

In our Time Programme 48  
*The End of History*

**Melvyn Bragg** : Hello, the end of the century approaches at a gallop now, we can hear the trumpets tuning up, but as man has grown in years and knowledge has he also progressed in terms of happiness and a truer understanding of the human condition. There are those that argue that it was the Enlightenment which gave birth to the idea of the possibility of progress. The biblical account of time which had held until the 18th century, was replaced by a conceit which put man, not God at the centre of the story of progress. But do we still believe in that story? Have we reached what's been called "the end of history" and the culmination of man's evolution? Was the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges right, when he said, "We've stopped believing in progress, what progress that is?"

With me to discuss this is Anthony O'Hear, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bradford, and author of "After Progress: Finding the Old Way Forward" and the psychoanalyst and writer, Adam Phillips, who is author of "Darwin's Worms", which has also been published recently.

Anthony O'Hear, can we define terms a little here? Progress is such a huge concept, do you want to differentiate between material progress and moral progress?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Yes I mean, obviously over the past few centuries there's been immense progress in science, in technology, in medical developments, material comfort generally, and also on peaceable and democratic arrangements, and I think in a way, the Enlightenment, the European Enlightenment has developed and extended this idea of progress, so that it moves into other areas where I think it's more questionable. According to the Enlightenment, negatively what we have to do is to get rid of superstition, repression, religion, old traditions and allegiances. Positively, if we have rational modern political social arrangements starting from scratch, we can then produce a society which is to some extent ideal, and more fundamentally, if we see human beings demythologised in scientific terms people will be able to pursue happiness untrammelled and unrestrained.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Do you see material and moral progress as being bound together? Can you see that people's material progress will make them kinder to each other, less likely to be insane, with vengeance and cruelty?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Erm, it may do but I think that the sort of image of mankind which comes out of this Enlightenment notion of progress basing it on scientific thought, leads to an image of human beings which is not flattering to ourselves, which actually undermines our ideals, and if you think of Goya's famous picture about the sleep of reason bringing forth monster, I would say, if you're thinking of Enlightenment reason, it's reason that brings forth monsters, in the sense that it shows us not to be creatures with high aspirations and able to reach them, but simply scientifically determined beings, determined by forces of society and by Darwinian explanations just having to survive and reproduce and so on.

**Melvyn Bragg** : We've brought forth monsters way before the age of reason. I've just been reading Ted Hughes's translation of Actaeon and (indistinct) and there are monsters there alright. Genghis Khan was a bit of a monster, reason or not. I don't think we needed the age of reason to teach us to be monsters, Anthony.

**Anthony O'Hear** : But I think what we have to do is to look at the particular nature of the monsters, which reason is bringing forth.

**Melvyn Bragg** : But let's get back this idea of progress. Now do you think.....? Now you're not giving..... I mean....people say "Look, if you're better fed, better off, better clothed, housed, roof over your heads, you don't have to worry about a living", you have material progress in that simple diurnal sense, then you're in a better position to behave less badly, do you agree with that?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Erm..... in some ways of course you're not going to struggle and fight and kill people, but it may not actually produce satisfaction or happiness, and...well I was just going to say that we're told that in quantitative terms, more and more people are now feeling that they lack self esteem....

**Melvyn Bragg** : How can you possibly measure that?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well.....

**Melvyn Bragg** : What quantitative terms do we have to compare with the 17th century of the 14th century, where are the statistics? You can't.....and actually you throwing happiness into the balance is like throwing a gobbet of air in balance against a sort of a ton of grain. How can you measure happiness? One person's happiness is another person's unhappiness. I don't think we would get anywhere with happiness.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well, no I quite agree, that's what I was going to say , I think actually our concentration on happiness is misplaced, because....and that itself is a product of Enlightenment thinking, and utilitarianism. I think that the concentration on happiness, itself produces discontents, and it takes us away from other ideals that we might have in our lives, such as dignity, integrity, creativity, honour, fidelity, continence, proving a theorem, writing a book.

**Melvyn Bragg** : That's enough to be going on with. Adam Phillips, what....how would you define progress?

**Adam Phillips** : Well, I think one of the advantages of living in a pluralist culture, is that you're going to have many competing versions of what progress might be. It would seem to me that we're only going to have an idea of morality and an idea of progress once we achieve a certain level of economic well-being. That people have to be fed, there has to be minimal conditions, then people have some space in which they might begin to think about what kind of lives they want to lead.

