

Knowledge of Good and Evil

According to the book of Genesis, Yahweh created Adam and Eve to live in the Garden of Eden. He commanded them on pain of death not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, Eve was convinced by the Serpent to eat of the tree, and she in turn convinced Adam to do the same. For their disobedience, Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden. The interpretation of this myth has led to the Christian idea that humanity is forever tainted by "Original Sin," and that our only hope for immortality is through the sacrifice of Christ which offers redemption from sin and entry into eternity to those who believe in him. The concept of Original Sin has become dangerously ingrained in Christian thinking, and needs reworking,

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

The book of Genesis contains two narratives of the creation. In the second (*Genesis* 2:4-25), attributed to a writer/editor called *J* (Rosenberg & Bloom, 1990), Yahweh created Adam by breathing into a lump of earth, and placed him in a garden in Eden. He then grew the trees of the garden:

And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (*Genesis* 2: 9)

Yahweh enjoined Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat
But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (*Genesis* 2: 16-17)

J then tells how God created Eve as a companion for Adam, and narrates the story of man's fall from innocence (*Genesis* 3: 1-24). Eve was asked by the Serpent whether she and Adam must not eat from any of the trees of Eden:

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. (*Genesis* 3: 2-3)

The Serpent convinces her that eating of the Tree of Knowledge would actually open her eyes to the divine knowledge of good and evil. The interaction between Eve and the Serpent is the subject of many paintings, among which is the tempera painting of William Blake (1800) in the Victoria and Albert Museum. This and the subsequent illustrations are derived from the Blake Archive:



Eve ate the fruit and gave some to Adam who likewise ate. Yahweh quickly realized how Adam and Eve had disobeyed him.

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever

Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (*Genesis* 3: 22-24)

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden is depicted in an 1808 watercolor by William Blake which was to illustrate the ending of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674). In this telling of the story, the archangel Michael leads Adam and Eve out of Paradise:



For now, too nigh
The Arch-Angel stood; and, from the other hill
To their fixed station, all in bright array

The Cherubim descended; on the ground
Gliding meteorous, as evening-mist
Risen from a river o'er the marish glides,
And gathers ground fast at the labourer's heel
Homeward returning. High in front advanced,
The brandished sword of God before them blazed,
Fierce as a comet; which with torrid heat,
And vapour as the Libyan air adust,
Began to parch that temperate clime; whereat
In either hand the hastening Angel caught
Our lingering parents, and to the eastern gate
Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast
To the subjected plain; then disappeared.
They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate
With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:
Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Though Milton's words portray the gravity of what has happened to Adam and Eve, they are also touched with hope. They had each other; their eyes were open; they could learn to survive; perhaps they might even thrive. The world was all before them.

The story of Adam and Eve and how they disobeyed Yahweh's commandment not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil has been retold again and again in the years since it was first written down in Judeo-Christian scripture (Greenblatt, 2017). In the Christian world it led to the idea of "Original Sin" (Boyce, 2015): because of the transgression of Adam and Eve, all human beings are doomed to die, unless they accept Christ as their savior.

One or Two Trees?

Yahweh's prohibition and Eve's words to the Serpent suggest that there is only one special tree in the garden: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. One is therefore tempted to re-examine the first mention of the two trees. The conjunction between them may be translated both as "and" and as "that is to say". Thus, the Tree of Life, may just be another name for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and *Genesis* 2:9 might read

the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, that is to say, the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

However, when Yahweh condemned Adam and Eve for their transgression, he did so lest they also partake of the Tree of Life and become immortal. Those supporting the existence of only one special tree in Eden have suggested that perhaps the word translated as "also" might actually mean "again." The issues about one or two trees have been discussed by Makowiecki (2021) and Zevelt (2013, Chapter 7).

My preferred interpretation is that there is only one special tree, that eating of that tree opens the mind to knowledge, and that, if our knowledge becomes great enough, we might somehow become immortal.

Good and Evil

The phrase "good and evil" needs two important explications. The first is that it is an example of a merism, "a figure of speech in which opposite extremes imply everything between them" (Robinson, 2024, p 77). When we say that we searched "high and low" we mean that we searched everywhere. The Bible makes frequent use of the device: the expression "heavens and the earth" (*Genesis* 1:1) includes everything between; "evening and morning" (*Genesis* 1:5) means the whole day (including afternoon and night); "alpha and omega" (*Revelations* 22: 13) means the complete alphabet of existence. Thus, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is the tree of all knowledge

characterized by the extremes of good and evil.

