

The Young Assumption

Where "recognition" comes from, and what the Fukuyama debate cannot see

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1. The occasion

Francis Fukuyama published his memoir this month, *In the Realm of the Last Man*. The newspapers reopened the old question. Since 9/11 he has served as shorthand for naïve optimism. Now the reviewers ask: was he right after all?

The question cannot be answered. Not because it is hard, but because both sides stand on the same floor. Fukuyama and his critics share one assumption: that human beings are driven by a need for recognition. He built his end of history on it. His critics attack the building and never inspect the floor.

This essay inspects the floor. It traces the assumption link by link, from the oldest human record to the columns of last week. Every link is documented: a citation, a translation, a correspondence, a teacher and a student. The chain turns out to be young, regional, and welded together from two parts that do not fit. Once you see the chain, the interpretation of everything built on it shifts.

2. Method

The rule is simple. A link counts only if the transfer can be shown. Someone cites, translates, corresponds, or teaches. No "spirit of the age," no "influence in the air." Where the record runs out, the essay says so.

One more rule. The oldest layer of human self-understanding is not written. It is oral, and parts of it are still alive. An honest chain starts there, not at the invention of writing.

3. The deep layer: sixty thousand years without the assumption

The San of southern Africa carry the oldest continuous human lineage. Genetic studies place the divergence of their ancestral population at well over 100,000 years. Their material trace is old: the engraved ochres of Blombos Cave (75,000–100,000 years), the worked serpent rock of Tsodilo. Their oral tradition is not a fossil. It runs unbroken to the present day. I have sat with San narrators and heard it directly.

Australia gives the control experiment. Humans reached the continent around 65,000 years ago (Madjedbebe). In 2016 Patrick Nunn and Nicholas Reid documented Aboriginal coastal stories at twenty-one locations around the continent. The stories describe coastlines that drowned when the sea rose after the last ice age. The descriptions are correct. That is a minimum of 7,000 years, more likely 10,000, of oral transmission that preserved factual content without writing. Oral lines can carry.

Now the content. What do these oldest lines say about being human?

They do not say lack. There is no fall, no lost paradise, no original debt. The San understood the speech of animals; their click languages carried a communication richer than ours in registers we have dropped. A being that converses with animals does not stand outside the world looking for a way back in. In Aboriginal thought, the Dreaming is not a history with a direction and an endpoint. It is a present layer of the world. You stand in relation to it. You do not travel toward it.

They do not say drive either. The human being in these traditions is not a bundle of striving that must be honored, ranked, or satisfied. It is a knot in one weave — tied into animals, land, ancestors, weather. Picture a fishnet. A knot does not lack the net. A knot does not compete with the other knots for the net's attention. A knot holds its crossing, and the net holds because it does.

Sixty thousand years of human self-description, and the two ideas that will later run the West — man as lack, striving as motor — are absent. They are not primordial. They have a birthdate.

4. Strand one: lack (Mesopotamia to Genesis)

The lack motif first appears in writing in Mesopotamia. The Adapa tale (tablets from the 14th century BC, found at Amarna): a man is offered the food of immortality, refuses it on a god's advice, and loses eternal life for mankind. The Gilgamesh epic (standard Babylonian version, 12th century BC, older material behind it): Gilgamesh finds the plant of life and loses it to a snake. Food, snake, forfeited immortality. The parts lie ready in Babylon.

Genesis 2–3 (written down 6th–5th century BC, portions redacted during or after the Babylonian exile, by scribes who knew that world) assembles them into the fall. Here the shift happens: what in Mesopotamia is a mishap — a trick, a bad piece of advice, a snake at the wrong moment — becomes a verdict on human nature. The human being is now constituted by what it lost. Man equals lack.

Around 250 BC the text is translated into Greek in Alexandria (the Septuagint) and becomes readable for the Greco-Roman world.

Around 57 AD, Paul radicalizes it. Romans 5 cites Genesis directly: through one man sin entered the world. Romans 7 moves the lack inside: "the good that I would, I do not." The fall is no longer an event in the past. It is the present condition of every person, operating from within. The shift: lack becomes inward and universal.

