



Why Francis Fukuyama's "Last Man" is Not a Paradox



Timothy Brown

17 min read · Aug 14, 2023



12

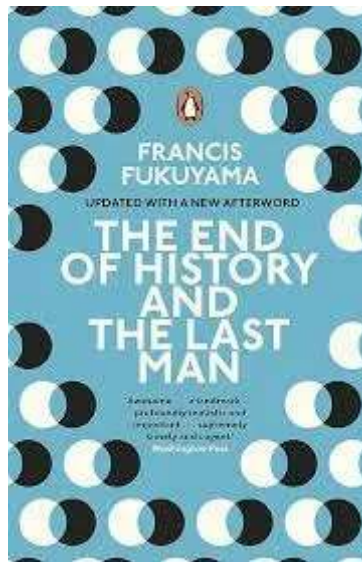


1



Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man," has two distinct theses: the "End of History Thesis," and the "Last Man Thesis." The second of these is commonly ignored. This is a shame, because it has proven incredibly prescient, despite its flaws. This article is an attempt to remedy that situation.

If you're familiar with the work in question, you can skip the intro below.



An Introduction to “The End of History and the Last Man.”

For those who have only heard of Fukuyama’s book second hand, I would caution that Fukuyama’s vision is not nearly as utopian as people make it out to be. **Fukuyama is not saying that we are approaching a point where inequality, hardship, and violence will soon disappear from the Earth** (i.e., the “Star Trek” future). Rather, his claim is that no alternative to liberal democracy will emerge that will be widely considered as a more legitimate alternative.

This “End of History” thesis does **not** predict that all states will instantly become liberal democracies. Rather it predicts that no strong international movement advocating for another type of governance will emerge. That is, there will be nothing akin to the movements behind communism or fascism in the 20th century, nor the international reactionary movement in support of monarchy in the 19th. In this regard, the End of History thesis appears to have been born out to date.

Additionally, Fukuyama predicts that alternative forms of governance will increasingly define themselves using the terms of liberal democracy (*because it is the only system widely held to be legitimate*). For example, authoritarians

now go by “president,” rather than “emperor.” They still hold something resembling elections, they have legislatures, etc. Autocratic regimes also tend to deflect criticism by pointing out that liberal democracies **also** fail to live up to their own values, thus implicitly suggesting that those values are worth achieving, rather than challenging the core values of liberalism directly.

Below is a good summary:

Summary Part I

*Fukuyama’s central thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man* is that human history is moving towards a state of idealised harmony through the mechanisms of liberal democracy. For Fukuyama, the realization of an ideal political and economic system which has the essential elements of liberal democracy is the purpose behind the march of history. ‘Liberal democracy’ does not necessarily mean the exact type of constitutional democracy found in the United States. It can manifest itself in a number of ways, but its consistent features are freedom of speech, free and fair elections, and the separation of powers. Fukuyama argues that there are no ‘contradictions in human life’ that cannot be resolved within the context of liberalism; or more generally, that there is no longer an alternative political and economic structure that can offer solutions to problems such as the need for freedom, protection, and human rights.*

In making his claim about history having a process and a goal, Fukuyama is following in the footsteps of the early Nineteenth Century German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831). This famous philosopher saw a ‘dialectical’ process as the driving force behind human history that will eventually achieve a final goal for humanity. This Hegelian dialectic is a logical process manifest in the events of history and unfolding over time. Hegel maintained that...history will continually

produce opposite, and conflicting, ways of thinking, thesis and antithesis: once the thesis has been formulated there will eventually be an antithesis opposing it. The result is a conflict of beliefs that somehow must be resolved. The resolution takes the form of a compromise between the thesis and antithesis. Thus, a synthesis provides a temporary solution, until it too becomes the new thesis, or in the historical sense, the new ideological state of society, which in its turn is also opposed; and this dialectical process continues until the development of the ultimate society.

