

# The End of the Western Civilization?

The Intellectual Journey  
of Humanity to Adulthood

*On the ontogenesis of the Western thought from  
the Axial Age to Postmodernism ... and beyond...*

by

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Series in World History



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# Instead of Introduction

The progression of Western Civilization, from the Classic Greek to the modern period, can be paralleled by the gradual transitions of human beings towards adulthood. From this perspective, the ancient Greek era resembles the toddler years of humanity, the religious period that followed until the Renaissance can be seen as our childhood, and the period spanning from the Enlightenment until almost the end of the twentieth century can be considered as our teenage years. According to this view, postmodernism can be paralleled by extreme relativism and the abandonment of reality that is seen, mostly in some teenagers. The last few decades signify our entrance to adulthood.

The same similarity is not applied only to the intellectual transformations of humanity but also to the physical changes that occurred when the history of the human species unfolded. Like children, that until adulthood progressively decrease their dependency on others, mankind also gradually managed to reduce its dependency on the natural environment, by altering it. Today, people engage actively and invest in their sustainability and the pursuit of norms that will warrant their perseverance and their existence over time. We are now attempting quite successfully, or at least planning in doing so, to manage resources, combat diseases, and position ourselves within our environment in a manner that will not be compromised in the future. Humanity started recently behaving like the adult that tries to do what is best, with what is available. This can be an optimistic view as long as we treat adulthood as the point of maturity and attribute a positive charge to the term. In the long run, however, it is closer to aging and as such, it is associated with various aging-associated pathologies that compromise the future. This is exactly the great challenge, of how we can prolong and enrich our adulthood but at the same time delay, or even avert our aging. Unless there are other options available that we should consider.

The aim of this book is to provide an admittedly simplified outline that demonstrates the similarity between the ontogeny of man and the intellectual development of humanity, that led to our current stage. It does neither aim to explain history offering purposes, determinism in processes, and unavoidable outcomes, nor to unveil hidden causes and drivers. It just aspires to emphasize the predominant aspects of our intellectual interrogation over time, that shaped our mindsets and influenced our ongoing path. The focus is on the Western tradition, especially from the American perspective that seems to dominate the world today and that provides an archetype that appeals to other versions of the West or the Westernizing world.

I admit that the work is presented in a rather simplistic way ignoring the complexity of the phenomena that lead to historical outcomes and intellectual developments. Furthermore, it is presented in a manner that may wrongly imply the *de novo* development of Western thought that proceeded independently and in seclusion from others. When for example the City States of Ancient Greece are discussed, it is not noted that such modes of organization, with primitive democratic principles, have already been practiced in Mesopotamia. Also, when the intellectual frame of Medieval Europe is outlined, the impact of the Islamic world is not mentioned. With these limitations acknowledged, the linearity of Western thought is arguably revealed and as such should be studied.

These ideas developed during the course on Confucius and Aristotle at the South Carolina Honors College. I am grateful to all students for our discussions, especially Wyatt Carhart, Collin Ladue, Evelyn Leary, Eric Nutz, Rechal Patel, Robbie Pocora, Mike Ponessa, Sydney Reichardt, Saanvi Somani, Chase Teal, and Gianna Torinese, to name some of them.

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# Chapter 1

## The Ontogeny of the Western Civilization

### Civilizations

Studying how civilizations were established, what constitutes their main characteristics, and ultimately what caused their collapses can provide a sense of self-awareness and be quite informative for our future. One avenue to do this is to compare different civilizations to identify similarities and differences, in an attempt to reveal the main themes that underscore their life histories. Alternatively, we can view civilizations as living beings that are born, grow, mature, and eventually die. This way we may be able to identify our intellectual age, predict our health status, and eventually, forecast our future.

Among the different Civilizations that ever appeared, the work that follows focuses on Western Civilization for various reasons. First and more importantly because of its direct relevance to us, as it is the one that we live in. Related to this is the bias we inherently possess to study it from an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic perspective, rendering eventually the whole endeavor an exercise of self-examination. Finally, due to the global scale it acquires, it renders likely the fact that upon its death, ostensibly subsequent civilizations will be related to the Western Civilization more than others related to different civilizations in the past. This is because of its global scale, the flow of information, and the proactive measures we take to sustain it. For these reasons, the ontogenetical scheme that is proposed here may be relevant to other civilizations as well, or not. An intriguing possibility would be that not all civilizations die of aging but from acute diseases before they reach their maturation. In some instances, they may be absorbed by others, and eventually, this becomes a matter of terminology to determine which one is the primary and which one was lost, died, or disintegrate. It is also semantics to determine the degree of the contribution that justifies a change in the essence of a civilization. For example, it is plausible that such an ongoing process happens now in China. Chinese Civilization is contemporary to Western Civilization at its birth, and after adopting a more capitalistic organization in the last decades<sup>1</sup> it emerges as a Confucian version

