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The Emergence Stage of the Theory of Historical Progress

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Abstract: The concept of progress, as one of the eternal themes of humanity, represents the aspiration for a future of happiness. Its fundamental connotations were ultimately established in the modern West. However, the emergence of the concept of progress was not an overnight development; rather, it underwent a long process of evolution, with its ideological origins traceable at least to ancient Greece. Throughout the ages, cyclical views of history and notions of divine providence successively dominated thought, closely tied to changes in the concept of time. This paper will trace the intellectual shifts in the theory of historical progress before the Renaissance, exploring the ideological foundations and historical context that gave rise to the concept of progress.

Keywords: Concept of progress; Cyclical theory; Notion of divine providence; Linear time

Throughout history, numerous Western thinkers have examined the patterns of human historical development and proposed both cyclical and linear views of history. Cyclical models were prevalent in ancient times, while linear models gradually gained widespread acceptance after the Middle Ages. The latter primarily includes the Christian notion of divine providence and the modern concept of progress. Of course, this does not mean that a single period is defined by only one viewpoint; rather, the cyclical view dominated ancient times, the notion of divine providence prevailed in the Middle Ages, and the concept of progress became predominant in modern times. Researchers' comprehensive understanding of the origins and evolution of historical perspectives aids in better grasping the influence and significance of the theory of historical progress.

1. The Concept of Progress and the Philosophy of History

Ideas largely determine human thoughts and actions, thereby shaping entire civilizations. Concepts such as freedom, equality, and destiny embody certain human aspirations and goals, which are realized over long periods or specific stages within society. The emergence and transformation of any concept require a theoretical framework; without such a framework, the establishment of a concept is unimaginable. Although different thinkers have diverse opinions on the concept of progress, they unanimously place it within the domain of the philosophy of history. This is because, unlike biological evolution or the cosmic development of stars, which can be examined and verified in the empirical world and fall under the realm of natural science, the concept of progress is a topic of philosophical inquiry.

The discussion of history and progress has accompanied human history throughout its entirety. However, the scientific form of the philosophy of history and the concept of progress only emerged in modern times. The theories of Voltaire and Vico are considered the beginnings of the secularization of the philosophy of history, which was soon followed by the establishment of the concept of progress. "In the 1770s and 1780s, the concept of progress began to become a prevalent part of belief. Some people understood it in a deterministic way, believing that humanity would move forward in an ideal direction regardless of their actions or inactions. Others believed that the future largely depended on our conscious efforts, and that nothing in the nature of things would hinder the prospect of steady and unlimited development. Most people did not explore such questions in doctrines with great curiosity but accepted it in a vague sense as a comforting supplement to their beliefs. However, it became an integral part of the thinking of educated individuals"^{[2][42]}. The establishment of the concept of progress is inextricably linked to the development of the philosophy of history. Without the framework provided by the philosophy of history, the concept of progress would struggle to find its foundation, much like a rootless tree.

After understanding the close relationship between philosophy of history and the concept of progress, it is necessary to clarify the positioning of the idea of progress within the framework of modern historiographical classifications, which broadly include speculative philosophy of history, analytical philosophy of history, and narrative philosophy of history. Speculative philosophy of history aims to uncover patterns or meanings in history that go beyond the typical perspective of historians; it can be seen as the metaphysics of history, exemplified by modern philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Toynbee. Analytical philosophy of history focuses on clarifying the nature of historical inquiry itself, gradually becoming the mainstream in Western historiography after the publication of Walsch's "Introduction to the Philosophy of His-

tory” following World War II. More recently, Hayden White’s “Metahistory” in 1973 further triggered a narrative turn (linguistic turn) in the philosophy of history, giving rise to narrative philosophy of history. In the early stages of historiography, there was a greater desire to elucidate the rationality hidden beneath historical events. When the concept of progress is viewed as an objective law to be sought and understood, it clearly falls within the realm of speculative philosophy of history, which deliberates upon historical facts.

