Too Late for a Conversation with John Lukacs

by Samuel Hux (December 2019)

John Lukacs at home. ©Ildikó Nagy, Gergely Szilvay, and Mandiner.

I once thought very briefly (or rather fantasized) that I might have one (a conversation with Lukacs). Early in 1987 I received a letter from Dale Vree, editor of *The New Oxford Review*, inviting me to contribute to a symposium scheduled for October, "Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism." However, this wasn't to be a classical affair such as Plato reported in his *Symposium,* but rather, strictly

written, so that there was no chance of panelists actually conversing. And a good thing too, for given the quality (or relative fame) of some of the fourteen other contributors—John Lukacs, Russell Kirk, Thomas Molnar, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Robert Coles, Christopher Lasch, to name but six—I would have been too awed to speak coherently. "What am I doing here?" I would have thought, and indeed did think.

So, in lieu of a *conversation* that could not take place, an *essay,* the next best thing. And a related thing—at least for me. For just as there's no way to know how a conversation will develop, will conclude (unless it's a calculated lecture dishonestly disguised), impossible to be sure which direction it will take, the same *can* be true of an essay, and in my case *will* be true. This is not for me, some compositional tactic, so to speak; the simple unadorned fact is that when I begin an essay I have literally no idea, not a clue, where it will end up.

"Why me?" Actually Vree had told me why. He had read some of my essays in *Dissent*, *Commonweal, Moment*, and *Worldview.* "You're a natural for this subject." And indeed I was. I was at the time a declared socialist, even a member of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee ("DSOC," pronounced *Deesock*) and at the same time a declared conservative.

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That is, I argued more than once in print that what Russell Kirk called “the permanent things” were more likely to be preserved by “humane socialism” than by its opposite, laissez-faire capitalism with its culturally revolutionary tendencies. I still believe that in a rough sort of way although I no longer consider myself a socialist in any contemporary meaning. For declared socialists—at least American ones—don’t strike me as particularly “humane.” Bernie Sanders, for goodness sake? And proclaimed socialists—again, particularly in the States—seem moved not by the traditional socialist considerations but rather by catchy racial and gender issues which make up the trendy “revolution” called *Identity Politics.* I do not think the most significant thing about me is that I’m an ageing white male born a gentile.

Rather, a significant thing about me is that, ideologically speaking, I am very lonely. What passes today for conservatism —so designated in public discussion by talking heads and print journalists and claimed by politicians and understood by the general public—does not strike me as particularly traditionalist. I understate the case there, and should say it doesn’t strike me as traditionalist *at all.* Donald Trump? George Will, I would imagine, must be feeling rather lonely as well. Charles Krauthammer is dead. And so is John Lukacs. But I have a habit of getting ahead of myself.

For the symposium back in ’87, New Oxford Review offered certain assumptions to evoke or provoke thoughts by the symposiasts: that traditionalists tend to be religious, often Roman- or Anglo-Catholics, and socialists predominately and aggressively secularists; that both camps are not too friendly to a capitalism by nature disruptive of tried cultural values; that a union of the two camps is an unnamed possibility.

I wrote, in part, that the two should be natural allies, that the religious/secularist divide need not be fatal if the two camps can be realistic, for while "concern with the *telos* . . . is not why most socialists become socialists . . . which is more likely, that socialists will experience conversion, or that traditionalists will give political life to the ethics implicit in 'Catholic forms of Christianity'?" And . . . "In the meantime, Hawthorne's observation resonates. 'The world owes all its onward impulse to men ill at ease. The happy man inevitably confines himself within ancient limits.' I used to read that as radicals in the first sentence, conservatives in the second. But more and more values transvaluate. Traditionalists are ill at ease, and socialists long for limits. Of course the capitalist apologists, with whom traditionalists rightly resent being lumped together as conservatives all, are also 'ill at ease': the frenetic 'onward impulse' of capitalism disdainful of 'ancient limits.' So some tactical alliance against that freneticism is all the more imperative. What should such an alliance be called? I'd call it 'a consummation devoutly to be wished.'"

