Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance

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1. The tension between natural law and history has come down to us, as so many other ideas, from the ancient Greeks. In a famous passage of his Rhetoric Aristotle put it in this way:

   Justice and injustice have been defined in reference to laws and persons in two ways. Now there are two kinds of laws, particular and general. By particular laws I mean those established by each people in reference to themselves, which again are divided into written and unwritten; by general laws I mean those based upon nature [κατὰ φύσιν]. In fact, there is a general idea of just and unjust in accordance with nature, as all men in a manner divine, even if there is neither communication nor agreement between them. This is what Antigone in Sophocles evidently means, when she declares that it is just, though forbidden, to bury Polynices, as being naturally just:

   “For neither to-day nor yesterday, but from all eternity, these statutes live and no man knoweth whence they came.”

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Let us briefly recall the context of these words. Aristotle is analyzing the different parts of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic, epideictic (that is, oratory which deals with praise or blame). The opposition between written particular law, on the one hand, and unwritten general law, on the other, takes place within the section on forensic rhetoric. Aristotle does not bother to demonstrate the existence of unwritten general law; he takes it as natural and therefore self-evident. As a footnote I would like to point out that the passage I just quoted from the Loeb Classical Library’s 1926 translation—“As all men in a manner divine . . . no man knoweth”—has today a sexist nuance that is absent in the Greek original texts. This is not a minor detail insofar as both Sophocles and Aristotle use neuter terms (οὐδείς, nobody; πάντες, all) in passages, respectively, ascribed to a feminine character, Antigone, or meant to introduce the same feminine character as a prominent example. Natural law, as those neuter terms emphasize, embraces both men and women. Antigone, therefore, speaks the voice of generality; on the contrary, the written (and, we may add, masculine) law in the name of which Creontes forbids the burial of Polynices, is, in Aristotle’s words, a “particular law” (νόμον τὸν μὲν ἵδιον).

Aristotle seems to suggest that what is “based upon nature” (κατὰ φύσιν) is unrelated to specific times and places. But some passages of the second book of Rhetoric suggest a different view. Aristotle examines in detail the different emotions (pity, for example) used by the orator in order to convince his audience:

The persons men pity are those whom they know, provided they are not too closely connected with them; for if they are, they feel the same as if they themselves were likely to suffer. . . . The terrible is different from the pitiable [τὸ γὰρ δεινὸν ἐτέρον τοῦ ἐλευθεροῦ], for it drives out pity, and often serves to produce the opposite feeling. Further, the nearness of the terrible makes men pity. Men also pity those who resemble them in age, character, habits, position, or family; for all such relations make a man more likely to think that their misfortune may befall him as well. For, in general, here also we may conclude that all that men fear in regard to themselves excites their pity when others are the victims. And since sufferings are pitiable when

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they appear close at hand, while those that are past or future, ten thousand years backwards or forwards, either do not excite pity at all or only in a less degree, because men neither expect the one nor remember the other, it follows that those who contribute to the effect by gestures, voice, dress, and dramatic action generally, are more pitiable; for they make the evil appear close at hand, setting it before our eyes as either future or past. And disasters that have just happened or are soon about to happen excite more pity for the same reason. \[R, \text{pp.} 227-28 (2.8.1386a)\]

We come across the same argument in the section about envy. People envy those who are near them in time, place, age, and reputation, whence it was said, "Kinship knows how to envy also"; and those with whom they are in rivalry, who are those just spoken of; for no man tries to rival those who lived ten thousand years ago, or are about to be born, or are already dead; nor those who live near the Pillars of Hercules; nor those who, in his own opinion or in that of others, are either far inferior or superior to him. \[R, \text{pp.} 239, 241 (2.10.1388a10)\]

In Aristotle's view the emotions analyzed in the second book of \textit{Rhetoric} are undoubtedly based upon nature \[\kappa \alpha \tau \alpha \phi \omega \nu \nu \]. But he submitted them, as we would say today, to specific historical and geographical limitations. In Plato's mythical account the kingdom of Atlantis had flourished nine thousand years before Solon.\textsuperscript{2} Aristotle uses an even larger figure—"ten thousand years" \[\mu \nu \rho \iota \omicron \sigma \tau \omicron \delta \nu \]—in order to suggest a time, either past or future, so remote that it prevents us from identifying, either in a positive or in a negative way, with the emotions of other human beings. The allusion to the Pillars of Hercules conveys similar implications; the lands and seas beyond the borders of the Mediterranean were supposed to be inhabited by savages or monsters, according to legendary traditions that later on were projected onto the disciple of Aristotle, Alexander the Great.

