

CLASSICAL GREEK AND ROMAN SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY

Introduction

The emergence from 'myth'

As we move forward in time, and geographically, into the period of Greek antiquity stretching from roughly 1200 BC to that flowering of Hellenic culture starting around 500 BC, we encounter a gradual emancipation of thought from that 'mythical' world-view described in the last chapter. As we will see, this shift in 'mentality' included changes in the way 'history' and the passing of time were understood. But let us first map out the general backcloth of the overcoming of the 'mythical' mind-set within which those changes occurred – namely, the transition to what is called the 'rational', or 'philosophical' consciousness which attempts to understand things purely through the exercise of 'reason' rather than from the imaginative, 'poetic' perspective of intimate involvement in an animated, anthropomorphised world.

Not surprisingly, this shift in outlook was not made all at once, but is traceable through the differing ideas of a number of thinkers who left writings (often fragments) or were reported on later. For example, in Hesiod (eighth century BC) we meet a poetic, mythical account of the origins of the gods and of men, sharing a number of beliefs with those ancient Near Eastern cultures in the previous chapter. But by the fifth century BC we are surrounded by philosophers, albeit of differing 'schools', who in their explanations of reality attained that level of rational intellectual abstraction epitomised by Plato and Aristotle. In addition, although not 'scientists', it is argued¹ that their mental approach centring on a belief in the ultimate intelligibility of the universe laid the foundations for that emergence of 'real' science which occurred in the Hellenistic period some two centuries later. As Frankfort puts it, '[t]his change of viewpoint is breathtaking',² and he attributes it primarily to the Ionian 'school' of philosophers originated by Thales (625–546 BC), contributed to by Anaximander (611–547 BC) and Anaximenes (570–500 BC), and which influenced the thinking of Heraclitus, (540–475 BC).

This school sought the 'origins' or explanation of things not in terms of the actions of gods but in terms of some ultimate 'principle' underlying all existence,

be it in their case water, air, or fire. It is true that some also spoke of 'the gods', whereas logic might dictate their abandonment altogether (as it did to later 'materialists' such as Democritus (c. 460–370 BC), Epicurus (341–270 BC) and the Roman Lucretius (98–55 BC), who still spoke of 'the gods' but regarded them as irrelevant to explaining nature and human affairs). But logic is one thing and reality – in this case, social reality – another. Some were boldly 'atheistic' whilst others, including later and different 'schools' (even Plato, 428–347 BC), continued to pay lip-service to 'the gods', perhaps as much to assure their ideas a hearing as to avoid censure (a practice continued in subsequent Christian – and other – societies into our own times).

The point is, however, that such philosophers adopted a viewpoint or 'mentality' which *detached* them, as subjects, from the 'objective' world outside them, held that world to be intelligible, and therefore posed them the challenge of exposing its 'workings' or 'logic' through reasoned argument. Some, as above, sought to explain everything in material terms (e.g., the 'atomic' theory of Democritus), others exploited the notion of the interplay of opposites such as 'Being' and 'Becoming' (e.g., Heraclitus' theory of 'universal flux'), whilst others such as Parmenides (515–? BC) abandoned the search for some ultimate *material* 'principle' underlying reality. He proposed instead that the universe is a changeless, infinite unity beyond the senses, governed or 'made up' by *thought* – that insofar as material or 'phenomenal' reality is ultimately explicable in terms of 'the thought of it', then its explanation is to be sought within the world of ideas, which we can enter through our capacity to 'reason' or be 'logical'. In short, since reality is 'thought', it can only be apprehended *through* the nature or 'laws' of 'thought' – the 'idealist' position famously elaborated upon by Plato – rather than by perception of material things or through imagination.

Reasons for the shift

This dawning and triumph of 'philosophy' in classical Greece has understandably been the object of enormous interest amongst philosophers and historians of thought. Its importance in laying the foundations for Western culture is monolithic. Yet for all the studies of early Greek philosophy, quite *why* this shift from a 'mythical' consciousness occurred, why in Greece, and why at the time it did, remain historical questions perhaps impossible to supply answers to, since it is doubtful we have enough information and evidence from which to infer them. It is noticeable that even those who do focus on the *shift* from 'myth' to 'philosophy' do so by explaining its character and significance, but only hint at explanations of *why* it occurred (or offer none).³ One observation common to some scholars, suggestive of an explanation, takes us back to Hesiod. Although he presented a 'mythopoeic' account of the origins of the gods and men, two things mark out his ideas as different from the ancient cultures of the Near East. First, he does not have a particularly reverent attitude towards the 'gods' – there is much intermarriage between 'gods' and men in his epic *Theogony* (Genealogy of the Gods) and this is

taken as early evidence of a more familiar, less respectful attitude in Greek thought towards many of the gods. Second, a number of Greek thinkers, as Hesiod himself, were laymen. Not part of an official 'priesthood' obliged to guard the sanctity of traditional beliefs and 'mysteries', the freedom of thought enjoyed by individuals such as Hesiod, Thales, and Anaximander was naturally accompanied by *independence* of thought.⁴ Apart from its other features, in his *Works and Days* Hesiod's frequent excursions into moral and political problems of the day, and practical advice on matters of farming and business, demonstrate the independence of mind of a secular thinker. Thus, despite the fate of Socrates (399 BC), the comparative freedom of thought enjoyed by the Greeks could be one explanatory factor in the shift from 'myth' to 'philosophy'.

