

RELIGIOUS ATAVISM AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS, WITH
REFERENCE TO TAYLOR AND RORTY ON LIBERALISM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>General Abstract</i>	iv
<i>Departmental Abstract</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
ONE	
Climate Crisis and Grand Narratives in a Secular Age	61
TWO	
Religious Atavism and Postsecular Liberalism	132
THREE	
Crisis and Modern Moral Order (Taylor)	189
FOUR	
Atavism and Cultural Politics (Rorty)	244
CONCLUSION	279
BIBLIOGRAPHY	327

GENERAL ABSTRACT

Climate change is often seen as the basis for new grand narratives of Western modernity, but grand narratives in themselves are unstable under the conditions of postsecularity in liberal democracies. By a widely accepted form of deflationary critique through analogy to religion, nominally secular worldviews are susceptible to genealogical redescription in terms of pre-liberal, theological antecedents in Western history. This thesis finds critical resources in theorists of liberalism for reading accounts of climate crisis that put climate at the centre of contemporary Western self-understanding as expressions of religious atavism.

Charles Taylor's genealogical account of secular liberalism provides a framework for understanding climatological claims of transcendental significance. On a Taylorian reading, the reality of climate crisis is perceived, phenomenologically, to repudiate the principle of 'mutual benefit' on which the modern moral order of liberal societies depends. Through its ontic validation of liberal-democratic malaise, climate crisis becomes a quasi-transcendental source of guidance and impetus for radical ideas in politics, theory, and culture.

The concept of atavism is suggested in particular by Richard Rorty's postsecular and historicist view of philosophy as cultural politics. On Rorty's quietist account, the world-historical magnitude of climate crisis is felt to be a cultural 'skyhook' – a foundational source that may be critically redescribed as a vestige of monotheistic dependency. The Rortyan view finds no need of more-than-human validation for utopian speculation, bringing into question the tendency of climate crisis to be invoked as a warrant for broadscale intellectual, social, and political radicalism.

The concurrent conception of climate crisis from both impartial scientific reason and highly conditional 'malaises of modernity' is linked to long-standing tensions in the Enlightenment legacy of liberal democracies. Revisionary programmes from climate crisis are thus both powerful and limited: while credible and moving, they nevertheless remain open to Nietzschean critiques of cultural nihilism.

DEPARTMENTAL ABSTRACT

Although the meaning of climate change is inherently polysemous, being amenable to description through the interpretive concept of ‘imaginaries’,¹ ways of understanding climate denialism have tended to be narrower, being predominantly presented in terms either of corporate manipulation or behavioural psychology.² These approaches have in common a basis in methodological individualism, which leaves to one side the question of how denialism works within a dialectical process. At the same time, the social-philosophical paradigm of *postsecularism* complicates simple dichotomies of belief and public reason. Theorists of the postsecular have challenged traditional dyadic conceptions of the secular through rich genealogies of modernity.

This thesis presents a phenomenological account of denialism in the context of postsecularity: less a rejection of scientific reason and rather more a reaction to the grand narratives of which climate change has been richly productive. On this view, predominant interpretations of climate crisis are jointly driven by natural-scientific outputs and a widespread sense of modern malaise and the concomitant longing for possibilities of ordinal renewal. While conditions of postsecularity broaden the aperture of permissible arguments and positions in the public sphere of liberal societies – allowing forms of religious reason to be embraced where these might once have been excluded – those conditions also mean the weakened plausibility of any single story assuming the role of Western grand narrative. Yet, responses to climate crisis in the mainstream of Western culture do often propose to use climate as the basis for just such foundational stories. This appears above all in the multifarious concept of the Anthropocene, and in climate-centric critiques of economic neoliberalism.

Thus, a sense of the opportunity for heroic renewal sits alongside anxiety and disappointment over climate crisis. This coexistence of aspiration and despair overdetermines proposals across domains of culture and scholarship for broadscale revision of theoretical, scientific, and civilizational frameworks, a trend arguably identifiable as a climatological turn. This thesis presents a critical interpretation of that turn through a hermeneutical concept of *religious atavism*, which links such

1. Mike Hulme, ‘Climate Imaginaries’, in *Climate Change, Key Ideas in Geography* (London: Routledge, 2022), 225–49, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367822675>.

2. Jay Odenbaugh, ‘Skepticism and Denialism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Environmental Ethics*, ed. Benjamin Hale, Andrew Light, and Lydia Lawhon (New York: Routledge, 2022), 293–314, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315768090>.

revisionary programmes genealogically to religious and theological antecedents in Western culture. Revisionist claims of the climatological turn often invoke the essentially novel or unprecedented character of the contemporary global situation. On this category of novelty hypothesis, ecological realities are framed in terms of ‘the unthinkable’, whereby the obsolescence of inherited categories is taken as a warrant for reimagining inherited methodologies and accounts of civilizational order.

The climatological turn is conceptualised in this thesis as a movement spanning disciplines in the natural sciences, those in the humanities and social sciences, and developments in civil society at large. While this trend spans different domains of theory and culture, the thesis draws upon social theorists engaged with ecological issues as a proxy of analysis. The novelty hypothesis takes a precise form in German sociologist Ulrich Beck’s theory of ecological change as a driver of ‘emancipatory catastrophism’, which understands ‘goods’ of epistemic clarity and renewal as emerging from ‘bads’ of ecological peril. Redescription of such claims in terms of religious atavism is presented as an challenge to the novelty hypothesis generally, with specific reference to Beck and to analogous ideas in the work of historian and philosopher of science Bruno Latour. Critical redescription of these claims is done by developing specific genealogies from the accounts of secular modernity in the work of philosophers Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty.

The hermeneutical idea of religious atavism is a way of explaining concepts such as ‘covert religion’ or ‘secularized eschatology’ as an inescapable reality of modern liberal societies. In contrast to methodologies that aim to bring out aspects of religion in terms of self-understanding, religious atavism accounts critically redescribe some given social or intellectual phenomena in terms of religious or theological antecedents, thus entailing the adoption of an ‘etic’ viewpoint.³ The specific historical accounts that the thesis draws upon for this form of redescription are found in the thought of Taylor and Rorty, who present different approaches by which Western social and moral order is theorised in genealogical or narrative terms. The contrasts and convergences between Taylor’s and Rorty’s approaches are as much epistemological as substantive. Where Taylor’s account is positive in

3. The distinction between ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ analytical perspectives originates in linguistics with subsequent development in cultural anthropology, and corresponds roughly to dichotomies (respectively) of ‘outsider–insider’, ‘objective–subjective’, or ‘observation–self-understanding’. While an insider – whose account of their own experience corresponds to an emic vantage point – may very well redescribe his or her own commitments in terms of religious anteriority, such a redescription would categorically be a matter of self-understanding or self-fashioning. The concept continues to be productive in the study of religion; see, for example, Steven Engler and Kevin A. Whitesides, ‘Emic Concepts and Etic Paths’, *Religion* 52, no. 1 (2022): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.2011090>.

method and ecumenical in spirit, Rorty's is privative and deflationary. At the level of epistemology, although Taylor's realism and Rorty's pragmatism lie in opposition to each other, each position has the practical effect of enabling a move from epistemology to social theory.



The thesis's introduction considers the religious overtones of climate discourse generally and some different ways that these might be interpreted. Touchstones of the climatological turn are introduced, with special reference to the ubiquitous and centripetal paradigm of the Anthropocene. Specific theorists of the climatological turn are introduced as proxies for analysis of the movement overall. The concept of religious atavism is introduced as a hermeneutical tool for understanding the historicist underpinnings of contemporary liberal self-understanding, and Taylor and Rorty are introduced as theorists whose work provides the raw material for redescriptive accounts.

Chapter one introduces features of the climatological turn, which refers to a constellation of attempts to use climate crisis as the basis for new grand narratives of Western modernity. The chapter begins with a general discussion of climate crisis as a concept, which may be understood in political and cultural terms by contrast to traditional forms of environmentalism. The discussion next considers constituent features of the climatological turn, a broad movement in scholarship and culture whose revisionist programmes find warrants in scientific prognostications of ecological change and crisis. Constituent literatures of the climatological turn have at their core a large and growing conversation on the phenomenon of the Anthropocene, a concept that has been richly developed in particular by the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour, who espouses a form of neo-animism based on the Lovelockian notion of the Earth as a quasi-sentient entity called Gaia. Three interrelated motifs of critical theorising within the climatological turn are anti-anthropocentrism, cultural and intellectual vanguardism, and a focus on order-defining *grand récits*. The discussion in this chapter observes in particular the trend in Anthropocene scholarship of proposals to repristinate stadial schemes of civilizational development. The centrality of warrants from the natural sciences within the constituent literatures of the climatological turn indicates an epistemological or ontological commitment to a traditional, Cartesian 'order of reasons'.⁴

4. Although a great deal of research has linked the idea of climate crisis and religious sentiment explicitly, in pursuing the subject of religious atavism per se the thesis is concerned primarily with accounts of environmental change that operate in spaces governed by methodological atheism,

Chapter two argues that conditions of postsecularity implicitly challenge the legitimacy of grand narratives of Western modernity, owing to the obsolescence of the traditional secular/religious dyad. While the postsecular turn elevates religious reason in the public sphere, it also subjects claims of purely secular reason to critical pressure. That critical pressure is theorised in the thesis by the hermeneutical concept of religious atavism: the principle by which any social, cultural, or intellectual story in modern liberal democracies may be critically redescribed – from an etic (outsider’s) viewpoint – as having a religious character or essence with genealogical reference to pre-liberal antecedents. Indeed, reasoning by analogy to religion or the religious is a commonplace of the Western mentality, and instances of religious atavism argument may be found across an array of contexts, registers, genres, and programmes. In this sense, the hermeneutical category of religious atavism argument is intentionally synoptic, encompassing a range of claims that would ordinarily not be thought together. In the basic, bipartite features of this synoptic category, instances of it will always include 1) some ascription of religious anteriority 2) from an etic standpoint.⁵

Specific instances of religious atavism argument may appear in the context of established programmes, ideas, or theories, with notable examples including the orientation in modern theology known as *radical orthodoxy* associated with the theologian John Milbank; the myriad of variations on the idea of *political theology* that all take their point of departure from the twentieth-century German jurist Carl Schmitt; and the academic paradigm of *civil religion* first used by the sociologist Robert Bellah. Observing the traditional problem of formal definition in the study of religion, religious atavism serves, too, as a heuristic that reveals intuitive, everyday understandings of the religious. Insofar as the concept of religious atavism is inherently historical, chapter two provides some context for the normativity of historicism in Western culture,⁶ finding models for contemporary religious atavism

insofar as it is intrinsic to arguments from religious atavism that their subjects be understood as having a religious component from an etic standpoint but not also an emic standpoint. Although it is perfectly conceivable that the religious atavism concept could be used, for example, in considering degrees of religiosity of subjects that are already religious from an emic viewpoint – i.e., as a matter of self-understanding – cases at this level of nuance are beyond the scope of the chapter.

5. While it is conceivable, as a matter of logic, to formulate a religious atavism argument without reference to anteriority – to describe, in other words, the hidden religious aspect of a given phenomenon without reference to history – the concept as proposed in this thesis derives its force from the conventionality of historicist thought, so that some invocation of social, cultural, or intellectual progression is inherent to the category. In this point lies the significance of the word *atavism*, with its connotations of stadial development.

6. The sense of *historicism* invoked here is a critical one that understands the distinctiveness of epochs as affording a comparative capability, whereby continuity and change in one era may always potentially inform the self-understanding of liberal individuals in other eras. Via the historicist

argument in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, including Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith, and Eric Voegelin.⁷

Chapter three develops a specific version of religious atavism account in regard to climate crisis with reference to the work of philosopher Charles Taylor. Drawing upon what Taylor calls a ‘reform master narrative’ – an expansive genealogical account of secular modernity that elucidates contemporary Western sensibilities in terms of intellectual and cultural consequences of the Reformation – climate crisis challenges the ‘mutual benefit’ principle that Taylor sees as being at the core of the modern moral order. On this account, the repudiation of the mutual benefit principle by climate crisis presents an *ontic* (i.e., immanent) validation of contemporary malaise, and thus resolves a tension between Enlightenment anti-teleology and the endurance of a globalised liberal-democratic telos. Climate crisis is thus experienced phenomenologically as liberatory, in view of the confining experience of life in the ‘immanent frame’ of modern existence. In this way, climate crisis becomes, counter-intuitively, a form of liberatory good. This hermeneutical account of the suasive power and force of climate narratives is in contrast to claims that the climatological turn is explicable solely through the force of scientific reason in the public sphere. This hermeneutical hypothesis is explored more deeply through Beck’s slogan of epistemic ‘goods’ emerging from ‘bads’ of ecological peril.

Chapter four develops an interpretation of Richard Rorty as a theorist of the postsecular who critiques the privileging of scientific reason in the context of liberal societies. Rorty’s thought contains a religious atavism strategy that is different in substance and method from the Taylorian iteration developed in chapter three. Where Taylor’s account is positive, presenting a vision of moral order that repudiates ‘subtraction stories’ of secularization, Rorty’s account is privative and quietist. As in the case of Taylor, however, the specific elements of Rorty’s social thought may be linked to his epistemological commitments. The quietism of Rorty’s pragmatism is linked to his thoroughgoing anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism in regard to culture and politics. The disparate strands of Rorty’s pragmatism may be brought together in the figure of the cultural *skyhook*, which refers to any (for

transposition, contemporaries who observe the fragility of past worldviews will experience weakened confidence in the durability of their own worldviews – and may, indeed, come to see dearly held truths in terms of mere ideology; cf. Troeltschian ‘crisis of historicism’ theses, e.g., Frederick Beiser, ‘Historicism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Michael Rosen and Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 171–73.

7. Hans Blumenberg is a significant figure in this context, in particular due to his exchanges with Löwith, but he could only be said to provide a model for contemporary religious atavism argument in terms of counterexample, for his general position is defined by his adamant rejection of the religious atavism premise. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

Rorty, purely mythical) form of incorrigible knowledge – any Archimedean lever – by which to proceed with certainty in intellectual, political, or cultural undertakings. For Rorty the contemporary longing for skyhooks is, by analogy, a vestige of Western monotheism. The nullity of skyhooks and other expressions of foundation-ism is the basis for Rorty’s conception of philosophy as *cultural politics*. In view of Rorty’s thoroughgoing anthropocentrism, a distinctively Rortyan religious atavism strategy would see the self-conscious displacement of the human in the context of climate crisis as a misguided attempt to link up with transcendence.

The conclusion argues that conditions of postsecularity should be understood as simultaneously propelling the climatological turn and qualifying its viability as a Western grand narrative. The Rortyan and Taylorian religious atavism accounts of climate crisis reveal an intrinsic relation between order and the social sacred in contemporary perspective. Since the time of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and William James (1842–1910), scholars of religion have explored how forms of social or moral order are constructed through socially-instituted conceptions of the sacred. Much commentary on the spiritual or religious dimensions of climate crisis adopts – in some cases self-consciously and in others reflexively – some version of the sacral–ordinal paradigm, and proposals of systemic solutions to climate crisis often include the adoption of overtly religious relations with the Earth or domains of the non-human generally. Voices both within and outside of the academy propose the creation and adoption of sacrality narratives to foster climate-oriented political and cultural agendas. Such narratives tend to draw upon motifs of the climatological turn, in particular characterising anthropocentrism per se as the originary source of ecological crisis. The foregoing – demonstrating something of the great cultural and political energy around the concept of climate crisis – indicates that conditions of postsecularity are likely to be fostering the power of climate narratives. Yet, at the same time, conditions of ‘fragilisation’ (Taylor) and ‘liberal irony’ (Rorty) mean that ordinal sources tend to be occluded from discursive scrutiny in liberal societies. Under such conditions, projects of effecting artificial resacralisation are likely to fail in achieving the status of Jamesian ‘live options’, and stories that attain the size and scope of traditional grand narratives will tend to come under critical scrutiny. Thus, the religious atavism accounts developed in this thesis suggest that attempts at deliberate resacralisation will tend to be no less vulnerable to *religionskritik* than traditional forms of faith. Denialism may then be reinterpreted in terms of this essentially Nietzschean critique.

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INTRODUCTION

In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, the concept of climate crisis has loomed large in Western culture.¹ Originating in findings of the natural sciences, the idea of climate change has gradually taken on connotations of planetary environmental crisis – even *emergency* – and in the process has become predominant across diverse quarters of the social sciences, the humanities, politics, and culture at large. This thesis considers the extent to which climate crisis has come to be felt, phenomenologically, as an organising paradigm of order and disorder. As would be the case for any organising paradigm, the overriding significance of climate crisis is often taken to be self-evident. The force and ubiquity of climate crisis as a paradigm owes much, undoubtedly, to the suasive force of scientific reason in Western liberal democracies. Nevertheless, as climate crisis is woven ever more finely into new grand narratives of Western modernity, scientific reason alone becomes less and less plausible as an explanation of the concept’s remarkable career. Because grand narratives are intrinsically to do with civilizational progress and regress, they depend for their credibility on some sense of transcendent values, which will ordinarily precede or exist alongside scientific reason. There is thus good reason to view climate crisis from a Nietzschean standpoint, from which liberal modernity rests upon occluded religious foundations.

1. There are various ways of referring to the present situation of planetary change and instability. The term primarily used in this thesis, *climate crisis*, is widely used and may be regarded as an instance of synecdoche, as it normally gestures as well towards such non-climatic issues as biodiversity loss. A more capacious formula would be that of ‘climate and ecological crisis’, as found in the important set of essays, Greta Thunberg, ed., *The Climate Book* (London: Allen Lane, 2022).

Climate crisis is often invoked as a challenge to received accounts of human progress and flourishing – held out as evidence that modern prosperity has been obtained only at a high and hidden cost. Viewing different stances on climate crisis as ideal types, the geographer and cultural theorist of climate change Mike Hulme refers to an attitude towards the crisis that he calls ‘transformative radicalism’, defined by ‘an adherence, often tenacious and passionate, to the findings of climate science and a deep dissatisfaction with the ideology and institutions of the current world order.’² On this view, climate crisis is understood primarily as a *negative* by-product of technoscientific progress, while knowledge and expanded awareness of the crisis are understood as cultural progress in a *positive* sense, one that is often concurrent politically with left-wing progressivism. Indeed, on many accounts of climate crisis, progress is both exposed as false and simultaneously promised anew. Ambivalences of this kind arguably express the pathos of loss and renewal that has coloured accounts of civilizational modernity for as long as such accounts have existed. In view of such pathos, theorisations of social or civilizational progress inevitably raise questions about the nature and meaning of secularization – the displacement of faith as the bulwark of value and purpose. Such questions are natural to Western liberal democracies, whose histories tend to involve an Enlightenment movement from religious and theological foundations towards the sovereignty of secular reason.³

2. Mike Hulme, *Climate Change* (London: Routledge, 2022), 106.

3. Canonically, the central problem on this point is framed by the following pair of questions: Is all social and cultural progress definable as a move away from faith and towards the hegemony of reason, which intrinsically fosters ethical and technoscientific improvement? Or is the very notion of

The extent to which climate crisis readily provides raw material for grand narratives of modernity indicates the sort of *legitimacy* that it has. The passion and dedication that climate change regularly elicits is remarkable amidst the postmodernist skepticism that pervades liberal democracies in the early twenty-first century: climate crisis sustains narratives of Western modernity where other issues are drained of their unifying potential by conventions of critique. The topic of legitimacy in turn points to underlying justifications of civilizational order that may be understood as the modern counterparts of theological foundations. Defining socio-political legitimacy in non-theological terms has been a central problem in Western thought at least since the time of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). What are the sources of legitimacy in societies whose foundational stories – originally based in revealed religion – have been undone by the force of reason? Can rationalism in itself be a sustaining source of legitimacy? Or must some residue of religious commitment always persist for order to be maintained? The rhetoric of climate crisis often presents scientific reason as having a privileged role in public policy and discourse, showing legitimacy to be a constant desideratum in the liberal-democratic public sphere.

It might be said that climate crisis naturally fosters grand narratives by virtue of its size and scope. As a natural phenomenon, or set of phenomena, climate change is inherently global and thus potentially touches all aspects of human existence. Climate change furthermore has a natural priority, lying outside of purely human constructs while nonetheless being substan-

progress a ‘secular version of Christian eschatology’? John Gray, ‘An Illusion with a Future’, *Daedalus* 133, no. 3 (2004): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027925>.

tially influenced by human affairs. There is thus a natural movement in the case of climate crisis between value-neutral and value-laden domains. Consider the relationship between climate change's direct effects and its underlying causes. Direct effects of climate change like extreme weather events are (at least in theory) amenable to value-neutral exposition through the natural sciences. Yet climate change is also anthropogenic, and therefore the product of specific, value-driven choices.

Talk of *belief* in climate change often frustrates those who see the issue as one of pure, objective fact. 'Have not expressions like "faith in science" and "faith in reason" become widely repeated clichés? Meanwhile, the "beliefs" of professional climate scientists are placed in the public discourse on equal footing with those of amateur global warming skeptics.'⁴ Nevertheless, as an outcome of human activity, climate crisis raises all manner of anthropological and cultural-historical questions. As noted above, climate crisis is often taken to reveal a rot deep within modern civilization, one which requires systemic renewal and reinvention of human institutions. Climate crisis thus has the power to reframe inherited accounts of Western decadence in the putatively value-neutral terms of the natural sciences. In this way, the concept of climate crisis produces grand narratives that are protected from the corrosive effects of social constructivism. Grand narratives may, however, be regarded as a *genre* that is problematic in itself, without regard to any particular story. The reality of climate change may

4. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 61.

be scientifically beyond dispute, but grand narratives – regardless of their source material – are a different question altogether.

The contention here is that grand narratives may in themselves constitute a form of religious conviction. Drawing the theological out of nominally secular domains naturally raises methodological issues, as does any distinction between value-neutrality and value-ladenness. Juxtaposing rational and non-rational forms of suasion must answer to theories of secularization that have tended to discredit *dyadic* categories of the secular and the religious. From this theoretical trend, the idea of *postsecularity* has described certain doxological norms of contemporary liberal societies. In postsecular contexts, grand narratives, by virtue of their size and force alone, tend to indicate traces of the theological. Critical accounts of modernity have, at least since Max Weber (1864–1920) and the founding of the sociology of religion, observed religion as being, in some sense, hidden in plain sight. To claim that some given phenomenon is quasi- or cryptoreligious requires a theory to account for that hiddenness and a method for demonstrating what is hidden. The paradigm of postsecularity has, accordingly, fostered phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches that reveal, in theory, otherwise occluded dimensions of value and normativity. The nuances of lived experience revealed by such approaches are not accounted for by dyadic conceptualisations of the secular and the religious. It is at this phenomenological level that extrascientific dimensions of climate crisis are likely to be uncovered – between the lines, so to speak, of those dichotomies that often shape the uppermost levels of public discourse.

