

Farnam Street Learning Community

Will and Ariel Durant on
The Lessons of History

Dear Learning Community Member,

Dedicated Farnam Street readers know our affinity for the works of Will and Ariel Durant; particularly their wonderful short book [The Lessons of History](#), which contains as much wisdom per page as anything we've ever read. Everyone we recommend it to seems to agree.

The Durants are, of course, most famous for writing the 11 volume [Story of Civilization](#), covering thousands of years of human history in great detail and great prose. For their work, they earned the Pulitzer in General Non-Fiction in 1968.

If you're one of those who enjoy the Durants' work and have learned from them as much as we have, we have a treat for you.

We were able to find nearly two hours of interviews with Will and Ariel, covering the same broad range of material in the Lessons of History, and we had it transcribed.

These interviews offer a wonderful level of "color" to their thoughts in The Lessons of History, and provide a further testament to the Durants' deep insights into human nature and the history of our species. They are priceless, and deserve to be read at least twice.

Enjoy!

“The meaning of history is it is man laid bare.”

Is it possible after all that history has no sense? Does it make sense?

Will Durant: A lot of people have thought that. Voltaire thought that history is the record of the crimes and absurdities of mankind. I thought that was a very unworthy definition. I should say that history is the record of the activities of mankind, and it has two sides. One is the crimes and absurdities. The other is the contributions to civilization, the lasting developments which enabled each generation to proceed with a larger heritage than the one before. That to me is the meaning of history.

Well, turning to this book, *The Lessons of History*, that I have, I'm fascinated that the first chapter is marked *Hesitations*. You in fact as a question that I would like to ask you. You say, “Of what use have your studies been?” And you ask, “What have you found in your work? Only the amusement of recounting the rise and fall of nations and ideas and retelling the sad stories of the death of kings.” Has it had meaning, in other words?

Will Durant: The meaning of history is it is man laid bare. You see, there are two ways of arriving at a large perspective, which would be a definition of philosophy, a large perspective. One is by studying the external world through science in all its aspects. You come to some general conclusion then, the way Herbert Spencer did, approaching it from that point of view as an engineer.

The other is to examine how man has behaved for the last six or ten thousand years. Consequently, history becomes the best guide we have to what man is, and we have to presume that one of the lessons of history is it continues to behave basically in each generation as it behaved in the generations before. Its instincts are the same. The basic situations that he faces are the same. Naturally, he makes similar responses, makes political organizations. He makes love affairs, marriages. He overeats each generation, and so forth so that the present is the past rolled up for action. The past is the present unrolled for understanding.

I'd like to hear how you got interested in history. What was it that made you get so interested in studying history?

Will Durant: That's very interesting. I was interested in philosophy, and I studied it very faithfully with a little book called *The Story of Philosophy*. I found that I wasn't getting any answers that I wanted. I wanted to know what kind of a man is man? Philosophy didn't tell me that. It is true that it's an attempt to deal with consciousness, which scientists never deal with, and yet it's the most astonishing thing in the world. But I discovered that to find out how man behaves and how he will probably behave in the future, you have to study history. That is the map of human character.

“The record of the past can have a great deal of significance, but the events themselves have significance only if you approach them from a philosophical standpoint.”

Dr. Durant, was it because he was so interested that you got interested, or were you interested before?

Ariel Durant: No, I was almost a child bride. I was much younger, and it took me time to try and catch up to what he really was saying so that when he talked I most attentively listening. I knew that that was the beginning of my education. I couldn't take credit for any of his early opinions. I didn't help make them. It was a hard enough task to understand them.

Will Durant: That's her words saying she was not responsible. History has a double meaning. It can be the events of the past or it can be the record of the past. Consequently, that double meaning has confused us very often. The record of the past can have a great deal of significance, but the events themselves have significance only if you approach them from a philosophical standpoint and ask the right questions. Otherwise it would be just the same thing all over again.

You also say, “History is a fragment of biology.”

Will Durant: Yes, because we are animals and living in conflict with an environment, and in competition with thousands of other species. Think of the insects, which according to Time Magazine will sooner or later get rid of the human species. You don't realize that from a biological standpoint, all the history of mankind is a very short chapter in the history of life, and that's a chapter in the history of the planet. You take Mars, apparently no life on it. But it's had a history.

You mention that the first biological lesson of history is that life is competition. That means our competition with the rest of the inhabitants of the Earth?

Will Durant: Yes. You see I reject the Marxian theory of history, that history is the history of the class war. That's only one part of the competitions of life. History is the activity of man in a struggle with other forms of life for the possibilities and gifts of the environment. The competition is the basic law. Competition is, as I quoted once, “The trade of life as well as the life of trade.” Consequently the whole Marxian theory of history falls onto one little element in the biology of man.

There always has been a kind of birth control among nations, has there not?

Will Durant: Yes.

That's not new in history.

Will Durant: It is new as a conscious social process in that groups of people deliberately organizing the control of population, but as a practice of man and wife, it is as old as history. Caesar was already offering in prizes for parents who had three children, and they didn't normally do it.

“If your civilization does not contain methods of survival, then it will not last very long.”

The difficulty was that the Romans obeyed him, and the non-native..., that were immigrants into Italy, did not obey him, and the Romans disappeared, and the non-natives inherited the Earth.

One of my favorite lines of yours is that, “There is no humorist like history.” Could you explain this?

Will Durant: It often surprises us with the congruence of the in-congruence. Let’s see how, for example, the most ignorant elements in the Roman Empire outlasted the educated Romans. Naturally, you would expect that the educated would inherit the Earth. The fertile inherit the Earth.

The fertile inherit the Earth. What does that teach us?

Will Durant: Yes, it teaches the law of biology that you have to breed as well as breathe.

Just how does biology influence the course of history?

Will Durant: I suppose civilization exists with the permission of the survival of the race. If your civilization does not contain methods of survival, then it will not last very long.

The survival of the fittest, the old Darwinian doctrine, still holds true.

Will Durant: Of course. We don’t know what the word “fit” means. He’d define it as ... Really when you boil it down to Darwin’s conclusion, it was this, that “Living history and biology is a struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest to survive.” How do you define fit? All intent is survival again, see? So it’s a more or less evading of the question, namely what do you mean by fit?

Well the hunter is a pretty vicious fellow.

Will Durant: Yes

And a pretty uncivilized fellow.

Will Durant: Hmmm, yes.

And yet is fit to survive in that environment.

Will Durant: He knew how to survive in that environment.

The great nations of the world today, we call them great because they are powerful. They are fit to survive?

Will Durant: So far they have proved to survive.

“Cooperation is a tool of competition.”

But also fit to destroy humankind as we know it, through nuclear proliferation and other ways.

Will Durant: Yes. You see, competition used to be among individuals, and then it was enlarged. It was among families. Then it was enlarged among communities. Cooperation is a tool of competition. You cooperate within the community because the community itself is in danger, and must have your cooperation in order to compete with other communities, like us with Russia, you see. Consequently, the basic reality is competition. We can't get away with it. We have to accept it as probably not only the method of survival, but the secret of vitality. If you are not competing, what would make you develop?

A certain degree of competition is inevitable and necessary?

Will Durant: Yes.

How do we account for man's dominance over the other species?

Will Durant: Intelligence, I presume. Maybe the fact that he was able to stand up, and he could use his hands, because the hands are the instrument of education in the early life when the child learns through his hands. Even the simple worker, he learns through his hands.