Another factor sometimes suggested is the city life enjoyed by many Greeks. Perhaps thinking of the effects of urbanisation in the nineteenth century AD, a reasonable supposition might be that 'city-life' put a new distance environmentally and culturally between people and nature, diminishing the hold of the old 'animistic' mythological world-view. Yet we have to assume that Frankfort, for one, would find this unconvincing since he notes that urban life thrived in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, but that this 'in no way diminished man's awareness of his essential involvement in nature'.⁵

A further suggestion to explain this 'shift' could be the *geo-physical* environment experienced by the Greeks – a factor often appealed to in later philosophies of history to explain different 'mentalities' between peoples (although not as dramatically different as the 'shift' we are considering here). Wilson, Frankfort, and Jacobsen are not the only scholars to make much of the geo-physical environment in their explanations of, respectively, ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian 'mythopoeic' world-views. Yet they refer to it more to explain the *differences* in the mythologies between these two civilisations, given the markedly different geographical and climatic features between the Nile delta and hinterland and those of the Tigris and Euphrates, than to explain the commonality of their basic mythical mind-set. In this connection it is perhaps significant that when the Frankforts turn to Greece and 'the emancipation of thought from myth', they make no reference to the geo-physical environment either as an aid to explaining this 'emancipation' or in accounting for the differences between ancient Near Eastern poetic mythology and its Greek counterpart *prior* to that 'emancipation'.⁶ As we will see, a different writer *does* exploit features of the natural environment of the Greeks to explain a fundamental aspect of their early philosophy – the abundance of *growth* – but not to explain its emergence from myth in the first place.⁷ Perhaps there is nevertheless a connection – namely, that the climate and geography of Greece was far more benign than its harsher, more unpredictable counterparts in Mesopotamia, and thus less likely to inspire fear and therefore 'superstition'; and that it was not dependent upon such a striking and singular feature as the flooding of the Nile in ancient Egypt, an obvious stimulant to 'myth-making'.

The above suggestions remain, however, purely speculative. Perhaps all we can say, ultimately, is that this fascinating and momentous period of the emergence

from a 'mythical' mentality was 'bound to' happen somewhere, sooner or later, as mankind began to leave behind its 'childhood' and start to 'grow up' – in short, we might find *ourselves* employing that analogy of the 'natural' development *individuals* undergo in the process of maturation which we have already encountered as a common theme in 'speculative philosophy of history'! This may not be a particularly convincing explanation (and certainly not of the *particulars* – i.e., why Greece, and why then?) – but at least it directly introduces *us* to the challenges addressed by philosophers of history.

Classical Greek and Roman ideas on 'history'

If increasingly explicit *philosophical* writings are the most direct evidence of the shift from a 'mythopoeic' view of the world amongst the Greeks, the emergence of *historians* is almost as powerful a pointer. Of these, some of the most famous are: the widely travelled, so-called 'father of history', Herodotus (c. 484–425 BC), who wrote extensively of the customs and histories of numerous Middle Eastern cultures and, in the latter parts of his *History*, traced the great conflict between Greece and Persia in the early fifth century BC; the militarily experienced Thucydides (c. 460–400 BC), whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* covered the confrontations between Athens and Sparta which, beginning in 431 BC, lasted for some twenty-seven years; and Polybius (c.203–120 BC), the widely informed and thoughtful Graeco-Roman who, amongst other things in his *Histories*, analysed the history of Rome up to the point when, having defeated the Carthaginians by the mid-second century BC, it became ruler of most of the Romans' then 'known' world.

Just as no historian today thinks and writes in a vacuum, neither did the classic Greek and Roman historians. To differing degrees and with varying deliberateness they reflected broader, more 'speculative' attitudes abundant in other philosophical and literary works towards the past and the course of events. Our interest is in these broad presuppositions rather than in the more exact historiography of classical Greek and Roman historians (although we shall return to Polybius in particular as a masterful exploiter of prevailing, sometimes contrary, 'theories' of history). It should not surprise us that some, and the most important, of these broad 'presuppositions' about history were inherited from that ancient 'primitive' mentality, to be re-worked into more 'rational' ideas. Although intertwined in ancient mythologies, for the sake of exposition we can separate out three such 'ideas' which were inherited, adapted, and elaborated upon.

Historical cycles

First, there is the recurrent theme of 'cycles' – the notion that time, and the events it contains, goes round in a huge circle. To the 'pre-philosophical' mind this notion applied to the cosmos as a whole, and within that overall 'pattern' the cyclical regularities of nature on Earth were subsumed. Daily, monthly, yearly, and in larger movements, things would return to the point where they began. Thus the same

natural events such as dawn, a new moon, the new year, and longer term catastrophes such as flood, draught, and famine would return repetitively as inevitable 'effects' of the (endlessly) circular motion or 'logic' of time. Numerous Greeks and Romans not only retained this idea, but by Hellenistic times refined it into an elaborate and popular astrology. Others, however, were not so interested in pursuing its superstitious possibilities. Rather, they transferred the notion of *cosmic* cycles to actual *human* history – if 'nature' goes round in circles, so does man and society. For example, numerous passages in Plato's writings demonstrate his belief that history stretched back maybe hundreds of thousands of years, in which human societies were repeatedly devastated by natural catastrophes and had to begin anew the long and arduous path from primitive kinship groups to the eventual formation of city-states. These city-states themselves, as we shall see, were suggested by Plato to undergo their own (perhaps circular) course of development and decline. But in the larger picture all that might have been achieved in the way of civilisation was, and will be, swept away again as the inexorable cycle of time turns all around. 'Have not thousands upon thousands of city-states come into existence, and . . . have not just as many perished?'⁸ In one of Plato's fables, indeed, it is suggested that because the Earth is a material thing, and thus imperfect, it cannot share the divine perfection of perpetual rotation but must periodically reverse its rotation, with catastrophic results – not only geographically (floods, eruptions) but, in the longer term, also *morally*. This is because in departing from the motion exemplified by 'God' or 'reason', the other 'force' governing the universe – chaos or disorder – gains the upper hand, and 'as this cosmic era draws to its close, this disorder comes to a head. The few good things it produces it corrupts with so gross a taint of evil that it hovers on the very brink of destruction, both of itself and of the creatures in it'.⁹ Although Plato might not have believed this himself, it is a typical enough application of the doctrine of 'cyclical history' derived from the widely accepted notion of the causal potency of cosmic cycles.

