



Article

History as Philosophy: The Search for Meaning

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Abstract: One of the reasons for our interest in the past, or history, is our concern for the future, including the future of our planet and its many and varied inhabitants. It has been suggested that “historians are particularly suited” to exploring and teaching about the future. This suggestion recalls earlier ideas of philosophical approaches to the study of history that sought to find patterns or purpose in history. These approaches are associated with ideas of progress and teleological accounts of history more generally. The underlying philosophical approach to history is a broader search for meaning.

Keywords: history; future; progress; teleology; meaning; deep history

1. Introduction

The idea of the frontier, or frontiers, is an enduring one. It has been in regular use since at least the twelfth century, when it appeared in the epic Castilian (Spanish) poem, *Cantar de Mio Cid* (translated as the Lay of the Cid or the Song of the Cid). The search for new frontiers arises out of humankind’s longing to discover and explore the great unknown, from the darkest depths of the ocean to the deepest reaches of the human psyche. With the closing or exhausting of geographical frontiers here on Earth, more recently, the idea of the frontier has taken on rather more abstract or metaphorical dimensions. As Lucien Febvre observed in his conceptual history, particularly in English, frontier “is used above all in a metaphorical, abstract or philosophical sense.” (Febvre 1973, p. 217). In this connotation, frontier applies to the limits of knowledge or achievement in a wide range of fields: from science and technology to learning and literature (Bowden 2020). The discipline of history is no different. Historians, too, look for new ways to uncover and understand the past.

While not often acknowledged, at least not explicitly, one of the reasons behind our interest in the past is our concern for the future, including the future of our planet and its many and varied inhabitants. This was a subject of discussion at a recent annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), where it was argued, “historians are particularly suited” to teaching the future. In pondering the question, “Is history really future studies in reverse?” the historian David J. Staley suggests, “We can use the historical method—whatever our specialization—to train our attention toward the future.” (Flaherty 2016; Bonneuil 2009; Staley 2002; Staley 2007) Staley and his AHA interlocutors are not alone when it comes to historians thinking about the future; the tenth and final unit of OER’s (open educational resources) Big History Project is also dedicated to considering “The Future.” (OER Project 2022).

The task of actuaries and risk analysts has long required them to engage in a certain degree of guesstimating or speculating about the future. So too, do currency speculators and investors in general. Setting aside the place of fortune-tellers and prophecy on the margins of society, scholars such as the English political economist, Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), have long sought to understand—and in doing so shape—what the future might look like demographically and socially based on current trends (Malthus 1826). Following his retirement as a physicist, Charles Galton Darwin (1887–1962), similarly took up the Malthusian theme in *The Next Million Years*, in which he “set himself the task of



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predicting the future of the human race over the course of the next million years.” (Darwin 1953; Haldane 1926; Haldane 1927). Futurists, then, have been with us longer than we might think, even if the role is relatively new in terms of a job description.

What are we to make of the suggestion that historians might operate as futurists; surely, this goes against the very idea of history, at least since Herodotus and Thucydides, that *historia* concerns the study of the past? R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943) could tell us exactly what is wrong with such a suggestion. In *The Idea of History*, he lamented, “Eschatology is always an intrusive element in history.” He went on to insist that the “historian’s business is to know the past, not to know the future; and whenever historians claim to be able to determine the future in advance of it happening, we may know with certainty that something has gone wrong with their fundamental conception of history.” (Collingwood 1961, p. 54).

Nevertheless, despite his aversion to the eschatological element of history, Collingwood has some sympathy for the kind of philosophical history outlined by Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) in his inaugural lecture (Schiller 1972). Collingwood highlights Schiller’s distinction between the bread-and-butter scholar, “(the professional researcher with his dry-as-dust attitude towards the bare facts which are the dry bones of history, a man whose ambition is to become as narrow a specialist as possible and go on knowing more and more about less and less) and the philosophical historian who takes all history for his province and makes it his business to see the connexions between the facts and detect the large-scale rhythms of the historical process.” (Collingwood 1961, p. 105). Following his former teacher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Schiller pursues what Collingwood describes as an emerging “historical method” based on “a philosophical as opposed to a merely scholarly attitude towards history . . . which enables the historian to get inside the facts” being studied (Collingwood 1961, p. 105). According to Voltaire (1694–1778), having coined the term “philosophy of history,” what these “dry” approaches to the study of history lack is “philosophical spirit.” Voltaire, rather, sought “to draw principles and regularities from the contingencies of successive and simultaneous historical events, in order to render history more comprehensible on the basis of its immanent rationality.” (Adler and Menze 1997, p. 9; Beck 1963, p. xii; Voltaire [1766] 1965). What these philosophical approaches to history are looking for in their study of the past, is meaning. A pursuit that continues in many disciplines, from history and philosophy to physics and palaeoanthropology.

