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# THEODICY AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

*Richard McNeill Douglas*

TEMPLE TRACTS



# Theodicy and the Anthropocene

**Richard McNeill Douglas**

*Temple Tracts: Book 22*

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# Chapter 1

## When addressed by a crisis

Eighty years ago, the Archbishop of York wrote a short book that would go on to have a big impact. The book was called *Christianity and Social Order*; the author's name was William Temple.<sup>1</sup> By the time it was published, in 1942, Temple had become Archbishop of Canterbury. Published from this vantage point, this was a book addressed at once inwardly, to all the members of the Church of England, and outwardly, to those who wielded, or aspired to wield, the secular political and economic power in the country.

At the time of writing the United States had not yet been forced into the fighting, while the British empire's solitary ally, the Soviet Union, looked anything but assured of survival: this was a time of national emergency, the country as a whole menaced by an existential threat. And yet, the crisis that Temple was addressing was less one of war, and more one of peace. The target of his criticism was, in its *laissez faire* form, the social credo of economic progress. Promoting the idea that individual selfishness was the path towards achieving social good, this belief evacuated morality from politics and economics. The result was a social world absent of heart, empty of spirit, and materially inadequate—incapable of acting to remediate the material sufferings of masses of people.

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<sup>1</sup> William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2018 [1942]).

The war was the crisis Temple used to promote the reform of the peacetime to come. His sermon was on the need to humanise and ethicise the political, to breathe values into the machine. He found the source of these values in the non-material world, and he sought to encourage Christians to bring their religious values to bear on the reform of the world around them. The book was an instant success, and its message highly influential in the creation of the post-war welfare state. Temple, indeed, was the one who introduced the phrase ‘welfare-state’ into the English language.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.1 From welfare state to environmental state

Halfway between that time and ours today, the future Bishop of Birmingham, Hugh Montefiore, applied much of Temple’s spirit in addressing a new crisis, this one caused by our over-exploitation of the natural world. Instead of a national crisis, this was a global crisis; and the remedy this time was to be, not the welfare state but the environmental state—and at an international scale. This was, in its own way, an even more decisive moment than that faced in the midst of the Blitz. Speaking at the turn of the 1970s, Montefiore pronounced: ‘It seems to me probable that the future of man as a species may be decided in the next half-century.’<sup>3</sup>

Half a century on, and we remain deep—deeper, even—in that same existential crisis. It is a double crisis, for it is not just that we humans are consuming the world’s resources and despoiling its environment. It is not even that, in the most horrifying scenarios of climate change, the future of humanity itself would be at stake: on an individual scale, as the human body lost the capacity to regulate its temperature through perspiration, and people began to broil to death; on a planetary scale, as ocean plankton lost the capacity to oxygenate the seas and atmosphere.<sup>4</sup> It is also that we have known full well that our collective treatment of the environment was unsustainable for decades, and still we have not taken any really effective practical

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Spencer, *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity Has Shaped Our Values* (London: SPCK, 2016), 168.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Montefiore, *The Question Mark: The End of Homo Sapiens* (London: Collins, 1969), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Bill McKibben, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* (London: Wildfire, 2019), 34, 58–59.

action of reform. It is a crisis *for* us, manifesting itself in nature; but it is also a crisis *of* us, manifesting itself in politics. Our ability to act appears to have left us. We are not safeguarding our own lives, our own future.

The double nature of this crisis tells us that those attempts that have been made to tackle it have so far failed. Some new argument is needed. So, why did the work of Temple—and others, Christian socialists and Christian democrats, who sought to reconstruct a moral framework for political economy in the post-war ruins—succeed, while that of Montefiore and those like him has yet to bear fruit in the same way?<sup>5</sup> The answer, I think, is that in the first case the morally-regenerative influence of religion was co-opted by secular progress in a way that is incompatible with the second.

Rather than rescuing secular progress, the environmental crisis demands that we transcend it. This is the argument I want to put forward here.

Such a tantalising statement—what on earth can it mean? Let us try a little preview. Given that secularity and modernity are virtually synonymous, to talk in these terms is to say something profound about the historical age in which we find ourselves embedded. The time is ripe, I want to suggest, to revive Montefiore's call for a religiously inspired environmentalism. Only now this spirit needs to be pushed further, towards its logical conclusions.

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<sup>5</sup> For a general discussion of the church's influence on the creation of welfare states internationally, see Spencer, *The Evolution of the West*, 167–84.

## Chapter 2

# Introducing the Anthropocene

There is a name for the crisis that addresses us today: the Anthropocene. It is a term used by stratigraphers—those who study the strata of rock on the Earth’s surface—to describe a new geological epoch. Until recently it was agreed we were living in the Holocene, the most recent or ‘wholly new’ era (from the Greek *hólos*, meaning ‘whole’, and *kainós*, Latinised as *cænus*, meaning ‘new’). This period, beginning after the end of the last ice age around 15,000 years ago, has been marked by its stable and temperate climate, conditions conducive to the growth of human civilisation.<sup>1</sup> The history of agriculture, settled communities, and great civilisations, is coterminous with it.

But now we have the Anthropocene. This is the era of the *anthropos*—the age of the human. The term refers not to the expanse of time in which humans have been around on the planet. Rather, in its stratigraphical context, it refers to that period in which humans have decisively left their mark on the planet—such that an imagined group of (alien?) scientists in the far future would be able to see the evidence for humanity’s presence in the geological record. It is the cause for some debate, first, because some stratigraphers worry that the period in question is simply too recent, and, thus far, too brief, to be able to say with confidence that this would represent a distinctly discernible epoch.<sup>2</sup> Second, even among those who embrace this idea,

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Roberts, *The Holocene: An Environmental History*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Monastersky, ‘Anthropocene: The Human Age’, *Nature News* 519, no. 7542 (12 March 2015), 144, <https://doi.org/10.1038/519144a>.

there is disagreement over where to mark its chronological boundary. The two most commonly advanced starting points for this epoch are around the year 1800, at the dawning of the industrial age; and around the year 1950, at the beginning of the atomic age. Both have seen a decisive mark being made on earth systems the world over: most obviously, in the emission of carbon dioxide, liberated from fossil fuel deposits long buried underground, and in the presence of radioactive debris dispersed via nuclear test explosions.<sup>3</sup>

To interpose my own opinion, there is a strong case, I think, for using the 1950s as the starting point. Aside from the dispersion of nuclear fallout, this was also the time of the dramatic post-war boom in production and consumption called ‘the Great Acceleration’.<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the 1970s, consciousness of the scale of human incursions on nature was finding expression in the nascent environmental movement. And this seems to complement the idea of tracing the beginnings of the Anthropocene to around this point: what is marked is not just a discernible imprint of human activity, but decisive changes worked at a planetary scale—the destabilising of ecological orders that had existed since time immemorial. Our influence now insinuates itself into the remotest environments like a never-ending oil spill. No corner of the world is untouched by us; and in that way we are interfering with the self-generating order of every ecosystem on Earth. This is what it means to say we are witnesses to ‘the end of nature’.<sup>5</sup>