But Aristotle's remarks on the chronological and geographical limits of pity and envy cannot be referred to an opposition between reality and myth. Mythical characters could also trigger powerful emotions, especially on stage. In his \textit{Poetics} Aristotle remarks that tragedy focuses on "incidents arousing fear and pity" \[\tau \alpha \omicron \tau \eta \nu \phi \omicron \iota \beta \epsilon \rho \omicron \omega \nu \kappa \alpha \iota \epsilon \lambda \epsilon \beta \iota \nu \omicron \omega \nu \ldots \mu \mu \rho \iota \tau \iota \kappa \iota \nu \]. He specifies them in these terms:

Such must necessarily be the actions of friends to each other or of enemies or of people that are neither. Now if an enemy does it to an enemy, there is nothing pitiable either in the deed or the intention,

\textsuperscript{2} See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "L'Atlantide et les nations," \textit{La Démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs: Essais d'hi
doriographie ancienne et moderne} (Paris, 1990), esp. p. 139.
except so far as the actual calamity goes. Nor would there be if they were neither friends nor enemies. But when these calamities happen among friends, when for instance brother kills brother, or son father, or mother son, or son mother—either kills or intends to kill, or does something of the kind, that is what we must look for.\(^3\)

*Fratelli, coltelli; Lontano dagli occhi, lontano dal cuore.* These two Italian proverbs (meaning, respectively, "Brothers, knives"; "Out of sight, out of mind") graphically convey the contradictory implications stressed by Aristotle both in his *Poetics* and in his *Rhetoric*. If extreme distance leads to indifference, extreme closeness can lead either to pity or to destructive rivalry. This ambivalence, which found a powerful expression on the Greek stage, was part of everyday experience in the face-to-face society in which Aristotle lived.

2. I will examine now a very different text written two thousand years later by Diderot: "Entretien d’un père avec ses enfants; ou, du danger de se mettre au-dessus des lois" ("Conversation of a Father with His Children; or, the Danger of Setting Oneself above the Law").\(^4\) In a broken, abrupt style inspired by Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Diderot describes a conversation that took place in his father’s house during a peaceful winter evening. People come and go, telling anecdotes and memories that revolve around a single issue: the relationship between written law and moral principles, that is, the "particular" and the "general law," as Aristotle would have said, embodied by Diderot the father and Diderot the son, respectively.\(^5\) Are we entitled to violate the written law in order to protect the general principles of morality? Is a doctor allowed to refuse to heal a wounded criminal? Is it morally legitimate to destroy an unjust will that would disinherit a group of poor people for the exclusive benefit of a selfish rich man? In reworking the 1773 text of the "Entretien," Diderot added a rather ill-woven digression. A hatter comes and tells his story. He had taken care of his sick wife for eighteen years; after her death, having no money left, he had taken his wife’s dowry, which according to the law should have gone instead to her relatives; was he right or wrong? A debate follows. Diderot the father insists that the hatter should give back the money he had illicitly taken for himself.

The hatter replied brusquely:

“No, Monsieur, I shall go away, I shall go to Geneva.”


“And you expect to leave your remorse behind?”
“I don’t know; but I shall go to Geneva.”
“Go wherever you choose, conscience will infallibly follow you.”

“We agreed,” Diderot writes, “that perhaps distance in space or time weakened all feelings and all sorts of guilty conscience, even of crime. The assassin, removed to the shores of China, can no longer see the corpse which he left bleeding on the banks of the Seine. Remorse springs perhaps less from horror of oneself than from fear of others; less from shame at what one has done than from the blame and punishment it would bring if it were found out.”

In his Supplement to Bougainville’s “Voyage” Diderot will argue that sexuality, being a natural activity, should be exempt from all sorts of moral or juridical constraints. In the “Conversation of a Father with His Children” he seems to suggest the same about the act of killing another human being. The starting point of Diderot’s shocking remark—“that perhaps the distance in space or time weaken[s] all feelings”—looks like a literal echo of the passage from Aristotle’s Rhetoric I quoted before; but it is Aristotle pushed to an extreme. This should not surprise us. “Aristotle,” Diderot wrote in an earlier piece of his, “is a philosopher who proceeds in an orderly way, by establishing some general principles and leaving to others the task of drawing their consequences and applications.” Among these consequences I would include the metamorphosis of Aristotle’s lack of pity, due to the “distance in space or time,” into Diderot’s presumable lack of remorse of the murderer, due to the same reasons. Distant, noncommunicating human beings turn into a split self; the theme inspired two of Diderot’s most powerful pieces, Rameau’s Nephew and The Paradox of Acting.