Thus, the Enlightenment gave birth to a new way of thinking about and studying history—an immanent rationality that saw history as universal and imbued with an all-important teleological or philosophical dimension. History with a purpose, with meaning, with an end in mind. Related to this, universal history holds that all peoples can be situated in the narrative of history on a continuum between a start and an end; all destined to travel the same path through history and arrive, ultimately, at modernity (Bowden 2017a, 2017b). As Collingwood put it in his discussion of Kant and Schiller, “universal history, so conceived, is the story of progress from savage beginnings to modern civilization.” (Collingwood 1961, p. 105; Bowden 2009a). The idea of historians thinking deeply, seriously, and systematically about the future, then, is not so new; it has been part of the discipline since at least the Enlightenment era.

2. History as Progress

The idea of progress has two related components. The first is that the human species universally progresses, albeit at different rates and to different degrees, from an original primitive or child-like condition, referred to as savagery, through to barbarism, and culminates at the apex of progress in the status of civilization. The second component of the idea of progress holds that human experience, both individual and collective, is cumulative and future-directed, with the specific objective being the ongoing improvement of the individual, the society in which the individual lives, and the world in which the society must survive.

As explored in depth elsewhere, the idea of progress is closely related to the ideal of civilization (Bowden 2009a, 2009b). For instance, French historian and statesman, Francois Guizot (1787–1874), notes that “the first fact comprised in the word civilization . . . is the fact of progress, of development; it presents at once the idea of a people marching onward, not to change its place, but to change its condition; of a people whose culture is conditioning itself, and ameliorating itself. The idea of progress, of development, appears to me the fundamental idea contained in the word, *civilization*.” (Guizot 1997, p. 16). Beyond Enlightenment Europe, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) outlines precisely such an idea based on his extensive study of American Indians, particularly the Iroquois Confederation. In his influential book of 1877, *Ancient Society*, he insisted, “It can now be asserted upon convincing evidence that savagery preceded barbarism in all tribes of mankind, as barbarism is known to have preceded civilization. The history of the human race is one in source, one in experience, and one in progress.” Consistent with idea of universal history, Morgan was convinced that “these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress. Moreover, that this sequence has been historically true for the entire human family.” (Morgan 1907, pp. v–vi, 3; Morgan 1995).

Back in Europe, Frederick Engels (1820–1895) argued, “Morgan’s great merit lies in having discovered and reconstructed” the “prehistoric foundation of our written history.” Engels saw his own work on the subject as “the fulfillment of a bequest. It was no less a person than Karl Marx who had planned to present the results of Morgan’s researches in connection with the conclusions arrived at by his own . . . materialist investigation of history and thus to make clear their whole significance.” Engels believed “Morgan rediscovered in America . . . the materialist conception of history that had been discovered by Marx forty years ago, and in his comparison of barbarism and civilization was led by this conception to the same conclusions, in the main points, as Marx had arrived at.” (Engels 1948, pp. 5–6).

