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## Modernity as Decline: An Ontologico-Historical Interpretation

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The concept of ‘cultural decline’ has long been conspicuously present as a contested and controversial reference point in assessments of what theorists often like to call ‘modernity’<sup>1</sup>. When invoked to affirm (or deny) cultural pessimism of some kind or other, it implies a conception of how things *ought*, culturally speaking, to be or have been, and this may correspond either to an idea of how things ought to be or have been generally, or to a notion of how they ought *then and there* to be or have been. Either way, a *positive* conception is implied, either of how things would have and should have been, or of how they are and are supposed to be, in the absence of any such decline. Such conceptions, however, are in turn usually linked to commitments of a more specific kind, to cultural, ethical and/or political ideals or paradigms of some sort, and to any underlying intuitions and beliefs, or minimally necessary contexts of intelligibility, on which these depend<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We assume here that the concept ‘modernity’ functions to encompass, rather than be subsumed by, such concepts as ‘post-modernity’, ‘post-post-modernity’, ‘anti-modernity’, etc.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the commitments and practices associated *inter alia* with liberalism, libertarianism, conservatism or marxism, and/or with the cultural legacies of Christianity and the Ancient world, including the humanism of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and the various forms of anti-humanism that have emerged since.

While these more specific commitments tend to dominate our public discourse about cultural flourishing and decline, so that they appear to define the contemporary cultural politics of this issue, it is by no means clear that they capture what is really at stake, or even the real range of positions involved. In fact, as I shall attempt to show, the pervasive juxtaposition of apparently mutually exclusive stances we are confronted with – e.g. conservative vs. progressive social liberal (or socialist), marxist vs. economically liberal (or libertarian) capitalist, and communitarian vs. individualist – may do more to conceal than to illuminate the real significance of what is going on here, especially as it serves to conceal an aporetic scenario that all of these oppositions share.

Cultural conservatives typically evaluate a culture as flourishing or declining on the basis of how successfully it maintains existing customs and traditions valued (at least partly) for their familiarity – as unique features of the particular forms of life that are carried on, and that have evolved gradually and ‘naturally’, in a given place over time. This may be accompanied by various supporting intuitions: e.g. the feeling that attempts to ‘engineer’ swift or systematic changes to an established order will only result in a worsening of conditions, and/or the more elusive thought that a *particular* and *concrete* form of life has value just by being the one that one *happens* to actually find oneself in<sup>3</sup>.

Cultural progressivists, on the other hand, tend to evaluate a culture as flourishing or declining on the basis of how successful it is in realizing (or helping to realize) conditions pertaining to the lives of its participants that are held to furnish (in principle) a justificatory telos for enacting changes to the existing culture. In our contemporary setting, such changes mainly reflect liberal ideals, but they could in fact be driven by any vision of a form of life (be it liberal, libertarian, marxist, or religion-derived) whose realization is taken to furnish such a rationale.

At first sight this contrast seems to offer a straightforward framework for making sense of the cultural-political discourse of flourishing and decline. Cultural conservatives, we may say, are willing to embrace and affirm historical contingency as a fundamental fact about human existence,

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<sup>3</sup> Of these two lines of thinking, only the former is really distinctive of cultural conservatism. The latter also appears in the thinking of those who follow Marx (and especially the earlier Marx) in holding that a context of intelligibility for human affairs only counts as properly substantial if grounded in concrete and particular (i.e. ‘material’) conditions, but who at the same time seek a convergence between this way of thinking and that of Heideggerian hermeneutic ontology and/or the later Wittgenstein. (That second thought is not embraced here for the sake of tradition, but because it just *happens* that, at a given time and place, some traditional forms of life better exemplify the conditions necessary for *authentic intelligibility* than those associated with modernity.)

whose implications are then critically brought to bear on an understanding of the given state of a culture through the identification of certain problematic features that are taken to manifest misguided forms of idealism, in the sense of a misguided faith in the capacity of human beings to reshape their social reality (by means of political praxis of one sort or another) so that it more clearly resembles their ideals. Cultural progressivists, on the other hand, are likely to regard any such principled acceptance of contingency in the political sphere as betraying a fatalistic acceptance of the *status quo* – one that prescind from, and thus forecloses on, the open-ended future in which possibilities of transformative political action and hopes of a better future are thought to be located.