The second point of explication concerns the word translated as “evil.” The original Hebrew word can mean both “bad” and “evil” (Kass, 2003, p 63, see also Speiser, 1964, and Rosenberg & Bloom, 1990). Both are value judgements. However, we often conceive of “evil” as pain and suffering that is intentionally rather than naturally caused. Thus, though murder is considered evil, an earthquake is not. However, this distinction becomes fuzzy if we believe the natural world to be controlled by divine intentions. Arnold (2008, p 64) points out that God created both good and evil. In the words of God proclaimed through his prophet Isaiah:

I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. (*Isaiah*, 45: 7)

According to our definitions of “evil” and “bad,” knowledge of good and bad could then refer to everything, whereas knowledge of good and evil is primarily concerned with moral judgements (Hartmann, 2002, Chapter V; Laird, 2014, Chapter V). I much prefer to interpret the story of Eden in the latter sense. A moral judgement combines an assessment of what we perceive with a decision about what we should do in the light of the predicted consequences. Morality requires a consciousness of a self that can control one’s actions, or in religious terms, a soul that has free will. The very act of disobeying is an exercise of such free will.

When the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened by the knowledge of good and evil, the first thing that they noted was their shame at being naked. This combines self-consciousness with the idea that one should not unnecessarily incite the lust of others.

Kass (2004, p 68) sums up his discussion of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad:

The knowledge prohibited is autonomous knowledge of how to live, found in or procured from one’s own garden (nature),

based on human experience of the visible world. The opposite of obedience, it is the kind of knowledge that is implicit in the act of violating a prohibition, indeed, in any act of choosing for oneself.

He goes on to say that this knowledge may not be sufficient for us to behave as we should. We also require rules such as the Ten Commandments to instruct us how to live:

But this autonomous knowledge of good and bad is not true knowledge of good and bad; human beings on their own will not find true knowledge of how to live. This must be supplied by what is later called revelation.

I find myself agreeing with his initial statements and disagreeing with those that follow. The commandments were not miraculously revealed to us by Moses: that story is as mythical as the story of Eden. Rather these rules were proposed on the basis of how human beings had learned to live with each other.

Original Sin

Though it is not directly discussed in the Bible, Talmudic and Christian interpretations of the disobedience of Adam and Eve led to the idea that all their descendants were afflicted with their Original Sin and that this explains our mortality and our suffering (Boyce, 2015; Greenblatt, 2017, Chapters 5 and 6; Zevit, 2013, Chapter 1). The apostle Paul wrote

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned (*Romans* 5: 12)

Paul proclaimed that Christ died to save us from this fate, and that belief in him can lead to eternal life. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) was the great champion of Original Sin. He argued against the teachings of an English theologian Pelagius (354-413 CE), who proposed that human beings are not born

innately sinful, but rather free to choose between good and evil:

Day by day, hour by hour, we have to reach decisions; and in each decision, we can choose good or evil. The freedom to choose makes us like God: if we choose evil, that freedom becomes a curse; if we choose good, it becomes our greatest blessing.

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge they were exercising their freedom of choice ... Before eating the fruit they did not know the difference between good and evil; thus they did not possess the knowledge which enables human beings to exercise freedom of choice. By eating the fruit they acquired this knowledge, and from that moment onwards they were free. Thus the story of their banishment from Eden is in truth the story of how the human race gained its freedom: by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve became mature human beings, responsible to God for their actions. (both quotations from Pelagius are in Boyce, 2015, p 15)

The story of Eden can thus be interpreted as Adam and Eve deciding not to remain in blissful innocence. They could have stayed in the garden, obeyed Yahweh's commandment and led a life of simplicity and comfort. Instead, by eating of the tree of knowledge they gained insight into the complexities of a life independent of Yahweh's care, a life wherein they made their own decisions rather than just accepting what Yahweh commanded. Their act of disobedience was an assertion of their freedom.

However, Augustine prevailed over Pelagius. At the Synod of Carthage (418CE), Original Sin became one of the essential doctrines of the Christian Church (Denzinger, 2012, p 223). This was unfortunate. Thinking of humanity as being free to choose, as being able to learn to do what is good, is far more productive than simply considering humanity as doomed to die.

Freedom to Choose

The story of Adam and Eve is not a realistic story of human origins. However, myths often contain true ideas about human nature. During our evolution, human beings gained a special kind of knowledge. We became conscious of ourselves as beings able to decide freely among possible actions on the basis of the good or evil these actions might entail. We also learned that with freedom comes responsibility. We must not act just for our own good but also for the good of others.