5. Strand two: striving (the Indo-European line to Aristotle)

The second strand is older than Greece and travels with a language family. Comparative linguistics has recovered an inherited formula: Greek *kleos aphthiton* and Vedic *śravas akṣitam* are the same phrase, word for word — "imperishable fame." An honor culture rode along with Indo-European itself.

Homer's *Iliad* (8th century BC, the endpoint of centuries of oral composition) gives the strand its monument. *Thymos* is the seat of spirit and honor. Achilles' rage over slighted honor is the engine of the whole poem. Note what thymos is here: a capacity. A power that makes heroes. Not a symptom of anything missing.

Plato knows Homer thoroughly and quotes him constantly, usually to attack him. In *Republic* IV (c. 375 BC) he gives thymos a fixed address: the third part of the soul, between reason and appetite.

Aristotle, twenty years Plato's student, carries the honor drive into politics as *philotimia* — love of honor as the currency of public life.

One thing Plato did not do: read Genesis. He could not. The Septuagint came a century after his death. The old claim that Plato read Moses was invented by Philo of Alexandria and the church fathers, who needed the two strands to be one. They were not. Two independent lines: striving as capacity, and — elsewhere, unknown to the Greeks — man as lack.

India proves the independence. It inherited the same honor formula (*śravas akṣitam*) and never built a fallen man on it. Its central problem became ignorance, not guilt. China never had a fall at all: for Confucius the human being is unfinished — to be formed, not restored. Civilizations exist that think without either assumption. That is the proof that they are assumptions.

6. The weld: Augustine, c. 400 AD

Augustine is where the two strands become one thing.

He absorbed strand two through Neoplatonism — Plotinus' *Enneads* in the Latin translation of Marius Victorinus; he says so himself in *Confessions* VII. He absorbed strand one through Paul — the conversion scene in *Confessions* VIII turns on a verse of Romans.

Then he welds them. The famous sentence does the work: "restless is our heart until it rests in You." Look closely at what happens in that sentence. Greek striving — thymos, the capacity, the power of heroes — is reinterpreted as a symptom of Pauline lack. Restlessness is no longer strength. It is homesickness. The motor of strand two is bolted onto the hole of strand one.

In *The City of God* he adds the second element Fukuyama will need: history acquires a direction and an endpoint. Time is going somewhere. The lack will be filled, at the end.

From here on, the West hands down one welded object: a human being defined by a lack, driven by a striving that is really the lack in motion, inside a history that runs toward the filling of the lack. Every later link inherits the weld without seeing the seam.

7. The single line down

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651). Classically trained; translated Thucydides and, late in life, Homer; fought Aristotle his whole career and, in fighting him, carried him. One of his three causes of war is *glory* — the honor drive, secularized. And Augustine's restlessness returns without God: "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (ch. 11). The shift: the endpoint is cut off. The lack remains; the filling is gone. Restlessness becomes the permanent human condition.

Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* (1755). Answers Hobbes by name in the preface and Part I. His move: the drive is relocated into the eyes of others. *Amour-propre* is self-worth that exists only through the regard of other people. The shift: the lack is no longer filled by God or by power, but by other humans. Dependence on the other's gaze enters the chain. (Rousseau was steeped in Augustine; his own memoirs borrow Augustine's title, *Confessions*.)

Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796). Working inside the Kant debate, praising Rousseau in his early writings, he coins the technical term: *Anerkennung*, recognition. His claim: self-consciousness arises only when another person summons you. The shift: the other's gaze is no longer just where worth is sought. It becomes the condition for having a self at all.

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), chapter IV. Colleague of Fichte in Jena. He assembles: Fichte's *Anerkennung*, Hobbes' fight to the death, Rousseau's gaze. The result is the master-slave dialectic: self-consciousnesses battle for recognition. In his lectures on the philosophy of history (1822–1830, published 1837) Augustine's form returns, secularized: history has a direction and a completion. Watching Napoleon ride through Jena in 1806, Hegel judged the completion near. The shift: the whole welded object — lack, striving, endpoint — is now one philosophical machine, and the machine is called History.