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<sup>1</sup> The demand in China for Westernization had started after the Opium Wars in the early nineteenth century, when China was massively defeated by the West. The demand was

of capitalism. This is seen, even more explicitly now in Japan. Ongoing trends suggest that East and West converge, especially within the current global setting, and in due time they may become one. Although the current trend is for the “Americanization” of the Eastern capitalistic economies, and indeed culture, it also remains plausible that due to financial and other geopolitical reasons we may witness the Easternization of Western capitalism in the future.<sup>2</sup> Even in that case, the discussion that follows will remain applicable as to the description of the signs of adulthood and aging. The only difference would be that the period of youth would be different! It would be hard though to think that continuity will not be apparent. In any case, it is not of significance to dispute these, and from our current perspective, we will focus only on the West.

The civilization we currently live in, is what has been referred to as the Western civilization and is the only, so far at least, civilization that is in the course of dominating the whole world. “Westernization” in culture, as well as in all expressions of human creativity, such as in social and intellectual life, appears as a dominant trend that becomes increasingly pertinent to all humanity. This has been done sometimes by force and at other times by means of financial domination (Diamond 2005; Ferguson 2012; Cline 2014).<sup>3</sup> Due to its increased dominance, stability, flexibility, and overall ability to adjust and absorb changes, the Western civilization, and especially the liberal societies that are associated with it, were also thought to provide the end to history, as we saw it unfolding in the past (Fukuyama 1992). Of course, conclusive processes may mean both the attainment of an apex and disintegration. Frequently this is a matter of perspective, and this work will attempt to show, these two can be combined.

We can think of our Western Civilization as being a child, that was born a few thousand years ago and since then it is growing up.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to define a specific starting point for Western civilization since humans, all over the world and much earlier than the Greeks, were always concerned about their existence, their role in the world, and their purpose. They were establishing coherent cultures and societies that were organized along themes, that were more

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also fueled (along with concomitant isolationism) after the also its subsequent defeat by the already Westernized Japan, soon after that.

<sup>2</sup> The so-called Chinese “threat” is viable in the collective psyche of the Americans, while geopolitical events such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war may strengthen even more the role of China in the global domain. This may result in an even more potent intrusion of Eastern characteristics towards the West in due time.

<sup>3</sup> The elimination of Mesoamerican cultures was done by force, by the Europeans. Today, Western Civilization acquires its global appeal, largely because of financial means.

<sup>4</sup> This should be treated as a poetic metaphor instead of a rigid doctrine in the biological sense, similar to the ideas of Goethe (Wald et al. 2014).

similar than they were different, both between them and at different times. Furthermore, almost none of the different civilizations emerged out of “thin air,” without people carrying already some information, some already shaped mindsets, from their ancestors that can be potentially traced back, to previous times. We will never know this with accuracy, and we will only be able to speculate. What we can tell for sure though, is that definitions and labels are helpful in making us grasp concepts, but they don’t always reflect accurately the reality.

What however we can say with some confidence is that what we describe as philosophy, in the same terms that we can do today started with the Greeks around the seventh and sixth century BCE. Before or at the same time as them, in other regions of the world, people were answering their questions regarding their existence, by engaging divine entities, their Gods, who were the ones that were offering them purpose, defined their ethics, prescribed the ways their societies were organized, conveyed power to their rulers, and even explained and rationalized their death. Some other times the divine was perceived more like nature itself, however, almost always the supernatural was inherently integrated into people’s thinking.

The involvement of Gods, however, in the cosmology of people, poses a big problem. Gods are perfect, and as such, they don’t have to change, and they indeed do not do so. And it is not only them that do not change but also what they instruct to people, what they prescribe. Therefore, the cultures that are defined in a high relationship by their Gods and their doctrines, can be rather static and immobile. Although progress and change can be recorded in these histories, basic perceptions remained the same. Society was changing over time with regard to its organization, but fundamental ideas and the whole imagery did not. This is likely the reason that besides our limited knowledge, when we discuss for example the civilizations of Egypt or Mesopotamia, despite that their duration of more than a few thousand years, surpassed the age of our current civilization of the West, we can concentrate their major features in a few short paragraphs. We can describe for example the power of the Pharaohs, the structure of the society in ancient Egypt, or the role of the priests, without referring to a specific period. No dramatic changes had occurred over time in the intellectual standpoints of the corresponding people, besides the historical sequence of events, as we have recorded them.<sup>5</sup> Basic perceptions remained the same, as well as the system of values and ideals, the norms, that drove these societies forward. This, by no means, implies that their societies did not evolve

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<sup>5</sup> These statements do not attempt to diminish the wealth of Egyptian or Mesoamerican culture. Just to indicate that intellectually, something analogous to what have occurred in the West with philosophy and associated traditions did not occur.

or that they did not reach astonishing complexity and efficiency accommodating people that lived happy and prosperous lives. On the contrary. It just focuses on the development of the collective intellect and how, and to which extent, it developed over time.