-David Macintosh — The End of History and the Last Man by Francis Fukuyama

Summary Part II: Introducing Hegel's Dialectical



G.W.F Hegel

It is worth interjecting here to explain how Hegel's dialectical is similar to "debate." Consider Plato's dialogues where different parties show up to

provide opposing views on some issue. In these dialogues, the views that come up are entirely contingent, the result of some individual happening to think of them. Hegel's innovation is to see that concepts themselves imply their own negations.

For example, with “good” or “right,” the concept of there being actions that are “right” implies that it is *possible* that some actions may be wrong. If you have right without wrong, then every action must be “right.” However, if a single concept can be applied to all things equally, then the term conveys no information; it is *contentless*.

The early semiotician Saussure says something to this effect: *‘you cannot have a one-word language, the same term will apply equally to all things.’* There is a similar issue in information theory, where an invariant substrate cannot carry information, since any measurement of the thing will always be the same (e.g., writing in white font on a white background). Similarly, in mathematics, a proof for the existence of one type of object may act as a proof for another object.

If we don't like Hegel's metaphysics, I think this can also be interpreted psychologically. When you consider a concept like “right,” it becomes necessary to consider its negation for the reasons above. For more detail: [Hegel's Dialectics \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#).

Thus, in the context of history, Hegel's dialectical predicts that we shall see an idea like liberal democracy entailing the emergence of its opposition (e.g. socialism). In this way, there is conflict, and whatever political system survives must survive by *sublating* its rivals. That is, it must overcome them, but it will do so by absorbing aspects of them into itself. For example, all

liberal democracies today have previously socialist policies like child labor laws, universal education, state pensions, etc.

Summary Part III



For instance, as Fukuyama agrees with Hegel, human beings are alike in the sense that they have basic needs, such as food, shelter and self-preservation, [b]and that the human spirit also demands a recognition of our worth[/b]. We instinctively want to say to others, “I am greater than you, I want you to look up to me and give me respect.” Peoples’ desires taking the form of wanting other people to recognise their superiority creates conflict with their fellow beings. This is, in essence, a struggle for dignity. Because all people desire dignity, no party is initially prepared to give ground, so a struggle for superiority ensures. Hegel refers to this struggle as the [lord-bondsman] dialectic or relationship. There will always be a winner and loser.

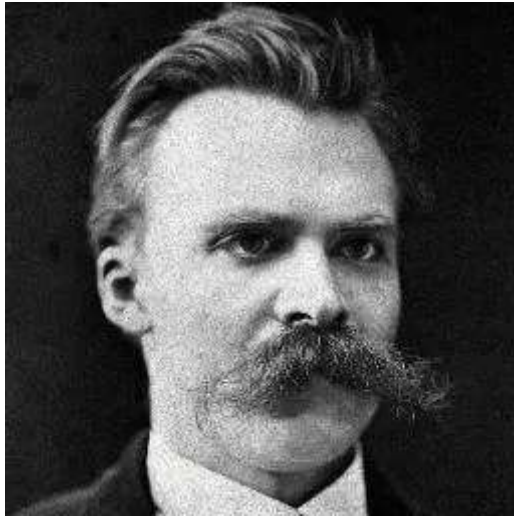
The lord-bondsman relationship is unstable because the lord is now dependent on the bondsman for their sense of recognition. Yet the lord cannot receive this recognition from the bondsman precisely because he has made them into an object, and thus not an entity that can give recognition. (*Simone de Beauvoir powerfully generalizes this to gender relations.*)

These and other conflicts are played out through history as dialectical processes. But Hegel believed that at the last stage in history, every human and every country will achieve a final synthesis. Fukuyama similarly believes that all humanity will shortly arrive at the final goal of history — liberal democracy. Fukuyama cites evidence that over time, more and more countries are turning to a liberal democratic system to solve their problems.

-David Macintosh — [The End of History and the Last Man by Francis Fukuyama](#)

This is the “End of History,” thesis. And it has generally been what most critics have focused on. However, Fukuyama has a second, far more prescient thesis about what the end of history means for the citizens of wealthy liberal democracies, “The Last Man Thesis.”

The Last Man Thesis — Start here if skipping the summary!