Marx (1844–1848). A side branch that proves the transfer. He reads Hegel in the Berlin Young Hegelian circle, keeps the structure — struggle, then completion — and swaps recognition for labor and class. Change the word, keep the weld.

Kojève, Paris, 1933–1939. Seminars on the *Phenomenology* at the École Pratique des Hautes Études; lecture notes published by Queneau as *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (1947). Kojève reads all of Hegel through the recognition chapter: "man desires the desire of the other." He declares the end of history already reached — at Napoleon in 1806; in a famous footnote added in 1962, in the American way of life. In the room: Lacan, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Aron, Queneau. The shift: the assumption becomes a Parisian commonplace, and the endpoint moves from the future into the past. History is not going somewhere. It has arrived.

Strauss. Kojève's friend and correspondent from the 1930s; their debate and letters are in *On Tyranny* (1948; expanded 1954). Strauss sends his best students to Kojève.

Bloom. That student: Chicago under Strauss, Paris with Kojève in the 1950s. He translates Plato's *Republic* (1968) — thymos enters English fresh. He edits the English Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1969). Both strands of the chain now pass through one man's desk.

Fukuyama. Cornell, early 1970s, classics under Bloom — he tells the story himself in the new memoir. "The End of History?" in *The National Interest* (1989); the book in 1992. Kojève is his declared main source. Thymos comes from Bloom's Plato. Hegel's completion is set on liberal democracy. The shift: the welded object becomes American foreign-policy doctrine. Four men — Kojève, Strauss, Bloom, Fukuyama — and sixty years carry a Paris seminar into the State Department.

1992, in parallel. The same year, from the same Hegel chapters: Charles Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition" and Axel Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition*. Three books, one source, one year. None of the three tests the assumption. Through Taylor and Honneth it flows into identity politics; Fukuyama recycles it himself in *Identity* (2018) to explain populism.

Today. Every column that says voters "feel unseen," every editorial demanding "respect" for some group, stands at the end of this line. The words shifted along the way — honor, restlessness, glory, amour-propre, *Anerkennung*, desire of desire, recognition, respect — and at each shift the meaning moved: capacity became symptom; God's filling became the other's gaze; the gaze became the condition of selfhood; the sacred endpoint became a secular one; the future endpoint became a past one. What never moved was the weld underneath: a human defined by lack, driven by that lack, inside a story about filling it.

8. What this does to the Fukuyama question

Now reread the debate.

"Was Fukuyama right?" Inside the frame, he was more right than his mockers admit. Thirty-seven years on, no ideological alternative has appeared. China, Russia, Silicon Valley compete with liberal democracy, but none of them proposes an idea of equal standing for everyone; they propose power. On the frame's own terms, the position holds.

But the frame is the interesting part. Fukuyama did not discover a law of human nature. He stands at link sixteen of a chain that is three thousand years old on a human record of sixty thousand — a young, regional, welded construction, never tested at any link. "History" in his title is not time. It is Augustine's arrow, passed through Hegel. Take the arrow out and there is nothing to end.

The last man. The strongest pages of his 1992 book, and the theme of his memoir, concern the citizen at the end of history: comfortable, passive, dissatisfied. Fukuyama presents this as a troubling paradox — the lack is filled, yet the striving remains, and turns destructive. It is not a paradox. It is the weld tearing. Strand two, striving-as-capacity, was never really a symptom of strand one, lack. Augustine bolted them together in the year 400. Fill the lack and the capacity is still there, with nowhere to go. The last man is not a mystery of human nature. He is a sixteen-hundred-year-old welding error becoming visible.

Populism. Fukuyama explains it, via Strauss, as the return of the desire to be superior: if people cannot fight for what is just, they will fight for what is unjust. That is the frame explaining its own residue with its own vocabulary. Step outside the frame and a simpler description is available. In the fishnet picture: a knot does not want to *receive* regard. A knot wants to *hold a crossing* — to be a place where lines meet that would not meet without it. Rights, welfare, and formal respect give a person standing, but standing is not a crossing. A society can deliver perfect equal regard and still leave its knots holding nothing. Tension with no crossing to hold does not disappear. It discharges — against institutions, against the deliverers of the regard, against comfort itself. That is not "megalothymia returning." That is what a net does when knots are cut out of the weave and compensated with attention.

