

Leo Strauss

Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization

Editorial headnote

This transcript is made from remastered tapes of the original recording of the first part of a three-part lecture, delivered at Hillel House, the University of Chicago, on November 5, 1952. (A link to the audio file can be found on the Leo Strauss Center website under “Occasional Lectures.”) This transcript notes the discrepancies between the lecture as delivered and the three published versions of it:

“Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” edited by Kenneth Hart Green, *Modern Judaism* 1 (1981): 17-45, reprinted in *Leo Strauss, Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997);

“Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” edited by Hilail Gildin, in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989);

“Progress or Return?,” edited by Thomas Pangle, in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss. Essays and Lectures by Leo Strauss, selected by Thomas L. Pangle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

This transcript also notes the discrepancies between the lecture as delivered and the handwritten manuscript that Strauss prepared. Only part of the handwritten manuscript is written as delivered; the rest is in note form. We note only the discrepancies between the new transcript and the fully prepared portion of Strauss’s manuscript. Strauss’s notes can be found in the Strauss archive in the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library, box 7, folder 2. The italicized words in the transcript were underlined by Strauss in his handwritten manuscript.

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Leo Strauss:

To some of you I may seem to speak about the *omnibus scibilibus*, about all objects of human knowledge. I cannot deny that the impression is partly justified, and therefore I will offer you an apology. To speak about all objects of human knowledge [is] in one way of course impossible and would fill an infinite number of books. But in another sense it is not so impossible, if a person really speaks only about what *he* knows. That usually fills a very small volume. And the second consideration which I suggest is this: that we all, really, have opinions and sometimes very strong opinions about all objects of human knowledge, and it is perhaps better to confess

that to oneself, and to try to clarify that, than just to leave it at the amiable appearance of modesty.¹

I. The title of these lectures indicates that progress has become a *problem*, that it seems as if,² or it could seem as if progress has led us to the brink of an abyss, and it is therefore necessary to consider *alternatives* to progress. For example, to stop where we are; or else, if this should be impossible,³ to *return*. Now this series is devoted to an exposition of this problem. And the natural articulation of this problem is indicated by the subdivision of this series. I cannot promise that individual lectures will exactly coincide with the subdivisions of the problem as I suggested.⁴ “Return” is the translation for the Hebrew word *t’shuvah*. *T’shuvah* has an ordinary and an emphatic meaning. Its emphatic meaning is rendered in English by “*repentance*.” Repentance is return: the return from the wrong way to the right one. This implies that we were once on the right way *before* we turned to the wrong way. Originally we were on the right way; deviation, or sin, or imperfection is not original. Man is originally at home in his father’s house. He *becomes* a stranger through estrangement, through sinful estrangement. Repentance, return, is homecoming.

I remind you of a few verses from the first chapter of *Isaiah*. “Quote: How is the faithful city become a harlot. It was full of judgment, righteousness lodged in it. But now murderers. Therefore, saith the Lord . . . [I omit a few lines—LS] I will *restore* thy judges as *at first* and thy counsellors as at *the beginning*. Afterward thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”⁵ Repentance is return; redemption is *restoration*. A perfect beginning, the faithful city, is followed by defection, decline, sin, and this is followed by a perfect end. But the perfect end is a restoration of the perfect beginning. The faithful city at the beginning and at the end. At the beginning, men did not roam in forests, left to themselves, unprotected and unguided: the beginning is the Garden of Eden. Perfection resides at⁶ the beginning, in the beginning of time, of the oldest time. Hence perfection is sought derivatively in the old times—in the fathers, the fathers⁷ of fathers, the patriarchs. The patriarchs are the divine chariot which Ezekiel had seen⁸ in his vision. The great time, the classic time, is in the past. First the period of the desert; later the period of the temple. The life of the Jew is a life of recollection. It is at the same time a life of anticipation, of hope, but the hoped for redemption is restoration—*restitutio in integrum*.⁹ *Jeremiah* 30: “Their children shall be as aforetime.” Redemption consists in the return of the *youngest*, the most remote from the past—the most future ones, so to speak—to the pristine condition. The past is superior to the present. This thought is then perfectly compatible with hope for the future.

¹ This introductory paragraph appears in none of the published versions. In the handwritten manuscript, Strauss has written in pencil: “The series devoted to exposition of the problem — articulation indicated by subdivision — no articulation of individual lectures into subdivisions”

² In Pangle and Gildin: “that it could seem as if”

³ In Pangle: “possible”

⁴ This sentence does not appear in Green, Pangle, nor Gildin, nor in Strauss’s handwritten MSS.

⁵ *Isaiah* 1.21-26. Emphasis is Strauss’s.

