

THE TRANSCENDENTAL FUTURE

John O'Loughlin



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Preface

This collection of philosophical dialogues, dating from the spring of 1980, begins with an introductory essay and progresses through some five fairly lengthy but stylistically and thematically-related dialogues revolving around the subject of transcendentalism.

Subjects tackled in this way include spiritual truth, environmental transformations, the concept of a transcendental future, psychic evolution, and the rise of transcendentalism in art, a subject that was to occupy me throughout the remainder of 1980 as I launched into three loosely-related novels on modern art and artists, beginning with *Thwarted Ambitions*.

John O'Loughlin, London 1980 (Revised 2022)

INTRODUCTION – THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE

Is there an ultimate purpose to human evolution, and, if so, what? This is a question which serious writers have been asking themselves for some considerable time now and providing a variety of answers to, according to their individual bents. For some, the answers have been flatly negative. For others, by contrast, highly positive. There are those who believe that evolution is a haphazard affair without any ultimate purpose, and others who are convinced that it signifies an important trend in the direction of greater spirituality. There are those who believe that evolution is drawing to a close, and others who are convinced that it still has a long way to go. No matter how diverse the opinions or answers may happen to be, the question remains one to which writers generally apply themselves either negatively or positively, pessimistically or optimistically. It induces a 'yes' or a 'no' response, rather than incertitude.

In this essayistic introduction and most of the ensuing dialogues, I propose to take a 'yes' stance and investigate one or two of the possibilities which human evolution may undergo during the course of the next few centuries. I am going to assume that there is an ultimate purpose to evolution which takes the form of a spiritual transformation of mankind into the Divine, but I'm not going to pretend that such a transformation will come about merely in the course of a few decades. If there is a progressive advancement from matter to spirit, it is not one that proceeds quickly but, rather, in accordance with the overall pattern of higher evolution from ape to man and then on to whatever lies beyond him.

Yes, I am going to contend that we began in very unspiritual circumstances, progressed, via our ape-like ancestors, to beings capable of religious experience, and are still progressing, slowly but surely, from the cultural state in which we have intermittently existed for the past 6–7,000 years towards a higher state of predominant spirituality, after which the material aspect of our being may disappear altogether as we merge into the omega absolute of pure spirit, following transcendence. If that sounds like Vedanta, then so be it! But I am not going to pretend that the ultimate purpose of evolution will be achieved before some considerable period of time has elapsed – enough time, in fact, to enable us to transcend our

current identity. For at present we are still men, not godlike entities, and so we shall remain until such time as the next great spiritual revolution and/or evolutionary leap comes about.

We are men, and therefore victims of and participants in history. History largely hinges, we learn from Spengler, a prominent philosopher of history, upon cultures rising and falling, upon a succession of cultural developments – some great, the majority small. It appertains to that compromise between the sensual and the spiritual which is man. Before the compromise, there is no history. Likewise there can be no history after it. Ape and Superman (to use a Nietzschean term) are each devoid of history and, consequently, of culture. Only man makes history, which will be the greater the more finely balanced the compromise between the sensual and the spiritual. Therefore history must continue, in one form or another, until man is extinguished in the Superman.

But what of cultural history, the history pertinent to great cultures, which Spengler considered the only true one? Does what he saw as the decline of the West, the last great culture to have appeared in the world, signify man's approaching end, or is there likely to be another such culture in the near future?

Of great cultures there have been, according to the aforementioned philosopher, seven or eight, and of this relatively small number the Christian, or Western, was in his opinion the greatest, having had the most far-reaching effects on the world and achieved cultural wonders unprecedented in the entire history of man. It was the last of a succession of great cultures and the most extensive of them all. No previous culture had developed art or music or literature or sculpture or architecture to such a high and complex level, and it is difficult to imagine any subsequent culture surpassing it. If we try to imagine a hypothetical future culture producing great art, we are immediately confronted by the immense difficulty of trying to imagine paintings or music or literature of a superior order to the greatest works of each genre currently in existence. We would have to reconcile ourselves, under duress of this hypothesis, to the implausible possibility of artists producing works superior in essence to Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Van Eyck, Breugel, Dürer, Poussin, Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, Tintoretto, Tiepolo, *et al.* Composers producing works superior in essence to Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert,

Weber, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, *et al.* Writers producing works superior in essence to Chaucer, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Swift, Goethe, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Balzac, Flaubert, *et al.* Needless to say, we are unlikely to succeed in doing that! And so, its being supposed that the arts have attained to their egocentric zenith in the last great culture known to man, we must assume that the cultural process, properly so-considered, has come to an end, never to be supplanted by another such development in the near or distant future.