This thesis argues that the concept of climate crisis emerges from the distinctively post-secular situation of twentieth-century liberal democracies. This argument is made through a philosophical hermeneutics that synthesises Charles Taylor’s account of Western liberal modernity and Richard Rorty’s theory of philosophy as cultural politics. As theorists of contemporary liberalism – who are concerned in particular with recurring ambiguities of liberal secularism – Taylor and Rorty offer resources with which to critically evaluate contemporary grand narratives and the claims of priority often made on behalf of climate crisis. A synthesis of their insights offers one way of answering the question ‘why didn’t they act?’⁵ – why, that is, has there not been a mobilisation of government and civil society on the scale that many see as self-evidently necessary to contend with the consequences of climate crisis? The answer suggested here is that postsecularity – an inherently pluralistic condition – produces a widely shared sense of lost meaning, which triggers a demand for new grand narratives. This demand operates alongside scientific reason in validating climate crisis as a paradigm of order. But new grand narratives will tend to face significant counterreactions, because foundational stories of a certain size and force – in the context of postsecularity – become susceptible to critique in terms of *religious atavism*. In short, postsecularity may explain both the rise and force of the climate crisis concepts as well as constraints on its potential as a force of change. On this view, climate denialism is less a matter of rejecting scientific reason and rather more one of cultural reaction.

5. Naomi Oreskes, ‘Why Didn’t They Act?’, in *The Climate Book*, ed. Greta Thunberg (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 29–31.

Approaching climate crisis in this way introduces a problem of overdetermination into the subject of climate ‘belief’, as the intertwining of scientific reason and extrascientific commitment arguably undercuts the purity of climatological warrants. Radical proposals premised on climate crisis often dovetail explicitly or implicitly with aspirations to *reenchant* the world, and climate change discourse is filled with the themes of civilizational decline and renewal. But dissatisfaction with the modern world did not begin with the emergence of climate crisis. The decadence of the modern world is a trope as old as modernity itself, as is the motif of a moribund West contrasted to the noble savage (or, later, the Nietzschean or Soviet ‘new man’). The very concept of modernity is arguably untenable without some sense that participation in a specific, historically recent form of life involves trade-offs between immanent goods and bygone transcendence.⁶ The approach of this thesis is therefore to consider how the concept of climate crisis may function as source of *respite* from the existential malaise commonly identified with the modern condition. This is important because, if proposals for contending with climate change are motivated by a longing for civilizational renewal alongside scientific prognostications of planetary peril, inherited accounts of civilizational denouement then become a resource for climate politics.

6. This raises such critical questions as, to what degree do ecological critiques of modernity bear the imprint of accounts that are historically antecedent to climate change or thematically broader in scope? And does it make any difference whether climate-centric agendas simply recapitulate inherited genres, such as the apocalyptic or utopianism?

Climate crisis as a source of social goods

The idea of overdetermination is a critique of explanations that rely on any single causal relationship. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines overdetermination in the following way: ‘The existence of more than one cause or contributory factor, or of more conditions than are necessary to determine or account for something’.⁷ Much discourse on climate change is to do with the determinants of climate ‘belief’. What causes the rise, development, and adoption of climate-centric grand narratives? It is a widely held commonplace that the primary answer should be along the lines of ‘research outputs of climate science’. Similarly, climate denial is commonly explained by pointing to corporate ‘merchants of doubt’ or pervasive instances of cognitive dissonance. Underlining that ascendant accounts of climate crisis are overdetermined is one critical response to the valourisation of institutional science, which operates in a cultural context of widespread malaise – even nihilism. This is effectively a conceptual and emotional vacuum into which climate change and related ideas of ecological catastrophe emit elements of large, unifying stories. This thesis contends that the development and embrace of climate-centric grand narratives has much to do with a broadscale demand for large, unifying stories while denialism, conversely, stems largely from a normative wariness towards such stories.

In other words, overdetermination is a heuristic device for managing the inherent complexity of a topic like climate crisis. Supposing that grand narratives take their form from

7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘overdetermination’, last modified July 2023, <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/Entry/134478?redirectedFrom=overdetermination>.

inherent human needs, one observes an entanglement of domains: stark objective fact on one side, nuanced issues of human value on the other. For evidence of this entanglement, one need only consider the sharp politicisation of climate change in liberal democracies. At one extreme of simplification, climate crisis may be understood as a large but essentially straightforward problem of engineering, solveable by technoscientific definition and remedy; at the other extreme, climate crisis may be understood as a totalising matter of spirituality that necessarily touches every aspect of human culture and meaning. At the level of lived experience, either extreme is bound to fall short of a full account. Insofar as dimensions of lived experience are explored through phenomenology, overdetermination may be regarded as a phenomenological concept. Furthermore, a phenomenological account of climate crisis potentially helps make sense of why ordinary people hold particular views on climate change. The principle of overdetermination stands in contrast to any ‘hegemony approach’ that ‘emphasises social-structural domination over the production and proliferation of scientific knowledge.’⁸

While not without cause and significant evidence, an approach based solely on factors of hegemony neglects the potential for conversion from climate change non-believer to climate change believer. As noted above, such a conversion is indeed possible, even among the most devout non-believers. These cases raise important questions about how to make sense of such conversions.⁹

In other words, the phenomenological approach is a way of taking distance from views that might ordinarily appear self-evident or unanswerable. For instance, radical proposals from

8. June Jeon, Rachel Gurney, and Michael M. Bell, ‘From Non-Believer to Believer: What Leads People to Change Their Climate Views’, *Sociological Inquiry* 93, no. 3 (2023): 442, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12527>.

9. Jeon, Gurney, and Bell, ‘From Non-Believer to Believer’, 3.

warrants of climate crisis – claims to the effect that the human world must be remade in part or in whole to deal with ecological change – tend to present the reform or reimagining of human society as a necessary response to the natural world’s own physical transformation:

The social forces that have produced high-pollution economies have acquired so much power within the earth’s systemic functioning that the prevailing climatic conditions of the last 12,000 years have been displaced, with human societies now having assumed the extraordinary capacity to shape ‘geohistory’. That this raises eminently legal and political questions about the nature of agency, responsibility, collective action and the prevailing ideologies that shape our sense of the *res publica* is clear. It is earth scientists themselves who have shown us this fact. Legal and political thought now needs to catch up.¹⁰

What often stands behind warrants of climate crisis, therefore, is a felt ‘order of reasons’ according to which the natural sciences take precedence over political or cultural domains as sources of evidence. On such valorising accounts of the natural sciences, the existential dimensions of climate crisis are so self-evident that failing to embrace the grand narratives implied by it can only indicate pathology.

By contrast, revision of the existing order – whether sought through radical politics, social reform, or theoretical innovation – might be regarded as a primary *good* in and of itself. On this view, climate crisis is felt to challenge the prevailing order at the level of phenomenology, being an event as much metaphysical as geophysical in character. The challenge to modern order posed by climate crisis may be experienced as a good owing to its counteractive effect on the experience that Charles Taylor refers to as ‘malaises of modernity’. In its world-historical dimensions and heroic possibilities, climate crisis is a deliverance from unremitting,

10. Daniel Matthews, *Earthbound: The Aesthetics of Sovereignty in the Anthropocene* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 6, <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1515/9781474455329>.

unfulfilling immanence, thus satisfying a primordial longing for transcendence. On this view, invoking a natural order of reasons looks like *ex post facto* justification, climate denialism shows up not as crude pathology but as a position on the nature of the good life, and climate crisis operates in the Western imagination independently of the natural-scientific enterprise.

Climate crisis as a disruption to modern order

The idea of overdetermination is thus about uncovering counter-intuitive features of climate discourse, namely that there may be a longing for reenchantment – a reversal or undoing of Weberian disenchantment – operating alongside the more straightforward objective of staving off catastrophe in concrete, technoscientific terms. To test this broad theorem, the thesis interprets climate crisis as a worldview of heroic renewal, emanating chiefly from spiritually etiolated liberal societies. The thesis draws upon the genealogy of modernity found in the work of Charles Taylor, whose hermeneutical approach to the problem of human meaning reconciles the autonomy of scientific reason with the phenomenological experience of value in a given lifeworld. Taylor's account of the *modern moral order* presents Western modernity – phenomenologically – as profoundly ambivalent. The thesis argues that climate crisis, as it is experienced, resolves an intrinsic tension between immanence and the transcendence in contemporary liberal societies.

There is nothing new in the idea of modernity as spiritually bankrupt and even inherently at odds with full human flourishing, nor in the idea that ecological worldviews offer a funda-

mental alternative to that modernity. Recent decades have seen a great deal of scholarship and literature in support of such claims. At least since Lynn White Jr.'s celebrated address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the blame for ecological crisis has been placed squarely on core presuppositions of Western culture.¹¹ While White Jr. saw those presuppositions as inherently theological and specifically Christian, many of those who came after him have depicted the bankruptcy of Western modernity in more general terms, as not necessarily theological yet nevertheless foundational. In other words, what is common to both White's theological thesis and the accounts of those arguing more broadly is the idea of ecologic crisis (later, climate crisis) as a problem of Western civilizational order. But, if it is indeed a collective yearning for transcendence that drives grand narratives of climate crisis, these will tend to be *occluded* in contexts of secularism and methodological atheism/agnosticism. The aversion to foundationalism that defines liberalism may be at odds with a human need for contact with the transcendent, which might be why renewal is so often a standing *desideratum* in nominally secular contexts. Thus, in liberal societies, any form of foundationalism may be redescribed in terms of religion. The interpretive principle of religious atavism describes such cases of concealed religion with specific historical genealogies – a method that potentially explains the tremendous role that the concept of climate crisis has come to play in Western culture and discourse.

11. Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–07, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>; Elspeth Whitney, 'Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" after Fifty Years', in *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty*, ed. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson (London: Routledge, 2017), 19, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.4324/9781315629018>.

Climate crisis and grand narratives

To consider how grand narratives are crafted from the concept of climate crisis, this thesis uses the work of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who is perhaps best known for his ‘risk society’ theory. Beck revises traditional theories of modernity, focusing on the relationship between social progress and the advance of technology. On Beck’s view, modern development cannot be theorised as a linear process, because technological progress always introduces new types of risk or amplifies existing ones. Beck takes the traditional idea that industrial civilization means (in theory) a gradually rising standard of living for all and qualifies it by pointing out that new and better technology also raises the chances of catastrophe. On Beck’s view, therefore, enjoying the benefits of progress means accepting the potential for disaster. Risk and progress stand in dialectical relation to each other, and it is not foregone that the benefits of progress will outweigh the negative outcomes that come with them.

Beck’s risk society theory initially referred to societies at the national level, but at a later stage of his career Beck’s focus moved to international dimensions of sociology. Purposefully adopting a cosmopolitan perspective, Beck revised the relationship between ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ as defined in his original formulation of the risk society. Where the emphasis had been on the negative side effects of goods, the later theory posits ‘the positive side effects of bads’.¹² Beck sees climate change as the quintessential global bad, suggesting that it thus serves

12. Klaus Rasborg, ‘From “the Bads of Goods” to “the Goods of Bads”’: The Most Recent Developments in Ulrich Beck’s Cosmopolitan Sociology’, *Theory Culture & Society* 35, nos. 7–8 (2018): 157–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418810418>.

to ‘stimulate new normative horizons based around principles of common goods’.¹³ Beck’s cosmopolitanist theory of goods emerging from bads is a template for grand narratives in which revision in itself – whether of methods or of whole political orders – is understood to be a normative ‘good’. While some instances of revision in this sense propose revisions to *theories* of order, others call for broadscale remaking of the human world in accordance with revealed truths. In this respect, historian and philosopher of science Bruno Latour’s conception of a ‘new climatic regime’ is a theoretical counterpoint to Beck’s concept of ‘emancipatory catastrophism’.

Religious atavism and political liberalism

Religious atavism refers to a particular tension at the heart of liberal democracies: while grand narratives of modernity face special problems of coherence and legitimacy in these inherently pluralistic societies, a felt absence of common foundations generates a psychological demand for large, unifying stories. Because Western liberal democracies so often have histories that involve a broadscale movement from theological to secular premises, attempts to craft unifying or foundational stories are vulnerable to the charge of atavism by analogy to historical, religious forebears. Against this backdrop, climate crisis is widely taken to portend the bankruptcy of inherited orders – whether political, social, moral, or global. The critical

13. Gabe Mythen, ‘Ulrich Beck: E-Special Introduction’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, nos. 7–8 (2020): 398, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420912178>.

principle of religious atavism shows climate crisis as a latent wish to re-pristiniate some lost locus of sacrality in liberal democracies.

This critical strategy takes its force from the paradigm of postsecularity. This essentially historicist-redescriptive form of critique adopts an *etic* (outsider's) perspective on its subjects. Religion will naturally tend to be intertwined with climate crisis insofar as climate change and related phenomena are of such magnitude and consequence as to be matters of Tillichian 'ultimate concern'. But the intertwining of religion and climate crisis arguably becomes more complex under conditions of postsecularity, in which the analytic dichotomy of the secular and the religious comes under critical pressure.¹⁴

Climate crisis and postsecularity, furthermore, go together as global issues. Climate change is a global issue in view of its planetary geophysical scope: while any given set of climatological phenomena are necessarily particular to a given region of the globe, such phenomena can be understood scientifically only with reference to events and conditions throughout the Earth system. Postsecularity is global in a normative sense. The conditions and causes of postsecularity have come about through globalization, which simultaneously complicates the received situation of any given society and causes societies around the globe more and more to face common issues. Sociologist of religion José Casanova writes of how 'secular and religious dynamics are becoming intertwined everywhere through the globalization of

14. The great multiplicity of meanings of the postsecular is discussed in Herbert De Vriese and Guido Vanheeswijck, 'The Performative Force of the Postsecular', in *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, ed. Herbert De Vriese and Guido Vanheeswijck (London: Routledge, 2018), 86–97, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315307831>.

the secular immanent frame and through an ongoing process of interreligious mutual recognition.’¹⁵ Scholars of international relations have focused on postsecularity in ‘an attempt to move beyond the secular and thus the secular/religious divide, which can be considered one of the foundational dimensions of Western modernity.’¹⁶ For such theorists, the concept of postsecularity reveals ‘the possibility that the secular order may also be a framework of exclusion, control, and violence’, an idea at odds with ‘one of the central (and contentious) assumptions of the discipline [of international politics], namely, the idea that secularization (the privatization and marginalization of religious belief) is essential for the possibility of modern international politics.’¹⁷ The hermeneutical approach of this thesis juxtaposes climate crisis and postsecularity in the context of the global, in particular by showing how threats to the global order posed by climate crisis are experienced phenomenologically outside of purely secular or religious terms.

Climate crisis and religion

Religious imagery and metaphors pervade discussion not only of climate crisis per se but also ecological change more generally, and the interpretation of these figures is naturally

15. José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 52, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895850-12340001>.

16. Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito, ‘Towards a Postsecular International Politics’, in *Towards a Postsecular International Politics: New Forms of Community, Identity, and Power*, ed. Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137341785>.

17. Mavelli and Petito, ‘Postsecular International Politics’, 3.

amenable to different approaches.¹⁸ On one hand, the politicisation of climate change in the wider culture makes it more plausible to link apocalypticist imagery to secular institutions, concerns, and worldviews. The idea of a distinct *climatological turn* can be understood through the central paradigm of the Anthropocene, a multidisciplinary concept that is often referred to as ‘boundary concept’,¹⁹ meaning one that connects diverse fields, domains, and concerns. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) notes in one of its special reports that ‘the Anthropocene can be used as a “boundary concept” (Brondizio et al., 2016) that frames critical insights into understanding the drivers, dynamics and specific challenges in responding to the ambition of keeping global temperature well below 2°C while pursuing efforts towards and adapting to a 1.5°C warmer world’.²⁰ Although the Anthropocene paradigm is inherently polysemous, multifarious, and revisable, common across its iterations is an idea of revising a received self-understanding or periodization of the human story.²¹

18. The thesis adopts the capacious term *ecological* for a broad and potentially open-ended range of topics. In many instances, scholarship and commentary referred to here as ecological will be specifically concerned with climate change. The word *climate* itself has come to stand in for all the interrelated phenomena of contemporary environmental change, which go beyond global warming and climatic shifts to encompass mass extinction, biodiversity loss, and landscape transformation, to name a few. The term ecological is useful not only in its breadth of connotation but also in its historical resonances, which date back to its coinage by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) in the mid-nineteenth century.

19. Eduardo S. Brondizio et al., ‘Re-conceptualizing the Anthropocene: A Call for Collaboration’, *Global Environmental Change: Human and Policy Dimensions* 39 (July 2016): 318–27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2016.02.006>.

20. IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5 °C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*, ed. V. Masson-Delmotte et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157940>.

21. The Anthropocene is inherently revisionist in two senses: from an *internal* viewpoint, each version of the Anthropocene is in itself an interpretation of the hypothesis that the Earth system has entered a new geological epoch, and the fact of a new epoch having been entered is often analogised

Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism is one example of the revisionist impulse within the climatological turn. Sloganised as a concern with 'the positive side effects of bads', the theory reflects a widely shared interpretation of climate crisis as overturning inherited understandings of order and value. Beck's focus on positive by-products of climate crisis raises the question of what value revision itself has for inward-looking liberal societies concerned with their own cultural stagnation. The philosophers Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty provide specific accounts of liberalism against which theories of this sort show up as religious atavism. Methodological and stylistic aspects of Taylor's and Rorty's thought make the pair an intriguing study in contrasts and convergences, while features of their specific accounts relate especially well, thematically, to key aspects of the climatological turn. These accounts reveal, in particular, how the nominally secular concept of climate crisis relates to latent sources of sacrality that underlie social and moral order in modern liberal democracies.



Much commentary on the relationship of climate and religion is in the apologetic tradition of the Lynn White Jr. thesis, which identified a Western civilizational trend of environmental destruction with distinctly Christian antecedents. Arguments in this tradition often draw a

to grand narratives of social/cultural/political import that are detached from the natural sciences in their implications; from a *comprehensive* viewpoint, the Anthropocene is revisionist in the sense of being itself highly revisable and protean, in view of the great many variations and permutations of the basic idea that currently coexist with each other.

link between Christianity's historic predominance in Western contexts and the West's disproportionately large responsibility for global carbon emissions, emphasising implied guilt:

Christianity was the dominant form of religion in the North Atlantic context at the advent of the Industrial Revolution and clearly has been unable to stem the tide of increasing carbon emissions in such countries since then. If Christianity did not provide ideological legitimation for industrialized capitalism, its critique of the associated ecological destruction remained ineffective enough that, in the eyes of outsiders, it is implausible that North Atlantic Christianity would now provide the main source of inspiration to address climate change.²²

The academic research on how religious faith impacts on attitudes towards climate crisis is replete with studies that link evangelical thought to climate denial. Similarly, much work links experiences of transcendence and experiences of contact with the natural world, suggesting that the spiritual lens may be an important tool for mobilising political action on climate change. Apart from climate-specific concerns, theories of re-enchantment present the retrieval of transcendence as a standing desideratum in modern liberal societies. All of this raises the question of how a longing for transcendence might complicate perceptions of climate and ecological risk. Does the sense of climate crisis emerge from scientific reason *exclusively*, or is the suasive force of that reason amplified by an experience of climate crisis as an epistemological point of access to the transcendent?

That climate crisis should evoke sentiments resembling or approximating the religious, even in nominally secular or methodologically atheistic contexts, should not be surprising in

22. Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster, 'Introduction: Christian Theology and Climate Change in North Atlantic Context', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567675187.0006>.

view of its immense scope and potentially fearsome consequences. This much makes sense in pre-critical terms, without recourse to the Continental, post-Heideggerian view of the existential as a subcategory of the religious. Indeed, the totalising nature of climate crisis has become a cross-disciplinary commonplace, whether this is expressed in calls to organise the geophysical sciences around the concept of the ‘Earth system’,²³ or in proposals to reform pedagogical models according to the intrinsically novel needs imposed by the Anthropocene.²⁴ The all-encompassing character of the climatological paradigm is coming more and more to be recognised by scholars concerned specifically with *worldviews*.

Only in the 2020s has the critical nature of global warming and the vital complexity of what is, essentially, a natural worldview based on scientific research become a high priority of politicians with international agreements on climate change assuming worldwide–political–ethical–social–cultural terms. This is now coming to provide one grand narrative of contemporary life.²⁵

The intuition that climate has an underlying, largely unspecified religious component is widely felt among scholars and cultural commentators. Some scholars simply take for granted that what appears to be religious or theological by analogy can be taken substantively as such, without need of translation into secular terms.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that ecologically specific visions are rather uncommon to the wider discourse of political theology as it has emerged in recent decades. The as-yet-unintegrated nature of ecological political theology does mean that

23. Will Steffen et al., ‘The Emergence and Evolution of Earth System Science’, *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 1, no. 1 (January 13, 2020): 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-019-0005-6>.

24. Christoph Rosol, ‘Finding Common Ground: The Global Anthropocene Curriculum Experiment’, *The Anthropocene Review* 8, no. 3 (December 1, 2021): 221–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20530196211053437>.

25. Douglas J. Davies, *Worldview Religious Studies* (London: Routledge, 2022), 76, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003242437>.

these discussions are, at least for now, speculative exercises, which one may hope will charge the collective imagination of political theology in the years to come.²⁶

Interpretations of climate's religious dimensions will naturally vary by discipline. Anthropologists, for instance, understand climate change as inevitably becoming a focal point of human meaning by virtue simply of its magnitude:

There is no natural solution and little national or international preparation to remedy the crisis. Our situation is similar to the move that our ancestors made to fresh water 8,000 years ago during the Great Drying, which resulted in arguably the most profound change in human identity – civilization. The challenge we face today is to develop a new form of interacting global/regional/local civilization.²⁷

Still others theorise that traditional boundaries between the religious and the secular are being dissolved by climate crisis and that this dissolution signals a turning point in Western history. The scholar of religion Willis Jenkins identifies three especially influential programmes in this area.

The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that anthropogenic climate change forces his discipline to reconsider how a modernist idea of freedom has organized its inquiries and to create methods for integrating species-level agency with the histories of particular worlds. The novelist and literary scholar Amitav Ghosh writes that climate change can only be understood in narrative dimensions that are religious in scope, suggesting that the real religious upheaval here is dissolution of a meaningful religious/secular distinction in this domain. The philosopher Bruno Latour thinks that climate crisis requires moderns to acknowledge that they live by a certain cosmopolitics and to do the religious work of articulating what that is.²⁸

26. Jeremy H. Kidwell, 'Re-Enchanting Political Theology', in 'Political Theology and Pluralism', special issue, *Religions* 10, no. 10 (2019): 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/rel10100550>.

