

# Heresies & Soapboxes

## An Outline of *The Outline of History*

Upon reading the introduction for G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, I thought it prudent to read the text Chesterton was critiquing: H.G. Wells' *The Outline of History*. On the surface, *The Outline* is a relatively standard history textbook, but as I made my way through, I found the focus on philosophy and religion to take precedence over the description of events, regardless of Wells' protests.

Something we should remember as we walk through *The Outline* is that Wells is a storyteller. He had published several novels by this time (1920), including *War of the Worlds*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Time Machine*. Wells brings his storytelling skills here and tries to tell "the story of ideas," which influences the world in incredible ways.

## Section I: The Uniqueness of Man

Wells begins *The Outline* with a long ramp-up into the evolution of Man. He begins with an account of the impartiality of the universe and a detailed description of the astronomy that governs the climate on Earth. He continues with a description of the evolution of the dinosaurs (skipping over how that life was made in the first place). This takes a relatively short amount of time in the book, but Wells continuously reminds us that the amount of time he's covering here makes the rest of history look like a fleeting moment. Then we come to the evolution of Man.

Wells describes in great detail all of the various species of the Homo genus, what their lives would have been like, how they must have lived, and all of the fossil evidence we have of their existence.

Of great importance in *The Outline* are the ideas from Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. In *The Descent* (which I haven't read, but intend to at some point), Darwin makes the claim (according to Wells) that humans are no different from animals (v. 2, p. 420). This is an idea that restructures the way we respond to animal cruelty as well as human rights violations. If a human is no more than an animal that happened to evolve obligate sapience (n.b. sapience is defined as learning new things from one's environment, as opposed to instinct. Obligate sapience is the same thing, but this skill is now obligatory for survival.), why should we care when a human is killed or a crime is committed? Do we care if a bug is smashed? My apartment complex requires pest control, a euphemism for poisoning insects and other invasive animals we have labeled "pests". Is that on the same level as gassing other humans because they are a nuisance? On the one hand, this could encourage people to be better stewards of the animals, since we are on their level. On the other hand, it could also discourage empathy for others, as "nothing of value was lost".

I don't want to spend a lot of time here, because Chesterton expounds upon this greatly in *The Everlasting Man*, but I think it is worthy of note to mention Chesterton's argument from the existence

of art. It seems to me that obligate sapience is insufficient to naturally produce art. Art, not just drawings, but music and works of fiction as well, are things unique to humans. While we have trained animals to produce art, this is a learned behavior and not something observed in the wild. No other animal participates in storytelling, even those with some level of sapience. Animals communicate, to be sure, some with rather sophisticated language, but fiction, telling an elaborate lie that explains the truth, is something unique to humans. That doesn't seem to be an accident.

## **Interlude 1: The Early Empires**

A lot of these ideas Wells puts forth seem to be parroted from one source or another. Explicitly, he mentions a few of his historian friends who double-check some of his information. The nature of man is one of these. The origin of religion is another, where he puts forth that religion is an extension of fear of the patriarch after the patriarch's death. He claims that among Aryan peoples, this developed into polytheism, but in the Middle East, this instead developed into monotheism.

History continues from the life of the caveman into the history of Israel, Babylon, and the Sumerians. Here, he describes the development of Judaism. He claims that Judaism developed from the Jews trying to justify their nationalism. He claims that before their captivity, they were more of a disconnected set of clans and that this religion served to unify them.

Wells describes the rise and fall of the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires. He spends more time on the Greek Empire discussing philosophers and their ideas than he does historical events, such as battles. He claims Alexander the Great was something of a man set up by the forces around him to achieve deity, instead of being some great unifying figure, the first sign of Wells' disdain for conquerors.

Then he comes to the development of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, where we see Wells' love of philosophical leaders. He claims Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad to be great philosophical leaders proclaiming a global unity with all mankind, instead of the tribalism that had evolved into nationalism as time moved on.

## **Section II: The Lie of Impartiality**

Throughout *The Outline*, Wells insists he is trying to be unbiased. My problem with this is when a controversial subject is brought up and he denies one of the claims. For example, he does not deny the existence of Christ, the miracles, or the teachings, but denies that Christ ever claimed to be God. This is false on its face. With this, Wells has denied the beliefs of millions of Christians as ahistorical, while affirming millions of atheists (or adherents to any other religion).

My problem is not that Wells denies Christianity, but that he claims to be unbiased while doing so. Bias is unavoidable, partly because it is invisible. It's like the water a fish swims in, or the air we walk through. You don't notice it until you're not surrounded by it anymore. If bias cannot be removed, how can we maintain objectivity? We can't. We can only acknowledge our biases and attempt to understand others' biases.

I think most people would agree that humans are logical creatures. Sometimes that logic is flawed, sometimes our emotions get in the way, but sometimes our logic is merely colored by our assumptions from our individual experiences. That is bias. When people disagree, it is better to assume something in their biases have shifted the logical starting point in comparison to ours. The best we can hope for is to find both our bias and theirs, and use that as a framework to drive to a system that describes both of our experiences.