Often thought of as at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum to Marx (1818–1883) and Engels, eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment thinkers espoused similar thoughts on progress. Perhaps not as well-known as Adam Smith (1723–1790), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) wrote a detailed and highly influential account of civil society and the progress of individuals and society from a state of “rudeness” to a “refined” or “polished” state (Ferguson 1966). For his part, Smith identified four distinct stages to human progress or social development; the first being “nations of hunters, the lowest and rudest state of society,” his example being the “native tribes of North America.” The second stage includes “nations of shepherds, a more advanced state of society,” such as that of the Tartars and the Arabs. Despite their progress, these peoples are said to lack “fixed habitation,” for they move about on the whim of their livestock in the ongoing search for pastures. The third stage of progress is that of agriculture, which “even in its rudest and lowest state, supposes a settlement [and] some sort of fixed habitation,” which in turn necessitates a measure of socio-political organization to manage and defend a settlement. The fourth and most advanced stage of progress is that of commercial society, which through its organization and the creation of surplus has the means to establish a standing army (Smith 1869, pp. 289–96, and Book V in general). Elsewhere, Smith highlights the human urge to improve and progress in general, what he calls the “uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, the principle from which public and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived, is frequently powerful enough to maintain the natural progress of things towards improvement.” (Smith 1869, Book II, Chap. III, p. 141). Just weeks prior to the publication of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, the first volume of Edward Gibbon’s (1737–1794) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* also appeared. In it, he went so far as to claim, “Since the first discovery of the arts, war, commerce, and religious zeal have diffused among the savages of the Old and New World these inestimable gifts: they have been successively propagated they can never be lost.” He concluded by stating, “We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that

every age of the world has increased and still increases the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race.” (Gibbon 1963, p. 530).

Despite such forceful declarations, Peter Gay suggests that French thinkers, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727–1781) and Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794), are the only authors associated with the Enlightenment who “may be said to have had a fully articulated theory of progress.” (Gay 1954, p. 380). Published in 1750, Turgot’s “A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind,” advances what is a kind of cumulative theory of history. Turgot claimed that the succession of humankind “affords from age to age an ever-changing spectacle.” His thinking running along the lines that “all the ages are bound up with one another by a succession of causes and effects which link the present state of the world with all those that have preceded it.” His account of human progress fits neatly within the idea of universal history in that “the human race, considered over the period since its origin, appears to the eye of a philosopher as one vast whole, which itself, like each individual, has its infancy and its advancement.” (Turgot 2011, p. 321). Turgot saw the world and its known inhabitants laid “out before us at one and the same time [with] all the gradations from barbarism to refinement, thereby revealing to us at a single glance, as it were, the records and remains of all the steps taken by the human mind, a reflection of all the stages through which it has passed, and the history of all the ages.” (Turgot 2011, p. 323).

Similarly, Condorcet saw the study of history as having two essential purposes: the first was “to establish the facts of progress,” and the second was “to discover its laws in order to determine the future development of mankind.” (Schapiro 1963, p. 241.). In undertaking this pursuit, Condorcet supposed:

“If man can predict, almost with certainty, those appearances of which he understands the laws; if, even when the laws are unknown to him, experience or the past enables him to foresee, with considerable probability, future appearances; why should we suppose it a chimerical undertaking to delineate, with some degree of truth, the picture of the future destiny of mankind from the results of its history? The only foundation of faith in the natural sciences is the principle, that the general laws, known or unknown, which regulate the phenomena of the universe, are regular and constant; and why should this principle, applicable to the other operations of nature, be less true when applied to the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man? In short, as opinions formed from experience, relative to the same class of objects, are the only rule by which men of soundest understanding are governed in their conduct, why should the philosopher be proscribed from supporting his conjectures upon a similar basis, provided he attribute to them no greater certainty than the number, the consistency, and the accuracy of actual observations shall authorise?” (Caritat 1795, pp. 316–17)

Condorcet the philosopher wanted to explore the passage of history in order to determine the future. As in the natural sciences, he believed “progress is subject to the same general laws, observable in the individual development of our faculties; being the result of that very development considered at once in a great number of individuals united in society.” Furthermore, the “result which every instant presents, depends upon that of the preceding instants, and has an influence on the instants which follow.” History, then, is directly connected to the present, which is in turn connected to the future. For Condorcet’s all-seeing philosophical eye:

“This picture, therefore, is historical; since subjected as it will be to perpetual variations, it is formed by the successive observation of human societies at the different eras through which they have passed. It will accordingly exhibit the order in which the changes have taken place, explain the influence of every past period upon that which follows it, and thus show, by the modifications which the human species has experienced, in its incessant renovation through the immensity of ages, the course which it has pursued, and the steps which it has advanced towards knowledge and happiness. From these observations on what man has heretofore been, and what he is at present, we shall be led to the means of

securing and of accelerating the still further progress, of which, from his nature, we may indulge the hope". (Caritat 1795, pp. 3–4)

Like Turgot and Schiller, Condorcet perceived a chain of unbroken links between the civilized peoples of Europe and the relatively recently encountered native peoples of North America. As with most commentators of progress, the former represented the apex of progress, while the latter are placed at the other end of the continuum. In expounding his theory of progress, Condorcet outlined ten distinct stages or epochs of human development, from (1) Men united in tribes; to (10) Future progress of the human mind.

