

Surprising Errors in Durant's Story

Dan Vacco, M.A.

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Will Durant is probably best known for the eleven volume work *The Story of Civilization* written in collaboration with his wife. However, his work *The Story of Philosophy* has also been incredibly influential. It is this latter work that is the topic of this article.

Durant should certainly be included as one of the top writers in the fields of history and philosophy in the 20th century. His *Story of Philosophy* is a pleasure to read. Durant has a unique way of blending complex, and sometimes daunting, philosophical ideology into a narrative regarding the thinker's life. The biographical material serves as relief for the heavier sections on the deeper philosophical thought. The skill, intelligence, and style of the work make it an intriguing read.

The facts above make two specific errors Durant makes even more surprising, and one may say, disappointing. Here is a man known for his comprehensive works in history and philosophy, yet he makes two staggering historical errors in the transition from ancient philosophy to the Renaissance. The errors are presented and critiqued in turn.

The conclusion of this article can be foreshadowed by a discussion of the selectivity of the work. In a foreword to *The Story of Philosophy* Durant notes this selectiveness. He should not be faulted for this since any work on the history of ideas must be selective according to the author's purpose. It is impossible to write on history or philosophy comprehensively without having to reproduce in their entirety the collections of works in the fields. But a key into the psychology that perhaps motivated the errors to be discussed below is the note Durant makes about his selection of thinkers to include in the work. He considers those he includes, "dominant thinkers," while those he excludes are, "lesser figures," although perhaps, "half-legendary."¹ Interestingly, the Scholastics are mentioned in one sweeping fashion, although at least Aquinas has his name mentioned a few times. Augustine is completely excluded. In fact, on his "Table of Philosophic Affiliations," Augustine's name cannot be found. While selectivity is a must, it is at least interesting to see silence regarding Augustine, a man who heavily influenced philosophy and theology, and barely an inclusion of the famous Aquinas. This is more intriguing when placed against philosopher Ronald Nash's work *Life's Ultimate Questions*. In Part One, Nash summarizes what he presents as six conceptual systems that serve as paradigms for philosophy. Nash places alongside Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, both Augustine and Aquinas. Nash sees the importance of the latter two thinkers as foundational. Nash is a Christian. Durant is not. Durant admits that the goal of his work is to "humanize knowledge."² The conclusion has been sufficiently foreshadowed.

¹ Durant, *Story of Philosophy* (New York, NY; Time Incorporated, 1962), To the Reader.

² *Ibid.*

As for the errors in Durant's work, the first appears in the section from ancient philosophy leading up to Francis Bacon. He makes this statement, "The Church, supported in its earlier centuries by the emperors whose powers it gradually absorbed, grew rapidly in numbers, wealth, and range of influence."³ He moves on to discuss the expansion of land ownership in the 13th century. The error, or at least what can be called a gross misrepresentation, is that the Church grew initially due to the acceptance by the powers that be. Perhaps after Constantine in the 4th century this could be argued, but it cannot be said for "its earlier centuries." The Church grew initially under tremendous persecution. This can be seen as already occurring in the Biblical account. In Acts chapter 7 Stephen is killed, and in chapter 12 James is killed by Herod. The Church has to scatter across the Roman Empire so much so that Peter begins his first epistle referring, "The dispersion," or, "Strangers scattered," (1 Pet. 1:1, KJV). Of course, the tradition is clear about Peter and Paul being killed by one of the very emperors Durant sites without qualification as supporting the Church. Beyond Scripture, Church History is rife with stories of persecution at the hands of the emperors of Rome in the Church's "earlier centuries." Ignatius was, "ordered by the emperor to be arrested and was sentenced to be thrown to the wild beasts in Rome."⁴ Polycarp was burnt, and Justin Martyr was "scourged and beheaded in Rome with six other Christians."⁵ Historian E.E. Cairns notes, "The apologists [the early Christian writers] faced a hostile government," and had to, "refute the false charges of atheism, cannibalism, incest, indolence, and antisocial action."⁶ Cairns even subtitles the time period of AD 100-313 as "The Struggle of the Old Catholic Imperial Church for Survival."⁷ What happened to Durant's, "The Church, supported in its earlier centuries by the emperors whose powers it gradually absorbed, grew rapidly in numbers, wealth, and range of influence,"? Stephen, James, Peter, Paul, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr would have appreciated the support.

The second error is found to closely follow the first. On the way, Durant makes this scathing remark about Christian philosophy:

"But this unity demanded, the Church thought, a common faith exalted by supernatural sanctions beyond the changes and corruptions of time; therefore dogma, definite and defined, was cast like a shell over the adolescent mind of medieval Europe. It was within this shell that Scholastic philosophy moved narrowly from faith to reason and back again, in a baffling circuit of uncriticized assumptions and preordained conclusions."⁸

³ Durant, *Story*, 98.

⁴ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids, MI; CSI Publications, 1964), 9.

⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

⁶ E.E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 1996), 103.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 99.

The conclusion rears its head, but this particular polemic must be allowed to pass. The error is made as Durant describes the progress of knowledge that was made once learning was no longer, “the monopoly of priests.”⁹ He states, “Brave mariners armed now with compasses, ventured out into the wilderness of the sea, and conquered man’s ignorance of the earth; patient observers with telescopes, ventured out beyond the confines of dogma, and conquered man’s ignorance of the sky.”¹⁰ He goes on to describe the transformation of chemistry, astronomy, and zoology after having made his reference to Earth Science. The not so vague intimation is that once knowledge broke free from the Church, the human race was free to truly learn. The Church created intellectual shackles from which the human race was only freed by the humanists and the scientists who abandoned Church authority.