So, this is the original meaning of the term Anthropocene. But it is not the only one. The ‘Anthropocene’ also names a wider concept in common currency—in social sciences and the humanities, in cultural criticism and literature. In this sense, the Anthropocene has ‘become a more general term to think about climate change and

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<sup>3</sup> Meera Subramanian, ‘Anthropocene Now: Influential Panel Votes to Recognize Earth’s New Epoch’, *Nature*, 21 May 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-01641-5>.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (London: Belknap Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Viking, 1990).

climate catastrophe’, one which sees ‘human beings as problems, or causing new sets of problems with potentially catastrophic effects [...] rising sea levels, or acidifying oceans, or wildfires’.<sup>6</sup>

This secondary usage follows through on the implications raised by the stratigraphical classification and speculates on ours as a time in which civilisation is beginning to unravel in the face of environmental breakdown. This meaning is often signalled by titles which refer to the Anthropocene with the prepositions ‘for’, ‘in’, or ‘of’—addressing such topics as *Love in the Anthropocene*, *Theory for the Anthropocene*, *Politics of the Anthropocene*. Such texts are concerned with what living in a new geological epoch means for us, how the consciousness of this ought to affect our approach to *everything*, to every department of life. This must be the demand because, in this wider conceptualisation, the Anthropocene is perceived as a state in which we know we are on borrowed time. We have, through our technological prowess, allied to the rapaciousness of our appetites, inadvertently driven the climate from its previously benevolent course. Even if we had the political unity to action it, we do not appear to have the technological power to reverse what we have done. ‘Poisons poured into the seas cannot be drained out again’, as the poet says.<sup>7</sup> We have broken the world that was given to us, and now we get to keep it. Or what we get to keep, what we now own, is our fate.

This idea of the Anthropocene entails a narrative which takes the form of a Greek tragedy: the hubris of our modern determination to transgress all limits leading us inexorably towards our nemesis. The very thing which makes this the age of the humans is also what is telling us that humans’ days are numbered. The discourse which invokes this idea ranges in mood—from a rather half-hearted assertion that we must carry on as if we did not know we were ultimately doomed; to a playful, ironic detachment that seeks to deny the gravity of the situation; to a sardonic, sometimes savage embrace of the hopelessness of our case, wallowing in a bitter sense of hopes

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<sup>6</sup> Joel Schlosser, ‘Joel Schlosser—Herodotus in the Anthropocene’, interview with Joel Schlosser by Jeffrey Church, *Political Theory Review* podcast, 23 October 2020, <https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/thepoliticaltheoryreview/episodes/2020-10-22T18.54.55-07.00>.

<sup>7</sup> Cicely Herbert, ‘Everything changes’, <https://poemsontheunderground.org/everything-changes>.

betrayed. But the underlying mood in all cases appears to be one of muted despair. The bleakness of this discourse is readily summed up in one noted title: *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*.

## 2.1 The Anthropocene, or Modernity

It would be useful at this point to consider a third, yet wider concept of the Anthropocene. This was given—as far as I know, uniquely—by the philosopher Charles Taylor, in conversation recently with Nick Spencer of *Theos* think tank. Taylor was describing the historical development of ‘this can-do attitude which defines us today. It’s the Anthropocene, the growth of what people call the Anthropocene’, whose motto is: ‘We can control the whole thing.’ It is a new ‘way of understanding what you are in the Universe, what a human being is.’<sup>8</sup>

Now, what Taylor is talking about here is something older than the second meaning of Anthropocene discussed above, that which preoccupies itself with what it means to live in a world whose environments we may have irrevocably destabilised. One can tell it is something different by its tone of optimism, its confidence in our ability to master our fate. What Taylor is describing here as the Anthropocene is more commonly known by another name: modernity. The ‘Anthropocene’ perhaps does even better as a description of the modern age in its entirety, than as just the more recent consciousness of environmental overshoot. After all, the Anthropocene is meant to be the age of humans, but, as we have seen, the second meaning of Anthropocene discussed above is more preoccupied with the return of *nature*, in the form of storms, fires, and floods unleashed by our industrial activities. We may have given rise to the Anthropocene in this sense, but we are hardly in charge of the situation. But that earlier spirit of modernity is another thing. This was built on the confident belief that, in the words of Descartes, we should, through scientific advance, become ‘the masters and possessors of nature’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘What does it mean to live in a secular age?’, *Reading Our Times* podcast, interview by Nick Spencer, 27 October 2020, <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2020/10/27/charles-taylor>.

<sup>9</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method: And, Meditations on First Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 38, [http://archive.org/details/discourseonmetho0000desc\\_i4z8](http://archive.org/details/discourseonmetho0000desc_i4z8).

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On reflection, it will not do to extend the ‘Anthropocene’ to cover modernity as a whole: the contemporary understanding of the Anthropocene, in the second sense outlined above, is too well established to be supplanted in this way. But there is still something to attend to in Taylor’s extension of the contemporary term: it throws a single cover over a period spanning the beginnings of the modern age and the present moment that has evolved from it, encompassing both the utopian optimism modernity began with and the dystopian pessimism with which it seems to be ending. In so doing, might Taylor’s remarks just make visible a ray of light in our current darkness? If we want to make sense of our present predicament, and hope to find a positive way forward, then we need to understand how we got here. The age of the human is the fruition of the intellectual revolution with which the modern age was born. If the meaning of the Anthropocene is that the modern project is reaching the end of its road, would it not make sense to examine what that project was seeking to achieve and how it sought to do so? Perhaps, under this newly searching gaze, old ideas might become amenable to reinterpretation in such a way as to allow us to give this project a thorough refresh? Or perhaps transcend it altogether?

# Chapter 3

## The secularisation thesis

I would like to propose that we turn to something called the ‘secularisation thesis debate’. By ‘secularisation thesis’ I do not mean the sociological assertion that the progressive decline in religious observance is an inexorable index of modernity—a theory which in recent decades has had to be revised to recognise the ‘postsecular’ persistence of religious belief.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is the argument that the secular beliefs which most define modernity bear the imprint of a theological understanding of reality, in reaction to which they developed, and to which they ostensibly stand opposed.

Perhaps the principal articulator of this argument today is the aforementioned Charles Taylor. In his magisterial treatment of the subject, *A Secular Age*, Taylor charts the changing nature, over the course of the modern period, of religious belief, an idea of the human self, and a background understanding (or ‘social imaginary’) of reality.<sup>2</sup> What emerges from these pages is a narrative of historical change in which, beginning with the scientific revolution, a materialist conception of fundamental reality gradually works itself into everyday life, thereby creating what we recognise today as secular reality. In this way, certain religious beliefs become secularised—not least,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Belknap Press, 2007).

faith in progress taking over as a social belief from faith in God's providential will. Meanwhile, religion proper lives on, but in a more subjectivised form, its tenets increasingly driven from society's recognised understanding of objective reality.