Not all, of course, of the symposiasts were as friendly to an alliance as I was, or (I have to admit) as unrealistically hopeful of such as I forced myself to be. But some, although not thinking exactly as I was, were in the same ballpark as I was, Christopher Lasch for instance, while some cared not at all for such an alliance. But the view which I found—and still find—most interesting, and ultimately most influential upon my views ever since was that of John Lukacs.

My intellectual retardation perhaps, but it had not really occurred to me that to be seriously anti-capitalist one did

not have to be friendly in some fashion to socialism, or to anarchism (not to be confused with libertarianism, by the way, which loves the capitalist faith). So when Lukacs wrote that all true conservatives are anti-capitalist, my life was changed. "*All* of the important conservative thinkers of the last 200 years have been anti-materialist and therefore, by definition, anti-capitalist. 'Christian capitalism' is almost a contradiction in terms, while 'Christian socialism' is not." I should hasten to explain my understanding of this truth.

My argument is not with the blessed institution of free markets with which we are indeed blessed, thank the Lord. My argument (since I've never heard of "free-marketism") is with the "ism" called *capitalism,* which I understand to be a vulgar insult to the human soul and mind: the belief that the most natural relationship between human beings is an economic one; that the economic relationship is only accidentally or incidentally a co-operative affair because its motor is the natural desire to gain aggressive advantage for oneself; that because of this human truth socialism is an unnatural violation of human relationships and not simply one natural choice of social arrangements among several; that given the social fact of markets there should be no area of human activity, not art or science or medicine or whatnot, that is not subject to market competition; that, in summary, the true identity of the human being is Economic Man.

So, when I reflect upon the nature of my conservatism I feel, as I said before, somewhat alone. And especially so when contemporary right-wing populists are called "conservatives" by press and on television. This populism is a manifestation of the petty *ressentiment* that drove Friedrich Nietzsche up the wall, a resentment of what Thomas Jefferson called the "natural *aristoi*," a rebellion against "elitism" so conceived.

But I suspect the populists in the States today do not resent the *economic* elite, a fancy way of indicating the wealthy (not what Jefferson meant), since there are plenty of indications that they admire those who have made themselves rich big-time. Rather, their resentment is of the *cultural* elite, conceived in broad terms, those of some mental and intellectual and even ethical achievement which sets them off, even without publicized claims, from the general run: a kind of "grace," to speak truly. What kind of conservatism is it—for God's sake!—that does not prize excellence?

It is a source of great pleasure to me that Lukacs's conservatism was the sort that I arrived at. So little was it a matter of economic orthodoxy that he tended to dismiss economics as a principal consideration, not all it's cracked up to ne, in the history of nations: whether one was socialist or capitalist was less important for good or bad—he argued in chapter after essay—than questions of patriotism or its vulgarization nationalism; hence the fact that historically speaking fascist and national socialist tendencies eclipse communist ones as the dominant and persistent negative ideologies of our time. With such views Lukacs was never a cheerleader for the Republican Party. And he was that rare American conservative—rare in my experience at any rate—who was not enthusiastic about Ronald Reagan, near dismissive in fact. Rather, in fact or fancy, if it were possible to cast one's vote without consideration of national borders or historical frameworks, I think he would have cast his, whether candidate were alive or deceased, for Winston Churchill. He was a most cranky conservative.

I have often thought it a shame—it would have been so *interesting*!—that he did not know (as far as I know) that cranky socialist, critic and historian Irving Howe, founder

and editor of *Dissent*, my old colleague and comrade in polemical arms. Howe published his respect for Russell Kirk and had good relations with the unpredictable Peter Viereck, whom *National Review* tried to drum out of the conservative *Weltanschauung.* And I could have introduced Lukacs and Howe—if I had had that conversation with Lukacs, that is.

This preceding issue does not mean—I want to make this clear—that Lukacs was the sort of conservative who intentionally or not endears himself or herself to non-conservatives—the sort called by partisan loyalist a "Rino" (Republican in name only); Lukacs would have bristled at the implication that he should be loyal to any party. Howe mad clear in his memoir *A Margin of Hope* that the conservatives he admired need only be humane, serious (Burkean, as it were) and not mere partisan capitalist apologists hiding in traditionalist garb. And Lukacs's conservatism was profound, culturally and even spiritually speaking, not a matter of his voting but of his intellectual and emotional habits, a matter and characteristic of his *being*.

