
Student Essay Competition Winner

Henry Adams' Philosophy of History: The Study of Force, Motion, and Modernity

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Abstract: The American thinker, Henry Adams, is a writer and historian whose thought has contributed to studies in modernity. I discuss Adams' scientific philosophy of history as it was recorded in his work, "A Letter to American Teachers of History" (1910), which proposed to render the field practical for education by aligning it with the scientific developments of his age. I also analyze what Adams considered to be the problem of modernity, outlined in his two major works, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907): The contrast between an age of "unity," understood through the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century; and an age of "multiplicity," best displayed by the contrasting scientific theories of physics and biology in the twentieth century. I analyze how Adams reinterpreted the field of history to mimic the thirteenth century's unified worldview and how he demonstrated the social and political problems that could arise from a science-based worldview.

Keywords: Henry Adams, Modernity, philosophy of history, Historiography, Darwinism, Virgin Mary, Positivism, Thomas Aquinas

"I see motion," said Thomas:—"I infer a motor!" This reasoning, which may be fifty thousand years old, is as strong as ever it was; stronger than some more modern inferences of science; but the average mechanic stated it differently. "I see motion...I infer energy... everywhere." Saint Thomas barred this door to materialism by adding:—"I see motion; I cannot infer an infinite series of motors: I can only infer somewhere at the end of the series, an intelligent, fixed motor"...We can conduct our works...on any other theory...but, if you offer it as proof, we can only say that we have not yet reduced all motion to one source or all energies to one law, much less to one act of creation, although we have tried our best"

—Henry Adams (1983, p. 667)

The meaning of the epigraph above, Henry Adams' critique of modernity, will become clear by the conclusion of this paper. In this excerpt, he narrates Saint Thomas Aquinas' justification for the existence of God—the primary cause theory of the unmoved mover—as it was upheld by Aristotle in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.¹ When Adams wrote

this statement in 1904 he was already convinced that the "ancient reasoning" in Catholic theology was stronger than the "modern inferences of science." From this conviction stemmed the rest of Adams' writings on history: *Something* about ancient reasoning could not be replicated by the positivist proofs of his time. He dedicated the rest of his life to understanding that something—and how to replace it—in the twentieth century. To do so, he needed to go back in time to understand the key elements of ancient reasoning rooted in that foreign concept for the modern man: Faith. This essay will be concerned with Adams' theory of history that proposed to render the field scientific and practical so as to mimic the appeal of ancient reasoning; that is, a unified worldview that sprung from "one source."

Adams' awareness of the intellectual, artistic, and spiritual shifts of his time has made him an influential writer on the topic we know today as modernity. An under-appreciated thinker, Henry Adams has been allotted a spot in literature courses more than in philosophy or history. In the introduction to his book, *Henry Adams and the Making of America*, for example, author Gary Wills explains that contemporary use of Adams ignores the profundity of

his thought. Adams' most famous book, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Wills argues, "has become a wholly owned subsidiary of English departments, while he is neglected in history departments" (Wills 2005, p. 6). With so much literary popularity, one could be forgiven for thinking that Adams' renown should be for his historical and philosophical insight. His academic training was as a historian, after all. He completed the nine-volume series, *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* (1889). This time-consuming task, according to Wills, made Adams into a formidable historian; one who trained a new generation of academics at Harvard, no less. The problem with reading Adams' *Education* through a literary lens, without fully understanding his essential philosophical and historical insights, is that one might "dwell on its stylistic ironies and eschatological fallacies" too much and miss the most important elements of his writings (ibid.). Several of these indispensable elements—Adams' thoughts on historiography, Christianity, science, and politics—need to be discussed because they all bear significance for his theory of history.

As this paper treats the subject of philosophy (or theory) of history, it serves to define the term at the beginning. A philosophy of history attempts to posit an underlying sequence of historical development. In a philosophy of history the thinker may derive his view from philosophical premises but he looks for historical evidence to corroborate his theories instead of metaphysical and abstract principles. Adams' studies led him to assume that natural history was governed by the same laws as human history (Kariel 1956, p. 1078). His historical development is synonymous with human development. Adams believed it was the historian's duty to concern himself with the leading theories of the day and apply them to his own observations. From this belief, he was able to use advancing theories in the physical sciences to analyze the "intensity and potency of the forces composing the respective equilibriums" in society by taking into account "the intensity of force, assigning values to it" and engaging in comparative analysis to "possibly make predictions" (Kariel 1956, p. 1079). It is helpful to bear in mind that Adams' theory of history is replete with mechanical terms, which he devised to integrate the field of history with the scientific revolution of his time. Adams developed, through his studies and travels, a nuanced way of looking at the world that measured everything by its "force" and "motion" (the meaning of these terms will later be explained). Adams' idiosyncratic use of words like "force," "motion," and "motor" are paramount in order to understand the the-

ory of history that he presented in his work, "A Letter to American Teachers of History" (1910). But apart from these mechanical terms, it is also important to note that Adams perceived the world with an artistic sensibility as much as a rational mind. His two books, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) are the strongest testaments to Adams' multifaceted approach to history. The former is a travel memoir that recounts his time in Europe, while the latter is his autobiography. These descriptions of his works, however, are as general as they are cursory. Taken together, the various elements discussed in the books outline Adams' initial attempts to define his philosophy of history before he dedicated his Letter to that sole task. In these first two books, Adams used the mechanical language that was typically reserved for writings about physics to discuss artistic elements such as medieval iconography and architecture. He intentionally described the artistic and intellectual world of the thirteenth century in mechanistic terms to convey its significance to modern readers who would not connect to his message through mere emotional appeals. Adams' amalgamation of sensibility and rationalism is indicative of the two contrasting elements that fascinated him throughout his life: The medieval worldview of the thirteenth century and the scientific worldview of the twentieth century. Both worldviews provided Adams with two fundamentally different theories about human development since they produced two fundamentally different interpretations of history. Henry Cabot Lodge, a senator, historian, and, in his college days, Adams' student, wrote a telling preface to Adams' autobiography, reminding readers to consider the full titles of each of Adams' books (Adams 1918, pp. vii-viii). The extended titles read *Mont Saint Michel & Chartres: A Study of 13th Century Unity* and *The Education of Henry Adams: A Study of 20th Century Multiplicity*. It is with the additional clauses to both of these titles that this paper is concerned insofar as they convey two central themes in Adams' thought on historical development and on modernity: Thirteenth-century "unity" and twentieth-century "multiplicity."

But why did he need a theory of history in the first place? Adams understood history as the discipline through which men could understand their place in the world. Civilizations need histories to understand themselves. Between unity and multiplicity, Adams believed, unity was always the better way to sustain a civilization, and a big part of sustaining a unified civilization, in turn, required education in history. History, after all, is the way in which we explain our existence to ourselves through analysis of the past. It

is the collection of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and the actions we have taken to preserve, or change, such narratives. But Adams believed that there was a fundamental problem with history education during his time that had left him unprepared and unable to understand the century into which he was born. He encountered a vastly different world when he studied the thirteenth century, and he could not understand what had brought about an age of multiplicity. He wanted to reconcile the two distinct narratives of these times—faith and science—so, Adams sought to adapt the field of history to fit the new positivist methods that were becoming the standard for truth. If history could become a science of sorts, it would be able to definitively explain the shift from unity to multiplicity and, hence, the course of human development. Before expanding Adams' theory of history, it will help to first elaborate on his criticism of the field of history.