However, on closer inspection things turn out not to be so simple. In practice, conservatives rarely invoke the cultural *status quo* as we find it today – and probably have rarely done so in the past. This is because that *status quo* itself reflects an intertwining of that which they consider ‘traditional’ in a positive sense with results of past attempts to enact social change of the kind they find to be idealistically misguided – where such results may themselves figure as both historically contingent and familiar<sup>4</sup>. Hence they must appeal, somewhere along the line, to yardsticks of value held to be valid independently of whether they happen to correspond to any contingently occurring historical actuality or not. This obliges them to look beyond the affirmation of what is familiar but contingent, and to invoke ideals of social harmony, order, simplicity, predictability, and so on.

Progressivists, for their part, be they liberal or socialist (or, indeed, even anarchist), are committed to construing human social existence in terms that imply the intelligibility of the actions they take to be required to change it for the better. This implies a belief that that which is to be changed is itself located in a wider realm of perceived possibilities, such as constitutes a framework for making practical sense of any attempt to bring about change by rational means. Hence they are committed to locating culture itself within a wider and more fundamental model of reality as a ‘space of possibilities’ for action – a ‘world’ in a specifically (but also thinly) practical sense of this term (not entirely unrelated, perhaps, to that elaborated by Heidegger in Division I of *Being and Time*). Yet in practice this does not seem to alter the fact that they also tend to be motivated by ideals and goals that in turn reflect a specific sort of ethical response – one directed

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<sup>4</sup>If the failure to appreciate the value of what is historically contingent but familiar that conservatives accuse progressives of becomes entrenched enough to itself count as historically contingent but familiar, then even if it is somehow paradoxical to attribute a positive value to this, one will surely be committed to doing so by affirming, as one’s ultimate yardstick of value, just what is historically contingent but familiar.

towards already existing social conditions or events in the past, and which invests these same ideals and goals with an ethico-moral significance that possesses the same historically contingent character as the states of affairs or events that prompted the responses in the first place<sup>5</sup>.

Conservatives and progressivists, then, both find themselves caught in an aporia – one that furnishes a significant parallel between the two otherwise contrasting sorts of case they represent. Conservatives appeal to the value of that which is familiar but historically contingent, but this stands in conflict with their need to leave room for an understanding of the possibilities closed off by any historical failure to recognize this same value. To affirm such unrealized possibilities over and above the consequences of such a failure is to affirm the non-contingent over the contingent, which pulls in the opposite direction from the affirmation of the familiar, in that the preference for the familiar over the unfamiliar itself only makes sense where *both* are historically contingent. Progressivists, meanwhile, understand their ethico-moral insights in terms that confer a historically contingent status on these insights themselves, where this is not thought to undermine their authoritative character. Yet at the same time they maintain a commitment to social change through forms of praxis directed at the same areas of human life, where this involves thinking of these same insights (and the concerns they relate to) as occupying a place within an arena of practical possibilities. But to think of them in this kind of way is to ascribe an importance to them that is ultimately indifferent to historical contingencies, since we are then supposed to regard the ideals and goals through which such insights and concerns find practical expression as being valid regardless of whether, in the light of historically contingent developments, their realization is in fact feasible or not. In short, both sides are caught up in a scenario that requires them to move in two opposing directions at once – on the one hand investing an unqualified significance in historical contingencies themselves, while on the other appealing to the idea of a higher-level framework of possibilities invested with value prior to any contingencies pertaining to their actual (or historical) (non-)realization.

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<sup>5</sup>There is a recognition that if those (or equivalent) conditions had not come to obtain, or those (or equivalent) events had not happened, then our current ethico-moral landscape would be substantially – perhaps even radically – different from how it is. Of course, that which is significant in virtue of its historically contingent character may itself presuppose a prior grasp of a ‘world’ relative to which certain values count ‘ontologically’ as pre-given. But this cannot be so where it corresponds to something that counts historically as a *watershed* – and where this ‘watershed’ has itself been individually or collectively lived through. To affirm or deny the possibility of such watersheds in ontological terms is self-contradictory and incoherent, but if they have, as a matter of historical fact, occurred, then it follows from the *actuality* of the particular cases that *those* cases *were* possible – otherwise *they* could not have occurred. This structure of commitment and entailment is therefore *radically historical*.

