

## Francis Fukuyama’s God That Failed

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It was 1989, and history had finally ended.

Or at least so said a then-obscure Straussian academic by the name of Francis Fukuyama, writing in the summer issue of *National Interest*. In triumphal tones, Fukuyama assured his readers that while events would carry on, and be duly recorded in magazines like *Foreign Affairs*, we no longer had to face any doubt as to what those events would eventually lead to. We had met the *Zeitgeist*, and it was identical with the dreams of the man who had pioneered the concept so long ago (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel) as interpreted by one of his fiercest disciples (Alexander Kojève).

The “end” in question was a full embrace of liberal democracy (Fukuyama emphasized the “liberal” part) by all civilizations around the globe, some slower than others, but all ultimately arriving at the same point. We had no need to worry about “immanentizing the eschaton,” to borrow Eric Voegelin’s derisive term for history-ending schemes. The eschaton, instead, would immanentize itself. All we had to do was sit back and watch as the world came its way.

Even in 1989, this was a daring thesis. The Berlin Wall would not come down for several months. The Soviet Union would not be similarly dissolved for several years. Fukuyama openly fretted in the opening pages about the potential for Mikhail Gorbachev to be deposed by a more hardline communist leader, little suspecting that in the end, Gorbachev would actually depose himself. And yet, while Fukuyama’s thesis was correct in its optimism, at least in the short run, the

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piece was more than an exercise in triumphal chest thumping. Fukuyama's essay aimed to provide something at once more ambitious, and vastly more useful: a thesis with explanatory power for the seeming irrevocable triumph of liberalism on the global scale, and with predictive power for what was to come. In fact, while he would later walk back this particular part of the essay in his book of the same name, Fukuyama seemed to suggest in his "end of history" essay that not only did we know how history *would* end, but in some sense, it had already ended.

Was he correct? To ask the question is to invite eyerolls and sniggers. Looked at today, the idea that liberalism would triumph everywhere with only minimal speed bumps where it was not accepted yet, and no chance of retrogression where it was, no doubt seems absurd. But while history has kept right on going, it must also be said, with admiration, that so has Francis Fukuyama. Rather than simply sticking to his thesis with the dogmatic certainty so characteristic of the [shipwrecked minds](#) of so many [triumphalists](#) of that age, Fukuyama has been constantly revising and qualifying his ideas, always in search of that explanatory and predictive paradigm that will offer us a peek at history's grand design, a design that Fukuyama still believes is far from ineffable. In short, far from being shipwrecked, Fukuyama has been making valiant and insistent efforts to build a raft that can once more allow him to ride the waves of destiny.

His work in that regard has been formidable: so formidable, in fact, that even those he would not regard as fellow voyagers have learned from it. I've little doubt that I, for example, am not the sort of thinker that Fukuyama meant to inspire with his work, being a sometime early adopter of President Trump's nationalist agenda. Yet inspire me he did, and toward the very ideas that he now seems most bent on attacking. I still remember listening to the audiobook of Fukuyama's massive treatise on the history of political order in late 2015, and hearing the observation that societies on the verge of decline are often saved not by reaffirmation of well-worn verities, but rather by resurrection of ideas previously thought discredited or dangerous, whose time had come.<sup>1</sup> That single observation did as much to push me from an agnostic but curious follower of candidate Donald Trump into a full-throated supporter of the unconventional, unpredictable billionaire, as any series of life experiences or scholarly observations I had read to that point. After all, Trump was speaking for a pair of ideas—populism and nationalism—that were regarded as not merely dead letter, but dangerous poison, by the establishments of both political parties.

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

Might it be that resurrecting those seemingly righteously defeated concepts was, in fact, the way to “make America great again?” And through America, to reinvigorate the entire project of liberalism? Based on Fukuyama’s observation, it seemed as likely, if not more so, as anything else. Why not, then, give nationalism a shot?

