

Crying Over the Spilled Milky Way

By

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As a schoolchild I disliked the study of history almost as much as I disliked math, which is saying a lot. I disliked it because it was boring. What relevance does the past have to a child whose entire life is ahead of him? I cannot visit the past. I cannot change the past. I cannot experience the past. So let the “dead bury the dead,” as Jesus said, while the living “plow” ahead.

My disinterest in learning about history—either from books or documentaries—lingered well into my adulthood. Although I was immensely interested in learning about some of the greatest ideas of the past, particularly by studying philosophy and psychology, it was the ideas that interested me, not the context in which they were born, not even the biographies of those who birthed them.

It wasn't until I was nearly forty when I finally began shedding the failed idealisms of my youth, grew less interested in figuring myself out, and was truly ready to put my hand to the plowshare and work toward a better future for everyone, that I finally became a student of history. This is so because I realized that today's problems and challenges are not altogether different than those made by our ancestors in the near and distant past. So, to help us correct some of the major issues we're facing today, it is necessary to learn what caused them long ago, the same way doctors must first understand the causes of illnesses before understanding how to treat them. To improve tomorrow we must, as the great scientist and inventor Emmet Brown famously told Marty McFly, “Go back to the future!”

Today, I believe, despite all our scientific and technological advances, that humanity itself has entered a new age of Endarkenment. As with the Dark Ages of the past, today's Endarkenment is fundamentally characterized by the widespread insistence on one idea, one right way of thinking, one righteous way of thinking. Only today, instead of there being only one specific idea—namely Roman Catholic doctrine—there are countless ideas. Yet people are often just as obsessed with the rightness and righteousness of their ideas as were our dogmatic ancestors. We saw this with the reformers who protested Catholic doctrine, only to soon become just as intolerant and cruel toward those who disagreed with them.

Michael Servetus, the founder of Unitarianism, was condemned and burned alive, along with his writings, by none other than Reformer John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterianism. Likewise, the Lutherans, those who started the Reformation and were persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church, brutally persecuted Unitarianism's theological ancestors, the Anabaptists, out of existence. The Calvinists, who also persecuted the Anabaptists, and were themselves persecuted by the Catholics, also clashed with the Lutherans over their theological differences. Later, the Anglicans (Church of England) came along and persecuted the Puritans (English Calvinists), who fled to America where they persecuted Quakers and Catholics. The animus toward Catholics in the US lasted well into the 20th century, which is

why it was a big deal when John F. Kennedy was elected President despite being one. Today, even the Unitarian Universalists branch of Unitarianism, which was founded in the 16th century on the very principle of religious tolerance, has finally become entirely intolerant of anyone who disagrees with its neo-racist beliefs, to the point of demonizing, silencing, and excommunicating ministers who dare disagree with them. Here we see the phenomenon known as “history repeating itself;” doomed to do so by those, as philosopher George Santayana said, “who do not learn from history.”

Today, with the advance of communication technology, differing ideas abound, far too many for any of us to keep up with or adequately consider. In our confusion, many of us seek refuge by finding just one ideology to believe in, then join with others who share it and become just as insistent that our group’s ideology is the one that’s right and righteous and, thus, feel justified demonizing and dehumanizing anyone who disagrees with us, just as our ancestors did.

Back then, rather than the Internet and social media, it was the invention of the printing press that made the spread of so many differing ideas possible, which led to the many instances of ideological persecution and intolerance I just mentioned. But, after a century of religious wars had finally weakened and worn most people down, they became more open to being more open. Intolerance, the insistence there is but one right and righteous ideology, wasn’t working for anyone. It was, then, as philosopher Susan Neiman says, “the Enlightenment emerged from a blasted landscape, on a continent soaked with blood ... It was a history of waves of plague without cure, and ever-returning religious wars in which countless people died ... Women were regularly burned alive as suspected witches, men thrown chained into dungeons for writing a pamphlet.”¹