⁶ In Green and Gildin: “results in”

⁷ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “father” in both instances

⁸ In Pangle: “saw”

⁹ In Green, Gildin, Pangle: “*restituto in integro*”

But does the hope for redemption, the expectation of the Messiah, not assign a much higher place to the future than to the past, however venerable? This is not unqualifiedly true. According to the most accepted view, the Messiah is inferior to Moses. The messianic age will witness the *restoration* of the full practice of the Torah, part of which was discontinued owing to the destruction of the Temple. Belief in the Torah was always the way in Judaism, whereas messianism frequently became dormant. For example, as I learn from Gershom Gerhard Scholem,¹⁰ cabbalism prior to the sixteenth century concentrated upon the beginning, and it was only with Isaac Luria that cabbalism began to concentrate upon the future, upon the end. Yet even here, the last age became as important as the first. It did not become more important. Furthermore, I quote Scholem: “by inclination and habit, Luria was decidedly conservative. This tendency is well expressed in his persistent attempts to relate what he had to say to *older authorities*.” For Luria, “salvation means actually nothing but restitution, reintegration of the original whole, or *Tikkun*, to use the Hebrew term. For Luria,¹¹ the appearance of the Messiah is nothing but the consummation of the continuous process of restoration . . . The path to the end of all things is also the path to the beginning.”¹² End of quote.

Judaism is a concern with return, it is not a concern with progress. Return can easily be expressed in biblical Hebrew, progress cannot. Hebrew renderings of progress seem to be somehow artificial, not to say paradoxical.¹³ Even if it were true that messianism bespeaks the predominance of the concern with the future, or of living toward the future, this would not affect in any way the belief in the superiority of the past to the present. The fact that the present is nearer *in time* to the final redemption than of the past does not mean of course that the present is *superior in piety or wisdom* to the past, especially to the *classic* past.

II. Today, the word *t'shuvah* has acquired a *still* more emphatic meaning. Today, *t'shuvah* sometimes means, not a return which takes place within Judaism but a return *to* Judaism on the part of many Jews who, or whose fathers, had broken with Judaism as a whole. That abandonment of Judaism, that break with Judaism, did not understand itself of course as a defection or desertion, as *leaving* the right way; nor did it understand itself as a *return* to a truth which the Jewish tradition in its turn had deserted, nor even merely a turn to something superior. But it understood itself as *progress*. It granted to the Jewish tradition, as it were, that Judaism is old, very old, whereas [it] itself had no past of which it could boast. But it regarded this very fact, the oldness¹⁴ of Judaism,¹⁵ almost as a proof of its own superiority and of the inadequacy of Judaism. For it questioned the very premise underlying the notion of return, that premise being the perfect character of the beginning and of the olden times.¹⁶ It assumed that the beginning is most imperfect, and that perfection can be found *only* in the end. So much so that the movement

¹⁰ “Gerhard” does not appear in the handwritten MSS, nor in Green, Pangle, Gildin.

¹¹ In the handwritten MSS: “Above all, for Luria”

¹² *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1961), 256, 268, 274. [confirm] Emphasis is Strauss's.

¹³ In Green, Gildin: “paradoxical.” In the handwritten MSS, Strauss inserts Hebrew terms in parentheses: “qidmah” and “hithqadmuth,” both meaning “progress,” both in post-Talmudic usage. The Strauss Center thanks Ralph Lerner for this transliteration and translation.

¹⁴ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “antiquity”

¹⁵ “the oldness of Judaism” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

¹⁶ “and of the olden times” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

from the beginning toward the end is in principle a progress from radical imperfection toward perfection. From this point of view, antiquity¹⁷ did not have any claim whatsoever to veneration. Antiquity rather deserved contempt, or possibly contempt mitigated by pity.

III. Let us try to clarify this issue somewhat more fully by contrasting the life characterized by the idea of return with the life characterized by the idea of progress. When the prophets call their people to account, they do not limit themselves to accusing them of this or that particular crime or sin.¹⁸ They recognize the root of all particular crimes in the fact that the people have *forsaken* their God. They accuse their people of rebellion. Originally, in the past, they were faithful or loyal; now they are in a state of rebellion. In the future they will return, and God will restore them to their original place. The primary, original, initial, is loyalty; unfaithfulness, infidelity, is secondary. The very notion of unfaithfulness or infidelity¹⁹ presupposes that fidelity or loyalty²⁰ is primary. The perfect character of the origin is a condition of sin, of the thought of sin.²¹ The man who understands himself in this way longs for the perfection of the origin or of the classic past. He suffers from the present, he hopes for the future. Progressive man, on the other hand, looks back to a most imperfect beginning. The beginning is barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme scarcity. He²² does not feel that he has *lost* something of great, not to say infinite, importance;²³ he has lost only his chains. He does not suffer from the recollection of the past. Looking back to the past, he is proud of his achievement; he is certain of the superiority of the present to the past. He is not satisfied with the present; he looks to future progress. But he does not merely hope or pray for a better future: he thinks that he can bring it about by his own efforts. Seeking perfection in a future which is in no sense the beginning or the restoration of the beginning, he lives unqualifiedly toward the future. The life which understands itself as a life of loyalty or faithfulness appears to him²⁴ as backward, as being under the spell of old prejudices. What the others call rebellion, he calls revolution or liberation. To the polarity “faithfulness-rebellion,” he opposes the polarity “prejudice-freedom.”