Plato and others were thinking of broad-scale movements – the succession of aeons – and were not referring to the more intimate details of actual historical life. But in succeeding centuries the cyclical doctrine became increasingly entrenched, particularly amongst those Stoics who took it to the extreme of believing that

as the planets retrace exactly the same route which they had already traversed, each being that had already been produced during the previous period will re-emerge once more in exactly the same manner. Socrates will exist again, and Plato as well, and also each man with his friends and fellow citizens; each of them will suffer the same trials, will manage the same affairs; each city, each village, each camp will be restored. This reconstitution of the Universe will occur not once, but in a great number of times; or rather the same things will reoccur indefinitely to no end.¹⁰

In like vein, it is clear (from a work wrongly attributed to Aristotle¹¹) that this overall belief in the cyclical nature of history even engendered doubts as to the

meaning of 'before' and 'after', since if the course of events has a beginning, and an end which heralds a re-beginning of the same course, are we 'after' the people of Troy, or, if nearer the beginning of the cycle, 'before' them? Clearly these latter examples are extremes, perhaps matched by modern-day counterparts who seriously speculate upon, or believe in, 'parallel universes' – that is, who in doggedly following up the implications of an idea, irrespective of empirical evidence and the apparent claims of common-sense, do what the classical Greeks have been noted for by those who try to explain some of their ideas.

These extremes apart (although they tell their own story), there is ample evidence of a widespread general belief in *cosmological* cycles from at least the time of Heraclitus (540–475 BC), which many translated into a belief in an analogous repetitive cycle of not only natural but also human events. Such beliefs persisted for centuries, into the so-called 'Silver Age' of Latin literature exemplified by Seneca (4 BC–AD 65), later by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180), and were clearly still widespread in St Augustine's times (AD 354–430) since, as we shall see later, he devoted considerable energy to combating them. Given such longevity and ubiquity of notions, however varied, about the world's cyclical history (human affairs included), we must therefore recognise overall general belief in the latter as an indispensable component of peoples' understanding of the past and the course events take – in other words, of how they saw 'history' and their place in it.

'Fate', 'Fortune', and 'the gods'

Another idea inherited from ancient times was that of 'fate' or 'fortune'. This is a notion as difficult to pin down then as it is in today's use. At one extreme it can mean 'blind chance', and at the other mean the 'force' which, sooner or later as 'fate' catches up with one, delivers the appropriate reward or punishment for the conduct of an individual or even of a nation. But even in the former guise as 'chance', the notion is used to refer to some force or 'agency' which determines affairs by overriding, and often confounding, human intentions and strivings – and it is probably unwise to go further in search of a formal definition. Rather, we have to look at how this 'umbrella' notion was *used* to see what 'fate' or 'fortune' meant for different individuals. We can draw a line, however, where 'fate' is not only equated with 'chance', but where 'chance' is construed as not in any sense a determining cause. In short, if one takes the view that 'things are simply as they are' (meaning there is no explanation for them), it adds nothing to that statement to attribute 'the way things are' to 'fate'. In that formula, 'fate' is literally meaningless. This may well have been the case for the 'materialist' thinkers, Epicurus (341–270 BC) and Lucretius (c. 98–55 BC), for although the former seemed to believe in 'the gods', he held that they are indifferent to human affairs; 'fate', where it does 'play a role' (sic), is in fact simply 'chance'. On the other hand, if in saying 'things are simply as they are' one *also* attributes them to 'fate', one means the latter to *add* something to the initial statement. In this case (apart from having contradicted oneself) one *does* mean something by 'fate'. One means there is a *reason* or *cause* for 'the way

things are' or 'the way things turn out' – namely, 'fate'. It would appear that for centuries numerous Greeks and Romans at least subscribed to this somewhat indeterminate notion of 'fate' or 'fortune' governing events.

More than this, they would often personify 'fate' into the actions of 'the gods'. Here we are reminded of that 'primitive' mythopoeic mentality which no doubt persisted at various levels, but this could be misleading insofar as belief in the existence of gods (and/or 'God' – for example, Plato, and many Stoics, talked of both) need not equate with a fully mythopoeic world-view. For the latter to be dominant it would not be enough to regard an unexpected event as the *effect* of the actions of a god. Rather, the event itself would be understood as 'the god' acting. In short, 'fate' would not be a term used to indicate that something happened because the gods willed it – rather, 'fate' itself would *be* a god (that is, 'the river *refused* to rise'). And indeed, in both Greek and Roman *mythology*, so widely exploited and much beloved in classical literature, 'fate' *was* a god – namely, the Fates which determined one's character, destiny, and time of death.