Before the Enlightenment of the 18th century, came the Renaissance of the 15th and 16th. The Renaissance refers to a “renewed” interest in history, particularly that of antiquity, before the “one idea” of Roman Catholicism became dominant. It was a particularly difficult study to undertake given that the Church, in pursuit of its ideological supremacy, destroyed as much as ninety percent of the writings of Antiquity, which means most of the period’s greatest and most important ideas were gone forever. We’ll come back to the significance of what little has remained, but first, given that our greatest problem today may be that we’ve entered a new age of Endarkenment, caused by too many people vying for ideological supremacy, let’s consider the historical causes of the original such state, the Dark Ages, which began after the fall of the Roman Empire.

In retrospect, the Roman Empire is often portrayed unfavorably, and rightfully so in many ways. But ancient Rome also gives us much to admire, particularly under the stable rule of its first Emperor, Octavius, who came to power in 27 BCE and was given the honorary, but well deserved, title, “Augustus,” meaning, “the Exalted.” Emperor Augustus became hugely popular among his people because he ended a hundred years of civil war and established the *Pax Romana*, a peace that lasted over 200 years, along with establishing an honest government, a sound economy, a better infrastructure (including roads, buildings, bridges,

and aqueducts), a postal service, free trade, art and literature, and the successful expansion of the Empire. Upon his death in 14 CE, the Roman Senate deified him, built temples in his honor, and his cult became an important part of the official Roman state's religion.

Rome remained the most powerful Empire in the world long past the death of its revered Emperor, but its eventual fall in 476 CE marks the beginning of the centuries-long period that has become known as the Dark Ages. So, to understand some of the potential causes of today's Endarkenment, in which intolerance abounds, we can look back to the causes of the first such period, beginning with the demise of the Roman Empire, resulting from the collapse of its political structures, administrative systems, economic systems, and fragmentation.

The weak, divided, and ineffective government made Europe vulnerable to invasion by the Visigoths, Vandals, Huns, and later, the Vikings and Magyars, which further destabilized the Roman provinces and created a power vacuum. Cities then shrank or were abandoned as populations shifted to rural areas. Economic activity declined, and infrastructure, such as roads and aqueducts, fell into disrepair. The decline of centralized power also meant that education and literacy became less widespread, which is one of the reasons we now refer to this as the Dark Ages, because of the deterioration of literacy and learning. These changes also led to a breakdown in trade routes and to the flow of merchandise, leading to recession. The loss of central authority also led to feudalism and limited cultural exchange. And, finally, these limited interactions with the more widespread world, led to the rise of Roman Catholicism to fill the power void, making dogma the dominant form of intellectual life—to everyone agreeing with and adhering to the one right and righteous idea.

We find in this list of causes some parallels to what's going on today. Powerful nations, including the U.S., are becoming weaker because of divided and, therefore, dysfunctional governments. If not exposed to invasion by neighboring countries, we are exposed to misinformation, disinformation, and cyberattacks perpetrated by foreign actors. The wish to protect ourselves, to be safe, to become great again, makes us want to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world by identifying with a specific group based on things like nationality, race, religion, political party, ideology, and so on. The threat of high levies on foreign goods and potential international trade wars could soon make inflation skyrocket around the world. Foreigners are being demonized and criminalized at home and abroad, which is a further example of how we are closing ourselves off from cultural exchange. Meanwhile, much of our aging infrastructure, at least here in the U.S., is in disrepair and there is no common vision for how to progress as one nation. Finally, we have extremists on both the far right and far left who embrace "alternative facts" and reject "reason," and are extremely intolerant of any who disagree with them, which can only lead to the demise of our intellectual life. One ideology is never enough for us to flourish as a society or to achieve our full potential as individuals.

Perhaps these parallels explain the age of Endarkenment we are now in, a term I use instead of Dark Age because, unlike the Dark Ages, today's Endarkenment is post-

Enlightenment, and a rejection of its commitment to our common humanity, individual dignity, freedom, reason, and tolerance. We have also learned from history that on the few occasions humanity has embraced these liberal principles, it has flourished socially, economically, technologically, scientifically, medically, and intellectually. But history also provides examples of what happens when they are rejected.