The uniqueness of the Western civilization, besides its direct relevance to us at present, is that at an equivalent time-period, had produced unequivocal changes in the ways people live and think. This at least holds true as our basic perception when we assess ourselves as Westerners. We cannot describe the West, and its associated predominant ideals and thought systems, unless we specify a specific time point such as 200, 700, or 1900. It is like referring to different worlds when we compare different time periods in the West. As we move forward, changes become even more dramatic. Life in 1200 and 1250 was much more similar than between 1900 and 1950. And most likely, it will be much more different between 2200 and 2250. Equally different are the ways that people are thinking.

What signifies the Western civilization is that starting with the Greeks, people began to develop their cosmology independently of their gods. They did not feel that constantly, they needed to merge their theological questions with those that related to their questions about their life. The divine and the earthy worlds were becoming distinct and separate, and people were developing a sense of autonomy according to which they were feeling responsible, and on their own power, in how they lived. This provided intellectual flexibility, the opportunity for controversy, and delivered dialectical thinking. This may also be relevant to the higher flexibility offered by Christianity or had to be tolerated by Christianity in order to survive, as compared to the other religions, that predominated the Western world since a few hundred years after the Greek period. These together resulted in what we perceive now as progress. It underscores the unidirectional change in the conditions that modified the lives of people and arguably improved them.

In each of its stages, Western Civilization and thinking, were characterized by major themes that contributed to its identity and were used by historians to designate specific periods. In analogy to a child that goes through different stages until adulthood, which are physical, behavioral, and intellectual, and are described as the toddler years, childhood, teenage years and then adulthood, also human civilization passed through different stages. At the philosophical level, these stages had to do with the types of questions asked, the answers provided and the approach to do so, and how humans were seeing themselves in the context of the whole Universe. It also had to do with the definition of morality and the value system that was worthy of pursuing. It was also relevant to the way that each one organized his or her life in relation to the others, in society. And this moves on to every aspect of human life. At the physical level, these changes could be projected to the vulnerability that mankind exhibited

against various, primarily extrinsic, factors and to its dependency on the resources that each and every period were available to support life.

According to this outline, it seems that the human Civilization only now enters its adulthood after passing through the naivety of its earlier years, then its attempts to integrate itself into a grander scheme, and finally the turbulence and then the stability of its most recent period. As adults now, people must take care of their homes, plan for their future, and make sure that they will be able to sustain themselves in the coming years. In addition, they feel increased responsibility against other people as well, which makes it a mission for them to assist them in reaching their adulthood. To do all that, they need to offset the romanticism and idealism of the past years. In their most recent past, people were feeling capable of altering the course of history to their desires. The search for Utopias was constant, from the times of the Greeks to our recent past in which such aspirations have been abandoned. Today people feel that available options are more restricted, and realism must predominate. In the meanwhile, as responsible adults, they are trying to avoid mistakes, convey to others the wisdom of their adulthood, and are moving forward according to consistent and well-thought plans. Nevertheless, accidents do happen, unpredictable threats emerge, and more importantly, aging is approaching.

### **The Ontogeny of our Intellectual History: An Outline**

Below, an outline is provided of the main theme that will be discussed subsequently. This is done to offer a chronological perspective and assist the reader in putting into context the different periods that will be discussed. Some discussion of analogous historical schemes suggesting the cyclicity of history or its deterministic nature will be done, along with an attempt to validate this scheme in another (Eastern) Civilization.