Yet ubiquitous as was the classical Greek and Roman belief in 'gods', and difficult as it might be to judge quite what they meant to them and how seriously they took their presence, they did not play the same role in their consciousness as in the earlier 'mythopoeic' mentality. For the Greeks and Romans nature was nature. The gods might intervene in it, but nature itself was not animated. Similarly, it seems, for 'history'. For Greek and Roman historians, history was the enquiry into the course of human events – wars, treaties, law-giving, the founding of cities, invasions, conspiracies, constitution-building – a history 'made' in the immediate sense by human-beings. 'Underneath' this busy history, however, would be the governing force of 'fate', or (taken from cosmology) the impersonal Wheel of Fortune which would ensure a predictable circularity overall in human affairs. For Polybius, for example, 'Fortune' particularly favoured Rome, ensuring its unique stability and exceptional achievements – but even Rome would inevitably decline, (signs of which he claimed to detect in his own day). Or at a less impersonal level, 'the gods' may intervene in certain episodes – a way of 'explaining' the unexpected, or of highlighting a significant event, or of lending an air of inevitability to the outcome of a battle.

Finally, at an even less impersonal, more immediate level, 'Fortune' was personified into a *moral* force arbitrating on the deeds and character of individuals (and nations). Arrogance, insolence, impiety, the committing of shameful acts, and other moral failings, would sooner or later be punished by Fortune, just as virtue would be rewarded. From Herodotus onwards, many Greek and Roman historians, as well as dramatists and poets, made a point of extolling how, 'in the end', justice is inescapably dealt out to the wicked – the moral order is maintained inexorably, because if men do not see to it themselves, or are unable to restrain those bent on wickedness, Fortune will see to it that evil gets its just desserts. Here, fortune or fate is at its most tangible and 'interventionist' as a 'force', 'power', or 'factor' determining not only the overall course of history, but the histories of individuals.

Once again, how sincere this belief was is difficult to gauge. For some it might simply have been a device to preach good morals, whilst for others this belief in the moral intelligibility of life could simply have been the effect of wishful thinking. In any event, this brand of ‘determinism’ in history – the notion that some agency outside humankind operates to ensure justice and retribution – continued to exercise a powerful influence into Christian times, even if the day of reckoning is moved to *after* death and ‘another place’. Even today there are those who, either from religious doctrine or from some notion akin to the classical notion of ‘Fortune’, believe for example that Hitler was *bound* to come to a sticky end ‘sooner or later’ because they cannot conceive of a history which is morally neutral, or even worse, ‘corrupt’. Today’s *historians*, on the other hand, are far too ‘sensible’ to entertain such an idea?

The principle of growth (the biological analogy)

The third idea of relevance to history which the Greeks inherited and adapted from the pre-philosophical, ‘mythical’ world-view of more ancient cultures was that of genesis, growth, and eventual decay. In the ancient mind this notion connected directly with that of an animated cosmos undergoing cycles of change. Surrounded by the natural world of plants and animals (including themselves) inexorably governed by the cycle of genesis, growth, decay, and rejuvenation, they transferred this overwhelming perception to the giant animal they conceived the universe to be. The Greeks rationalised and exploited this notion of ‘growth’ into an all-pervading principle which they applied now to ‘physical science’ and to history. (Nisbet suggests the Greek *climate*, in producing an abundance of plant life as well as a contrasting arid season, might have contributed to the pervasiveness of the concept of growth and decay in the Greek way of looking at things).¹² Aristotle (384–322 BC) is the best-known exponent of this principle. His extensive researches into biological and zoological life confirmed for him the overriding truth that all things come into being, grow to fulfil their ‘end’, and then decay. Observation of this process in a thing reveals its *nature*. For example, the acorn is a hard seed – but gradually it changes into a shoot, grows into a sapling, and ‘finally’ develops into the fully-fledged oak-tree, after which zenith it eventually decays. Here we have the notions of a *natural* process of *change*, through *growth*, towards a pre-programmed ‘end’ or ‘purpose’ (the mature oak), succeeded by gradual decay. This is the famous teleological principle (taken from *telos* – ‘end’ or ‘final cause’) whereby, barring accidents (e.g., seeds being eaten, saplings being trampled), things *necessarily* or ‘by nature’ come to be what they essentially ‘are’ through a process of *change*, *growth*, or *development*. They have an inbuilt ‘end’ or ‘purpose’ which is realised as the zenith of their being.

But this notion of organic growth towards a ‘natural’ end-fulfilment was not restricted to the realm of biology. Aristotle himself applied this way of understanding the *nature* of things to (amongst other things) geophysical and historical processes. ‘If the earlier forms of society are natural, so is the state, for it

is the end of them, and the completed nature is the end. For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family'.¹³ Indeed, so compelling did this method of understanding reality seem to many, that 'the realm of final causes stood . . . for the bedrock of intelligibility. The result was that investigation of any realm, living or not, was not considered satisfactory without attributing, rightly or wrongly, purposes to processes and phenomena of every kind, ranging from the fall of stones to the motion of the stars'.¹⁴ For example, under the influence of the master Aristotle, until the seventeenth century AD a stone was thought to fall because, being base material, it longed for the centre of the Earth. This has led at least one writer (Jaki) to attribute the failure of scientific progress in classical and medieval times (and by implication the broader 'progress' resulting *from* successful science) partly to the over-exploitation and mis-application of the biological analogy of organic growth.