I. HISTORY'S PROBLEM, SCIENCE'S ALTERNATIVE, ADAMS' ANSWER

Adams worked in historical circles during a time when the field of historiography was gaining consciousness. History was becoming more evidence-based; even Adams himself implemented an empirical method of historical research when he studied an impressive number of archives to write his *History of the United States*, something novel for the field during this time (Wills 2005, p. 33). Adams was friendly and even related to most of the prominent American historians from New England, all of whom were excited about the new possibilities for their discipline that could come from the influence of the scientific revolution (Wills 2005, pp. 33-34). Perhaps, they thought, the historian could rise to the ranks of the scientist who discovers laws about nature: He would discover laws about mankind.

History for the modern historian was an entirely new discipline. Across the pond in England, Lord Acton hailed "a generation of writers who dug so deep between history as known to our grandfathers and as it appears to us" (Wills 2005, p. 34). The nineteenth century, after all, had centuries of intellectual work on its hands from which the modern-day historian could deduce ideas about the genealogies of human development. History, thus, started to become more "scientific" in its research methodology, distinct from the philosophical or conjectural history of the previous centuries that was based on "authority, myth, and forgeries" (ibid.). Just as Renaissance scholars, "with their sophisticated philological tools" (ibid.) had been able to unmask

the forgeries of the past, followed by Enlightenment scholars who had tirelessly worked to debunk myths, the modern historian could take his place in this intellectual timeline by placing the last nail on the coffin, interring authority for good.

Adams respected the premises of positivist research, for he felt that history as an academic subject in the twentieth century was pointless. The discipline had eschewed any theory that could provide a coherent narrative of human existence because it had succumbed to relativism. For that reason, some scholars are quick to place Adams on the list of historians who welcomed a historical field devoid of emotion, literature, and reflection.² They assume that Adams, too, viewed myth and authority as logically erred and intellectually oppressive. He wrote an essay, after all, which, at a surface level, seems to be advocating to turn history into a branch of empirical science because it was bending uncomfortably towards subjectivity. In his Letter, Adams wrote that the academic aversion to philosophies of history such as those crafted by Hegel, Comte, and Marx, solidified the fact that history could never be a science because of their varied and contrasting theories, which weakened history's social applicability against theories of human development like those presented by Charles Darwin and William Thomson (Adams 1910, p. 14). Adams posited that scientists won the world over at the turn of the twentieth century because they had to "consent to test their result by the facts of experience," while the same could not "fairly be asked of historians" (Adams 1910, pp. v-vi). Instead, historians only accumulated multiple events in the form of "inert facts," without asserting what parts "turned out to be useful, and what not" (Adams 1918, p. ix; p. 379).

It can certainly be said that Adams believed that history education needed to be useful, but in a very different sense of "use" than we might initially conceive from his writings. Adams rejected the notion of history as the collection of knowledge for knowledge's sake. His goal with *The Education*, which became clear after exploring the concept of unity in *Mont Saint Michel*, was to unify the scattered form of history that he was taught during his life and model it after the clarity of the scientific method. This does not mean, however, that Adams viewed science as the ultimate solution. Adams' scientific theory of history, moreover, shows signs of having a double intention. In one sense, it manages to criticize the subjective and relativistic turn which history was taking. But in another sense, he is demonstrating that the alternative (science) is insufficient. Adams "seized upon the Second Law [of thermodynamics]" in order to "expose

the fallacy of the determinism and materialism which dominated the nineteenth century and which Adams had captured in his powerful image of the Dynamo” (Burich 1987, p. 479).

Adams’ answer to history’s problem and science’s alternative, therefore, was his “dynamic theory of history” as he first introduced it in the 33rd chapter of *The Education*. Because Adams’ concern with forming a philosophy of history was closely tied with his desire to create a unified system of knowledge with which to educate men, the stability of this system rested on his ability to find a common denominator to history that could be traced, measured, and studied during various moments in time. Adams wanted to find the necessary sequence of human movement—that is, the element (or elements) that inspire men to develop—by studying this sequence within pivotal moments in history that produced “motion” in society. Motion, as Adams defined it, could be described as any physical production in man motivated by an overarching worldview: Art, architecture, music, vehicles, technology, and medicine, for example, are all the physical productions of human motion, indicative of a worldview that reveals how we perceive society and our role within it (Adams 1918, p. 382).

How much motion existed during a period of time depended on the strength of the worldview. “Force” was the measurable term that Adams used to describe the strength of that which generated motion. Adams rooted his theory of history in force because it could be measured by motion. Force, moreover, proved the existence of a “motor,” that which generates motion. The order, then, is as follows: A motor generates motion; the amount of motion indicates the force of that motor. By understanding force as the measure of a motor, and motion as the demonstrable output of man’s intellectual and physical production, Adams posited that one could use history to study force at various points in time, thus rooting the field in evidence. These new, more measurable elements of motion and force were preferable over the “chaos” of mere thought and the “artificiality” of time that were found in abstract philosophies of history (ibid.).

So far so good. Adams’ critique of the field of history led him to seek an alternate research methodology for the field rooted in science, namely the mechanical sciences that measure output in force and motion. We should consider him, then, an advocate of the scientific worldview. Interestingly enough, this is not the way we read Adams, since *Mont Saint Michel* and *The Education* provide excerpts, like our epigraph, that seem so clearly against positiv-

ism. Even scholars sympathetic to his interest with science criticize his theory of history as an “irrational” obsession with finding an “inclusive, indeterminate, absolutist, and simple scheme for history...” (Jordy 1952, p. 218). Relativism and subjectivity were bad in Adams’ mind, surely, but was science the logical alternative? If it is not, why did Adams write a theory of history that wants to uphold the scientific method? For one, Adams knew that science’s ability to convince through proof was pressuring other fields into submission, and the humanities could either join in or be left behind. His colleagues, too, were distancing themselves from a field of history that originated from literature—that is, from myth—to perpetuate false stories about mankind. He knew that science was the dogma of the century: That which did not uphold scientific facts would become merely decorative, obsolete. In “A Letter to American Teachers of History”, Adams is doing something much more astute than we initially perceive. He presents a scientific theory of history, using to his advantage the intellectual step that society was taking towards a scientific worldview, to demonstrate the problems that come from reducing everything down to a science, while also explaining history through a scientific theory to appeal to his educated audience.

History education in the nineteenth century had a problem because its departure from a unified worldview to one dominated by positivism had left it vulnerable, without facts to assert its alleged myths and forgeries about human development. Science had provided an alternative—an ultimatum, really: fact or fiction. Adams realized that even if science had persuaded most intellectuals in the nineteenth century, arguably himself, there had to be a trade-off to the previous narrative of history. A society without faith, myth, or authority had to lose *something* in exchange. In several parts of his Letter, Adams mentions the problems that came from the dominant worldview of his time: “Granting that the intended effect of intellectual education is,—as Bacon, Descartes and Kant began by insisting,—a habit of doubt,” meant that “it is only in a very secondary sense a habit of timidity or despair” (Adams 1910, p. 81). Intellectual education inculcated the habit of doubting; it also inculcated something much more serious: Doubt, championed by the founders of modern philosophy, opens us up to timidity or despair. Timidity, for Adams, does not mean shyness as we use it in our common language, but rather a lack of courage or confidence to believe in something and to assert anything. It is the privation of faith. What then, is the point of historical education—a form of intellectual education—if it only teaches such dismay?