27. Barry H. Rodrigue, 'The Children of Climate Change and Their Search for Meaning', in *Science, Religion and Deep Time*, ed. Lowell Gustafson, Barry Rodrigue, and David Blanks (London: Routledge India, 2022), 49, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003256656>.

28. Willis Jenkins, review of *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval*, by Philip Jenkins, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90, no. 2 (August 2022): 508, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfac041>.

Each of these trends in isolation is a distinctive development within a specific domain or discipline. Taking them synoptically, the image emerges of confluent intellectual, socio-cultural and political programmes that take ecological change as a constitutive warrant – a movement that may be analysed in the holistic terms of a climatological turn.



As discussed above, the religious valences in climate crisis discourse can be understood in different ways. In Tillichian terms of ‘ultimate concern’, the convergence of diverse issues upon a central point – climate crisis – compels reflection upon existence itself. As the topic of climate has moved ever closer towards ubiquity, discourse on ecological crisis has grown to encompass many overlapping literatures, and various formulas have evolved for referring to on-the-ground realities of crisis and change in the natural world. Greta Thunberg’s declaration that ‘the climate and ecological crisis is the greatest threat that humanity has ever faced’ indicates something of this complexity in its pairing of ‘climate’ and ‘ecological’ as joint descriptors of a single, overarching situation.²⁹ Such passages telegraph a sense that climate crisis discloses heroic possibilities. ‘[The climate and ecological crisis] will no doubt be the issue that will define and shape our future everyday life like no other.’³⁰ The totalising imperative of climate discourse appears in rhetoric that portrays ecological breakdown as the

29. Greta Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, ed. Greta Thunberg (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 2.

30. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 2.

consequence of some fundamental flaw in modern society or in modernity itself. For instance,

Thunberg takes issue with the mainstream attitude by which

there are no black-and-white issues in life. No categorical answers. Everything is a subject for endless debate and compromise. This is one of the core principles of our current society. A society which, when it comes to sustainability, has a lot to answer for. Because that core principle is wrong. There are some issues that are black and white.³¹

It has become conventional to frame the ecological predicament in terms of modernity and civilization itself. ‘Our most dangerous weapon [against non-human species] would prove to be modernity and its trusty sidekick, late capitalism.’³²

Indeed, many popular narratives of climate crisis trace it to dysfunctionalities at the core of the Western lifestyle. ‘The Industrial Revolution, which was fuelled by slavery and colonization, brought unimaginable wealth to the Global North, and in particular to a small minority of people living there. That extreme injustice is the foundation that our modern societies are built upon. This is the very heart of the problem.’³³ In statements like this, themes of discontinuity and convergence exist alongside each other. Discontinuity defines the fundamental challenge of ecological change to the systems that sustain human civilization.

When it comes to the climate and ecological crisis, we have solid unequivocal evidence of the need for change. The problem is, all that evidence puts the current best available science on a collision course with our current economic system and with the way of life many people in the Global North now consider their right. Limitations and restrictions are not exactly synonymous with neoliberalism or modern western culture.³⁴

31. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 2.

32. Elizabeth Kolbert, ‘Civilization and Extinction’, in *The Climate Book*, 13.

33. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 19.

34. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 22.

Convergence, on the other hand, emerges from the sense that climate crisis encompasses virtually all domains of human concern.

There are countless issues that deserve our full attention and that have to be focused on, but the climate and ecological crisis differs from many others as it cannot be undone in the future. And the answers to all the other crises rely on us resolving this one.³⁵

Convergence, furthermore, shows up in the relation of climate crisis to the historical legacies of colonialism and oppression:

The climate and ecological crisis is a cumulative crisis that ultimately dates back to the colonial era and beyond. It is a crisis based on the idea that some people are worth more than others and that they therefore have the right to steal other people's land, resources, future living conditions – even their lives. And this is still going on.³⁶

That nominally secular discourse on climate crisis often evokes religious or theological ideas naturally raises questions regarding covert religion or secularized eschatology. Two broad approaches to surface-level features of ecological discourse would be the substantive and the epiphenomenal. In contemporary liberal democracies, the politicised nature of climate change makes literal interpretation problematic. Owing therefore to the agonistic character of public discourse, surface-level references to religion and theology are more plausibly taken to be cultural artefacts than indicators of substantive links to historical antecedents.

As discussed above, scholarly and demotic discourse on climate crisis alike is pervaded by religious and theological rhetoric.³⁷ Of course, in postsecular liberal societies, religious language and imagery are found throughout forms of nominally secular discourse – they are

35. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 42.

36. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 20.

37. Sarah J. King, “‘The End of the World as We Know It?’ Apocalypticism, Interdisciplinarity, and the Study of Religion”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2015): 422–31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24488054>.

hardly unique to ecological topics. The anthropologist Jonathan Benthall observes that ‘the vocabulary of religion and its imagery and overtones have spread across our society’s secular institutions’, posing the question of epiphenomenalist versus substantialist interpretation thus: ‘Is this just a matter of surface vocabulary, or a sign of deeper infiltration? Has religion become a metaphor for everything but itself?’³⁸ Theories that characterise political or cultural projects as secularized eschatology, too, belong to their own traditions and have been productively applied to subjects far beyond the ecological; these would include not only the traditional, Schmittian thesis of *political theology* but also new literatures on concepts after the Schmittian model, such as economic theology.³⁹ What might mark out religious imagery in climate crisis discourse for special consideration is the sense that climate change bids fair to have truly Biblical consequences: much rhetoric in climate crisis discourse evokes apocalyptic or eschatological themes, reflecting the felt sense that a fundamental alteration or even end to human civilization (as it has been known) may be imminent. ‘A simple google search already demonstrates that climate change and the apocalypse are frequently connected in the popular imagination of the twenty-first century’, reports the introductory chapter of a recent handbook.⁴⁰ The religious or theological inflection of ecological discourse, moreover,

38. Jonathan Benthall, *Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age Is Haunted by Faith* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 5.

39. Tim Christiaens, ‘Agamben’s Theories of the State of Exception: From Political to Economic Theology’, *Cultural Critique* 110, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 49–74, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2021.0002>.

40. Jan Alber, Steffen Jöris, and Wolfgang Römer, ‘The Apocalyptic Dimensions of Climate Change between the Disciplines’, in *The Apocalyptic Dimensions of Climate Change*, ed. Jan Alber (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 1, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1515/9783110730203-001>.

goes beyond end-of-times motifs, encompassing topics such as animism,⁴¹ Prometheanism,⁴² providence,⁴³ and sin,⁴⁴ to name a few. The author of a seminal work on modern environmentalism's spiritual dimensions observes in a ten-year retrospective the extent to which popular culture has become saturated with 'dark green religion', speculating that 'we might be witnessing the nascent stages of a new global nature religion'.⁴⁵

These religious overtones have elicited different scholarly responses. On one view, religious or even overtly apocalyptic narratives are seen as potentially useful to political and cultural action on ecological issues.⁴⁶ From a theoretical direction, the rhetoric of climate crisis has spurred academic discussion of a historically recurring 'apocalyptic imagination' or 'apocalyptic imaginary', with scholars in a range of disciplines looking to previous eras of apocalypticism for resources in understanding present-day issues.⁴⁷ These pragmatic, his-

41. Arianne Conty, 'Animism in the Anthropocene', *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 5 (2022): 127–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211039283>.

42. Jason W. Moore, 'Power, Profit, and Prometheanism, Part I: Method Ideology, and the Violence of the Civilizing Project', *Journal of World-Systems Research* 28, no. 2 (2022): 415–26, <https://doi.org/10.5195/JWSR.2022.1140>.

43. Joseph Hardwick and Randall J. Stephens, 'Acts of God: Continuities and Change in Christian Responses to Extreme Weather Events from Early Modernity to the Present', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 11, no. 2 (2020): e631, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.631>.

44. Kurt Bangert, 'Climate Change and Eschatology', in *Beyond Belief: Opportunities for Faith-Engaged Approaches to Climate-Change Adaptation in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Johannes M. Luetz and Patrick D. Nunn (Cham: Springer, 2021), 157–88, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67602-5>.

45. Bron Taylor, 'Retrospective: Dark Green Religion: A Decade Later', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2020): 498, <http://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.34630>.

46. Emily Hogg, 'Biblical Narratives and the Ecological Crisis: An Argument for Hope', *Theology* 125, no. 3 (2022): 172–81, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0040571X221097545>; Stefan Skrimshire, 'Activism for End Times: Millenarian Belief in an Age of Climate Emergency', *Political Theology* 20, no. 6 (2019): 518–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2019.1637993>.

47. Gerbern S. Oegema, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination and Climate Change', in *The Apocalyptic Dimensions of Climate Change*, ed. Jan Alber (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 49–62, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1515/9783110730203-003>; Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 193–205, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316588307.006>.

torical, and political approaches leave to one side the question of whether religion simply provides a stock of convenient metaphors (an epiphenomenalist view), or whether this feature of ecological discourse indicates a more robust connection between ecological concern and the religious (a substantialist view). In methodological terms, the epiphenomenalists would tend to include cultural theorists and literary scholars while the substantialists might include intellectual historians and philosophers conversant in theories of secularized eschatology.

At the same time, much of the religious and theological language in ecological discourse is overtly religious. For example, alongside the growth of ecological issues in the West generally, ecotheology has become a large and rich subfield of modern theology. Nor is the linking of nature and religion wholly recent. Near-historical roots of contemporary environmentalism may be found in nineteenth-century Romanticism and the works of such luminaries as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) and Walt Whitman (1819–92), who found in communion with the natural world a connection to the divine. Jonathan Benthall recognises the influence in this regard of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78); William Blake (1757–1827) he refers to as ‘prophetic’, and John Muir (1838–1914) and Gifford Pinchot (1865–1946) as ‘paradigmatic’.⁴⁸ Forms of spirituality arising since the 1960s have had a strong affinity, both in thought and practice, with diverse forms of environmentalism. Part of any explanation, therefore, for the ubiquity of religious resonances and themes in ecological discourse must include the mainstream influence of traditions that have looked for the divine in the natural world. Yet, in tracing the connection between contemporary ecogism and anterior traditions,

48. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 122–23.

it must be noted that these earlier sources were often anything but apocalyptic, tending in many cases rather towards the utopian or even the Edenic.

Climate crisis in secular domains

Even leaving to one side religious metaphor that is general to Western culture and expressions of the overtly faithful, domains governed by norms of methodological atheism or agnosticism still contain much religious imagery and metaphor. How is such imagery in nominally secular contexts best understood? The question is potentially controversial – to perhaps a unique degree – when it comes to climate crisis. On one hand, straightforwardly interpreting apocalyptic rhetoric as religious or theological is complicated by postsecularity, which problematises dichotomies of modernity and religion. For instance, the modern theologian Catherine Keller presents apocalypse as a thoroughly secularized construction.

The most difficult lesson for us to learn is that the apocalyptic scenarios of the last 100 years are secularizations of an apocalyptic imagination. Nuclear weapons did not design themselves. Binding everyone's life on the planet to a precarious global economy was not a natural process. The creation of artificial intelligence was definitely an artificial process. Producing the gases that now warm the planet inexorably was part of an economic process pursued with apocalyptic zeal for two centuries.⁴⁹

Others emphasise the darker aspects inherent in contemporary views of apocalypse. 'The deep link between ecological awareness and the apocalyptic thought of the beginning of the twenty-first century is self-evident. Ecology and apocalypticism are mirror-imaged twins

49. Catherine Keller, 'Nightmares of a Dying World and the Dream of a Counter-Apocalypse', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 80, no. 5 (2021): 1486, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12441>.

because ecological consciousness is equated to the awareness of the disappearance of nature in time.⁵⁰ At the same time, it is potentially incendiary to suggest that religion is secretly at work in secular domains, as it is wholly conventional to cast some given phenomenon as latently religious in nature, of which reference to *secularized eschatology* and similar language is representative. Enquiring into the religious resonances in ecological discourse may in itself appear as an instance of this discursive practice, which is often put to polemical or deflationary aims. Indeed, attitudes towards climate crisis tend to follow partisan patterns, with climate issues in the West conventionally championed by the political left,⁵¹ and the hypothesis that ecological concern can be largely or wholly explained as ‘green religion’ will tend to track political affiliations. In view of the politicised status of climate change and related topics, the very question of how to understand the religious rhetoric around climate crisis may look like a rhetorical move against ecological positions.

The sensitive nature of ecological topics in the wider culture has, indeed, created special difficulties for research into certain worldviews. For example, scholars in the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism, in a transnational study of climate-skeptical attitudes, reported that ‘a mixed group of scientists and humanists responded to a presentation of this research by suggesting that, while it was fine to discuss it in a scholarly context, we ought not to make it

50. Alex Siegemund, ‘Environmental Sciences, Apocalyptic Thought, and the Proxy of God’, in Alber, *Apocalyptic Dimensions*, 125.

51. Environmental concern in the West before the mid-twentieth century tended to be aligned politically with the right wing, and even today it has its representatives on the far right, although these tend to be of the cultural fringe.

public in case it further undermined the scientific argument [for climate crisis].⁵² Scholars approaching ecological discourse through reflection on historical instances of apocalypticism are careful to point out the large qualitative difference between bygone, mythological beliefs and present-day concerns grounded in science:

This end [of the world] is obviously scientifically argued for and is not based on mythological concepts, as our worldview is based on scientific facts and arguments.

In particular, we are using a Cartesian and technocratic worldview and methodology instead of apocalyptic and demonological worldview and methodology. We argue on the basis of ‘cause-effect’ and used statistics for all of our claims instead of relying on secret knowledge and magical practices. We have technical, medical, and climate experts instead [*sic*] apocalyptic authors and interpreters of the signs of the times.⁵³

Many theorists have expressed ambivalence towards their own past work of deconstruction, with concern as to how that work may now undercut new orthodoxies on various issues, with climate crisis often having pride of place among these. The effect of politicisation on academic trends generally has been a rich topic of discussion in recent years – with debates in particular on the academic sources of ‘post-truth’ trends in the wider culture – and ecological topics have often received special attention in this regard. In one widely cited article, Bruno Latour begins his call for broadscale revision in the humanities with the observation that climate denialism might find comfort in the very constructivism that he himself once championed. After quoting a *New York Times* editorial that questions the scientific consensus on global warming from constructivist principles, Latour asks rhetorically, ‘was I wrong to participate

52. Greg Garrard, Axel Goodbody, George Handley, and Stephanie Posthumus, *Climate Change Skepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350057050>.

53. Oegema, ‘Apocalyptic Imagination’, 58.

in the invention of this field known as science studies? . . . Why does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not? Why can't I simply say that the argument is closed for good?'⁵⁴ Latour's comment may be read as a prolegomenon to recent debates over the corrosive effect of 'epistemic relativism' on public confidence in scientific and institutional experts, with sources of such relativism being located in 'social constructivism, the strong programme, deconstructionism, postmodernism, and major parts of Science and Technology Studies (STS).'⁵⁵ Notice of this effect has driven calls for the abandonment or revision of critical theories and methods.

There is, furthermore, a problem of potential confusion between insider and outsider viewpoints. Methodologically, issues arise in speaking of a religious dimension that is intrinsically occluded, not only in regard to climate crisis but for activism and commentary of all sorts. Reading apocalyptic rhetoric too straightforwardly as religious or theological will risk begging the question of what counts as religion or theology in the first place:

Alternative political theologies . . . have a broader significance in showing how the contemporary political terrain is being pluralised, not only by different religions with their claim to the public space but also by new secular social movements and ecological sensibilities that have an unmistakably theological character. For instance, climate justice movements such as Extinction Rebellion would seem to be modern-day secular forms of millenarianism, for which the imaginary of the Apocalypse and the 'end of times' narrative is the main mobilising force.⁵⁶

54. Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>.

55. Sven Ove Hansson, 'Social Constructionism and Climate Science Denial', *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 10, no. 3 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-020-00305-w>.

56. Saul Newman, 'Political Theology and Religious Pluralism: Rethinking Liberalism in Times of Post-Secular Emancipation', *European Journal of Social Theory* 24, no. 2 (2021): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020968673>.

Whether activists such as Extinction Rebellion would describe their own programmes in terms of religion or theology is a central question for determining what is substantial and what is mere rhetoric in such movements. Apocalypticism may be a valid *emic* concept in some instances of activism and not in other, closely similar instances, which creates methodological issues for its adoption as a category of *etic* analysis.

The foregoing suggests that climate crisis, among various worldviews, belief systems, and ideologies, may be exceptional in the extent to which it is politicised. Such sensitivities may be further heightened when the subject of religion comes up, as when Benthall poses the choice of explaining religious rhetoric as either epiphenomenal or substantial. Any account of religious resonances in nominally secular expressions of ecological concern needs to do more than straightforwardly parse apocalyptic or soteriological metaphors. Were there were evidence of secularized eschatology on the surface, as it were, of social and cultural expression, such commitment would presumably be difficult to sustain in practice. A substantialist account, therefore, likely requires some description of ecological discourse as having features of secularized eschatology, at a conceptual level, while at the social level – the mainstream of discourse – these religious commitments will remain occluded.

While an epiphenomenalist view is less likely to provoke sensitivities around denialism than a substantialist view, these approaches should not be regarded as a binary. The religious resonances in ostensibly secular interpretations of climate crisis may be merely epiphenomenal – or incidental artefacts of the wider culture – while still hinting at the contours of a

substantialist account. The apparent paradox in epiphenomenal artefacts of language and imagery that hint at but do not necessarily describe the actual religious content of their discourse may be thought to reflect ‘the contradictions of secularized eschatology’.⁵⁷



Although the discourse of climate crisis is pervaded by religious language and imagery, any hermeneutics of covert religion must begin with nominally secular features of that discourse. The revisionism – defined by calls for remaking social and political order – that regularly features in climate-centric grand narratives is one starting point for this undertaking. Different projects of ordinal revisionism – whether taking the form of political radicalism, social reform, or theoretical innovation – mark out a multidisciplinary field that converges on some version of the hypothesis that methods overly indebted to epistemic relativism must be revised in light of ecological issues. Central to such claims is an imperative of rendering political and cultural agendas impervious to critical dissolution. At the centre of this multidisciplinary field is the polysemous and ubiquitous notion of the Anthropocene, an inherently revisionist designation for the present geological epoch.⁵⁸ Examples of the climatological turn in high theory – to which the Anthropocene is central – present some themes for discussion of climate crisis

57. Jonathan Sheehan, Henning Trüper, and Mario Wimmer, ‘Beyond Secularized Eschatology Introductory Remarks’, *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 4 (2022): 1188, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244321000299>.

58. Anne Coudrain, Matthieu Le Duff, and Danielle Mitja, ‘The Anthropocene Is Shifting the Paradigm of Geosciences and Science’, *Comptes Rendus. Géoscience* 355, no. S1 (2023): 1–18, https://comptes-rendus.academie-sciences.fr/geoscience/item/CRGEOS_2023__355_S1_A16_o/.

more specifically. Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism is one such example, as is the work of Bruno Latour, a pre-eminent figure within that movement.

Ordinal revisionism, in its basic form, makes some version of the claim that contending with climate crisis will necessarily mean overturning established hierarchies, orders, or institutional arrangements. Bruno Latour provides a quintessential statement of this view:

My original discipline, science studies, finds itself reinforced today by the widely accepted understanding that the old constitution, the one that distributed powers between science and politics, has become obsolete. As if we had really passed from an Old Regime to a new one marked by the emergence in multiple forms of the question of *climates* and, even more strangely, of their link to *government*.⁵⁹

In referring to the 'old constitution', Latour alludes to the theory of the 'modern Constitution' that he developed in one of his first books, *We Have Never Been Modern*, which chiefly repudiates classic dichotomies that conceive of the natural as separate from the human:

A constitution is judged by the guarantees it offers. The moderns' Constitution . . . included four guarantees that had meaning only when they were taken together but also kept strictly separate. The first one guaranteed Nature its transcendent dimension by making it distinct from the fabric of Society – thus contrary to the continuous connection between the natural order and the social order found among the premoderns.⁶⁰

A preoccupation with theories of modernity has therefore marked Latour's career all along, and his use of climate crisis as a warrant for ordinal revisionism is building on his earlier ideas.

59. Latour refers here to his role in establishing science and technology studies – STS – as a critical discipline distinguished chiefly in its application of ethnographic methods to sites of scientific production. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), introduction, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4926426>.

60. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chapter 5.4.

In developing his thought in this way, Latour extensively invokes the proposed geological epoch known as the Anthropocene.

What makes the Anthropocene an excellent marker, a ‘golden spike’ clearly detectable beyond the frontier of stratigraphy, is that the name of this geohistorical period may become the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological, and – as we shall soon see – political concept for beginning to turn away from the notions of ‘Modern’ and ‘modernity’.⁶¹

Latour’s use of the Anthropocene accords with the concept’s centrality in ecological discourse generally and in the climatological turn in particular.

Climate crisis and the anthropocene

In its essence, Anthropocene is a scientific term in the geosciences, referring to a particular geological epoch in the lexical form of other epochal designations such as the Holocene or the Pleistocene.⁶² As a discursive phenomenon, however, the life of the Anthropocene has been much more varied. Having originated in the Earth sciences, the concept was subsequently adopted and adapted in disciplines far outside of the natural sciences. Latour alludes to this cross-disciplinary migration when he refers to the paradigm as ‘a “golden spike” clearly detectable beyond the frontier of stratigraphy’. While attempts have been made to govern the trajectory of the Anthropocene as a term, these have produced much cross-disciplinary

61. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, lecture 4.