In terms of *history* we have already seen an intimation of its application in Aristotle. But we can also go back to Plato and before for the overall 'theory' that the polis (or Greek form of 'city-state') was in fact the culmination of a necessary, 'natural' process of development wherein the first form of social organisation was the family. This ('the seed') 'grew' into kinship groups organised into villages, which in time 'grew', through a 'natural' process of amalgamation and enhanced complexity, into city-states. The 'end' or 'telos' was, then, the city-state, but there is a strong sense in which, given the biological analogy, the city-state is *logically* 'prior' to the family and the village, since they are social organisations which must 'naturally' change and develop towards their 'pre-programmed' end-point.

Yet not only was the biological analogy of purposive growth applied to the emergence of nations and city-states; it can also be detected in how many Greeks conceived of the arts, the practical sciences of agriculture and animal husbandry, and general cultural sophistication, as the natural culmination of a progressive development from more 'barbarous' times. Some, regarding their own civilisation as the zenith (or 'telos') of humankind's development, exhibited a certain complacency, even smugness. The analogy of biological change and growth towards a fulfilled apex contained a powerful message, after all. It told them humankind was *meant* to live in city-states and was *meant* to achieve the culture and life-style enjoyed by (better born) citizens of Hellenic city-states. In short, it was *natural*, because things had 'grown' to be as they were – and insofar as, for example, the *polis* was natural, it was 'right' – and insofar as it was right, it was 'good'. Here we encounter perhaps the origins of the perennial equating of 'rightness' with 'the natural', and of both with 'the good'. The key to this familiar equation, however, is that underlying the notion of 'the natural' is the analogy of *biological growth* with its attendant notions of purposive ('teleological') change.

But history has of course moved on. The polis no longer exists, and markedly different civilisations or 'cultures' succeeded those times. Humankind is not, then, 'meant' to live as it did in, for example, fifth-century BC Athens. Does this mean those Greeks and Romans who saw historical change in this way were wrong? Or were they right to apply the analogy of purposive biological growth to historical

change, and only wrong where they believed their *own* societies represented the *maturity* of human life? Let us not forget the other side to the principle of growth – namely, decay. There is logical room to argue that the fact of succeeding, different civilisations does not necessarily give the lie to those who regarded their own times as the apex of humankind – later times could simply represent gradual decay. And, as we shall see, this is indeed how many in the Renaissance interpreted history, looking back with admiration to the ‘golden age’ of classical civilisation and culture and hoping for a ‘rebirth’ of European societies (a fittingly *biological* metaphor) by following its model. Alternatively, there is logical room to argue the Greeks and Romans were not wrong in their ‘biological’ thinking, but only mistaken in placing their *own* civilisations at the apex of human development. And indeed, using a ‘theory’ not altogether dissociated from the classical pre-occupation with the principle of growth and teleological change, the nineteenth-century philosopher, Hegel, did just that, as we shall see. He proposed the view that humankind had in *his* times reached its ultimate ‘meaning’, ‘nature’, or ‘perfection’ in the socio-economic, political, and religio-philosophical forms of dominant post-revolutionary European countries. Not only this, later in this book we shall encounter the view put forward in our *own* times by Fukuyama (leaning on an interpretation of Hegel), that the collapse of Soviet communism at the turn of the 1990s has *at last* signified ‘the end of history’ in the sense that humankind has reached the zenith of its historical ‘growth’ – namely, a world now dominated by capitalist economies functioning through liberal-democratic political institutions.

Returning to classical times, however, we should observe that the notion of purposive historical change through the analogy of biological growth was one of the most important ways in which the course of history was made not only *intelligible* but also *meaningful*. Underneath the seemingly arbitrary play of immediate historical events, a pattern analogous to genesis, growth, and maturation in the organic world was discerned in the broader history of civilisation. This pattern endowed history with intelligibility. More than this, because the pattern was that of natural biological growth, it endowed history with meaning. History is not aimless. Although such ideas were not, so far as we know, put into a systematically worked out ‘philosophy of history’, the notions of intelligibility and meaning, however ill-formed, introduce ingredients essential to the subsequent emergence of just such ‘speculative’ philosophy.

Decay, and ‘the ages of man’

We have already noted that one phase of the biological principle of ‘growth’ is its nemesis – decay – but have had little to say about it so far. When thinking in broad terms of the history of civilisations, some Greeks and Romans, as we have seen, were more concerned to point to the achievements of their societies than to contemplate the ‘downside’ to the biological analogy (although Polybius did warn of it in the case of Rome’s triumphant rise to prominence).¹⁵ But there were two other strains of thought which *did* concentrate on the notion of decay in their view of history and change.

The first is an ancient view, retold in some detail in Hesiod's myth of the races of men, and appealed to in one form or another by many subsequent Greek and Roman philosophers and poets. This idea was that over a huge time-span there had been a succession of different 'ages of men', and that each age was worse than the previous. Using a metaphor from metallurgy (which has some correspondence in archaeology), the first age was the famous 'golden' one in which men lived simple, peaceful, technologically uncomplicated, moral lives. This race of men disappeared, however, to be succeeded by the age of silver, where men were warlike, quarrelsome, and wicked – 'in no way like the first, in body or mind'.¹⁶ This age was succeeded, in turn, by the age of bronze, in which the obsession with war grew to such a pitch that the race destroyed itself. In Hesiod, this age of bronze is followed by a race of military 'heroes' who, although warlike, were morally superior because of their uprightness and bravery. (This fourth age, 'metallurgically' unspecified, seems to interrupt the overall tale of decline – in Hesiod, it corresponds to the time and people of the Trojan war, and may thus be his way of paying tribute to a widely revered 'national myth' – indeed, those 'heroes' not killed in battle were awarded eternal life on the Isles of the Blest). The fifth, and final, age is the age of iron – their present age in which men's lives were full of oppression, labour, injustice, and other evils.