Friedrich Nietzsche — the second philosopher behind Fukuyama's work

One problem for Fukuyama is that his thesis leads to a “paradox;” one he is happy to acknowledge. The end of history will be an age where liberal democracies meet the [basic] economic and psychological needs of every citizen. There will no longer be a need to struggle for respect, dignity, and recognition. However, part of what makes us human is our desire to be recognised as something more than just creatures with basic needs to be met. This leads to a paradox because when we will have finally arrived at the end of history, our basic needs are satisfied, and there will no struggle by which our superiority to animals can be recognised.

-David Macintosh — The End of History and the Last Man by Francis Fukuyama

This is the “Last Man Thesis.” No longer having to struggle, the human being, whose basic needs are now easily met, sees themselves degraded into a bovine consumer. The name comes from Nietzsche:

For this is how things are: the diminution and leveling of European man constitutes our greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary. — We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect

that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian — there is no doubt that man is getting ‘better’ all the time. —

Friedrich Nietzsche — On the Genealogy of Morals

This part of the book is often ignored, so I wanted to start here before writing a follow up article on where “The End of History” thesis goes wrong (and more importantly, all it gets right.)

I would argue that this problem has indeed materialized. It is made all the worse by steep declines in religiosity, and even steeper declines in the share of people who belong to civic organizations, clubs, and unions, as well a drop in the share of adults who are parents or in romantic relationships (all important sources of identity and meaning).

That many people are forced into unfulfilling, alienating jobs, or else become reliant on welfare programs, also makes this problem worse. One’s career can be a powerful source of meaning and identity, but it can also be a source of shame. **It’s not uncommon in America to see someone denigrated precisely because of their vocation.** “Don’t listen to him, he’s a pizza delivery guy,” or “you’re a failure, look at you, you bag groceries for a living,” etc.

The Last Man thesis is extremely prescient here. It perfectly predicts so many trends we’ve seen since the early 1990s, when Fukuyama’s book was published:

- The cult success of the film “Fight Club,” a work that captures the “Last Man Problem,” *from the inside* quite well.
- The emergence of “Pick Up Artist,” online communities and then the “Manosphere,” and “Incel,” communities they later spawned (I will try to do an article later explaining how Simone de Beauvoir and Hegel can help explain these movements)
- The massive success of “Virgin versus Chad,” memes, and the wide application of “alpha/beta male,” typography online.



A common meme template comparing a loser “virgin” with a hyper-masculine “Chad.”

- The success of authors like Jack Donovan, the success of “Bronze Age Pervert,” and the entire genre of “warrior mindset,” self-help books.
- The huge surge in the sale of tactical gear and assault weapons (along with the advent of products like “tactical baby carriers,” and “tactical coffee mugs,” for cultivating a military aesthetic in all aspects of life)
- The huge resurgence in combat sports, driven largely by the advent of MMA and the large numbers of adults actively training in combat sports

(including Mark Zuckerberg, and perhaps Elon Musk soon, as they plan their “cage match”).

- The reintroduction of the word “cuckold” into the modern vernacular (when I first started hearing it, I thought I had fallen into a Shakespeare play)
- The success of neotraditionalist movements, the resurrection of interest in Julius Evola, etc.
- This rise of far-right extremism and the “Alt-Right” (although the Last Man phenomena certainly has an influence on radicals on the left as well)
- The wide commercial success and appeal of apocalypse/societal collapse-focused media (e.g. “The Walking Dead”) and the even more pronounced dominance of dystopian fiction in the young adult genre (e.g., The Hunger Games, Divergent, Red Rising, etc.).

These are not all necessarily negative trends. I used to do martial arts, Fight Club is a rare film I liked better than the book, Red Rising and the Hunger Games are a lot of fun, etc. But I do think they are signs of a growing restlessness, particularly among young men, who fear degrading into “Last Men.”