62. The Anthropocene is an established paradigm in the Earth sciences, notably among those scientists who identify their work as *Earth system science*. A prominent figure in this domain is Johan Rockström, who states that ‘scientifically, it is now well established that Earth has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, where our globalized world constitutes the largest driver of change on Earth.’ Johan Rockström, ‘Tipping Points and Feedback Loops’, in *The Climate Book*, ed. Greta Thunberg (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 32.

contentiousness.⁶³ In this way, the Anthropocene has become a hybrid – a formal scientific concept whose precise meaning will differ according to different conversations and context. It has arguably become a multidisciplinary template for grand narratives in the early twenty-first century, as suggested by the innumerable forms and permutations in which it has appeared. ‘This word provides a platform to gather information and current preoccupations. Thus, the absence of an official definition from the academic geological community does not preclude the fact that this term can engage and encourage scientific thought and work.’⁶⁴ Researchers have found more than a thousand variations on the theme.⁶⁵ The term’s fecundity has not unsurprisingly given rise to cross-disciplinary contention over whether it requires a formal geophysical definition at all or whether the Earth sciences can claim ownership of it. ‘We agree that the multiple uses of this term have stimulated much scholarly debate, but we contend that precision in terminology is far more desirable than vagueness, and promotes more productive communication.’⁶⁶ The term and the underlying concept (or concepts) behind it have proved

63. ‘The AWG [Anthropocene Working Group, the scientific body responsible for issuing a formal recommendation on whether to add the Anthropocene to the Geological Time Scale] argues that . . . “anthropocenes” discussed by non-geoscientists are fundamentally different concepts than their “Anthropocene” (lower-case versus upper-case), which is intended to be a formally designated unit of the geological time scale that must have a fixed point in time and be tied to hard rock stratigraphy or a golden spike.’ Todd J. Braje, and Matthew Lauer, ‘A Meaningful Anthropocene?: Golden Spikes, Transitions, Boundary Objects, and Anthropogenic Seascapes’, *Sustainability* 12, no. 16 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12166459>.

64. Coudrain, Le Duff, and Mitja, ‘The Anthropocene Is Shifting the Paradigm’, 2.

65. Clémence Hallé and Anne-Sophie Milon, ‘The Infinity of the Anthropocene: A (Hi) Story with a Thousand Names’, In *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 44–49.

66. Martin J. Head et al., ‘The Anthropocene as an Epoch Is Distinct from All Other Concepts Known by This Term: A Reply to Swindles et al. (2023)’, *Journal of Quaternary Science*, published ahead of print (March 29, 2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jqs.3513>.

to be, therefore, inherently revisable and arguably *revisionary* in spirit, attributes which are functions as much of aetiology as of ontology.

In spite of the Anthropocene's protean nature, common across its iterations is the hypothesis that ongoing ecological change compels formal recognition that an epochal transition is currently in progress. In this way, the Anthropocene presents a template for conceiving of new grand narratives, by generating a sense of necessity, urgency, and high purpose. All received conceptions of order come under scrutiny within the Anthropocene's penumbra. In domains of science and literature alike, a felt need for wholly new ways of categorising the world is the Anthropocene's signature attribute.⁶⁷ Much of the climatological turn is, therefore, a debate between different visions of the human future: on one side are those who see plausible human futures as requiring new categorical formulations, while on the other are those who see climate crisis as qualitatively analogous to events in the human past. The concept of religious atavism belongs to positions of the latter, past-focused sort.

The theorem of a climatological turn is borne out in the multifarious strands of climate-focused commentary and scholarship which all share a tendency to revise received premises. Specific programmes within this turn begin from some idea that society, culture, or civilization itself must be remade for the consequences of climate crisis to be contended with. In specific

67. Some of the Anthropocene paradigm's severest critics have been those who see it as latently reproducing standing problems of Western culture. Such critics point to the Anthropocene's claims to universality, for instance, or interpret it as a revival of oppressive narratives of civilization that once underwrote Western colonialism. That grand narratives may inherently be prone to such objections points to the problem identified, in different ways, by both Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor – the inescapable nature of master narratives (Taylor) or ethnocentrism (Rorty).

instances, the case for revision is often grounded in observations of the intrinsic novelty of climate crisis and the world-historical conditions it produces.⁶⁸ That intrinsic novelty is presented in different ways. One of these is extent or size – climate crisis is a problem of unprecedented scope – an approach taken where Naomi Klein and Timothy Morton invoke metaphors of totality:

Philosopher Timothy Morton and social activist Naomi Klein each use significant keywords to emphasize the scale and scope of their thinking. Morton coins the term ‘hyperobjects’, and Klein writes about ‘everything change’; these words elicit a sense of large-scale entities and actions. Together they form what might be thought of as two modes for ecological totality thinking.⁶⁹

Novelty is presented by others as the obsolescence of received concepts. Such desuetude of categories is the thesis by which climate crisis represents ‘the unthinkable’ in the work of Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh; similarly, climate crisis is a generator of ‘emergent’ categories in the work of Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁷⁰ Alongside presentations of world-historical novelty – whether this means unprecedented immensity or conceptual desuetude – these theories also envision a hierarchy of knowledge disciplines, which is sometimes implicit and sometimes stated plainly. In each case, a specific area of the humanities or social sciences – social thought (Klein), philosophy (Morton), history (Chakrabarty), or literature (Ghosh) – is

68. The natural-scientific quarters of the climatological turn would be defined by proponents of Earth system science and the *planetary boundaries* framework in particular.

69. Brent Ryan Bellamy, ‘Ecology with Totality: The Case of Morton’s *Hyperobjects* and Klein’s *This Changes Everything*’, in *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital*, ed. Kevin Floyd, Jen Hedler Phillis, and Sarika Chandra (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 213, <http://doi.org/10.1515/9780823298228>.

70. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category’, *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (2019): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/705298>; Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

informed by deliverances of the natural sciences. This sense of hierarchy – in which outputs of the natural sciences have a privileged status – also appears throughout Anthropocene discourse. Humanities scholars engaging with the Anthropocene continuously invoke the theory's basis in Earth system science. Novelty, therefore, may be a powerful warrant for revisionary proposals, but only a novelty that is more than simply a human construct, being – to the contrary – validated by developments on a planetary scale.

A preoccupation with the new, then, binds together the various strands of the climatological turn. Iterations of the Anthropocene exist on a spectrum, with many reflecting deep pessimism towards humanity's near-term prospects, while others are neutral on the question, and some are even hopeful. What appears to be a melange of different viewpoints may be understood, however, as the collective movement towards fresh cultural, political, and intellectual possibilities. The key question is to what extent the longing for such possibilities is an impulse of religious significance. The climatological turn plays out against the backdrop of a West defined by forms of political liberalism and globally dominant in geopolitical terms, yet also facing sundry challenges borne of globalization and struggling to locate sources for its own revitalisation.

It is in this context that Ulrich Beck's account of global 'metamorphosis', for example, describes novelty explicitly as a form of good. In this version of the novelty hypothesis lies a classic problem put in contemporary terms. Novelty is of course inevitable – the evolution of social and cultural norms is an iron fact of history. But what are the motors and determinants

of that evolution? For Beck, contemporary conditions of globalisation give this old problem of sociology a new set of parameters by introducing an interaction between norms at the level of national societies and norms of the globalised culture in which those societies participate but from which they are analytically distinct. Beck's late-career pivot to the international dimensions of sociology is the context for his account of broad-scale, high-level transformation of global norms and viewpoints. Positing a dialectical relationship between national societies and globalised culture, Beck theorises global metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*) as a process in which goods emerge from 'bads' once global risks become too large or unfamiliar to be conceptualised or theorised with inherited categories. On this account, the bads in question are the risks that inevitably arise from modern progress, while the goods are the refreshed 'normative horizons' of a global viewpoint. Those horizons are transformed by necessity when new categories or concepts must be constructed to accommodate risks of new types and scale.



The heuristic of overdetermination thus takes the spiritual-liberatory goods generated by the experience of climate crisis as reason to doubt that the force of scientific reason alone can explain the climatological turn. This strategy is a form of critical redescription that observes a single theme or process occurring at different levels. For instance, in theories like those of Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty, novelty is both a warrant and a desideratum: revision is at once to be accepted due to terrible necessity and also a form of good that is desirable in itself. In the case of Ulrich Beck, both of these sentiments are stated explicitly together.

Similarly, like other theorists in the climatological turn, Beck is concerned with revision at different levels. There is revision at a meta level, where order as a naturally occurring phenomenon is being revised by circumstances, and there is revision at a normative level, where circumstances underwrite the human demand for methods of enquiry and understanding to be revised. It is this second, methodological revision in particular that Beck presents as a good with the potential to have spiritual-liberatory effects.

The meta-level revision in Beck's programme is his theory of global 'metamorphosis'. This idea is in continuity with Beck's earlier theories of the *risk society* and the *global risk society*, both of which observe, from a sociological viewpoint, the increasing complexity of global systems and its corollary, the increasing complexity of hard problems both nationally and globally. Beck specifies what he means by metamorphosis through a distinction between it and social change: 'social change is about the reproduction of the social and political order, while metamorphosis is about the transfiguration of the social and political order.'⁷¹ For Beck, climate crisis has a special efficacy in this process of transfiguration, and he presents it not in dark images of planetary destruction but in the positive, optimistic terms of *emancipation*:

Climate change is not climate change; it is at once much more and something very different. It is a reformation of modes of thought, of lifestyles and consumer habits, of law, economy, science and politics. Whether presenting climate change as a transformation of human authority over nature; as an issue of climate (in)justice; as concerning the rights of future generations; or as a matter of international politics and international trade; or even as an indication of suicidal capitalism – all this is about the dramatic power of the unintended, unseen emancipatory side effects of global risk, which

71. Ulrich Beck, 'Emancipatory Catastrophism: What Does It Mean to Climate Change and Risk Society?', *Current Sociology* 63, no. 1 (2015): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114559951>.

already have altered our being in the world, seeing the world and imagining and doing politics.⁷²

Beck's *methodological* revisionism, by contrast, finds traditional methodologies of critique to be unsuitably abstract in view of the new realities imposed by climate crisis, and proposes that these be grounded anew in deliverances of the natural sciences. Beck refers to his revised methodology as 'a new variant of critical theory, which does not set the normative horizon itself but takes it from empirical analyses'.⁷³ Beck is thus dissatisfied with social constructivist theories of change, and he suggests that climate crisis opens a window onto alternatives to them.

Beck's revisionary proposals echo a recent trend of post-constructivism among theorists who believe that traditional methods inflected by epistemic relativism are inadequate to the challenges of the climate crisis. Scholars such as Pepijn van Eeden recognise Bruno Latour, the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers, and theorists in their orbit as having self-consciously moved away from the constructivism hitherto regnant in the philosophy and sociology of science – and away also, more generally, from the precepts of deconstructionism – towards theories and methods capable of giving aid to cultural and political agendas.⁷⁴ On the generic post-constructivist view, the empiricism of climate science is a source of heightened awareness and the de-emphasis of abstraction is salutary. Pipijn echoes Latour's invocation of William James's 'radical realism' in proposing an alternative to forms of critique that have become

72. Beck, 'Emancipatory Catastrophism', 79.

73. Beck, 'Emancipatory Catastrophism', 83.

74. Pipijn van Eeden, 'Materializing Discourse Analysis with James, Schmitt and Latour', *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (2017): 17039, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.39>.

etoliated through political co-optation.⁷⁵ Pipijn and Latour (whom Pipijn acknowledges as an important precursor) are in agreement that ecological topics in particular reveal the need for theories that are resistant to the universal acid of critical theory: ‘in view of the catastrophically inevitable, this academic discussion on turning to “radical empiricism”, “materialism” and “biophysical objects” must lose its naïveté – as it is forced upon us by the Earth’s ecological ruptures.’⁷⁶ On this view, raw necessity is a counterargument to the deflationary irony of traditional deconstruction, by which earnestness and urgency are in themselves taken as discursive vulnerabilities.

Beck concurs with Latour’s seminal diagnosis of the critical attitude per se as having become, in its deconstructionist forms, feckless and maladroit:

The critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a stubbornly realist attitude – to speak like William James – but a realism dealing with what I will call matters of concern, not matters of fact.⁷⁷

Beck and Latour are in accord, furthermore, in linking climate revisionism to a spirit of intellectual vanguardism, as where Beck opines that

climate change risk is far more than a problem of measures of carbon dioxide and the production of pollution. It does not even only signal a crisis of human self-understanding. More than that, global climate risk creates new ways of being, looking,

75. van Eeden, ‘Materializing Discourse’, 9–10.

76. van Eeden, ‘Materializing Discourse’, 4.

77. Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1086/421123>; see also this article’s companion piece, Bruno Latour, ‘The Promises of Constructivism’, in *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 27–46.

hearing and acting in the world – highly conflictual and ambivalent, open-ended, without any foreseeable outcome.

As a result, this compass is different from the postmodern ‘everything goes’ and different from false universalism.⁷⁸

These positions of Latour and Beck epitomise the move by which theorists in the climatological turn begin from broad interpretations of climate crisis – as producing global circumstances of intrinsic novelty – and end with calls for the reconceptualisation of order and transformation of methods. Such appeals often observe in climate crisis an element of harsh necessity.

Where theories put forward warrants of novelty in support of their claims, the impetus to revise in itself may be the object of critique. By contrast to claims made on the basis of harsh necessity, the cultural preoccupation with climate crisis may be recast in terms of a latent wish for civilizational renewal and repriming that inexorably gives rise to new grand narratives of modernity. Crucially, however, conditions of postsecularity render grand narratives per se susceptible to critical redescription as the echoes of theological or religious antecedents in Western history. The concept of religious atavism thus poses a challenge to hypotheses of novelty and the programmes of revision that they underwrite. Proposals that have been put forward as disinterested, secular reckonings with stark reality may be reinterpreted as an impulse to re-establish contact with the transcendent.

In this sense, the religious atavism critique is a hermeneutics of covert religion. Such a strategy must grapple with overt – i.e., non-hidden – appeals to transcendence. Although faith-based defenses of ecologism are plentiful in the literature of climate crisis, this thesis

78. Beck, ‘Emancipatory Catastrophism’, 83.

primarily puts to one side visions of the ecological built from expressly religious premises. One reason for this is that the mainstream of liberal democracies tends to be governed by the methodological atheism/agnosticism that pertains throughout academia and institutional science generally, and Western grand narratives of climate crisis and scientific reason are, accordingly, constructions of a self-consciously secular culture.

As discussed above, the meaning of the secular in these contexts is complicated by two theoretical factors. First, conditions of postsecularity – as established by a generation of scholarship, among whose notable entrants are Peter Berger, Jürgen Habermas, and Charles Taylor – mean that traditional boundaries between the religious and the secular are inherently porous. Second, theories of secularism may be understood as having two main branches, one sociological and the other conceptual-historical. Whereas secularization in sociological disciplines tends to be a subfield of the study of religion, which regularly draws upon quantitative and empirical methods, the conceptual dimension of secularization tends to be a topic in historical and philosophical fields:

Whereas in the German-philosophical context ‘secularization’ tended to signify a transitive (or qualitative) process in which a modern phenomenon is regarded as a secularized (transformed or alienated) version of a religious equivalent (‘x is a secularized Y’), hereby describing a hidden presence of a religious element in secular-modern disguise, the sociological secularization theorists were more concerned with secularization as an intransitive (or quantitative) process that denotes a gradual and unambivalent disappearance of religion.⁷⁹

79. Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate: Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt in Polemical Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 401, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004504523>.

Each stream of the secularization concept has its own sources and lineages, and their literatures often do not intersect. Different ways of hypothesising covert religion track this twofold nature of secularization. First, a given claim may be sociological, in the sense of identifying religious experiences in everyday life through fieldwork methods of ethnography, as in the case of Edward Bailey's 'implicit religion' framework.⁸⁰ Second, at the conceptual level, political concepts or institutions may be traced back to religious antecedents through intellectual history or the history of ideas, an example being theories that rely upon the Schmittian idea of political theology. Religious atavism in the climate crisis may be approached by either route. On one hand, expressions of ecological concern in a given society – such as environmental activism – may be studied through sociological methods. Alternatively, concepts of the ecological may be traced back genealogically to religious or theological antecedents through intellectual history or the history of ideas.

Insofar as this thesis theorises the above-described climatological turn as an expression chiefly of liberal democracies, it aims to bridge the conceptual and social. The specific hermeneutical approach of the thesis is redescription in terms of religious atavism, which is *etic* in viewpoint and historicist in function. The aim is both to bridge sociological and conceptual forms of secularization theory, and to require no specific definition of religion, thus accounting for postsecularity. In regard to liberal democracies specifically, the approach understands latent sources of sacrality as being represented by commonly recognised visions

80. Francis Stewart, 'Implicit Religion: Reshaping the Boundary between the Religious and the Secular?', *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2022.2005707>.

of order; these will be *latent* because explicit sources of sacrality that are general to a given society will not withstand exposure to the cross currents of pluralism. This approach therefore engages with nominally secular features of a contemporary scene, rather than through a family resemblances approach to the religious or theological. The agonistic dynamics of pluralism are theorised in the social thought of Charles Taylor, who observes a general process of ‘fragilisation’ to which all individual viewpoints are subjected, and in Richard Rorty’s concept of ‘liberal irony’ – by which historical awareness among cultivated individuals precludes commitment to final vocabularies. Owing to these cross pressures, a social sacred that is intentionally reprimed will likely fail to achieve the status of Jamesian live options.



The concept of religious atavism synthesises ideas from different theorists of the postsecular. Charles Taylor’s account of secular modernity is paired with Richard Rorty’s pragmatist critique of foundationalism to redescribe the revisionary trends of climate crisis as a demand for transcendence in liberal democracies. Where Taylor’s account is a narrative template for understanding occluded sources of sacrality in liberal contexts, Rorty’s pragmatism challenges the putative hierarchy of disciplines according to which the natural sciences are assumed to underwrite cultural and political initiatives in pluralistic societies.

As theorists of liberalism, Taylor and Rorty have bodies of work in which there are both convergences and sharp dissimilarities. Each arrives at a view of the postsecular, but each does so by a very different route to the other. Taylor and Rorty share a methodological commitment

to historicism, and each has a body of social thought that can be linked to a distinctive epistemological position. However, their respective forms of historicism and epistemology differ markedly from each other. Taylor's generous and expansive idea of 'robust realist' contrasts with Rorty's quietistic and deflationary pragmatism. Where Taylor emphasises historical continuity in his analysis of Western-liberal concepts and societies, Rorty invokes a Kuhnian notion of paradigm decay and renewal to cheerfully abandon whole intellectual traditions. In each case, the outcome is a distinctive way of thinking the postsecular, but where one is positive and constructive the other is negative and minimal. For Taylor, the religious is intrinsically bound up with the secular because – in a self-conscious echo of Robert Bellah's principle of historical genealogy – 'nothing is ever lost'; for Rorty, present-day instances of foundationalism can be discredited merely by analogising them to moribund religious doctrines. In Taylor's view, the intertwinement of the religious and the secular discredits secularization 'subtraction stories'. Rorty's account of the postsecular, by contrast, is effectively privative, a strategy for simply dropping cultural paradigms that have outlived their usefulness.

In each case, a particular figure or metaphor links social or intellectual phenomena to religious antecedents. Rorty's deflationary-analogical approach is the figure of the *skyhook*, a metaphor for any (Rorty would say mythical) point of access to universal, unacculturated truth. Taylor's explanatory-genealogical approach is the observation that social norms require *ontic sources* to have coherence and legitimacy. In each case, the figure evokes the interpretive

principle that transcendence may only be accessed through specific points of contact with the immanent.

Taylor's thought, in and through *A Secular Age* in particular, substantially set the terms in the early phases of the postsecularity paradigm. Methodologically, Charles Taylor's account of Western modernity bridges the sociological and conceptual tracks of secularization theory, bringing a rich history of ideas together with close observation of contemporary norms and practices to form a distinctive style of philosophical genealogy (described by many as 'magisterial'). The methodological core of this approach is the concept of *social imaginary*, which invokes the Wittgensteinian notion that philosophy may bring to light details of the unarticulated backgrounds against which everyday experience makes sense. Taylor's account of the contemporary scene is *describable* in terms of social practices and *explicable* through a history of Western social, political, and religious thought. This use of social imaginary by Taylor emerges from his epistemological realism, whose contact theory of knowledge supposes that the background presuppositions of social realities are, in some sense, immediately accessible to us – on the principle that human beings intuitively grasp the norms of their own societies and do not require social theory to understand these. This merger of the concrete and the abstract is the basis for classifying Taylor's style as a form of philosophical hermeneutics.

As a resource for the concept of religious atavism, Taylor's stance towards argumentative purpose is an irenic and broadly ecumenical one. Taylor's narrative spans 500 years of Western history to show that subtraction story accounts of secularization – which present the secular as

nothing more than what remains when religion is removed from a natural substrate of society and culture – cannot account for the conditions of contemporary liberal democracies. The specific story that Taylor tells of secular modernity is a type of grand narrative that he refers to as a ‘reform master narrative’.⁸¹ At the core of that narrative is the emergence of a modern moral order that operates on an underlying understanding of *mutual benefit* – according to which an individual’s pursuit of his or her own interests is conducive to the general weal – as the telos of modern liberal societies. In this way Taylor presents a narrative explanation of how order is understood as emerging naturally from a harmony of interests between diverse and ostensibly uncoordinated social actors in modern liberal democracies. It is this essentially Nietzschean conception of order that climate crisis is felt to have disrupted.



Taylor’s account of the modern moral order describes an evolution in Western societies through different Durkheimian social stages. These are Durkheimian insofar as they describe moral order as being underpinned by sacral sources that can be related to ontic sources – or, features of the immanent world. Through successive stages, the ontic components of ordinal sources become increasingly decentralised and abstract. Contemporary liberal democracies – at the level of an unarticulated background of social understanding – still instinctively rely upon a sense that norms require ontic components for their legitimacy. But – crucially – due to the

81. This master narrative is qualified by the term ‘reform’ because Taylor’s account begins historically with the Protestant Reformation and hypothesises aspects of the Reformers’ thought and practice as crucial to the secularizing processes that his genealogy describes.

Durkheimian process of moral sources becoming increasingly abstract, these components tend not to be readily identifiable as objects in the world.

Taylor's story, therefore, is a socio-historical account of religious atavism in which there is both change and continuity. Where order is first underpinned by God's presence in a given society, the sense of a precise immanent–transcendent threshold becomes more and more abstract, until it is little more than a residue or underlying instinct. Order will continue to be conceptualised in terms of a transcendent referent, but without any single referent being acknowledged by all the members of a given society. Common sources of ordinal meaning are occluded further by the agonistic dynamics of pluralism in liberal democracies, which give rise to a phenomenon that Taylor refers to as 'fragilisation', meaning that any single belief or ideology will be subject to attrition by its adjacency in a social space to other beliefs and ideologies. Taylor's work is also explanatory and genealogical in character. In contrast to Rorty's quietistic and deflationary style, Taylor is concerned to broaden the terms of discussion and consider the widest possible range of viewpoints. Taylor's genealogical style accords with his irenic disposition in being modular and extensible, amenable to improvement through further deepening or explication of a given detail or aspect of the story.