This inward shift is projected into a geographical scene—from France to China—which is immensely larger than Aristotle’s Mediterranean world. But why China? The mention of China in the framework of a fictitious moral case has suggested the possibility that Diderot took his example from a Jesuit treatise on casuistry. This hypothesis, although


8. Diderot’s reference in “Entretien d’un père avec ses enfants” to a “text” (“ce texte épuisé” [p. 742; “Conversation of a Father with His Children,” p. 143]), however, does not necessarily refer to a written text. See Diderot, “Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux
undemonstrated so far, is intriguing. Whatever the source of the story may be, Diderot took it as a starting point for a moral experiment comparable to the one he had made twenty years before in his “Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux qui voient” (“Letter on the Blind, for the Use of Those Who See”):

Since the blind are affected by none of the external demonstrations that awaken pity and ideas of grief in ourselves, with the sole exception of vocal complaints, I suspect them of being, in general, unfeeling toward their fellow men. What difference is there to a blind person between a man urinating and a man bleeding to death without speaking? Do we ourselves not cease to feel compassion when distance or the smallness of the object produces the same effect on us as lack of sight does on the blind? Thus do all our virtues depend on our way of apprehending things and on the degree to which external objects affect us! I feel quite sure that were it not for fear of punishment, many people would have fewer qualms at killing a man who was far enough away to appear no larger than a swallow than in butchering a steer with their own hands. And if we feel compassion for a horse in pain though we can crush an ant without a second thought, are these actions not governed by the selfsame principle?9

There is clearly an analogy between the geographical distance of France and China, on the one hand, and the sensorial deprivation of the blind, on the other.10 The lack of humanity and compassion that, in Diderot’s view, is the outcome of both situations refutes the alleged eternal character of morality. “Ah, madame! How different is the morality of the blind from ours!” says Diderot to Madame de Puisieux, the addressee of the


Comme de toutes les démonstrations extérieures qui réveillent en nous la commisération et les idées de la douleur, les aveugles ne sont affectés que par la plainte, je les soupçonne, en général, d’inhumanité. Quelle différence y a-t-il pour un aveugle, entre un homme qui urine et un homme qui, sans se plaindre, verse son sang? Nous-mêmes, ne cessons-nous pas de compatir lorsque la distance ou la petitesse des objets produit le même effet sur nous que la privation de la vue sur les aveugles? tant nos vertus dépendent de notre manière de sentir et du degré auquel les chose extérieures nous affectent! Aussi je ne doute point que, sans la crainte du châtiment, bien des gens n’eussent moins de peine à tuer un homme à une distance où il ne les verraien gros que comme une hirondelle, qu’a égorger un bœuf de leurs mains. Si nous avons de la compassion pour un cheval qui souffre, et si nous écrasons une fourmi sans aucun scrupule, n’est-ce pas le même principe qui nous détermine?

“Letter on the Blind.”11 According to Diderot, morality is the result of specific circumstances and constraints, physical as well as historical. The same crucial words, crainte and châtiment, fear and punishment, surface again, after twenty years, to explain the lack of remorse of both the hypothetical murderer leaving Paris for China and the person who would kill a man from a distance who looks no larger than a swallow. But this analogy, through a sudden twist, typical of Diderot’s way of reasoning, leads to a new theme, implying a different kind of displacement: our attitude towards animals. Diderot says they are also affected by our perception of size and distance. He does not spell out the consequences of this seemingly innocent principle. They are of course ambiguous. Should we extend to ants the compassion we feel for a suffering horse? Or should we, on the contrary, extend to horses and human beings the lack of compassion that we, human beings, have for ants?