## **Interlude 2: The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire**

Wells describes Jesus as a good moral teacher whose ideas were twisted into the religion called Christianity. He claims that Jesus never claimed to be God in the Gospels, but that claim is easily refuted by reading John 8, where Jesus says, "... before Abraham was, I am." If you think this is insignificant, the Jews moved to stone Jesus directly after saying this. And John is the gospel that Wells claims is most accurate.

Wells repeats this claim about great moral teachers getting twisted into religious figures by those who would seek to control the populace, once with Buddha, and once with Muhammad. Critically, neither of these figures were prophesized about as precisely as Christ was, and neither were their teachings written down anywhere near as soon as the New Testament was. To me, this is enough to say this is a false comparison.

Wells continues and describes the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, which led to the dark ages. He describes the loss of the empire's "soul," the national spirit, so to speak, though this isn't quite right, given his disdain for nationalism. No, he seems to be lamenting Rome's neglect of *community* spirit. His real concern is that the common man had no interest in preserving the status quo of the empire, allowing it to fall into disrepair. There are other factors he mentions, such as the Huns, the "effeminacy of the age," and their practice of hiring mercenaries, but this community spirit seems to be the crux of the issue for Wells.

## **Section III: Morality Apart From Religion**

After this, as we move to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Wells laments the lack of moral compass in the general public, denouncing nationalism as evil, and attempting to encourage people to see humanity as one unit that should work together.

He wants people to take the messages that these "great moral teachers" (Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad) had in their times, but divest themselves of the religious dogma that has become interlinked with their teachings. This, I think is flawed logic. If there is no God, I have not found a good reason to be nice to others, especially in the "turn the other cheek" way that Christ taught. Niceness is only a tool to get what you want. If there is no greater morality to align ourselves to, why shouldn't we care only about our clans? After all, man is just a smart animal.

But if there is a God, then God defines morality. If we want to be good people, we align ourselves with God's standards, whatever they are. To be fair to Wells, I don't think he's necessarily trying to do away with religion altogether, just that we need to distance ourselves from the groupthink that dogma provides.

Then again, he promotes Socialism as a solution. He admits that he doesn't know how to implement it, just that things should be collectively owned, a kind of "we're all in this together" kind of way. The problem comes in that Socialism assumes people can think on the level of the greater good without thinking of themselves and those closest to them.

### **Interlude 3: "Present Day"**

Moving quickly through the rest of this, Wells describes the renaissance, the reformation of the Church, and the revolutionary period of the United States and the French. He seems to have great respect for the American Revolution, as it was an ideological act of rebellion against a stale system. On the other hand, Wells denounces Napoleon's career as "one of almost incredible self-conceit, of vanity, greed, and cunning, of callous contempt and disregard of a Il who trusted him, and of a grandiose aping of Caesar, Alexander [the Great], and Charlemagne which would be purely comic if it were not caked over with human blood."

Wells spends quite a bit of time on the industrial revolution, shockingly enough skipping over the Enlightenment altogether. He then, almost begrudgingly, describes World War I. The ideas of nationalism and international secrets are denounced.

### **Section IV: Utopia**

Throughout the book, Wells has been promoting the idea of continuous progress, marching from the sludge into civilization and onward to Utopia. He makes frequent allusions to the animals we came from, particularly in the aftermath of a particularly nasty war.

After WWI, Wells describes the formation of the League of Nations, where he heralds Woodrow Wilson as the savior of humanity... until Wilson arrives in Europe, looking like a tourist. The League of Nations was still in effect at the time of writing *The Outline*, but it collapsed after World War II, when it was replaced by the United Nations.

Wells is trying to encourage people to move toward utopia, but World War II and the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century really kicked that optimism into the ground. The Cold War brought out the worst in paranoia in people within a nation, let alone between nations.

This only serves to show Wells' overly optimistic prediction of the future was not based in anything. World War I was about imperial nationalism, an idea that was carried into World War II with the rise of fascism. Wells believed nationalism had been beat. Instead, it was reinforced. Utopia, having all of humanity united to a single cause would require uniformity of thought, is something that a United Nations is ineffective in bringing about.

The two ways to enforce unity from disparate peoples is either from removing the disparity, or removing will. But disparity is inherent to the human condition. Even if currency is abolished, and people do things altruistically, I am still taller than others, and shorter than others. This leaves only removing the will. If we could remove choice from the equation, then we could achieve unity. This is the concern that *Brave New World* and *1984* both were worried about. This is the stuff of dystopian novels, not utopia.

To adapt a paraphrase of Chesterton, “If we’re going to evolve utopia, it’s going to have to be a result of a series of miracles.” Utopia is an unattainable goal. It is better to focus on altruism for ourselves, and worry less about forcing altruism upon others.