Crucially for the topic of climate crisis, Taylor's modern moral order rests upon a principle of *mutual benefit*. On this account, the modern liberal dispensation depends upon a deep and usually unarticulated sense that societies naturally flourish when individuals seek to meet their own needs in ways that either foster or at least do not interfere with the needs of

others. For Taylor, this felt principle of generalised beneficence goes back, through a sequence of conceptual shifts in Western history, to the revealed benevolence of the Judaeo-Christian God. Taylor thus theorises a functional analogy: just as order and flourishing depended, in an early-modern Christian worldview, on God's divine benevolence, so order and flourishing in a contemporary worldview – the default, mainstream mentality of liberal democracies – depends on the natural benevolence of human beings living in society with each other.

Climate crisis relates to this hypothesis in the following way. Confidence in the principle of mutual benefit is sustained by the evidence that flourishing and order appear to follow from it. Since the end of the Cold War, world order has been largely determined by systems of political liberalism and economic neoliberalism that are, on Taylor's view, shaped by the modern moral order of mutual benefit. That world order, with the United States as its de facto head, has suffered various shocks – notably the September 11 attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, the US presidency of Donald Trump, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine – yet there remains no system or theory of order to plausibly replace it in the near term. The liberal system has therefore shown great resilience. But far from being celebrated, the resilience of the post-Cold War world order is often a source of anxiety and dissatisfaction, as it leaves many deeply dissatisfied.

This may be interpreted in different ways. Although operating in an unarticulated, Wittgensteinian background, the reduction of divine benevolence to a mere code of social and economic behaviour may be felt at the level of phenomenology; for Taylor, the widespread

malaise of modern life demonstrates that such a cheapening is widely apprehended, even by those who would self-identity as secular non-believers. Thus, on Taylor's account, the principle of mutual benefit at the heart of Western liberalism – counter-intuitively – leaves many spiritually unfulfilled on account of its inherent thinness. This critique of modernity as rationally efficient yet spiritually etiolated is a crucial point, and one for which Taylor's debt to Nietzsche is plain. Climate crisis appears to repudiate the principle of mutual benefit by demonstrating that the present world order – shaped above all by post-Enlightenment liberalism – eventually leads to disorder and collapse. The planetary boundaries framework favoured by many Earth system scientists, for instance, shows climate science challenging the notion of limitless economic growth that is a byword for economic neoliberalism. In this way, climate crisis is experienced as a spiritual opportunity, as it repudiates the attenuated principle of mutual benefit and presents the chance to break free of an ossified, oppressive immanent frame.

By this account, the apocalyptic aspect of climate crisis is felt, at the level of phenomenology, to resolve tensions inherent to Western modernity. The principle of mutual benefit gives modern societies an essentially teleological character, but this teleology is disrupted insofar as industrial civilization produces its own undoing in the form of climate crisis. The sense of resolution may be understood in either of two ways. First, there is general dissatisfaction with the thinness of mutual benefit as the regnant telos, which leads to a generalised longing for a fuller, more authentic experience of the connection between society and human flour-

ishing. Second, there is a tension between the anti-teleological imperatives of Enlightenment rationality and the apparent resilience of a globalised liberal-democratic telos. Climate crisis potentially resolves both.



Richard Rorty contributes to the thesis's vision of liberal postsecularity by undercutting the priority of scientific reason in the liberal public sphere. In this, Rorty provides a privative complement to the positive account in Taylor's genealogy of secular modernity. The quietistic and privative character of Rorty's thought flows from his epistemological commitments. Rorty's pragmatism is one of strong anti-foundationalism that understands different cultures as distinct 'vocabularies' that coexist in non-hierarchical relation to each other. On this sort of post-metaphysical view, any Cartesian natural order of reasons is merely the echo of a moribund Christianity (itself indebted to deficient Platonism). Accordingly, for Rorty, liberal postsecularity is defined above all by an Enlightenment principle of 'anti-authoritarianism' that applies equally in ethics and epistemology. This anti-authoritarianism suggests that scientific reason does not operate autonomously, but rather depends for its authority on a principle of religious atavism.

A central idea in Rorty's work is the inevitable desuetude of all vocabularies, a term that encompasses knowledge disciplines and cultures.⁸² Rorty invokes the principle of vocabular

82. Rorty was influenced in his account of vocabularies and the inevitability of their obsolescence by Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts in the natural sciences.

desuetude not through genealogical delineation but rather through simple analogies taking the basic form ‘as x, so y’. In this way, contemporary problems in philosophy are analogised to forgotten problems of past epistemes. Although Rorty expressed great admiration for *geistesgeschichte* – even declaring it to be the general form of philosophy per se – his oeuvre contains no sustained work of history. The Rortyan trope of vocabular desuetude, therefore, gestures towards and stands in place of full genealogies in the style of Taylor’s.

For Rorty, the quintessential instance of vocabular desuetude is the decline in the West of belief in a creator-deity. Throughout Rorty’s corpus, an analogy to monotheism paints contemporary projects of foundationalism as misguided quests for transcendence. Rorty is an uncompromising anthropocentrist for whom attempting to validate cultural or political projects with reference beyond the human domain is an expression of religious atavism. By a Rortyan argument, then, revisionary projects linked to climate crisis have no need of validation through the natural sciences. This thoroughgoing anthropocentrism links Rorty’s epistemology and his mature social thought. Rorty rejects out of hand any form of epistemological skyhook, and his pragmatism in its final iteration is a defence of anti-authoritarianism. For Rorty, philosophy is best thought of as a form of cultural politics, in which the philosopher’s role is to expand the stock of imaginative resources for utopian speculation. The Rortyan position therefore finds no fault with utopianism, but would count the privileging of scientific reason an expression of inherited theistic tendencies. Here, once again, the principle of overdetermination is germane to a religious atavism interpretation. The presence of high uncertainty in climate science

means that interpretative principles play a crucial role in relating findings to policy. ‘There is high (as well as deep) uncertainty . . . surrounding tipping points and making quantitative statements about tipping points is challenging.’⁸³ One of these principles is the precautionary principle. ‘The idea takes multiple forms, some far more cautious and targeted than others. . . . The central idea is that regulators should take aggressive action to avoid certain risks, even if they do not know that those risks will come to fruition.’⁸⁴ Many commentators have noted that climate crisis is a special case in favour of the precautionary principle:

Earth’s future climate might or might not have a domino-like succession of tipping points that turns the system into a hothouse after an uncertain number of centuries. . . . Such worst-case scenarios are highly speculative. But they cannot be ruled out with complete confidence in the present state of climate science and climate modeling. So there has never in human history been a stronger case for applying the precautionary principle.⁸⁵

A religious atavism principle on Rortyan premises is potentially a counterargument to the precautionary principle. Dealing with themes similar to those in Taylor’s hypothesis of fragilisation, Rorty wrote on the normative force of *liberal irony* – at least among cultivated members of liberal democracies – as awareness of historical change in worldviews erodes one’s conviction that any given vocabulary will be final in the sense of unrevisable. A Rortyan critique might thus also take issue with grand narratives of climate crisis in regard to their inherent corrigibility.

83. Vincent Lam and Mason M. Majszak, ‘Climate Tipping Points and Expert Judgment’, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews Climate Change* 13, no. 6 (2022): 2.

84. Cass R. Sunstein, *Averting Catastrophe: Decision Theory for COVID-19, Climate Change, and Potential Disasters of All Kinds* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 43.

85. Michael Edgeworth McIntyre, ‘Climate Tipping Points: A Personal View’, *Physics Today* 76, no. 3 (2023): 45.

Summary

This introduction has described the thesis's principal subjects and claims, following the thematic flow of its chapters. It began by considering religious themes in ecological discourse generally and approaches to interpreting them. It then described the great interest in climate crisis of recent years among high theorists and in the wider culture as a distinct climatological turn. The Anthropocene was introduced – being primarily a multidisciplinary, mediating, and discursive phenomenon – and the discussion then moved to use of the natural sciences among theorists of climate crisis in underwriting projects of ordinal revision. Reference was made in particular to Ulrich Beck's hypothesis of emancipatory catastrophism and its corresponding slogan of 'the positive side effects of bads'. This idea was juxtaposed to analogous ones in the work of Bruno Latour. Having established the hypothesis of a climatological turn, the discussion then introduced the hermeneutical concept of religious atavism as a critical response that approaches that turn through its implicit claims. The discussion then outlined some methodological considerations regarding scholarly understandings of secularism and postsecularism before introducing Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty as theorists of liberalism whose ideas substantiate the link between climate crisis and religious atavism.



Chapter one introduces the climatological turn by linking the Anthropocene, Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism, and Bruno Latour's account of a 'new climatic regime'.

A preoccupation among theorists of climate crisis with the apophatic dimensions of climate change is presented as the link between different theorists and projects. The origins and nature of the Anthropocene paradigm are discussed, and recent multidisciplinary collections show that natural-scientific interpretations of the paradigm still have priority in the literature. Themes in that literature are linked to Ulrich Beck's theory of global metamorphosis, which Beck sees as producing new kinds of order. Specific revisionary proposals are considered in view of the Beckian slogan of 'the positive side effects of bads'.⁸⁶ Beck's revision of methods is related to the lineage of critical theory, and the foregoing themes are then found in Bruno Latour's mature work.⁸⁷

Chapter two uses the concept of religious atavism to interpret climate crisis as a cultural construction of liberal democracies. In contrast to views like that of Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, for whom climate crisis is an instance of 'the unthinkable' in Western culture, the approach from religious atavism uses an etic viewpoint in redescribing the climate crisis worldview in historicist terms, in conversation chiefly with theories of postsecularity in liberal societies. The bifold nature of traditional secularization theories is discussed, and the need is outlined for strategies that bridge this sociological and conceptual divide.

Chapter three introduces Charles Taylor's *robust realism* in epistemology and his irenic approach to social thought. It details Taylor's hypothesis that norms of social order require

86. Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

87. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

ontic sources, and how this hypothesis features in his ‘reform master narrative’ of secular modernity. Focusing on the evolution of societies through Durkheimian stages, over the course of which the status and visibility of ontic sources in a given society changes, the discussion relates Taylor’s account to Ulrich Beck’s hypothesis regarding ‘the positive side effects of bads’ in cosmopolitan sociology. Taylor’s modern moral order of mutual benefit is interpreted as having at its core a tension between order as ‘telos’ and the anti-teleological naturalism of the Enlightenment. On this view, the goods produced by ecological ‘bads’ are a resolution of the widespread malaise that emerges from the felt senselessness of civilizational flourishing in the absence of foundations.

Chapter four contrasts Richard Rorty’s approach and views with those of Taylor, describing Rorty’s pragmatist epistemology and relating it to his style of historicist analogy. Rorty’s pragmatism is analogous in key respects to Derridean deconstruction and other methods of epistemic relativism. Rorty’s trope of vocabular desuetude is described and examples of it are presented. Rorty’s use of the epistemological ‘skyhook’ is found in his philosophical papers, and this is related to his later theory of cultural anti-authoritarianism. The account of religious atavism that emerges from Rorty’s work is related to the Beckian hypothesis of ‘the positive side effects of bads’ and the longing for extra-human sources of validation.

The conclusion compares Rorty and Taylor, reflecting on the convergences and dissimilarities of their accounts. The discussion reflects on the use of climate crisis as a platform for repriming a sense of the sacred that is capable of withstanding felt disenchantment. It

concludes that in view of Taylorian fragilisation and Rortyan liberal irony, it is necessary for sources of order in liberal democracies to remain apophatic. While conditions of postsecularity grant religious reason greater entrée to the public sphere than these previously enjoyed, those conditions also challenge grand narratives of reenchantment.

ONE

Climate Crisis and Grand Narratives in a Secular Age

Whether seen as one concept or many, climate crisis looms large in the contemporary Western imagination, and the natural phenomena at play in climate change have been matched in their magnitude by a cultural response. From the Anthropocene to the Green New Deal, the threat of natural calamity on a world-historical scale has inspired different proposals for systemic change. Behind the idea that climate crisis must be met with a radical revision of institutions and mores lies a vision of interrelated processes touching all aspects of modern life. ‘Climate crisis is not the only crisis we face. We face so many overlapping and intersecting emergencies – from surging white supremacy to gender-based violence, to gaping economic inequality – that we simply can’t afford to fix them one at a time.’¹

With the rise in Western attention to ecological issues over recent decades, arguments for a causal link between climate crisis and core features of Western culture have also grown in sophistication and visibility. This chapter develops the hypothesis that there has been a *climatological turn* among various disciplines in the tradition of critical theory. This turn is, in part, an intellectual movement that is defined by three constitutive and interrelated elements: a discursive centre, a core concern, and a unifying method. The discursive centre is the polysemous and multidisciplinary paradigm of the Anthropocene; the central concern is the revision – either in theory or in fact – of inherited understandings of moral, social, or

1. Naomi Klein, ‘A Just Transition’, in *The Climate Book*, ed. Greta Thunberg (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 391.

global order; and the unifying method is the invocation of warrants from the natural sciences. The revisionary proposals of the climatological turn are exemplified by German sociologist Ulrich Beck's theory of global metamorphosis (*verwandlung*). The philosopher and historian of science Bruno Latour is presented as a proxy for theorists in the climatological turn generally.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. First, a preliminary discussion distinguishes between inherently revisionist ecologism and traditional environmentalism, while providing some historical context for the concept of ecology per se. Second, the paradigm of the Anthropocene is introduced, and its nature and function as an emergent and multidisciplinary *grand narrative* sets the scene for a discussion of the climatological turn more broadly. Third, Ulrich Beck's hypothesis of global metamorphosis is introduced, and Beck's closely related hypothesis of 'emancipatory catastrophism' establishes the slogan of 'the goods of bads' – which refers to a cosmopolitan cultural process whereby ecological change generates new 'orders' by challenging 'sacred' norms. The hypothesis of 'goods' from 'bads' is used as a heuristic for interpreting the central preoccupation in the climatological turn with the revision of order and method. The two levels of revision in Beck's programme – of norms and of order – are described and qualified. Fourth, the historian and philosopher of science Bruno Latour is introduced as an avatar of the climatological turn. The levels of revision in Latour's programme are parallel to those in Beck's, and the particulars of these are discussed. The abandonment of methods of epistemic relativism in favour of deliverances of the natural sciences is analogous to Beck's insistence that theory be grounded in empirical sources. The revisionary programme

of Latour's *new climatic regime* is interpreted in light of Ulrich Beck's cosmopolitanist slogan regarding the positive side effects of bads.

Preliminary discussion of the ecological

This section considers various positions of political and intellectual radicalism. An inherently revisionist ecologism is distinguished from traditional (incrementalist) forms of environmentalism. This process of revision is part of a historical trend in which ecological themes have come more and more to be associated with intellectual vanguardism in the academy and Western culture generally speaking.

A distinction between environmentalism and ecologism is a commonplace of many disciplines concerned with the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Where environmentalism would be associated with a 'managerial' disposition towards the planet and the persistence of human beings at the centre of value systems, ecologism argues for the transformation of received thought and practice on behalf of the natural world. Andrew Dobson's account of green political philosophy explains that '*environmentalism* argues for a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption' whereas '*ecologism* holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social

and political life.’² In a revised statement of this view, Dobson argues that the specific conditions of the Anthropocene demand that the management orientation of environmentalism be discarded in favour of the transformative proposals of ecologism:

Our generation is living through an epochal change taking us from the Holocene into the Anthropocene. For the first time in the history of the planet, one species has become a geological force in its own right. Most of our social, economic and political thinking to date – including about emancipation – has been based on a set of assumptions which no longer hold, regarding the kind of being we are.’³

A similar distinction appears in the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss’s paradigm of ‘deep ecology’ versus ‘shallow ecology’, which had a tremendous influence on ecological thought in the second half of the twentieth century,⁴ and continues to be a resource for ecological thinkers in the early twenty-first.⁵ A third formulation of the distinction between traditional and revisionary approaches to valuing the natural world is Bron Taylor’s dichotomy of ‘green religion’ and ‘deep green religion’:

It is important to distinguish between green religion (which posits that environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation) and dark green religion (in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care). These two forms are often in tension and sometimes in direct conflict.⁶

The environmentalism–ecologism distinction is a prominent theme in the political history of environmental activism. Mainstream forms of environmentalism since the mid-twentieth

2. Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), 2, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=165643>.

3. Andrew Dobson, ‘Emancipation in the Anthropocene: Taking the Dialectic Seriously’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 1 (2022): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310211028148>.

4. Arne Næss, ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary’, *Inquiry* 16, nos. 1–4 (1976): 95–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682>.

5. Nina Witoszek and Martin Lee Mueller, ‘Deep Ecology: Life after Life?’, in ‘Deep Ecology’, special issue, *Worldviews* 21, no. 3 (2017): 209–17, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685357-02103001>.

6. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 10.

century have tended to see care for the planet as a means of furthering received social and personal values, emphasising continuity with precedents in earlier moments of humanism and social progressivism. Environmentalist activism and theory in the second half of the twentieth century significantly reflected the nuclear tensions in the Cold War and debates of the time regarding the benefits and risks of nuclear power. Around the beginning of the 1960s, a loosely connected set of social movements and grassroots political organisations gradually began influencing policy in various countries and internationally, with the appearance throughout the 1970s and 1980s of green parties in Europe and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States being notable milestones in this development. The entry of concepts such as *sustainable development* into the vernacular of corporations, policymakers, and international bodies such as the United Nations may be traced to these early environmentalists.

In contrast to the incrementalist and pragmatic strategies of twentieth-century environmentalism in the West, the climatological turn in theory and culture has emphasised crisis and disruption, casting suspicion on regnant conceptions of liberal order. Much discourse of the climatological turn is harshly critical of concepts inherited from twentieth-century environmentalism such as *sustainability*, proposing as alternatives ideas such as *degrowth* that tend to go along with critiques of free-market capitalism. Where early environmentalism often focused on practical contexts and agendas for protecting and preserving the natural world, theorists of the climatological turn have often approached questions of value in meta-

physical or ontological terms, suggesting in many cases that human beings must, in different senses, be decentred within organising paradigms. This variety of more *existential* engagement with the ecological has steadily risen in prominence in public and academic discourse since the fall of the Soviet Union, in tandem with the dissolution of a global geopolitical context determined largely by the US-USSR rivalry of the Cold War era. The role of ecological concern in social and cultural discourse of the early twenty-first century is often compared to that played by the threat of nuclear catastrophe in the decades after the Second World War,⁷ not necessarily in terms of concrete effect but rather in abstract dimensions such as magnitude and historical significance.

While it is surely the case that, in the United States and other Anglophone countries of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, ecological politics have tended to be associated with the political left, before the mid-twentieth century it was more common to find concern for the natural world expressed from the political right:

In Germany, in particular, the critique of the destruction of nature was often wedded to defending an antimodern nationalism – for example, in Ludwig Klages’s 1913 *Man and Earth*, which lambasts deforestation and species loss while extolling the virtues of German landscapes and the homeliness of peasant life. Conservationism and conservatism, soil and blood, became a fateful, often anti-Semitic mixture on which fascism could draw.⁸

7. The connection between twentieth-century nuclear anxieties and twenty-first century ecological anxieties will be multifaceted, but may be understood in part as reflecting twentieth-century environmentalism’s preoccupation with nuclear issues, the legacy of which arguably plays a role in many present-day climate activists’ aversion to the use of nuclear power in aid of emissions goals.

8. Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood, ‘Introduction’, in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 2, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=5247454>.

However, ecological concern among right-wing groups in Anglophone societies may in recent years have begun to move from the fringes towards the mainstream.⁹ The climatological turn has nonetheless been a phenomenon largely of political leftism, and its emergence may be linked to a steadily intensifying focus on the environment and the *planetary* per se since the turn of the millennium; a focus which has, moreover, increasingly set the agendas of national governments and international bodies and stimulated much debate across disparate fields of scholarship, science, and culture. A significant impetus to this trend has been concern with local and planetary consequences of ecological change, chiefly in the form of climate change. But the outlook of *crisis* that has emerged from this focus is different in many respects from the animating spirit of much twentieth-century environmentalism.

The inaugural statement of environmentalism in the second half of the twentieth century is conventionally recognised as Anne Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*.¹⁰ 'Carson initiated a fundamental shift in the way we regard the environment. The impact of this shift can hardly be overstated.'¹¹ Carson's fear that the then widely used agricultural treatment DDT might be carcinogenic, and her concern with the human consequences of its widespread use, is the quintessential instance of an environmentalism borne from a human-orientated formulation of values.

9. Graham Macklin, 'The Extreme Right, Climate Change and Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 5 (2022): 979–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2069928>.

10. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring and Other Writings on the Environment*, ed. Sandra Steingraber (New York: Library of America, 2018).

11. Janet Browne, 'Rachel Carson: Prophet for the Environment', in *Dreamers, Visionaries, and Revolutionaries in the Life Sciences*, ed. Oren Harman and Michael R. Dietrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 207, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226570075.001.0001>.

While philosophical and religious reflection on the natural world before the twentieth century often had utopian or Edenic overtones, the cultural pessimism of the twentieth century marked environmental concern after the Second World War with a different character.¹² The touchstones of cultural pessimism were not necessarily environmental per se – for philosophers and cultural observers (and later mainstream Western culture generally) the Holocaust became the standard for the depths to which human beings could sink.¹³ Civilizational self-annihilation through geopolitical nuclear exchange was widely supposed to be inevitable in the near term. Nevertheless, environmentalism first appeared as a serious political and intellectual force with the emergence into consciousness of the post-war generation in Europe and America, who absorbed the products of an intellectual milieu substantially inflected by cultural pessimism. Crisis was absorbed as a cultural habit of thought.

Overtly faith-based expressions of environmental concern have played an important role in the climatological turn, in particular the subfield of modern theology known as ecotheology. Although the present enquiry is concerned with quarters of the climatological turn nominally governed by methodological atheism or agnosticism, it is important to note the significance of

12. Genealogical precedents for the climatological turn might well include Husserl's late-career diagnosis of a 'crisis of European sciences', in which he developed the view that Western philosophy had gone fundamentally awry in its historical failure to accord primacy to the lifeworld in accounts of human experience. Husserl's work may be regarded as an expression of European interwar pessimism, bearing many thematic similarities to Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, to which it may be regarded as a response.

13. Alec Ryrie has argued that the Holocaust and the Second World War have become 'sacred' narratives in the West, insofar as they have become indispensable and potentially irreplaceable points of reference for a Western sense of shared morality.

ecothology in the wider domain. Ecotheologians often contrast their positions to culturally dominant paradigms of the secular:

Evolutionary naturalism is insufficiently satisfying and may partly explain why some advocates of a 'Good Anthropocene' incorporate niche construction into what I perceive is a secularized eschatology. More explicit theological engagement with our natural history of human becoming will be, I suggest, crucially important in perceiving how to act in an ecologically responsible way in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

A focal shift towards ecological issues has occurred not only among theologians but also scholars of religion, and ecological issues have arguably provided interdisciplinary frameworks in the context of ongoing debates about the relationship between theology and the study of religion.¹⁵ A convergence on common points of ecologism in interrelated fields of religious studies and modern theology suggests the possibility for new kinds of ecumenism. Ecological concern has become an important current within Roman Catholicism in the light, in particular, of Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*.¹⁶ The climatological turn thus represents a spectrum of positions, from the theologically explicit to the methodologically atheistic, but across the spectrum ecological issues are put forward as warrants for projects of revision.