"It is between this degree of civilization and that in which we still find the savage tribes, that we must place every people whose history has been handed down to us, and who, sometimes making new advancements, sometimes plunging themselves again into ignorance, sometimes floating between the two alternatives or stopping at a certain limit, sometimes totally disappearing from the earth under the sword of conquerors, mixing with those conquerors, or living in slavery; lastly, sometimes receiving knowledge from a more enlightened people, to transmit it to other nations—form an unbroken chain of connection between the earliest periods of history and the age in which we live, between the first people known to us, and the present nations of Europe". (Caritat 1795, pp. 11–22)

In continuing this tradition of seeing history as a story of progress, more recently, E. H. Carr (1892–1982) gave that very title, "History as Progress," to the fifth of his 1961 George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures. He began by noting how, in *Modern Historians and the Study of History*, Sir Maurice Powicke (1879–1963) identified that a "craving for an interpretation of history is so deep-rooted that, unless we have a constructive outlook over the past, we are drawn either to mysticism or cynicism" (Powicke 1955, p. 174). For the mystics, meaning can only be located "outside history, in the realms of theology or eschatology." For cynics, it is more straightforward, "history has no meaning, or a multiplicity of equally valid or invalid meanings, or the meaning which we arbitrarily choose to give it." For Carr, these "are perhaps the two most popular views of history today" (Carr 1965, p. 109). Notably, today for Carr was the volatile 1960s beset by the Cold War, which emerged all too soon after the Second World War, which had in turn followed too closely after the Great Depression and the First World War. The general air of pessimism was perhaps understandable.

Written in 1940 as he attempted to escape persecution at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) wrote in "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

"This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress". (Benjamin 1969, para. ix, pp. 257–58)

Regarded as a thoroughgoing critique of historicism and historical materialism, further on in the essay, Benjamin states, "Historicism rightly culminates in universal history." Yet, "universal history has no theoretical armature" or framework. "Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time" (Benjamin 1969, para. xvii, p. 262).

As the war came to an end, Karl Popper (1902–1994) bemoaned in 1945 that "historicism is a social and political and moral (or, shall I say, immoral) philosophy, and it has been as such most influential since the beginning of our civilization" (Popper 1980, p. 259). He was firmly of the view that history has no "unifying theories; or, rather, the host of trivial universal laws we use are taken for granted; they are practically without interest, and totally unable to bring order into the subject matter." He goes on to argue, "those universal laws which historical explanation uses provide no selective and unifying principle, no

‘point of view’ for history.” (Popper 1980, p. 264–65). In essence, Popper was adamant, “History has no meaning” (Popper 1980, p. 29). Similar to Popper, Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was of the view that, to the “unbiased historian,” the supposedly “historical process,” in actual fact exposes “itself as the meaningless web spun by what men did, produced, and thought, no more than by unmitigated chance—a tale told by an idiot” (Strauss 1965, p. 18).

In discussing those inclined to mysticism, Carr highlights Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) and Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), noting that Toynbee “triumphantly asserted” in the preface of *Civilization on Trial*, how “history passes over into theology” (Carr 1965, p. 109; Toynbee 1948, p. v). Toynbee’s extensive study of the rise and decline of civilizations (Toynbee 1934–1961) was itself influenced by Oswald Spengler’s (1880–1936) *The Decline of the West* (Spengler 1962), which prompted Toynbee to question, “whether my whole inquiry had been disposed of by Spengler before even the questions, not to speak of the answers, had fully taken shape” (Toynbee 1948, p. 9). Toynbee argues in *A Study of History* that the “illusion of progress” as linear is further evidence of humankind’s inclination to over-simplify complex matters, including historical eras, “in a single series end to end, like the sections of a bamboo” (Toynbee 1946, p. 38). A reputed scholar of the Ancient Greeks, Toynbee was more than familiar with the nuances of their own rise and fall cyclical versions of history (Toynbee 1952; Edelstein 1967). Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979) has ably explained what stood in the way of the Greeks in terms of arriving at a more complete idea of progress. A key inhibitor being “their theory of catastrophe, bringing the human race perpetually back to the beginning again. Time, as they thought they experienced it, was cyclic therefore, and utterly pointless to them” (Butterfield 1981). Despite the influence of key figures such as Spengler and Toynbee, in his general discussion of “cyclical theories of history,” Georg Iggers claims that they might actually have “received more attention than they deserve in terms of their influence on modern thought or their value as scientifically defensible systems” (Iggers 1965, p. 7).