For what would another culture require in order to establish itself on a proper footing with cultural development generally? It would require Nature, above all regular contact with the best possible type of Nature – a type peculiar to temperate rather than tropical zones. A great culture is unlikely to arise in climates which are either too hot or too cold, too fierce or too sultry. It requires proper nourishment, and this can only be obtained in certain regions of the world. Rule out those regions, such as Western Europe and North America, where the representatives of the last great culture still exist, or those regions, including China and India, where an earlier cultural people developed and declined, and what is left? Very little, indeed! Hardly anywhere which is not either already in the hands of the last cultural people or, alternatively, in the hands of an earlier cultural people who have since abandoned or are in the process of outgrowing their culture. Apart from this, one finds regions which are not in the best of geographical positions to foster a great culture. There is something inferior about the climate and the consequent state of Nature there. One cannot imagine the world's greatest art ever arising from such places.

But if the proximity of temperate Nature is a necessity, indeed a precondition, of higher cultural development, then its abundance is no less so. Thus arises our next objection to the likelihood of subsequent cultural development. For wherever man lives in large numbers, these days, Nature is on the defensive, is being ruthlessly exploited and destroyed by him. The larger the cities become, the less does Nature come to play a part in the lives of their citizens, with a consequence that cultural activities decline.

And because the world is becoming increasingly urbanized and mechanized, there would seem to be little chance of another culture arising. The incentive for it is just not there. Consequently we need not be surprised if the age of separate cultures is at an end.

But what of the world's future, now that we are outgrowing our traditional provincialism and growing into a cosmopolitanism based on the technological advancements and inventions of the West? Is man drawing to *his end*?

There are two ways of looking at this question, and in both cases I would be inclined to grant man the benefit of the doubt and to accord him a survival beyond the cultural phase. In the first case, I would imagine him capable of surviving the catastrophe of a nuclear accident and/or war, even if millions of his kind don't. But in the second case, I would imagine him incapable of transforming himself into the more-than-human over the next few decades. Consequently, the end of man would seem to lie too far into the future for us to have either serious qualms about or any great hopes for his self-overcoming. In the meantime, however, it isn't impossible that he will survive his own self-destructive tendencies and extend his knowledge of space to a point which may well bring him into contact, whether on a friendly or a hostile basis initially, with other beings (aliens) in the Galaxy.

Conceived in material or scientific terms, evolution should embrace an expanding knowledge of the Universe, and thus confine man to the roles of victim of and participator in the struggles for survival which will probably take place there. Conceived, on the other hand, in spiritual or religious terms, evolution should signify a growing knowledge of spiritual potentialities, and thus involve man in an inner journey towards his Final End through a condition which completely transcends the mundane. If, however, man is first destined to come to grips with the Galaxy, then it's difficult to imagine his transformation from the human plane to the superhuman one taking place before he has done so. As such, one is inclined to push this hypothetical transformation quite a long way into the future!

But why assume that man will be transformed anyway? What is there to prevent us from considering his present form the final one? Well, let us briefly take a look at the history of his development. He began – did he not? – where the ape-like ancestor came to an end. The ape-like ancestor may have developed from something earlier or lower, but, so far as we're concerned, it suffices us to consider it the forerunner of man – the animal beginnings. Thus from the unspiritual, predominantly sensual life of the ape surrounded by Nature-in-the-raw, man emerged as a compromise

between matter and spirit because he could to some extent master Nature, and thereby surround himself with Civilization. He built villages, then towns, and finally cities, and the more he advanced, the less animal he became and the closer he drew to the superhuman, which stems from large cities. In the pre-cultural stage he is smothered by Nature and thus remains, to a significant extent, its victim. In the cultural stage, however, he exists on equal terms with Nature, thanks to his growing ability to create a world of his own in opposition to it. Villages and towns are a pleasant reminder of man's power and province. They prevent him from feeling the might of Nature breathing down his neck and driving fear into his soul. But if Nature-in-Moderation is the motto of cultural man, then the motto of post-cultural man is effectively Victory-over-Nature, and the larger his towns and cities become, the more evident does this victory appear. Now it is man who plays the bully, as he continues to extend his power at Nature's expense. The compromise is gone and, with its departure, man finds himself one stage closer to the Superman, to the spiritual transformation which will put an end to his humanity.