There is a hunger to “prove oneself” in some sort of struggle, any struggle. This is a passion to tear down, not a desire to build up. In many ways, it reminds me of the voices from 1900–1914 that clamored for a war, thinking bloodshed would “restore a decadent society.” In part this has to do with the way in which it is war that undergirds modern liberal democracies “foundational myth” (a problem I discuss [here](#)).

Of course, there is a cruel sort of irony in the fact that “the market” has so ably responded to these anxieties by offering us a bevy of products that we can consume to assuage our fears. It is ironic because the ways in which we simply *consume* our identities, commodifying central elements of the self, is itself alienating, part of the cause of our distress.

I’d argue that the Last Man Problem is one of the reasons that politics across the West has become increasingly divisive and polarized. It is not the only reason for this, but it helps drive people towards Manichean narratives through an increased tendency to make politics a key part of personal identity– a source of “life defining struggle.” This applies to both the “Great Awakening,” and the far-right populism of Trumpism. This ties into the contemporary thesis that, in important ways, politics has come to replace religion in the United States. (e.g., [How Politics Replaced Religion in America — The Atlantic](#))

What Fukuyama Gets Wrong with the Last Man



Three decades on from the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama's "Last Man" thesis seems sadly prescient.

Fukuyama's thesis is that the Last Man Problem develops precisely because the basic needs of individuals are so well met. This explanation has some merit; the Last Man phenomenon seems strongest in the upper half of the income distribution. However, it is helped along by growing inequality and declining social mobility, factors that Fukuyama largely ignores in his initial treatment.

These factors feed widespread status anxiety — **a fear of slipping down the ladder even as the rungs between the top and the abyss fall away.** The stagnation of real wage growth, a phenomenon across developed economies, also adds to the problem because progress/growth is important *of itself*, i.e., regardless of people's ability to fulfill their basic needs. We can no longer look at this as a temporary problem; **wage stagnation has now lasted half a**

century. Such gains help support a life narrative that includes accomplishments. It is important for us that our lives follow a positive trajectory.

This does not mean that we must always earn more, spend more, consume more. That is not sustainable. Rather, our problems show that **we must learn to find other, more meaningful sources of progress to take pride in.** Nevertheless, inequality is relevant to the Last Man Problem precisely because we have learned to base so much of our self-worth in our income as a society. Those afraid of downward social mobility are also afraid of losing what recognition they have left. Those who never had full recognition to begin with remain ready to struggle for it. The result is a more unhappy, less verdant society.

Hegel's Philosophy of Right — Lessons for Today

Much more could be said about the Last Man problem, but I mostly wanted to point out two things:

1. If we follow Hegel's framework, as Fukuyama supposes he is doing, the Last Man is not a "paradox." The fact that liberal democracy fails to deliver on the essential human need for meaning and recognition in this way is itself the type of internal contradiction that Hegel predicted would continue to generate dialectical changes in history. That is, **the "paradox," turns out to be, in fact, exactly the sort of thing that Hegel took to be his theory's main subject matter.**

Fukuyama's mistake is to focus on too narrow a set of "*basic needs*." This set appears to be based more on what modern political science and welfare economics tends to focus on. But what these fields focus on is confined to what they consider to be their study's purview, and moreover what can be

easily quantified for analysis. Such a set of “basic needs,” is not based on a balanced consideration of what makes for “a good life.” Aristotle, for instance, would not think these goods were enough to ensure *eudaimonia*, human flourishing. Indeed, for Aristotle, the development of the virtues (something the social sciences tend to ignore) is essential to a “good life.”

I would maintain that Fukuyama’s inspiration, Hegel, does not make this same mistake. This is why the family occupies an entire section of the *Philosophy of Right*. Citizen’s enjoyment of their vocation and membership in civic organizations also merits significant coverage for Hegel. (In the *Philosophy of Right* these civic organizations are called “corporations,” a bit of a misnomer since they are actually a sort of mash up of medieval trade guilds, unions, and modern professional associations). Thus, if we follow Hegel’s theory to its logical conclusion, **the Last Man Problem will eventually generate major problems for liberal democracy precisely because it represents a foundational contradiction within the system.**

2. The “Last Man Problem,” is precisely the type of problem we should expect to give liberal democracy a hard time because it is one that liberal democracy has defined as outside the scope of the state. The modern state has a welfare system, something it gained by sublating socialism (more on that in the “End of History” section). But this system exists simply to keep you from starvation and homelessness.