So that once people can economically survive, they can start having ideas and thoughts. I think the advantage of living the way we do now, is that there really are competing and conflicting ideals. We really are living in a multicultural society, people have very different ideas, both of what progress is, and very interesting ideas about why there shouldn't be such a thing as progress. This must be historically unprecedented, I would have thought.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Do you think progress is possible, moral progress is possible?

**Adam Phillips** : Yes, I mean I think the Platonic question "can virtue be taught?" is a very interesting one. I think it seems to me, clear that people learn things, people are curious about being good and bad, and I think the reason the question is not generally answerable , is because as you've implied, people have very different ideas about what progress would entail. For me it would be progress to live in a culture in which there was less humiliation . It seems to be the best possible moral project for a culture would be, to diminish humiliation.

**Melvyn Bragg** : But you could do a lot more progress in sort of grand headline terms as well. I would consider that it was moral progress when largely inspired by British men and women, slavery was abolished .

**Adam Phillips** : Yes. Exactly.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Now I would say that is progress, would you agree?

**Adam Phillips** : Yes.

**Melvyn Bragg** : That's moral progress

**Adam Phillips** : For sure.

**Melvyn Bragg** : That was also based on a certain level of material comfort. If you're a deeply cynical Marxist, you'd say "The Brits have made an awful lot of money out of the slave trade, now they could afford to get rid of it and make everybody else get rid of it. Nevertheless, it's moral progress.

**Adam Phillips** : Mmmm, absolutely.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Would you agree with that?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Erm, yes I think that the idea of getting rid of slavery was indeed moral progress which, to an

extent was made possible by material comfort, material well-being, material progress. What I think..... where I think things become more questionable on moral progress is that the images of humanity which science is presenting us with, undermine the idea of man as something spiritual, something capable of high aspiration.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Which images are they?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Sorry?

**Melvyn Bragg** : Which images are they?

**Anthony O'Hear** : The images provided by Freud, Darwin, Marx.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Which images? Can you just be specific, so that the listeners click in with this? Which particular images are you talking about?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Yes. Well, Darwin says that "we are here on Earth simply to compete to survive and reproduce". Freud tells us that many of our beliefs and practices are actually not as we think they are, but simply the engine of the unconscious. I think that they destroy our perceptions of ourselves as rational moral beings.

**Melvyn Bragg** : That's.....as Adam Phillips's new book "Darwin's Worms" is about Darwin and Freud and smack on this subject would you come in on that?

**Adam Phillips** : Well, it's very difficult I think to talk about mankind and images and so on. It seems in some ways rather abstract. If you read Darwin and Freud, you find a multiplicity of images of people, all the time they're evolving stories about what they think people are. I don't think that....I mean it depends what...I suppose it depends what one values. I don't feel that Darwin's account, even if we take it as starkly as you put it, that the project, that as Nietzsche says, "We're clever animals", the project is to survive and reproduce, that doesn't seem to be in and of itself diminishing.

Neither does Freud's account of satisfaction seem in and of itself diminishing, because I suppose I would want to know, why....how our lives would be better without Darwin and Freud.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Continue...sorry I wasn't interrupting.

**Adam Phillips** : No I just wanted to ask Anthony this question, I mean, if you feel critical of them, and you feel in some ways we're being given an impoverished view, I wonder how our lives would be better, if there hadn't been a Darwin or a Freud?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well, (stutters) I ...I...it seems to me that Darwin may well be providing a correct account of biological evolution. The question that still remains is, the extent to which human behaviour and human culture allows us to transcend what Darwin himself calls "the one general law leading to the advancement of all organic beings", this is a quotation from Darwin, namely multiply, vary, let the strongest live, and the weakest die. Now if you pursue Darwinian theory into the human realm, what we would be told, and to an extent we are told this by Darwin himself in "The Descent of Man" is that our practices, our institutions, our behaviour, is all designed to enable us to let the strongest live and let weakest die. Now it seems to me, that this gives a completely false account of human life and human nature, in particular areas which, I mean I can go into in a minute, but maybe you'd want to come back on that?

**Adam Phillips** : Well, I mean there are two things that occur to me. One is that, obviously we are in a position to contest Darwin's account, and I think the risk is that the rhetoric of this is very powerful. When one is talking about the strongest surviving, it's...the risk is it evokes images of kind of supermen, something like this. It seems to me, we could produce a political culture in which the strongest people were the kindest for example. That all the time Darwin gives us space to work out what it is about ourselves that we want to value most and do our best to promote, and back.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I mean I.....