Thus from the pre-human ape-like creature there emerged man, and from him there should emerge the post-human godlike being who will signify the termination of his evolution. From predominant sensuality one proceeds to a sensual/spiritual balance, and from that to a spiritual predominance. From the subhuman to the superhuman via the human. In the first, or subhuman, stage there is only the fight for survival carried-out in the crudest terms. In the second, or human, stage the fight for survival is no longer as crude as before but, though still existing in various degrees, is accompanied by evidence of man's growing spirituality – in short, by culture, which proceeds from its humble beginnings in the predominant sensuality of the pre-cultural to the balanced greatness of the culture-proper, before declining, with the post-cultural, into the predominantly spiritual. However, in the third or superhuman stage there is neither a fight for survival nor culture but continuous self-realization. For the temporal world has largely been overcome in the interests of the eternal one, and man, the doer of deeds, has ceased to exist.

What, exactly, his successor will look like it is of course difficult, if not impossible, for us to imagine at this juncture. But we needn't be particularly surprised if 'he' should transpire to being as different from man as man was from his ape-like predecessor. If the pre-cultural lasted many

hundreds of years, then there is no reason for us to suppose that the post-cultural, which began in the nineteenth century, won't do so either. For we are still, to all appearances, a long way from becoming the superhuman beings that evolution would seem to be working towards! A few of us may be slightly closer to that transformation or be more spiritually advanced than the majority, but most human beings can hardly be regarded as incipient or even potential Supermen! Alas, the faces and mentalities of the local road sweepers, dustmen, butchers, grocers, window cleaners, etc., are not guaranteed to inspire one with any great confidence that humanity is about to be transformed into something higher and more spiritual! If one is reasonably realistic, one can only conclude that the post-cultural stage of man should have quite some way to go, before the next hypothetical stage of evolution makes its first appearance in the world. Thus we need not fear any impending demise of our sensual habits!

Yet, paradoxical though it may seem that humanity in general is heading towards a future transformation, it nevertheless does remain a fact that our relationship to the world has been steadily changing ever since we began, and will doubtless continue to change for as long as we continue. There can be little doubt that human evolution is a fact, even if we aren't altogether convinced, at present, that we are destined to transcend our humanity at some unspecified time in the future. What has happened to man over the past 6–7,000 years of cultural development is staggering enough, and reveals to us, particularly in its more recent Western manifestations, the cultural heights to which he can rise through living in harmony with the most suitable type of Nature. If there was a golden age of man, it could only have been during the heyday, so to speak, of his greatest cultures, not antecedent to them in the pre-cultural stage, or subsequent to them in that of the post-cultural. For early man, surrounded by too much Nature, could not attain to the balanced compromise between matter and spirit which makes for the grandeur of cultural man, or man in his prime as man, while late man, surrounded by too much Civilization, has outgrown that compromise and thereby established himself in a lopsided, predominantly spiritual context which is the converse of early man's predominant sensuality. He has passed from the instinctually-tinged spirituality of temporal religion to an intellectually-tinged spirituality which, whether in the guise of mysticism, spiritualism, academicism, or puritanism, characterizes our time. From the standpoint of man, this third or post-cultural stage of his development does indeed signify a decline, a