Taylor's analysis is formidable and repays close and repeated reading. But for the purposes of this discussion, I would like to turn, as briefly as I may, to another of the other great theorists of secularisation, Hans Blumenberg.<sup>3</sup>

Blumenberg's most famous contribution to this debate is *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, originally published in 1966, and revised a decade later.<sup>4</sup> Let me begin to highlight the ways in which this work may shine a light on the concept of the Anthropocene by discussing what it says about the metaphysics of modernity. The figure Blumenberg highlights here is the sixteenth century visionary, Giordano Bruno. Bruno developed what seemed to be the logical implications of the Copernican revolution in astronomy, which had displaced Earth from the centre of the cosmos: he made the leap to the idea that the cosmos had no centre and was thus infinite in extent. In making sense of this idea, Bruno put forward the explanation that God had utterly spent Godself in creation, such that God's infinite being was made fully manifest in the cosmos. For this and other heresies Bruno was burnt at the stake.<sup>5</sup> But, Blumenberg argues, it was this idea which triumphed in the end. In identifying Bruno as the key figure in the epochal transition to modernity, Blumenberg reinforces a central plank in the secularisation thesis, namely, the beliefs that: a) what fundamentally establishes modernity as a distinct era is a new concept of

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<sup>3</sup> To those familiar with his work, it might seem strange at first to include Blumenberg as a proponent of the thesis that important elements of modern, secular belief have their origins in forms of theological belief. He is generally remembered as an opponent of this thesis. This opposition was fuelled by his feeling that the integrity of modernity was being undermined by theoretical attacks on its commitment to rationality, and on its ability to make good on its promise of progress. To this end, he was at pains to present modernity as something which stood on its own foundations, and progress as an expectation of future betterment generated as a simple by-product of substantive advances in knowledge. Ultimately, however, he is forced to concede that progress is shaped by Christian eschatology, in the sense that this was the framework which conditioned people's expectations of salvation.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Alberto A. Martinez, 'Giordano Bruno and the Heresy of Many Worlds', *Annals of Science* 73, no. 4 (1 October 2016), 345–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00033790.2016.1193627>.

material, or immanent, infinity, in which—for the first time in history—the Universe is understood to be endless in space and time; and b) this idea of infinity—formerly understood solely as a divine attribute—was taken over from an idea of God.<sup>6</sup>

As Elizabeth Brient glosses Blumenberg, modernity was founded through the *immanentisation of the infinite*.<sup>7</sup> It transposed the ‘principle of plenitude’, the belief that had held that creation was filled with all the things that can exist, outflowing from God’s infinite bountifulness and each occupying their appropriate station.<sup>8</sup> Immanentised, this became the belief that there was a plurality of worlds like ours stretching throughout the cosmos—the Universe replete with sentient life.<sup>9</sup> This proved to be a vital source of comfort in the face of early advances in scientific understanding; the idea that life was going on, and would always be going on, in an infinity of worlds is what gave Bruno a sense of solace for the knowledge of his own mortality.<sup>10</sup>

This immanentisation of the infinite is, more than anything else, what creates the sense of the secular which so defines the modern age. The logic which Bruno applied to his vision gradually captured the whole of the modern world: if the Universe were truly endless, it would have to be everything there was. As Blumenberg reads it, Bruno’s infinitisation of the physical gives rise over time to the scientific vision of nature: ‘Nothing “supernatural” is possible’, since there is no room for anything beyond nature to exist.<sup>11</sup> Thus is created what the theologian John Milbank has described as ‘the sealed off totality of nature’, the modern idea of the Universe as existing, eternally, through its own immanent, self-generated laws.<sup>12</sup> Where does God

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<sup>6</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*.

<sup>8</sup> See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001 [1936]).

<sup>9</sup> Steven J. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds: The Extraterrestrial Life Debate from Democritus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Choron, *Death and Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 105–8.

<sup>11</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 551.

<sup>12</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 10.

fit into this picture? The classic scientist's answer was given by the mathematician Laplace, in answer to Napoleon's posing of this same question: 'Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis'.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.1 The incoherence of modernity

It must be said this view of reality was always incoherent and, what is more, we now know it to be flawed, even on its own terms. It is incoherent in the sense that there is no room on its map of reality for our minds. The world of the mind is not physical, nor does it follow laws of physical causation. Yet we know, with more certainty than we know anything else, that it exists: this, after all, is the very centrepiece of modern philosophy, Descartes's 'I think, therefore I am'. To resolve this contradiction, we have come to regard the mental world as a thing we call subjective reality, which we view as an interior, purely personal, quasi-imaginary dimension. In counterpoint to our idea of physical, exterior, official reality, the subjective is not treated as being really real at all. It is into this subjective dimension that religious belief has, over the modern period, come increasingly to be consigned. Religion thus lives on, but its theology is divorced from metaphysics. Metaphysics itself has come to be regarded as insupportably subjective: in deriving our official understanding of reality from physical science alone we forget that this image of infinite physical dimensions was itself a product of metaphysical thinking in the first place. A profound alienation is thus baked into the experience of living in modernity: a vision of reality which we have created now confronts us as brute reality, devoid of meaning, indifferent to our existence.

Science, meanwhile, has, over time, falsified its own metaphysical foundations. The seeds of disquiet were there from the start, but as long as we believed in the innumerable worlds of the infinite cosmos, we could retain our peace of mind. From the early days of the scientific revolution the Earth was understood to be menaced by comets from without and seismic upheaval from within, its habitable lifetime the

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<sup>13</sup> Augustus De Morgan, *A Budget of Paradoxes ... Reprinted, with the author's additions, from the 'Athenæum'*, ed. Sophia De Morgan (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1872), 250.

subject of learned debate.<sup>14</sup> Yet the recognition of the mortality of our planet, and thus of ourselves as a race, could be borne ‘even with a sort of complacency’, as Kant was able to put it in 1755.<sup>15</sup> Given the infinite expanse and creativity of nature, the existence of civilised life throughout the cosmos would be eternally regenerated.

We now know that the Universe is neither infinite in extent, nor ultimately physical: it had a beginning in the Big Bang, and is expanding towards an end—whether this is, thanks to entropy, the ‘heat death of the Universe’ in which all energy is utterly dissipated; or, thanks to gravity, its contraction and destruction in a ‘Big Crunch’; or some other variations thereof.<sup>16</sup> We know too, through quantum mechanics, that on its most fundamental levels physical reality breaks down, and time and causation with it. We also know, finally, that the conditions for life appear to be much rarer than we had previously thought.<sup>17</sup>

We already knew enough of this by the turn of the twentieth century for William James to talk of our planet as a sort of ‘local accident in an appalling wilderness of worlds where no life can exist’. Science had now revealed mankind’s fate to be like that of

a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature’s portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Moynihan, *X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Cosmogony as in His Essay on the Retardation of the Rotation of the Earth and His Natural History and History of the Heavens* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose and sons, 1900 [1754-55]), 151.