This question is the true problem that Adams raises in *The Education of Henry Adams* and “A Letter to American Teachers of History”: What is the use of historical education? For this question, he needed to develop a theory of history. Adams’ response to this problem, which will be explored in depth, is that history cannot teach such dismay whether it be true or not because of the visible effects it will have on society. Adams’ theory of history is scientific in its description and terminology; in reality, it demonstrates the need for rescuing a form of faith, even if not whole. He began exploring this theory in his first book.

II. MONT SAINT MICHEL AND CHARTRES: THE ORIGIN OF ADAMS’ CONCEPT OF FORCE

The earlier traces of what would later become Adams’ study of force within his philosophy of history were first visible in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. Adams’s understanding of force was adapted from the traditional definition in physics as something which causes a change in motion in an object and he applied it to collective human action and thought. Adams defined force as “anything that does, or helps to do work” (Adams 1918, pp. 474-475). But for a man to “do work” there needed to be something to generate both the mental disposition for work and the physical execution of that work, so when Adams stated that force “does” or “helps” the process of work, he included the need for an external force that acted upon man. This point echoes the opening epigraph of this paper, where Adams discussed the concept of a motor. Adams’ themes of unity and multiplicity became the categories that explained why Christianity in the thirteenth century, as St. Thomas explained it, was a stronger motor (had a greater force) than science in the twentieth century.

To Adams, the most complete example of a motor throughout history had been Christianity. Christianity offered a shared belief in an ideal that was capable of generating a unified force by converging all facets of human life from the “social and the intellectual” to the “secular and religious” (Hochfield 1962, pp. 104-106). In *Mont Saint Michel*, Adams identified three main generators of motion: The Archangel Michael, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Thomas Aquinas. All three symbols represented one worldview but manifested it through different mediums. Adams’ proof for Christianity’s force was the architecture of cathedrals in France and the vast amount of artwork that featured Mary and the Archangel Michael; his intellectual proof was me-

dieval Scholasticism, exemplified by the theology of Saint Thomas. Christianity was such a strong force that it generated motion through a physical manifestation, with beauty as a direct outcome of its unified culture. Adams called the visible world of the thirteenth century a “work of art” that expressed unity through the culture it produced (Hochfield 1962, pp. 101-102). Christian art went above intellect towards a much more powerful element—emotion—that was capable of captivating an entire civilization for hundreds of generations. The iconography of the time became a motor that rendered Christianity universal through the emotion it produced in society, compelling people to continue expressing its story. Art *moves* us, so the expression goes.

Adams viewed the thirteenth century as a better example of force and unity in human action and production for two reasons. On an aesthetic level, the unity of its worldview produced uniformity in music, art, architecture, and philosophy, as various mediums of expression fell into place with each other despite having their own creative differences. On a metaphysical level, unity was intrinsically appealing to mankind and it was closer to his human nature. According to Adams, the idea of unity was one that “survives the idea of God or of Universe” because it is “innate and intuitive”; “thought floats much more easily towards than against it...” (Adams 1910, p. 82). Thirteenth-century Christian culture conveyed this unity.

But it was not only in art and faith that Christianity unified an entire culture. Adams wrote in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* that “the great Cathedrals of the middle-ages” and “a shrine, such as Lourdes” turned itself into a market and created valuable industries (Adams 1983, p. 439). Cathedrals were more than architectural marvels for Adams: While they displayed through their design the spiritual understanding of the world at the time, they also had a material impact that helped to generate an entrepreneurial civilization that dominated commerce for centuries. Through his economic analysis of the lure of medieval art, Adams arrived at the image of the Virgin and deemed her the strongest generator of force within Christianity. Adams cites the six volumes of the *Dictionnaire du Mobilier Français*, published in 1873, to explain the extent to which the Virgin generated an industry in art, arguing that “the whole world of the Virgin’s art...made a market such as artists never knew before or since” (Adams 1983, p. 440).

It was the coalescence of economic, artistic, intellectual, philosophical, architectural, and theological factors visible in the thirteenth century that made Adams consider thirteenth-century Christianity the most palpable example of

unity in Western history.³ As this worldview diverged in multiple, irreconcilable paths in the twentieth century, Adams sought to explain the shift through his theory of history, first introduced in his autobiography.

III. THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS AND HIS "DYNAMIC THEORY OF HISTORY"

With Adams' understanding of force and motion explained, the next step is to analyze what Adams understood to be his role as a historian living in modernity. He explained this best in his autobiography when he wrote that the historian's job was to "undertake to arrange sequences—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect" (Adams 1918, p. 382). In seeking a necessary sequence of human motion during his time, Adams needed, then, the twentieth-century reincarnation of the motor he had observed in the thirteenth century. Christianity as it was felt in the thirteenth century—as it had moved people—was gone and lost, so Adams was constantly searching for signs of motors in his generation. He found them, though not as whole, in Darwin's scientific theories and William Thomson's laws of thermodynamics.

The Education features several chapters where Adams describes the signs of the radical shift that occurred in society, a large part of which were the mechanical inventions displayed in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900. In his famous metaphor, history's neck had been broken by this inconceivably rapid advancement (ibid.). Adams' brace for history became what he called a "dynamic theory of history," which adopted the principles of physiochemical processes in a form of historical research methodology that studied man's self-proclaimed progress, his dynamism.

Because Adams believed that history should play an active role in society as a field of study through which people obtained practical knowledge of the world, he set out to re-explain history as a field that unified physiochemical principles with the elements of force and motion that he first observed in the thirteenth century. The thirteenth century, as Adams first saw it in *Mont Saint Michel*, became the "fixed element of the equation" for Adams' philosophy of history, as the point of comparison for later centuries (Hochfield 1962, p.101). The physical phenomenon of force, moreover, allowed him to turn history into a quantifiable science that would measure motors through their output of human thought, action, and production during any given period. Force, then, was a form of "occult attraction" that

manifested itself in different ways, either through "love of God" prior to 1500, or through a *vis a tergo* in mechanics that emerged after Christianity (Adams 1918, p. 427).

Adams wanted to converge human action throughout the ages with physiochemical laws because he believed that the modern historian's predicament was his inability to reduce the "energy with which history had to deal" into a "mechanical or physiochemical process," as he later admitted in his Letter (Adams 1910, p. 12). Otherwise ignoring this important task would mean trouble for the historian, for he would either have to deny that "social energy" was a form of physical energy or assert that it was an energy that operated independent of physical laws, deeming itself impervious to the so-called universal laws of physics, and thus discredit itself from serious academic inquiry (Adams 1910, pp. 11-12). Admitting that social energy was not a form of physical energy ceded to science the intellectual limits of history because the historian revealed himself as a meagre observer of human action, incapable of applying his observations to anything of practical use. Adams' Letter took his dynamic theory of history and turned it into something applicable and relevant for academic inquiry.