Fukuyama does not see things at all the same way. In the opening pages of his most recent book, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Fukuyama identifies the rise of Donald Trump not with the renewal of American politics, or of liberalism generally, but rather with the decline of the American state. In fact, it is this alarm that drove Fukuyama to compose the book, so he says. Needless to say, my thesis—that nationalism could be a necessary ingredient for the functioning of liberalism and of American society—and his cannot coexist. One of us has to be right, in the sense that one of us has to see the world with more explanatory power. Which is why, though it may be that I and others like me will end up shipwrecked as surely as Fukuyama and his compatriots did, I feel the need to write this piece. Because for all the majesty of his scholarship, Fukuyama’s work still seems hampered by its religious commitment to the project of detailing a history that not only has an end, but also *should* have an end, and a liberal end at that, and sooner rather than later. I do not believe that a single one of these premises is accurate, and I believe that Fukuyama should be able to see why from looking not at the evidence of history, but at the plain words (and contradictions) of his own writing. Therefore, as just one passenger on the nationalist schooner sailing past Fukuyama’s shipwrecked efforts to set sail, consider this an attempt to send a lifeboat—or at least to shout out—to him that no matter how beautifully he builds his boats, they keep running aground because the direction to which his compass points (universal, global liberalism) is *the wrong one*.

To begin with, there is a matter of some confusion that needs exploration: when Fukuyama wrote of the “end of history,” what did he mean? Throughout his career, Fukuyama has given conflicting accounts of this, but a quick look at the opening pages of *Identity* gives us at least his current explanation: “I was using the word *history* in the Hegelian-Marxist sense—that is, the long-term evolutionary story of human *development* or *modernization*. The word *end* was meant not in the sense of ‘termination,’ but ‘target’ or ‘objective.’”<sup>2</sup>

Whether this has always been Fukuyama’s idea of the “end of history” is a matter I leave for others to debate. Even if not, it would be needlessly peevish to grudge him a little refinement in thirty years as a public intellectual. For now, I

<sup>2</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *Identity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), Kindle edition, Loc. 65 of 3,562.

would only add one term to his list of synonyms for his intended meaning of “end”: *Telos*.

I add this word because words like “target” or “objective” do not fully capture the sense of intentionality that Fukuyama ascribes to history, writ large, at least in his original essay and book. It is not an exaggeration to say that Fukuyama believes, like his self-professed inspiration Hegel, that history has a very real spirit that is trying to get to an end state: in this case, that of a “liberal state linked to a market economy.”<sup>3</sup>

Fukuyama notes that he has since revised this thesis with his two volumes on political order, though his revision, by his own account, is less substantial than one might think. Fukuyama now believes that creating a liberal state, or “getting to Denmark,”<sup>4</sup> as he puts it, is much harder than he anticipated, and potentially prone to backsliding even once it is created. In other words, even if a state gets to Denmark, there’s no guarantee that its people won’t later move it to Moscow, even if history still (by Fukuyama’s account) wants it to stay in Denmark. Human will, it seems, is still in the driver’s seat rather than *Zeitgeist*.

This is an important concession, not least because without it, Fukuyama’s entire original thesis would have been disproved by events. To understand why, we need to return to Fukuyama’s original 1989 essay, and his discussion of the fall of one of liberalism’s most powerful twentieth century opponents, fascism. Fukuyama writes, “Fascism was destroyed as a living ideology by World War II. This was a defeat, of course, on a very material level, but it amounted to a defeat of the idea as well. What destroyed fascism as an idea was not universal moral revulsion against it, since plenty of people were willing to endorse the idea as long as it seemed the wave of the future, but its lack of success.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, fascism got a pass so long as people saw it as the “end of history,” but lost its appeal when disastrous events made it fall cataclysmically short of that expectation. Replace World War II with the Iraq war, the financial crisis of 2008, the Arab Spring, or any of a number of other historical events that have exposed the lacunae of triumphalist 90’s liberalism, and you have virtually the same story. If Fukuyama were to follow the same unreconstructed Hegelianism of his 1989 essay, this would necessitate the conclusion that liberalism is anything but the *telos* of history: in fact, it would render it no less an artifact than its two defeated rivals, fascism and communism. As such, in order to maintain his rhetorical pose in favor of liberalism, Fukuyama has to get