IV. To repeat, the return²⁵ to Judaism succeeds to a break with Judaism which eventually, or from the beginning, understood itself as a *progress beyond* Judaism. That break was effected in a classic manner by a solitary man: Spinoza. Spinoza denied the truth of Judaism—Judaism, which includes of course the Bible, is a set of prejudices and superstitious practices of the ancient tribes.²⁶ Spinoza found in this mass of heterogeneous lore some elements of truth, but he did not consider this as peculiar to Judaism. He found the same elements of truth in paganism as well. Spinoza was excommunicated by the Jewish community in Amsterdam. He ceased to regard himself as a Jew. He has sometimes been accused of having been hostile to Judaism and to Jews. I do not find that he was more opposed to Judaism than to Christianity, for example, and I do not

¹⁷ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “age”

¹⁸ “or sin” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

¹⁹ In the handwritten manuscript: “notion of infidelity”

²⁰ “or loyalty” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

²¹ “of the thought of sin” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

²² In Pangle: “Progressive man”

²³ In the handwritten MSS: “lost something of infinite importance”

²⁴ In the handwritten MSS: “life which understands itself, a life of loyalty or faithfulness, appears to him”

²⁵ In Pangle: “the contemporary return”

²⁶ In the handwritten MSS: “of an ancient nation.”

find that he was hostile to Jews. He acquired a strange, or perhaps not so strange, neutrality in regard to the secular conflict between Judaism and Christianity. Looking at the Jews and the Jewish fate from this neutral point of view, he even made some suggestions as to the redemption of the Jews. One suggestion is almost explicit. After having asserted that the Jews have not been elected in any other sense than [that] in which the Canaanites too had been elected earlier, and that therefore the Jews have not been elected for eternity, he tries to show that their survival after the loss of the land can be explained in a perfectly natural manner. In this context, he makes the following remark: Quote: “If the foundations of their religion did not effeminate their minds, I would absolutely believe that they might again restore their state, under auspicious circumstances, considering the fact that human things are mutable.” Unquote.²⁷ Which means the hope for divine redemption is altogether baseless. The sufferings of the exile are altogether meaningless. There is no guarantee whatsoever that these sufferings will ever cease. But the first condition for entertaining any reasonable hope for the end of the exile is that the Jews should get rid of the foundations of their religion, that is to say, of the spirit of Judaism. For that spirit, Spinoza thought, is adverse to warlike enterprise and to the energy of government. As far as I know, this is the earliest suggestion of a purely political solution to the Jewish problem. The substitution of a purely political solution for the miracle of redemption toward which men can contribute, if at all, only²⁸ by a life of piety. It is the first inkling of unqualifiedly political Zionism.

But Spinoza intimated still another solution. In his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, he sketches the outlines of what he regarded as a decent society. That society as described by him can be characterized as a liberal democracy. Incidentally, Spinoza may be said to be the first *philosopher* who advocated liberal democracy. Spinoza still regarded it as necessary to underwrite liberal democracy with a public religion or a state religion. Now it is very remarkable that that religion, that state religion,²⁹ which is emphatically *not* a religion of reason, is neither Christian nor Jewish. It is neutral in regard to the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, Spinoza claims to have proved, on the basis of the Bible, that the Mosaic law was binding only for the period of the commonwealth, Jewish commonwealth. If one considers these two facts, first, that the state religion is neutral in regard to the differences between Judaism and Christianity, and second, that the Mosaic law is no longer binding, one is entitled to say that Spinoza laid the foundation for another purely political solution of the Jewish problem, in fact, for *the* alternative to political Zionism and the solution known as assimilationism. In Spinoza’s liberal democracy, Jews do not have to become baptized in order to acquire full citizen rights. It is sufficient if they accept the extremely latitudinarian state religion, and they may there forget about the Mosaic law. In this neutral atmosphere, the sufferings of the exile could be expected to wither away.

V. Spinoza has merely intimated the two practical³⁰ alternatives which followed from the radical break with Judaism. These practical consequences were fully developed in the course of the nineteenth century. But when they were exposed to the test of practice, they led into certain difficulties. On the premise of assimilationism, Jewish suffering, suffering *for* Judaism, becomes

²⁷ In the handwritten MSS: (III § 55)

²⁸ In the handwritten MSS, “only” is inserted in pencil.