IV. ADAMS' "LETTER," A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY TO EXPLAIN MODERNITY

Adams affirmed that a theory of human development needed to account for man's intellectual shifts. Only a comprehensive theory that explained history's trajectory could achieve this task. Physics was the new motor that replaced Christianity in the twentieth century; the Dynamo had replaced the Virgin, but the implications of this shift still needed to be weeded out. The theological scheme of the universe that existed in the thirteenth century had now been succeeded by a mechanical theory of the universe that dominated the twentieth century as "scientific dogma" (Adams 1910, p. 1). Accordingly, in "A Letter to American Teachers of History," Adams presented the laws of thermodynamics as a potential explanation for the consequences that would arise from this new worldview. The first law, the conservation of energy, and the second law, the dissipation of energy, were two laws that explained humanity and its development over the ages. As per the premise in the Law of the Conservation of Energy, since nothing can be added to or removed from nature, man needed to "shift the constituents of the never-varying total," and "out of one of them form another" (Adams 1910, pp. 8-10). Thirteenth-century God was an old constituent of that "never-varying total," who,

under Adams' theory of history, could now be understood as a historical example of mechanical "force" or "energy."

Historicizing the intellectual development of force would build a bridge between the past and the present. Adams' philosophy of history could explain the motors that generated motion in societies of previous generations in a measurable way, proving that they were still following the laws of thermodynamics before man put a name to them. The physical phenomenon of force, as it followed the Second Law of Dissipation of Energy, demonstrated to Adams the social and intellectual shifts that took place over the years. He revealed his philosophy of history to be the study of force and motion through the following analogy:

Few things are more difficult than to judge how far a society is looking one way and working in another, for the points are shifting and the rate of speed is uncertain. The acceleration of movement seems rapid, but the inertia, or resistance to deflection, may increase with the rapidity, so that society might pass through phase after phase of speed, like a comet, without noting deflection in its thought. (Adams 1910, pp. 30-31)

The excerpt above demonstrates how Adams described the law of entropy for human development. To place his philosophy of history within a scientific framework, Adams is careful to make the point that force should not be confused with forward motion: Although society might believe that it is progressing in one direction, this motion might be slower than it can sense—the "rate of speed is uncertain." Just as acceleration of movement might appear rapid to us, the laws of physics can also exchange that motion in another, opposite force, resulting in "inertia." Society, in other words, could be at an intellectual and developmental standstill, compared to its previous centuries, without even noticing it because the laws of motion and thermodynamics make it so. The faster we try to move, the more we increase the rapidity; the likelier we are to pass through phases of speed without noting a "deflection" in our collective thought.

Adams called inertia "the law of the mind as well as of matter" and considered it "a form of instinct" that explained human history (Adams 1910, pp. 31-32). It is a form of "resistance to deflection" that increases with speed: The faster we move, the less able we are to diverge from our course, but that also means that all other forms of deflection—intellectual or spiritual, for example—may pass by unnoticed until it is too late. We are highly susceptible, in a modern, scientific society that only focuses on "progress," to becoming

obtuse to any deflection of thought as we pass from one phase of development to another: We might feel that we are moving forward, but, by necessity, something else needs to be moving against us.

We think in terms of motion, which is why history is often described in directional terms as being either "progressive" or "stagnant" (ibid.). But Adams warned his readers that inertia is a physical law that is constant (Adams 1910, p. v). It is more dangerous, then, to try to move faster against inertia (against the established course of motion) than to try to alter it subtly. In his Letter, he wrote "For myself, the preference for movement of inertia is decided. The risk of error in changing a long-established course seems always greater to me than the chance of correction..." (ibid.). This was modernity's problem: The rate of speed at which it was trying to implement change. Adams warned that our modern society was so preoccupied with progress, that it did not notice the deflection in worldviews that came about as a result of scientific advancement (this is another iteration of his "broken neck" observation of history).

The problem for Adams was that society had been told to accept these modern forms of worldviews (Darwinism, Positivism) without taking the time to look back at what had come before them. We simply "abandoned" one form of world view for another when we were told to do so—a dangerous form of complacency, and an early trace of the timidity that would become our habit. Adams provided a "simpler" figure for this claim in his Letter:

If a simpler figure is needed, society may be likened to an island surrounded by a rising ocean which silently floods its defenses. One after another, the defenses have been abandoned, and society climbed to higher ground supposed to be out of danger. So the classic gods were abandoned for monotheism, and scholastic philosophy was dropped in favor of the Newtonian; but the classic Gods and the scholastic philosophy were always popular. And the newer philosophies won their victories by developing compulsory force. (Adams 1910, pp. 30-31)

Adams described society as being on an island surrounded by a rising ocean that is flooding our defenses "silently," that is, without us noticing. In this analogy, we must determine what the rising ocean is, and what our defenses are. Adams writes that society has gradually abandoned its defenses, which parallels his previous statement about our "deflections in knowing." Our defenses are our forms of

knowing: Our worldviews, philosophies, or gods. We abandoned the classic gods for monotheism and scholastic philosophy for Newtonian philosophy. Interestingly enough, the classic gods and scholastic philosophy we left behind endured the swell; so, the defences that we left down below were not so weak after all. History, then, is not a ladder leading towards better defences.

Perhaps we are now on higher ground, “supposed to be out of danger,” Adams notes, but we are by no means safer from whatever the rising ocean may be. The rising ocean, then, might be Adams’ renewed metaphor for that age-old antagonist in our history, the ripened fruit that tempted even the first man: Knowledge. Our pride and desire to be like God necessitates all-encompassing knowledge. But the forms of knowing that we developed throughout history (our defences) are not the same as the knowledge promised to Eve in Genesis 3: One helps us know and accept our limitations, the other to deny them in a self-destructive form. In the latter, it is only the illusion of knowledge that we seem to find. Adams writes that, for whatever reason, we have been unable to fully overcome the lasting popularity of classic gods and scholastic philosophy. Maybe there was something to those ancient defences, whose forces lie in philosophy, literature, art, and “ancient reasoning,” that better taught us to interpret the world, not know it. Science is convincing, but it is not moving.

These anecdotes from Adams’ Letter reveal an element lying beneath all the mentions of force and motion. They hint at Adams’ conception of modernity. Beyond the study of force and motion, his philosophy of history is also the study of modernity understood as the moment in time when the search of knowledge transitioned from being noble to being proud. The problem that Adams saw in modernity was that it was a moment of multiplicity that ripped the social fabric of had been meticulously weaved through generations, arrogantly claiming that everything that came before it was a lie. As Adams stated, it was preferable to form, through history, a long-established course of “knowing” that changed subtly (inertia), than to change knowledge dramatically. The paradox of Adams’ time, so he believed, was that society was heading nowhere despite thinking that it was progressing in an upwards direction. He phrased this concept in his Letter as “immutability in the midst of change” to recognize that, even if there isn’t any “final gain nor loss” in human action at times, the law of energy dissipation still holds (Adams 1910, pp. 8-10). For him, man’s self-defeating search for all-encompassing knowledge was proof of the physiochemical law of entropy.