On this note I would like to conclude with a third image from the work of William Blake: *Rose Albion* (1795). We do not know exactly what Blake was depicting. A common interpretation is that the image represents man (or more specifically, England) freed from the shackles of materialism. It might also represent the more general idea of humanity as free to choose.



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Progress

Loss of Paradise

The ancients did not believe in progress (Bury, 1932; Pollard, 1968; Meek Lange, 2011). They had two main ideas of how the world changes over time. One was that an initial state of peace and plenty – the Garden of Eden of Genesis, the Golden Age of Hesiod, or the Arcadia of Virgil – had degenerated over time to our present world of strife and suffering.

The decline from our golden beginnings to the present age of iron might have been simply caused by the passage of time, but more often than not it was attributed to human foolishness. The Jews told the story of original sin and the Greeks recounted the myth of Pandora's box.

Lucas Cranach (1530) portrayed the Golden Age as a time when we could dance without fear of the lion and eat of the tree of knowledge without concern for the consequences. The word "paradise" means an area enclosed by a wall. Suffering and death remained outside the wall.



Our forefathers' second concept was that nothing ever really changes. The world may go through cycles of improvement and deterioration, but in the end everything stays about the same. The world is not perfect and never will be. The Jewish preacher Ecclesiastes (3rd Century BCE, 1:9, KJV) claimed that all is vanity:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (180 CE, *Meditations* X:I, Staniforth translation) proposed that the soul

... can encompass the whole universe at will, both its own structure and the void surrounding it, and can reach out into eternity, embracing and comprehending the great cyclic renewals of creation, and thereby perceiving that future generations will have nothing new to witness, even as our forefathers beheld nothing more than we of today.

These two ideas of history were often combined. Our original paradise cannot be regained. The beings that began in Eden now find themselves condemned forever to brief lives characterized

more by suffering than by happiness, and leading inexorably to death.

Eastern religions adopted a similar view. They conceived of human life as a continual reincarnation into a world of suffering. The only escape was from the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*) was to remove oneself from the changing world (*maya*) by abdicating all desire and dedicating oneself to wisdom and charity.

City of God

Into the gloom that pervaded much of our ancient wisdom came the idea of salvation. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ would allow the believer to escape to Heaven at the end of life. Failure to believe, however, would lead to Hell. In the 5th Century CE, Saint Augustine proposed that human beings can choose either to belong to the City of God or to remain in the Earthly City, the one founded by Cain (*City of God*, XV:1). People of the City of God progress “from earthly to heavenly things, and from the invisible to the invisible” (X:14).



The illustration at the right shows a terra cotta maquette from the Hermitage, a model for Bernini's 1650 statue of Augustine in St Peter's Cathedral. Bernini's sculpture was meant to be seen from many different perspectives. So perhaps we are not amiss in interpreting Augustine's work in ways not intended by the saint.

The idea of Christian salvation, like the benefits of many other religions, is basically mean-spirited and divisive. An elect will go to heaven; all others will not. Membership in the elite is not awarded on the basis of achievement but gifted by the grace of God. Indeed, Augustine believed that since God is omniscient, membership in the elect is pre-ordained.

Great Chain of Being

Augustine's thinking was embedded in the notion of a Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy, 1936) that he derived from Greek philosophers, most notably from the Neoplatonist Plotinus. God created the world. Within this world everything was arranged hierarchically from inanimate matter at the bottom through plants, animals, man, and angels, to God at the top. This concept was extensively worked out in medieval Scholasticism, but persisted long after, as evidenced by Alexander Pope's lines in his *Essay on Man* (1734, Epistle I:VIII):

Vast chain of being, which from God began,
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect! what no eye can see,
No glass can reach! from infinite to thee,
From thee to nothing!

The hierarchy also characterized human society with the anointed King placed at the top, the lords and clergy below and the peasants at the very bottom. Society was not supposed to change: one knew one's place, and did not move between the levels.

Enlightenment

All this began to change with the emergence in the Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries of a new way of thinking that questioned the authority of the past. The very idea that we may not have understood the world correctly in the past implied that we might understand it better in the future.

This way of thinking led to the Enlightenment of the 18th Century. The new sciences had shown that we could understand more and more about the workings of the world, derive laws to predict what might happen, and harness energy to change the world which controlled us. Lives were becoming better.



The Enlightenment gave birth to our modern idea of progress.

In 1750 Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, Baron de l'Aulne (1727-1781) published an essay entitled *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*. He agreed with the ancients that

All things perish, and all things spring up again; and in these successive acts of generation through which plants and animals reproduce themselves time does no more than restore continually the counterpart of what it has caused to disappear.