To describe the advance of the sciences as taking place as a result of the abandonment of faith and the Church is a staggering error. The various fields Durant mentions are filled with significant contributions, if not the most significant contributions, coming from Biblical creationists. Earth Science, and particular Geology, is forever indebted to the creationist and Bible-believing Nicolaus Steno.¹¹ Steno, “published on the geology of Tuscany in 1669,” and, “set forth the basic rules followed by geologists today when examining field evidence.”¹² The Law of Superposition, The Principle of Original Horizontality, and The Principle of Cross-cutting Relationships were all proposed by Steno. Staggeringly not only Durant misses this, but the public High School textbook on Earth Science published by Holt also completely ignores the influence of Steno. Instead, James Hutton is given the prominent place of influence.¹³ Why would this be? Hutton developed uniformitarianism which is the key to establishing an old age for the Earth and refuting Biblical creation. Perhaps philosophy books are not the only ones that must be guilty of philosophical selectivity.

While Steno is key to the development of contemporary Geology, other creationists are key to every field of science. In Physics, Isaac Newton’s importance cannot be overstated, but Newton was a Bible-believer. James Maxwell did the key work in electromagnetism as a Biblical creationist. In fact, Einstein even said that Maxwell’s work on electromagnetism was, “the most profound and fruitful that physics has experienced since the time of Newton.”¹⁴ Einstein has no problem giving credit to creationists, but Durant does. The author of our *Story* also mentions chemistry as being part of the emancipation of knowledge from the Church. Dr. Jonathan Sarfati mentions Boyle, Dalton and Ramsey as key creationists who influenced chemistry.¹⁵ This is the

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Roger Patterson, *Evolution Exposed: Earth Science* (Hebron, KY; Answers in Genesis, 2008), 126.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See chapter 8, of Allison, DeGaetano, and Pasachoff, *Earth Science* (Orlando, FL; Holt, 2007).

¹⁴ R. Terrance Egolf and Rachel Santopietro, *Physical Science* (Greenville, SC; BJU Press, 2008), 329.

¹⁵ Jonathan Sarfati, *Refuting Evolution* (Green Forest, AR; Master Books, 2003), 26.

Boyle of Boyle's Law which is eminently important to the field. In addition, who can forget the influence of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler in Astronomy, a field mentioned by Durant? But all three of these were part of the Church. One could go on regarding Carl Linnaeus and Edward Blyth in Biology¹⁶, or even the more recent Dr. Raymond Damadian who developed the MRI. If creationists, those who are part of the Church, were so key to the development of scientific fields, how can it be correct to refer to those fields as only developing because of a freedom from the Church and a breaking free from the shells of dogma?

The question then must be asked, "Why would Durant make such errors"? Certainly, simple selectivity is not the excuse. Selectivity is necessary, but blatant misrepresentations and historical errors from an eminent historian and philosopher? Recognize that selectivity is necessary, but ask the question, "Why does one select what they select?" That answer will always lie in one's particular worldview. It is unsurprising that an unbeliever would downplay the importance of Christian thinkers in the development of ideas. The problem is, Durant's own unbelief and condescension towards the Church has forced him to make historical errors that are inexcusable for a thinker of his intellectual ability.

The Christian can be encouraged that this is expected in light of the fact that Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad," (Matt. 12:30, KJV). There is no such thing as neutrality. All that people do, including writing history and philosophy books, will be governed by their assumed starting positions and underlying beliefs. If one assumes Christians are irrelevant to the history of philosophy, then they will certainly see a shell from which humanity needed to break free. If someone disparages Christianity, and is against Christ, then they will not be willing to acknowledge nor even sometimes reference the Stenos, Maxwells, and Boyles of science. Certainly, they will assume, these men's beliefs in creation could not have influenced their contributions to the advancement of science.

It is vital for believers and unbelievers to recognize the role their underlying assumptions have in their willingness to acknowledge facts. It is not as postmodernism assumes, that there are no True underlying assumptions, and only the sea of relativism. To assert such would be to assert at least one True underlying assumption, which is fatal to the relativistic systems. Relativism is self-defeating. However, underlying assumptions, or presuppositions, do play a vital role in determining what a particular person will be willing to assert as true, or accept as fact. The question becomes are the person's underlying assumptions and presuppositions the correct ones? Are they examining their assumptions which motivate their fact finding by placing them alongside God's Holy Word, the Bible, and correcting them as necessary? Are they doing what Paul the Apostle demanded and, "Bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of

¹⁶ See ed. Robert Carter, *Evolution's Achilles' Heels* (Powder Springs, GA; Creation Book Publishers, 2015), 21-26.

Christ,”? (2 Cor. 10:5b, KJV). Of course, an unbeliever will not be willing to do so without a supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit opening their hearts and minds. But are Christians? Are Christians actively seeking the basis for their own selectivity? Are they asking about their own assumptions which can so easily lead to error if they are not rigorously examined by God’s two-edged sword? In their political interests, does Durant’s desire for humanistic knowledge motivate their fact finding as well? In their scientific studies, do they recognize the vital importance of believing Scripture? To not do so, will certainly lead to errors that will be even more tragic than Durant’s errors, since they should know better. Let judgment begin in the house of God. Let each member of God’s invisible Church demand a return to the Holy Word of God as authoritative over every field of thought. If a Christian will not do this, it will only lead to errors in their own Story. And what a worse tragedy this will be. May God direct His people back to His Holy Word, incline their hearts to His wisdom (Prov. 2:2), and transform them by the renewing of their mind (Rom. 12:2). May God prevent His people from making Durant’s error.