**Adam Phillips** : Yes, go on.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I mean I prefer the word "fittest", because you can be fitter....a sort of a gentle cunning can be the fitter way to survive, just as much as a bloke or a blokes with a huge club, thumping people, I totally agree with Adam there. I don't think what he's saying actually necessarily gets in the way of characteristics and virtues more commonly associated with religious morality. I don't see that they are at each other's throats.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well, I mean I've....the strongest was actually his word, and he hardly uses the word fittest, in fact. But I...if Adam's telling me that Darwin leaves plenty of space for other ideals, other activities, that's fine, that's...so we'd be in agreement there, then the question would be, where is one going to get the ideals of kindness, abolishing slavery, I say fidelity, courage, magnanimity, all kinds of things that don't seem in themselves to have much to do with survival and reproduction. Now the Darwinian account doesn't explain these.

**Melvyn Bragg** : They could have *everything* to do with survival. Everything you've said there could have everything to do with survival, depending on the society you construct . Every single example you gave there.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well .....

**Adam Phillips** : You see if the question is "where are our ideals going to come from?", the answer is "they are going to come from us" . That we, as clever animals are going to achieve on the basis of rhetoric and persuasion, some kind of consensus about what it is that we as a group, depending on how you define the group are going to value, and that's then going to be promoted as an ideal. It doesn't seem to me that Darwin tells us anything specific about what we have to do morally. It seems to me he leaves us a lot of room to work out exactly what it is, which values we want to treat as the most valuable and the "fittest", for the kind of world we want to make. I don't think Darwin produces a simply a legitimation of global capitalism.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Can we bring..... er can we bring Freud into this now, and maybe bring the idea.....let's just explore a bit the ideas of where do..... ? I was a bit abrupt about that, I didn't say anything I didn't believe in, but I was rather elliptical a couple of minutes ago.....er where ....where can these ideas.....these ideas of magnanimity, and so on, are these...? Do these come because of the way we construct society or is there something "in us" which religious people, of course believe profoundly that it has been revealed.....? What does Freud have to say about this Adam?

**Adam Phillips** : I think Freud believes that we are in a sense, culturally informed , that we bring into the world what we would now think of as a genetic inheritance, and then this is like a set of predispositions, and these then are culturally formed, and we can transform the culture through our genetic inheritance. So I don't think he's...Freud is an innatist in some absolute sense, he doesn't believe that all the ideas are already inside us. What he does believe I think, is that what is already inside us is some kind of biological instinctual life, which then meets the culture we happen to be born into.

**Melvyn Bragg** : You say in your book, "if we ditched redemption, or dreams of perfect happiness, then we might be less unhappy, or more happy", I think you say "more happy", which seems to be.....not an attack on because you don't write in that way, but it seems to question, the promises of organised religion.

**Adam Phillips** : Yes I think that, for me, one of the interesting things about Freud and Darwin in a different way, as I say in the book, is that they seem to imply that some of our ideals, are in a way, ways of not living in the so-called real world, that to have an ideal, to have an aspiration, in some way is to live in a kind of future state. One's never present, one's always aspiring towards something else. So one of the things that Freud is very interesting about, is how we use ideals as refuges, as ways of protecting ourselves from the world as well as ways...as we're making the world.

**Melvyn Bragg** : So you're pred.....you're predicating a relativism about life all the time?

**Adam Phillips** : Yes.

**Melvyn Bragg** : And that relativism has more chance of catching on to some of the truths, than any sort of

absolutism?

**Adam Phillips** : Yes, that it's going to be less inclined ideally, to produce marginal people.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Well, Anthony?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well ..... I mean, I'd like to take up two points really. I mean I thought it was interesting that Adam said that we would develop through persuasion and rhetoric. I would hope that we would develop through **reason** and perhaps in a general sense piety . He also said that we are "transforming our culture", and of course I agree with that, and that's part of my complaint about the Enlightenment view of man. If I can mention another figure who I think is a very significant commentator on all of this, it's Nietzsche.

Now Nietzsche said that in the past, people loved the Olympian gods more than they deserved to be loved. They loved the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, more than he deserved to be loved, and they loved the god of the new testament more than he deserved to be loved. Nevertheless, in this loving, they gave themselves aspirations and structures which, according to Nietzsche, allowed us to escape chaos, anarchy and a situation in which we ceased to have genuine respect for each other. Now it seems to me that it's a very open question as to whether, in the absence of higher ideals, which I suspect Adam will call "refuges", it would...it is going to be possible to sustain an understanding of the respect for the individual, which I am sure we all want to.....

**Adam Phillips** : I accept that, but.....

**Anthony O'Hear** : ....cling to.

**Adam Phillips** : ....but I think there are two sides to this coin, because I think the other side of this, is that we know that terrible things have been done in the name of high ideals. That people fought.... people are prepared to kill for ideas. This is an absolutely astonishing fact.