This sounds much like Marcus Aurelius. However, Turgot also noted that human beings were different from the rest of the world, since they can accumulate and communicate knowledge:

The succession of mankind, on the other hand, affords from age to age an ever-changing spectacle. Reason, the passions, and liberty ceaselessly give rise to new events The arbitrary signs of speech and writing, by providing men with the means of securing the possession of their ideas and communicating them to others, have made of all the individual stores of knowledge a common treasure-house which one generation transmits to another, an inheritance which is always being enlarged by the discoveries of each age.

This allows the idea of progress, whereby

... the whole human race, through alternate periods of rest and unrest, of weal and woe, goes on advancing, although at a slow pace, towards greater perfection (all quotations from Turgot, 1750, p. 41).

Turgot became most famous for his work on economics, his *Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth* being one of the foundational works of economic liberalism. Nevertheless, it is to him in particular and to the Enlightenment in general that we must trace the origin of our idea of progress (Younkins, 2006; Meek Lange, 2011). The statue of Turgot by Pierre Travaux (1853)

illustrated above was appropriately photographed in the bright sunlight. Turgot was one of the giants of the Enlightenment.

Science advanced rapidly the 18th and 19th Centuries and by the beginning of the 20th Century it appeared that everything was within our reach. The study of thermodynamics had led to steam engines and automobiles, the study of electricity had given us artificial lighting and telephones, and the study of medicine had resulted in anesthetics and vaccines.

Society had become more humane. To some extent a belief in progress replaced our earlier belief in salvation.

Humanism is not science, but religion – the post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived ... Christians understood history as a story of sin and redemption. Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal human emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence. (Gray, 2003. xiii)

No one was more enthusiastic in their belief in Progress than the people of the United States. They considered it their manifest destiny to replace the simple life of the Native Americans with the railways and industry of European civilization. The 1853 painting of *Progress* by Asher Brown Durand of the Hudson Valley School portrayed the changing American landscape. On the left are the Native Americans and on the right the New Americans. The unspoiled wilderness gives way to the glorious future. Both are suffused in sunshine: nostalgia for paradise is balanced by hope of heaven.

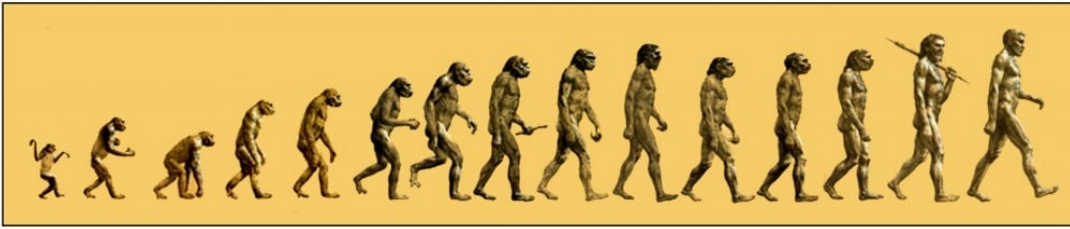


March of Progress

The Theory of Evolution inverted the Great Chain of Being. God did not create the world and all that is within it. Rather, the world evolved from inanimate to animate and from simple to complex. Man descended from earlier humanoid species, that themselves had descended from monkeys. The universe developed from bottom up rather than from top down.

Religion generally rejected this world view. However some religious philosophers tried to combine evolution with divine purpose. Man was perhaps evolving toward a perfect being, an Omega Point where everything would be understood, time would cease, and God and man become one. (Teilhard de Chardin, 1959).

The evolution of man was often portrayed as a *March of Progress*. The most famous of these illustrations was by Rudolph Zaillinger for the Time-Life book on *Early Man* (Howell, 1965):



The idea of the *March of Progress* was conceived in much the same way as the Great Chain of Being, although the sequence was temporal rather than heirarchic. Yet it remained a chain, and we often engage in a futile search for missing links.

Zaillinger's picture suggests a linear sequence, with each humanoid species evolving into the next. This is completely wrong. Evolution has multiple branches, with most of the branches ending with extinction. Evolutionary progress is better illustrated by a bush than by a ladder (Gould, 1989). Furthermore, the evolution of man appears to have depended much more on chance contingencies than on an inevitable path. This does not make progress directionless, but does underline its precariousness.

Brave New World

As the Enlightenment progressed, the Common Man began refused to stay subservient. The Divine Right of Kings no longer held; revolutions occurred; democracy began to flourish. In the 20th Century governments began to grant Universal Suffrage.