Turning to another pair of opposing positions within contemporary cultural politics, we encounter something similar. Marxism and free-market capitalism propound theories about the proper economic structures that their proponents believe should be put in place in order to furnish a preferred material and/or practical basis for human social existence – where this basis is thought to be recognizable as good or bad prior to questions about what specifically ‘cultural’ forms of life might be empowered or frustrated by it. Marxists, in espousing an ideal of unalienated conditions of labour, embrace the view that treats economic systems as forming the material ‘base’ that makes possible (and constrains) other so-called ‘super-structural’ aspects of the society in question. Proponents of the free market, meanwhile, motivated by the more libertarian values of ‘economic’ rather than ‘social’ liberalism, typically assume that whatever cultural forms of life emerge as a consequence of the unhindered operations of the free market in various areas of human concern will be *ipso facto* indubitably good, just by virtue of having thus emerged, as in that context they are construable as transparent expressions of the freely determined and manifested preferences of the individuals involved.

The basis for the marxist conception of economics is a teleologically dialectical understanding of the ethico-practico-rational character of human life derived from Hegel’s account of human history, recast in the mould of an explicitly materialist understanding. This, however, attributes primary significance to the structures of intelligibility that show up when human beings are engaged with their surroundings as *agents* seeking to bring about materially and economically advantageous outcomes through organized labour – that is, through *work* on particular elements or aspects of the reality they find around them. The thought that one should do so is tantamount to an ontological claim, since it is not itself derivable as some sort of outcome of the historical dialectic itself – on the contrary, it serves as a *prior* reference point for deciding how such a dialectic (and its telos) should itself be construed. Yet this introduces a clear tension with the dialectic itself, since the very idea of such a dialectic as it appears both in Marx and in the particular phase of Hegel’s philosophy that inspired it (namely, that of the *Phenomenology*) is the idea of something whose claim on us stems entirely from the historical actuality of its having already unfolded, and not from some metaphysical claim regarding the primordial possibilities intrinsic to the practical-social nature of human beings themselves. What is aporetic here is that each of these commitments is supposed to be irreducible to the terms in which the other operates, but since one of them appeals to an over-

riding and all-encompassing historicism that purports to leave no room for metaphysics, while the other one is, in fact, tantamount to a metaphysical commitment about where we should expect to encounter the primordial and ultimate intelligibility of whatever is to be admitted into our concept of reality, each actually implies a commitment to the reducibility *in toto* of the sphere within which the other operates<sup>6</sup>.

Free-market economic liberalism implies something similar when it construes itself as a transparent vehicle not only for the expression of human preferences, but also, by extension, for the manifesting of the values – here presumed to be similarly subjective – underpinning culture itself. That is to say, to be consistent with its own presumptions, culture, construed as a set of values sustained by practices of one sort or another, must itself be evaluated with reference to whatever is revealed through the procedurally rational choices made when human beings engage in the free exchange of goods and services (with or without money as a mediating instrument for regulating and facilitating this). Whatever emerges as an expression of consumer choice in the context of the mechanisms of the market will therefore count as a historically disclosed yardstick for determining the state of a culture with respect to its putative flourishing or declining. The aporetic dimension of this comes into view once we realize that what often tends to be revealed by such choices are preferences for things, and qualities of things, associated with modes of living ostensibly at odds with that which develops around a market-driven economy itself, once the latter is self-consciously construed as a foundational phenomenon, and thus as something whose acknowledgement is taken to imply that culture itself has no value beyond being consonant with the preferences and values revealed through the mechanisms the market itself. It thus appears that the market brings to our notice the awkward, historically contingent fact that when subjective human preferences have been transparently revealed through it, they have for the most part testified to a desire for an existence whose guiding values will be (re)invested with the sort of significance values can only have when construed as more than historically contingent facts about the subjective preferences human beings have so far revealed themselves as having. Such values, it seems, imply a perspective on value as it pertains to human life that is at odds with the proceduralistically minimalistic conception of the unconditionally good at the heart of the free-market ethos. They suggest that what human beings seek, after all, is a structure of value, or *kind* of

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<sup>6</sup> I take these points to also be applicable to the Heideggerian-Wittgensteinian variant mentioned earlier (see above, note 3). In that case, the demand for a certain sort of intelligibility plays a similar role (as a regulative ideal) to that fulfilled by the notion of unalienated labour in Marx.

value, capable of being embodied in an actual form of life experienced more concretely than is the proceduralistic transparency of the free market and its dependent cultural forms – i.e. concretely enough to effectively delimit an internally coherent and binding conception of a ‘lifeworld’, in the specific sense of a sphere of determinate practical possibilities for living expressed in the form of communally accepted norms. And *this* is paradoxical, because the very disclosure we are talking about here is, surely, one which only the free market, or something like it, could be relied on to bring about<sup>7</sup>.