But the way that Adams interpreted man’s quest for knowledge as the proof for the law of entropy was different than how society’s scientists understood their mission. Since they believed they were progressing in a forward motion aimed towards boundless improvement, they began to have an influence in society that Adams deemed dangerous. A particular point of disruption came with the rise of Darwinism in the nineteenth century. As a result, Adams dedicated a great portion of *The Education of Henry Adams* and “A Letter to American Teachers” to discuss the problematic philosophical and social implications of Darwinism.

V. THE PROBLEM OF DARWINISM

Darwinism, characterized by an emphasis on the theory of evolution, represented a pivotal moment for Adams because it was an intellectual movement that destabilized the unity of scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century. In *The Education*, Adams titled the years 1867-1868 “Darwinism,” and argued that the emergence of various new scientific laws based on evolution imposed a blind faith that man “had to take on trust” that became the modern equivalent of medieval Christianity (Adams 1918, p. 224). Adams believed that Darwin’s discoveries problematized the laws of thermodynamics because the law of evolution claimed that vital energy could be added and raised indefinitely in potential, denying what physicists claimed that the law of entropy applied to all vital processes even more rigidly than to mechanical processes (Adams 1910, p. 25). This teleological division between the biological and the physical sciences left historians with a choice to make between the two, and most were taking the progressive view of human development.

Adams noticed this contradiction between two scientific worldviews: One tending towards evolution and perfectibility and the other towards dissipation and decay. Adams favoured the latter narrative because it was closer to his personal view of history, but he also recognized that the concept of evolution won people over during his time and dictated modern culture for the years to come. Evolutionists, however, were unable to reconcile their concept of human perfectibility with the law of dissipation, so Adams viewed Darwin’s influence as something that disrupted the unified theory of force and motion that he had found in physical laws. He described evolutionists as “battalions... like an army, the energies of government, society, democracy, socialism, nearly all literature and art, as well as hope

and whatever was left of instinct, all striving to illustrate not the descent but the ascent of man” (Adams 1910, p. 29).

To prove that he was not the only one who saw this incongruity between physics and biology, in his Letter, Adams included the opinion of geophysicist, Bernard Brunhes, to explain the problem of Darwinism. Brunhes wrote that physical science presented a world that was “unceasingly wearing itself out,” and any philosophy that used biology as support for its worldview needed to adopt a progressive view of society as “steadily improving,” accepting that “physiological life goes on always growing perfect to the point of reaching full consciousness of itself in man” (Adams 1910, p. 195). Darwinism proved Adams’ point about modernity being incapable of reproducing the unity of the “fixed motor” of Christianity that society had left behind in the thirteenth century because it promoted another scientific theory that produced its own cult following. Darwinism, then, was just another feature of twentieth-century multiplicity that, in its quest for knowledge, failed to provide man with a meaning of his existence. From this conclusion it serves to treat Adams’ conception of unity to explain why it is preferable to multiplicity.

VI. UNITY AS A MOMENT IN HISTORY

Adams identified unity and uniformity as “the whole motive of philosophy” that inspired thinkers through the ages (Adams 1918, p. 226). He began his foray into studies of modernity with the thirteenth century because he considered it the point in time “when man held the highest idea of himself as a unity in a unified universe” (Adams 1918, pp. 434-435). Although Adams adapted his philosophy of history to the laws of energy of his time, he admitted, nonetheless, that scientific worldviews could never live up to the theological unity that had been visible in the thirteenth century because they would always conflict with each other as to who had the right answer based on their evidence. Now that the discords of twentieth-century scientific theories had become evident, they left Adams with the conclusion that modernity was an irreparable sequence of multiplicity.

But history, Adams wrote, “had no use for multiplicity; it needed unity; it could study only motion, direction, attraction, relation. Everything must be made to move together” (Adams 1918, p. 377). Disillusioned in his hope that science would be the new force that would replace Christianity, what was left for Adams was to present his findings to his audience. In a chapter of *The Education*, titled, “The Abyss of Ignorance,” Adams expressed a similar sentiment

to what he wrote in his Letter regarding the inevitable timidity and despair of his time, worth quoting in full:

Rid of man and his mind, the universe of Thomas Aquinas seemed rather more scientific than that of Haeckel or Ernst Mach. Contradiction for contradiction, Attraction for attraction, Energy for energy, St. Thomas’s idea of God had merits. Modern science offered not a vestige of proof, or a theory of connection between its forces, or any scheme of reconciliation between thought and mechanics; while St. Thomas at least linked together the joints of his machine. As far as a superficial student could follow, the thirteenth century supposed mind to be a mode of force directly derived from the intelligent prime motor, and the cause of all form and sequence in the universe—therefore the only proof of unity. Without thought in the unit, there could be no unity; without unity no orderly sequence or ordered society. Thought alone was Form. Mind and Unity flourished or perished together. (Adams 1918, pp. 428-430)

The problem with the multiplicity of science was its lack of a central point of convergence—of a Deity. Indeed, he wrote that “the old habit of centralising strain at one point” for the sake of society had disappeared; modern attempts at unity were only creating greater “complexity” and “friction” (Adams 1918, p. 398).

His conclusion that mankind will never again find the unity that society in the thirteenth century found in Christianity might seem cynical, even exaggerated. But it should be mentioned that Adams himself was hardly religious.⁴ Still, despite his rather temperate and detached analysis of religion, Adams’ works have been criticized as “a revelation of values in historical garb,” nothing more than nostalgic, existential, and romantic reflections from a man seeking “compensation” for his time (Hochfield 1962, p. 114). Less critically, he has been called the “helpless child of historical circumstance rather than a willful pessimist” (Nicols 1935, p. 168). Scholars argue that the law of entropy was attractive to Adams because he would never amount to the most illustrious members of his distinguished family, his grandfather and great-grandfather, who had been presidents of the United States, and even his father, a renowned minister to Great Britain: Adams, in the fourth generation, “was never to have the satisfaction of receiving even a minor post...Here was a dissipation of energy” (ibid.). It is true that Adams felt a sense of pressure from the legacy of his name, even admit-

ting in a letter that he wished to be “less Adamsy” (Wills 2005, p. 11), but whether this sentiment came from resentment towards never amounting to the same celebrity as his ancestors is debatable. Adams was a private person, who would have preferred to be distant from the world in anonymity rather than immersed in it in fame. Adams’ conception of himself, of his time, of history, and of “unity” is far more nuanced than mere self-pity, and his books should not be reduced to cathartic venues through which he vented his existential anxiety.

The claim that Adams took on a maudlin attitude towards the changing of times would have been anathema to someone who dedicated his life to seeking the proper education to form himself into a man who understood history and accepted the inevitable changing of the times. It wasn’t for religious reasons that Adams upheld the unity of Christianity over the multiplicity of modernity. He saw, socially and culturally, the unintended consequences that multiplicity would have on the future ordering of society. In a culture of multiplicity that engendered hyper-individualism, relativism, and subjectivism, —combined with a mass sense of timidity and inertia—it was only a matter of time before something came along to persuade man to relinquish his autonomy to a new god. The “higher defense” of our current day: The State.