²⁹ “that state religion” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

³⁰ In Green: “classical”

meaningless. That suffering is merely the residue of a benighted past, a residue which will cease in proportion as mankind makes further progress. But the results were somewhat disappointing. The decrease of the power of Christianity did not bring about the expected decrease in anti-Jewish feeling. Even where legal equality of the Jews became a fact, it contrasted all the more strongly with the social inequality which continued. In a number of countries, legal inequality and the cruder forms of social inequality gave way to subtler forms of social inequality, but social inequality did not for this reason become less of a hardship. On the contrary,³¹ sensitivity increased with social ascent.³² Our ancestors had been immune to hatred and contempt because it merely proved to them the election of Israel. The uprooted assimilated Jew had nothing to oppose to hatred and contempt except his naked self. Full social equality proved to require the complete disappearance of the Jews as Jews—a proposition which is impracticable, if for no other reason than at least for the perfectly sufficient one of simple self-respect. Why should we—who after all are not gypsies,³³ but have behind and within us a heroic past not second to that of any other group anywhere on earth—deny or forget that past, where we came from, that past which is all the more heroic, one could say,³⁴ since its chief characters are not the glitter and trappings of martial glory and of cultural splendor, although it does not lack even these? Assimilation proved to require inner enslavement as the price of external freedom. Or to put it somewhat differently, assimilationism seemed to land³⁵ the Jews into the bog of Philistinism, of shallow satisfaction with a most unsatisfactory present, a most inglorious end for a race³⁶ which had been led out of the house of bondage into the desert, with careful avoidance of the land of the Philistines—although, to quote: “And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near.”³⁷ It is always near.³⁸ [Laughter] One³⁹ progress was indeed achieved: hatred of the Jews could no longer present itself among educated or half-educated people as hatred of the Jews. It had to disguise itself as antisemitism. (Incidentally, it is due, I believe, apart from thoughtlessness, to the survival of assimilationism that Jews still stoop to speak of antisemitism,⁴⁰ a term invented by some bashful⁴¹ German or French pedant of the nineteenth century. It is certainly a most improper term.) The shock administered by the continued existence of social inequality, and by the emergence of antisemitism especially in Germany and France, proved to be a fair warning for what was going to happen in Germany, especially in⁴² 1933 to 1945.

Those European Jews who realized that assimilation was no solution to the Jewish problem and looked out for another purely human or political solution turned to political Zionism. But

³¹ “On the contrary” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

³² In the handwritten MSS: “increased with emancipation”; there is then an insert written in pencil: “social ascent.”

³³ “who are after all not gypsies” does not appear in Green, Pangle, or Gildin.

³⁴ “one could say” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

³⁵ In Pangle: “lead”

³⁶ In Green and Pangle: “people”

³⁷ Exodus 13:17.

³⁸ “It was always near” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

³⁹ In Gildin, Green, Pangle: “Once”

⁴⁰ The first part of the sentence, from “Incidentally” to “to speak of antisemitism” does not appear in Green, Pangle, or Gildin; it does however appear in the handwritten MSS.

⁴¹ “bashful” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

⁴² In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “between”

political Zionism led to difficulties of its own. The basic idea underlying purely political Zionism was not Zionist at all. It could have been satisfied by a Jewish state anywhere on earth. Political *Zionism* was already a concession to the Jewish tradition. Those who were seeking for a solution of the Jewish problem other than the disappearance of the Jews had to accept not only the *territory* hallowed by Jewish tradition but its language, Hebrew, as well. They were forced to accept, furthermore,⁴³ Jewish culture. *Cultural Zionism* became a very powerful rival of political Zionism. But the heritage to which cultural Zionism had recourse rebelled against being interpreted in terms of culture or civilization, meaning as the autonomous product of the genius of the Jewish people. That culture or civilization has its core in the Torah, and the Torah presents itself as given by God, not created by Israel. Thus the attempts to solve the Jewish problem by purely human means ended in failures. The knot which was not tied by man could not be untied by man. I do not believe that the American experience forces us to qualify these statements. It is very far from me⁴⁴ to minimize the difference between a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and the nations of the Old World, which certainly were not conceived in liberty. I share the hope in America and the faith in America. But I am compelled to add that that faith and that hope cannot be of the same character as that faith and that hope which the Jew has in regard to Judaism and which the Christian has in regard to Christianity: no one claims that the faith in America and the hope for America is based on explicit divine promise.⁴⁵

VI. The attempt to solve the Jewish problem has failed because of the overwhelming power of the past. The experience of that power by a generation which had become forgetful of that power is part of what is sometimes called the discovery of history. The discovery was made in the nineteenth century. As a discovery, it consisted in the realization of something which was not realized previously, that is to say,⁴⁶ the acceptance of the past or the return to the Jewish tradition is something radically different from a mere continuation of that tradition. It is quite true that Jewish life of the past always was more, or almost always was more than a continuation of a tradition. Very great changes within the tradition have taken place in the course of the centuries, but it is also true that the change which we are witnessing today and of which we may perhaps say that all of us are participating in it, one way or the other, is qualitatively different from all previous changes within Judaism. Let me try to clarify that difference. Those who today return to Judaism do not assert that, say, Spinoza was altogether wrong. They accept at least the principle of that biblical criticism which was regarded as the major offense of Spinoza. Generally speaking, those who today return to Judaism admit that modern rationalism, to use this vague term,⁴⁷ had a number of important insights which cannot be thrown overboard and which were alien to the Jewish tradition. Therefore, they modify the Jewish tradition *consciously*. You only have to contrast that with the procedure of Maimonides in the twelfth century, who, when introducing philosophy, Aristotelian philosophy into Judaism, had to assume that he was merely recovering Israel's own lost inheritance.⁴⁸ These present-day Jews who return to the tradition try to do in the element of reflection what traditionally was done unconsciously or naively. Their

⁴³ In the handwritten MSS: "in addition"

⁴⁴ In the handwritten MSS: "Far be it for me"

⁴⁵ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: "promises"

⁴⁶ "is to say" does not appear in Gildin, Green, Pangle.