Thus the myth of 'the golden age', which people would look back to and, thinking cyclically, hoped would reappear following the destruction their own 'iron' age was inevitably headed for. Although not rationally explicated in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (and earlier mythologies), the idea of a Golden Age succeeded by progressive decline echoed on as a strain in the classical mind-set regarding the overall course of the history of mankind, alongside and perhaps contrary to the belief in 'growth'. But we should not look for too much consistency. To the extent that the myth of 'the ages of men' derived from, or was combined with, the notion of cyclical change, there is room in it for a return to 'the Golden Age'. Likewise, where the notion of cyclical change was associated with the biological analogy of 'growth', not only does that analogy decree decay – it also decrees a rebirth from new 'seeds'. In short, we have a set of notions flexible enough to engender apparent or even real inconsistencies, and one needs to see which notions were chosen, and how they were used, in any particular case. The myth of 'the ages of men' was usually interpreted pessimistically as signalling man's inevitable decline from a pristine happiness, simplicity, and morality. Yet, for example, one present-day commentator, Nisbet, abandoned this standard interpretation of the myth, claiming to find in Hesiod's famous version much that optimistically speaks of the *progress* of mankind (that is, without resorting to belief in a cyclical return to the 'golden' age).¹⁷ The *principle of growth* (the biological analogy), on the other hand, was often used optimistically to praise the achievements of mankind and laud the present. Its darker implications – the inevitability of decay following the zenith of maturity – were underplayed. And even so, the analogy could be extended to include the notion of rebirth and reinvigoration from new 'seeds'. As for the third component of this set of notions, the notion of *historical cycles* – it could be used in

conjunction with the biological analogy to give meaning and purpose to human history. On the other hand in classical times there were those who saw historical change as ultimately meaningless precisely because they saw history as one unfolding, endlessly repetitive cycle.

Political cycles

The other strain of thought which utilised the 'decay' dimension of historical change is that found in notions of *constitutional* change. Here the focus narrows from ideas about the course of humankind's overall history to the more immediate historical consideration of changes in forms of government in the recent experience of Greek and Italian city-states. As will be apparent, the notion of cyclical repetition played a strong part in classical *political* thought. So also did the idea of decay, although how far the common-place cyclical notion of constitutional change was associated with the *biological* analogy of growth, decay, and rebirth is more difficult to judge. It could be argued that the dynamics of political change in the 'standard' account were so based on common-sense and observation (157 constitutions, in Aristotle's case) as not to require resort, either deliberate or unwitting, to any analogy taken from another area of study.

Although the way in which political change was often understood has been the object of close scrutiny by political theorists and historians of political thought, whose detailed explorations engender different versions and diverse interpretations, it is sufficient here to abstract its general outlines. Pre-figured in Plato and given a more elaborate treatment in Aristotle's *Politics*, (and appealed to in one form or another by philosophers and political thinkers until beyond the sixteenth century AD) the 'standard' account suggested an inevitable cycle of constitutional change. The dynamic principally responsible for this was the notion of degeneration from an initially sound 'starting point', leading to a change of constitution. 'Starting' at monarchy, this initially healthy form of rule by a king who cares for the common good and judiciously balances the contesting ambitions of different groupings, begins to degenerate as the king becomes corrupted by power or greed, or if his successor lacks the skills, morality, and foresight to manage the complexities of statecraft. A point is reached where the better-off, responsible, influential, and well-born minority of the citizens take control of the city-state, thereby instituting an aristocracy. Initially a healthy form of rule, aristocracy itself begins to degenerate as jealousy and ambition within its ranks cause rival factions manoeuvring for power. The needs of the bulk of the citizens become ignored as corruption grows and public order and safety is diminished. As the aristocracy degenerates (into what Aristotle called 'oligarchy'), a point is reached where the general body of disillusioned, public-spirited citizens throw off the rule of the now selfish minority and themselves take power, thereby instituting a 'democracy' (or 'polity').

But the same principle of 'decay' inexorably begins to operate. What begins as the sensible government of the city-state, where wealth and property are respected and justice is strictly observed, degenerates through envy, ignorance, and selfishness

into such disorder that government collapses. ‘Anarchy’ or mob-rule takes over, threatening the very existence of the city-state by subverting people’s confidence in law and order and inviting foreign aggression. Out of such dangerous chaos emerges a ruthless dictator or tyrant who rescues the city-state by imposing despotic order, careless of the citizens’ rights to life and property. The populace submit to tyranny, however – some willingly, given the alternative; others because they have no choice. Order is restored, but at a terrible price. As affairs settle down, however, the tyranny moderates (‘deteriorates’?). It no longer needs to govern so draconically. It becomes to its advantage to cull the favour and cooperation of its subjects. A point is reached where tyranny either reforms itself into monarchy, or is succeeded by a monarch rather than a tyrant, or may even be overthrown in a revolution, to be replaced by a monarch. Whichever way this stage is achieved – (and the reader will see the manifold possibilities in actual history as to the rich variety of mechanics for *all* of these constitutional changes) – the circle is now complete. We are back at our ‘starting-point’ of monarchy, and the whole cycle begins again.