The third contrast we shall discuss here tends to figure more implicitly in debates about cultural flourishing and decline: communitarians hold that values – be they construed ontologically, deontologically, or consequentialistically – are to be determined primarily with reference to human communities rather than individuals, whereas individualists advocate the converse of this. The aporetic scenario pertaining to this emerges whenever these two positions square off against each other. Wherever the communitarian argues with reference to *ahistorical* considerations that the community constitutes a more fundamental basis for defining the values and concerns informing the cultural sphere than the individual, it remains open, at least in principle, for the individualist to argue that what really matters are not such considerations at all, but rather those pertaining to the value-disclosing legacy of *historical* events, which, it may be argued, point in the opposite direction by suggesting that what is of ultimate significance are values and concerns pertaining in the first instance to the individual (as, for example, in Kant’s invocation of ‘the *faktum* of reason’, or Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s attempts at a historicistic underpinning of individualism).

Equally, wherever the communitarian argues that it is with reference to just the latter sort of *historical* considerations that the community constitutes an overriding touchstone for determining cultural values (and thus, by extension, whether a culture should be deemed to be flourishing or in decline – as, perhaps, it might be said to do in Hegel and Marx), it remains open to the individualist to argue against this that what matters before all else are *ahistorical* considerations pertaining to the nature of human individuals (say, for example, the rational autonomy of the individual, construed metaphysically as a part of the essential nature of the human being qua generic individual (as in Aristotle), or transcendently, as being presupposed as a necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge (as

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<sup>7</sup> Its force, as an apparent negation of the proceduralism of that model, itself derives from the fact of its having been revealed through the choices of individuals in a supposedly transparent setting, where the only basis we have for thinking that we are dealing with such a setting is furnished by the *procedural* neutrality attributed under this model to the mechanisms of the free market itself.

in Kant)). The same relations of incommensurability between competing modes of justification will, of course, also run in the opposite direction, allowing the communitarian to respond to individualist arguments by likewise shifting the terms of reference of the debate from the ahistorical to the historical, or vice versa, whenever it suits him or her to do so.

Such moves leave unaddressed the question of whether the relative importance of historical vs. ahistorical considerations should be determined in the light of a *prior* determination of the relative importance of communitarian vs. individualistic concerns, or prior to (and as a basis for) determining the latter. In the absence of any clear consensus about which areas of human affairs are to be ultimately construed in terms of historically or ahistorically disclosed structures of value, any meaningful discussion about what the appropriateness might be of invoking communitarian or individualist criteria in the first instance to determine the state of a culture becomes clouded in uncertainty.

At the bottom of each of these aporetic scenarios lies a similar problem – uncertainty about whether the basic-or-ultimate *phenomenon* under consideration (when we talk about human beings, their lives, projects, customs, traditions and social institutions, and so on) is one that should be conceived in ahistorically or historically value-disclosing terms. Does such a phenomenon call for a quintessentially *ontological* mode or paradigm of understanding, where values are defined in the first instance with reference to some overarching set of *framing* possibilities for human beings, that are taken as just ‘given’, or for a quintessentially *historical* mode or paradigm of understanding, in which values are defined with reference to the implications of specific events and developments in the past, including actual states of affairs taken to have issued from these?<sup>8</sup> What is aporetic in all of these cases is that there appears to be an underlying relation of incommensurability between the competing yardsticks of evaluation involved, where this means that the choice of one or other of these paradigms for any given aspect of human affairs (or, indeed, for the whole, or the sum, of them) will appear arbitrary to anyone willing to recognize a plausible alternative in the form of the other available paradigm.