The former conclusion was certainly much more consistent with Diderot’s emphasis on passions and sensibility, on “that disposition,” he wrote in an obvious autobiographical mood, “which accompanies organic weakness, which follows on easy affection of the diaphragm, on vivacity of imagination, on delicacy of nerves, which inclines one to being compassionate, to being horrified, to admiration, to fear, to being upset, to tears,” and so on.12 But the alternative, that is, the projection on a cosmic scale of our disregard for insects’ sufferings, was made explicit by one eighteenth-century reader. As Franco Venturi, the great historian of the European Enlightenment, perceptively noticed in his book Jeunesse de Diderot, the arguments against religion displayed in the “Letter on the Blind” had a remarkable impact on the marquis de Sade.13 In fact, I would suggest that the latter’s philosophy would have been inconceivable without Diderot’s “Letter on the Blind.”14 Here is Sade, arguing the legitimacy of murder in his Philosophy in the Bedroom:

What is man? and what difference is there between him and other plants, between him and all the other animals of the world? None, obviously. Fortuitously placed, like them, upon this globe, he is born like them; like them, he reproduces, rises, and falls; like them


14. In commenting on Diderot’s remark that a blind man perceives a urinating and a bleeding man alike, Venturi mentions “the characteristic cruelty which is often associated with the eighteenth-century vision of Nature” (Venturi, Jeunesse de Diderot, p. 165).
he arrives at old age and sinks like them into nothingness at the close of the life span Nature assigns each species of animal, in accordance with its organic construction. Since the parallels are so exact that the inquiring eye of philosophy is absolutely unable to perceive any grounds for discrimination, there is then just as much evil in killing animals as men, or just as little, and whatever be the distinctions we make, they will be found to stem from our pride’s prejudices, than which, unhappily, nothing is more absurd. . . . If Nature denies eternity to beings, it follows that their destruction is one of her laws. . . . Little animals are formed immediately a large animal expires, and these little animals’ lives are simply one of the necessary effects determined by the large animal’s temporary sleep. Given this, will you dare suggest that one pleases Nature more than another?  

3. Sade has sometimes been considered as the extreme but logical outcome of the Enlightenment—an argument that had been already suggested in a polemical article by Charles de Pougens, the reactionary writer, published in 1801. But, for the intellectual and political champions of the Restoration, Diderot was of course a much more obvious target than Sade. In The Genius of Christianity, Chateaubriand’s European best-seller, the story about the murderer who had left Europe for China re-emerged again, taking a new shape. “Perhaps distance in space or time weakened all feelings and all sorts of guilty conscience, even of crime,” something that does not exist, Diderot had written, if there is no fear of punishment. These very words triggered Chateaubriand’s virtuous indignation:

Conscience! is it possible that thou canst be but a phantom of the imagination, or the fear of the punishment of men? I ask my own heart, I put to myself this question: “If thou couldst by a mere wish kill a fellow-creature in China, and inherit his fortune in Europe, with the supernatural conviction that the fact would never be known wouldst thou consent to form such a wish?” In vain do I exaggerate my indignation; in vain do I attempt to extenuate the murder, by supposing that through the effect of my wish the Chinese expires instantaneously and without pain; that, had he even died of a natural death, his property, from the situation of his affairs, would have been lost to the state; in vain do I figure to myself this stranger overwhelmed with disease and affliction; in vain do I urge that to him death is a blessing, that he himself desires it, that he has but a moment longer to live: in spite of all my useless subterfuges, I hear a voice in the recesses of my soul, protesting so loudly against the mere

idea of such a supposition, that I cannot for one moment doubt the reality of conscience.\textsuperscript{17}

Chateaubriand is obviously reacting against Diderot's texts about the murderer fleeing to China and those who would easily kill a human being from a distance. By mixing them, Chateaubriand created a new story: the victim is a Chinese; the murderer, a European; a reason for the murder—financial gain—is mentioned. In this new version the story became famous, albeit under a false attribution to Rousseau. The mistake goes back to Balzac.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{Le Père Goriot} Rastignac spends a night in considering the possibility of making a rich marriage which would involve him, at least indirectly, in a murder. Then he meets his friend Bianchon at the Luxembourg Gardens.