**Melvyn Bragg** : It's the big message of the century isn't it?

**Adam Phillips** : Yeah, that people die and kill for ideas. Now if this is the case, it seems to me, **we have to be very mindful of the kind of ideals we're willing to pursue, and the cost of them.** That we can't just simply say that we're going to better off aspiring say, to be godlike. It seems to me that one of the things about a lot of Christian ideals, and Nietzsche's very interesting about this too, is that they create guilt driven people, or shame-filled people, that is to say, compared to our ideals, we look rather poor and pathetic . In other words we're always failing. Now this seems to me to be a rather diminishing way to live. It would be useful to have, as it were, realistic ideals for ourselves. Not ideals that are always, in a sense, humiliating us, or that we use to diminish other people.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well....

**Melvyn Bragg** : You actually say in your book, Anthony, about ideals, you said, "could it be that notions human rights and equality so prominent a feature among consciousness, failed to prepare people for the fundamental fact that we're not all equal, not all can achieve equality, that leave us unable to cope with what is inevitably the condition in each of us", and you go on to say, "maybe upbringing, background and education ought to confer privileges on those who have them to a degree that they are better able to decide and to rule". Those are quite big steps forward aren't they?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Yes, erm you've slightly changed the....

**Melvyn Bragg** : Well, I thought I was moving on a bit.

**Anthony O'Hear** : ...subject. But..... it seems to me that at one level we have to say that all people are equal. They're all equal before the law, all equal in the sight of God, if you like . We have to respect everybody's individuality and personality up to a point in a formal, abstract way, but this does not mean that everybody is equally able to do everything.

**Adam Phillips** : But as anybody ever said that they were?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Not every.....erm, I think that that's the direction of a certain prominent amount of egalitarian rhetoric.

**Adam Phillips** : I don't think it is.

**Adam Phillips** : That it .....

**Melvyn Bragg** : Where have you heard this? I Mean.....

**Adam Phillips** : No I really don't..... sorry...Melvyn.

**Melvyn Bragg** : No after you.

**Adam Phillips** : It seems to me that people are not saying "everybody's exactly the same", but people are saying that "a good society would be one in which people were equal before the law" for example as you've said.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well, I would agree with that yeah.

**Adam Phillips** : It is manifestly untrue that people are not.....they don't look the same....they don't come from the same....they have different families et etc. It seems to me this is a kind of straw dog.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well I don't think it is a straw dog. I think you only have to look at a lot of the way that people speak about education , to see that what they are trying to do, is to produce an equality that is actually unattainable .

**Melvyn Bragg** : They are trying to produce an equality of *opportunity* which is ...which is not attainable wholly, but you can get further towards it than we've got towards it before. I think they are trying for an equality of opportunity all over the political shop.

**Anthony O'Hear** : But they tend to define equality of opportunity in terms of equality of outcome.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Do they?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Yes. In education they do, in many cases.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Well I'm a governor of a comprehensive school and they don't define it in that way when I read their papers, go to their meetings.

**Adam Phillips** : It seems to me one can't give a compelling account of this, without having some sense of the history of what's involved. There have been large...huge numbers of people who have been educationally underprivileged. There is an attempt to right this. This seems to me to be an excellent thing. I don't think everybody's assuming that everybody's going to be President of the United States as a consequence. But it does mean that people have the opportunity. More people have more opportunities and access to the things that are valued.

**Anthony O'Hear** : But I think the means by which this is being achieved is actually undermining opportunities for the best, ...and I mean, I don't want to get too political about this, but I...

**Adam Phillips** : I think we can't get too political about this.

**Anthony O'Hear** : I, I, I...

**Adam Phillips** : I want to know what "the best " is you see.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Yes.

**Adam Phillips** : What's "the best" that you are actually promoting for all of us?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well, we're simply talking about educational opportunity.

**Adam Phillips** : Yes. No, in education.

**Anthony O'Hear** : And it seems to me that the grammar schools are not the best for everybody, but they are the best for a certain group of people. And I think that the destruction of the grammar schools has been extremely undermining of our culture. Now this was done in order to promote equality, in order to quote "promote equality of opportunity" . What I think it has in fact done, is to deprive people from largely inner city and working class backgrounds of the opportunities they did have before.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Mmmmm, this is a different argument....I think we're going to race on a political....all I know is that my contemporaries who stayed on at Oxford and became Dons there, tell me that there's a higher level of applicant now than in my day, by a long way, that a lot of them come from comprehensive schools. When I was at this little grammar school in the north of England, we got two people to Oxford, we thought it was great, there's nine went to Oxford and Cambridge this year from that same comprehensive school and so on. I don't think it's an argument we should get into here and now..You know it's interesting, but it's not what we're talking about.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Sorry I only got into it because you asked me about egalitarian rhetoric.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Yeah, yes, but yes, but you still haven't proved your point, it seems to me. It's just the same old stuff comes out....anyway I'm not going to be insulting about that. Let's talk about science, and science and the idea of progress in the time we've got left. The...there was a notion that science was in many ways a new platform and certainly offered new solutions, which because they were based scientifically would be cleaner and better and more fertile than previous solutions. Where did that notion take us Adam?