VII. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR LOSS OF UNITY

In a letter to the American Historical Association, of which he was president from 1893-1894, that served as his “annual address of the president,” Adams raised the possibility of “a new Darwin” who would demonstrate “the law of the laws of historical evolution,” which would overpower the influence of “a mere theorist like Rousseau...a reasoner like Adam Smith...and a philosopher...like Darwin”(Adams, 1894). Adams curiously refers to Darwin as a philosopher, which was likely an intentional remark that contained a share of criticism of his theories of evolution. Adams refutes Darwinian evolution, moreover, on metaphysical grounds rather than scientific because he noticed from the beginning that evolutionists were rejecting abstract inquiry about existence, claiming only that natural explanations were valid in society. Of course, evolutionists themselves couldn’t help but extend their discoveries to the wider teleological implications about man and society. To that, Adams raises another point: What will be the attitude of government or of society toward any conceivable science of his-

tory? Rousseau, Smith, and Darwin were met with their fair share of “industrial and political struggles,” “revolution,” and “vehement opposition,” so Adams asked in his address to the country’s top historians, “can we imagine any science of history that would not be vastly more violent in its effects than the dissensions roused by anyone or by all three of these great men?”

The answer for Adams was clearly no. In fact, this address has been considered by some scholars as a deliberate rhetorical argument to emphasize the impossibility for a definitive, scientific theory of history because of the political problems it can cause. Science claims a universal authority that leads to a loss of autonomy, and Adams knew this fact all too well because he himself endeavored in the “dangerous game of applying the scientific method” to history—a task that, ironically, rendered him a “doyen of the historical profession” (Munford 1959, p. 79). Adams never truly believed that science could be applied to history and produce salutary results, but his students and colleagues did not understand the rhetorical element of his writings on the science of history. In turn, he sought to “redeem himself” by “playing the scientific game through to its revealing conclusion,” which was utilizing the “claims of science to universal authority” by remorselessly elaborating them to show where these claims were leading: He could apply the scientist’s own generalizations “so brutally and cynically that he could shock his readers into an awareness of what could happen and perhaps actually was happening” (Munford 1959, pp. 79-80).

Still, there is no reason to doubt that Adams’ essays are “a serious effort to convert history into science” (Munford 1959, p. 80). But science was important to Adams only to the extent that it allowed him to personally discover its shortcomings. To truly see what science was missing, Adams had to honestly believe, for some time, that it was the unifying theory of human development and all of its complexities. Adams’ studies in history and his personal encounter with the medieval art and culture of the thirteenth century proved to him that the science of the twentieth century was not as moving as he thought: Its motor could not reach the hearts of men, only their minds. From this conclusion, Adams had no valid proof to refute the ailment of his time as the “continuing enfeeblement of man’s mental powers as reflected in the deterioration of his noblest instincts—religion, law, manners, morality and art” (Burich 1987, p. 470). The affirmation of this fact explains why, when Adams attempted to subsume history under science, “all that was aesthetic and humane in his personality protested

the result” (Munford 1959, p. 80).⁵ And so, by letting “the physicist-historians illustrate their own degradation,” Adams’ “Letter to American Teachers of History,” “has every appearance of being a devastating indictment of those who persist in reducing man and society to units of energy to be measured and predicted by mathematical formulae” (Munford 1959, pp. 86-87).

Although Adams’ understanding of scientific laws of energy was criticized when his theories were first published, later scholars commend his formulation of their socio-political implications for its prescience (Kariel 1956, p. 1074). Adams wrote pieces that were “so consistent, elaborate, and thoroughgoing—and yet so free from the burden of technical jargon—that intentions and goals unclear or concealed in modern science may be illuminated by a retracing of his search for genuine knowledge of society...” (Kariel 1956, p. 1074). It appears that Adams’ use of science and his lacking use of scientific jargon, then, was intentional: It was meant to reveal the political implications of science before scientists themselves had an opportunity to infiltrate all areas of valid social knowledge.

It is an open question whether Adams himself truly believed to the end of his life that science could replace religion in framing a coherent worldview of past, present, and future. That he was aware of science’s limits and inferiority to the medieval, theological worldview of the universe is clear; but then why attempt to argue for a scientific philosophy of history, instead of simply writing as an advocate for religious or cultural revival? Adams certainly preferred indirect argumentation, one that allowed the individual, be it his readers or his students, to arrive at the problems of their own conclusions. More importantly, however, is that both alternatives to Adams’ theory of history—that it was an intentional attempt to restore unity through science but fell short to theology, and that it was an intentional rhetorical hoax meant to demonstrate the dangerous implications of scientific hegemony—arrive at the same conclusion: Science cannot replace or replicate Christianity and the world it created.

Adams noted the problem of his day as “the conflict between such a science,” (one that wanted to force society into attaining utopic ideals) “and those who would defend their freedom” (Kariel 1956, p. 1092). The world of the twentieth century was “wholly free of imperatives, devoid of meaning, lawless in its very essence,” so Adams realized that social scientists could experience “an exhilarating sense of liberation...from restrictive theory,” and, thus, be “free to impute norms, standards, or values” (Kariel 1956, p. 1090).

The goal of the social empiricist, with science to back up his ideals, was “to incarnate the trans-historical theory it posits, to translate, as Marx had envisaged, abstract philosophy into concrete action, to make the real blend with the ideal” (ibid.).

Blending the real with the ideal defied our intellectual limitations, and Adams foresaw the political problems that could arise from this blindness. Adams’ “Letter to American Teachers of History,” thus, serves a more noble purpose than presenting a scientific theory of history. Adams observed that modern society had a tendency toward a “suffocating uniformity,” whether it be through “socialism or corporate capitalism” (Burich 1987, p. 481). But uniformity is not unity. Adams predicted the dangerous direction that a science-based worldview—one that wanted to impose its own norms on society—was taking, and the problematic implications it would have for man’s freedom. In a private letter to a colleague, he wrote that it was an appeal to the “classical historian, with his intuition of free-will and art,” to persuade him to join the lists against the “socialist frame of mind which we are already floundering in” (Burich 1987, p. 481).⁶ He included a “cryptic comment” in another note to a colleague, regarding his “Letter to American Teachers of History,” saying that the true motivation behind the essay-letter, where he presented his theory of history was to indirectly ask American teachers of history “what they are going to do about socialism” (Kariel 1956, p. 1092).⁷

If Adams’ contemporaries truly failed to understand what he was setting out to do with his theory of history—that is, to warn against the “suffocating uniformity” that was the political product of the social sciences—then the relevance of Adams’ writings for our current day becomes all the more evident: What is the use of reading Henry Adams? What is the use of his theory of history? These two lingering questions will take up the final two sections of this paper.