Broad features of the climatological turn can be identified through its historical precursors. As an influence upon and subsequently a contemporary of theorists in the climatological turn, Ulrich Beck's engagement with issues of ecological change is unique in the directness with

14. Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Evolution: A Theology of Niche Construction for the Twenty-First Century', in *Theology and Ecology across the Disciplines: On Care for Our Common Home*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 241, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567672766.ch-018>.

15. Christian Jacobs-Vandeger, 'Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90, no. 1 (2022): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfac022>.

16. *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015).

which he presents outcomes of catastrophe as positive ‘goods’. Building on the distinction between environmentalism and ecologism, other precursors of the climatological turn might be identified as the Club of Rome, founded in 1968, and its concept of a ‘world problematique’ and E. O. Wilson’s notion of an ‘epic of evolution’ as a secular framework for ultimate meaning. The ecologism of the climatological turn, in short, may be distinguished from more traditional, institutional, or mainstream forms of environmentalism.

The Club of Rome and its landmark publication, *The Limits to Growth*, marked a turning point in the history of environmental thought.¹⁷ The non-profit group of scientists, academics, and industrialists met in a cultural context inflected by expanded planetary awareness following the *Earthrise* photograph, the Apollo 11 lunar mission, and the inaugural Earth Day in 1970.¹⁸ The conclusions of the 1972 report *Limits to Growth* were supported by computer-aided simulations of future scenarios that were technologically sophisticated for the time. The Club’s original focus of concern, the interrelated, neo-Malthusian issues of overpopulation and natural-resource depletion, have arguably been eclipsed in the intervening decades, owing to the emergence of new vocabularies and conceptual frameworks with which to articulate ecological issues. ‘From today’s perspective, the limits to growth are no longer seen primarily in terms of depleting raw materials, but rather as planetary boundaries, with the ecological

17. Donella H. Meadows, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (London, Earth Island, 1972).

18. ‘The “Earthrise” photograph, taken on the 1968 Apollo 8 mission, became one of the most significant images of the 20th Century, triggering a profound shift in environmental awareness and the potential for human unity.’ Susan L. Prescott et al., ‘Project Earthrise: Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Conference of *inVIVO* Planetary Health’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 20 (2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182010654>.

functioning of the planet being endangered.’¹⁹ The long-term influence of the Club’s original vision continues, however, to be discernible, and the group has continued to meet and issue reports.²⁰ The Club’s initial report bears comparison to central notions of the climatological turn in its introduction of the ‘world problematique’:

[The Club’s founder] Peccei’s principal objectives were to analyze and understand the basic interdependencies that link all the problems facing mankind across the globe, whatever the nature. The perception that they all interconnect made him coin the term ‘world problematique’. It covers a vast sphere of innumerable difficulties confronting mankind, such as social injustice, malnutrition, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, population growth, the obsession with growth, inflation, the energy crisis, monetary problems, the degeneration of cities, damage to the environment, the rise of the nuclear threat and political corruption.²¹

The idea that multifarious civilizational issues converge into a singular paradigm has been a commonplace of theory and commentary in the climatological turn, and it is central to many iterations of the Anthropocene. In this regard the Club of Rome’s notion of world problematique is an important antecedent to the overtly ontological theories in climate crisis discourse, as reflected in the trend of disciplines reconceptualising their inherited paradigms:

The basic continuity between these developments [in philosophy, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and, especially, anthropology itself] and the ontological turn, as we understand it here, lies in a common desire to present alternatives to the fundamental ontological premises of what Bruno Latour – one of the key figures – has called ‘the modern constitution’ (1993). Transfiguring some of the orientations that used to get debated under the banner of postmodernism, *and often motivated by the perception of a total (political, economic, ecological) crisis of empire, capitalism and modernity at large,*

19. Thomas Döring and Birgit Aigner-Walder, ‘The Limits to Growth – 50 Years Ago and Today’, *Intereconomics* 57, no. 3 (2022): 187, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1046-5>.

20. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker and Anders Wijkman, *Come On! Capitalism, Short-Termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet* (New York: Springer, 2018), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-4939-7419-1>.

21. J. C. Hanekamp, G Vera-Navas, and S. W. Verstegan, ‘The Historical Roots of Precautionary Thinking: The Cultural Ecological Critique and “The Limits to Growth”’, *Journal of Risk Research* 8, no. 4 (2005): 301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1366987042000265056>.

these theoretical developments are symptomatic of an even broader impulse to invent new ways of thinking about, intervening in and experimenting with the world.²²

One overarching motif of the climatological turn is anti-anthropocentrism, but this term requires careful qualification, in view of the many different meanings and connotations it may have in colloquial contexts. The polysemy of anthropocentrism in itself may contribute to its usefulness in polemical contexts:

To leave the word ‘anthropocentrism’ ambiguous allows it to be criticized from various perspectives. While the interpretations and usages of diverse perspectives do not overlap or even may conflict, the ambivalence of the concept makes possible an apparent agreement across the board to erect the concept ‘anthropocentrism’ as a scapegoat for the environmental crisis.²³

For the present purposes, anti-anthropocentrism refers to a jointly ethical and ontological orientation that sees traditional human-centredness as deleterious (in whatever sense) in immanent terms *and* contrary to an underlying order that may be reflected in political, intellectual, or cultural projects. Anti-anthropocentrism is of central importance to the field of environmental ethics. Allen Thompson begins a survey of anthropocentrism in its different forms with the following dictum: ‘If one had to summarize the history of environmental ethics in a single question, a good candidate would be: Is anthropocentrism the ideological source of our environmental problems?’²⁴ A traditional stance in environmental ethics opposes the idea

22. Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 31 (italics added), <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1017/9781316218907>.

23. Lařna Droz, ‘Anthropocentrism as the Scapegoat of the Environmental Crisis: A Review’, *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* 22 (2022): 39, <https://doi.org/10.3354/esep00200>.

24. Allen Thompson, ‘Anthropocentrism: Humanity as Peril and Promise’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 77, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.013.8>.

that the domain of human beings should be the exclusive locus of ethical concern. Summing up a schema that covers ontological, ethical, and conceptual forms of anthropocentrism, Thompson concludes that

if indeed we are moving into the Anthropocene, the age of human domination . . . then perhaps environmental ethics ought to focus closely on human beings, on the species-specific environmental character traits, the environmental virtues and vices, of this particular moral animal. The well-being of all life on Earth may hang in the balance.²⁵

Alongside the motif of anti-anthropocentrism, the climatological turn has stylistic features. Much scholarship within the climatological turn embraces the baroque forms of thought and style associated with postmodernism. Many programmes in this movement are pitched against traditional or establishment viewpoints in their respective areas. In many cases, of which Bruno Latour is a pre-eminent exemplar, intellectual vanguardism and anti-anthropocentrism are virtually equated with each other. The theories of ordinal evolution in these programmes appear, from a historicist viewpoint, to draw upon notions of civilizational stadialism similar to those found, for example, in Auguste Comte's 'law of the three stages' or Joachim of Fiore's interpretation of the Book of Revelation.²⁶ As a motif of the climatological turn, intellectual vanguardism prizes multiplicity, novelty, and disruption, and relates to its parallel motifs as a warrant for proposing new conceptions of order and the decentring of the human. In this regard, the Anthropocene has been especially productive, insofar as the concept not only

25. Thompson, 'Anthropocentrism', 87.

26. Michel Bourdieu, 'Auguste Comte', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, Spring 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/comte/>; Julia Eva Wannemacher, 'The Interpretation of John's Apocalypse in the Medieval Period', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 421–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190655433.013.24>.

represents a new paradigm, but may in its own novelty, polysemy, and instability of conception itself easily be made the subject of revision. Mads Ejsing astutely observes the interrelation of these motifs, citing ‘the need to pay renewed attention to the more-than-human entanglements of the climatic and ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, as well as the recognition that these crises cannot be reduced to either a crisis of technology or politics, but go deeper, all the way to the cultural, even spiritual.’²⁷

The Anthropocene

At the centre of the climatological turn is the polysemous and increasingly ubiquitous notion of the Anthropocene. This section describes some ways in which the Anthropocene plays a unifying role in the climatological turn. The concept’s history is discussed and its use in various disciplines is explored. An idea originally developed in the geological discipline of stratigraphy, the Anthropocene has been widely embraced across the humanities and social sciences, in particular in domains of criticism and theory:

[The Anthropocene is] a keyword in the lexicon of environmental research and, increasingly, in international environmental policy discourse too. Its ascent to semantic prominence attests to the authority exerted by a variety of geoscientists, even in conditions where deference to ‘experts’ has declined in many countries. . . . Unlike previous geoscience concepts that became part of the *lingua franca* (such as ‘acid rain’ and ‘ozone hole’), the Anthropocene idea is unusually grand. . . . ‘The Anthropocene’ sits at the heart of a whole family of (not always commensurable) concepts that increasingly frame people’s understanding of ‘the age of humans’.²⁸

27. Mads Ejsing, ‘The Arrival of the Anthropocene in Social Theory: From Modernism and Marxism towards a New Materialism’, *The Sociological Review*, article in review (2022): 3802612211069, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221106905>.

28. Noel Castree, ‘Framing, Deframing and Reframing the Anthropocene’, *Ambio* 50, no. 10 (2021): 1788, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-020-01437-2>.

The paradigm's cross-disciplinary profile has made it uniquely influential, and its career is a topic of interest in its own right. 'While it is impossible to reconcile the many different approaches to the Anthropocene concept in history, economics, philosophy, law, ethics, and social thought, the contribution of the humanities and social sciences can be understood as assuming a position of metareflection.'²⁹ Conceptions of order – whether moral, social, global, natural, or political – in the climatological turn often begin with postulations of the Anthropocene, underpinning critical claims regarding the nature of contemporary civilization itself.

It is notable that the concept of the Anthropocene is not treated to very much depth in the latest outputs of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – now in its sixth round of reports – although the bibliographies of those texts are strewn with instances of the term. The contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), which focuses on the 'physical science basis' of climate change and is therefore the most technical and formal of the customary three reports, notes the following in a section entitled 'Long-Term Perspectives on Anthropogenic Climate Change':

The rate, scale and magnitude of anthropogenic changes in the climate system since the mid-20th century suggested the definition of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Steffen et al., 2007), referring to an era in which human activity is altering major components of the Earth system and leaving measurable imprints that will remain in the permanent geological record (Figure 1.5; IPCC, 2018).³⁰

29. Zalasiewicz et al., 'The Anthropocene: Comparing Its Meaning in Geology (Chronostratigraphy) with Conceptual Approaches Arising in Other Disciplines', *Earth's Future* 9, no. 1 (March 2021): e2020EF001896, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020EF001896>.

30. D. Chen et al., 'Framing, Context, and Methods', in *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental*

By contrast to the formality and and reserve of this statement, the contribution of Working Group III to the AR6 finds the Anthropocene at the conceptual centre of climate change as a topic, noting the following in its introduction:

The Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (SR1.5) underlined that humanity is now living with the ‘unifying lens of the Anthropocene’ (IPCC 2018a, pp. 52–53), that requires a sharpened focus on the impact of human activity on the climate system and the planet more broadly given ‘planetary boundaries’ (Steffen et al. 2015) including interdependencies of climate change and biodiversity (Dasgupta 2021).³¹

The Anthropocene may be understood as a conceptual by-product of the more general move towards conceptualizing the planet in holistic terms:

Computer models have greatly contributed to imposing a global vision of climate and climate change (Hulme, 2010), a vision central to the work of the IPCC. The global physico-mathematical vision embedded in these models has thus ousted the plural and geographical conception that prevailed previously – regional climates defined as types of weather (Heymann, 2010).³²

Although in commonsensical accounts of how science works, holistic visions of the planet might seem to be the simple outgrowth of a scientific worldview, the factors underlying such constructs are inevitably more complex:

Scientific reasons are often put forward to justify this global scale: for example, carbon dioxide molecules emitted at any point mix quickly with the air and integrate the atmospheric circulation on a planetary scale. But other factors have helped to co-produce this global conception in climate science and policy (Miller, 2004): a powerful infrastructure of observational networks (Edwards, 2010); a long-standing

Panel on Climate Change, ed. V. Masson-Delmotte et al. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 161, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157896.003>.

31. M. Grubb et al., ‘Introduction and framing’, in *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed P.R. Shukla et al. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), Cambridge, 2022), 151, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157926.003>.

32. H  l  ne Guillemot, ‘Climate Models’, in *A Critical Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. Kari De Pryck and Mike Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 130.

internationally recognised scientific community; the huge scientific exploration programs of the American military during the Cold War, relayed by worldwide scientific programs and institutions, such as the World Climate Research Program (WCRP).³³

An impulse to revise received notions motivates philosophers like Latour, and that impulse may be understood as analogous to the revisionary proposals that have become common in mainstream climate science:

It has been argued that the IPCC plays an instrumental role in producing the visions of societal change used by those arguing for its necessity (Beck et al., 2021). In SR15 [Special Report on 1.5°C], it is explicitly claimed that ‘limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require substantial societal and technological transformations’ in terms of energy production, land use (agriculture and food), urban infrastructure (transport and buildings) and industrial systems (IPCC, 2018a: 56). It also states that the work of achieving a resilient future is fraught with complex moral, practical and political difficulties and inevitable trade-offs.³⁴

The planetary scale of the science naturally complements the global scale of theories about order:

If the IPCC is to help the world’s diverse peoples tackle climate change through collaborative action – and in the process help usher in a transformation of the global economy and energy systems – it needs to reflect on and re-imagine itself as a maker of global *social order*, not simply a maker of global *facts*. It needs to ask what kind of global social order it wants to help call into being. This would be a radical departure for the IPCC and the alternatives are stark.³⁵

The various reports issued by the IPCC naturally vary among each other in focus, tone, and content. To date, the only report issued by the IPCC that extensively features the Anthropocene

33. Guillemot, ‘Climate Models’, 130.

34. Rolf Lidskog and Göran Sundqvist, ‘Political Context’, in *Critical Assessment*, ed. De Pryck and Hulme, 213–14.

35. Clark Miller, ‘Re-imagining the IPCC’, in *Critical Assessment*, ed. De Pryck and Hulme, 259.

is the *Special Report on 1.5°C*, which uses the concept of the Anthropocene as a framing device and links it to the idea of ‘global transformation’:

The global transformation that would be needed to limit warming to 1.5°C requires enabling conditions that reflect the links, synergies and trade-offs between mitigation, adaptation and sustainable development. These enabling conditions are assessed across many dimensions of feasibility – geophysical, environmental-ecological, technological, economic, socio-cultural and institutional – that may be considered through the unifying lens of the Anthropocene.³⁶

Indeed, across different formulations of the Anthropocene hypothesis, new models of human order are a consistent topic of discussion. Many new academic programmes in recent years have been self-consciously framed by their authors as critical engagements with the Anthropocene, and a close consideration of these may reveal the inner logic of the concept. Scholars such as Kathryn Yusoff, for example, see the Anthropocene as recapitulating and perpetuating historical patterns of domination and injustice perpetrated by West:

It is well noted that the Anthropocene as a concept is disrupting the binaries of nature and culture, human temporality and deep time, human history and prehistory, bio and geo, and rearranging temporal and spatial scales of analysis, but it also has unproblematically reinstated a pre- and postracial subject.³⁷

Although Yusoff challenges dominant formulations of the Anthropocene, her paradigm of ‘the inhumanities’ also uses the Anthropocene as a jumping-off point for theories of human order.

‘The inhumanities is a field in which the historic double life of the inhuman as both matter

36. IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*, ed. V. Masson-Delmotte et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157940>.

37. Kathryn Yusoff, ‘The Inhumanities’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111, no. 3 (2021): 665, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2020.1814688>.

and as a racial category of liberal humanism are made visible as coconstituting discourses of modernity and the extractive geosocial relations that form the Anthropocene.’³⁸

In its most straightforward form, the Anthropocene is the stratigraphic designation of a time span whose relationship to other such time spans – such as the Holocene or the Pleistocene – is codified by the Geological Time Scale (GTS). First appearing around the year 2000, the term may be read in a literal way as ‘the epoch of humankind’, being etymologically of the Greek *anthropos* (man) and *kainos* (new). The notion of this new epoch of the human is predicated on the idea that human beings have become a *telluric* force, one capable, that is, of altering the planet to such an extent as to merit formal scientific recognition. A group within the Union of Geological Sciences called the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) is responsible for making formal proposals regarding the epoch’s inclusion on the Geologic Time Scale. In its purely natural-scientific, geophysical iteration, the Anthropocene may be regarded as not unlike other geological epochs. Yet, the great multiplicity of forms that the Anthropocene has now taken is reflected in a rich and complicated literature, and the subtext of virtually all Anthropocene discourse is the fact the concept is profoundly different in kind from other stratigraphic designations.

This multiplicity has inspired different taxonomies of the Anthropocene, and these commonly use a scheme of ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘odd’ iterations,³⁹ as in Mads Ejsing’s account: ‘the

38. Yusoff, ‘Inhumanities’, 670.

39. This formulation, it may be inferred, is modeled on the English colloquial phrase ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’, which the OED defines as ‘used to designate the varied range of aspects or qualities associated with or attributed to a specified item, event, group of people, etc.’

“good” Anthropocene promoted by the so-called ecomodernists, the “bad” Anthropocene critiqued by the eco-Marxists, and, finally, the “uncanny” Anthropocene envisioned by new materialists.⁴⁰ Holmes Rolston presents another variation of this pattern in proposing that ‘we can can confront the Anthropocene in different moods’ and going on to delineate characteristics of ‘Anthropocene, Alas! Toxic Anthropocene’, ‘Anthropocene. Limit and Adapt’, and ‘Anthropocene. Hurrah!’.⁴¹ The multiplicity of Anthropocene forms suggests a paradox at the heart of the climatological turn: while the Anthropocene in many respects resembles a form of grand narrative that is grounded in deliverances of the natural sciences, a legacy of suspicion towards grand narratives in Western societies means that the Anthropocene, in its totalising implications, will also engender cultural reaction. Mads Ejsing, charting a progression of Anthropocene thought through the works of Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway, paraphrases the ‘new materialist’ position in totalising terms:

To new materialists, the crisis of the Anthropocene is an invitation to challenge the way we currently think about and perform the relationship between society and nature, between the human and the non-human, and to start paying more attention to the dependencies, entanglements, and resonances that cut across and interrupt those distinctions. . . . What is needed is a whole new way of understanding ourselves in the world, a whole new cosmology.⁴²

The intellectual vanguardism of the climatological turn thus contains tensions that are brought to light by Ejsing’s account: there is, on one side, the revisionary imperative of arriving at ‘a

Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. ‘good (*adj.*, *n.*, *adv.*, *int.*)’, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4101948276>.

40. Ejsing, ‘Arrival of the Anthropocene’, 2.

41. Holmes Rolston, ‘The Anthropocene! Beyond the Natural?’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 63–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.001.0001>.

42. Ejsing, ‘Arrival of the Anthropocene’, 13.

whole new cosmology’ and, on the other side, the critical imperative ‘to challenge and pluralize the grand narratives that posit the Anthropocene as a shared global epochal condition.’⁴³

Furthermore, the Anthropocene may be compared to earlier theories according to which human civilization naturally goes through stages of development. Such theories of stadial progression have appeared over the centuries in different specific forms. Giambattista Vico’s (1668–1744) theory of stadial progression included the possibility of cyclical or periodic reversion; Auguste Comte’s (1798–1857) stadialism, by contrast, understood civilization as a linear process. Stadial models of different sorts can be found throughout Anthropocene discourse. A cyclical Anthropocene would likely tend to go along with a hopeful account, speaking either obliquely or directly to the possibility of planetary renewal;⁴⁴ a linear Anthropocene, on the other hand, would tend to present no possibility of stadial reversion.

Despite the array of forms that the Anthropocene has taken in theoretical domains, a degree of consensus has been reached on the idea that ‘getting the Anthropocene right’ means giving priority to the natural sciences over outputs of the humanities or social sciences:

Even where our essays describe different aspects of how we got here, all take the physical reality of the Anthropocene and its difficult, complex challenges as our starting point – even though we’d happily wish them away if that were possible.

In short, the distinctive quality of all true Anthropocene stories is that they respond to geologists’ evidence of the recent, global, near-synchronous, durable, human-made layer in the Earth’s crust and to the corresponding findings in Earth System science

43. Ejsing, ‘Arrival of the Anthropocene’, 15.

44. Ulrich Beck, ‘How Climate Change Might Save the World’, in ‘Climate Change and Social Risk’, special issue, *Development and Society* 43, no. 2 (2014): 171–76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/deveandsoci.43.2.169>; Jordi López Ortega, ‘How Anthropocene Might Save the World: Metamorphosis’, in ‘Social Theory for the Anthropocene: Thinking and Acting in a Disrupted Planet’, special issue, *Social Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2022): 14–21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020068>.

showing that the old Holocene Earth System has been destabilized, and is now lurching toward dangerous thresholds and state shifts.⁴⁵

Thus, the Anthropocene often shows up as a hybrid construction, an argument simultaneously for disciplinary unity and convergence. Considered holistically, the cultural and disciplinary uptake of the Anthropocene paradigm telegraphs a new trend of theorising about the nature of civilizational progression, which is now understood to be underwritten by deliverances of the natural sciences.⁴⁶ Discussion of the Anthropocene, meanwhile, lends itself to a neologising style, an orientation towards productive novelty that pertains both to concepts and to language. Many theorists who adopt the views of van Eeden and Latour are proponents of an ‘agentive turn’, in which ‘objects’ in particular and the non-human world generally are described in terms of attributes traditionally thought to inhere exclusively in human beings. Critics of the agentive turn often take the approach exemplified by Alf Hornborg’s slogan that ‘objects don’t have desires’: which is, in effect, to say that attributing to non-human entities such properties as have traditionally been thought to inhere only in human beings ends up committing itself, paradoxically, to an anthropomorphism – which may simply be another form of anthropocentrism.⁴⁷

45. Julia Adeney Thomas, ‘Introduction: The Growing Anthropocene Consensus’, in *Altered Earth: Getting the Anthropocene Right*, ed. Julia Adeney Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009042369>.

46. The Anthropocene is considered here as a term of critical and cultural theory, and this thesis leaves to one side any technical aspects of its definition, as these lie beyond the scope of the present topic.