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, Loc. 76 of 3,562

<sup>5</sup>Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest* (Summer, 1989), 7.

rid of its world historical inevitability, falling back on its normative desirability to justify its status as history's *telos*. In other words, even if we aren't going to get to full-scale global liberalism through the inexorable force of the *Zeitgeist*, we should all want to.

But in making this concession, Fukuyama inadvertently exposes a key difference between liberalism's failure, and that of fascism and communism: namely, that it is still possible in modern society to hope for the triumph of the former and be thought a decent person, but the same treatment is not offered to partisans of the latter two systems. How can we account for this, if mere failure as a *telos* of history is all it takes to discredit a system? The answer is that Fukuyama's explanation for the lack of appeal attached to fascism and communism gives entirely too little credit to moral revulsion as a causal factor where both are concerned. Fascism was not merely defeated by the fact that it lost World War II, but rather also by the soul-shattering revelations of atrocities at Auschwitz, Birkenau, Dachau, etc. that emerged with the Nuremberg trials: atrocities that had been kept secret during the war, but attracted precisely the universal moral revulsion that he downplays at its conclusion. So, too, was communism discredited among all but the most ideologically blinkered by the ghosts of those entombed in Gulags, starved to death in the Holodomor/the Great Leap Forward, etc. The fact that liberalism has avoided perpetrating atrocities of this kind is what has prevented its being consigned to the ash heap of history despite the fact that it, too, has manifestly failed to live up to the world-historical ambitions that Fukuyama himself once attached to it.

Thus, despite being self-evidently a failed *telos* due to its failure to self-execute over time even at its moment of triumph, liberalism remains a plausible normative preference for history's interpreters in a way that fascism and communism cannot be. Because of this, it is possible to imagine a world where liberalism once more ascends to a dominant status worldwide, and wherein future theorists of the "end of history" proclaim our own era merely a speed bump in the rush to that "end." In fact, I would argue, this is precisely what Fukuyama himself hopes to see happen, and what his scholarship is designed to effect. In other words, while fascism and communism were discredited as *teloi*, liberalism-as-*telos* has merely been deferred.

This alone tells us something important about what history's "end" would look like, if such a thing were to exist: namely, that it would have to be an "end" that avoids attracting universal moral revulsion. Which is to say that it would have to be an "end" that human beings would find morally acceptable at all intermediate stages of history prior to that "end." Which, ultimately, is just another way of saying that it would have to be an "end" that is compatible with

human nature. In other words, in order to divine the *telos* of history, we must attempt to divine the *telos* of humanity, since human beings are the inescapable subjects and agents of history.

And indeed, it is possible to make the case that the economic and political arrangements that make up what we today think of as liberal regimes are the ones most consistent with human nature. In fact, that was arguably the conclusion drawn by American founding fathers like James Madison, who took the tendency of humans toward factionalism and dissension as axiomatic and sought only to sculpt an order that could accommodate that tendency in *Federalist #10*.<sup>6</sup>