⁴⁷ "to use this vague term" does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

⁴⁸ Beginning at this point, the text is written in notes in the MSS.

attitude is historical rather than traditional. They study the thought of the past *as* thought of the past and *therefore* as not necessarily binding on the present generation as it stands.⁴⁹ But still, what they are doing is meant to be a return, that is to say, the acceptance of something which was equally accepted by the Jewish tradition. Thus the question arises as to the relative importance of these two elements: the new element and the unchanged element, the new element being the fact that present-day Judaism is forced to be what Mr. Harris calls⁵⁰ “postcritical.”⁵¹ Are we wiser than our ancestors in the decisive respect, or only in a subordinate respect? In the first case, we still would have to claim to have made decisive progress. But if the insights implied in the postcritical character of present-day Judaism are only of a subordinate character, the movement which we are witnessing can justly claim to be a *return*.

VII. Now this return movement⁵² would not have had the effect which it has but for the fact that not only among Jews but in⁵³ the Western world generally⁵⁴ progress has become a matter of doubt. The term “progress” in its full and emphatic meaning has practically disappeared from serious literature.⁵⁵ People speak less and less of “progress” and more and more of change: they do no longer claim to know that we are moving in the right direction. Not progress, but the belief in progress or the idea of progress as a social or historical phenomenon is a major theme for the present-day student of society. A generation or so ago, the most famous study on this subject was entitled *The Idea of Progress*. Its opposite number in present-day literature is entitled *The Belief in Progress*: the substitution of belief for idea is in itself worthy of note.

VIII. Now to understand the *crisis* of the belief in progress, we must first clarify the *content* of that belief. What is progress? Now (a) progress in the emphatic sense presupposes that there is something which is simply good, or *the end* as the goal of progress. Progress is change in the direction of the end. (B) But this is only the necessary, not the sufficient, condition of the idea of progress. [A sign of this is the notion of the]⁵⁶ golden age, which also presupposes a notion of the simply good; but that simply good, that end, is here located in the beginning. *The end of man*, the simply good, must be *understood* in a *specific manner* if it is to become the basis of the idea of progress. I suggest that the end of man must be understood primarily as perfection of the understanding, in such a manner that the perfection of the understanding is somehow akin to the arts and crafts. It has always been controversial whether man’s beginning was perfect or imperfect, but both parties to the controversy admitted that the arts and the crafts, and certainly their perfection, does not belong to man’s beginning. Therefore, the decision of the question⁵⁷ regarding the perfection or imperfection of man’s beginning depends⁵⁸ how the question of the value of the arts and crafts is decided. At any rate, the idea of progress presupposes (a) that there

⁴⁹ “as it stands” does not appear in the handwritten MSS.

⁵⁰ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “has been called”; in the handwritten MSS: “forced to be postcritical.”

⁵¹ Probably Rabbi Monford Harris.

⁵² In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “movement of return”

⁵³ In Green and Pangle: “throughout”

⁵⁴ In Green and Pangle: “more generally”

⁵⁵ In handwritten MSS, “scientific or scholarly literature.”

⁵⁶ Words in brackets do not appear in the handwritten MSS; there is what looks like a Greek word [*check p. 21, section VIII, line 4]

⁵⁷ In Green and Gildin: “to decide the question”; in Pangle: “the answer to the question”

⁵⁸ In Gildin, Green, Pangle : “depends upon”

is the simply good life, and (b) that the beginning⁵⁹ is radically imperfect. (c) Accordingly, we find in Greek science or philosophy a full consciousness of progress: in the first place, of progress [as] *achieved* and its inevitable concomitant, looking down on the inferiority or the weakness of the *ancients*.⁶⁰ And as regards *future* progress, quote, Aristotle himself:⁶¹ “In the art of medicine, there is no limit to the pursuit of health, and in the other arts there is no limit to the pursuit of their several ends. For they aim at accomplishing their ends to the uttermost.”⁶² The possibility of infinite progress, at least in certain respects, is here stated.⁶³

(d) Yet *the* idea of progress is different from the Greek conception of progress. Now what is the relation between, the relative importance of—to clarify, we must raise the question: What is the relative importance of fulfillment on the one hand, and future progress on the other?⁶⁴ The most elaborate statements on progress seem to occur in Lucretius and Seneca—the possibility of infinite progress in the sciences and arts is clearly stated.⁶⁵ Yet Lucretius was an Epicurean and Seneca was a Stoic, which means they both presupposed that the fundamental issues have been settled already, either by Epicurus or by the Stoa. No future progress then in the decisive respect.⁶⁶ Generally speaking, it seems that in classical thought the decisive questions were thought to have been answered as far as they can be answered. The only exception of which I know is Plato, who held that the fulfillment proper, namely, full wisdom, is not possible, but only quest for wisdom, which in Greek means philosophy. But he also insisted that there are no assignable limits to that quest for wisdom, and therefore it follows from Plato’s notion that indefinite progress is possible in principle.