<sup>16</sup> Katie Mack, *The End of Everything* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Milan M. Ćirković, *The Great Silence: Science and Philosophy of Fermi’s Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1902]), 491–92, 141.

Advances in scientific knowledge have contradicted the foundations of modernity, then, and rendered modern life yet more incoherent. But belief in a reality built on those foundations lives on. An epochal vision of reality is not easily given up.

# Chapter 4

## The theodicy of progress

Why do people feel the need to cling onto such an epochal vision? To answer this, we need to understand what is at stake if such a vision were lost to us. And to understand this, we need to turn to another element in Blumenberg's analysis. If one of his contributions was the identification of the infinitisation of the Universe as the foundation for a modern sense of reality, another was his analysis of how and why this vision had come to the fore in the first place. At its heart, Blumenberg thought, this was a question of theodicy.

What is theodicy? The word was coined in the early eighteenth century by Leibniz.<sup>1</sup> What it concerns is good and evil; more specifically, 'the problem of evil'—how is cruelty and misfortune compatible with God? In David Hume's formulation, one may ask of God: 'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. If he is able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?'<sup>2</sup>

In its original meaning, theodicy stands for a vindication of God in the face of those who would argue that the existence of evil disproves his existence (as a being either all-powerful or all-good): from the Greek '*theos*' (god) and '*dike*' (justice), theodicy's literal meaning is 'justifying God'. In Leibniz's case, belief in God's

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<sup>1</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951 [1710]).

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 74.

goodness led to the assumption that this was the best of all possible worlds, the evil in it an unavoidable by-product of the interactions of the elements of creation; if it were possible to create a more harmonious world, God would have done so. But theodicies stretch much further back than Leibniz's invention of the term in 1710 (witness Augustine's wrestling with the problem of evil) and even extend beyond the defence of a Christian idea of God (going back at least as far as Epicurus). For Max Weber, this problem had been the driving force in the whole history of religion, encompassing the 'Indian doctrine of karma, Persian dualism, original sin, predestination' and much besides.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s, William Temple had noted that evil is perceived to be a problem even by those who avow no theistic faith;<sup>4</sup> and in a contemporary, more secular form, theodicy has come to refer to all systems of belief that situate our lives—and deaths—within an ordered, meaningful cosmos. It has thus become shorthand for the power of beliefs to help us cope with the problem of evil in itself; not just indirectly, in the sense in which the presence of evil problematises the idea of God, but in the sense of the anguish that the experience of evil causes us directly. What we need to manage this experience, this wider concept of theodicy says, is a faith that provides us with a sense of moral security, of basic trust in the world. In this form theodicy has become a central element in the sociology of religion, where it is deployed to account for the psychological appeal of collective faiths.

It is in this sense that Blumenberg uses the term 'theodicy'. It is central to his reading of how modernity took off. The scientific revolution was just that, a revolution: it changed the way educated people saw the world, creating a new era in human consciousness. How was it possible for the modern worldview, in which God was first expelled as an active participant from the Universe, and then excised from a map of objective reality altogether, to emerge from and eventually to supplant the Christian, largely theocratic, worldview of the middle ages? In Blumenberg's analysis there are both negative and positive factors at work—an old theodicy that was failing in its promise of dealing with the problem of evil, and a new one whose offer was novel and irresistible.

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<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, 'The Politician's Work', in *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2020), 107.

<sup>4</sup> William Temple, *Nature, Man And God* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1949 [1934]), 356.

## 4.1 Old and new theodicies

What had gone wrong with the theodicy offered by the medieval Christian church? To offer a stylised summary of Blumenberg's reading—supplemented by the related analysis of others, notably Michael Allen Gillespie—this was the result of a conflict between reason and divine authority.<sup>5</sup> The European rediscovery, via Islamic sources, of Aristotelian philosophy led originally to a productive fusion of theological and philosophical thought under the banner of scholasticism, reaching its apogee in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. But there was always a tension in this marriage of theology and philosophy. Ultimately, philosophy's warrant is reason: not only do its arguments stand and fall on their own logical construction, but it has to be that way; the force of rational thought lies in the transparency of its grounding and the explicit ordering of its argument, such that other minds can adjudge the merits of an argument on the same terms. The power of such reasoned thought is then founded on a belief that the world itself is reasonable and thus may be comprehended through our reasoning. This is the idea of cosmic or divine *logos*: it asserts that the events of the world are not mere random flux but are patterned and conditioned according to structures and principles which may themselves be rationally understood.

While this idea of *logos* was present within Christian thought from its origins, the renewed emphasis given to its self-generating authority (and thus its independent and exhaustive claims to truth) in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries caused problems for the Christian mind. If reason were understood to have its own authority, then this could place it above God: if there were certain things God could not do because they would be logically impossible—if logic were thus more powerful than God—then God could not be considered all-powerful. Thus grew a theological backlash in the form of nominalism, which sought to reassert the absolute authority of God by claiming God's superiority over any rules, and in the process wiping the intellectual map of existence clean of much of the metaphysics and physics that had been derived from Aristotle. But while this movement—an early sign of which could be found in the Bishop of Paris's condemnations of 1277, denouncing hundreds of Aristotelian tenets as being impious falsehoods—established the unbounded nature of the person of God, it did so at the expense of cutting God adrift from human understanding. If God

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

is impervious to logic, it followed that one could not construct anything intelligible to say about God. Even more, if reason's authority were not universal then reason itself was falsified: if two plus two *could* equal five, if God willed it, then logic itself was always a mere illusion. The intellectual influence of the nominalist counter-revolution, therefore, tended towards not only making God utterly unknowable and thereby separating God from the sensible world, but it also led towards the world itself becoming felt as an unreasonable, unknowable place.

For Blumenberg, as a result, the European high middle ages were a period of theological deficit. This was felt as a deep spiritual angst—Luther's writings providing a classic illustration of the wrought anxieties, redolent of the age, over God's opaque and (because of this) fearsome expectations of us, and with that our chances of eternal salvation or damnation in the next life. Such anxieties of course fuelled the religious passions of the age: the intensity of faith was a response to the intensity of angst. But the power of the Christian vision to affirm the fundamental goodness of the world, and to offer explanation and consolation for the pains and misfortunes that take place within it, was diminished. The God created by nominalism was so unknowable as to become a *deus absconditus*, a hidden God, 'whose implicit content could have been formulated in the postulate that man had to behave as though God were dead.'<sup>6</sup>

This was the negative factor in Blumenberg's account of the rise of modernity: in sociology-of-religion terms, the epochal Christian faith was faltering in its structural mission of providing social confidence in the ordered nature of the cosmos and one's place in relation to it.