VIII: THE USE OF READING HENRY ADAMS

Adams’ doubt about science or history’s ability to explain the world came from a concern about the ambitions that this action could produce among social scientists: “Any presumption of necessity to the course of history” would only strengthen “the forces of ‘collectivism’ at the expense of those pockets of resistance to society; increasing demands for uniformity” (Burich 1987, pp. 481-482). To be sure, the problem of modernity and of multiplicity was for Adams a philosophical problem, perhaps even a spiritual one. It ap-

peared, however, that scientism kept inserting itself in the debate, claiming that science was indifferent to philosophy. To Adams, nothing could be further from the truth: In modernity, science sought to destroy philosophy and all forms of inquiry that were not rational by its standards; whereas before, science had a metaphysically humble role beneath philosophy. In his time, Adams was seeing the rebellion against that hierarchy in its true form, so he included his thoughts about the social and political consequences of a world dominated by science in most of his writings. During his final paragraphs in his Letter, Adams quoted an excerpt from the French sociologist Gustave Le Bon's 1895 book, *Physiologie des Foules (Psychology of Crowds)* to explain the social consequences that came from a shift from unity to multiplicity:

That which formed a people, a unity, a block, ends by becoming an agglomeration of individuals without cohesion, still held together for a time by its traditions and institutions. This is the phase when men, divided by their interests and aspirations, but no longer knowing how to govern themselves, ask to be directed in their smallest acts; and when the State exercises its absorbing influence. With the definitive loss of the old ideal, the race ends by entirely losing its soul; it becomes nothing more than a dust of isolated individuals, and returns to what it was at the start, a crowd. (Adams 1910, p. 193)

Adams saw a connection between metaphysical unity and political order in society. Once unity faded, men were nothing but scattered individuals who no longer knew how to govern themselves, and so they sought uniformity. In contrast, unity provided man with an ability to rule himself because he was governed by his overarching worldview of Christianity that granted him freedom, albeit in a different sense from the modern, liberated version of the twentieth century. As the thirteenth-century worldview came to a close, people, lost and without knowledge of what it means to live in modernity, asked to be “directed in their smallest acts.” This direction came through the form of a stronger, centralized government. Le Bon wrote that it was through this newfound freedom without cohesion that the State was able to exercise its “absorbing influence.” The end result of this new, State-controlled society is that it ends by society “entirely losing its soul.”

Adams believed that society had indeed lost its soul and that individualism and uniformity was becoming more per-

vasive in society. Uniformity had a deleterious effect on freedom because man “became increasingly dependent upon forces beyond his control” (Burich 1987, p. 479). Agreeing with Le Bon, Adams warned how something as abstract as a shift in worldview eventually crept its way into human institutions like the state, because men needed a new governing edifice on which to depend. Individuals no longer formed “a people” unified by a coherent history, but what they were before organized society: “a crowd.” Such a clear stance against collectivism and uniformity portray Adams as an opinionated and outright political writer, but this was also not the case. Adams’ studies had proven to him that it was impossible to ascertain any truths. “...He rejected the Nietzschean view that the artist-historian should impose on his material and simply fabricate his myth no less than the Hegelian one that History is permeated by Spirit moving in a determinable way” (Kariel 1956, p. 1086).

In fact, Adams’ political contribution through his historicism was that “he institutionalized no insight, translated no transcendental truth into secular reality, imposed no law of science,” distinguishing himself from historians like Marx and Engels (ibid). Intellectual humility was a weapon for this trained historian, instead of a source of discredit. Adams echoed the concerns and sentiments of other thinkers who were wary of the shift in worldview that came in the twentieth century as a result of individualism and positivism, but he reserved himself only to academic speculation about the end results. Adams’ flaw, if we should consider it one, was intellectual integrity in the form of self-admittance of failure to develop a theory of history that explained the world through science. In fact, Adams describes his “personal battle...his peculiar pains, trials, and failures” constantly in *The Education* (Kariel 1956, p. 1074). According to Adams, neither his upbringing as a wealthy patrician in Massachusetts, nor his college years as a student at Harvard, nor his later appointment as a professor of medieval history at that same university, nor his professional years as a U.S. diplomat living in London, had been enough to prepare him for the changed world of multiplicity that he encountered in the twentieth century.

In the article, “The Limits of Social Science, Henry Adams’ Quest for Order,” Henry S. Kariel argued that Adams established a scientific order to history to entertain multiple possibilities: In one sense, he made the case for irrationalism as he advocated for the “conversion of theory into action;” in another sense, he made the case for conservatism as he “supported the reduction of discords by a manipulative science of means;” and he even made the case for elit-

ism as he “permitted the practitioners of empirical science to settle the social conflicts left open to debate by the traditional methods of politics and philosophy” (ibid.). But Adams was unable to reconcile all of these alternatives upon discovering that the laws of nature and history were chaotic and, worse yet for the politically-minded social scientist, unknowable. Adams admitted: “Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man” (Adams 1918, p. 415). Adams’ critique of modernity and of progress came from his conclusion that “progress was the result of man’s willful disobedience of the laws of nature and society” (Burich 1987, p. 481).

Adams’ problem was that “he never kept himself from pushing his theories to conclusions,” even if those conclusions admitted error and exposed “the limits of their science” (Kariel 1956, p. 1074). But it is exactly the fact that Adams failed at connecting all the pieces of history and science that reveals the most applicable lesson from his writings. Kariel correctly pointed out in his analysis of Adams’ theory of history that the narrative of Adams as becoming severely existentialist upon his discovery of a universe without order mischaracterizes Adams:

If Adams mystically sought self-annihilation, spontaneous activism, or total quietism—if indeed he approached the mystic’s conclusive solution of a conflict which, unresolved, drives man to despair—he always stopped short of actually embracing it. It is fascinating, in fact, to watch Adams move toward the mystic’s final coordination—and to see him shrink back. (Kariel 1956, p. 1085)

Adams wrote and engaged with the issues that had plagued the history of thought for centuries, never despairing: Thus, “Adams’ life and works contradict precisely such anti-humanism” that is often misattributed to him (ibid.). Adams understood the importance of having belief and faith in something. If God had been forgotten, Adams could at least uphold a humanism that preserved “all expression, all discourse, fabrication, and art,” lest it be forgotten (ibid.). Adams, therefore, most poignantly provides an answer to the unresolved question in studies of modernity: Whether to engage or disengage with a disenchanted world.

Adams “undeniably” acted on the premise that “although the world is black, although all is pointless, one can yet want to go on, keep talking, cultivate interests, react, and take note” (Kariel 1956, pp. 1085-1086). This perseverance

in a world that promotes nihilism is what Adams described as a “failure” in his autobiography, but Kariel emphasizes placing the word in quotes because he was “successfully sustained not by his scientific conclusions, but by his artistic commitment (Kariel 1956, p. 1088). Kariel argues that Adams presented two ways to understand historical events, either as a scientist or as an artist: “Either by those who master the forces of society or those for whom every view, every conclusion, is too provincial, too specific, too narrow” (Kariel 1956, p. 1089). Adams masqueraded himself as a scientist but was persuaded by the artist, for his studies in history proved to him that art was more intuitive and more meaningful to man. He wrote in a letter,

My idea is that the world outside—the so-called modern world—can only pervert and degrade the conceptions of the primitive instinct of art and feeling, and that our only chance is to accept the limited number—the one-in-a-thousand born artists and poets—and to intensify the energy of feeling within that radiant center. (Adams to Albert Stanborough Cook, August 6, 1910)⁸

Adams gradually realized the importance of preserving the “primitive” instincts of art and feeling because they are closer to our nature, like unity. There is, then, a choice to be made by those who study history as a way to understand their place in the world. The paradox of what to do in a world that seems bleak is nothing new, neither for the Christian nor for the modern: “Since compromise of principle seems to be out of the question,” Adams wrote, the choice confronting modern civilization is the “same old dilemma of Saint Augustine and Descartes—the deadlock of free-will” (Adams 1910, p. 160). Adams understood the conflict of free will as a conflict in freedom: We are free to choose what is good and evil; we are free to choose our worldview; we are free to act upon that worldview. Should we choose wrong, we must live with that mistake. Adams’ thought comes full circle upon this conclusion that the modern intellectual’s problem is wrestling with the collective good and bad decisions of all the previous ages and from them trying to explain the purpose of existence. While the world outside is chaotic, he concludes, we can appease it with our internal understanding of the world.