47. Alf Hornborg, ‘Objects Don’t Have Desires: Toward an Anthropology of Technology beyond Anthropomorphism’, *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 4 (2021): 753–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13628>.

In recent years, *Anthropocene studies* has developed as a field of study in its own right, while Anthropocene literature has grown accordingly both in extent and multifariousness. The adoption of this paradigm across such a range of disciplines may be attributed not solely to its protean nature but also to its usefulness as a template for theories of civilizational progress, which is remarkable in view of the desuetude into which previous such schemes – above all Marxism – have fallen. The Anthropocene’s usefulness in this regard undoubtedly owes much to its interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary nature. As noted above, the extent and diversity of Anthropocene literature is unusual for scientific terms and concepts of its general type. Although as a term of stratigraphy the Anthropocene is intended to be grounded in empirical models, the claims that sustain it as a cultural narrative quickly pivot towards philosophy or otherwise depart from the ordinary standards of a given discipline. Theorists throughout the humanities have used the term in notably idiosyncratic ways.

The cross-disciplinary nature of the Anthropocene, nevertheless, is often regarded as being among its virtues. While the AWG is responsible for sending a formal recommendation to the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy as to whether an Anthropocene epoch should be added to the Geological Time Scale, the paradigm has been principally developed by humanities scholars. Furthermore, although development of the Anthropocene has been predominantly in academic contexts, the term has recently appeared with increasing regularity in popular and mainstream culture. Mark Bould presents a list of three dozen proposed variations on the term, which include ‘Accumulocene’, ‘Corporatocene’, ‘Naufragocene’, and

'Plantationocene', and he remarks that this terminological fecundity 'is what happens when the implications of a technical stratigraphic issue – primarily of interest to geologists and paleontologists – spill out into wider culture.'⁴⁸ The Anthropocene has been increasingly adopted in literary studies as an interpretative lens.⁴⁹ The hypothesis that the Anthropocene is unique in its position across scholarly and mainstream domains was first proposed in an influential article by Earth scientists Whitney J. Autin and John M. Holbrook,⁵⁰ who wonder whether the term's appearance in popular culture might not detract from its usefulness to institutional science:

Elevating terms that may become iconic in pop culture is not in itself sufficient evidence to amend formal stratigraphic practice. Science and society have much to gain from a clear understanding of how humans drive Earth-system processes instead of conducting an esoteric debate about stratigraphic nomenclature.⁵¹

Since the time of that statement, the visibility of the Anthropocene in domains of popular culture has increased considerably. A recent quantitative study of the term's appearance in the mainstream press concluded that it is 'alive and well aside from academic discourse', noting however that 'the four countries analyzed unexpectedly provide four different representations of the Anthropocene', reflecting the term's inherent adaptability.⁵²

48. Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (London: Verso, 2021), 7–8.

49. Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery, and Tereza Dědinová, eds. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), <https://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350203372>; Joel Alden Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

50. Whitney J. Autin and John M. Holbrook, 'Is the Anthropocene an Issue of Stratigraphy or Pop Culture?', *GSA Today* 22, no. 7 (2012): 60–1, <https://doi.org/10.1130/G153GW.1>.

51. Autin and Holbrook, 'Issue of Stratigraphy', 61.

52. Angela Zottola and Claudio de Majo, 'The Anthropocene: Genesis of a Term and Popularization in the Press', *Text&Talk* 42, no. 4 (2022): 470, <https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2020-0080>.

Theorists in other fields interpret the Anthropocene as a planetary ‘master narrative’, an overarching paradigm with applicability to potentially any subject of interest, from political economy and pedagogy,⁵³ to accounting and organisation studies.⁵⁴ In its expansive, modular pattern, this discourse may be understood as a counterpart in the social sciences and humanities to the interdisciplinary field of Earth system science (ESS), a relatively new idea in the geophysics whose proponents have often sought to revise concepts of the planetary by complicating distinctions between the natural and the anthropogenic. Meanwhile, the sharply contested status and legitimacy of the Anthropocene across disciplines has given rise to an ancillary, meta discussion regarding its overall characteristics. Whether the uptake of the Anthropocene by scholars working far outside of the natural sciences has diluted or alternatively enhanced the concept’s usefulness, a consensus endures regarding the priority of deliverances of the natural scientific in determining the Anthropocene’s character. An important methodological issue for Earth scientists is the phenomenon of the Anthropocene’s meaning becoming transformed through disciplinary mixing:

The conceptual difference between a temporally recent, rigorously, and precisely defined chronostratigraphic Anthropocene in geology and a more generally defined and earlier starting Anthropocene, the meaning of which can differ from study to study, seems great enough to potentially cause significant and widespread confusion and mis-

53. Jeremy Green, ‘Comparative Capitalisms in the Anthropocene: A Research Agenda for Green Transition’, *New Political Economy* 28, no. 3 (2023): 329–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2022.2109611>; Chris Peers, ‘Catastrophe or Apocalypse? The Anthropocenologist as Pedagogue’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 3 (2022): 263–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1903434>.

54. Jan Bebbington and Andy Rubin, ‘Accounting in the Anthropocene: A Roadmap for Stewardship’, *Accounting and Business Research* 52, no. 5 (2022): 582–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00014788.2022.2079780>; Marina Dantas de Figueiredo and Fábio Freitas Schilling Marquesan, ‘Back to the Future: Ecocentrism, Organization Studies, and the Anthropocene’, *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 38, no. 2 (2022): 101197, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2022.101197>.

understanding. Although great richness in our understanding of the term comes from contributions from diverse specialisms, there is also need for a common language for the debates among these groups (Robin, 2013). Formalization of the geological meaning of the Anthropocene in stratigraphy – if this becomes the case – will likely contribute to the clarity of the term and facilitate its use, at least in the geology-related sciences and hopefully more widely.⁵⁵

As noted above, the paradigm possesses unique features as compared with other terms of its kind, such as the Holocene or the Pleistocene. A prominent ecologist in a summary of the Anthropocene's career observes that

the most dismissive critiques label the Anthropocene as a mere item of 'pop culture' (14, 51), subject to the vagaries and fashions of environmental politics. A more focused critique is that the Anthropocene, being a time we are immersed in, is a fundamentally different entity from previous chronostratigraphic units. In trying to formalize the Anthropocene, the knowledge practices and objectivity of geological convention are being stretched beyond their utility to answer what is a speculative and political question (52–54).⁵⁶

The cultural currency of the climate change topic, sustained at least in part by a focus on the reality and threat of ecological catastrophe, plays an important role in legitimating the Anthropocene's disciplinary mixing. In this regard, the Anthropocene may be an important tool in the task of self-consciously shaping broadscale narratives of climate change, of which view the Oxford ecologist Yadvinder Malhi (cited above) is a representative. Malhi concludes his summary of the Anthropocene's career with the observation that

the wide variety of new literature on the Anthropocene suggests that it has been useful in catalyzing new thinking. It seems to be stimulating environmental thinking in and across a variety of disciplines, from a re-examination of historic and prehistoric human

55. Zalasiewicz et al., 'The Anthropocene: Comparing Its Meaning', 18.

56. Yadvinder Malhi, 'The Concept of the Anthropocene', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 42, no. 1 (2017): 87, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102016-060854>.

impacts on the natural world to new perspectives on what is natural, and whether we live in a postnatural world.⁵⁷

Although the complexity and range of Anthropocene discourse makes it difficult to generalise about, at a meta level of observation it may be observed that the Anthropocene is a remarkable conceptual phenomenon. The nature of its emergence and the trajectory of its development raise questions about the role of theory in the natural sciences generally. The Anthropocene appears to have followed a common pattern by which whole new systems of thought are gradually instantiated through the use of simple metaphors in colloquial speech: beginning by discerning some conceptual lacuna, the members of a speech community gradually arrive at some consensus on how best to refer to a phenomenon that has been widely perceived but which has hitherto gone unnamed. The metaphor remains outside of established usage until its referent loses all sense of controversy, at least within that particular universe of discourse. In this regard, it is worth noting that stratigraphy as a field has traditionally been especially averse to the use of figures.

A stratigraphic designation like the Anthropocene can only be formalised once exhaustive material criteria have been met. Identifying a proposed epoch's Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP) is a crucial step in the process of validation. For instance, by one proposal, an Anthropocene GSSP – or *golden spike*, as it is informally known – may be found in layers of sedimentation containing traces of nuclear weapons testing, which would generally support proposals to place the Anthropocene's start date at 1950. At the same time, some would

57. Malhi, 'Concept of the Anthropocene', 98.

contend that the requirement of a golden spike for the Anthropocene potentially diminishes its practical or conceptual usefulness:

We argue that the productive nature of the Anthropocene concept is that it attracts disciplines into dialogue, and rubs them together in ways that spawn innovative thinking. In many ways, the Anthropocene is a classic ‘boundary object’, in that it is ambiguous, yet robust. . . . The Anthropocene concept stimulates new lines of inquiry into the long, discontinuous, and complicated distribution and redistribution of human and non-human agencies; necessitates trans-disciplinary research agendas; and facilitates the communication of political and environmental management messages to the public.⁵⁸

On views of this kind, the Anthropocene is understood less as a geophysical phenomenon and more as a large metaphor. An important strain in post-Second World War philosophy of science, dating back to the work of Mary Hesse,⁵⁹ proposes that scientific theories may be understood, by analogy, as types of metaphor. On this view, continuity and change in science may be understood through patterns of linguistic change, especially in the emergence and desuetude of metaphors in ordinary language usage. Viewing the Anthropocene through this linguistic lens may cast light on both its cultural appeal and its weaknesses as a cultural construct. Scientific models share with metaphors in ordinary language the attribute of remaining open to revision, which is the case because metaphors like theories are intrinsically provisional. As approximations, one metaphor may always be replaced by another that works better, and scientific theories are similarly understood as remaining answerable to new evidence. Historically, scientific theories have often been juxtaposed by way of contrast

58. Todd J. Braje and Matthew Lauer, ‘A Meaningful Anthropocene? Golden Spikes, Transitions, Boundary Objects, and Anthropogenic Seascapes’, *Sustainability* 12, no. 16 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12166459>.

59. Paul L. Franco, ‘Ordinary Language Philosophy, Explanation, and the Historical Turn in Philosophy of Science’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 90, no. 1 (2021): 82–3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2021.09.009>.

to the ostensibly incorrigible claims of religious belief systems. On Popperian accounts of *falsifiability*, to demonstrate the falsity of a received explanation is to progress towards a superior explanation. To view conceptual change as analogous to metaphor change is to observe that scientific explanation often involves the transference of descriptive terms, from objects in one domain of established knowledge to objects in less rigorous domains, just as ordinary metaphors use familiar notions to shed light on the unfamiliar or unknowable.

The Anthropocene appears to have inherited traits from earlier accounts of civilizational progression, and theories of scientific change on the Hessian, metaphor model suggest some ways that such inheritance may occur. The Anthropocene is, in one sense, infinitely revisable, and in a different sense uniquely resistant to revision. From at least the nineteenth century onwards it has been clear in principle (albeit by no means demonstrated) that human beings will reach no upper limit in the ability to transform the natural environment according to their own wishes. There are virtually no critics of the Anthropocene paradigm who contest the basic premise that human beings have collectively reshaped the planet. Debates regarding the scientific basis of the Anthropocene concept tend to focus on questions of the degree, nature, and time frame of that transformation. One popular account of the Anthropocene, for instance, is the Great Acceleration hypothesis, which puts the epoch's start date around 1950. Others, by contrast, opt for accounts of the Anthropocene by which human beings had already become a telluric force by the time of human prehistory.

The Anthropocene paradigm depends on metaphor in other ways as well, using metaphors of demarcation for describing stadial progression, by which ages of the Earth system or human civilization may be spoken of in concrete terms. The concept also uses metaphors – essentially mereological in character – of internal order, such as in the elaborate *planetary boundaries* approach to Earth system science developed by Will Steffen and Johan Rockström, or the notion of ‘emergent properties’ in the Earth system approach:

Basically, the ‘Earth System’ refers to the interacting physical, chemical and biological processes that operate across, and link, the atmosphere, cryosphere (ice), land, ocean and lithosphere. These processes create ‘emergent properties’ – that is, properties and features of the Earth System as a whole which arise from the interaction amongst these spheres. Global average surface temperature is a good example – it is a property of the Earth System as a whole.⁶⁰

Genealogies pertaining to the ecological and in particular to the Anthropocene have been an important part of the intellectual and cultural moment referred to in this thesis as the climatological turn. There have been many attempts in recent years to present genealogical accounts of climate change as an idea, with many finding the concept’s origins in such hypotheses as the greenhouse effect that date to the nineteenth century. At the same time, contemporary senses of the *environmental* or the *planetary* have few antecedents in the West that were not, in some sense, religious or theological. Many of the accounts that make this connection do so in the spirit of a famous paper by the American historian Lynn White Jr., who portrayed

60. Will Steffan and Jamie Morgan, ‘From the Paris Agreement to the Anthropocene and Planetary Boundaries Framework: An Interview with Will Steffan’, *Globalizations* 18, no. 7 (2021): 1299, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1940070>.

environmental degradation as, at root, a symptom of the destructive anthropocentrism inherited from medieval Christianity.⁶¹

Through the interdisciplinarity of the Anthropocene, fields in the humanities and social sciences influence the natural sciences and vice versa. An example of this interdependence is the collaborative project of economist Kate Raworth and the above-mentioned ecologist Yadvinder Malhi, who share the aim of establishing a single vocabulary across their respective disciplines that centralises the Anthropocene and the premise of an ecologically imperilled planet. Raworth refers to the resultant theory as ‘donut economics’, which describes its aims in two ways: as a holistic alternative to mainstream economic thought, and as a form of narrative framing that challenges inherited notions of limitless economic growth. In developing this concept, Raworth draws upon the planetary boundaries paradigm, which (as noted above) aims to bring together fields that are not normally coterminous in a system of unprecedented scope and predictive efficacy:

The planetary boundaries is a framework designed to assess what is required to maintain the Earth System in a stable Holocene-like state. We defined the state of the Earth System based on nine processes or features – such as climate stability, biosphere integrity, the water cycle, land-cover change and so on. . . . Our present estimate is that four of the nine boundaries have been transgressed, including the two key ones of climate stability and biosphere integrity. This assessment is consistent with the scientific evidence showing that the Earth System has already left the Holocene and has entered the Anthropocene, a proposed new epoch in Earth history.⁶²

61. Lynn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–07; Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson, eds., *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The ‘Lynn White Thesis’ at Fifty* (New York: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/027046768200200407>.

62. Steffan and Morgan, ‘Paris Agreement to the Anthropocene’, 1299.

A valorisation of interdisciplinarity similar to that which arguably motivates the planetary boundaries paradigm also appears in Yadvinder Malhi's overview of Anthropocene literature up to about 2017. Malhi concludes with a case for the Anthropocene's pragmatic utility, referring chiefly to the paradigm's usefulness in the framing of narratives. For Malhi, the Anthropocene's apparent invitation to neologise is one of its strengths:

The 'accident' of adopting a geological nomenclature increases its likelihood of transition from passing zeitgeist to a long-lived mindset with which we view our planetary history. It is possible to envisage literature a century from now and beyond (if the Anthropocene rupture permits such a century) referring to the concept. It may still have cultural saliency, in the way the nineteenth-century geological term 'Jurassic,' originally based on the Jura mountains, still carries Hollywood blockbusters in the twenty-first century.⁶³

Malhi thus defends both the resonance of accidental features and the substantive case for the Anthropocene epoch to be formally included in the Geologic Time Scale. Similarly, the interdisciplinarity of which the Malhi–Raworth collaboration is representative is often defended as an urgently needed corrective to the Western division of knowledge into different domains, a state of affairs which is seen as in itself deleterious.

The exceptional ways in which the Anthropocene has been received may indicate something about the conditions under which such reception has been possible at all. Consensus on the meaning of the Anthropocene remains elusive, but the concept's tremendous appeal as a heuristic is evident in the various ways that it has been adopted and adapted. On one account from a historicised view, then, if the Anthropocene means or refers definitely to anything – if it is the appropriate appellation for a particular moment in time – it is the name for an era in

63. Malhi, 'Concept of the Anthropocene', 99.

search of a master narrative. For example, Jason Moore has cited the weak historicisation of many iterations of the Anthropocene in support of his proposal that it be replaced with the notion of a *Capitalocene*, an unambiguously Marxist formulation.⁶⁴ Moore argues that a Capitalocene deals much more plausibly with historical facts than do many mainstream iterations of the Anthropocene. Similarly, another instance of historicist critique might observe that the Anthropocene as a hypothesis emerges as much from the deliverances of Earth sciences as from the vacuum left in Western culture after the geopolitical events of 1989 left a global scene seemingly devoid of and inhospitable to leftist master narratives. Moore's project, then, might be recast as an essay in the repristination of Marxist discourse through ecological warrants.

Many interlocutors in ecological conversations identify warrants for particular descriptions of order in climate crisis, Latour being just one instance among many. Such conceptions are multifarious and stand in complex relation to each other. Yet, a form of methodological reduction may be applied in the observation that these ideas of order often resemble each other in their broad features. For example, the programme of *new materialism* seeks, like, Latour, to challenge worldviews based in traditional binaries, aiming in particular to counter what it sees as deleterious forms of anthropocentrism. 'There is no agreement across these thinkers/theories as to what this [new conception of agency] amounts to, but they all seek to demote the role of the human, so these views can also be seen as non-anthropocentric in a variety of ways (hence the "post-humanist" title that is used to sometimes refer to these

64. Jason W. Moore, ed., *Capitalocene or Anthropocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM, 2016).

movements).⁶⁵ Environmental ethicists similarly recognise the problem of anthropocentrism as being the very crux of their research agenda, with the weight of opinion in the field traditionally against all forms of centring the human.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, in academic scholarship, and increasingly – if unevenly – in international institutions and the wider culture,⁶⁷ the concept of the Anthropocene has been by far the most important single jumping-off point for broadscale statements of climate crisis. Yet, despite the richness and multiplicity to be found across them, all iterations of the Anthropocene share – along with all permutations of the term identifiable by the -ocene prefix, such as Capitalocene or Chthulucene⁶⁸ – an underlying hypothesis that broadscale change is taking place, premised upon deliverances of the natural sciences.

The rise of the Anthropocene paradigm has been concurrent with the development of similarly polyvalent and adaptable formulations, notable among which is the postulation of a sharp uptick in human activity, called the Great Acceleration, beginning around the year 1950. Where the Anthropocene is a dispositional designation, the Great Acceleration is a processual idea. Like the Anthropocene, the Great Acceleration has been elaborated in the terms of the

65. Geoff Pfeifer, 'New Materialism(s)', in *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Stephen P. Turner (London: Routledge, 2021), 541, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111399-47>.

66. Allen Thompson, 'Anthropocentrism: Humanity as Peril and Promise', in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77–78, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941339.001.0001>.

67. Julia Adeney Thomas, 'Introduction: The Growing Anthropocene Consensus', in *Altered States: Getting the Anthropocene Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 8–10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009042369>; Lisa H. Sideris and John Whalen-Bridge, 'Special Issue Introduction: Popular Culture, Religion, and the Anthropocene', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 13, no. 4 (2019): 409–13, <http://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.40382>.

68. Jason W. Moore, 'The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594–630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373780>.

natural sciences while at the same time providing a figure for expressing various humanist theses that track developments of the mid-to-late twentieth century.⁶⁹ Where stratigraphers have developed the Great Acceleration idea as a natural step in formalising the Anthropocene as an entry on the Geological Time Scale,⁷⁰ scholars and theorists in the humanities have adapted the term and its underlying aspects in more creative ways.⁷¹ Moreover, the trend of projects that find ecological warrants for theories of human order may be regarded as a significant shift in environmental thought from the mainstream Western environmentalism of the twentieth century. That shift may be regarded as a distinct *turn*, not only in the specific disciplines where it is playing out but in the wider culture as well. This major Western movement has here been referred to as the climatological turn and identified through projects in which climatological visions of order are paired with cultural features inherited from traditions in the humanities and social sciences.

Conceptions of order in the climatological turn, furthermore, often have an interdisciplinarity that matches their ambitions. The basic form of the Anthropocene – notwithstanding the great many variations on the core theme – appears as a hybrid from a historicist viewpoint.

69. E.g., the aftermath of two world wars, the unprecedented horrors of the Holocaust, the appearance of nuclear weapons as a factor in geopolitics, and generalised anxiety about the long-term prospects of human civilization followed, near the century's end, by a period of relative peace and flourishing that stands in sharp historical contrast to the chaos and devastation of the preceding decades.

70. Martin J. Head et al., 'The Proposed Anthropocene Epoch/Series Is Underpinned by an Extensive Array of Mid-20th Century Stratigraphic Event Signals', *Journal of Quaternary Science* 37, no. 7 (2022): 1181–87, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jqs.3467>.

71. Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, 'Rethinking Time in Response to the Anthropocene: From Timescales to Timescapes', in 'Nature in the Anthropocene', special issue, *The Anthropocene Review* 9, no. 2 (2021): 206–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20530196211006888>.

The concept straddles genres, being both a proposed addition to the formal account of the world's stratigraphical history – through formal processes overseen by the International Commission on Stratigraphy – and a point of departure in disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. Conversation between the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences on the subject of the Anthropocene has often occurred organically. Significantly, the Anthropocene began its career in a context of interdisciplinarity among natural scientists:

The concept of the Anthropocene was born in the ESS [Earth Systems Science] community, itself a relatively new development in the natural science arena. Building on the work of such pioneers as Vladimir Vernadsky (Grinevald, 2007) and James Lovelock (1979), the thrust of ESS is far more integrative and transdisciplinary . . . than occurs in most areas of academia.⁷²

It is, nevertheless, unlikely that the members of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme who were present when Paul Crutzen first used the word Anthropocene in the year 2000, or the practitioners of chronostratigraphy who later proposed adding the Anthropocene to the GTS, foresaw how the concept would be adopted and adapted by scholars and thinkers far outside of the natural sciences. Interdisciplinarity will tend in general to intensify the ordinary dynamics of academic conversation, and the status of the Anthropocene – whether in regard to its informal meaning or its formal definition – has been extensively contested through the GTS proposal process, through the specific subfields of the humanities and social sciences in which it has been richly productive, and in conversation between representatives

72. Zalasiewicz et al., 'The Anthropocene: Comparing Its Meaning', 7.

of the two domains. A recent statement by natural scientists concerned with the development and trajectory of the term put their views in the following way:

It is not clear whether the formalization of the chronostratigraphic Anthropocene, should it occur, will have any impact on humanists, social scientists, and others who are not ready to engage with the scientific approaches such as in chronostratigraphy and ESS. It is therefore important to consider how these various meanings might be managed in practical terms.⁷³

Conversations pertaining to conceptions of order, whether formalised in a geophysical schema of history or elaborated through genealogical accounts of modernity, will necessarily tend to be contentious.