"I'm being tortured by evil thoughts," Rastignac says, adding:

"Have you read Rousseau?"
"Yes."
"Do you remember that passage in which he asks the reader what he would do if he could become wealthy by killing an old Chinese mandarin, without leaving Paris, just by an act of will?"
"Yes."
"Well then?"
"Oh, I'm on my thirty-third mandarin."
"Don't joke about it. Come, if it were proved to you that the


O conscience! ne serais-tu qu'un fantôme de l'imagination, ou la peur des châtiments des hommes? Je m'interroge; je me fais cette question: "Si tu pouvais, par un seul désir, tuer un homme à la Chine, et hériter de sa fortune en Europe, avec la conviction surnaturelle qu'on n'en saurait jamais rien, consentirais-tu à former ce désir?" J'ai beau m'exagérer mon indigence; j'ai beau vouloir atténuer cet homicide, en supposant que, par mon souhait, le Chinois meurt tout-à-coup sans douleur, qu'il n'a point d'héritier, que même à sa mort, ses biens seront perdus pour l'état; j'ai beau me figurer cet étranger comme accablé de maladies et de chagrins, j'ai beau me dire que la mort est un bien pour lui, qu'il l'appelle lui-même, qu'il n'a plus qu'un instant à vivre; malgré mes vains subterfuges, j'entends au fond de mon cœur une voix qui crie si fortement contre la seule pensée d'une telle supposition, que je ne puis douter un instant de la réalité de la conscience.

thing was possible and that all you'd need to do would be nod your head, would you do it?"

"Is your mandarin very old? Oh, well, young or old, healthy or paralytic, good Lord . . . Oh, the devil! Well, no."

4. The mandarin parable anticipates the development of Rastignac's character. Balzac wants to show that in bourgeois society it is difficult to observe moral obligations, including the most basic ones. The chain of relations in which we are all involved can make us at least indirectly responsible for a crime. Some years later, in *Modeste Mignon*, Balzac again used a mandarin to make a similar point: "if at this moment," the poet Canalis says, "the most important mandarin in China is closing his eyes and putting the Empire into mourning, does that grieve you deeply? In India the English are killing thousands of men as good as we are; and at this moment, as I speak, the most charming woman is there being burnt—but you have had coffee for breakfast all the same?" In a world dominated by the cruelties of backwardness and the cruelties of imperialism, moral indifference already implies a form of complicity.

In contradistinction, the resistance of Rastignac's friend to the idea of killing an unknown Chinese mandarin can be considered an implicit endorsement of the existence of "a general idea of just and unjust in accordance with nature," as Aristotle put it. But the emergence of a worldwide economic system had already turned the possibility of a financial gain, involving much longer distances than Aristotle had imag-


"Je suis tourmenté par des mauvaises idées." . . . "As-tu lu Rousseau?"

"Oui."

"Te souviens-tu de ce passage où il demande à son lecteur ce qu’il ferait au cas où il pourrait s'enrichir en tuant à la Chine par sa seule volonté un vieux mandarin, sans bouger de Paris?"

"Oui."

"Eh bien?"

"Bah! J'en suis à mon trente-troisième mandarin."

"Ne plaisante pas. Allons, s'il t'était prouvé que la chose est possible et qu'il te suffit d'un signe de tête, le ferais-tu?"

"Est-il bien vieux, le mandarin? Mais, bah! jeune ou vieux, paralytique ou bien portant, ma foi . . . Diantre! Eh bien, non."

See also p. 174. On the erroneous attribution to Rousseau, see Martins, "O mandarim assassinado."

ined even in his wildest flights of phantasy, into a reality. The possibility of such a connection was perceived a long time ago. "A West-Indian merchant will tell you, that he is not without concern about what passes in Jamaica," David Hume remarked in a section of his Treatise of Human Nature entitled "Of Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time."21 As we will see, Hume’s subtle remarks on this topic ignored the moral and juridical implications of it. This silence is not easily missed today. We should have become aware that somebody’s financial gains can be related, more or less directly, to the distress of distant human beings, thrown into poverty, starvation, and even death. But the expanding global economy is only one way other people’s lives are affected from a distance that progress has given us. In the most widespread version of the story, the Chinese mandarin can be killed simply by pressing a button; this is a detail more consistent with modern warfare than with the traditional attribution of the story to Rousseau.22 Airplanes and missiles have proved the truth of Diderot’s conjecture, that it would be much easier to kill a human being if he or she would look no larger than a swallow. Bureaucratic progress went in the same direction, creating the possibility of dealing with large groups of human beings as if they were mere numbers, which is also a most effective way of distancing them.