John Lukacs died the year in which I write, on May 6, 2019, at the age of 95. When he was 65 he wrote that he hoped to have 15 more productive years. Thank God he had roughly 30—I think his last book was published when he was 93. Born in Hungary, he was brought up Roman Catholic because both parents were converts from Judaism. Considered nonetheless Jewish he narrowly escaped the Holocaust when Hungary's "ally" Nazi Germany took over the country in 1944-45. Having survived the Nazis, he didn't wait around long enough to have to survive the Communists, leaving Hungary with University of Budapest doctorate in hand and arriving in the States in 1946. Thus

Lukács János became John Lukacs—his name in the U.S. evidently pronounced like *Lucas*, but, sworn if pedantic enemy of the Americanization of foreign names, I continue to think of him as "LOO-kotch."

After a year or so teaching as an adjunct at Columbia, he got an appointment at an undistinguished Catholic institution on the outskirts of Philadelphia, Chestnut Hill College—where he remained for the rest of his academic career except for visiting professorships here and there at classier universities, and turned down the occasional offer of a more distinguished faculty appointment. This for reason of his conservative sensibility: after Budapest and New York he loved his semi-rural home and didn't want to leave it. And besides, Chestnut Hill actually looks like a college, which I, after a career at the City University of New York, can appreciate. And I should explain, furthermore, that when I call Chestnut Hill "undistinguished" I refer to its relatively modest reputation, for it had actual distinction. The previous occupant of the faculty chair Lukacs ascended was the remarkable Austrian scholar, polymath, and later columnist at *National Review*, Erik von Kuehnelt-Liddihn, "the world's most fascinating man" according to William Buckley. One of Kuehnelt-Liddihn's distinctions was that, as a political theorist, he placed Adolf Hitler firmly on the Left—as did Lukacs by the way. Among the visiting lecturers during Lukacs's tenure were André Maurois, Otto von Hapsburg, Carl van Doren, John Dos Passos, Elizabeth Bowen, and Jacques Barzun. Chestnut Hill sounds like a more exciting place to be than your run of the mill distinguished college.

So I suspect another reason to stay put was to avoid one definition of a minor hell on earth, being surrounded daily by liberal academics, a class of people constitutionally

incapable of admitting ever to being wrong. Lukacs's conservatism was deep, so deep he regularly called himself a reactionary, but I suspect he liked the word *reactionary* because it sticks in the liberal's craw.

And of course there's an advantage to being "stuck" in an academic backwater, so long as it's a liberal arts college (although this is partly a confession): you have a source of income and insurance, and can enjoy teaching and conversation, without having to advise graduate students and waste your mind reading their dissertations.

But I have long thought a place like Harvard, Yale, or Princeton should have made an offer—*Godfather* like—he couldn't resist, a million bucks or so. For, in my judgment, and not a lonely judgment, Lukacs makes one think of names like Burckhardt, Trevelyan, Michelet. However, on the other hand, given the academic obsession with specialization ever narrower and falsely thought ever the more rigorous, what historical "field" could they have assigned him the field?

Not counting the essays collected in the gigantic collection *Remembered Past,* and a brief selection closing out his publishing career, Lukacs wrote "book" books (if you will) on topics (several more than once) as varied as Eastern Europe, the Cold War, contemporary European history, definitions of the Modern Age, World War Two, Philadelphia, the 20th Century in the U.S., Budapest, a students' guide to the historical discipline, Churchill and Hitler, historical views of Hitler, George Kennan, Churchill alone, Hitler and Stalin, democracy vs. populism, a couple of works blending history with autobiographical reflections, several works on the philosophy

of history crowned by the formal philosophy of *Historical Consciousness*, and one pure memoir *Confessions of an Original Sinner.* In all, 33 books not including the essay collections. Oh—I forgot—and a brief history of Chestnut Hill College.