Was that dumb luck, or was it the product? Where does the intelligence come from? That is the question.

Will Durant: The intelligence is not exactly the cause, it is the product. Namely, when a man experiments and finds that he can get his results by certain means, then he uses those results. That is intelligence. It's not so much that he was intelligent. He becomes intelligent. Maybe the first part of the process is luck, accident.

You don't see any distinct pattern in this, no inevitability? The role of accident is very prominent, then, in the progress or the development of man to his present estate?

Will Durant: I should say its role diminishes in importance. Obviously the role of education today in America is more important than the role of accident

Why is it that racism has endured so long in every culture, and continues even today in our so-called modern, enlightened society?

Will Durant: Racial distinctions are a part of the egotism that stimulates life. Everybody thinks his own color is the most wonderful, and if he didn't believe that, he'd lose a part of the stimulus that carries him along. It'd be just the same with you and me. If we didn't have a little vanity, we'd have less energy. We like to think that we're particularly special.

“I defined civilization at the beginning of the ... as social order promoting cultural creation.”

We do indeed, and yet there’s been a general intermixing of cultures here, for example in the United States, and in the course of human history, has there not?

Will Durant: Yes, it’s going on. Yes.

So the racial ingredient then, in the course of civilization, is just the product of egotism, or the biological competition that has always existed among organisms and species on our planet that you eluded to in an earlier talk.

Will Durant: Yes. I should say yes, simply yes. I must not say simply yes. I must yes, provided you remember that if you have a pride of race, it can be a strengthening stimulus. If you had no pride of race, and the other fellow had pride of race, he might get the better of you just through that difference.

How have race and history been intertwined?

Will Durant: It enters history as the operation of collective egotism, but whether the great achievements of history were due to the racial composition of the people that achieved these results is another question, because if there’s anything clear in the history, it is that civilization and greatness have appeared under all kinds of skin, and under all sorts of nationalities. For example, take Confucius. Surely it wasn’t this man as a Kansas City Yankee, and yet he was a pretty great man, although the present Chinese don’t quite agree with that, you know.

You make the observation that perhaps there were no great intellectual civilizations in Africa where the blacks were. But perhaps if the population had been white, it wouldn’t have made any difference. Is that correct?

Will Durant: There the populations in Africa were subject to biological laws. Many of them were living in conditions that did not permit any development under what we call civilization, mainly the graces and the arts and sciences and philosophies of life. They were too busy surviving, just brutal survival, and so they discarded all clothing that they could, and they armed themselves because they had to defend themselves at every minute of the day almost. What chance did they have? I defined civilization at the beginning of the ... as social order promoting cultural creation. The central Africa got social order, but it didn’t have much chance for cultural creation.

Ariel Durant: Well then, that’s almost a contradiction of your definition because you presuppose that if you got social order, it would automatically promote civilization. Now you say they got social order, but they didn’t get civilization. How can they get social order without utilizing it toward some effort of higher civilization?

Will Durant: I don’t say that every social order produces cultural creation. I said civilization is social order when it produces cultural creation.

“The basic lesson of history is that man is essentially what he has been all through history and he changes his habits, but he does not change his instincts.”

Ariel Durant: Oh, I think that’s begging the question that way, because at first you made us think that if we got ourselves in condition to have social order, bumped each other head until we had some sort of unifying meaning then of life, that therefore we would get, so to speak, creation. Now I don’t know where we are.

Will Durant: Of course, the words cultural creation is a prejudice. Who’s to determine whether it is creation or not? The central African might say we have produced a great many things we consider to be cultural creations, like songs, the little tattoos that we carve into our sticks, and so on. These are our arts, and the fact they are different from yours doesn’t mean that they are not cultural creation. We have magnificent song. They would call it cultural creation. In short all writing is prejudice.

What do you mean when you say that society is founded not on ideals, but on the nature of man?

Will Durant: Society is founded on the nature of man in this sense; that by nature, he is intended for the brute struggle for existence according to his individual powers, but by society, he is intended to check those individual instincts in order to be a social being.

I catch that. One wonders, have we changed?

Will Durant: I can see the basic lesson of history is that man is essentially what he has been all through history and he changes his habits, but he does not change his instincts. His instincts, that is those tendencies of behavior that we seem to have with us in our blood from heredity. There’s a great deal of discussion of course as to whether there any instincts or not. I have not placed much confidence in the theory that we have no instincts. Obviously inquisitiveness is instinctive.

So you don’t see that human nature is changed in the course of history.

Will Durant: Human behavior has changed, but not human nature, and consequently the basic responses of man are the same; sexual, commercial, there’s the same sort of person. The French are just the Greeks ... revived. The Germans are the Romans revived, and so on. They behave about the same way as those ancients did.

Who are we revived, then?

Will Durant: The Romans. We are the Romans who imported Greek civilization. We imported European civilization, and our chief function in history is apparently to be a transmission line for that great heritage.

If we met someone who was wandering through the desert of 4,000 years ago, would he be like us? Would we be like him? Would he react to things in the same way?

“The intellect is an individualist. It learns how to protect the individual long before it ever thinks of protecting the group.”

Will Durant: He would be competing for his next meal and his next mate. Those are the essential things in our lives, too. I don't mean to say that all the activities of human beings are exactly the same as they were 2,000 years ago, or 20,000. I know history's only about 2,000 years old. It's a moment, and human history's just a moment in the history of the planet. Twenty thousand years ago, it's like saying the last minute of the day is half the day. It isn't. It's just the last minute.

In terms of what makes the difference, you have a line in the book that, “Intellect is a vital force in history, but it can also be a destructive power.” What does that mean?

Will Durant: It becomes an instrument for justifying impulse. Namely, if you can become smart, you can prove that what you really want to do, what you are itching to do, is just what should be done. Haven't you ever done that in your life?

Always.

Will Durant: Always. The difficulty is that the intellect is an individualist. It learns how to protect the individual long before it ever thinks of protecting the group, that has to come later, comes with the maturing of the mind. Consequently, a civilization controlled by the intellectuals would commit suicide very soon.

Ariel Durant: That's a slap against himself. You don't have to be so mean to yourself.

Will Durant: I'm not an intellectual.

Ariel Durant: What then are you, a plebeian?

Will Durant: An intellectual is opposed to a man who mistakes ideas for realities.

Ariel Durant: No. No, that's selling them short. That's not my idea of an intellectual.

Will Durant: I'm trying to submit my ideas to reality. Of course I may fool myself, but the only way to do it is by subjecting your ideas to the course of history.

Ariel Durant: How do you do that?

Will Durant: I read my books.

Ariel Durant: Ah, you see that?

Will Durant: Or your books.

Ariel Durant: I thought so.

“I suppose the role of character is for the individual to rise to a situation.”

Will Durant: Why do you think we've been operating for the last 40, 50 years trying to find out how has man really behaved?

Haven't certain individuals, the genius, great man, or hero, as Carlisle believed, been the prime determinants of human history?

Will Durant: There are many cases, I think, in which individual characters have had very significant results upon history. But basically, I think Carlisle was wrong. That is the hero is a product of a situation rather than the result being a product of the hero. It is demand that brings out the exceptional qualities of man. What would Lenin have been if he had remained in, what was it, Geneva? He would have a little.... But he faced tremendous demands upon him, and something in him responded. I think those given us would have brought out capacity in many different types of people. They wouldn't have to be geniuses to begin with.