**Adam Phillips** : Well I think in a way there might be a simple point here, which is that all these cultural practices have paradoxical and equivocal outcomes. One is never going to know the consequence, and it would seem to me an awful lot of people don't want to live in a world with a nuclear bomb, but almost everybody wants to live in a world with anaesthetics. So that it's inevitable that this is going to be a mixed bag . So to be anti-science would be silly, it would seem to me, across the board. But it's inevitable that coming with, what is loosely defined as a scientific view, and it seems to me again, science covers an enormous number of different kinds of practices and methods, coming with scientific method has come a certain picture of what a person is. It's very different thinking of a person as a machine, than it is thinking of a person, as it were as more like a tree than a car, or more like an animal than a computer. In other words science throws up analogies of what we as people might be like, and then we in the culture have to debate what we think about these.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Would you agree with that Anthony?

**Anthony O'Hear** : Mmm, yes I think I would, erm it seems to me though that science itself is a product of a human aspiration, which itself is difficult to explain or understand in purely scientific mechanistic terms. I think it's a desire to know and to acquire wisdom for its own sake, not for the sake of any utilitarian end, And that seems to me to be a fundamental human aspiration that would be difficult to explain on Darwinian or Freudian terms. Difficult to explain.

**Melvyn Bragg** : It's undeniable that science has brought progress, in many ways and also great dangers. The bomb is the most obvious and so on. But coming back to what we started with, do you think that it is any way helping people to achieve moral progress? In your book you talk about....your theme is not progress but "loss", and do you think it has brought more loss than gain in terms of the way we behave?

**Anthony O'Hear** : I think that if people think that the only considerations that should be brought to bear on say a question like euthanasia or cloning or using embryos for spare parts, which are all questions we are confronted with,

and which seem to me to be eroding the sacredness of human life. If people think that the only consideration that should be taken into account there is a scientific consideration then I think it is leading to moral loss. If they think that, but of course that's not an inevitable consequence of science?

**Adam Phillips** : Why does life have to be sacred in order to be valuable?

**Anthony O'Hear** : I think that we have to preserve a civilised society we have to keep a sense of the respect for individual life, and I think that without some notion of it being sacred, and without there being a notion of there being certain things that are off limits in dealing with other people, we will erode that sense in a way that will be eventually disastrous.

**Melvyn Bragg** : But it's very odd..cloning you use in a sort of alarmist way as if there is sacred human life, but you wouldn't disagree with heart transplants, liver transplants, and so we clones all over the place, they're called "twins", so where do you stop there?

**Anthony O'Hear** : I think I think this is indeed one of the major dilemmas of our age, and one which I don't think actually we have the resources to solve, which is also one of the things I say in my book. What worries me, is that drip by drip, drip by drip, step by step we're going down a slippery slope, that may lead us to all kinds of results, which now we'd find very unpalatable, but which we're quite likely to get to.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Talking brutally, a hundred years ago, with a lot of the things in place which you seem to like very much. We started on a slippery slope that sent us on one of the biggest black holes in human kind's history.

**Anthony O'Hear** : Well it was but I must just say that the ideals which led to that slippery slope namely Communism and Marxism, were fundamentally godless ideals.

**Adam Phillips** : No but also, think what people have done in the name of God. I mean this idea that somehow to believe in the sacred is to believe in the kind, seems to me preposterous. Think of the religious wars, people are killing and have killed millions of people for the sacredness of life. This is truly amazing!

**Melvyn Bragg** : And it's still going on in Europe.

**Anthony O'Hear** : I am not saying that all or any religious belief would be the sort of thing that I want, but I still think that we have to have a sense of mankind as somehow spiritual outside the material. How that's interpreted, of course is another question.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I think the religious dimension is important to bring in but actually...and it's important to....I think the "why" question, and that's a huge think to cope with, but I don't think that just by saying "the sacred" is something that governs everything. I don't think we can live by that alone. I think we have to stop now, I'm very sorry about that, thanks very much Adam Phillips and Anthony O'Hear, and thank you for listening.