1. The Idea of Human History:
Detaching Human History from Its Traditional Narrative

1.1. The Human Condition

Is contains was and will be. Was contains is and will be. Will be contains was and is. Such is the nature of all living things. An organism develops in its actual environment using the product of its past growth to actualise its inherent potentiality. Human beings and human societies are living things.

Human history is natural history, the organic history of a particular life form, the interesting story of the life of a particular species of animal. The human condition contains humanity’s past, its present, and its future. The human condition contains potentialities flowing from the human past into the human present, potentialities which may become the future of human life.

We are authors and actors in the historical drama. We are also spectators. History is the history of what has happened to the human race, and not merely the history of what the human race has done. We are temporary trustees of an inheritance whose awful burdens at least equal, if they do not exceed, its remarkable benefits.

Human consciousness contains the remarkable characteristic that it is also consciousness of its own consciousness. Francis Bacon calls it radius reflexus—the beam of light that the human mind focuses upon itself—the human brain talking to itself about itself. The human brain is an integral part of the natural world. The human mind is the human brain seen as the source of human consciousness. Human consciousness is a peculiar force of nature, a force as natural and as mysterious as gravity or inertia.
The history of what the human race has done is also the history of what the human mind has thought, the history of the human mind. The human mind has its own history, the natural history of human consciousness. Human consciousness recounts to itself the interesting story of its activity as a force of nature.

Human consciousness also contains a remarkable capacity—radius imaginans, let us say—which allows us to imagine possible realities and, having imagined them, we can choose to make our ideas into actual realities. We can make what we imagine into what is. Human consciousness contains within itself the potentiality of countless possible realities.

We can even imagine what we ourselves might be, and we can make what we think we might be into what we are. For human beings, what we will be is not determined merely by what we were and what we are. For human beings, the future is also what we think that we could be, a future containing countless possible human futures. The human condition contains within itself the potentiality of countless possible human realities.

So it is that the human condition contains a past which is present to us only in the form of ideas, and a future which is present to us in the form of our idea of potentialities. The imagined past condemns us to be what we think that we are, and the imagined future obliges us to choose what we might be. We are the masters and the victims of the existential paradox of the human condition.

We are powerful and powerless. We have the power to imagine a human future; but the human future that we make may be a future that is not the future that we imagined. We have the power to imagine a better human future; but the future that we make may be a worse human future.

Human history is the strange story of the response of human beings to the existential paradox of the human condition. The history of international law is part of that history.

1.2. The Human World

The existential paradox of the human condition—fate and freedom—has always been present to human consciousness. It forced itself into the consciousness of the earliest human beings who saw the night sky, the seasons, birth and growth and decay and death, and thought about fellowship with all other living things, and the relentless burden of everyday existence for each human being.

Human beings have always known, through personal and inescapable experience, the universal and the particular, the infinite and the finite, the