Then what is the function or role of heroes?

Will Durant: They form the function of meeting a situation whose demands are always all has potential abilities.

What do you think is the important thing for us, in studying the course of history, to know about character? What is the role of character in history?

Will Durant: I suppose the role of character is for the individual to rise to a situation. If it were not for the situation, we would never have heard of him. So that you might say that character is the product of an exceptional demand by the situation upon human ability. I think the ability of the average man could be doubled if it were demanded, if the situation demanded. So, I think Lenin was made by the situation. Of course he brought ideas, and he had to abandon almost all those ideas. For example, he went back to private enterprise for a while.

Could you give me a definition of civilization as you perceive it?

Will Durant: We defined it on the very first phase of volume one of the story as social order promoting cultural creation. Social order, I suppose, means a combination of order and liberty, and those two seem to be both necessary to the basis from which all the flowers of civilization grow; the literature, the art, the science, the philosophy, the music, the morals.

And yet they would seem to be at odds. Very often order and liberty or freedom seem to be in conflict with one another.

Will Durant: Civilization, it is a subtle collaboration and balance between order and liberty. If order is too great, liberty is stifled. If order is too little, liberty becomes license so that it becomes a matter of ultimately wisdom in both of them to exist each to the other. Perhaps at the present time, liberty has the upper hand.

“Civilization itself is the most remarkable thing that has ever happened on the planet.”

Do you think at this juncture that liberty is gaining the ascendent, and has the upper hand over order?

Will Durant: Yes. I suppose, for example, the family, the school, the church, even the state, they have lost their efficacy probably because the basis of all of them was religious belief which has been enormously weakened.

How do you account for that, the weakening of religious belief?

Will Durant: It's been going on ever since Copernicus discovered that we were just a drop in an ocean of planets, and we began to wonder how is it that we became so important to God? Why did he choose this particular bit of mud as his home on Earth? Of course, that was the beginning of it, was Copernicus. What is it? About 1560, and then if you jump 400 years to Charles Darwin, you get another blow that was struck at our old beliefs; mainly the revelation that we belonged to the animal kingdom, and have a great deal of the animal left in us.

And yet there are many people who would suggest that the animal in us is rather more civilized by any more reasonable definition of the term than the human. More civilized in the sense of being more at home with other animals, and at home with its environment. Civilized man is extremely uncivilized, don't you think?

Will Durant: Well, from another standpoint, you could say remarkably civilized. Civilization itself is the most remarkable thing that has ever happened on the planet from our point of view. Certainly the most remarkable thing that man has done, but the trouble is that it requires a perpetual delicate balance of the social impulses with the animal impulses. After all, you see, we have a general idea that man was a hunter for hundreds of thousands of years. He's been an agriculturalist, a tiller of the soil, only for some 30,000 years so far as we know. It was in the agricultural regime that our social impulses were encouraged and developed.

That's really the origin of civilization at that point.

Will Durant: The origin of civilization was at the agricultural development of the home and the social impulses. A civilization is always a perilous balance between the social and the individual impulses. In the hunting stage, we had to be individualists. When there was a family, or a narrow family perhaps, but there was the picture that we have of man in those days which may have lasted in the hundreds of thousands of years, in that hunting stage.

Generally, the biologists, or the sociologists, picture man as having lived at least a million years, and of those million years, at least 300,000 were in the stage of hunting, the agricultural, a relatively short period. In the hunting stage we had to be animals almost. We had to be individualists. We had to go out with a club and be ready to fight our way to some food that we wanted to get. We had to face animals sometimes and conquer it before we could eat

“... we had to develop institutions to mitigate those hunting qualities.”

it, and we ate it almost on the spot because we could never tell what would happen.

Similarly, the man being a hunter was inquisitive. It was pugnacious, and he was sexually almost lawless. Those qualities were necessary. They were virtuous in the hunting stage. I should define a virtue as a quality that makes for survival.

Survival then becomes one of the highest attainments of man.

Will Durant: Yes, but in agriculture, those hunting qualities are pugnacity, aggressiveness, and sexual voracity which were once virtues because they were necessary to survival. They became problems. We needed them still in some degree to give vigor to human life and activity, but we had to develop institutions to mitigate those hunting qualities. That is a problem with the persistent problem of civilization is by what institutions have we been able to mitigate those hunting qualities so that they might be useful, but not excessive, not dangerous to us. We had to develop social impulses, which were partly in our blood in the sense that we inherit the affection of a man for a woman. Perhaps the family, you might say that they are biologically rooted. But civilization is not biologically rooted. It depends upon the development of the mind, educational systems. It depends upon religious belief, depends upon social organization through the community and the state, and none of these were known by the hunter.

You yourself have challenged some of the prevailing religious beliefs of our time.

Will Durant: That was in my youth. Today I should say that I know much less than I did then. I would not be so forward as to stand up and judge a religion, because a religion is a product of hundreds and thousands of years, the way Christianity is. I have learned that it is very dangerous for an individual to think that his own individual mind can stand up and with the experience of some 30 or 40 years, judge the experience of the race, which is without supernatural beliefs, it's very difficult to control the animal instincts in us. It may be that all through history, religions have helped society to control those animal instincts to enable the social instincts to cope with them and to make civilization possible.

I suppose it is the attempt to control in a society, the instincts that were developed in the hunting period of man which had been enormously longer than this agricultural period. Civilization is a product of agriculture. I don't know whether we can use the historical relationship to illustrate the function of morals, but basically the function of morals is to overcome the aggressive instincts of mankind that were stimulated in the hunting period of centuries to overcome those impulses by social impulses that are generated in the family. In each civilization I think behind all the brilliant male characters, the philosophers and the generals and the warriors, the basic process going on was women bringing up children, trying to develop in them the qualities

“The real function of morals ... is to produce order out of natural chaos in all the fields of human life.”

learned in the family, not on the stage or on the battlefield. On the battlefield, the necessary quality is kill or be killed. In civilization, the necessary quality is to make accommodations or be isolated.

But morality rests upon the function of women. That is a function performed by women. Is it to induce a moral sense in the family?

Will Durant: No. I think woman is the basic transmitter of morals, but she does not fulfill the real function of morals which is to produce order out of natural chaos in all the fields of human life. We have morals that apply to economics, for example, thou shalt not steal. It has not much to do with the family, but has a great deal to do with economic order. Thou shalt not kill, and all these ... most of the commandments were not for the family. They were for the group. The evolution of morals has been the enlargement of the area to which the commands apply; to pass from the narrow family to the tribal family or tribal group, and to the community, to the state, to the nation.

You don't see any revival of interest in morals, in a moral code

Will Durant: In a sense, yes. It seems to me the young people that I see today are better organized morally than the young people of my youth. They are better reconciled to marriage and to parentage. They don't say with Katherine Hepburn years ago that marriage is a gyp. They don't try to avoid parentage. They want to have not only one child, but three or four. I find all sorts of happy marriages around me, so that indeed I've seen so many good people in my life that I've almost lost my faith in the wickedness of mankind. In short, I think there is a more wholesome attitude, but the trouble is, and maybe I'm wandering in a different set than I used to, you see. It's hard to judge. Maybe I've raised myself from the people who are disorganized to the people who are organized.

Could America be going through a period of moral disintegration?