But, for Fukuyama, that sort of defense of liberalism is a problem, because it would run counter to Hegelian ideas about human nature, as summarized and embraced by Fukuyama—namely, that human nature does not exist, but is rather malleable depending on the social norms and technology of the time.<sup>7</sup> This premise is implicit in Fukuyama's work up to the present day, as his explanation for the rise of populist-nationalism in *Identity* is framed in terms of particular ideas (like the distinction between the inner and outer self) rising or falling from grace, without stopping to consider whether those ideas succeeded because they spoke to something immutable in man. For Fukuyama, our current day wants are simply desires we have thanks to the propagation of certain ideas that can be pruned or altered at will, presumably by philosophers and technocrats. This is entirely consistent with the fact that the history of ideas presented in *Identity* spends a great deal of time on Plato's rationalistic attempt to construct a "city in speech," but doesn't even mention the more organic formulation of politics defended by Aristotle. So, too, is it consistent with the fact that *Identity* defends national identity only insofar as it is useful to promoting liberalism, but makes no attempt to consider whether the classical Greek concepts that Fukuyama correctly traces it to—*isothymos*<sup>8</sup> and *megalothymos*<sup>9</sup>—might be fixed features of the human animal that create an unyielding hostility to liberal philosophy.

This rejection of essentialism in human nature is not merely an eccentric feature of Fukuyama's thought. It is, in fact, vital to the entire liberal

<sup>6</sup>Nor is it only the founders who took this position: the Dutch philosopher Bernard Mandeville grounded his defense of liberalism in the idea that only liberalism could fully accommodate the universal human foibles of pride and greed.

<sup>7</sup>"Hegel was the first philosopher to speak the language of modern social science, insofar as man for him was the product of his concrete historical and social environment and not, as earlier natural right theorists would have it, a collection of more or less fixed 'natural' attributes. The mastery and transformation of man's natural environment through the application of science and technology was originally not a Marxist concept, but a Hegelian one." Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 2.

<sup>8</sup>The desire for equal status with others.

<sup>9</sup>The desire for superior status to others.

philosophical project. Why? Because unlike liberalism as a political system, liberalism as a philosophy is allergic to all absolutes except itself. This is because liberalism as a system demands an almost fetishistic attention to process, and its cardinal virtue is its ability to attain consent from all by giving everyone an equal chance to advocate for their preferred regime.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the losers in any given election in a liberal democratic system, or the heads of any failed company in a liberal economic system, are forced to blame themselves if their vision fails, rather than militate against the system for refusing them an equal shot. Liberalism at its most consistent is simply a signpost with multiple arrows pointing down different roads, without commenting on the desirability of those various roads, nor favoring one or the other by having one arrow larger than another.

To maintain this signpost-style agnosticism, it is necessary that liberalism also maintain agnosticism on virtually everything else, including human nature. After all, if there is a fixed human nature and some regime forms violate it, then how can one justify a political system that permits those regime forms to compete on equal footing with others? To do so would be political malpractice. Thus, in order for liberalism to be justified on its own terms as a political system, human nature must at least be politically indiscernible, just as at the economic level, the optimal distribution of resources must be relative, and thus simply impossible to calculate. To admit anything else would be to make liberalism a contingent phenomenon: merely the best we can do given immutable constraints, but hardly a morally necessary *telos* of history.

But while this agnostic approach is philosophically necessary, it is practically fatal to the existence of liberal institutions. Not least because, as Fukuyama correctly notes, *megalothymos* is still with us. And what is ultimate desire *megalothymos* but to end history not simply with a political process, but with one's own eternal ascendancy to superior status? Abraham Lincoln, in his Lyceum address, warned of precisely this phenomenon: of the insufficiency of temporary liberal offices to contain the ambitions of men who belong "to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle."<sup>11</sup> Fukuyama pleads in *Identity* for citizens who are "open-minded, tolerant of other viewpoints, and ready to compromise their own views for the sake of democratic consensus."<sup>12</sup> If this is what is necessary to maintain liberalism, then I think we can say the system

<sup>10</sup>This is a virtue that Fukuyama takes great pains to promote in his original essay, asking "are there, in other words, any fundamental 'contradictions' in human life that cannot be resolved by an alternative political-economic structure?" and ultimately answering in the negative. Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 7.

<sup>11</sup>Abraham Lincoln, "Lyceum Address," January 7, 1838, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>.

<sup>12</sup>Fukuyama, *Identity*, Loc. 2,241 of 3,562.

will inevitably fail. As Margaret Thatcher put it, “what great cause would have been fought and won under the banner: ‘I stand for consensus?’”

