in any direction. In this world without plan, eternal duration would by the mere calculation of chances yield eventual recurrence, as has been noted. But how could it ever afford, let alone assure, genuine and reliable progress?

The thought of Lucretius at this point is versatile rather than consistent. The universal atomic whirl and pulsation are



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not altogether random or chaotic. Under some conditions certain combinations persist or else are transformed in a definite direction. Driven by need or lured by use and advantage, men devised tools, perfected plans and methods which sustained them in what they possessed and opened to them still larger prospects of achievement. They found their place in nature and proceeded to fuller mastery of their territory. So, gradually in every field of activity, in farming and seafaring, in armament and legislation, in self-clothing and road-building, in all the arts, men step by step were taught by practice and mental activity to progress, *progredientes*, through time *and by reason*.<sup>9</sup> The acknowledgment of directive intelligence is surprising in the materialistic outlook of Lucretius.

The recognition of a genuinely progressive course in human affairs by the Classical philosophers of more or less rationalistic bent, while it was not dominant, was significant in view of the generally unhistorical outlook of ancient thought which we have been considering. In Plato's theory of Ideas the supreme reality is the Idea of Good or the Principle of Value and Prevailing Perfection. There is always evil, and lesser and lower values are always contending with the higher, for there must always be something antagonistic to good and to perfection; but there is also possible advance in knowledge and in the arts, and this advance can have no bounds. This view accentuates one aspect of Plato's idealism, and it can be and has been criticized as overemphasis. For all his exaltation of sovereign Reason, Plato's thought is marked by a deeply tragic conviction of our finitude and inconclusiveness in the assured mastery of values.

Aristotle was less dramatic about men. Without exaltation, he granted them some reach beyond their immediate grasp. Like Plato, he traced the degeneration of the state, but he also pointed out the path of social order and government towards more perfect realization of justice and general welfare. He did

<sup>9</sup>*Cf. De rerum natura*, V: 1448ff.

not proceed to any rigid conclusion of a final advance or decline, for while in any era some progress in the arts and crafts or knowledge or practice may be traced, the cycle of existence may sweep it all away, and, like Pandora's box, leave to man only hope.

For more explicit advocacy of human progress, we must turn to the Stoic sages of Rome who, be it remembered, did not entertain the doctrine of eternal recurrence held by their predecessors in the Athenian schools. Especially noteworthy here are Cicero and Seneca. Cicero recognized both progress and the obstacles to it in man's social relations and activities. "Man is the source of both the greatest help and the greatest harm to man."<sup>10</sup> Yet while in so many ways men are hampered and also corrupted by the societies in which they have to live their lives, it is in and through society that they can advance in knowledge and in the arts. "Without the association of men, cities could not have been built or peopled . . . laws and customs were established, and . . . the equitable distribution of private rights."<sup>11</sup> From small beginnings men proceed to larger gains and advantages, *progressionibus*. We should also seek to discover and further the development of which we are capable until it is fully attained.<sup>12</sup>

Seneca was even more explicit in his belief in social progress, yet he combined it with his Stoic austere advocacy of the simple rational life. He saw the simple virtues in the lives of bygone generations, and the retrospect inclined him to final resignation. But he also looked to further advance. So he wrote to Lucilius: We should emulate our forebears and advance as they did, going beyond them. Mankind is still in its infancy, and future ages will know clearly much that to us now seems a closed book. We should trust to sound thinking, for "life is the gift of the immortal gods, but living well is the gift of

<sup>10</sup>Cicero, *De officiis*, II: v, 17; transl. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library ed.

<sup>11</sup>*De officiis*, II: iv, 15.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Cicero, *De finibus*, V: xxi; cited by A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935), 248f.

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philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Seneca was also nostalgic in his reflections on the Golden Age, in his praise of the long past, in his revulsion at the luxuries and vulgarities of his age. And he viewed with deep concern the eventual dissolution of it all, in words recalling the earlier Stoic belief in a cosmic conflagration: "A single day will see the burial of all mankind . . . All that is famous and all that is beautiful, great thrones, great nations—all will descend into the one abyss, will be overthrown in one hour."<sup>14</sup>

Do we not observe repeatedly here a characteristic tension between recognition and exaltation of great values, and doubt and dismay about their final undoing? This tragic outlook may be noted in the greatest Greek poets. Two examples suffice. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the great culture hero recites with justified pride his noble services to mankind. His eloquent soliloquy reviews every field of activity in which he had led men from the savage burrows where they had groped like beasts, into the light of day: the light of skill and understanding and security and civilized life. But Aeschylus also portrays the titan Fire-Bringer as chained to a rock in the Caucasus. Great Zeus has condemned him; and his work for man, man's upward reach and progress, is doomed to ruin.

Akin to the Promethean tragedy is the "Hymn to Man" in the famous Chorus of the *Antigone*, one of the finest pages in Sophocles:

*Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man; the power that crosses the white sea, driven by the stormy south-wind, making a path under surges that threaten to engulf him; and Earth, the eldest of the gods, the immortal, the unwearied, doth he wear, turning the soil with the offspring of horses, as the ploughs go to and fro from year to year. And the light-hearted race of birds, and the tribe of savage beasts, and the sea-brood of the deep, he snares in the meshes of his woven toils, he leads captive, man*

<sup>13</sup>Seneca, *Epist. moral.*, xc: 1, transl. R. M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library ed.

<sup>14</sup>Seneca, *Quaestiones naturales*, III: 29, cited in *The Idea of Progress*, G. H. Hildebrand, ed. (Berkeley, 1949), 106.

*excellent in wit. And he masters by his arts the beast whose lair is in the wilds, who roams the hills; he tames the horse of shaggy mane, he puts the yoke upon his neck, he tames the tireless mountain bull. And speech and wind-swift thought, and all the moods that mould a state, hath he taught himself; and how to flee the arrows of the frost, when 'tis hard lodging under the clear sky, and the arrows of the rushing rain; yea, he hath resource for all; without resource he meets nothing that must come: only against Death shall he call for aid in vain; but from baffling maladies he hath devised escapes. Cunning beyond fancy's dream is the fertile skill which brings him, now to evil, now to good. When he honours the laws of the land, and that justice which he hath sworn by the gods to uphold, proudly stands his city: no city hath he who, for his rashness, dwells with sin. Never may he share my hearth, never think my thoughts, who doth these things!*<sup>15</sup>

"Only against Death shall he call for aid in vain." This undertone in the "Hymn to Man" seems as tragic as in the culture paean of Prometheus. And the heroine of Sophocles is tragic indeed, with her utter commitment to the ageless laws of Heaven, and the doom to which her sublime devotion is bound. Yet the Chorus of Sophocles, just as the whole tragedy of *Antigone*, does not end on a note of despair. It is Platonic in its unwavering acknowledgment of the highest values, that they are the highest. They have no easy prevailing power in human lives and societies, but they alone have right; so how could they be ultimately futile?

<sup>15</sup>Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 332ff., transl. R. C. Jebb.