IX: THE USE OF ADAMS' THEORY OF HISTORY

In his preface to *The Education*, Adams explained the purpose of his book by drawing an analogy to tailoring: Much like the tailor's goal is to adapt clothes to his patron's wants, so Adams' intention was now "to fit young men with the proper garments in universities or elsewhere to be men of the world" (Adams 1918, p. ix). Adams' writings teach readers to be aware of their individual and collective roles along the trajectory of history. It is the job of the history teacher, after all, to inculcate this ability for introspection and social analysis in his students. Adams' theory of history, in other words, did not need to contain either objective truth for philosophy or testable validity for science: It needed only to successfully pass on that inherited sense of importance of the past so as to engage men and motivate them to study and understand the world and all its changes moving forward. His audience, the educated modern man, has a greater challenge living in a world of multiplicity: How to reconcile our times with the vestiges of a previous world that revealed a time of faith and unity? With a sound historical education that demonstrates the strengths of one worldview over another.

Reading his theory of history literally, the lesson that Adams had for historians was that unity could be measured through examples in time exhibiting force and motion, but this task requires more than the detached analysis of a scientist. To successfully measure a century's strength (or force), one has to absorb that century's intellectual and artistic products as Adams had while studying the world of medieval Europe. The witness must feel the objects he is seeing "as they had been felt; as convertible, reversible, interchangeable attractions on thought" (Adams 1918, p. 383). This is the methodology to Adams' theory of history: Force and motion allow us to understand an age, a worldview, an epoch, etc., but only when the historian or history-minded student immerses himself in that timeframe as if he were living in it. He cannot distance himself from the object he studies: He must love it. When we are truly able to feel something "as it had been felt," we become aware of what is good about a particular society or civilization, whether it be artistic, scientific, philosophical, or theological. The historian or student is, thus, compelled to preserve the good.

Secondary and auxiliary to Adams' theory of history is his astute refute to the socio-political implications of scientism, evolutionism, and positivism against the greater importance of philosophy. But apart from the pedagog-

ic lesson to how we must study history, there is one very normative statement in Adams' theory of history which he also poses as a solution to the problems of modernity. That the thirteenth century left so many palpable traces of force through its art was enough proof for Adams that there was something valuable about this period that went beyond its role as a mere variable in his equation of historical motion and force. Its unity was moving because it was true; it was true because it was moving. Adams wrote that the mystery of the Virgin Mary's fecundity was as strong as the dynamo's ability to create electricity from steam and coal, but the Virgin had something more: "Her fecundity was not only responsible for the underlying continuity between successive generations, it was also the wellspring of mankind's wonderful diversity and consequent resistance to order and uniformity" (Burich 1987, p. 480). She symbolized, thus, "both unity and multiplicity, order and anarchy, the basic antinomies of history; and there was no doubt in Adams' mind that her sympathies lay with man's constant rebellion against the laws of science, society, or religion" (Burich 1987, p. 480). Adams noticed that Christianity does not demand perfection: we may choose wrong at times in our search for knowledge—the apple does not fall far from the tree—but the Virgin knows this and is compassionate. Moved, Adams concluded that Christian philosophy indeed grasped the essence of existence best and assisted man with the necessary solace to live in a chaotic world.

Adams wrote that man concentrated in Mary "the whole rebellion of man against fate; the whole protest against divine law; the contempt for human law as its outcome; the whole unutterable fury of human nature beating itself against the walls of its prison house" (Adams 1983, pp. 276-277). Man, in his despair, was "suddenly seized by the hope that in the Virgin man had found a door to escape" (ibid.). And it seems that Adams believes that this sentiment has not been restricted to the thirteenth century only. He wrote that "the convulsive hold which Mary to this day maintains over human imagination was due... to her sympathy with people who suffered under law, divine or human" (ibid.).

The Christian worldview, then, is not a mere anecdote of history for Adams: It has a palpable force that goes beyond it. Adams used the Virgin Mary to push back on Francis Bacon's epistemological edifice that wanted to chain the imagination and ground it on evidence. Adams' theory of history is an effort to prove that the use of intellectual education should not come from premises of doubt because the use of intellectual education, of which history is a part, is not to "discover" anything or to find any "proof." It is meant

to develop our imagination to its most whole potential, so that we may understand freedom. Adams blamed Bacon's rejection of the imagination for "man's slavish worship of the machine," while he was convinced that Mary's compassion "had liberated man's imagination" (Burich 1987, p. 480). The quality of art, for Adams—the messages it conveys, the principles it teaches, the worldview it sustains—is more than mere expression: Its intellectual depth is a visible sign of whether a society is truly free from its self-consuming tendencies. How much society (and an individual) is able to overcome dependence on the world indicates how it uses free will; a society's politics, philosophy, and culture, in turn, demonstrate its dependence on the world. Modernity, for Adams, proved that no one was truly free. Our habits of doubt, despair, and timidity restrict our freedom to achieve and create excellence and beauty.

Adams' philosophy of history is indeed a pedagogical method to teach people the value of history by studying the moments in time that represented the greatest force and unity. These elements are displayed through the permanent things that a society creates, namely in its highest arts. His normative claim, embedded in his philosophy of history, was that Christianity in the thirteenth century achieved this goal best. Not in spite of, but because of his deliberate efforts to unify his theory of history with science, Adams came to the conclusion that the alternative to modernity is not the multiplicity of science, but the unity of the Christian worldview. Faith or not, we can discern the "goodness" of a worldview intuitively, naturally, from how its products speak to our emotions: Unity will always be more persuasive than multiplicity. In Adams' own words, "Truth, indeed, may not exist; science avers it to be only a relation; but what men took for truth stares one everywhere in the eye and begs for sympathy" (Adams 1983, p. 694).

NOTES

1. Aristotle discusses his concept of the unmoved mover in Book 12 of the *Metaphysics*, and Book 8 of the *Physics*.
2. Cf. Comments by George Hochfield, William Jordy, Roy F. Nicols, cited in this paper.
3. Adams rarely discussed history and philosophy outside of the western canon. It is plausible that he viewed Christianity as the best example of unity in "world" history, but he never used that term and the claim would be academically dubious given his limited scholarship and commentary on non-western history and philosophy.
4. Most of *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* demonstrates Adams's perception of Catholicism, and he mentions in his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, that religion was never inculcated by his family.
5. Munford is quoting from William Jordy's book, *Henry Adams, Scientific Historian* p. 6, 219 (New Haven: 1952).
6. Burich is citing a letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell, 14 March 1910, *The Letters of Henry Adams* (1892-1918), p. 537.
7. Kariel cites Adams' letter to Waldo G. Leland, quoted in Cater, p. xcv, as well as Letters II, p. 537.
8. Excerpt from letter originally quoted in Burich's article, "Henry Adams, The Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the Course of History" (1987).

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