*Axial Age and the toddlers-The time of Naivety.* The origin of Western thought traces back its roots to the Classic Greek period (Evans 2018; Kenny 2010; Russell 1967), an Age that worldwide is referred to as the Axial Age and provided philosophers that shaped mankind, such as Confucius in China and Buddha in India (Jaspers 1948). Starting at the Axial Age, that in the West culminated in the onset and the development of Ancient Greek Philosophy and Civilization, human beings started recognizing themselves as being intellectually distinct and independent entities within the world and set a frame that aims to provide answers to fundamental questions regarding their existence, independently of theology. It is also the period at which people started being consistently preoccupied with intellectual activities that do not derive from and do not attempt to address, directly or indirectly, their mere biological needs. Irrespectively of their exact motivations and mindsets, these specific questions that were being asked, and the precise direction they acquired as societies, all together contributed to the development of a sense that in the Universe, the position of

the people is distinct and unique. They were not the same, or equivalent, with everything else they were observing, and they needed to develop designated thought lines to address and justify their uniqueness. During this period, they started realizing that their sense of wellbeing is associated with their understanding of the world. To do so, they needed to actively engage in intellectual endeavors that should not aim simply to the satisfaction of what they needed to survive. It is the time at which the strong sense of intellectual identity emerges that established the foundation for the future of mankind, in a manner that linearity, until the present day, is widely recognized.<sup>6</sup>

This period of mankind's history is highly similar to the toddler years in humans, when boys and girls are developing a sense of their individual identity and are able to start projecting themselves in the future, as grown-ups. At this period, they differentiate from all other mammals, and progressively, rationale emerges and substitutes instinct. They become curious and start asking questions on matters that extend beyond their mere existence and well-being. Just observing the world is not enough, and the first primitive "why" questions appear. They also understand that they are snapshots of an ongoing process. They are increasingly involved in various activities as they play, they find joy in entertaining themselves, and engage in actions that do not address only what they need to sustain them. Communication with others becomes increasingly significant and offers purpose as an activity, beyond the mere exchange of information. Also, they accept their dependency on others. Caretakers, such as their parents, represent a natural component of their universe, and they recognize the hierarchical structure of the world they live in.

*Religious period and childhood: Comprehending hierarchies.* During this period, which for the Western world spans roughly between 400-500 CE to Renaissance, intellectual activity gradually is preoccupied with interrogations that are primarily relevant to religious matters (Evans 1993). People are deeply comprehending hierarchies and accept their position within them. Such theological matters always remain central in this period, and intellectual activity aims to position mankind in relation to theological questions. Another important feature of this period is that the order of the Universe, as expressed and reflected in all facets of human creativity, is not being drastically questioned, while theology remains crucial. It is the period at which the Church dominates intellectual life, sets the frames, and provides the foundation for intellectual activity, and restricts inquisition around theology. Societies are highly structured, and people's destiny is largely predetermined by where they

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<sup>6</sup>This is not a notion that should be considered as a given. As it will be discussed in the next chapter Spengler (1928) considered ancient Greek and present Western Civilizations as distinct and separate, having unique themes overarching the collective psyche.

were born. The notion that things can operate otherwise is suppressed, or at least it is well-hidden.

In human development, this can be seen as equivalent to the childhood period at which children understand that they have to adhere to societal and family norms and that even in the cases that they do not do so, and engage in punishable activities, it is not because of some type of deep rationalization of their actions but rather due to their attraction to provocation, their mistake-prone immaturity, or the fact that their desires may supersede the fear of punishment. Nevertheless, the frame in which they must operate within is not being questioned, and drastic and consistent derailment from what is anticipated from them is not happening in a manner that is thoughtful, consistent, and end oriented. The social environment, which includes primarily family and school, is rigid and its hierarchical structure is not questionable.

*Enlightenment and the teenage years: The time of romanticism.*<sup>7</sup> At this period, Western thought starts to rationalize human existence and the world (Bristow 2017; Gottlieb 2016; Cassirer 1956). Different frames are set by the different individual philosophers and lines of thought, and each of them attempts to explain how the world operates, and why. Furthermore, it attempts to identify purpose and to propose if and how life can be lived better. Occasionally, drastic changes from what people live now are also proposed. Disciplines, in the sense of intellectual directions, emerge, and intellectual heterogeneity becomes increasingly common and is appreciated. Technological and scientific progress are intensified, providing the lay ground for the industrial revolution, and setting the firm basis for our current course. The naivety of the past starts to be abandoned and is replaced by romanticism, while the quest for understanding the world becomes more genuine and deeper, detached from dogmatic perceptions. That norms may be arbitrarily selected but should exist, is recognized, and this is appreciated, yet this, as a concept is highly centered to human existence and is used to justify people's well-being. The past is also criticized, and its continuity is appreciated.

This standpoint reminds the teenage years of our adolescence during which children start seeing themselves as adults. They feel that they are highly distinct from their past selves, they do recognize the authority of the rulers and the power of their rules imposed on them, but they are able to question them and irrespectively of their specific stance, they can provide criticism and suggest alternatives. During this period, they also recognize the variety of different characters and personalities among them but are also able to integrate them into their activities. They also start seeing the world with their own eyes. This is

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<sup>7</sup> The term is used in its contemporary meaning, not to be confused with the formal period of Romanticism that peaked at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

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