(E) Hitherto I have spoken of intellectual progress. What about social progress? Are they parallel? The idea that they are necessarily parallel or that intellectual progress is accompanied in principle by social progress was known to the classics.⁶⁷ We find there the idea that the art of legislation, which is the overarching social art, progresses like any other art. Yet Aristotle, who reports this doctrine, questions this solution, and he notes the radical difference between laws and arts or intellectual pursuits. More generally stated, or more simply stated, he notes the radical difference between the requirements of social life and the requirements of intellectual life. The paramount requirement of society is stability as distinguished from progress. If I summarize⁶⁸ this point, in the classical conception of progress, it is clearly admitted that infinite intellectual progress in secondary matters is theoretically possible. But we must add immediately, there is no practical possibility for that,⁶⁹ for according to the one school, the visible universe is of finite

⁵⁹ In Green and Pangle: “beginning of life”

⁶⁰ In the handwritten MSS: “or weakness of the olden times.”

⁶¹ In Gildin, Green, Pangle: “Aristotle himself noted”

⁶² *Politics* 1257b25-28.

⁶³ “is here stated” does not appear in the handwritten MSS. At this point, the handwritten MSS becomes more sketchy; it is written more as notes than as a script.

⁶⁴ Strauss’s stumbling is deleted from Gildin, Green, Pangle.

⁶⁵ In the handwritten MSS: “possibility infinite progress in sciences and arts”; in Gildin, Pangle: “was clearly stated”

⁶⁶ In Green and Gildin “is envisioned” is added; in Pangle, “was envisioned”

⁶⁷ In his handwritten MSS, Strauss makes a reference to “Ar. Pol II,” and then some Greek terms. (p. 22, (e), line 2)

⁶⁸ In Pangle: “may summarize”

⁶⁹ In Pangle: “it is not practically possible”

duration: it has come into being and will perish again. And according to⁷⁰ the other view, which held that the visible universe is eternal, they say,⁷¹ especially Aristotle, that there are periodic cataclysms which will destroy all earlier civilization. Hence, eternal recurrence of the same progressive process followed by decay and destruction.

Now what is lacking⁷² in the classical conception as compared with the modern conception? I see two points. In the first there is lacking⁷³ the notion of a guaranteed parallelism between intellectual and social progress, and secondly, in the ancient concept of progress is lacking—there is no necessary end⁷⁴ of the progressive process through telluric or cosmic catastrophes. As to the first point, the guaranteed parallelism between social and intellectual progress, in the classical statements about progress the emphasis is upon intellectual progress rather than on social progress. The basic idea can be stated as follows. Science or philosophy is the preserve of a small minority, of those who have good natures, as they called it; who are gifted, as we say. Their progress, the progress of this tiny minority, does not necessarily affect society at large, far from it. It was this thought which was radically challenged in the seventeenth century, the beginning of modern philosophy, and the crucial notion⁷⁵ of the idea of method. Method brings about the levelling of the natural differences of the mind, and methods can be learned in principle by everyone. Only discovery remains the preserve of the few. But the acquisition of the results of the discoveries, and especially of the discovery of methods, is open to all. And there was a very simple proof: mathematical problems which formerly could not be solved by the greatest mathematical geniuses are now solved by high school boys.⁷⁶ The level of intelligence—that was the conclusion—has enormously been raised, and since this is possible, there is a necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress.

As for the second point, the guarantee of an infinite future on earth not interrupted by telluric catastrophe, we find in the eighteenth century this thought clearly⁷⁷ developed. The human race had a beginning but no end, and it began about seven thousand years ago. You see that man⁷⁸ did not accept the biblical chronology. Hence, since mankind is only seven thousand years old, it is still in its infancy. An infinite future is open, and look what we have achieved in this short span, compared with infinity, of seven thousand years. The decisive point is then this: there is a beginning and no end. Obviously, you see the argument presupposes a beginning, otherwise you cannot figure out this infinite progress. The origin of this idea—a beginning, but no end—could perhaps be found in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, if one takes that literally, yet Plato certainly admitted regular telluric catastrophes. The source, I think, has to be found in a certain interpretation of the Bible, which we find, for example, in Maimonides, where you have a beginning—the creation—and no end . . . and cataclysms are excluded, not by natural necessity but by the covenant of God with Noah. Yet precisely on the basis of the Bible, the beginning

⁷⁰ In Pangle: "As for those holding"

⁷¹ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: "asserted"