2. Emergence of the Idea of Progress

It is generally accepted in academic circles that cyclic theories predominated in ancient times, with most Greeks believing in the closed-loop nature of societal history, where events repeated endlessly. On one hand, Greek natural philosophy, rooted in observations of natural phenomena like sunrise, sunset, and seasonal changes, readily fostered a primitive cyclical worldview. On the other hand, Pythagoras' theory of reincarnation ("soul transmigration") reinforced the notion that identical events could recur over time. Additionally, belief in a once-existed "Golden Age" in history led some to perceive human civilization as steadily regressing. Nevertheless, scholars such as Niebuhr and Grote argue that elements of a progressive outlook emerged in ancient Greece, albeit in a rudimentary form characterized by elemental growth without significant value increment. The acute insights of the Greeks enabled them to perceive the gradual evolution of human civilization from a primitive state to the civilized era. Anaximander proposed a universal generative process wherein life emerged from the drying of the sun's moisture, suggesting human beings originated from other animals, namely fish.^[3] More significantly, certain linear elements can be discerned in ancient Greek thought. Hesiod divided human society into consecutive ages—Golden, Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron—providing a longitudinal reflection on human practices, imbuing history with a sense of regression. Similarly, Plato applied theories of decline in his political studies, tracing the evolution from a primordial world to subsequent stages of aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and despotism, illustrating regressions in societal structures.

Seneca posited that time and human wisdom would eventually clarify presently unclear issues; however, this did not imply that knowledge advancement would bring any improvement to the world, as human life on Earth would face periodic destruction.

The Atomists, such as Epicurus, went further by entirely refuting the theories of a supposed "Golden Age" and regression. Nevertheless, they remained convinced that the universe would one day be destroyed amidst ruins.

Despite acknowledging a certain relative progress among these thinkers, scholars widely agree that the Greeks never fully embraced a genuine concept of progress. Firstly, progressive thought during the ancient Greek period only sporadically emerged in a rudimentary form, as their limited historical experiences did not easily lend themselves to such deductive reasoning. Secondly, their philosophical principles, skepticism toward change, and various theories on regression and cyclical recurrence all imply a worldview fundamentally opposed to progressive development.^{[2][14]} As Colin Woodard aptly states, consistent with the general philosophical attitude of the Greeks, they could not conceive history as a science but rather as a collection of perceptions.^[5]

3. Emergence of Linear Historical Concepts

The prevalent concept of Providentialism in the Middle Ages was a Christian theory interpreting history, where under divine providence, history unfolds in a linear process culminating in human redemption. While Providentialism does not explain history in secular terms, its development of a linear concept of time opened the door to linear historical perspectives during that era.

The concept of time is an unavoidable theme in history and central to historical perspectives. Augustine, in "The City of God," distinguished between Christian and ancient Greek views of time, affirming the linear Christian view while refuting the cyclic view of the Greeks. He remarked, "There was before now a Plato, for instance, with whom our own contemporaries, in the same city, held discussions, and it is incredible that this should have happened over and over again through countless ages."^[6] Despite current debates over this division, it initially clarified the characteristics of these two views of time. The linear view of time sees time as an endless, uninterrupted progression, an extension, a journey, a linear, one-way movement, once gone and irretrievable, clearly different from the cyclic view of time.

The evolution of the concept of time is intimately intertwined with the widespread influence of Christianity. In the Old Testament, it is evident that time progresses from its beginning towards the end, interpreting historical events as a unique process. The culmination of history is marked by the arrival of the Messiah, an event that signifies its ultimate conclusion.^[7] In the New Testament interpretation, with the advent of Christ, a decisive event enters historical time, providing a clear linear description of historical time. It is structured into two distinct periods: before and after the birth of Christ. World history spans from God's creation to the final judgment, with the pivotal divine event of Christ's advent determining the entire course of human history.^[8] As Christianity emerged and developed, the linear view of time became prevalent. Within the framework centered on God, time is not only finite but also possesses a definite beginning and end. Although this unidirectional process unfolds in the realm beyond rather than in the earthly world, it instilled in humanity a new conception of time. This foundational shift ultimately laid crucial groundwork for the emergence of later progressive ideas.

4. Conclusion

The transition from a cyclical view of history to a linear view was not achieved overnight but through a gradual process. In fact, seemingly distinct ideas are intricately connected, and even in modern thought, some elements of cyclical views persist, exerting immeasurable influence. Although a genuine notion of progress in history was not firmly established in the Western world before the modern era, its seeds were nurtured over the long periods of ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. With the rapid advancements in natural sciences and the arrival of the Enlightenment, coupled with humanity's endless aspirations for a better life, the idea of progress evolved from an optimistic dream into an objective law governing historical development. Ultimately, it emerged and was firmly established in the 18th century.

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