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### What Makes History Work (by Ellen G. White)

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**December 01, 2010**

## **What Makes History Work (by Ellen G. White)**

“In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passion, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will. . . . God has revealed in His law the principles that underlie all true prosperity both of nations and individuals. “This is your wisdom and your understanding,” Moses declared to the Israelites of the law of God. “It is not a vain thing for you; because it is your life.” [Deut. 4:6; 32:47](#). The blessings thus assured to Israel are, on the same conditions and in the same degree, assured to every nation and every individual under the broad heavens. To understand these things,—to understand that “righteousness exalteth a nation;” that “the throne is established by righteousness” and “upholden by mercy;” to recognize the outworking of these principles in the manifestation of His power who “removeth kings, and setteth up kings,—this is to understand the philosophy of history.” [EGW, Education, 173-175](#).

### **Questions:**

- If events of history are not shaped by the power and ambition of mankind, what are they shaped by?
- Is history shaped directly by God? How does this happen, by miraculous intervention, by angelic action, or some other way?
- How does this theological understanding of history affect the cause and effect relationships we usually rely on in historical analysis?

Posted by [Nicholas Miller](#) on December 01, 2010 in [Church and Society](#), [Philosophy of History](#), [Quotable](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Professor Miller, Your questions as applied to the philosophy of History leads us to the threshold of humanity's cosmological rubric. Is our existence causational? Who or what is involved in the process? Is the causational model universal?

If our hypothesis is that God causes all things (universal causation) then we identify God as the agent of all things, including death, destruction, sin and separation. This conclusion would conflict with the revelation of Christ that describes just the opposite. How do we reconcile the two paradigms?

What if a paradigm shift occurred that introduced anthropo-centric causation into the universe? What if God created our world according to theo-centric causation? If so, then the will of man himself would be theo-centric as well, without an independent will. The contention against this paradigm would be that man had the free will to choose to sin (to do evil) by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. However, if man had the will to choose he would also have the knowledge of what he was choosing; he would already know good and evil. The contention would be that man did not know sin because he had not committed sin, he only knew sin in theory. This would mean that man lived under law and we survive as long as we obey; therefore life is conditional upon the will of man not the will of God . . . He is not really in control of our lives, humanity dictates the course of human history. The concept that a covenant of law existed in Eden is in conflict with universal theo-centric causation.

What was the transition Adam and Eve experienced upon eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Perhaps the description is in the tree itself . . . knowledge of good and evil. What emerged in humanity that was not there before? What was found in them that was not there before? Scripture describes an awareness of potential action separate from the will of God and a conscience that God identified as not being naturally from them, "Who told you that you were naked?" Could it be that what is being described here is the emergence of human will separate from God and an emergence of human conscience based upon the separated will? If so then the history of humanity turns from being the product of the will of God and becomes the product of the will of man . . . what are the results?

As in all disciplines we establish knowledge based on the axioms of what we know, not on what we don't know. We communicate based on what we sense and perceive not on what we cannot. The threshold of our cosmology is human causation, we control that. We however, cannot control divine causation therefore it cannot be the subject of experiment. Can divine causation be observed and studied? Is it objective or is the nature of God beyond the cosmological threshold of our perception? It is a rubric we do not have the means to define. Perhaps the idea of definition is itself the human cosmological barrier?

How is the narrative of the fall of man similar to the fall of Lucifer? What was found in the archangel and what did it cause him to think and do? Now do we ask why God made creatures in whom an independent will and conscience could emerge? Is there an alternative? Could God create a creative being who would never discover the potential of their own separate identity? God warned of the result of independent will: we would have knowledge, know good from evil on our own; but the result would only lead to death. Is it punishment or the effect of creature-centric causation?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [December 02, 2010 at 10:21 AM](#)

Well, David, that is quite a little essay on human-centered versus God-centered causation. I think your ultimate point has to be right, that causation in history or the universe cannot be entirely God-centered, or He would be responsible for all the suffering and evil in the world. He apparently created a world that was sufficiently independent of Him that true freedom, anthropocentric causation, was possible. But that still leaves us with difficult questions about how much of history is influenced and directed by God, and how much is pushed along by independent human action. In historical thinking today, all attention is given to human and natural causes, and we are reluctant to consider supernatural or God-centered causes. Ellen White's quote seems to challenge this, at least in some way, and I'm wondering how we can implement that

seriously as historians.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [December 03, 2010 at 10:21 PM](#)

Thanks, Professor Miller, for reminding us of this wonderful quotation from Ellen White on the biblical philosophy of history!

Part of what White teaches is that God is “working out the counsels of his own will” according to “his law.” She indicates that what happens in history is based in part on whether we choose to obey or disobey God’s law. Obedience is the key to “all true prosperity both of nations and individuals.”

Therefore, when an individual or nation prospers through obedience to divine principles we can say that God has prospered them. So true prosperity derives from the fact that God created the universe according to divine laws and God sustains the divine laws of his creation.

At the same time, if we rebel against God's laws we will not experience true prosperity. And in fact, all have sinned and come short of God's glory. Therefore, we do not deserve God's prosperity.

Praise God that He not only creates and sustains his laws, but he also intervenes to save us from death which results from our transgression of these laws. Since we have sinned, we disqualify ourselves for true prosperity. But God has provided a way of salvation whereby we can prosper through the perfect obedience of Christ. Therefore, the biblical philosophy of history includes the salvation history of Christ.

Hallelujah!

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [December 04, 2010 at 02:57 PM](#)

Implementing a causative interpretation of history that includes both human and divine agency would be just as challenging as using science to account for the divine origins of life. Two reasons would make it difficult: 1. The historian would be discounted by fellow historians and professionals who utilize the products of history whose epistemology does not accept divine agency; 2. If the phenomena of divine agency lies beyond the measurable perception of humans then accounting for causation may prove difficult.

Perhaps the words from a parable of Christ may give us sobering counsel concerning the efficacy of evangelism via history, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead."

Is it human based science and academia that persuades the human soul to surrender to Christ or is it the Spirit of God through the limited language of academia that reaches the lost?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [December 04, 2010 at 11:02 PM](#)

Your are right, David, that scientific and historical methods that presuppose the non-existence of God will be unable to recognize divine agency in the origin and history of the cosmos.

At the same time, the words of Jesus (which you quoted) suggest that God does bring some to faith through the historical revelation of Moses and the Prophets.

Also, as you wrote, there is the work of "the Spirit of God through the limited language of academia that reaches the lost".

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [December 07, 2010 at 08:52 AM](#)

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