⁷² In Pangle: "distinctive"

⁷³ In Pangle: "there is lacking in the classical conception"

⁷⁴ In Pangle: "secondly, there is in the modern conception no necessary end"

⁷⁵ In Green and Pangle: "with the introduction of the crucial notion"

⁷⁶ In Pangle: "high school students"

⁷⁷ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: "fully"

⁷⁸ In Pangle: "the thinker I have in mind"

cannot be imperfect. To say nothing of this other very important aspect, that⁷⁹ the power of sin and of the need for greater redemption counters of course the effect of the notion of progress necessarily. Moreover,⁸⁰ in the Bible the core of the process from the beginning to the end is not progress. There is a classic past, whether we seek it at Mount Sinai, or in the patriarchs, or wherever else. Furthermore, and quite obviously, the core of the process as presented in the Bible is not intellectual-scientific development. The availability of infinite time for infinite progress appears then to be guaranteed by a document of revelation which condemns the other crucial elements of the idea of progress. Progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term is a hybrid notion.

This difficulty explains why the idea of progress underwent a radical modification in the nineteenth century. I quote one specimen. Quote: "Truth can no longer be found in a collection of fixed dogmatic propositions . . . but only in the process of knowing, which process ascends from the lower to ever higher stages . . . All those stages are only perishable phases in the endless development of the lower to the higher . . . There is no final absolute truth and no final absolute stage of the development. Nothing is imperishable except the uninterrupted process of becoming and perishing, of the endless ascent from the lower to the higher . . . We do not have to consider [I still continue the quotation—LS] here the question as to whether this view agrees with the present state of natural science, for at present natural science predicts a possible end to the existence of the earth and a certain end to the inhabitability of the earth. Natural science therefore assumes today that human history consists not only of an ascending, but also of a descending, process. However this may be, we are certainly still rather remote from the point where decline begins to set in."⁸¹ That statement was made by Friedrich Engels, the friend and collaborator⁸² of Karl Marx. Here we see infinite progress proper is abandoned, but the grave consequences of that are evaded by a wholly incomprehensible and unjustifiable "Never mind." This more recent form of the belief in progress is based on the decision just to forget about the end, to forget about eternity.

IX. The contemporary crisis of Western civilization may be said to be identical with the climactic crisis of the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term. I repeat, that idea consists of the following elements: the development of human thought as a whole is a progressive development, certainly the emergence of modern thought since the seventeenth century marks an unqualified progress beyond all earlier thought. There is a fundamental and necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress. There are no assignable limits to intellectual and social progress. Infinite intellectual and social progress is actually possible. Once mankind has reached a certain stage of development, there exists a solid flooring beneath which man can no longer sink. All these points have become questionable, I believe, to all of us. To mention only one point, perhaps the most massive point, the idea of progress was bound up with the notion of the conquest of nature, of man making himself the master and owner of nature for the purpose of relieving man's estate. The means for that goal was a new science. We all know of the enormous successes of the new science and of the technology which is based on it, and we all can witness the enormous increase of man's power. Modern man is a giant as compared to

⁷⁹ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: "Moreover, such additional important notions"

⁸⁰ In Green and Pangle: "Then again"

⁸¹ *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der deutschen klassischen Philosophie*, ed. H. Hayek, 6. [confirm]

⁸² In Green, Pangle, Gildin: "co-worker"

earlier man. But we have also to note that there is no corresponding increase in wisdom and goodness. Modern man is a giant of whom we do not know whether he is better or worse than earlier man. More than that, this development of modern science culminated in the view that man is not able to distinguish in a responsible manner between good and evil: the famous value judgments. Nothing can be said responsibly about the right use of that immense power. Modern man is a blind giant. The doubt of progress led to a crisis of Western civilization as a whole, because in the course of the nineteenth century, the old distinction between good and bad, or good and evil, had been progressively replaced by the distinction between progressive and reactionary. No simple, inflexible, eternal distinction between good and bad could give assurance to those who had learned to take their bearings only by the distinction between progressive and reactionary, as soon as these people had become doubtful of progress. The substitution of the distinction between progressive and reactionary for the distinction between good and bad is another aspect of the discovery of history, to which I had to refer before. A discovery of history, to state this very simply, is identical with the substitution of the past or the future for the eternal—the substitution of the temporal for the eternal.