Will Durant: It is possible, yes. Religious codes are uncongenial to human nature. They run against our most powerful instincts. They are usually the ... moral code is usually made strong enough to handle those instincts by being bound up with powerful religious beliefs. When the religious beliefs weaken, the moral code loses, you might say, its supernatural supports. It becomes then a calculus of expediency, more or less. Usually in history the moral life of a people deteriorates along with the weakening of its religious belief.

This is not an apology for religion. I am not discussing whether a religion is right or wrong. I don't know. But usually there is that association in history. You can see it in Moses coming down from Sinai with the ten commandments. If he had said to his people, "I, Moses, give you these commandments," they would have sent him about his business. He had to say, "The Lord sayeth, God gives you these commandments." He knew that he had to make this uncongenial code part of the religious belief or else it wouldn't be strong enough to buck up against their instincts. In short, society is based on social

“The word sin is relevant only in the context of the individual versus a group.”

order, which is based on character and moral discipline which is usually associated with religious belief. Consequently, when the religious belief weakens...

As it has in this country.

Will Durant: I think so. Then the moral life tends to become a little more disorderly.

This has happened to all civilizations that have disappeared?

Will Durant: It's quite clear that it happened in Greece, quite clear that it happened in Rome. It's happened in France in our time. It may be happening to the United States at the present moment. That's a terrible question to ask. Is there any escape from these developments? I sometimes think that the decline of religious belief is far more important an event today than the communist challenge or the terrific struggle of between different economies. How trivial that seems compared with the question, "Is Christianity dying?" Did you ever think of that? Isn't that an awful thought? But if it is dying, the moral code that it supported will lose an immense support on which it depended. If the moral life disintegrates, the civilization to which it gave social order will have quite a problem to handle.

Getting to that in your chapter on morals and history, you say that, "Sin has flourished in every age." So is sin basic to man?

Will Durant: It's always in every age. The individualistic instincts are more powerful than the social instincts. That is the individualistic instincts are those that protect the individual for survival. The social instincts are those that counteract those individualistic instincts that operate for the protection of the group. For example, when I join a club that overcomes a purely individualistic attitude. Even when I vote, organizing does that. The definition of sin, I suppose, is the overcoming of the social by the individual in process

How does that reflect itself on what we think of as everyday behavior?

Will Durant: hen the course of the sin would not be involved.

Sin would not be involved?

Will Durant: No. Taking your glasses off your nose is not a sin, but it's obviously the word sin would be irrelevant then. The word sin is relevant only in the context of the individual versus a group. It's individualistic instincts versus his group impulses.

But in theological terms, when they talk about sin...

Will Durant: Oh, that's another subject. I'm not an expert on that kind of sin. Namely sin there would be a violation of the laws of God.

“There are many things profounder than reason which should enter into a man’s judgement and understanding of life.”

Ariel Durant: As interpreted by the priesthood.

Will Durant: Behave yourself.

Many philosophers have believed that human reason should be the sole arbiter of morality. Indeed you even wrote a book on *The Age of Reason*. Did this experiment work? Do you agree that this was in fact an age of reason?

Will Durant: In the sense that it was an age of great philosophers, was an age of what we call rationalism, namely the belief that reason should be the ultimate test of truth. That I think would be a fair definition of rationalism. It was an age of revolt against traditional beliefs, especially against traditional religious dogmas.

The age has received that name, let us say the age from 1700 to 1900, has received the name *The Age of Reason* because it included so many great philosophers like Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, Spinoza, Lidenance, and then of course culminating in Voltaire, Diderot, and the great encyclopedia of 1750 which attempted to subject the religious and political beliefs of Europe to the test of reason. It created a great deal of disorder, of course.

Now whether I would call it an age of reason, yes. I think I would, but I would put the word reason in quotation marks, and utter it with a smile, recognizing that there are many things profounder than reason which should enter into a man’s judgement and understanding of life, and yet would not come under the name reason. Sentiment, for example, tenderness, affection, and mystery. These things that can hardly be reduced to any rational formula are just as important in our lives as reason. Reason is a tool, but character is based upon instincts and feelings into which reason seldom enters. Consequently, reason can not really be the dominant aspect of any age or any man. It’s an instinct.

I wonder why so many people decided to call it *The Age of Reason* then.

Will Durant: Because the philosophers themselves called it that at the time. They said that instead of determining truth by opening scriptures or by accepting the teaching of a church, they decided they would determine everything by examining their own reason. It was a tremendous adventure because no individual mind, however brilliant, can ever safely sit in judgement on the traditions of mankind because the traditions are the result of the trial and error thinking of hundreds of generations so that every book of philosophy is an audacious, wild enterprise, an uncalculated risk. It’s like a drop of water suddenly standing up on the crest of a wave and announcing that it is going to analyze the sea.

That’s a wonderful analogy. Dr. Durant, you said it was an experiment really by the philosophers. Do you think it had a bad influence on us, their decision?

Will Durant: That’s a profound question, and who am I to judge? You’d have to be 300 years into the future really to judge. The *Age of Reason* was a good

“The function of religion ... is to give man a belief that will enable him to tolerate life.”

influence I think, in the sense that it cleared up a great many absurdities, liberated us to think freely. On the other hand, it was a danger in the sense that it was immodest, that it did not warn us why we were free to think, that we should be mighty careful about this freedom because freedom is a trial. It's a terrific test, and in an ideal world, it would be only commiserate with our intelligence. When we made ourselves free, we forgot to make ourselves intelligent, thereby perhaps, hang many tails, including mine.

In your view, Dr. Durant, is morality a function of religion?

Will Durant: Not exactly, but it's a dependent upon religion in that sense. It's not a function of religion. The function of religion is quite different I think. It is to give man a belief that will enable him to tolerate life. That is indeed the definition, isn't it? To enable man to bear reality, that's the first function. Practically every religion in history has turned out to have been a delightful dream of happiness to come or a delightful assumption that the individualistic instincts could be overcome by the social instincts.

But the individualistic instincts were formed in the hunting stage through hundreds of thousands of years. The social instincts were formed in the agricultural stage which is only 25,000 years old. They are weaker than the individualistic instincts, enormously weaker. The social instincts need support, and they get support from law, but law is not enough. Law visibly fails today in checking the individualistic instincts.

Religion came to the rescue of law by teaching man that the individualistic instincts were contrary to the law of God. It depended upon belief in a god who saw everything and who could judge everything and could punish everything. When the belief in that declines, this moral order loses one of its strongest supports, and that is a condition in which we are today.

Does studying history give you a great respect for religion, or a lack of respect?

Will Durant: Terrific respect.

Why?

Will Durant: I made a great fuss about anything in the religion that was bequeathed to me by my French Canadian parents, and looking back upon it, I see that basically they were right, and I was wrong. I was the individualist who felt that his little ideas, his studies were of sufficient depth and scope to sit in judgement on the traditions of the race. That was a mistake. I don't know what I would do now if I were in the same situation with the brilliant mind that I have at the present moment, but I would like to feel that I would give tradition a better deal than I gave it.

Ariel Durant: So that's the eternal battle between youth and old age. If you leave it up to the old, they would take back everything they ever had the courage to do when they were young and virile so that you must never trust

“The brake (is) more important than the gas.”

an old man to be the judgement of youth. They would just nip it off before it ever expressed itself.

Will Durant: I feel destroyed.

Well in every old man, there must be a boy still, I think.

Ariel Durant: No, sir. Not still. A dead boy, yes.

Will Durant: Tradition is the memory of the race. Insanity is the loss of memory. That's the whole business, you see? I'm putting Edmund Burke there in one line there. You don't have to read his books now.