And ultimately, in citing Thatcher, we come to the real reason why Fukuyama's idea of liberalism as the *telos* of history was a death sentence for liberalism: because liberalism has historically been at its strongest when its proponents refuse to think of it as an inevitable *telos*, and instead perceive it as a precious and easily dismantled set of institutional safeguards. Can anyone imagine Thatcher and Reagan acceding to the idea that history would cleanly mop up the Soviet Union all on its own? Can anyone conceive of Churchill saying the same of fascism, or Lincoln of slavery, or the Founding Fathers of monarchy? In fact, all those figures saw the triumph of liberal politics as contingent on liberalism's ability to fight harder than its rivals. To refuse to tolerate them. To discard “consensus” with them. To treat their claims as illegitimate, barbaric, and opposed to human nature. Paradoxically, the moments of liberalism's greatest political triumphs are precisely the moments it abandons its own philosophy, when it refuses to be merely a process, a signpost, or a system, but instead grounds its power in the very *megalothymos* that it would otherwise discourage, and when it denies *isothymos* to its enemies. The difference in outcomes between the American revolution's Scottish Enlightenment-style advocacy of historically grounded rights, and the French revolution's French Enlightenment appeals to ahistorical universal rights of man, says much here: namely that liberalism tends to succeed only when it refuses to be all things to all people.

To give Fukuyama his due, he goes to great pains in *Identity* to stress the importance of culture in propagating liberalism. But he cannot quite bring himself to admit the obvious: that culture is downstream from politics because culture is more of an unfiltered expression of the aspirations and desires of human beings. It cannot be easily rejiggered to conform to a political program. The calibrated expression of human experience only changes thanks to new experiences, not arid rationality. So politics must either adjust to culture, or take up arms against it. Politics cannot simply argue culture into changing: it must create, through force, the experiences that will make it change. And even then, as the manifest failures of the “Soviet New Man,” or the Reign of Terror, or even (perish the thought) the Iraq War teach us, the power of force to shape the human heart is far from absolute.

But, to accept this would be to accept the opposite of Hegelian liberalism: that human nature is fixed, while liberalism is merely contingent. It is not fit to be a universal *telos* that tries to encompass and negotiate the claims of all different forms of human experience. In fact, in treating liberalism as the *telos* of history,



Fukuyama's imitators have opened it up to the very failures attached to the systems it displaced, hypocrisy preeminent among them. It is hard to stomach, for example, Fukuyama's wistful odes to what might have been in the Arab Spring,<sup>13</sup> when he dismisses the no-less *thymotic* and democratic Brexit movement as mere "narrow nationalism."<sup>14</sup> But weirdly, that hypocrisy is actually completely consistent for our confused liberal neo-Hegelians, because ultimately, only one regime can be denounced in a world where liberalism is the *telos* of history: the kind that seeks to frustrate liberalism's philosophical agnosticism by asserting the primacy of its own character over the demands of process and consensus. Even when that regime is, like the one supported by today's Brexiters, only concerned with maintaining historical, national forms of political liberty at the expense of the universal, global pretensions of liberal technocracy. When liberalism cannot stomach an absolutist defense of liberty, but can countenance authoritarianism in the service of regimes that reverence nothing-in-particular, then it has simply failed.

I genuinely believe that political and economic liberty can still be vindicated if and *only if* their proponents both ruthlessly exploit the inevitable forthcoming failures of neo-fascist, neo-socialist, and neo-theocratic alternative visions, while also making every effort to understand and accommodate the tiny kernels of human nature that will always give those visions a lease on life. But as a universal Hegelian end of history, Fukuyama's vision of liberalism has ended like the God of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: by vanishing in a puff of its own logic. In order to produce the grand explanatory theory of history that he so desperately wishes to create, Fukuyama's project must start and end by acknowledging that reality.

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, Loc. 171.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, Loc. 55.