X. Now to understand this crisis of Western civilization, one cannot leave it at understanding the problematic character of the idea of progress, for the idea of progress is only a part or an aspect of a larger whole, of what we shall not hesitate to call modernity. What is modernity? A hard question. I cannot possibly go into this infinite question now; I may say something about this next time, and I would like to make only two somewhat rambling considerations. I would like to remind you of the decisive steps which led up immediately to the contemporary crisis of Western civilization, and those who are familiar with these things I must apologize to them for the superficiality of what I must say in these few minutes, but I think it is important to remind you of these things nevertheless.⁸³ Therefore regard this as a stenogram, not as an analysis. Western civilization has two roots: the Bible and Greek philosophy. Let us first look at the first of these elements, the Bible, the biblical element. Modern rationalism rejected biblical theology and replaced it by such things as deism, pantheism, atheism. But in this process, biblical morality was in a way preserved. Goodness was still believed to consist in something like justice, benevolence, love, or charity; and modern rationalism had generally a tendency to believe that this biblical morality is better preserved if it is divorced from biblical theology, which implies, accidentally but necessarily, all the awful social implications of theology: persecution.⁸⁴ Now this was of course more visible in the nineteenth century than it is today; it is no longer so visible today because one crucial event happened around 1870, 1880, and that was the appearance of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's criticism can be reduced to one proposition: modern man has been trying to preserve biblical morality while abandoning biblical faith. That is impossible. If the biblical faith goes, biblical morality must go too, and a radically different morality must be accepted. The word which Nietzsche used is "the will to power." With all its implications, Nietzsche meant it in

⁸³ In Green and Pangle: "A hard question, which cannot be discussed here in detail. However, I would like to offer one or two somewhat rambling considerations. First, one might remember the decisive steps which led up to the contemporary crisis of Western civilization, and to those who are familiar with these things I must apologize for the superficiality of what is now offered in brief; but I think it is important to recall these things nevertheless"; Gildin's rendering is almost identical with very minor variation.

⁸⁴ The last part of the sentence, beginning with "which implies," does not appear in Green, Pangle, or Gildin.

a very subtle and noble manner, but the crude and ignoble way in which it was understood is not altogether independent of this radical change of orientation.

As for the other great element⁸⁵ of Western civilization, the classical element, the idea of philosophy of science, in the seventeenth century, a new philosophy and a new science began to emerge. It was in its claim the same as all earlier philosophy and science had been, but certainly the result of this seventeenth century revolution produced something which had never existed before: the emergence of Science with a capital S. Originally it was the attempt to replace traditional philosophy and science by a new philosophy or science, but in the course of a few generations it appeared that only a part of the new philosophy or science was successful, and indeed, amazingly successful. No one could question these—say, Newton.⁸⁶ But only a part of the new science or philosophy was successful. This great distinction between philosophy and science, which we are all familiar with, came into being. Science is the successful part of modern philosophy or science, and philosophy is the unsuccessful part, the rump. Science is therefore higher in dignity than philosophy. The consequence, which you know, is the depreciation of all knowledge which is not scientific in this peculiar sense. Science becomes the authority for philosophy in a way perfectly comparable to the way in which theology was the authority for philosophy in the Middle Ages. Science is *the* perfection of man's natural understanding of the world. But then certain things took place in the nineteenth century, you are familiar with these things, the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry and its use in physics, which made it clear that science cannot be described adequately as the perfection of man's natural understanding of the world, but rather as a radical modification of man's natural understanding of the world. In other words, science is based on certain fundamental hypotheses which, being hypotheses, are not absolutely necessary to accept and which will always remain hypothetical. The consequence was again drawn most clearly by Nietzsche: science is only one interpretation of the world among many. It⁸⁷ has certain advantages, but that of course does not give it an ultimate higher⁸⁸ cognitive status. The last consequence, as stated by some men in our age, as you know: modern science is in no way superior to Greek science, as little . . . as modern poetry is superior to Greek poetry. So in other words, science, having this enormous prestige, a higher prestige than any other power in the modern world, yet is a kind of giant on feet of clay, if you consider its foundations. I remind you again of the fact to which I had to allude before, that a consequence of this scientific development is that rational morality, the heritage of Greek philosophy, has lost its standing completely—the famous issue of value judgments. All choices are ultimately non-rational or irrational.⁸⁹

I will leave it at these remarks and may take up at the beginning of next time this issue of the crisis of modernity again. Permit me to conclude with one statement which I will try to substantiate perhaps next time. What modern man tried to do was—he made the attempt to

⁸⁵ In Green, Pangle, Gildin: “major component”

⁸⁶ In Pangle: “(e.g., Newtonian physics)”

⁸⁷ In Pangle: “The scientific interpretation of the world”

⁸⁸ In Green and Pangle: “superior”

⁸⁹ In Green, Pangle, and Gildin, the close of this paragraph appears thus: “As a consequence of this chain of scientific development the notion of a rational morality, the heritage of Greek philosophy, has, to repeat myself, lost its standing completely; all choices are, it is argued, ultimately non-rational or irrational.”

liberate thought from all prejudices by one decisive action. One man said, “You have to doubt of everything once in your life and then you get it out of your system.” A break, a once for all break with all opinion and hence with the past. At the end of this development, we find in control—not always visibly, sometimes in a disguised form—the assertion of the radical unfreedom of all human thought, that all thought depends ultimately on unevident premises which are imposed on thought by fate. I will try to explain next time how this beginning and this end are connected with each other. I leave it at this now.⁹⁰

[Applause]

[55:37]

⁹⁰ This final paragraph does not appear in Green nor in Pangle.