Ariel Durant: Is that Edmund Burke's feeling?

Will Durant: He wrote the best analysis of conservatism, the philosophical basis of conservatism. In short, he believed that the brake was more important than the gas.

Ariel Durant: The brake more important than the gas. Depends on whose gas.

Will Durant: My daughter, Ethel, is suggesting I tell you this story about two great friends of mine, Ernest Renan, and Hippolyte Taine. Taine is spelled T-A-I-N-E. I used to pronounce him "Tane". He wrote a magnificent history of English literature despite the fact that he was a Frenchman. No Englishman has ever yet equaled that history.

However, that is not the point. In their old age, they began to feel that the share that they had played in attacking religious orthodoxy had been a destructive influence. They perceived that the theology which they had rejected, had been a support to a moral code which had been almost worthless without the theology. Namely, the idea of the individual controlling his individualism in order to take into consideration the needs of the group that he belonged to.

Renan wrote to Taine inquiring what it was that he, Renan, and Taine, despite losing their Christian theology, had retained and been guided by the Christian ethic. He said, "We have been living on the shadow, on a shadow, but it worked with us because it was the ethic was warmed up, so to speak, by the theology, and the warmth remained, even when the theology went. But our children are being brought up on a Christian ethic no longer warmed by the Christian theology. They are living on the shadow of a shadow. You and I are living...nous vivons dans une ombre. We live on a shadow, but our children will live on a shadow of a shadow...ils vivent dans l'ombre d'une ombre.

The basic process in the 19th century was not socialism, and the great figure was not Marx. It was Darwin. It was the disillusion of the theology that had been the support of the moral life along of course with the agricultural regime which had also been a great factor in the moral life. Namely their father was the employer of the son as well as the father of him. The family was an economic unit and process. Now that process has been going on right along, and in the livelihood you perceive how relatively unimportant

“Love is a creative force.”

was the Russian revolution. It changed the way of producing goods. But did it effectively replace the Christian ethic? That’s the problem that they have to face.

Suppose the developed rich and poor there, as we did here. Wouldn’t they begin to wonder what is the meaning of life if we have such struggle that others may have abundance? And then the individualism would reappear, especially if the communistic myth disappears in the face of history. What I mean is that they may discover that they haven’t found Utopia yet at all. They will be in the the condition of Alfred de Musset’s story of the peasant who said to Voltaire, “You told us to abandon Heaven and build it here, and to give up our pitchforks and take up our guns and fight for a new life. We took you at your word. We have been defeated. We have to go back to our farms and our pitchforks, and now we are exploited just as much as before and the Heaven that you took from us which was our consolation is no longer with us so that you have done one of the greatest crimes in history. You have taken our last resort from us.”

Is the Bible a great document of history?

Will Durant: Of course. It’s a treasure of practically everything if history, of philosophy, everything except science. Science after all is limited to the external world. It hardly has any effect when you deal with the internal world. What is consciousness? Do you have any scientific answers to that?

No.

Will Durant: I believe in God, but I have my own definition. God to me is a creative force, whatever appears, and in whatever form. It might be in the growth of a little blade of grass between the cracks of a concrete sidewalk. Having forever been moved by the site of that, I looked at one one day and said, “My god, there’s God.” Of course it has, a creative force has all sorts of operations. I believe that it exists in the universe. I take everything as a lie basically, even matter. That creative force running through matter all the way up to Einstein, that’s the God I believe in.

It’s also being said quite often in our culture that God is love. Do you think God is love? What do you think of the relationship between love and God?

Will Durant: Love is a creative force, too. But it’s only one form of creative force. It might be destructive, just as the sexual instinct can destroy a society. No, it has to be creative before I would call it divine. It doesn’t have to be merely instinctive.

What do you think of that, Mrs. Durant?

Ariel Durant: To tell you the truth, I haven’t ever divided in my own mind, my own way of feeling, I have never divided love from the aspect of creation. I never thought there was creation without love. Even if the love be, so to speak, inanimate, or a not very visible element. But seems to me, when two

“As long as there is poverty, there will be gods because human beings need some consolation and some inspiration to hope.”

birds perched on a limb begin whispering to each other, there's love. It's in, I imagine it's in everything that is alive.

You also say in that chapter about religion that, “As long as there is poverty, there will be gods.”

Will Durant: Yes, as long as there is poverty, there will be gods because human beings need some consolation and some inspiration to hope. If they are well fed and belong to the jet set, they don't feel the need of a god. But if they're working in the fields, the angelus is a great consolation to them.

Ariel Durant: Still the desire that thanks somebody when something is great or good or marvelous or mysterious, is natural and instinctive, and in that respect, I believe that we unconsciously believe in something bigger, greater than ourselves which we may call God.

Will Durant: Unto whom we wish to offer thanks.

Ariel Durant: That's right.

Has Marx removed God in vast areas of the world really or not?

Ariel Durant: I don't think so.

Will Durant: You mean socialistic movements have removed religious belief?

Yes. Have they in fact removed the deep belief?

Will Durant: I should say the other way, that the decay of religious beliefs has promoted socialistic movements. I was just reading Thucydides' Peloponnesian War again. It has a terrific chapter about the revolution in Corcyra. There was such cruelty on both sides, and then you discover that practically everybody at that time had lost his religious belief. In the days of Pericles, you'd think Pericles took Zeus as a god. Zeus was a statue with a little gold in it which could be used in a pinch which they actually did use in the Peloponnesian War. But he didn't take religion seriously. The same way with Socrates, same way with Euripides. Euripides' dramas are full of agnosticism.

I have to ask you, who would be your favorite character in history?

Will Durant: Oh my. God.

Do you have such a thing?

Will Durant: Without any doubt, I would say Jesus Christ. Does that sound funny? The old skeptic?

Ariel Durant: But that's not history.

Will Durant: Well of course. He was born of history, wasn't he?

“... biology overcame religion.”

Ariel Durant: Well you can't tell whether he's just ...

Will Durant: You don't want me to say he was a complete myth, do you?

Well, why do you say it?

Will Durant: Because he gave me ideas which appeal to me very much. I wish to God I could obey his ethical doctrine. I know it's impossible to human nature, but it's enormously desirable as a counter action to our natural individualism. For example, when he says turn the other cheek. Well it's silly. You don't turn the other cheek, but you try to behave without returning insult with insult or blow with blow. How enormously important that is to living in a social order.

Dr. Durant, there seems to be more and more people going back to church these days. There's a return to religion in this country. What do you think?

Will Durant: I don't think that is a religious revival. It's a church going revival.

So many wars have been based on Christianity versus other religions or one sect of Christianity facing another, like in Ireland today.

Will Durant: Yes, but biology overcame religion. Man is a competitive animal you see, even religions compete, even the various sects in a religion compete.

Do you think that we North Americans are getting closer to the Russians and the Russians are getting closer to us? Is there a meeting place taking place, or are we splitting off?

Will Durant: Oh yes. I think in all history, as Hegel would remind us, is a process in which a condition, which he calls it thesis, splits into opposing elements as for example socialism and capitalism. The third condition, synthesis, is a combination of the two opposing elements. When you go back to Hegel and beyond Marx, you see Marx failed to make the last step in his analysis. He said here's our economic woe. It's dividing socialism and capitalism. But he should have said they would unite. He said, "No, socialism would destroy capitalism." He was unfaithful to his own teacher, Hegel. Hegel would have said, "You're silly. I didn't teach you that. I would have said the third step is the synthesis of the previous steps." That is what the world is coming to, the combination of capitalism and socialism.