And now for our solution to this problem. It is proposed here that we should construe culture *itself* as a basic-or-ultimate phenomenon of a spe-

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘ontological’ should be construed fairly broadly, here, as indicating an overall mode of thinking in which one is inclined to begin by taking certain possibilities as given, where these constitute a *framework* for understanding all actual developments pertaining to that which one seeks to understand. (Platonist, Aristotelian and Leibnizian forms of metaphysics, as well as Kant’s transcendental a priori, the hermeneutic ontology of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and Quinean ‘regimented theory’, all may be said to involve something like this.)



cific kind – one that can only be understood in terms of the thought that it involves elements of both of these forms of understanding, interlinked via relations of mutual interdependency and irreducibility, where some of these serve to define a cultural *inheritance* by relating an ontologically conceived (cultural) present ‘backwards’ to a historically grasped (cultural) past, and others define a cultural *legacy* by connecting a historically grasped (cultural) present ‘forwards’ to an ontologically conceived (cultural) future. It will be helpful, I think, when elaborating this, if we draw upon an analogy with family life, where something similar can be observed, and in a somewhat more explicit and intuitively recognizable form<sup>9</sup>.

It is self-evident that to be involved in family life as a member of a family is to be caught up, at one and the same time, in two distinct roles, each corresponding to one of the two sides of an asymmetric relationship that an individual typically stands in to certain other individuals: such an individual stands at the end of a chain of relationships linking persons to their ancestral progenitors, but also at the beginning of a chain of relationships linking persons to their descendents.

If someone is understood in terms of their being a descendant of their ancestral progenitors (parents, etc.), then they are understood as forming one element within a relationship whose other element, formed by one or more of their ancestral progenitors, corresponds, with respect to its role within that relationship, to the role of the element they themselves constitute in the context of *their* relationship with their descendents. Likewise, if someone is understood in terms of their being an ancestral progenitor of their descendants (children – including those unborn, etc.), then they are understood as forming one element within a relationship whose other element, formed by one or more of their descendents themselves, corresponds, with respect to its role within that relationship, to the role of the constituent element that *that person* constitutes in the context of *their* relationship with *their* ancestral progenitors.

Considered ‘formally’, without reference to which role a given individual *actually* happens to occupy, these two relationships have the same form and so are of the same kind: they exhibit the same contrastive duality of roles. But considered in terms of the fact that a given individual will occupy opposing roles depending on whether the relationship in question locates them at the end or at the beginning of a chain of relationships stretching away from their own temporal standpoint in *one or other* of the

<sup>9</sup> For a more fully elaborated account of how family life can be understood in such terms, see C. Humphries, ‘The Family and its Ethos, A Philosophical Case Study in Ontologico-Historical Understanding’, in *The Ignatianum Philosophical Yearbook (Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum)*, vol. XIX/2, 2013.

two temporal directions available (i.e. running towards either ‘earlier and earlier’ or ‘later and later’ times, either ‘into the past’ or ‘into the future’), they correspond to entirely distinct perspectives on how the individual in question stands relative to others. Relative to these standpoint-dependent perspectives, then, the two relationships do not have the same form, and so cannot be said to be of the same kind.

We may add that a person’s relationship with their ancestral progenitors is a relationship that has the same essential character, regardless of whether the latter happen to be still living or already dead – though it is one that is, perhaps, brought into a more explicitly graspable form when they *are* actually dead. *Their* legacy is *that person’s* inheritance, and this legacy-inheritance structure links a *historical* understanding of their lives, construed as structures of historical development ultimately to be comprehended specifically *ex post*, with an internally ahistorical *ontological* understanding of that person’s life, construed as that structure of constitutive possibilities identifiable as having already been in place prior to any actual developments pertaining to its historically contingent unfolding as this may have occurred so far. This linkage forms a structure of constitutive ‘references’ running in both directions at once<sup>10</sup>. On the one hand, the possibilities that one takes to be constitutive of that person’s life as an ontological phenomenon, in that they furnish the background framework for making sense of what actually occurs over the course of that person’s life, are *already* pre-imbued with a meaning: one that reflects a grasp of the historical developments that had to occur in the life-histories of their ancestral progenitors in order for them to have just *that* totality of possibilities available, and not some other<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, the structures of historical development that happened to occur in the life-histories of their ancestral progenitors are, at the same time, imbued with a meaning that reflects a grasp of the changed structure of possibilities for that person’s own life that is thought to actually have issued from them. To come to appreciate this structure of jointly constituted significances is, we may say, to come

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Heidegger’s elaboration of the intelligibility conditions pertaining to equipmentality in Division I of *Being and Time*. Unlike Heidegger, though, we have in mind constitutive references running to and fro between the two mutually irreducible domains of the ontological and the historical. See M. Heidegger (transl. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson), *Being and Time*, London 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Such developments will be ones that, at some point in time or other, either had to occur for the possibilities available to one to be so, or had to occur for the possibilities not available to one to not be so. The vanishing or non-vanishing of possibilities over time, understood as a form of development that is a function of events, has been analyzed by G.H. von Wright. See G.H. von Wright, “Diachronic and Synchronic Modality”, in G.H. von Wright, *Truth, Knowledge, and Modality*, Oxford 1984.

to appreciate both their legacy to that person and that person's inheritance from them – understood as two inseparable aspects of one relationship<sup>12</sup>.