Throwing a bomb that kills hundreds of thousands of people can sometimes generate remorse, as the case of Claude Eatherly, the Hiroshima pilot, suggests. But it does not require training ordinary people to perform the grim details of human butchery. Even when such a training is fully successful (and this is often the case) some frictions may occur, as Christopher Browning has shown in his book Ordinary Men, which presents thoughtful, deeply disturbing research on a German reserve police battalion that was involved in the extermination of Jews in Poland.23 Normal German citizens who were turned into mass murderers were slightly disturbed by the perspective of performing their usual job when by chance they came across Jews they had known in the past. To project the stereotypes provided by the Nazi propaganda into tens or thousands of unknown Jews was apparently easier for them.

The sharp distinction between us and them that was at the core of the Nazi racist legislation was related, on a theoretical level, to an explicit rejection of the idea of natural law. In this sense, the formulation of the


22. The false text by Rousseau is reproduced in Diderot, Oeuvres, p. 1418 n. 7; it is alleged to be from Émile, but no exact citation is provided. This provenance is immediately disproved by a quick glance at Étienne Brunet, Index-Concordance de "Émile ou de l’éducation," 2 vols. (Geneva, 1980).

juridical notion of crimes against humanity that emerged at the end of the Second World War can be regarded as a belated victory for Antigone. “It is just, though forbidden, to bury Polynices, as being naturally just”: these words, in Aristotle’s view, implied the supremacy of general laws over particular laws, of allegiance towards humankind over allegiance towards a particular community, of distance over closeness. But as Aristotle himself remarked, both distance and closeness are ambivalent concepts; moreover, they are submitted to temporal and spatial constraints. As we have seen, distance, if pushed to an extreme, can generate a total lack of compassion for our fellow humans. We may ask, How can we trace the boundary between distance and extreme distance? Or, to put it in another way, What are the historical limits of an alleged natural passion such as human compassion?

5. This is a very big question, which I will not try to answer directly. But it might be worthwhile to clarify at least some of its implications.

The mandarin’s story was concerned only with distance in space. In his Treatise on Human Nature Hume explored a much larger topic—“Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time”—which as we have seen had been already touched by Aristotle. Hume, who did not mention him, approached the issue from a very different angle.

“We find in common life,” Hume wrote,

that men are principally concern’d about those objects, which are not much remov’d either in space or time, enjoying the present, and leaving what is afar off to the care of chance and fortune. Talk to a man of his condition thirty years hence, and he will not regard you. Speak of what is to happen tomorrow, and he will lend you attention. The breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house, when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant. [THN, pp. 475–76 (2.3.7)]

Hume’s rather paradoxical argument is conducted from a general but strictly self-centered perspective; the house which is burning is ours when we are abroad—not somebody else’s. No Chinese mandarin is involved here. Hume does not even mention sympathy, which in his mind was closely connected to morality. Then a qualification follows:

Tho’ distance both in space and time has a considerable effect on the imagination, and by that means on the will and passions, yet the consequences of a removal in space are much inferior to those of a removal in time. Twenty years are certainly but a small distance of time in comparison of what history and even the memory of some may inform them of, and yet I doubt if a thousand leagues, or even the greatest distance of place this globe can admit of, will so remarkably weaken our ideas, and diminish our passions.
Hume supports his statement with the example of the West-Indian merchant who is concerned by what goes on in Jamaica: "tho'" he writes, "few extend their views so far into futurity, as to dread very remote accidents" (THN, p. 476 [2.3.7]). This asymmetry between space and time leads him to the discussion of a further difference concerning time: "the superior effects of the same distance in the past above that in futurity" (THN, p. 477 [2.3.7])—superior, that is, in terms of weakening more both our will and our passions. As far as the will is concerned, Hume says, this is "easily accounted for. As none of our actions can alter the past, 'tis not strange it shou'd never determine the will" (THN, p. 477 [2.3.7]). Passions deserve on the contrary a much longer discussion, which ends up this way: "We conceive the future as flowing every moment nearer us, and the past as retiring. An equal distance, therefore, in the past and in the future, has not the same effect on the imagination; and that because we consider the one as continually encreasing, and the other as continually diminishing. The fancy anticipates the course of things, and surveys the object in that condition, to which it tends, as well as in that, which is regarded as the present" (THN, p. 478 [2.3.7]).