Given such production, and none of it standard academic make-work, it's hard to single things out, so I simply note a few favorites. Lukacs keeps returning to Winston Churchill, but of special interest are two books on Churchill's early premiership and "duel" with Adolph Hitler, the aptly titled *The Duel, 10 May-31 July 1940* and *Five Days in London, May 1940.* My personal number one of the narrative histories, however, is *The Last European War: September 1939-December 1941,* almost 550 pages devoted to the pre-Pearl Harbor campaigns with an intellectual history of relevant social and political thought. The philosophical masterpiece is *Historical Consciousness.* Just as masterful is the memoir of Hungarian youth and American maturity, *Confessions of an Original Sinner,* his most interesting title by far. I must stop before other must-reads occur to me.

Too late for a conversation, as I have lamented. But if I could like Moses Herzog write letters to the dead, as in Saul Bellow's great novel *Herzog*, there are certain themes I wish I could talk to him about. But, odd thing and doubtfully appropriate, history is at best only tangentially one of the subjects, by which I mean I would not ask him if he really thought Churchill thought such and such when Hiller did what-not: that sort of thing. And one matter is, I will admit ite once I get it off my mind, really rather petty.

In his last book of essays, *We at the Center of the Universe*, Lukacs has a brief piece, "End of the World of Books," in

which he touches on the decline of bookstores and the reading habit, his dickering with university libraries over his personal library and papers and correspondence (but nothing from me, alas), his resignation from authorship, “I shall write no more books,” and relations with publishers, about which he generally has no complaints. But I would like to ask him why he chose a certain publisher for his last book. Not because I am curious for an answer, but in order to whine and complain about *that* publisher. Publishing long had the reputation of being a “gentleman’s profession. Or a gentle lady’s too. Years ago Ester Yntema, late of the Atlantic Monthly Press, having read an essay of mine sent me a letter inquiring if I was doing a book. No, I’m afraid I have a 5000 word mind, I answered. She wrote me immediately wishing me well with essays and encouraging me to keep her in mind if something longer turned up. And since then I’ve felt more warmth from the ladies of the gentle profession, while the men have not struck me as gentlemen. A typical case: three years ago I queried the publishing house of Lukacs’s last book about a sequence of essays espousing a conservative view of culture, offering to send a sample or two. No, the publisher in chief responded, send the entire manuscript. And although I checked in periodically by email and snail mail for a year and a half I never had a reply. I hesitate, for reasons of legal caution, to name the ungentlemanly son of a bitch. Well, that’s off my chest—but I have more substantial matters on my mind.

In *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, 1990, Lukacs complained that his philosophical opus *Historical Consciousness*, published relatively early in his career, 1968, had not received the attention it deserved in the world of historiography. (And deserve attention it assuredly did!) But I doubt historians pay much attention even today, in spite of the attention paid Lukacs’s subsequent work by presses even more intellectually reputable than Harper and Row, Yale

University Press having published *ten*.

Historical Consciousness may be too difficult for garden-variety historians. What would they make—most of them—of a theme Lukacs returns to in book after book, essay after essay? The notion that the practice of history is not merely an objective affair—that Leopold von Ranke didn't have it quite right that history is telling the story if the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, as it really was—but rather is in some significantly philosophical sense *participatory.* Not, however, in the sense of the historian participating in the academic discipline, but rather in participating in the history one writes about itself. And that notion *not* in the sense that we humans all participate in history, no matter how insignificantly, because history is in its major branch the story of the human race. Rather: something more radical, the notion that *the writing of history is analogous to the physicist's discipline of quantum mechanics!* Before pursuing this stunning notion further, some biographical (and autobiographical) details, not really a digression.

Lukacs tells us in *Confessions* that he tried to test his insights through conversations with the available physics professors, but found them not very interested in his efforts. Consequently he corresponded with Werner Heisenberg and even visited Heisenberg himself in Europe to see if he, Lukacs, had a good grasp of the Uncertainty Principle. Yes, he did, he was assured.