In parallel to this, we may say that a person's relationship with their descendants is also a relationship that, taken in non-standpoint-dependent terms, exhibits the same essential character, regardless of whether they happen to be already living or to be as yet unborn and unconceived – though it is one that is, perhaps, encounterable in a more explicitly graspable form prior to their actually being conceived or born. *That person's legacy is their inheritance*, and this legacy-inheritance structure links a *historical* understanding of that person's life, construed in terms of structures of historical development ultimately to be comprehended by others *ex post* (where such comprehension is thus something that that person will mostly stand in an anticipatory relationship to), with an (internally ahistorical) *ontological* understanding of *their* lives, construed as that structure of constitutive possibilities identifiable as already in place even prior to any actual developments pertaining to the historically contingent unfolding of *their* lives so far. Here we find the same linkage as before, forming the same structure of constitutive 'references' running in both directions at once. This time, though, the possibilities that one takes to be constitutive of that person's descendants' lives, construed ontologically as furnishing the background framework for making sense of whatever will actually occur over the course of those lives, are pre-imbued with a meaning that reflects the historical developments that have had to occur in that person's own life-history for those others to have *ended up starting out* with just *those* totalities of possibilities available to them, and not others. Meanwhile, the structures of historical development that have actually occurred in that person's own life so far are imbued with a meaning that reflects a grasp of the changed structure of possibilities for the lives of their descendants that are thought to have issued from them. To appreciate this structure of jointly constituted significances is to appreciate both that person's legacy *to them* and their inheritance *from that person* – understood here, as earlier, as two mutually inseparable relational dimensions within one internally complex structure of *relationship*.

In each of these cases, the (structure of) relationship involves an irreducible conjunction of elements – of historical commitments and concerns that derive their form and meaning from references to ontological commitments and concerns, and vice versa. As such, such relationships

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<sup>12</sup> Compare this to hermeneutic-ontological accounts of relations to the past (Heidegger, Gadamer), which capture only the latter aspect. Ricoeur's narrative-based account of remembering is similarly one-sided.

must be thought of as constituted with reference to a form of understanding we shall call *ontologico-historical*. But in one of these two cases a given individual occupies one role, one standpoint, and one perspective on this conjunction of elements, and in the other case that same given individual occupies the other role, the other standpoint, and the other perspective on this. And it is in what we might loosely and provisionally describe as ‘the natural order of things’ for any such individual to occupy both roles at the same time, where this fact can itself only be understood with reference to that same form of understanding.

What such a structure of understanding provides, in the context of the family, is an enriched set of points of reference for evaluating the unfolding of individual lives – one that seeks to determine the value of the course that such an unfolding takes in any particular case by considering its implications for other lives with which that one may be said to be both contingently and non-contingently interconnected. Our proposal, then, is that notions of cultural flourishing and decline should be understood in a way that runs parallel to this: i.e. by referring them to a conception of what it means for a culture to unfold or occur over time, construing this in similar terms. What this implies, above all, is a grasp of relations *between* cultures – between an unfolding or occurring culture and two sets of non-occurring or non-unfolding cultures – those that have (or at some already relevant future point in time will come to have) already unfolded or occurred, and those that have yet to unfold or occur (or at some still relevant point in the past had yet to do so).

Such an approach requires us to place this or that culture and *its* unfolding or occurring in the context of some broader conception of human civilizational unfolding or occurring – one that, just like the conception of the family elaborated above, is not weighted in advance in favour of either an ontological or a historical paradigm, but recognizes both of these as corresponding to distinguishable elements within the complex structure of asymmetrical dependency relations linking a culture on the one hand to its retrospectively contemplated antecedents (which may be said to make up its ‘cultural past’), and on the other to its projected successors (which represent its ‘cultural future’).

So, we may ask, what in practice would it mean to interpret notions of cultural flourishing and decline in such terms?