However, we may have become too confident. Butterfield (1931) pointed out the human tendency to conceive of past history as necessarily progressing to the perfection of the present. Our present happiness simply confirms that our past policies were correct. The Great War shook this simple faith. Where could one place such terrible carnage in any concept of progress?

The tendency to see the present as the best of all possible worlds persists. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama announced the *End of History* (1989). Fascism had been

defeated; communism had failed; democracy had triumphed:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

All that was then needed was to export democracy to the rest of the world. Today we live with the violent results of this idea. The world and human society are far more complex than they appear. Progress may be both desirable and possible, but it will require more foresight than we have shown so far.

Angelus Novus

Not everyone subscribed to the idea that progress is beneficial. The first half of the 20th Century undermined everyone's faith. The rise of fascism in Europe, the war that it unleashed, the horror of the Holocaust, and the use of nuclear weapons were strong lines of evidence that history was descending into evil rather than progressing toward good.



Walter Benjamin gave terrifying poetic voice to this

possibility by evoking a 1920 painting of Paul Klee:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1941, 257–8)

Benjamin's warnings were disregarded in the years of peace and prosperity that followed World War II. In recent years, however, the idea that progress can be evil has been reconsidered:

To believe in progress is to believe that, by using the new powers given us by growing scientific knowledge, humans can free themselves from the limits that frame the lives of other animals. This is the hope of nearly everybody nowadays, but it is groundless. For though human knowledge will very likely continue to grow and with it human power, the human animal will stay the same: a highly inventive species that is also one of the most predatory and destructive. (Gray, 2003, p. 4)

If anything about the present century is certain, it is that the power conferred on 'humanity' by new technologies will be used to commit atrocious crimes against it. (Gray, 2003, p. 14)

It is not hard to find historical examples of progress leading to problems (Wright, 2006). For example, the invention of flint arrows facilitated hunting but may have also led to the extinction of the very game that early man was pursuing. In addition, arrows provided yet another way for human beings to murder each other. Wright considers this early weaponry an example of a “progress trap” something that initially improves our lives but ultimately makes them worse.

Many of the problems brought on by progress are linked to human failings, particularly to selfishness. Wright considers the discovery of agriculture in this light:

The invention of agriculture is itself a runaway train, leading to vastly expanded populations but seldom solving the food problem because of two inevitable (or nearly inevitable) consequences. The first is biological: the population grows until it hits the bounds of the food supply. The second is social: all civilizations become hierarchical; the upward concentration of wealth ensure that there will never be enough to go around. (Wright, 2006, p. 108).

Modern democracies base their economies on capitalism. As well as being inherently unfair, capitalism cannot survive without continually increasing consumption. This has led to our current ills of pollution and climate-change:

Capitalism lures us on like the mechanical hare before the greyhounds, insisting that the economy is infinite and sharing therefore irrelevant. Just enough greyhounds catch a real hare now and then to keep the others running till they drop. In the past it was only the poor who lost this game; now it is the planet. (Wright, 2006, p. 124).

Nevertheless

Though we must properly consider the problems that we face, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are getting better

even if the pace is slow and variable. Despite the tremendous loss of life in the two world wars of the 20th Century, we are less murderous now than in the past (Pinker, 2011, 2015). Though governments are far from perfect, the people of the present world have more rights now than in the days of kings. And even if science can lead to such terrible things as nuclear war, it has also provided us with the benefits of modern agriculture, transportation, communication and medicine.

We are right to be careful. Yet we should not do away with progress and retreat to the past. The paradise that we think we remember is not real. The future dystopias we imagine are warnings not necessary predictions.

Temple of Longing

To balance Benjamin's vision of the angel we might conclude with another of Paul Klee's paintings, *Mural from the Temple of Longing* (1922). The colors of the painting come from the desert. The surface is weathered as if by wind and sand. The shapes likely represent a mountain village in North Africa. Klee had been irrevocably changed by a brief sojourn in Tunis in the summer of 1914, and themes from that visit recur in many of his paintings. The blues of the picture suggest twilight, and the circular and semicircular shapes in the upper part of the picture may hint at a moon both full and waxing.



The various vertical constructions terminate in arrows which move away from us, upward and deeper into the space of the picture. Arrows occur many times in Klee's paintings and mean many things: the passage of time, the movement of things, and the force of desire. Here they may represent thoughts or questions:

The father of the arrow is the thought: how do I expand my reach? Over this river? This lake? That mountain? (Klee, 1925, p. 54)

A faith in progress is necessary. We should not simply accept our present state. We should long for a better world. However, we should always question how we should change the present to the future. And we should proceed with caution.

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