A bell rings for me. With very little training in science—my education has been reading and some conversation—I found myself almost consumedly fascinated by physics, and especially quantum physics. I became, am, obsessed by the sheer wonder of

its truths. Take the phenomenon of the *quantum leap* for example. An elementary particle can be in one "orbit" within an atom, and then can move to another orbit, but *move* isn't really the right word, is only a convenient term. *Movement* to us implies getting from one place to another place by traversing the physical distance between the places. But in a quantum leap—and even the word *leap* is misleading—the article is "here" and then "there" without traversing the distance between "here" and "there." No, it's *here* and then, Bang!, it's *there.* I find this quantum fact mind-blowing, amazing, full-of-wonder, and in some paradoxical way "science-defying"—it just can't be! But when I tried to share my stunned-ness with the physicists I knew over coffee, to them the leap was a settled scientific truth and therefore no longer, if ever had been, a kind of "poetic" mystery. So I can appreciate how Lukacs felt when querying the profs.

But not only ordinary physics profs have I often found emotionally unresponsive to what is ultimately a philosophical wondering (an unresponsiveness alien to Einstein, Niels Bohr, Heisenberg, and the like!). I have owned Steven Weinberg's *Dream of a Final Theory* for twenty years, but cannot make myself turn its pages knowing there is a chapter on the scientific irrelevance of philosophy. I don't want to die of apoplexy.

Now back to the theme at issue. According to the Uncertainty Principle if we can know, ascertain, the *location* of an elementary particle, as in the particular orbit in which it is circling, as it were, we cannot know its velocity. And if we can know, ascertain its *velocity* we cannot its *location*, the where-it-is. And this uncertainty of speed and place is somehow because our very *observation* of the particle affects the behavior (speed and place) of the particle. Our

observation, in other words, is participating in the quantum realities.

So when Lukacs says the historian's task is, like the quantum physicist's, participatory, what does he mean? He cannot mean that the historian (1) discovers evidence of events in the past that we didn't know before had happened back then and thereby changes our understanding of the past, for in this case the historian is participating only in the historical discipline itself. He cannot mean that the historian (2) discovers evidence of thoughts, feelings, attitudes that historical figures had which we had not known before and therefore changes our understanding of the minds and hearts of the figures, changing thereby our present views of those figures. He cannot mean (3) etcetera, and so forth, *und so weiter.* For while the observation of the physicist is participatory in that it changes the behavior of the particles, changes the what-is-happening in the atom, the historian's "observation" of what happened in the past, whether 1, 2, or 3, does not alter what-happened, and thus is not "participating" in the same way.

Now, recognizing that an analogy is never an exact equivalence between phenomena (as a likeness never is) but as close to identification as possible, I would like once again to extrapolate from Lukacs's hints. (I love to extrapolate. I even love the word *extrapolate*.) Lukacs is perhaps the most literarily sophisticated historian I have read recently; he even has written literary criticism especially of the novel. He knows that the historian has some historical events he (or she, of course) can rely upon, their veracity I mean, and knows that some are tenuous at best. Nothing out of the ordinary here. But suppose we have reliable event A and reliable event. . . well, call it B. Suppose we are sure we

grasp A *wie es eigentlich gewesen* and grasp B *wie es eigentlich gewesen,* and know with fair certainty that B could not have happened had A not; but—enormous But—have no reliable idea how or why A facilitated or caused or made possible B. . .none at all. What do we do?

We suppose/propose an event or series of events we have no reliable knowledge of as a connective tissue between the reliable events—so long as this tissue makes sense, that is, occupies the intellectual space between possibility and probability, a kind of post-A or pre-B, so to speak. That's what we do. One might say we have invented a brief fiction to get from one point to the next. Yes, one might say that; one might. *But*, just as the physicist's observation alters the location or velocity of the particle since the observation is participating in the quantum events, when I as historian propose that I am witnessing back then in the past the post-A/pre-B connecting the A and B events I have altered the relationship between A and B, so that I am in effect a participant in those past events. I realize this is not a perfect identification of physicist's action and historian's action, but only an analogy, a likeness, and pretty damned close.