Dr. Durant, is peace possible? Is it unrealistic to hope for world peace?

Will Durant: It's not unrealistic provided that you're up against all the lessons of history. But it's a good thing to try for. Perhaps we improve conditions even if we don't realize the complete elimination of war.

Has war really ever solved any basic problems?

“The nicest warriors were the mercenaries.”

Will Durant: No, it replaces one possessor by another, and he will be replaced by another and so on until the terrain is exhausted.

Hmmm, until the terrain is exhausted or until we’ve obliterated mankind. Do you think of that is a realistic possibility?

Will Durant: I don’t think man will be obliterated by a war. Obliterated by petulance or earthquakes ...

But not by thermonuclear holocaust?

Will Durant: No. He will preserve to the last minute the pressure of killing his brother.

Do you think that war ever serves a really useful purpose?

Will Durant: It may be in the sense that it exhausts the pugnacity of the participants.

As a siphon then.

Will Durant: Yes. If they didn’t have war, they’d do something else which conceivably could be different because in many centuries, war affected only a small part of the population. There were certain rules that every gentleman observed. You remember the days when the English used to visit France even when they were at war with France. There actually was. Like Robert Walpole, who was the man who wrote all those famous letters to Horace Walpole. Robert was the Prime Minister. Horace Walpole visited Paris when England was at war with France even. There were several cases of that.

Of course this was a highly civilized kind of manifestation in a time of limited warfare.

Will Durant: Yes.

Aha, the civilized rules of war.

Will Durant: Yes. Between you and me, the nicest warriors were the mercenaries because they were paid to do a job, and they did as little of it as possible and they had no objection to peace if they had been properly paid

We’ve become much more civilized now to the point of unlimited total war in which no such thing would be possible.

Will Durant: Yes.

Hmmm. While you were an instructor at Columbia University back in 1917, there were demonstrations against American entry into World War I. Today there are demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Are the situations

“The problem of liberty is that at what point does it become excessive.”

similar.

Will Durant: Well, similar and different. It's similar in the sense that young people naturally resent being sent off to war. Of course in the Civil War, the reaction of the youth was even stronger than it is now, I think. But there was not in 1917 any emphasis on the immorality of war. It was only on the tradition of America and its moral doctrine to stick within our hemisphere. It was an isolationist emphasis. The idea was that we should not get involved in European war. Naturally, all that is now water under the bridge. We don't think in terms any more of whether we should be in Europe or not. The youngsters feel that this kind of a war that we're fighting now has no moral justification. That doesn't mean that I feel that way, but I think that's the way that they do feel.

The problem of liberty is that at what point does it become excessive. At what point does it produce disorder? I think it's easier to understand that question when you ask have we not reached that point today? We will agree that we were oppressed by a great many compulsories before and that it was desirable to overcome them. We rejoiced at the growth of freedom. We turned our whole national psychology upon the idea of freedom. But when you consider that civilization is made possible by self restraint, it is obvious that there must be a limit to freedom, because our self restraint, or the restraint would disappear.

I think we have reached that point today. I think, between you and me, though I know they'll call me an old fogey for it, and they're probably justified, I think freedom has reached a point where it is creating disorder and forgetting that order was its mother. It is destroying its mother.

So that freedom is really the product of order.

Will Durant: Yes. Certainly, and you could be free if we didn't have a degree of order, that peace made from knocking you down, besides other reasons.

Yes. Yes, there might be other reasons. But you can't then consider freedom without its relationship to order...

Will Durant: Correct.

And the limits imposed on the interests of order.

Will Durant: Freedom has to be moderate or it destroys itself with no course.

Who determines the limits?

Will Durant: Events.

Events? This is an impersonal process.

Will Durant: I think so. Nobody comes along and says, "No, you have too

“I’m not quite sure the common man is ruling today. Common people never rule anything.”

much freedom. I’m going to take some of it away.” We wouldn’t allow that. We’ve reached the point where we are so free, that we destroy anybody who attempts to limit our freedom, so we destroy ourselves.

In this chapter, you mention Plato and his scheme. Where would we fit into Plato’s scheme today, politically?

Will Durant: We have rule by men who have succeeded in business and have learned how to meet problems, get around them somehow or other, and they are subject to the fourth form of regime in Plato’s description which is democracy, ruled by the devos, the common man. I’m not quite sure the common man is ruling today. Common people never rule anything. But what we mean is that government has fallen more and more into the hands of the more and more common denominator of humanity. Not entirely, obviously the businessman is still at the realm today, but he can order and get things done. The average man is still in a condition where he needs to be told what can be done, and how to do it. Usually he appreciates getting information of that sort and following instruction. If he rebels entirely against order, he’s an undeveloped individual and we’ll have to forget about him.

Now, what Plato does there is to express the view of an aristocrat about democracy because he himself is born of a rich family. He never had to worry about his food, so he went on to describe what happens if the common man gets power. You can see the result by looking first at what he does to manners. Manners disappear. What he does to literature. It deteriorates a little bit. What is poetry today? It’s a medley of deliberately unintelligible lines.

Now you’re not sounding very much like the socialist that you were some 50 or 60 years ago.

Will Durant: No, it has nothing to do with socialism. I am arguing against formless behavior and formlessness in life, in manners, in literature, in art. I detest meaningless art, but that has nothing to do with democracy or socialism. I just like meaning. I think an artist should have something to say, and should tell us what it is, not splash a canvas with indiscriminate colors and rely upon the colors themselves to teach us significance.

So given the choice between an excess of liberty and an excess of order, you would lean in the direction of order.

Will Durant: Yes, because if you have excess order, you still have order, but if you have excess liberty, you have chaos.

So if you could tell me what art is in essence, I understand it to be a function of order, and if art is not orderly, then there is no art. That’s the basis of your dissatisfaction, isn’t it?

“Freedom and order are equal in desirability.”

Will Durant: Art is freer than ever before, so it isn't chaos. Before your eyes a man throws paint upon a canvas and thinks that that's art, or he puts lines down, 15 lines, one length or another, and he gets thousands of dollars for that.

That's not art, that's chaos in your judgement.

Will Durant: That's disintegration I should say. Or when I ask an artist, "What does that mean?" he refuses to answer. "You have no right to ask me what it means." Well I should say, "If it didn't have any meaning, why did you do it?" And he answers, "Because it is a pleasure in itself, and even the meaningless is beautiful." I don't agree with that. I think that the instance of beauty is order.

I see. For you, order is primary in these matters.

Will Durant: No. Freedom and order are equal in desirability. You can imagine that order can be excessive and then you demand freedom, and to a certain extent, you're achieving a higher line. It was good that artists became free, but they were even emancipated from following some great figure like Michelangelo so that things everybody was doing the same thing. But they went to the extreme of doing things to which you could apply no significance. You learn nothing from viewing them, and yet I think that the essence of art is the giving permanence to significance.

What I wonder is we hear so much about the fact that perhaps American civilization is dying. Perhaps it's over. Perhaps it's on the way out. Is it? When I say American, I involve of course all Western civilization.

Will Durant: All Western civilization is in that situation. It has lost the religious basis of its moral code, and it is trying to operate on a natural ethic. Except for those good people who still have the old beliefs, and I think they are helped a great deal by those, but as you will agree, the effective part of the population is the one that has the least theology, isn't it? The higher you go in the intellectual scale, the less the old creed remains. That is a basic fact in our society. As time... we are living in the post-Christian era.