In response to the cynics and skeptics, Carr concludes with the claim, “History properly so-called can be written only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in history itself.” In effect, he is arguing that there is more to history than just a series of events, some related others not. For those like Carr, Voltaire, Condorcet, Turgot, and Schiller, with sympathies for the more philosophical view of history, the “belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere.” Our all-important future with a meaning. Furthermore, Carr warned, “society which has lost belief in its capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with its progress in the past” (Carr 1965, p. 132).

3. History as Philosophy

Concerns such as these were central to the work of many thinkers. There is, for instance, a “great tradition of historical thinking, and writing” that stretches “almost unbroken from Herodotus to Gibbon,” that perceives “history as philosophy.” The American historian Henry Steele Commager (1902–1998) argues “Bolingbroke had put it with wonderful succinctness: History is philosophy teaching by examples; and what was this but a restatement of the axiom of Dionysius of Halicarnassus?” He adds, this was “Voltaire’s notion of history, Voltaire who towered above all of his contemporaries, and Montesquieu’s too—the Montesquieu of the *Grandeur and Decadence of Rome*.” So too “it was the Abbé Raynal’s idea of history, and that of Turgot and his tragic disciple Condorcet; of the Swiss, Johannes Müller, who inspired Schiller’s *William Tell* and of the Dane, Ludwig Holberg who wrote *Universal History*, and of the great Gibbon himself, the only one of them who can be called a professional historian.” For all such thinkers, “It was all history as philosophy, not history as fact.” Commager concludes, “what is clear, at once, is that the generation of the Enlightenment, European and American alike, thought of history not as we customarily think of it, as the reconstruction of the past, but as a moral enterprise.” That is, history with purpose and meaning. Commager declares, “Perhaps it was not history at all; let us call it philosophy and be done with it” (Commager 1969, p. 19).

4. The Progress Trap

This sentiment about history and progress is evident in J.B. Bury's (1861–1927) prominent work, *The Idea of Progress*, where he writes, the “idea of human Progress then is a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing—*pedetentim progredientes*—in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely” (Bury 1960, p. 5). Robert Nisbet makes a similar point in his study of the history of the idea of progress, “Simply stated, the idea of progress holds that mankind has advanced in the past—from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity—is now advancing, and will continue to advance, through the foreseeable future” (Nisbet 1980, pp. 4–5). Bury believes that the idea of progress is taken “so much for granted, we are so conscious of constantly progressing in knowledge, arts, organising capacity, utilities of all sorts, that it is easy to look upon Progress as an aim.” An aim that “only depends on our own efforts and goodwill to achieve” (Bury 1960, pp. 1–2) Nisbet similarly contends that the idea of progress has become so entrenched in our thinking that it constitutes something of a “universal religion” (Nisbet 1980, p. 7). He suggests, “No single idea has been more important than . . . the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years.” Nisbet goes on to argue that while important foundational concepts like equality, justice, and liberty might be at the forefront of collective consciousness, it “must be stressed: throughout most of Western history, the substratum of even these ideas has been a philosophy of history that lends past, present, and future to their importance” (Nisbet 1980, p. 4).

In looking back on the idea of progress, Nannerl Keohane outlines that it was “first preached during the Enlightenment” and went on and “became an article of faith in the nineteenth century and remained the dominant doctrine in Western culture until the middle of the twentieth century” (Keohane 1982, p. 21). In a similar line of argument, Alain de Benoist highlights that the “idea of progress seems one of the theoretical presuppositions of modernity. One can even regard it, not without reason, as the real ‘religion of Western civilization’.” (de Benoist 2008, p. 7).