I wish Lukacs were still alive for me to ask him the way he asked Heisenberg) if I have his thinking precise. And it has crossed my mind to wonder if Lukacs by any chance read an essay in which I dealt with a theme pretty close to this ("Taking the Historical Novel Seriously," *NER* September 2018) since he was still alive when it appeared. Whether yes or no, I'm going to pretend that he did (it gives me pleasure), so I become participatory in Lukacs's bio, if you know what I mean.

Perhaps there is something almost perverse (I admit this once more) in writing about a great historian and reflecting not on what he says about Churchill. Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt, De Gaulle, the Cold War, Hungarian history, populism, how to define the Modern Age, and so forth, but focusing on other quite different sorts of issues instead. But one attraction feel to Lukacs is that he has thought about questions that have consumed me most of my adult life. For instance:

I think that in the "moral universe" of human behavior, as opposed to the realm of the laws of nature, any deterministic philosophy, as opposed to faith in "free will," is a puerile and intellectually embarrassing dead-end appealing to fifth-rate social scientists, and so I have argued for countless hours in the classroom. My favorite philosophical essay may well be William James's "The Dilemma of Determinism," although Charles Sanders Peirce's "The Doctrine of Necessity Examined" is a close rival. So it pleases me that Lukacs clearly agrees. It must be five or six times I've run across in book after book the statement that "People don't *have* ideas; they *choose* them."

And there is another idea—a *big* idea, outside the strictly historiographic realm—which Lukacs reflected upon to the extent that it supplies the title to his last book, an idea I wish I could ascent to, try to, and ultimately fail to (to my personal dismay because I feel inadequate to disagree with Lukacs about anything. After all, who am I?—as I said in the first paragraph of this essay.) So, now to the title essay of *We at the Center of the Universe.*

We are back to the human being as participant, but ultimately in a much more profound and important way than the historian

investigating and the physicist observing. Lukacs insists that great scientific figures like Galileo, Descartes, and Newton don't necessarily know more about our universe than "Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Montaigne, or Pascal" (although I don't know why Machiavelli should join that trio), and who need disagree with such a wide generalization? The first trio, like many scientists since, "looked at the universe as being *outside* of us," without adequate recognition of how much depended upon *our* knowledge of the universe. It is not that our knowledge alters the functioning of the great cosmos the way that the physicist's observation alters the behavior of the elementary particle in the atom. No sane person, I don't think, would make such a claim.

Rather—as I try to summarize his point with some pointed brevity—the ancients like Aristotle (and the Christian thinkers for whom Aristotle was "the philosopher"), who thought the earth was the center of the universe and not merely on the periphery, were right. Not right only or simply because earth is where Christ appeared—although Lukacs's argument is indeed consistent with his Catholic beliefs about which he makes no bones. No, the earth is central because *We* are here. And we are central because without us, without our knowledge, there is no understanding and no appreciation of what God has wrought.

In one sense, then, Lukacs's view is simply a poetic and compelling version of a rather classical view he would not claim to have invented, only a view he knows is a minority report in the intellectual world today. Minority report, but compelling nonetheless. It goes something like the following (although the language is my own and not an exact reproduction of Lukacs). It would be a rare scientist who would say, and a rare theologian who would not say, that the fact that the

human being is capable of discovering and grasping the basic laws of nature (speed of light, law of inertia, and so on) as well as the consistent "violations" (as it were) of those classical laws in the realm of subatomic quantum physics, means that God or Creator, or whatever we wish to call this mysterious force or being, has endowed by design this human creature with the ability to grasp the outlines of this wondrous universe and thereby appreciate God's handiwork—so that the handiwork is not merely an accidental whatzit with no transcendental meaning; that the stunned human observer is thus a necessary participant in the divine plan; and that, therefore, the human being (We!) on this planet is at the center of the universe (whether or not there are observers elsewhere in God's creation). This I want to believe, and try my best to, but. . . .

First and perhaps least important, I find it hard to believe "there are observers elsewhere." As one who cannot escape the influence of Darwin, I know that one implication of evolutionary theory goes like this: We humans are *one* (not *the*) result of the evolutionary history of Earth, depending on aeons and aeons of slow change through climactic alterations as well as dead-end evolutionary paths as well as "successful" paths affected by geologic thises and that's too numerous to encapsulate. For there to be something like us (not just any life form) on some other planet in our solar system or some other, that planet would have to have had practically the same evolutionary history as Earth has had, and the likelihood of that being the case approaches the number best called *Zilch.* So we are most likely alone in the universe, even if, as Thomas Carlyle once observed, that's a great waste of space. And speaking of space. . . .