These days, because of the great strides we have taken in these areas, thanks to the Enlightenment's unleashing of human innovation and curiosity, we tend to think we are a lot smarter than our primitive ancestors. But I think they were just as intelligent as us and we are often as primitive in our thinking and behavior today as we imagine they were then. For example, we consider Einstein the father of modern physics and think that our knowledge of quantum physics is relatively new and is what has allowed us, unlike anyone else in history, to develop atomic energy, land on the Moon, build computers, cars, television, the internet, artificial intelligence, and so much more. But most of the knowledge that led us to these advances was also known by our ancestors nearly 2,600 years ago. The only difference is that their knowledge was suppressed by dogmatists before they could use it to make the kind of advances we have. But our advances are based on the rediscovery of what they already knew way back then. The Renaissance, and the Enlightenment that followed, are the result of having discovered less than ten percent of what our ancient ancestors understood, which makes them seem extremely impressive.

Anaximander, for example, a student of Thales of Miletus, the first Greek philosopher, is the first we person we know of anywhere to understand, "The Earth is a body of finite dimensions floating in space."² This idea isn't remarkable to us today, unless we are among the few idiotic flat-earthers there are, but considering what most people believed about the nature of our existence at the time, the idea that the Earth is a body that floats in empty space, is stunning! Anaximander also understood that "Rainwater is water from the sea and rivers that evaporate because of the Sun's heat. It is carried away by the wind and then falls onto the Earth. Thunder and lightning are caused by colliding and splitting clouds. Earthquakes are caused by fissures in the Earth."³ He also said that "All animals originally came from the sea or from the primal humidity that once covered the Earth. The first animals were thus either fish or fishlike creatures. They moved onto land when the Earth became dry, and they adapted to living there. Human beings, in particular, cannot have been born in their current form, because babies are not self-sufficient, so someone else had to have fed them. They grew out of fishlike creatures."⁴ Again, Anaximander came to these conclusions through reason and observation, more than 2,500 years before Newton, Darwin, or Einstein.

A few years after Anaximander expressed his unprecedented theories, a couple of other Milesian philosophers, Leucippus and his brilliant student Democritus developed atomic theory. According to physicist and philosopher Carlo Rovelli, Democritus explained that "the entire universe is made up of a boundless space in which innumerable atoms run. Space is without limits; has neither an above nor a below; is without a center or a boundary. Atoms have no qualities at all, apart from their shape. They have no weight, no color, no

taste.”⁵ In Democritus’s own words, “Sweetness is opinion, bitterness is opinion; heat, cold and color are opinion: in reality only atoms, and vacuum.”⁶ Anaximander, Leucippus, and Democritus understood things about the nature of reality that weren’t discovered but rediscovered in the modern era by giants like Darwin and Einstein.

But the genius of these more ancient thinkers was all but erased by the one right and righteous idea of the Roman Catholic Church. Again, as Rovelli puts it, “centuries dominated by monotheism have not permitted the survival of Democritus’s naturalism. The closure of the ancient schools such as those of Athens and Alexandria, and the destruction of all the texts not in accordance with Christian ideas was vast and systematic ... Christianity was to be the only and obligatory religion of the empire.”⁷ What we do know of these ancient physicists is mostly from a few fragments or ideas explained in the writings Aristotle. We also have an impressive list of the titles of Democritus’s many writings:

*Great Cosmology; Little Cosmology; Cosmography; On the Planets; On Nature; On Human Nature; On Intelligence; On the Senses; On the Soul; On Flavors; On Color; On Diverse Movements of the Atoms; Of Changes in Shape; The Causes of Celestial Phenomena; The Causes of Atmospheric Phenomena; On Fire and On Things in Fire; The Causes of Acoustic Phenomena; Concerning the Magnet; The Causes of Seeds, Plants and Fruits; On Animals; A Description of the Sky; Geography; A Description of the Pole; On Geometry; Geometrical Reality; On the Tangents of the Circle and the Sphere; Numbers; On Irrational Lines and Solids; Projections; Astronomy; Astronomical Table; On Rays of Light; On Reflected Images; On Rhythm and Harmony; On Poetry; On the Beauty of Song; On Euphony and Cacophony; Concerning Homer, or On Correct Epic Diction; The Science of Medicine; On Agriculture; On Words; On Names; On Values, or On Virtue; On the Disposition that Characterizes the Wise; On Painting; A Treatise on Tactics; Circumnavigation of the Ocean; On History; The Thought of Chaldea; The Thought of the Phrygians; On the Sacred Writings of Babylon; On the Sacred Writings of Meroe; On Fevers and the Coughs Deriving from Illness; On Aporiae; Legal Questions; Pythagoras; On Logic, or Criterion of Thought; Confirmations; Points of Ethics; On Well-Being.*⁸

Again, these are but hits titles. Tragically, the writings of Democritus are gone forever. Hence the title of my sermon, “Crying Over the Spilled Milky Way.” In reading history, I mourn the loss of what could have been. I imagine what the world might be like today if our ancient ancestors, just as smart or smarter than us, had been honored and believed, instead of silenced and condemned. Imagine if by the time Copernicus had to recant and Galileo was imprisoned for their proclaiming heliocentric theories of our solar system, the question had long been settled, and we had already gone to the Moon, maybe even to Mars, and had the Internet, Quantum computers, AI, and had already passed through our destructive and dangerous era of environmental degradation and found ways to restore Earth’s life sustaining systems and to live in technological harmony with nature, because our ancestor’s had believed the writings and teaching of Anaximander and Democritus instead of worshipping a single book of obvious and absurd fictions, while banning and destroying all others.

Look how far we’ve come in just the past 120 years since accepting Einstein’s theory of relativity. Yet there were more than 1500 years between Democritus and Copernicus. Imagine what humanity could have accomplished during all those centuries compared to what we, with the same knowledge at our disposal, have accomplished in little more than

one century. Or, conversely, try imagining what our world might be like 1500 years from now.

So, yes, I am crying over the spilled Milky Way, my metaphor for having lost the groundbreaking scientific knowledge of our world and universe that was discovered centuries before even Christ was born. That's the thing about studying history. It grieves us, not because mistakes were made, but because we realize we are still suffering the impacts of those ancient mistakes and, worse, are still making some of the same mistakes today.

But the point of studying history is not to grieve what we've lost, but to learn from the mistakes of the past so that we can move forward and make real progress. History reminds us that the only way forward is to be openminded and openhearted toward others. It means embracing our common humanity and respecting the worth and dignity of others, no matter where they come from or what they believe. It means facing reality on its own terms, whether we like them or not, by embracing reason, and science, and genuine facts. It means committing to a society that guarantees the freedoms and rights of everyone, including, especially, those we might disagree with; the freedom to speak and to think for ourselves, the freedom to be innovative and creative. And it means we must tolerate one another, no matter how different we might be, nor how much we might disagree. We must learn to live and let live. We don't have to like our neighbors, or be like our neighbors, but we must love them, by caring about their welfare and valuing their rights as much as our own.

None of us needs to be a genius to understand this is the path forward. It's not brain science. It's something we already understand and, considering what history teaches us, is something we've always understood on some level. So, let's put our hands to the plowshare and move forward, but not without looking back over our shoulders now and again to remember where we've come from, so that we don't end up crying over the spilled Milky Way.

¹ Neiman, Susan. *Left Is Not Woke* (pp. 33-34). Polity Press. Kindle Edition.

² Rovelli, Carlo. *Anaximander: And the Birth of Science* (p. 34). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³ *Ibid.*, (pp. 35-36).

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 36).

⁵ Rovelli, Carlo. *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity* (p. 20). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280.