Taking modern European culture as our primary focus of interest, we may observe that this culture understands its possibilities above all with reference to two principal antecedent cultures: the Judeo-Christian and

Graeco-Roman civilizations of the so-called ‘ancient world’. Each of these furnishes a legacy in the form of a set of possibilities that it opens up or helps to keep in play for human beings: on the one hand, a vision of human life as generating moral and political insights as, above all, compassionate responses to the contingencies of human life as a site of the pathetic (e.g. of suffering, experienced happiness, etc.), and, on the other, a vision of human life as a project framed in terms of practical possibilities and exigencies that ‘are there’ in that they are available to be rationally and systematically grasped prior to any contingencies pertaining to their realization. In each case, while framing our own culture’s sense of its possibilities, this inherited legacy does so in terms that reflect a historical understanding of its origins in events and developments whose primary *historical* meaning pertains to what befell those antecedent cultures themselves.

At the same time, we should note that these two visions themselves correspond to thematizations of the basic elements of the contrast between ontological and historical paradigms of understanding which we have found to be the source of the aporetic scenarios afflicting the opposing positions within the sphere of cultural politics discussed earlier. They are, then jointly responsible for the obtaining of a state of affairs in which those aporiae could arise at all. So the tension between these two incommensurable modes of understanding of culture generally (and, more specifically, cultural flourishing and decline) is itself part of our culture’s historical inheritance, and to seek to deny that such a tension exists by withdrawing, say, into a mystico-religious poetics (as, arguably, both Eliot and the later Heidegger did), is tantamount to a wholesale denial of that inheritance. Yet equally, to *unconditionally* affirm such a distinction as a generalized feature, such as would entail the *necessary* incommensurability of *all* competing applications of ontological and historical understanding within the sphere of cultural politics, would be tantamount to assigning a positive historical significance to all of the developments in the past that led to our having the cultural inheritance that we do have – so that, absurdly, none of these contingencies could ever then be seen as juxtaposable with potentially preferable counterfactual alternatives<sup>13</sup>.

If this is correct, then we should not expect or demand the achieving of any formal resolution to the issues pertaining to the aporetic character of our cultural politics insofar as it is bound up with these positions and the relations of incommensurability that arise between them when both ontological and historical paradigms of understanding are in play. Instead, what

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<sup>13</sup> This would be a case of affirming one’s past *just* because it happened.

we must seek to identify our particular threads of historical development linking specific aspects of this or that aporetic scenario back to specific aspects of the antecedent cultural histories in which they have their origin, in order to grasp their historically disclosed character as positive or negative – as corresponding, that is, to something that already counted as a positive or negative historical outcome *prior* to its figuring in our own culture's hermeneutic engagement with *its* own past as essentially a reflection of its own internal concerns. Such outcomes, insofar as they *also* correspond to aspects of our own cultural state of affairs, may then be affirmed or disaffirmed in the light of this as forms of flourishing or decline. However, this would still be just one side of an ontologico-historical interpretation. The other side would involve recognising that this same state of affairs pertaining to our culture itself has an unfolding historical dimension – one whose completion will eventually constitute a legacy for some successor culture in which our historically disclosed achievements and fate will take on some kind of significance in virtue of the possibilities they will have kept open, created or closed off for that culture, albeit in terms that continue to reflect what those same historical actualities meant for us.

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**Nowoczesność jako upadek kultury – ujęcie ontologiczno-historyczne**

We współczesnej dyskusji o kulturze interpretacja „nowoczesności” jako procesu schyłkowego, w rozumieniu konserwatystów, marksistów lub liberalistów zawiera wspólną aporię: w każdym przypadku zostawia się pierwszy lub drugi przeciwstawny paradygmat (ontologiczny lub historyczny) jako podstawę dyskursu. Zamiast wycofywać się do mistyczno-religijnej poetyki, która nie pozwala na rozróżnianie obu paradygmatów, proponuje się pozytywne rozwiązanie, traktujące je jako niemożliwe do wyeliminowania. Stwierdza się, że w kontekście „nowoczesności” upadek kultury najlepiej pojąć jako cechę wewnątrznie złożonego zjawiska, w którym ontologiczne i historyczne modele rozumienia są powiązane poprzez wspólne relacje zależności i nieredukowalności. Powyższe stwierdzenie zostaje rozwinięte za pomocą opisu analogii pomiędzy kulturą a rodziną.