Apart from the fascination such a ‘theory’ might have had for political theorists and the tantalizing possibilities it offered for historians in their accounts of real events, what concerns us here is the common dynamic underlying this notion of constitutional change – the theme of decay or degeneration (or if ‘degeneration’ is over-suggestive of the biological analogy, ‘deterioration’) from an initially healthy ‘starting-point’. I say ‘starting-point’ because the emphasis is clearly on the process of subsequent *decline* rather than on any process of *growth towards* a healthy form of state. An example of where attention *was* paid to the latter idea is Polybius’ account of the ‘growth’ or development of Rome to its political pre-eminence. But here the ‘standard’ account is precisely set aside, for he argued that Rome was exceptionally well-favoured in its political stability because its institutions had ‘grown’ into a constitution remarkable for being a *mixture* of monarchy, aristocracy, and ‘democracy’. In short, the Rome of the second century BC was exceptional amongst states *because* it was an exception in constitutional development. But this apart, the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ course of political change was construed as a cycle driven by *deterioration* (even when things ‘improve’, as in the ‘deterioration’ of tyranny).

Unchanging ‘human nature’

If we look further into this dynamic of deterioration we find another notion common to the classical ‘understanding’ of historical processes – namely, that human nature never changes. It is *because* it never changes that the political cycle turns inexorably. Although (apart from the beliefs of some Stoics) this does not mean a repetition of the same actual events, it does mean that in similar situations people, both individually and *en masse*, will act in the same way, thereby producing similar outcomes. Quite how this unchanging ‘human nature’ was construed is difficult, if not pointless, to specify but easy enough to imagine. As Aristotle

insisted, men are neither gods nor beasts – we can take him to mean they are neither perfect in their virtues nor bestial in their vices. They have the light of intelligence and the balm of morality, but can be deceived by ignorance and appearances and corrupted by selfishness. Amongst their ‘natural’ attributes are love of family and fatherland, but also a self-love which invites greed, envy, and a capacity for violence. The natural urge for justice can be overwhelmed by the desire for vengeance. Although nature produces some individuals of unblemished character, given enough pressure most of humankind will put their own interests first, blame others for their own shortcomings, and *en masse* will seek scapegoats and be fickle in their political loyalties. Thinking as much of the history of the Roman Republic as of his own times, we shall find Machiavelli (in the sixteenth century AD) exploiting the notion of an unchanging human nature in the construction of his lessons of statecraft, and the picture he paints of it is famously cynical – or realistic – depending on one’s point of view. But he was elaborating upon notions apparent amongst Greek and Roman writers, including many historians – namely, that we have to be realistic about human nature; that it never changes; that acquaintance with it helps to understand history; and that political lessons can be learnt from it.

That the notion that human nature is always the same is contradicted by the myth of ‘the ages of men’, in which it precisely *is* said to have *changed* from a race of ‘golden’ men, should not surprise us. We have outlined a number of different notions underlying attitudes towards the past and the course of human events (both long-term and more immediate) in the classical world. As broad presuppositions and/or tendencies of thought, it would be wrong to expect the kind of overall consistency found in later explicit attempts to construct a ‘philosophy of history’. An exception to this could be the aforesaid Polybius. Many of the notions singled out in this chapter are interwoven into his *Histories*, particularly Book VI, making for instructive reading. Yet he wrote as an historian, not as a philosopher in the ‘technical’ sense of the term, and his employment of these various notions – for example, ‘fortune’, cycles, the biological analogy, and constitutional change – is eclectic rather than logically consistent, as so ably demonstrated by Trompf in the opening two chapters of *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought*. Yet perhaps as much *because* of this eclecticism as despite it, Polybius’ *Histories* is a valuable second century BC source for the mix of presuppositions and more explicit notions which coloured Greek and Roman attitudes towards the past and their understanding of the course of history. These continued after Polybius (doubtless partly *because* of him), variously reflected in poetry, philosophy, political thought, mythology, and the writings of classical historians.

Comments

Conflicting views on the idea of ‘progress’ in the Classical world

Given it was not until around the seventeenth century AD (with the possible exception of Augustine, discussed in the next chapter) that *explicit* ‘speculative

philosophies of history' emerged, which deliberately attempt to find an overall intelligible pattern – even 'purpose' or meaning – in history, what do we make of the less systematic yet suggestive classical ideas treated above? Fate, Fortune, cycles, repetition, decay, degeneration of mankind from a 'golden' age, the growth of culture and civilisation to its 'natural' zenith, an unchanging human nature, hopes for a new 'golden age', an ordained moral order – the reader may be forgiven for thinking this a mixed, even contradictory, bag. Is it right to conceive of the possibility of 'human nature' changing over the course of history (e.g., for either better or worse), or have human-beings always had basically the same nature, (and will they continue to) despite enormous changes in their circumstances? Is 'fate' or 'fortune' simply a device for expressing ignorance of causes and marking exceptional events, or does 'it' actually operate 'underneath' historical development, ultimately flouting all human attempts to fashion their own history? Again, does a fate-governed history render humankind's history meaningless, or reassure us that justice prevails, despite human failings? And perhaps most exasperating of all, should we conceive of history as progressive, as if humankind were like an individual growing from infancy, accumulating skills and learning from experience, all the while maturing towards a perfection of civilisation, knowledge, and culture? Or is human development caught in the grip of cyclical forces whereby, either through a necessity of decay (following the biological analogy) or through some 'flaw' in human nature which causes inevitable deterioration from healthy high-points, it is unrealistic to think in terms of unilinear progress?