The state is not generally seen to have any real role in making sure you like your job or that you feel fulfilled in your life. Any move to address this problem would be seen as violating a sacrosanct line between the public and private spheres; it would be the culmination of a “nanny state.”

My counter to this position would be that no state is secure when its people are unhappy. This artificial division between the public and private spheres is itself born of a conception of freedom that focuses too much on *negative freedom*, and not enough on *positive/reflexive freedom* and *social freedom*.

Types of Freedom in The Philosophy of Right



To quickly define these terms:

Negative Freedom is defined by a subject's freedom relative to the external world. It is freedom from external barriers that restrict one's ability to act, e.g., the government or thieves seizing your tools so that you cannot work.

Reflexive Freedom is defined by subject's freedom relative to themselves. To quote Hegel, "*individuals are free if their actions are solely guided by their own intentions.*" Thus, "*man is a free being [when he] is in a position not to let himself be determined by natural drives.*" i.e., when his actions are not subject to

contingency. Later philosophers have also noted that *authenticity*, and thus the free space and guidance needed for us to discover our authentic selves, is another component of reflexive freedom.

Social Freedom is required because reflexive freedom only looks inward; it does not tie individual choices to any objective moral code. This being the case, an individual possessing such freedom may still choose to deprive others of their freedom. (This the contradiction inherent in globalizing Nietzsche's "revaluation of all values").

(**Note:** I have borrowed from and modified Axel Honneth's work in *Freedom's Right* in drawing up this typology)

Since individuals will invariably have conflicting goals, there is no guarantee than anyone will be able to achieve such a self-directed way of life. Negative freedom is also contradictory because "*the rational [reflexive] can come on the scene only as a restriction on [negative] freedom.*" E.g., being free to become a doctor means being free to choose restrictions on one's actions because that role entails certain duties.

Social Freedom then is the *collective resolution* of these contradictions through the creation of social institutions. Ideally, institutions objectify morality in such a way that individuals' goals align, allowing people to freely choose actions that promote each other's freedom and wellbeing. Institutions achieve this by shaping the identities of their members, such that they derive their "feeling of selfhood" from, and recognize "[their] own essence" in, membership.

In the language of contemporary economics, we would say that institutions change members' *tastes*, shifting their *social welfare function* such that they

increasingly weigh the welfare of others when ranking “social states.” In doing so, institutions help resolve collective action problems, prisoners’ dilemmas, etc. They allow citizens to transition into preferencing social welfare over maximal individual advantage.

We are free when we do what it is that we want to do, and we can only be collectively free when we are guided into supporting one another’s freedom. Otherwise, there will always be some who are not free. Further, those who appear to have freedom will not be truly free. They will not be free to pursue any course they’d like, as they must always fear losing their freedom — losing their status — and becoming just another of the oppressed. Further, we do not have to balance freedom and happiness. Freedom entails happiness, as people will not do what makes them miserable if they are free to do otherwise.

“My particular end should become identified with the universal end... otherwise the state is left in the air. The state is actual only when its members have a feeling of their own self-hood and it is stable only when public and private ends are identical. It has often been said that the end of the state is the happiness of the citizens. That is perfectly true. If all is not well with them, if their subjective aims are not satisfied, if they do not find that the state as such is the means to their satisfaction, then the footing of the state itself is insecure.”

— This and all quotes above from Hegel's Philosophy of Right

The Last Man Problem cannot be solved by modern liberal democracy in its current form because liberal democracy's commitment to negative freedom outweighs its commitments to reflexive freedom, while at the same time it lacks an explicit sense of social freedom.