Then there was the positive factor. This was the new, secular theodicy provided by science. This took the spiritual insecurity of the age, the sense of God's remoteness from our understanding, and succeeded—by adding the idea, pioneered by Bruno, that God's infinite being had passed over into the world—in making a virtue out of it. Yes, we are all alone in this world, it said; the time for miracles is past, God will not intervene in the chain of causation. But this very lack of intervention from the one being capable of falsifying reason itself through unlimited power left reason alone as the highest authority in the world. Now the seesaw tilted back towards the *logos*,

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<sup>6</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 346.

at the expense of the idea of the person of God. Without supernatural intervention in the chain of causation, that chain could be observed, followed, and, over time, manipulated and mastered. So yes, we were alone, but through scientific observation of natural laws we had the capacity to take responsibility for our fate. Over time, and through an additive process, we would discover the keys to all things, grow in material power, and deal with the problem of evil ourselves, as a practical matter. Humanity would become its own theodicy.

# Chapter 5

## Recognising epochal crisis

What Blumenberg leaves us with is a theory of history, and one in which theodicy is key. It is more than an account of the transition between historical examples of socially upheld theodicies. What makes this authentically a theory of history is the idea that goes with it, that it is dominant theodicies that define historical epochs. What makes an epoch a distinct age within the human story is a specific understanding of fundamental reality and where the human being fits in relation to it—how our lives and deaths are made meaningful.

This echoes the analysis of Max Weber, another of the great contributors to the secularisation thesis. In his *Psychology of World Religions* Weber talks about how social reality is importantly shaped by a ‘world image’ that not only conceptualises an understanding of fundamental reality, but does so in a way that promises the possibility of human redemption—‘liberation from distress, hunger, drought, sickness, and ultimately from suffering and death.’<sup>1</sup> In the modern world, the dominant form of such theodicy has taken the form of belief ‘that through the sciences, men can eventually achieve freedom from those constraints which they fear and hate—the illnesses, hunger, disease and cold which shorten life—and it promises the means to fulfil all their material needs’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, ‘The Psychology of the World Religions’ in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. by H. H. Garth & C. W. Mills, (NY: Galaxy Book, 1958), 280.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Price, ‘Science, Idealism and Higher Education in England: Arnold, Green and Haldane’, *Studies in Higher Education* 11, no. 1 (January 1986), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075078612331378421>.

Taking stock of our discussion of the secularisation thesis, and applying this learning to the present, what do we find? It is not hard to see the present moment as being similar to that which Blumenberg found in the late middle ages: this time, it is the overarching theodicy of modernity that is failing, leaving those who have grown up in a culture that depends on it feeling lost, anxious, and receptive to movements that offer to match this sense of bewilderment with an intensity of faith.

That modern theodicy, let us not forget, is more commonly known by the name ‘progress’. It is precisely the negation of this theodicy that the Anthropocene (in the wider, theoretical use discussed earlier) stands for. And it is this which tells us that our present moment represents an epochal crisis. Over its career, modernity has been subject to deep ideological conflicts, but none has put its conceptual integrity into doubt. Principal elements of modernity—capitalism, liberal democracy, industrial technology, Western colonialism—have spawned significant opposition movements; and the principle of secularisation, with the authority of science at its heart, has been opposed by religious counter-revolutions. But these opposition movements—socialism, fascism, workers’ movements, anti-colonial movements, and so on—have been internal divisions within modernity, disputing control over its material productivity. To dispute scientific and material progress as such has been to fade away into historical irrelevance. As for the religious counter-revolutions, no critiques of modernity have done anything to reverse the secularising tendencies of modern metaphysics: the scientific worldview has conquered the world, in the sense of establishing the nature of the Universe, and the technological means to harness its forces in forms that bestow economic and political power.

## 5.1 The long present

But the present moment—the long present, dating this from the beginnings of the contemporary environmental movement at the turn of the 1970s—is different. As one noted environmentalist puts it, consciousness of the limits to growth ‘drives a dagger into the heart of the modern understanding of the human being, that of world-maker, the Enlightenment subject who creates the future of the world’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Clive Hamilton, ‘Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change’ (Congreso Cambio Climático, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina, 2011), 38.

Environmentalists are not wrong, in turn, when they analyse the deep motivations of their hardcore opponents, the climate denialist movement. Beneath the defence of fossil fuel industries and other big polluters, there is a common ideological focus: to ‘beat back the ontological threats to Western modernity’;<sup>4</sup> to reassert the ‘unbounded faith in the ability of humans to manipulate the world in ever more effective fashion’; simply, to defend ‘human progress’.<sup>5</sup>

This spells it out clearly. This conflict is not internal to modernity, but disputes modernity as such. Neither environmentalism nor its conflict with denialism is due to fade away into irrelevance as a result of the forward march of progress. The environmentalist challenge is to point out that progress is itself losing momentum, that its forward march is digging us down into a rut into which it will disappear. The historian Sidney Pollard told it like it is, writing half a century ago: people will continue to cling onto belief in progress because the only alternative is ‘total despair’.<sup>6</sup>

For this is it: the environmentalist challenge tears down the theodicy of the modern world but does not erect anything in its place. In this sense, environmentalism is still too modern, despite itself; still too much a prisoner of secular modernity to think beyond it. It treats progress as an illusion, and seeks to liberate us from it, so that we may finally live without illusion. What environmentalism asks is that we attempt to live without a theodicy, to confront all the evils of existence—up to and including the mortality of the human world itself—as they are, without meaning, consolation, or transcendence. Thus, the Anthropocene. This is modernity without belief in progress: a time of despair.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Jacques, ‘A General Theory of Climate Denial’, *Global Environmental Politics*, 2012, 12 (2), 11, [https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP\\_a\\_00105](https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00105).

<sup>5</sup> John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*, 3rd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society*, [New Thinkers Library. No. 26.] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 205.

## 5.2 The secular secularised

We can recognise the Anthropocene as the final consummation of the secularising tendencies with which modernity began. What the great theorists of secularisation tell us is that modernity was born out of Christianity, and gradually took on more and more of religion's role, displacing and parochialising organised religion in the process. And this was a *process*: for many centuries the religious outlook—its metaphysics and theodicy—overlapped with belief in science and progress; this is nowhere better depicted than in Taylor's *A Secular Age*. During this time, an essence of religious belief infused progress with a sense of transcendent, even divine, grandeur, a sense of higher purpose and eternal life.