While he does not necessarily believe it to be a good thing, given that his book *A Short History of Progress* is described as a vision of “impending doom,” even Ronald Wright acknowledges, “despite certain events of the twentieth century, most people in the Western cultural tradition still believe in the Victorian ideal of progress” (Wright 2004, p. 3). That said, Wright is far more “glass is half empty” in his perspective on progress, insisting that “many of the great ruins that grace the deserts and jungles of the earth are monuments to progress traps, the headstones of civilization which fell victim to their own success. In the fates of such societies—once mighty, complex, and brilliant—lie the most instructive lessons for our own. Their ruins are shipwrecks that mark the shoals of progress.” As he puts it, “they are the fallen airliners whose black boxes can tell us what went wrong” (Wright 2004, p. 8; Aron 1968). In his book, Wright describes a number of “progress traps” that humankind keeps falling into, making the same mistakes over and over again. The first trap he highlights is the “perfection of hunting, which ended the Old Stone Age—and how our escape from that trap by the invention of farming led to our greatest experiment: worldwide civilization.” While some suggest that modern capitalist societies have shown themselves to be remarkably resilient in adapting to various crises or threats, Wright argues that we “have to ask ourselves this urgent question: Could civilization itself be another and much greater trap?” (Wright 2004, pp. 31–32).

Ultimately, Wright believes that “things are moving so fast that inaction itself is one of the biggest mistakes. The 10,000-year experiment of the settled life will stand or fall by what we do, and don’t do, now.” He further believes that the “reform that is needed is not anti-capitalist, anti-American, or even deep environmentalist; it is simply the transition from short-term to long-term thinking” (Wright 2004, p. 131; Cochrane and Harpending 2009; Diamond 2005; Bjornerud 2018).

5. Deep Time, Big History

The embrace of different scales of time is one that began many years ago for some and might also be thought of as another new frontier in history—that of deep time and Big History. Coined by John McPhee, the term “deep time,” describes geologic processes sketched in his 1981 book, *Basin and Range*. McPhee made the point that “numbers do not seem to work well with regard to deep time. Any number above a couple of thousand years—fifty thousand, fifty million—will with nearly equal effect awe the imagination to the point of paralysis” (McPhee 1981, p. 29). To demonstrate his point metaphorically, he asks us to “consider the earth’s history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the king’s nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. One stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases human history.”

McPhee’s discussion of geology and deep time owes much to the Scotsman, James Hutton (1726–1797), referred to by many as the father of geology, and by at least one as the “man who found time.” At two meetings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in March and April 1785, Hutton revealed his “Theory of the Earth,” something he had been working on for a considerable time. Early on, he explains that a key “object is to know the time which had elapsed since the foundation of the present continent had been laid at the bottom of the ocean, to the present moment in which we speculate on these operations” (Hutton 1788; Repcheck 2009). By the end of the second lecture, Hutton concludes:

“We have now got to the end of our reasoning; we have no data further to conclude immediately from that which actually is: But we have got enough; we have the satisfaction to find, that in nature there is wisdom, system, and consistency. For having, in the natural history of this earth, seen a succession of worlds, we may from this conclude that there is a system in nature; in like manner as, from seeing revolutions of the planets, it is concluded, that there is a system by which they are intended to continue those revolutions. But if the succession of worlds is established in the system of nature, it is in vain to look for any thing higher in the origin of the earth. The result, therefore, of our present enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning—no prospect of an end”. (Hutton 1788, p. 304)

Just as McPhee outlined, the dimension of deep time is difficult for many of us to comprehend with any real sense of proportionality. We have even had to create new acronyms to accommodate such a grand scale: MYA for millions of years ago and BP for before the present, whereby the present is generally recognised as 1 January 1950, the eve of radiocarbon dating. Robert Macfarlane suggests that the identification of eons, which are divided into eras, which are in turn divided into periods, which are in turn divided into epochs, which are in turn divided into ages, demonstrates the “power of language,” perhaps even more powerful than the geological forces they describe. Thus, the “the geological past, and hundreds of millions of years”—deep time—were rather effortlessly shoehorned into a handful of letters and single-word names (Macfarlane 2003, p. 53).