Many civilizations we know that have obvious periods of growth and obvious periods of decay, or have then disappeared, but whether it's a secular process is open to question. As you know, many of the great thinkers on that subject like Spengler, Vico, have had different notions of the cycles. I was interested to find that a socialist about 1780 conceived a plan according to which he felt all civilizations develop. They first had an organic, no, no they had a critical stage in which they discussed what should be done. Took two or three hundred years to discuss, and then an organic period in which they had made up their minds. Then that would collapse and it would collapse as criticism resurrecting, so it had another age of criticism, and so on.

“The age of criticism is an age of freedom.”

So he thought the Middle Ages were a stable age of organic unity and development. From 1500 years until now, we have the critical stage in which the mind knocks to pieces any positive idea that you can give.

Beginning with the Renaissance and Reformation.

Will Durant: The Renaissance perhaps criticised the whole medieval review and wanted to go back to the classics. The Reformation also wanted to make a change. Restraint should say it went back to many medieval ideas like Saint Augustus for example, more than any other of the Fathers of the church. In a sense, that was a return to old ways as a way of getting away from Rome.

I guess this is why I think of the whole concept of growth and decay in terms of cycles, because so much of what is new, critical, innovative, and that seems to represent a turning point of history looks back.

Will Durant: Well, I think we can agree with Saint-Simon that there are organic ages and there are critical ages. Obviously we live in a critical age. Indeed we are visibly occupied in tearing our traditions and our foundations to pieces.

In the name of freedom.

Will Durant: Yes, of course. The age of criticism is an age of freedom. The age of order is an age of stability.

Dr. Durant, do you think that history repeats itself?

Will Durant: In the large, but not in detail. For example, all civilizations begin with clearing the wilderness, developing agriculture, maybe conquering a possessing population as we conquered the Indians. It passes on to developing industry, developing organizations of finance, and then when it has built its economic base, it begins to produce cultural activities; literature, art, science, philosophy. It usually has strong religious beliefs at the beginning and as the civilization develops science and philosophy, those beliefs run into conflict that is supposed to be the progress of knowledge.

Then there is a terrific struggle which may unsettle the moral base of the civilization because the moral basis is usually tied up with religious belief and instruction. Then two things can happen. One or the other of them happens to every civilization. Either the civilization decays from within through moral disintegration, which may be happening to us at this minute. Or there is a change of trade routes which leaves the country off the direct line of communication and wealth, and that may be happening to England now in the air age. You see it belong to the maritime era, but the air age means going directly to your goal which will leave England off the main line.

“A pessimist is supposed to be a man who believes that things are as bad as it could be. You don’t find that sort of a person anywhere.”

So that in the large, civilizations go through the same stages, but naturally, the details are different. We know for example that every religion will change in the course of time. We have a general idea how it will change. We know it will happen to the civilization itself. It is bound to die at some time.

You think so?

Will Durant: Of course. American civilization like any other is a transitory thing. It’s a moment in geological time. Isn’t that a mean thing to say? That American civilization is a moment in geological time. So by the way is literary immortality so that when you speak of Shakespeare as immortal, you realize that’s just between one ice age and another.

Now the details will be enormously different. You can have automobiles instead of push carts. You can have radios instead of the letters of Madame de Sévigné. But the details are rather unimportant in determining the future of a civilization. The fact that we have automobiles instead of horses doesn’t determine our future. The fact that we have radios instead of reading my books doesn’t determine the future. Those are incidentals.

The essential things to America are will the moral life of the American people survive the enormous test that it is undergoing from the growth of intellect and the weakening of inhibitions, and will it survive changes in trade routes and the discovery of raw materials and so forth. Imagine that Russia and China for example, prove geologically far richer than this continent. That will have an enormous influence on the history of America in the future.

Looking ahead, I must ask this question. Do you feel pessimistic or optimistic having studied history so long? What is your basic feeling? Are you an optimist about the future, or are you a pessimist?

Will Durant: No. I think the words pessimist and optimist should be kicked out, because they are both extremes. The word optimist should mean who believes that things are the best possible types, best possible conditions. Optimist means the best. It doesn’t mean the good. And pessimist means the worst. A pessimist is supposed to be a man who believes that things are as bad as it could be. You don’t find that sort of a person anywhere.

I’m a realist. I accept life is composed of difficulties and delights. I accept the difficulties as a natural price of existence, but I accept the delights as goodies which I really don’t deserve. Take this for example. I never dreamed in my youth I would have this delightful surroundings in which to decay.

Well are we progressing or regressing? Are we going ahead, or are we going backward?

Will Durant: It’s hard to use those terms. We’re changing. We are changing from one social order to another one. I might suspect that we will go on with our pagan period until a great social calamity comes, like a war or a great earthquake or something, when the cities will be destroyed and man will be

“We tend to play our achievements down because they were done by somebody else.”

driven back to till the soil for their living. Then some religion will reappear. It could be the old one. I could imagine Christianity reappearing. It's done devilish things, but it has been basically beautiful.

We should never use the word progress to imply progress in everything. Obviously we are progressing in some things, and retrogressing in others. Personally when my prejudices, I would say that we are retrogressing in manners for example. But we are progressing in the ability to cover space and we have made enormous conquests with the airplane. I enjoy and honor all these things, but the things that we want to do change from generation to generation. Maybe we are not as interested in making beautiful structures as we used to be, and consequently I would not expect contemporary sculptors to rival the great sculptors of ancient Greece or Rome. Although I must say I would have said the same thing if I had lived in Rodan's day, then I would have been surprised to find Rodan.

It's a very interesting question whether we really have a good sense of the quality of our own age. Do you think it is possible to get a perspective on one's own age?

Will Durant: We don't know enough about other ages. We usually know more about their achievements than about their faults, and we know more about our faults than about our achievements. We tend to play our achievements down because they were done by somebody else.

You've stated that human nature hasn't changed, that man made himself free, but forgot to make himself intelligent. But I could say it in your words another way. He forgot to change his nature.

Will Durant: Yes. Yes, I think by and large, human nature does not change in the historic period. It may have changed in the biological career of man, let us say from the old stone age 50,000 years before Christ, though again it's very hard to tell because the only knowledge that we have of the old stone age is bones. We can hardly tell what sort of nature they had, so while I might admit that human nature changes, I should say it changes with geological leisureliness and that you can assume without going far wrong that it hasn't changed in the last 2,000 years.

I find that the Greeks who were anxious to do the same things that we're anxious to do. They were anxious to get power, anxious to get wealth, anxious to get women. I suspect that we are similarly anxious today. We use slightly different means. Progress is an improvement in the means that we use for achieving the same old ends. I sometimes wonder if whether the progress is only of means without any progress in ends. Do we desire the same things that we used to desire thousands of years ago? Do we merely achieve them with different instrumentalities, radios for example, automobiles. Once we wanted to put our arm around a girl. Well, we did it on a sofa. Sofas are out of date today. We go out into the byways and do it in a car or in a drive-in theater. But it's only the means that have changed. The desire is the same.

“There’s no sign of improvement in human nature. We’re just as cruel, just as inquisitive ...”

People do say that human nature has changed. Human nature has improved in the past few hundred years. You don’t agree?