In the nineteenth century, the momentum of secularisation did lead to the famous declaration by the philosophers that God was dead. And by the early decades of the twentieth century this had so washed through into the consciousness of the masses that George Orwell could remark on the astounding fact that the age-old belief in heaven had largely evaporated in the previous generation; Blumenberg adding later that 'even contemporary Christianity, around the world, scarcely mentions immortality in its rhetoric any longer'.<sup>7</sup> And, certainly, this waning of belief in a Christian afterlife had been in motion from the very beginnings of modernity. As Toynbee observed, Bruno's vision of an eternal cosmos of innumerable worlds must have prompted the thought that Christ must have been crucified not only once, for our sake, but countless times for the salvation of countless alien peoples. While this may have been too absurd to be taken seriously, this sense of disbelief leaked back into ordinary Christian faith, undermining belief over time in 'the possibility of personal immortality after death for the human inhabitants of a planet that [was now] one of any number of habitable specks of dust scattered almost infinitely far apart from each other'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> George Orwell, 'As I Please', *Tribune*, 3 March 1944; Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 467.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Toynbee, 'Changing Attitudes towards Death in the Modern Western World', in *Man's Concern with Death*, by Arnold Toynbee et al. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968), 126, <http://archive.org/details/mansconcernwithd0000unse.k5m4>.

Yet this passage to secularism did not mean a bleak embrace of nihilism. It was enabled by the simultaneous founding of a religion of humanity, with faith in progress providing a kind of secular afterlife in the shape of an imagined human collective, advancing through an open-ended expanse of future time. One could see them in one's mind's eye—whether one's successors were marching under the banner of one's nation, one's class, or of universal humanity—and, in identifying oneself with them, enjoy a vicarious sense of life everlasting.<sup>9</sup>

Belief in this religion of humanity has been in retreat for many decades: the atavistic shocks of the twentieth century—whose bloodshed and terror were so often the work of those acting in the name of such a religion—had started to discredit it before environmentalism came along to disprove it. If progress led to the death of God, then its refutation has led to the death of humankind, as the divinity of a secular religion. Thus, it is today that we confront our fate as mere individuals, theodicy-less. Once progress is finally dismissed as an illusion then the divine light, which had illuminated modernity, is lost. The secular is itself secularised. The material world is all there is, and once we realise that it is finite, then we understand ourselves to be so too.

### 5.3 Nihil Unbound

The Anthropocene represents the triumph of secularisation, of the modern prejudice against the objective existence of values. The term 'nihilism' was coined contemporaneously with, and explicitly to describe, exactly the kind of late Enlightenment attitude we discussed earlier—Laplace's dream of understanding the cosmos in mathematical, hence predictable, forms, thereby rendering the 'God hypothesis' otiose.<sup>10</sup> It was named 'nihilism' after the doctrine of *Ex nihilo nihil fit*: nothing comes from nothing. This means, in the context of modernity, the belief that the Universe was not created, out of nothing by a divine will, but that it exists by its own immanent principles, infinitely and eternally. The pejorative meaning of nihilism relates to

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<sup>9</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 72–73.

what this doctrine implied: the Universe may not have come from nothing, but that means that there is nothing beyond it either, no source of transcendent values. In the nineteenth century, nihilism meant a sense that nothing in life mattered, since life as a whole was going to go on forever; every person's life was to be compressed into insignificance by consciousness of an eternity of future worldly time. Everything that could happen was going to happen, again and again, in an eternal return.

Now things are worse yet. After advances in scientific knowledge that have told us the Universe is not infinite, that it had a beginning and will have an end, nihilism comes into its own. For we moderns now do believe that the Universe came from nothing, in the form of the Big Bang, and that it will be followed by another nothing. But we have not restored the idea of a divine will standing behind it all. If life seemed to have no meaning to those who contemplated an eternity of worldly time to succeed them, what must it mean to us who contemplate an eternal nothing to succeed the demise of our world? Life must become just a fleeting, meaningless fluke; from nothing we come, to nothing we go, and the middle passage is infused with the spirit of nothingness. The Anthropocene stands as the moment when this is brought home to us.

## 5.4 A (trans)humanist vision

In this situation there is a great temptation to take refuge in denial, to numb our sensibilities to our nihilistic predicament; the numbness being our nihilism. For those who sense “in their bones” that climate change is an existential predicament’, and find little cause for optimism in the political response, to live in denial has a ‘twisted kind of rationality’ to it.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the Anthropocene to date, as awareness of existential threat has risen, so have we collectively foreshortened our gaze: the ‘future has been abolished, evicted from the field of vision’, lest we do not like what we see. In its place we have increasingly sought to fill up our attention

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<sup>11</sup> Jörg Friedrichs, ‘Peak Energy and Climate Change: The Double Bind of Post-Normal Science’, *Futures*, Special Issue: Community Engagement for Sustainable Urban Futures, 43, no. 4 (1 May 2011), 474–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2010.12.004>.

with the here and now, to live in a ‘time without continuation or consequence, a continuous present’.<sup>12</sup> It is a collective flight from reality; on a global level, the height of irresponsibility.<sup>13</sup>

One school of thought that seeks to dispel this denialism is represented by a group of researchers associated with Oxford University’s Future of Humanity Institute (FHI).<sup>14</sup> This group is dedicated to promoting awareness of the existential risks to human survival—extending beyond climate change to encompass nuclear war, rogue AI, asteroid strikes, and, on larger and larger scales, astronomical calamities such as the death of the Sun.<sup>15</sup>

Based at the FHI, the moral philosopher Toby Ord argues that we have a moral imperative to secure our ongoing existence.<sup>16</sup> The basis of this argument is, as spelt out by his colleague Thomas Moynihan, our observations to date that we are the only sentient beings in existence. This makes us the only source of values in an otherwise valueless Universe. Virtue itself lives and dies with us. Thus, we need to develop a deep and collective sense of human vocation, our primary, civilisational purpose being to maintain and extend that very civilisation.<sup>17</sup> The present moment

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<sup>12</sup> Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, 141.

<sup>13</sup> Even here, progressive theodicy may live on. See Tim Jackson and Miriam Pepper’s analysis of the theodicy of late twentieth and early twenty-first century consumerism, in which faith in an ongoing stream of material possibilities helps to hold deep, existential angst at bay. Tim Jackson and Miriam Pepper, ‘Consumerism as Theodicy: Religious and Secular Meaning Functions in Modern Society’, in Lyn Thomas, ed., *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost?* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 17-36.

<sup>14</sup> Another prominent group that bears some relation to the FHI are the ‘ecomodernists’ of the Breakthrough Institute. For an analysis of the theodical nature of their ongoing belief in technological progress to master the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, see Clive Hamilton, ‘The theodicy of the “Good Anthropocene”’, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 7, 2015, pp. 233-238. Hamilton has enough sympathy for the object of theodicy that in analysing ecomodernism in these terms he is out to ‘demystify rather than debunk’ it. All the same, he is quite clear: this theodicy is false. Alas, his analysis does not suggest any more fruitful alternative.