The deep layer knew this without a theory. In the San weave, a person is not honored into place; a person *is* a place — in the exchange with animals, land, and the group. The oldest human self-description already contains what the newest political science struggles toward: the human problem is not recognition. It is participation. Not being seen. Being needed.

The reviewers. The Volkskrant essay that occasioned this piece ends by noting that we keep shooting the messenger of the broken promise. True, and one step short. The promise could break because it was built on the weld. Every future debate that stays inside the frame — pro-Fukuyama, anti-Fukuyama — will reproduce the same blind spot. The productive move is not to answer the question but to date it.

9. The chain in one view

- **>60,000 BP — living oral layer (San, Aboriginal Australia).** Human as knot in one weave. No lack, no fall, no endpoint. Still transmitted today.
- **14th–12th c. BC — Mesopotamia** (Adapa, Gilgamesh). Lost immortality as mishap.
- **6th–5th c. BC — Genesis.** Mishap becomes verdict: man as lack.
- **8th c. BC — Homer** (on an Indo-European inheritance: *kleos aphthiton* = *śravas akṣitam*). Striving as capacity.
- **c. 375 BC — Plato.** Thymos housed in the soul. No contact with Genesis.
- **c. 335 BC — Aristotle.** Honor enters politics (*philotimia*).
- **c. 250 BC — Septuagint.** Strand one becomes readable in Greek.
- **c. 57 AD — Paul.** Lack turns inward and universal.

- **c. 400 AD — Augustine.** THE WELD: striving reinterpreted as lack in motion; history given direction and endpoint.
- **1651 — Hobbes.** Endpoint cut; restlessness made permanent; glory as cause of war.
- **1755 — Rousseau.** The filling relocated to the other's gaze (*amour-propre*).
- **1796 — Fichte.** The gaze becomes the condition of selfhood (*Anerkennung*).
- **1807/1837 — Hegel.** The machine assembled: master and slave; History with completion.
- **1844 — Marx.** Structure kept, word swapped (labor for recognition).
- **1933–47 — Kojève.** "Man desires the desire of the other"; the end declared already reached.
- **1948–69 — Strauss → Bloom.** The Paris seminar piped into Chicago and Cornell; Plato and Kojève translated by the same hand.
- **1989/92 — Fukuyama.** The weld becomes doctrine.
- **1992 — Taylor, Honneth.** The same source feeds identity politics.
- **2018–2026 — Identity, the memoir, the reviews.** The frame explains its own residue and asks whether it was right.

Three thousand years of chain on sixty thousand years of record. Two strands, one weld, one seminar-room bottleneck, and a vocabulary that changed its clothes eight times while the body underneath never got examined.

10. Annotated references

Deep layer

1. **Henshilwood, C. et al., "Emergence of Modern Human Behaviour: Middle Stone Age Engravings from South Africa," *Science* 295 (2002).** Why read? The Blombos ochres: symbolic marking at 75,000+ years. The material anchor for a human record that dwarfs the written one.
2. **Coulson, S., Staurset, S. & Walker, N., "Ritualized Behavior in the Middle Stone Age: Evidence from Rhino Cave, Tsodilo Hills," *PaleoAnthropology* (2011).** Why read? The serpent-rock claim and the debate around it. Read critically; the dating is contested, the site is real.
3. **Clarkson, C. et al., "Human occupation of northern Australia by 65,000 years ago," *Nature* 547 (2017).** Why read? Madjedbebe. The date that sets the Australian clock.
4. **Nunn, P. & Reid, N., "Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago," *Australian Geographer* 47 (2016).** Why read? The key methodological result of this essay: oral transmission verified against geology across seven-plus millennia. This is why the deep layer counts as evidence.
5. **Konstapel, J., "Homo Futures," *constable.blog*.** Why read? The San research behind section 3: animal speech, click communication, and direct oral testimony. First-hand, not literature.