The great expanse of time also underpins the emerging field of Big History. Big History seeks to place the history of humankind, and the Earth on which we live, in the wider context of our known universe. Drawing on a wide range of fields and disciplines, including archaeology, geology, anthropology, cosmology, chemistry, and biology, among others, Big History’s approach to history ranges from the Big Bang to the present, a period of approximately 13.8 billion years (Christian 2005; Brown 2007; Christian et al. 2013; Christian 2018). In terms of time scales, it does not get much bigger. Big History is no less ambitious in its search for meaning, “Big History examines our past, explains our present, and imagines our future. It’s a story about us” (Big History Project 2022). Discussions of the future, and “what happens next,” are just as important to Big History as the history. Despite the scale and ambition of the Big History project, while it might not be explicit, the idea of progress, or increasing complexity, and the teleological dimension, remain.

Some scholars working on similar time scales are far more explicit. Robert Wright, for instance, argues, the “more closely we examine the drift of biological evolution and, especially, the drift of human history, the more there seems to be a point to it all.” In seeking to explain “the arrow of the history of life, from the primordial soup to the World Wide

Web”, he insists, “Globalization . . . has been in the cards not just since the invention of the telegraph or the steamship, or even the written word or the wheel, but since the invention of life” (Wright 2001, pp. 3, 7).

6. Conclusions

The Scottish philosopher, John Stuart Mackenzie (1860–1935), notes in his discussion of the idea of progress, “It is the common characteristic of human life to look forward.” Given that some of those humans are historians, it is not surprising that some are inclined to look to the future. Mackenzie goes on to note, “sometimes we tend to go farther, and to think of progress not merely as a characteristic of this ‘wonderful [nineteenth] century,’ but as a law of the universe, as an aspect of the great cosmic process, showing itself in the development of animal species as well as in the growth of human institutions, extending downward also to the life of plants, and perhaps even to be seen in the structure of rocks and mountains and islands and continents, and in the formation of suns and worlds.” (Mackenzie 1899, p. 195). Quite a few historians, philosopher-historians and Big Historians alike, are inclined to believe they have observed such laws at work.

Perhaps those who find laws of progress and meaning in history, are right. On the other hand, it might be that philosophical historians, like Schiller and his kind, find the meaning they are looking for as they sift the evidence working backwards from present to past. As Schiller explains, whereas the “real series of events descends from the origin of things to their most recent state,” the thinking of the philosophical “historian moves in the opposite way from the most recent state of the world up to the origin of things.” The historian imbued with philosophical spirit is one who “imports a rational purpose into the course of the world, and a teleological principle into world-history” (Schiller 1972, pp. 331–32).

Then again, perhaps some of the things we take as gospel when it comes to ideas of history and progress are open to entirely new interpretations. This is what anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow have done in their *New History of Humanity* as they do their own sifting through the historical record and speculate, in what they call “a game almost,” on some very different conclusions (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). In place of historically inevitable stages of development, they suggest our prehistoric ancestors made deliberate choices about the ways they chose to live and organize themselves. In another challenge to conventional wisdom, in the penultimate chapter they discuss the idea of “Indigenous critique,” suggesting that during encounters between Europeans and Native American intellectuals in the New World, the latter made it clear what they thought was fundamentally wrong with European society. It was this, they argue, that ultimately sparked in Europe what would become known as the Enlightenment, with its ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* coupled with rationalism and the scientific method. Moreover, Graeber and Wengrow propose that Western infatuation with material progress arose as a response to Indigenous critique.

This is why looking for meaning, whether in history, the present, or the future, is tricky. What constitutes meaning? Wealth? Happiness? Why is meaning found in the material? Meaning for whom? Why equate riches, or wealth, with moral superiority? Why consider commercial society and boundless riches the final stage of progress? Perhaps these new frontiers in history, including those looking to the future, are not actually new. The search for meaning in history is a long-standing and ongoing enterprise. Perhaps the meaning is in the seeking, not the finding. When we find what we are looking for, we usually stop looking, and that goes against the very idea of historical inquiry.

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