<sup>15</sup> See Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic, eds., *Global Catastrophic Risks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Toby Ord, *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Moynihan, *X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2020).

is pivotal: as Ord writes, ‘whether we are remembered as the generation who turned the corner to a bright and secure future, or not remembered at all, comes down to whether we rise to meet these challenges.’<sup>18</sup>

In terms of seeking to inspire practical, collective action to avert ecological breakdown, this school are surely right. But their secularist supposition that we are the source of all value implies an utterly nihilistic attitude towards nature; and since we humans are a part of nature, it implies a rejection of our natural selves. Their logic commits them to transhumanism, an extension and transformation of the human being via technological innovation. It is our biology, after all, which contaminates us with mortal frailty; thus, transhumanists seek ‘a total emancipation from biology itself’.<sup>19</sup> This school do not actually want to avert human extinction, they want to transcend humanity; in embracing transhumanism they are in fact committed to human extinction. They want us to leave humanity behind, to shed our natural, biological basis. Only by upgrading our selves via technology, ultimately by digitising and uploading our minds to some digital substrate, do they think we can outpace death.

This is our vocation, they say: to do whatever it takes to maintain our existence. If we are the source of all values, then we are all that matters; and for us to believe that life matters, and that there is a point to existence, then we must be committed to existing forever. Only this way will we preserve the cosmos itself from the eternal night of unredeemed nihilism. But every astronomical body and the Universe itself are mortal; every planet, star, and galaxy will burn out. And so, even transhumanism is not enough. Even a digitised self must have some hardware to run on.

The logic of the need to imagine the successive overcoming of all manifestations of death prompts the most outlandish of fantasies. We will need to re-engineer the heavens, towing the Earth towards a new star as our Sun runs out of fuel,<sup>20</sup> or

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<sup>18</sup> Ord, *The Precipice*.

<sup>19</sup> Mark O’Connell quoted in Geoffrey Karabin, ‘The Heaven of the Transhumanists’, *Genealogies of Modernity*, 9 February 2021, <https://genealogiesofmodernity.org/journal/2021/1/29/the-heaven-of-the-transhumanists>.

<sup>20</sup> Adrian Berry, *The Giant Leap: Mankind Heads for the Stars*, Revised Edition (London: Headline, 2000), 243.

disassembling it to be recycled into spaceships to the same purpose;<sup>21</sup> to reverse the ageing process on a galactic scale we will want to engage in ‘large-scale engineering projects to keep the universe trim and maintain the optimum conditions for life’;<sup>22</sup> ultimately, we will need to take control of all space and time, fusing the cosmos and ourselves into a sentient singularity, the Omega Point, in which we all spend eternity living in perpetual prosperity.<sup>23</sup>

To escape the nihilism of death in the secular, the transhumanists say, we must bring the cosmos itself under control—mastering death by mastering nature, making it an extension of ourselves, of the ego that believes it can never die. This is accelerating the Anthropocene to avoid being destroyed by it: the end of nature to the end of time.

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<sup>21</sup> Frank J. Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 57.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman Dyson, *Imagined Worlds* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 172.

<sup>23</sup> Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality*.

# Chapter 6

## Beyond the Anthropocene

So, modern metaphysics and its fundamental picture of reality has been disproved, and from within the intellectual terms of modernity itself. The Universe is *not* infinite; the temporal and material are not endless. Modern theodicy, its defining vision of progress already failing, ultimately falls with modern metaphysics. If even the Universe will have an end, then humanity certainly will; we know in advance that progress must one day encounter obstacles that remain insuperable. The transhuman attempt to extend modernity forever only succeeds in undermining its credibility.

What do these developments tell us about modernity? That the conditions are here, now, for it to be superseded? This is not a conclusion that necessarily would have made sense to Blumenberg, given his preoccupation with defending the legitimacy of modernity. But it is readily implied by his approach to history as an evolution of theodical ideas.<sup>1</sup>

The possibility of epochal transition is almost impossible to discuss seriously, it must be said—certainly not when one is talking about one’s own epoch. Any epoch must appear as embodying a true reflection of reality and acquire an aura of unquestionability. The secularising tendencies of modernity have added to this by eventually

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<sup>1</sup> It could even find support, one might observe in parentheses, in William Temple’s writing on the subject. For Temple, not a single attempt to solve the ‘triangular problem’ of theodicy—the simultaneous recognition of ‘the reality of evil, the universal sovereignty of God, and His perfect goodness’—had ever been altogether satisfactory. But this is something that we simply cannot live without attempting; and the failure of one attempted theodicy may prompt successive and better attempts, he suggested. Temple, *Nature, Man And God*, 356–57.

making metaphysical speculation itself appear insupportably subjective. Moreover, modernity, based as it is on a metaphysics of infinite immanence, has from its beginnings been thought of as ‘a final realm [...] that will come into being but have no end’.<sup>2</sup> But if science itself tells us that these founding metaphysics are false, then logically the interdiction against speculation on this level should fall. The terms of modernity no longer satisfy, either in a purely intellectual or in a theodical sense. The boundaries of what speculation may count as being intellectually respectable become expanded by default.

## 6.1 Respiritualised times

There are already signs of a greater readiness to ask such questions within mainstream, secular discourse: to admit metaphysics, and discussions of spirituality and transcendence, back into intellectually serious conversation. A notable example was the two-year *Spiritualise* project at the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), led by the philosopher Jonathan Rowson, resulting in a report published in 2014.<sup>3</sup> Engaging with different religious faiths and philosophical traditions, this project explored the centrality of the human experience of spirituality, explicitly including the experience of those who would not think of themselves as being religious. Its impact came from being the work of the RSA, a long-standing secular institution associated with the practical advances of modern progress.

Rowson’s report seems representative of a moment in which the door to metaphysical discussion is being opened again. Only now, it is not so much that questions of spirituality are to be given a new hearing within the terms of secular modernity, as that the modern worldview itself is coming into question.

What, concretely, does such talk imply? If a new epoch is to emerge it will be shaped by the modern, just as modernity had been shaped by the religious worldview from which it emerged. What would enable modernity to transcend itself and emerge into a new epoch would, in fact, be precisely the recognition of the secularisation

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Rowson, *Spiritualise: Cultivating Spiritual Sensibility to Address 21st Century Challenges*, 2nd Edition (London: The RSA, 2017).

thesis: the understanding that modernity, and its scientific, secular worldview, is a product of theological thinking and theodical need. The very recognition of an underlying continuity with religion at modernity's core would undermine the concept of secularity, and, with it, modernity's self-understanding as marking a sharp break with the theological.