Will Durant: No. There’s no sign of improvement in human nature. We’re just as cruel, just as inquisitive, just as excited men about women. Do women get excited about men? I don’t see much evidence of that, but if I may speak for men, we still get excited about women, even at the age of 72. That goes on from century to century without any basic change, and those basic impulses are the things that determine our lives.

So from the standpoint of the historian, you see no change in human nature.

Will Durant: I’m quite confident in that.

We’re the same. The environment’s different, but basically the nature’s the same.

Will Durant: Very good. The biological factors remain unchanged. The social factors change. When I was born, I think I was born with the same impulses in nature that men were born with 50,000 years ago. The only difference is that there was a greater social heritage that I might absorb. There was an immense accumulation of intellectual advances, of moral restrictions, of aesthetic achievements, music and art. All those things were laid at my feet when I was born, but I was the same savage at birth that neanderthal man was, but he didn’t have this heritage. If I become different from him, it is in the course of the individual life after birth. It’s not that my nature has changed, it’s that my acquisitions have, well let me see, grown.

Then there really is some credit due us.

Will Durant: Yes.

Maybe all the more credit due us since our basic nature is the same.

Will Durant: That’s right.

We’ve learned to handle our environment in such a way that we’ve softened the exterior of our basic nature. Maybe we deserve even more credit, or have we?

Will Durant: We’ve become civilized by absorbing civilization, but we don’t become civilized by nature. Human nature is uncivilized. It’s almost contra-civilization. By nature we’re so pugnacious and inquisitive and erotic that you need all kinds of inhibitions and restraints and moral codes to make us civilized, and these things of course are required in the lifetime of the individual. They are not a native gift.

We do try now to acquire more of those than past civilizations did. Is that true?

“[A]n individual today can become much more learned today than Aristotle because the heritage has grown since Aristotle.”

Will Durant: Yes. The technique of disseminating the heritage and of absorbing it has grown immensely. Consequently an individual today can become much more learned today than Aristotle because the heritage has grown since Aristotle. He can inherit the Renaissance and all its great artists which Aristotle couldn't do and so forth. In short, the pedestal on which we are born grows with the years. We are the same at birth that we used to be, but in a sense, we progress by the rise of the pedestal of the social heritage.

Sounds a little obscure, doesn't it? But you can see just from the history of civilization the enormous wealth of the heritage. I always feel awe stricken when I think of how many things the past has offered me, how rich is this gift that it puts at my door when I emerge from the womb.

In the last page of that book, I have fallen to a kind of religious rhapsody about the heritage and it has served me as a substitute for my religious belief. Namely can you spread the book and see if I can read this? This is indeed the heart of Will Durant right here.

“Consider education not as a painful accumulation of facts and dates and range, nor merely the necessary preparation of the individual to earn his keep in the world, but as a transmission of our mental, moral, technical, and aesthetic heritage as fully as possible to as many as possible, for the emergence of man's understanding, control, embellishment, and enjoyment of life.

The heritage that we can now more fully transmit is richer than ever before. It is richer than that of Pericles, for it includes all the Greeks following that followed him. Richer than Leonardo's for it includes him and the Italian Renaissance. Richer than Voltaire's for it embraces all the French enlightenment and its ecumenical dissemination. If progress is real despite our whining, it is not because we are born any healthier, better, or wiser than infants were in the past, but because we are born to a richer heritage, born on a higher level of that pedestal which the accumulation of knowledge and art raises from the ground in support of our being. The heritage rises, and man rises in proportion as he receives it. History is above all else the creation and recording of that heritage.

That's my answer to Voltaire's definition. Progress is the increasing abundance, preservation, transmission, and use of that heritage. To those of us who study history, not merely as a warning, reminder of man's follies and crimes which again was Gibbon's definition. But also as an encouragement or remembrance of generative souls.

The past ceases to be a depressing chamber of horrors. It becomes a celestial city, a spatial country of the mind, or in a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach, carve and sing.

“If a man is fortunate, he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children ...”

If a man is fortunate, he will, before he dies, gather up as much as he can of his civilized heritage and transmit it to his children, and to his final breath, he will be grateful for this inexhaustible legacy, knowing that it is our nourishing mother and our lasting life.”

Very beautiful.

Will Durant: My alma mater.

Amen.

Will Durant: Our American mother. That is just what the phrase means of course when you graduate from the college, you call it your alma mater. Alma means elementary, your feeding, your nourishing mater, mother, your nourishing mother. That's what the heritage is.

Looking at history as a whole, Dr. Durant and Mrs. Durant, are ideas stronger than weapons, or is history made in the barrel of a gun?

Will Durant: Ideas are the strongest things of all in history, because even a gun was originally an idea. Somebody discovered gunpowder, for example. Somebody discovered the mechanism for discharging it. All these things were ideas.

Ariel Durant: At the time, an idea could, however important it might be in history at a certain proficuous time, it may lay dead and sallow for centuries having no influence and no meaning at all so that the idea is in itself that important until the idea meets the personality and the zeitgeist of the time spirit. When those three unite, you've got something going.

Will Durant: The ideas of today are the politics of tomorrow, and the philosophy of today is the literature of tomorrow. You can see if you familiar with French literature of how the influence of Leeché pervaded a whole generation of Sartre and Camus and Gide. Not so much Proust, but it there's another example of the influence of Schopenhauer went all through the literature from 1860 to 1960, so that ultimately it's ideas. Think of the number of things that were ideas in our youth that are now realities. All sorts of welfare legislation were rooted in my youth. Paul Norman Thomas has probably had more of his ideas realized by elected officials than any other person alive today.

Today there seems to be more concern on American campuses about world and domestic problems. Is this a healthy sign?

Ariel Durant: A certain amount of rebellion has always existed. The discrepancy between the generations makes the development each one in its own process, a little alien to the other. In other words, youth will always have desires that those who have outlived youth are beyond and can hardly remember or understand as they themselves have entered middle age or old

“If there’s one thing we ought to learn about history, it is that every generation rebels against the preceding one.”

age. Therefore, a rebellion is natural. But how do we keep a foreign political and other country... who have sent their provocateurs who are arousing youth for something that youth would not by itself at its own development be in need now. I understand and sympathize with the rebellion of youth. I dislike the alien elements that is using this rebellion of youth to make our country a chaotic process, into a chaotic process.

Will Durant: May I say a word about that? If there’s one thing we ought to learn about history, it is that every generation rebels against the preceding one, and that therefore the preceding ones should not take it too seriously. It’s traditional that the young should rebel against the old, and as Ariel said, it’s natural and desirable. Consequently I don’t think we should take it as seriously as we do. We can be sure that according to history, these young fellows will be getting jobs. They will be earning more money. They will be voting the Democratic ticket. They would be then voting the Republican ticket. Then after a while, Hoover will be too radical for them, but in old age, which is hard to locate. Let’s say according to the Income Tax Bureau it’s after 65. There is another element that comes in, an element of acceptance.

It’s not resignation. It’s chiefly, I think, understanding. For example, in old age, you understand how good it is that there should be radicals, and how good it is that there should be conservatives, but the radicals supply the wind, no pun intended, then supply the gas, again no pun intended. The conservative supply the brakes, and both of those functions are indispensable. There’s a tension there between youth and old age which creates this vitality, this society so that the old man does not have to feel useless. He’s fulfilling a very necessary function. If we were young, but knew as much as we later knew, of course it’s an impossible supposition, but you remember the old French adage, *je ne savez...*

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