Strand one

6. **Izre'el, S., *Adapa and the South Wind* (Eisenbrauns, 2001).** Why read? The full Adapa edition. Lost immortality as a trick, centuries before it became a verdict.
7. **George, A., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin, 1999).** Why read? The standard translation. Tablet XI: the plant of life and the snake. Genesis's spare parts, in situ.
8. **Genesis 2–3.** Why read? Read it after Adapa and Gilgamesh and watch the mishap become a definition of man.
9. **Paul, *Letter to the Romans*, chapters 5 and 7.** Why read? The moment lack moves inside. Romans 7 is the psychological birth of the divided self.

Strand two

10. **Watkins, C., *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford, 1995).** Why read? The *kleos aphthiton* / *śravas akṣitam* equation, with the full comparative apparatus. Proof that the honor strand predates Greece and traveled with a language.
11. **Homer, *Iliad*.** Why read? Thymos as capacity, at full strength, before anyone called it a symptom.
12. **Plato, *Republic*, Book IV (transl. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1968).** Why read? Thymos gets its address in the soul — and read it in Bloom's translation deliberately: this is the very text through which the word reached Fukuyama.
13. **Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics IV and Politics*.** Why read? *Philotimia*: honor as the currency of public life. The strand enters politics here, not in 1989.

The weld

14. **Augustine, *Confessions* (transl. Chadwick, Oxford).** Why read? Book I for the restless heart; Book VII for the Neoplatonists in Latin; Book VIII for Paul. The weld, documented by the welder himself.
15. **Augustine, *The City of God*, Books XI–XXII.** Why read? History acquires direction and endpoint. Hegel's arrow, cast in the year 420.

The line down

16. **Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), chapters 11 and 13.** Why read? Restlessness without God; glory as a cause of war. The secularization, in two short chapters.
17. **Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755).** Why read? *Amour-propre*: worth relocated into the other's gaze. The direct ancestor of "recognition."
18. **Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796), §§1–4.** Why read? The word *Anerkennung* is coined and made the condition of selfhood. Four sections, enormous consequences.
19. **Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), chapter IV ("Lordship and Bondage").** Why read? Ten pages that the twentieth century read instead of the rest of the book. The machine assembled.
20. **Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837).** Why read? Augustine's endpoint, secularized. The "History" in Fukuyama's title comes from here.
21. **Kojève, A., *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (ed. Bloom, transl. Nichols, 1969).** Why read? The bottleneck itself. Read the 1962 footnote on America: the end of history relocated to the present, thirty years before Fukuyama.
22. **Strauss, L. & Kojève, A., *On Tyranny* (expanded edition, 1991).** Why read? The correspondence that carried the seminar to Chicago. Watch two men decide what politics is about, by letter.
23. **Fukuyama, F., "The End of History?", *The National Interest* 16 (1989); *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).** Why read? Link sixteen. Read Part V of the book first — the last-man chapters are the honest part, where the author feels the weld tearing and says so.
24. **Taylor, C., "The Politics of Recognition" (1992); Honneth, A., *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992).** Why read? The same Hegel chapters, the same year, flowing left instead of right. One weld, two political families.
25. **Fukuyama, F., *Identity* (2018); *In the Realm of the Last Man* (2026).** Why read? The frame explaining its own residue, then looking back on a life inside it. The memoir's furniture-making passages, read against Part V of the 1992 book, say more than the political chapters.
26. **De Vries, J., "Francis 'End of History' Fukuyama geldt sinds 9/11 als naïeve wensdenker. Maar had hij niet juist gelijk?", *de Volkskrant*, 10-9-2026.** Why read? The occasion for this essay, and a fair specimen of the genre: a sharp rereading that inspects every wall of the building and never the floor.

Control cases

27. **The Upaniṣads (transl. Olivelle, Oxford, 1996).** Why read? India inherited the honor formula and built its central problem on ignorance, not lack. The first control case.
28. **Confucius, *Analects*.** Why read? A civilization without a fall: man as unfinished, to be formed, not restored. The second control case. Together with India, the proof that the Western floor was a choice.