Such a realisation would not mean the triumph of what we have known for the past forty or fifty years under that broadest of headings: postmodernism—that should rather be seen as 'a phenomenon of modernity's bad conscience', as doubts have crept in about the reality of progress.<sup>4</sup> It would not falsify the methods of modern science, nor all the knowledge we have gained and continue to gain through it. The main effect would be to restore consciousness of the fact that science has metaphysical foundations. It would be to recognise that what modern science has discovered—the secret of its success—is the *logos* in the immanent world. It reveals hidden structures, relationships, and laws in nature, and affords us some measure of practical control over nature as a result. All its intellectual progress is real; rediscovering metaphysics, as an expanded register in which to think about reality, would do nothing to cancel it.

Exploring a metaphysical context for science should actually—by re-embedding it within a transcendental dimension—be a way of strengthening belief in reason and scientific knowledge. This is to recognise that a thoroughly secularised scientific enterprise fundamentally does not make sense of the world to us. Once we believe that there is nothing beyond the Universe, we embed the Universe in nothing; when we then say that the chain of causation goes back no further than the Big Bang, then we make the Universe itself inexplicable and thus irrational. Reason itself is turned into a contingent product of our accidental cosmos. This irrationality then permeates through all scientific explanation. A disjuncture arises between the pretensions of scientific rationality and its inability to answer the big questions of human existence.

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<sup>4</sup> Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (London: MIT Press, 2002), 4.

For as long as the practical successes of science keep coming and its prestige is high, this fault can, on a social level, be bridged. But it means we are forever vulnerable to the kinds of crank theories that reject scientific authority in favour of explanations which, while false, offer us a synthetic experience of rationality, connecting our individual lives with supra-personal explanations.

## 6.2 The succour of metaphysics

Just to be asking metaphysical questions again, to take them seriously as a society, would be to help more people find (open themselves up to) a connection with a sensed dimension of eternal being. This could provide an enormous amount of theodical succour. One of the great evils of late modernity is the sense of overwhelming contingency: no sense of reason or necessity underpinning the flux of events. All is flux. Everything could just as easily have been other than it is. Nothing happens for a reason extraneous to its own self-preservation—which will always ultimately end in failure. ‘Things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind them [...] there is nothing.’<sup>5</sup> To understand reality in this way is to be enclosed in one’s own private self—to be haunted by one’s own contingency, interpenetrated by impermanence. From this state, simply to begin asking metaphysical questions—and thus to recognise another dimension of existence, even if one has the most unfinished grasp of it—is to open up the boundaries of the self. This could help to address the pangs of existential insecurity. In gaining a vision of necessary being one becomes aware of an eternal presence and one’s connection with it, thereby offering a sensed experience of eternal life—and of life’s fundamental goodness, in its very indestructibility.

Metaphysical questions will be asked in different ways within different philosophical and religious traditions. But I think it may be that Christianity has a special role, or status, or potential within this. If we take the secularisation thesis seriously, Christianity is in important ways the mother of modernity; it would be natural to inquire of Christian theology if we are now talking about transcending modernity again. Christianity, in its emphasis on the person of God, and on the relationship of human persons to that divine person, has a great deal to say specifically about

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), 112.

human character and action. It offers the idea of life to be lived within the context of a spiritual mission. And one which, in affirming our dependent nature—renouncing the ambition to make gods of ourselves, and, with it, impulses and social logics from which derive our characteristically modern forms of inhuman behaviour—may help us to reconnect with what being human means.<sup>6</sup> This seems precisely the context in which a new epoch may most readily emerge out of these Anthropocene times of exhausted modernity.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018).

# Conclusion

‘The resources of the earth should be used as God’s gifts to the whole human race, and used with due consideration for the needs of the present and future generations.’ These words—anticipating the 1987 Brundtland Report’s<sup>7</sup> secular articulation of the principle of sustainability by nearly five decades—appear in the conclusion of William Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order*.<sup>8</sup> They are not his words alone; he takes them from a letter he wrote jointly with three other church leaders to *The Times*, in December 1940.<sup>9</sup> These words refer, he says, to the background principle that must be satisfied in order for any human progress to be accomplished.

Eighty years on, we know that this principle has not been sufficiently respected, on a global scale; today, as a result, what was background has become foreground. This is the meaning of the Anthropocene: the natural world is no longer the taken-for-granted foundation for our projects but, increasingly, their all-too-present destroyer. In this new world we need to do more than respect the environmental basis of civilisation; environmental concern ought to be seen as the centrepiece of civilisation itself. We need to recognise the vocation of our time: to put the fruits of modernity to work in restoring natural environments to conditions of self-sustaining health for the long term. Such work ought to command the greatest practical urgency and might

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ – Chapter 2, no page number, 1987, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> William Temple *et al.*, Letter, *The Times*, 21 December 1940.

yield great benefits to humanity and other species. But it would also be a story of moral restoration, of our rediscovering, as a global civilisation, our spiritual being: ‘ecological restoration is social restoration is human restoration’.<sup>10</sup>

One can only envisage the peoples of the world acting on such a scale and to such purpose if activated by a sense of spiritual mission. Hugh Montefiore said as much, writing in 1972: ‘There is no possibility of such huge changes in personal, national and international orientation taking place except under the compulsion of strong religious conviction. [...] Religion, far from being outmoded, provides the only hope of man’s deliverance.’<sup>11</sup>

Why did this message not presage a decisive new sense of religious mission at the time? A strong environmental movement did grow out of those times (and Montefiore was a leading player, serving as Chair of Friends of the Earth for many years), and there have been prominent environmentalists of faith ever since, but environmentalism itself has remained essentially secular in outlook: modernist minus the progress.<sup>12</sup> As for the other side, the mainstream currents of politics and economics, one could say the theodical promise of secular progress was still too vivid, and the immanent sense of political reality, shaped by the Cold War, too all-encompassing.

Perhaps things are different now. The recognition of the Anthropocene is the recognition that environmental limits are already beginning to bite. And the political, immanent world seems less weighty, less exhaustively real than before. With the prestige of one theodicy attenuated, another has a greater chance of being listened to, and perceptions of reality shifting with it.

In action, such a shifting of perspectives would mean something like turning what William Temple did inside out: instead of reinfusing secular action with spiritual purpose, it would mean reforming the secular understanding of reality itself. In recognising the inescapable reality of humankind’s relationship with a transcendental dimension, secularity would be recognising its own transcendence. A spiritual mission

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<sup>10</sup> Paddy Woodworth, *Our Once and Future Planet: Restoring the World in the Climate Change Century* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 232.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Montefiore, *Doom or Deliverance? The Dogmas and Duties of a Technological Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 25.

<sup>12</sup> If anything, environmentalism has tended to exhibit an anti-religious bias. For a classic example, see Lynn White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’, *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967), 1203–7.

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of restoration would not be labouring under the modern illusion that technological progress would allow us to ‘fix’ the earth and extend humanity’s career for ever. But it would not lack in theodicy. Because acting in the consciousness of a spiritual mission—doing the right thing—is attempting to instantiate the ideal in the world, to apply our best selves in celebration of it. And that is to enjoy a sense of eternal life in the everyday; to open up the world itself to theodicy.

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