It is this latter dichotomy which has particularly captured attention in modern scholarship. In 1920, J. B. Bury's *Idea of Progress* was published. Although not the first to make the claim, he insisted the classical world of the Greeks and Romans had no idea of 'progress'. Mesmerized by a world which was fundamentally unchanging because it was part of an endlessly wheeling cosmos, the classical mind submitted fatalistically to the ultimate pettiness of human affairs and aspirations. Many followed Bury in arguing that this world-view precluded any belief in the idea of human progress (understood as extending cumulatively in a linear direction). Indeed, this is one of the reasons given for the claim that speculative philosophy of history did not begin until the seventeenth century AD, since only then did the belief in human progress appear – the supposition being that a necessary condition for speculative philosophy of history is the holding of such a belief.

However, in 1980 R. A. Nisbet – who had already grappled with classical ideas in an earlier study of Western theories of social development¹⁸ – directly confronted, and attempted to refute, this view of the classical mind in his *History of the Idea of Progress*. His method is to give numerous examples from classical literature where the notion of human progress is apparent, and to reinterpret writings which were in his view wrongly taken to deny its possibility. He does not deny the classical propensity for cyclical thinking, but even so:

the point should not be lost that what eventually is to become decline and fall commences as genesis and progress . . . [and] whatever amount of

cyclical thought there may have been in classical antiquity, there was also a solid and fertile substance of belief in linear progress – from remote past to distant future.¹⁹

He reinforces this by making the following clarion-call for a revision of the view which alleges the absence of any idea of progress in the classical world-view:

[t]he supposition, so widely repeated in even the best of modern and contemporary interpretations of Greek political thought, that time and change were regarded as enemies, that reality lay in the permanent and unchanging, and that everything must be seen as dictated by Fate – that supposition should be laid to rest forever.²⁰

Some few years earlier, however, S. L. Jaki had reached the opposite conclusion in chapter 6 of his *Science and Creation* (1974). Concerned primarily with the history of *scientific* thought, Jaki is also deeply interested in the notion of human progress. Indeed, we might say it is the latter which is his ultimate concern, and that his interest in the history of science stems from his belief that scientific inquiry and progress is the key to human progress in general. His method is similar to Nisbet's insofar as he finds numerous examples from classical writings to demonstrate, in this case, the *lack* of the possibility of any worthwhile idea of human progress. Particularly critical of what he takes to be the dominant strain in classical thinking – the belief in cyclic recurrences – and especially of Aristotle's application of 'the biological cycle' to *physical* processes, which he claims held back progress in scientific thought, Jaki lays much of the blame for the lack of any commitment to human progress in classical thought to a mind-set oppressed by

the inhibitory impact of the belief in cyclic recurrences. The treadmill of perennial returns not only generates pessimism by its spectre of the inevitable decay of man's achievements but it also invites the setting of a complacently low ceiling on attainable goals.²¹

Again, 'preoccupation with the idea of universal cyclic recurrences leads naturally to the weakening of a concept of time which gives to each human action a unique character and unequivocal meaning. More concretely, the meaning of historical succession and what is based on it, the concept of progress, would in such a framework lose their significance and, more specifically, their inspirational value'.²² Such a preoccupation 'hardly encouraged conviction in the rationality of nature, nor did it enhance man's readiness to dominate nature. It did not generate intellectual curiosity or appreciation of experiments aimed at controlling nature. In particular, the belief in eternal cycles imposed on thinking a concept of time which could only be cyclic, therefore fundamentally repetitious and ultimately meaningless'.²³

'Progress' and philosophy of history: special pleading?

The contrast between these two positions could not be clearer. Both are argued passionately and with impressive erudition. Yet it is what the two *agree* on which should particularly interest us. Despite their disagreement on classical thought both authors are intimating that the very idea of (and hence belief in) human progress must be grounded on a uni-directional rather than cyclical history; more, that the project of *philosophy* of history must be grounded on the notion of linearity and progress; and finally, that without such presuppositions history has no *meaning*, and (speculative) philosophy of history is impossible. In short, the disagreement highlights an alleged symbiosis between belief in human progress and the very rationale of speculative philosophy of history. And this may help account for what appears to be an alarming conflict of views. When we look at each book as a whole we find the above intimations brought out as, in fact, strongly held convictions. In Jaki's case (indeed, as his concluding words) he wants to insist on the Christian truth of 'the Creator and . . . a creation once-and-for-all . . . – a firm faith in the only lasting source of rationality and confidence, the Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible'.²⁴

Nisbet advances what appears to be a similarly religiously inspired viewpoint, for after complaining his contemporary Western culture has lost all sense of its historical identity and continuity, and its sense of religion – where '[t]he present becomes a scene composed of the absurd, the irrelevant, the demonic', and where 'the result of ceasing to believe in God is not that one will then believe nothing; it is that one will believe anything'²⁵ – he concludes his book by claiming that in such an atmosphere belief in the idea of progress 'is bound to remain moribund. . . . Only, it seems evident from the historical record, in the context of a true culture in which the core is a deep and wide sense of the *sacred* are we likely to regain the vital conditions of progress itself and of faith in progress – past, present, and future'.²⁶

In short, both authors are engaged in special pleading, and where this happens distortions, exaggerations, forced interpretations, and partial selections of examples, are common dangers. This does not mean these books should be dismissed – on the contrary, they contribute greatly to our knowledge, and we are grateful to revisit them in the following chapters. But it does mean we should take into account the special pleading underlying their construction. Thus, to revert to the marked disagreement between Jaki and Nisbet on the classical world-view, it may be safe to assume that each side has exaggerated its case, and has selected examples less than impartially. The latter is all the more easy to do, of course, when dealing with a period in history so long (even if we limit it to c. 500 BC–c. AD 100) and so rich in diverse schools of thought. I suggest we should rest content with that mixed, even contradictory bag, summarised above as a more likely account of classical speculations on history.