How do we solve this? That is a much harder question. I would just throw out that the state, in concert with other institutions, could work to build up institutions that help individuals generate a sense meaning and solidify their identities. These projects might include:

- Ongoing educational opportunities, including education in philosophy, ethics, meditation, etc.;
- Creating and/or using public funds to support sports leagues, hiking clubs, book clubs, and other recreational organizations;
- Actively empowering vocational organizations such that more professions can belong to groups akin to the American Medical Association, American Bar Association, or International City/County Management Association. These are groups which focus on perfecting their craft, enforcing a code of ethics, and developing new practitioners, rather than just “collective bargaining.”

The state need not directly manage these endeavors; it could simply fund them through progressive taxation, the way colleges use general fees to fund a wide variety of organizations.

Second, reducing inequality should be given a high priority. Inequality itself is bad because human beings naturally judge themselves based on those around them; we are naturally hierarchical. Hierarchy isn't necessarily bad; divisions that are too deep are.

To put it in psychological terms, I agree with Hegel that private property plays an important role in *objectifying* our will to ourselves and others. Think about how you learn things about someone from the books they display in their book case, or why teens blanket their rooms in posters. But when a great deal of people's total wealth adds up to essentially nothing compared with a small cadre of elites, their property becomes irrelevant to objectifying their will.

Immigration policy is also relevant to identity, but I will save that discussion for the post on the "End of History."

BTW, you can find Fukuyama's original article here: [Fukuyama — End of History.pdf \(ucsd.edu\)](#) (the book you'd need to find elsewhere)

Philosophy

Hegel

Fukuyama

Political Science

Democracy



Written by Timothy Brown

Edit profile

9 Followers · 1 Following

Fiction author, philosopher, climber, former city manager, and consultant.

Responses (1)



What are your thoughts?

Respond



Greg Daneke, Emeritus Prof.

over 1 year ago (edited)



Great essay Tim. I know Francis, but I do not know what he would say about the US tilt toward fascism these days. Or how the GOP became the Gestapo Operatives Party in defense of Trump. Hardly the End of History, just the end of liberal democracy.....

[Read More](#)




1 reply

Reply

More from Timothy Brown

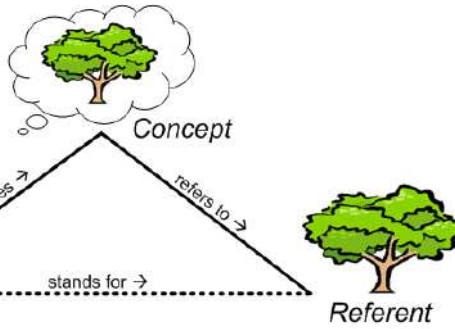



 Timothy Brown

World War II: The Foundational Myth of Modern Liberal Democra...

Next time you're in a bookstore, take a quick look at the history section. You will likely find...

Sep 6, 2023

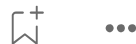



 Timothy Brown

Saint Augustine and the Semiotic Trinity

In this article we shall explore Saint Augustine's semiotics. I will show how...

Aug 30, 2023



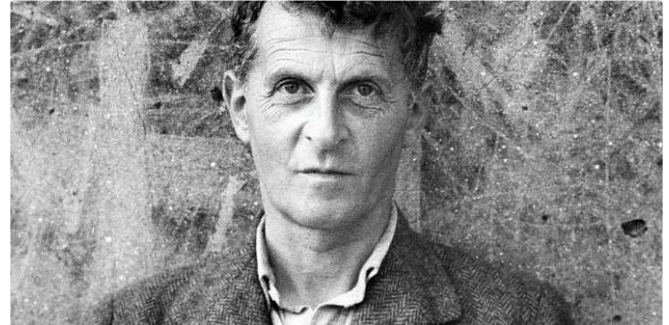
 Timothy Brown


Blind Brain Theory and the Role of the Unconscious

Blind Brain Theory (BBT) is a theory developed by novelist and philosopher R...

Aug 11, 2023

 50  1



 Timothy Brown

“Language as a Game” Taking the Wrong Message from Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's “language as use,” insight is simultaneously genius and a negative...

Aug 4, 2023

 12  1



See all from Timothy Brown

Recommended from Medium