decadence. But from the standpoint of man's hypothetical future transformation into the Superman, it must be regarded as a phenomenon bringing him one step closer to evolution's ultimate designs. For what can the final post-human stage represent if not the most extreme opposition to Nature conceivable, the ultimate victory of a higher life-form over Nature? After all, if one begins like an ape, with subservience to Nature in the form of animal sensuality, and progresses to the human stage which, in its prime, signifies a balanced compromise with Nature, how can the third or final transformation of the being called man not signify a complete independence of Nature in the form of a supernatural severance from the sensual? And what is *that* if not the ultimate spirituality, a spirituality which transcends the sensual spirituality known to man in his prime *as man*? For cultural man is ever the finest compromise between the animal Nature-bound past and the godlike transcendent future and, as such, his spiritual endeavours can be no more than a pointer to that ultimate spirituality which would seem to lie in-wait for his post-human successors. Whatever he does is tempered by the sensual, is rooted in his animal past, with his dependence on Nature. But in his highest cultural achievements, be they the great ceiling paintings of Michelangelo or Tiepolo, the great musical outpourings of Bach or Mozart, the great literary writings of Bunyan or Milton, he is already depicting the future course of humanity, albeit through sensuous means and forms, towards its ultimate goal in spiritual union with the Divine.

If there is one symbol, above all, of man's aspirations towards his future transformation, it is that of the Risen Christ Who, in His Ascension into Heaven, symbolizes the triumph of the Supernatural over Nature, which is termed the miraculous. In its transcendentalism, Christianity has aptly symbolized man's spiritual aspirations, whilst its mundane side has constantly reminded him of his sensual origins and consequent dual nature, pitting the light of heavenly redemption against the darkness of worldly animality. Now that we are outgrowing our cultural traditions, however, these reminders are becoming less necessary and therefore less frequent, as the aspirations towards our spiritual transformation grow more earnest with the influence of urban Civilization, which is bringing us one step closer to it by further isolating us from Nature and thereby reducing our sensual capacities. While man remained in harmony with Nature, balanced between body and spirit, Christianity remained the true spokesman of his dual condition, reminding him of his 'sinful' (sensuous) nature but, at the

same time, pointing him towards his future spiritual salvation. Curiously that salvation is now closer to us than when Christianity was at its height. But the traditional Christian way of conceiving of it is no longer relevant, because we have outgrown the environmental conditions in which Christianity flourished, and cannot therefore regard it from a strictly Christian standpoint. Naturally, this doesn't mean that Christianity was mistaken in its concept of a future salvation in God, but simply that it could only illustrate this salvation in the sensual/spiritual terms peculiar to man at that stage of his evolutionary development. At the time in which it flourished, Christianity was the most apt representative of man's spiritual aspirations, the only possible representative of them under the circumstances of his allegiance to Nature. But now that we have evolved to a point where the great sensuous mother of us all is on the defensive, as we increasingly isolate ourselves from her, so it stands to reason that Christianity should be left behind with our previous harmonious condition, left behind as a testimony to it, to man in his prime *as man*. For now that we are in the post-cultural stage of our development it isn't the religion of balance, with its sensuous representations, to which we relate, but the religion of spiritual lopsidedness or, rather, a biased spirituality, the transcendentalism which stems from our growing isolation from Nature and necessarily excludes sensuous representation of the spiritual.

Thus the evolution of man through the three stages of his being, from pre-cultural to post-cultural via a cultural stage-proper, is accompanied by a religion germane to each stage of his development. In the pre-cultural stage we have, in accordance with his subservience to Nature, a religion glorifying the sensual aspects of life which, in its various manifestations, we may call paganism. Then comes the cultural stage in which, in accordance with his growing knowledge of Nature and ability to tame it to some extent, we have a religion which, while rooted in the earthly, aptly expresses his aspirations towards the Divine, and so takes the form of Christianity or Buddhism or some such cultural religion. Finally, in the post-cultural stage of his development, in which he is increasingly becoming the enemy of Nature, a being who predominantly lives in isolation from it in giant cities, we have a religion reflecting his growing concern with the purely spiritual aspect of life, a religion which is the complete converse of the pagan worship of sensuality with which he began his religious advance, and therefore a logical development beyond the dualistic religion that supplanted it.

Thus from the old fertility rites and phallic worship, man progressed, via religions like Christianity and Buddhism, to the modern transcendental preoccupations with the spirit, the Holy Ghost, in which there is not a hint of sensuous representation. From the phallic Father to the Holy Ghost via the Risen Christ – such is the path of human evolution from the senses to the spirit. The Risen Christ is indeed a beautiful symbol of man's ongoing spirituality, but the very fact of its ongoing renders such a symbol inadequate to contemporary man, whose ...