Through a detailed analysis Hume has been able to account, in his own words,

for three phaenomena, which seem pretty remarkable. Why distance in time weakens the conception and passion: Why distance in time has a greater effect than that in space: And why distance in past time has still a greater effect than that in future. We must now consider three phaenomena, which seem to be, in a manner, the reverse of these: Why a very great distance encreases our esteem and admiration for an object; Why such a distance in time encreases it more than that in space: And a distance in past time more than that in future. [THN, p. 479 (2.3.8)]

These two sets of conflicting arguments point, if I am not mistaken, to a factual (not logical) contradiction that Hume, and even the Enlightenment at large, could not easily cope with: on the one hand, a tendency to dismiss the power and prestige of tradition as a purely irrational argument; on the other, a recognition of that same power and prestige as an undeniable force. Some cutting remarks on the effects of distance in time compared with those of distance in space show Hume the philosopher engaged in a productive dialogue with Hume the historian: "Antient busts and inscriptions are more valu'd than Japan tables: And not to mention the Greeks and Romans, 'tis certain we regard with more veneration the old Chaldeans and Egyptians, than the modern Chinese and Persians, and bestow more fruitless pains to clear up the history and chronology

24. The text actually reads: "the superior effects of the same distance in futurity above that in the past." I have corrected the text according to the logical requirements of the argument.
of the former, than it wou’d cost us to make a voyage, and be certainly inform’d of the character, learning and government of the latter” (THN, p. 480 [2.3.8]).

The way in which Hume tried to solve the already mentioned contradictions are disappointing insofar as they are drawn from individual psychology only. The connections between distance and difficulty, between difficulty and the pleasure in overcoming obstacles, stressed by Hume cannot explain the value ascribed by our civilization to distance, to the past, and to a distant past. This is a specific historical phenomenon, related to specific historical circumstances. These utterly changed during the twentieth century. Hume could still confidently write that “none of our actions can alter the past.” Today we would add that this is certainly true, but human actions can deeply affect the memory of the past by distorting its traces, by putting them into oblivion, by utterly destroying them.

6. The impulse to rescue the past from an incumbent menace has never been so poignantly articulated as in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” written by Walter Benjamin in the early months of 1940, in the aftermath of the Hitler-Stalin pact. “Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins,” Benjamin wrote, just a few months before his own tragic death.25 At the beginning of his second thesis Benjamin quoted a sentence by Hermann Lotze, the nineteenth-century German philosopher. “One of the most remarkable characteristics of human nature,” Lotze wrote, “is, alongside so much selfishness in specific instances, the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future.”26

In these words we can hear a distinct echo of the passage of Aristotle’s Rhetoric on the ambivalent relationship between passions (more specifically, envy) and distance in space and time. The lack of envy towards posterity was considered by Lotze as a “wonderful phaenomenon” that

may well tend to confirm our belief that there is some unity of history, transcending that of which we are conscious, a unity in which we cannot merely say of the past that it is not. . . . The presentment that we shall not be lost to the future, that those who were before us though they have passed away from the sphere of earthly reality have not passed away from reality altogether, and that in some mysterious way the progress of history affects them too—this conviction it is that first entitles us to speak as we do of humanity and its history.27


27. Ibid., 2:173–74.
The *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin’s great unfinished work on Paris in the nineteenth century, includes several quotations from Lotze’s *Microcosmus*, a book which was very popular in the late nineteenth century and is now forgotten. Lotze played an important and so far nearly unnoticed role in Benjamin’s thought.²⁸ One of the central themes of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the urge to “brush history against the grain,” developed Lotze’s remarks on the redemption of the past within the framework of both Judaism and historical materialism. “Like every generation that preceded us,” Benjamin wrote, “we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.”²⁹

These words were written in 1940. In the light of what happened since then one is tempted to say that the last two generations have been endowed, on the contrary, with a powerful, albeit negative, messianic power. The end of history—not in the metaphorical sense, which became fashionable recently, but in a most literal sense—has been for the last half century a technical possibility. The potential self-destruction of humankind, in itself a turning point in history, has affected and will affect the life and the fragmented memories, respectively, of all future and past generations—including “those that are past or future, ten thousand years backwards or forwards,” as Aristotle wrote. The realm of what Aristotle called “general law” seems to have expanded accordingly. But to express compassion for those distant fellow humans would be, I suspect, an act of mere rhetoric. Our power to pollute and destroy the present, the past, and the future is incomparably greater than our feeble moral imagination.

²⁸. To my knowledge, Benjamin’s intellectual debt to Lotze has been mentioned only by Stéphane Moès, *L’Ange de l’histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris, 1992), p. 166.