When I consider, as I'm sure you consider, with perhaps better

results, the utter vastness of our solar system, to say nothing of the universe with millions of solar systems, I feel so utterly small, minute in the scheme of things, that I cannot comprehend myself as the center of things any bigger than loved ones, friends, and a few citizens. Well, that's just *me.* But when I observe the rest of the human race—whether the novelist I chatted with the other day, or the scumbag who jumped to the head of line in the supermarket, or your average member of congress, I know that I love the beauty of Shakespeare's words,

> What a piece of work is man! / How noble in reason! how / infinite in faculties! in form / and moving how express and admirable! / in action how like an angel, in / apprehension, how like a god! the / beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!

But I have to agree with Hamlet's concluding sentence, "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

And yet. . . . (I don't know how many *and yets*). Quintessence of dust or not, I confess to occasional visitations or delusions of grandeur—as when I cannot imagine what the world would be like without me, or, rather, without my ever having been, since I can easily imagine the world without my being still alive: no delusions of immortality here. I invite anyone to try to imagine his or her never-having-existed. Try it! There's a variation or extension here of Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum,* "I think therefore I am." Just try to think of never having thought! You can't do it. I am not suggesting that Lukacs's certainty or strong belief that "we are at the center of the universe" is simply a matter of self-grandeur. For:

The implicit notion within his assumptions that there is some kind of correspondence between the nature of the universe and the capacities of the human mind to reflect upon that nature is one classical idea of rationalist philosophers who predated and postdated Descartes. And it is even one support for classical arguments for the existence of God, since, an argument goes, who or what but an intelligent deity could have invented that correspondence?

And yet (or is it *therefor*e?) my reflection on the *smallness* and the probable-to-certain *aloneness* of the human race, suggesting a kind of accidental irrelevance, can be turned on its head: that is, the idea of the very singularity of our status in the universe can render support for Lukacs's point of view, suggesting a designed purpose for our presence, as if to say "for what other reason are we here?"

So, again, who am I to resist "we at the center of the universe"? And (or is it *but*?) what do we really mean by "universe"? I confess that recalling that vastness Carlyle thought possibly a waste of space my mind habitually stops at the limits of this particular solar system, which is what the classical thinkers from the Greeks on up to modern times meant by *universe*. So my smallness is not so small as it seems when I contemplate multiples multiplying solar systems? And when we (including theologians) contemplate "God" do they really think of the Lord of the multiplicity of solar systems equaling the universe, or do they really think of the Lord of this local system, as the ancient thinkers who gave theological shape to this world's religions surely did?

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And if this Earth (inhabited by we-at-the-center) is an evolutionary accidental chance. . . . Well, this way madness lies, so I rein myself in. And yet I'm able to appreciate and wonder at all the glories that accident can achieve, and I ponder the odd possibility that "accident" is really a method of the divine. Some odd kind of "Darwinist" I must be. But back to Lukacs's belief about who and where we are:

I hope it's clear that I know what Lukacs means not only intellectually but in feeling as well. I thoroughly appreciate his point of view and admire him for it with a sort of limitless admiration so that my respect for him increases hundred-folds. I hasten to add that my resistance has nothing to do with any atheistic impulse. For although my religious views are best characterized by befuddled inconsistences and mutually cancelling contradictions, I fully detest the arrogance that is atheism. Somewhere I have defined the atheist not as someone who weighs the evidence and concludes that God is *not*, but rather someone who says in effect, "*I* don't believe, so *God* therefore cannot exist."

Anyway, anyway, I greatly enjoy thinking about John Lukacs, and always will because he generates so much thinking beyond whatever the subject is. And I encourage anyone else to make his acquaintance, this great man with whom I once shared a symposium.

Conversation is a way of learning what you think.

«Previous Article Table of Contents Next Article»

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