The climatological turn hypothesis may be developed with reference to the work of philosopher and historian of science Bruno Latour and his close collaborators, and the philosophical and critical subfield known as *new materialism*. Latour, importantly, represents a distinctly post-constructivist instance of the climatological turn's vanguardist character, reflecting the trend of declaring hitherto regnant methods in critical theory to be inadequate to a larger social and cultural moment. The Anthropocene may be understood as a mediating element between different aspects of the climatological turn. The increasing presence of the Anthropocene in popular culture is a link between theoretical scholarship and mainstream culture and society. Key motifs of the climatological turn are non-, post-, or anti-anthropocentrism and a mentality of cultural vanguardism, which stand in complex relation to one another. Anti-anthropo-

73. Zalasiewicz et al., 'The Anthropocene: Comparing Its Meaning', 18.

centrism tends to be the default stance of the vanguardist mentality. On views of this sort, anthropocentrism per se is presented as not only intellectually and philosophically retrograde but also culpable for climate crisis. In the context of this anti-anthropocentrism, scholarly programmes such as the ‘new materialism’ and Bruno Latour’s *actor-network theory* propose theories of ontology by which attributes traditionally exclusive to human beings are discovered in non-human entities, and which seek to reconceptualise sources of personal agency in liberal democracies. Actor-network theory theorises agency, for example, as an inherently decentralised property, and therefore regards it as fallacious to ascribe this to any discrete entity – human beings included. Moreover, anthropocentrism is often portrayed as the sustaining ethic of neoliberalism, and therefore the basis upon which planetary destruction is perpetrated through modern capitalism. The climatological turn, furthermore, often claims a role for itself at the forefront of thought and culture, rather than at the head of a given movement in particular. Claims to vanguard status are supported not only by the presentation of anti- or non-anthropocentric attitudes, but also in claims of the Anthropocene’s epochal significance. The style of these claims is often the neologising variation on colloquial expression inherited through the conventions and style of critical theory.

A concern with a progressive revelation of order appears in fields far beyond those pertaining to ontology. Ecopsychologists such as Peter Kahn link the climate crisis with traditional theories regarding the importance for human beings in general of contact with the natural world. Kahn has described the era of climate crisis as one intrinsically subject to ‘environ-

mental generational amnesia', whereby societies strained by ecological change, rather than breaking down all at once, undergo a gradual deterioration in their quality of life that is largely periodic and imperceptible:

Children are constructing deep baseline phenomenological knowledge about what constitutes normal nature, but the normal is increasingly impoverished. So when you try to explain to these children, as they become older, that their environment is a shell of its former self . . . they can look at you and say: 'I don't feel like I am missing too much.' This is what all of us say. Because we are all affected, more or less, by the problem of environmental generational amnesia.⁷⁴

Kahn's hypothesis makes specific reference to climate change and the burdens it will place on societies in the future. 'Climate change is upon us. We could call it climate havoc, as it will continue to massively upend ecological systems and human lives.'⁷⁵

Kahn's work draws upon an idea in evolutionary thought – first proposed by Erich Fromm and subsequently developed by the sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson – of a human instinct or drive referred to as *biophilia*, an inclination to be in contact with other living creatures and largely unaltered natural landscapes.⁷⁶ The link between Wilson and Kahn is a progression of ecological thought spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Wilson's work in particular is germane to the question of how climate change creates a sense of heroic possibility, pertaining chiefly to civilizational renewal, as the hypothesis of human biophilia emerged from a context of anxiety about the unimpeded advance of industrial civilization. Although Wilson describes biophilia in evolutionary rather than supernatural terms, he imagines evo-

74. Peter Kahn, 'In Moral Relationship with Nature: Development and Interaction', *Journal of Moral Education* 51, no. 1 (2022): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2021.2016384>.

75. Kahn, 'Moral Relationship with Nature', 73.

76. Naomi A. Sachs, 'E. O. Wilson: A Legacy of "Biophilia"', *Health Environments Research & Design Journal* 15, no. 4 (2022): 283–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19375867221120409>.

lution itself taking on the role of a universalist myth of origins – on the model of religious accounts of origins such as those in Genesis – in terms of an ‘epic of evolution’.⁷⁷ Wilson later developed the meta-theoretical concept of *consilience* to imagine an ultimate convergence of all human knowledge:

I will grant immediately that the belief in the possibility of consilience beyond the natural sciences and across to the other great branches of learning is not the same as science, at least not yet. It is a metaphysical view and a minority one, still, at that.⁷⁸

Metanormative ideas such as Wilson’s epic of evolution and consilience may be regarded as similar in kind to concepts recently proposed by theorists of the climatological turn, which have in common with each other the features of a synthesising framework.

An important strain of thought within the world of climate change policy has focused on the role of science communication in catalyzing political engagement with climate issues. There have been many versions of the hypothesis that narrative framings of ecological issues are considerably more effective than fact-oriented approaches for generating action among the general public. Thematically apocalyptic or dystopian narratives in particular may be especially effective in this respect,⁷⁹ although transformational or uplifting narratives may

77. David C. McDuffie, ‘The Epic of Evolution and a Theology of Sacramental Theology’, *Religions* 10, no. 4 (2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10040244>.

78. Edward O. Wilson, ‘Consilience: The Role of Human Nature in the Emergence of Social Artifacts’, in *Predicting the Future in Science, Economics, and Politics*, ed. Frank Whelon Wayman, Paul R. Williamson, Solomon W. Polachek, and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014), 45.

79. Ailise Bulfin, ‘Popular Culture and the “New Human Condition”: Catastrophe Narratives and Climate Change’, *Global and Planetary Change* 156 (2017): 140–46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloplacha.2017.03.002>.

gain value as audiences become saturated with dispiriting predictions.⁸⁰ The Anthropocene often features prominently in discussions of how to craft specific narratives, being portrayed as a global situation whose very novelty compels the articulation of new cultural stories.⁸¹

When the Anthropocene is portrayed as a narrative or a frame, however, it is implied to have a truth status different in kind from questions of, say, levels of carbon in the atmosphere. To gesture towards a space of justification and consequence that is qualitatively secondary or tertiary in nature is to invoke a natural order of reasons whose structure is self-evident. What is the difference between simply stating the facts of the matter, on one hand, and putting them in the form of a narrative, on the other? The question raises longstanding philosophical issues. The salient problem is to identify what makes climate change a special sort of issue.

Ulrich Beck and emancipatory catastrophism

This section discusses some ideas of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, and in particular his theory of climate crisis as a source of emancipatory catastrophism in the context of a more general process of global metamorphosis (*verwandlung*). Beck's work throughout his career shows concern with the ecological, but in his later output he articulates an inherently revisionary set of aims. Indeed, Beck's theories have revisionary implications for both conceptions of order and for methods, analogously to the theories of Bruno Latour. Although

80. Chris Riedy and Sandra Waddock, 'Imagining Transformation: Change Agent Narratives of Sustainable Futures', *Futures* 142 (2022): 103010, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.103010>.

81. Mrill Ingram, Helen Ingram, and Raul Lejano, 'Environmental Action in the Anthropocene: The Power of Narrative-Networks', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 21, no. 5 (2019): 492–503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2015.1113513>.

revisionism is a standing feature of Beck's theoretical programme overall, it has a special role in the concept of metamorphosis, in which phenomena of climate crisis are invoked as a special category of warrant.

An overview of Beck's work shows that the concept of metamorphosis developed in continuity with Beck's earlier formulations, the risk society and the global risk society. For Beck, metamorphosis is a hypothesis about the instantiation of new orders, and the ancillary hypothesis of emancipatory catastrophism revises Beck's concept of the world risk society, flipping a previous focus on the 'negative side effects of goods' to the 'positive side effects of bads'. The result is a sociological apparatus for describing both revisions of order – which begin with reimagined processes of global civilization – and of methodology, insofar as emancipatory catastrophism is understood as producing 'critical norms'. Beck's theory of metamorphosis, in other words, proposes global transformation at two levels: 'The metamorphosis of the world, I argue, includes the metamorphosis of the world picture, which has two dimensions: the metamorphosis of framing and the metamorphosis of practice and acting.'⁸²

Beck theorises a process by which awareness of global risks, and those relating to climate crisis in particular, initiates a phenomenon of global metamorphosis. In précis, this process of metamorphosis proceeds through stages of, first, awareness of catastrophic events at the level of of the nation state; second, a transformation of imagined horizons internationally; and third, the emergence of epistemic 'goods' at the global level. This late-career theory of

82. Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Polity: Cambridge, UK: 2016), chapter 2, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4673091>.

Beck's is the product of a methodological cosmopolitanism that distinguishes itself against methodological nationalism,⁸³ and builds upon Beck's earlier formulations of risk society and world risk society. This process of transformation that Beck theorises as effecting normative change is what he refers to as emancipatory catastrophism – in sloganised form, 'talk about bads produces "common goods"'.⁸⁴ Notwithstanding the complexity of Beck's overall programme,⁸⁵ the theory of metamorphosis, together with its ancillary hypothesis of emancipatory catastrophism, builds on and revises his earlier concepts of risk society and world risk society. The career of Beck's thought that is traced in the link between a thesis of risk and the theory of metamorphosis goes through four stages: risk society and reflexive modernity; the world risk society; the cosmopolitan turn; and the theory of global metamorphosis.⁸⁶ Throughout this programmatic progression of Beck's thought, the central factor of risk is conceptualised in terms of social 'goods' and 'bads'.

83. Beck's final, posthumously published book emerged from 'a major five-year EU-funded research project on "Methodological Cosmopolitanism – In the Laboratory of Climate Change"'. Klaus Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck: Theorising World Risk Society and Cosmopolitanism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89201-2>; see also <https://webarchiv-ulrich-beck-soziologie.uni-muenchen.de/en/ulrich-beck-erc-advanced-grant-methodological-cosmopolitanism-in-the-laboratory-of-climate-change/>.

84. Ulrich Beck, 'Emancipatory Catastrophism: What Does It Mean to Climate Change and Risk Society?' *Current Sociology* 63, no. 1 (2015): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114559951>.

85. 'The scale and complexity of Beck's body of work make it difficult to grasp in its entirety, and his often somewhat convoluted and abstract way of expressing himself can be challenging for uninitiated readers.' Klaus Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck*, 2.

86. Klaus Rosborg, 'From "the Bads of Goods" to "the Goods of Bads": The Most Recent Developments in Ulrich Beck's Cosmopolitan Sociology', in 'Ulrich Beck: Risk as Indeterminate Modernity', special section, *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, nos. 7–8 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418810418>.

At the core of Beck's original theory of risk society – 'a novel reformulation of the substantial sociological theory of modernity'⁸⁷ – is an act of complicating progress narratives, insofar as Beck proposes that civilizational progress inherently generates civilizational problems. Ecological issues demonstrate the dialectical relationship of 'goods' and 'bads', and concern with environmental risks per se was the 'starting point' for Beck's thesis.⁸⁸ The year in which Beck's book on the risk society first appeared in the original – 1986 – has been identified as the beginning of an 'ecological turn' more generally, owing to a remarkable coincidence of events, from the meltdown of Chernobyl to the first stirrings of media awareness of the ozone layer.⁸⁹ For Beck, the rise of the risk society reflected a new, global state of affairs in which 'human civilisation was entering a new era, in which natural and social transformations interlock and create a new global condition'.⁹⁰ The new global condition was understood as lying in continuity with earlier paradigms of the planetary, as these were conceived in the context of nuclear technology in the twentieth century:

[Ulrich's] book was devised in direct response to the meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, but displayed also awareness of an accumulation of multiple ecological threats as a novel challenge. On account of the manner in which Beck's analysis responded to contemporary concerns, it can be read as a document of the transition

87. Henning Trüper, 'Species and Salvation: Theology of History in the Anthropocene?', *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 4 (2022): 1247, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244321000330>.

88. Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck*, 28.

89. 'Das Jahr 1986 markiert die ökologische Wende: in diesem Jahr machten die Massenmedien auf das antarktische Ozonloch aufmerksam, es explodierte der Reactor von Tschernobyl, es gab eine große Umweltkatastrophe am Rhein, das Umweltministerium wurde gegründet, Beck veröffentlichte seine Risikogesellschaft und Luhmann die Ökologische Kommunikation.' Reiner Grundmann, 'Wo steht die Risikosoziologie?', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 28, no. 1 (1999): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-1999-0103>.

90. Daniel Chernilo, 'One Globalisation or Many? Risk Society in the Age of the Anthropocene', in 'Post-National Formations and Cosmopolitanism', special issue, *Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 1 (2021): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783321997563>.

from a nuclear-age discourse on the planetary dimensions of modern technology to an ecological one.⁹¹

Beck's development of the risk society concept into the *world* risk society concept was one effect of his cosmopolitan turn.⁹² With the theory of metamorphosis, the central insight of Beck's earlier sociology, 'the negative side effects of goods', is flipped to its diametrical opposite, 'the positive side effects of bads'.⁹³ This is the basis for Beck's hypothesis of emancipatory catastrophism, part of the more general theory of global metamorphosis, a process by which structural changes in global society are initiated by perceptions of risk.⁹⁴ While in the original risk-society formulation, the process by which social goods produce social bads is largely a matter of physical processes related to modern industrial society, the process by which bads produce goods in emancipatory catastrophism operates at a more abstract level. Beck identifies the sorts of goods he has in mind in particular as 'norms': 'Metamorphosis is about a new way of generating critical norms in the age of global risks.'⁹⁵ On this sociological analysis of Beck's, which effectively synthesises materialist and constructivist methods, institutional arrangements intersect with features of an imaginary. Beck describes, for instance, how unprecedented destruction and atrocity in the mid-twentieth century gave rise to transnational institutions and the codification of liberal norms that came to represent

91. Trüper, 'Species and Salvation', 1247.

92. Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Malden, MA: Polity, 1999); Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

93. Klaus Rasborg, 'From "the Bads of Goods" to "the Goods of Bads"', 165.

94. Beck's 'positive side effects of bads' idea resonates with the original conclusion of Thomas Malthus's essay on population, which – though later rewritten for being theologically heterodox – contended that population pressures might be read as a providential spur to human societies.

95. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 3.

a global baseline – with even vicious dictators drawing upon the language of human rights in justification of their acts, for instance. At the same time, geopolitical circumstances – in particular, global systems for managing nuclear weapons and cooperation between national space exploration programmes – provided the crucial conditions for many of the early twenty-first century’s global research institutions:

When one day the history of emancipatory catastrophism is written, it will start not with the issue of global climate risk but with the experiences and horrors of the Second World War, as a significant historical shift in which the emancipatory potential of the risk of global war has led to a series of cosmopolitan institutions, such as the UN, the IMF, the World Bank and, most significantly, the European Union.⁹⁶

The transformative consequences of climate change and the Anthropocene feature in Beck’s theories in specific ways. The global scene is revised in the light of new ecological realities, the dimensions of which are not exhausted by the ecological per se but in which climate change is crucial to the conception of global order.⁹⁷ In describing the extraordinary meaning and significance of climate change as a phenomenon, Beck specifies that

[climate change] does not even only signal a crisis of human self-understanding. More than that, global climate risk creates new ways of being, looking, hearing and acting in the world – highly conflictual and ambivalent, open-ended, without any foreseeable outcome.

As a result, a compass for the 21st century arises. This compass is different from the postmodern ‘everything goes’ and different from false universalism.⁹⁸

96. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 7.

97. Ulrich Beck, ‘Emancipatory Catastrophism: What Does It Mean to Climate Change and Risk Society?’, *Current Sociology* 63, no. 1 (2015): 78–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392114559951>

98. Beck, ‘Emancipatory Catastrophism’, 83.

Climate change is furthermore presented as an extension of received projects, the full articulation of which has hitherto gone unrealised:

The narrative of the risk society [in the case of climate change] is in itself a narrative of metamorphosis. . . . It provides a way of speaking of the physical world and of its risks that brought in a striking array of new topics. It enables people to speak of things – indeed, in a way to see things that they had been trying to speak of and to see – but where the concepts had been chronically lacking.⁹⁹

It is in Beck's shift of focus from the national level to the international that the paradigm of the Anthropocene comes in. This development of Beck's views on the dialectical relationship between goods and 'bads' dovetails with the change of focus from the national level to the international. In elaborating the distinct phases by which metamorphosis unfolds,¹⁰⁰ Beck makes the Anthropocene the basis of a new cosmopolitan distinction that replaces received categories of social *class*:

The next move of *metamorphosis* is that, in the age of climate change, the notion of 'social class' becomes *Anthropocene class*. In other words, the issues and concerns about social inequality are becoming involved in the new geological era of earth's history.¹⁰¹

Beck's intervention in debates on the meaning of climate change thus dovetails with more traditional concerns in sociology. Beck's revision of class analysis proceeds from the observation that an even distribution of risk in a society effects a kind of egalitarianism. 'National class society is based on the distribution of goods (income, education, health, prosperity, welfare, large-scale national movements such as unions). World risk society is based on the

99. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 3.

100. To review, the process of metamorphosis moves through three stages: first, a global event violates 'sacred' norms; second, a process of revision ensues; and third, there emerge new 'normative horizons of common goods'.

101. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, 60.

distribution of bads (climate risk, financial risk, nuclear radiation), which are confined neither by territorial borders of a single society nor in time.’¹⁰² Thus, through its ‘cosmopolitan critique of class’, Beck’s hypothesis of global metamorphosis is an extension of his earlier theorisation of the world-risk society.¹⁰³ ‘Given the equalizing effect of risks and the increasing centrality of risk distribution to life conditions and chances, Beck is able to reject the importance of class to the risk society.’¹⁰⁴

Strikingly, Beck opposes his paradigm of climate change to forms of apocalypticism: ‘The literature on climate change has become a supermarket for apocalyptic scenarios. Instead, the focus should be on what is now emerging – future structures, norms and new beginnings.’¹⁰⁵ In the face of ecological catastrophe Beck repudiates both overt pessimism and brash optimism:

The world is not perishing as the preachers of catastrophe believe, and the rescue of the world, as invoked by the optimistic advocates of progress, is not imminent either. Rather, the world is undergoing a surprising, but understandable, metamorphosis through the transformation of the reference horizon and the coordinates of action, which are tacitly assumed to be constant and unchangeable by the aforementioned positions.¹⁰⁶

Beck furthermore presents the revision of methods as necessary to correct obstructive pessimism:

In this book, I hypothesize that the main source of climate pessimism lies in a generalized incapacity, and/or unwillingness, to rethink fundamental questions of social and political order in the age of global risks. To counter such incapacities, the cosmopolitan

102. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, 59.

103. Dean Curran, ‘Beck’s Creative Challenge to Class Analysis: From the Rejection of Class to the Discovery of Risk-Class’, *Journal of Risk Research* 21, no. 1 (2018): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2017.1351464>.

104. Curran, ‘Discovery of Risk-Class’, 31.

105. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 3.

106. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 1.2.

theorizing and research that I promulgate hinges on the recognition that climate change alters society in fundamental ways, entailing new forms of power, inequality and insecurity, as well as new forms of cooperation, certainties, and solidarities across borders.¹⁰⁷

Beck's account of metamorphosis entails a revision of methods in fields of sociology that may be seen as activist in motivation. At the core of Beck's revisionism is a thesis analogous to that of 'the unthinkable' as found in the works of novelist Amitav Ghosh and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty:

The word, concept or metaphor that I introduce in this book for this speechlessness [of sociological theories] as a distinguishing feature of the intellectual situation of the age is that of the metamorphosis of the world.

I use this theoretical diagnostic concept of transition to focus attention on the events that are unthinkable within the frame of reference of established social theories and on the new cosmopolitan framework and space of action.¹⁰⁸

It is notable in this regard that Beck's concept of metamorphosis was developed through a research project whose central concern was to move from 'methodological nationalism' to 'methodological cosmopolitanism'. Beck emphasises the necessity imposed by climate crisis, and the *reflexive modernity* that comes after 'first modernity', according to which sociologists themselves must take care not to recreate received conceptions of social order in their work. 'To sociology, breaking with the reproduction of the social order and theorizing (cosmopolitan) metamorphosis implies its own set of epistemological and methodological difficulties. . . . Cosmopolitan sociology, in short, must reorient itself towards an unknown and unknowable future, made present in the temporal horizons of global risk.'¹⁰⁹

107. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, introduction.

108. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 4.

109. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 4.

Beck recognises that hypothesising climate change in terms of ‘the unthinkable’ implicitly invokes strong positions on history. In his analysis of climate change’s historical significance, Beck develops analogies to other paradigms of historical change – specifically the Axial Age, the French Revolution, and European colonisation – that qualify the aspect of novelty in processes of metamorphosis:

While the conflicts over revolutions in worldviews lasted decades, even centuries, while the effects of the French Revolution extended over the past 200 years (and are still continuing), the metamorphosis of the world is taking place in world seconds with a speed that is nothing short of *inconceivable*, and as a result it is overrunning and overwhelming not just people but also institutions. That is why the metamorphosis that is at present occurring before our eyes is almost beyond the reach of the conceptualization of social theory. And that is also why many people now have the feeling that the world is unhinged.¹¹⁰

Nor does Beck wish to revise only the meaning of time frames. The notions of ‘second modernity’ and ‘reflexive modernity’ from Beck’s original risk-society hypothesis were substantial interventions in traditional sociology at the level of national societies.¹¹¹ With the risk society thesis, Beck sought to establish a middle ground in sociology, between the classical and the postmodern, from which to hypothesise ‘the emergence of a new type of society – a risk society’.¹¹² Beck’s early sociological programme thesis was, therefore, not concerned with the nature of risks per se, whether environmental or otherwise, but rather with the interaction between perceptions of risk and the structures of societies:

Beck therefore seeks to develop a new theoretical lens through which to view the world. On the one hand, he stresses that contemporary society has changed radically com-

110. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 4.2.

111. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

112. Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck*, 28.

pared to the stage of industrial society analysed by the early classic sociologists – Karl Marx (1818–1883), Max Weber (1864–1920), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936). On the other hand, he rejects the notion that we have arrived at, as some philosophers and sociologists claim, a ‘post-modern’ cultural and social state in which all previous foundations have collapsed.¹¹³

Beck’s work is thus characterised by fresh engagement with theories of history and sociological explanation of cultural habits.¹¹⁴ The theory of metamorphosis analogises those earlier formulations for a global level of analysis – breaking down different dimensions of metamorphosis by ‘categorical’, ‘institutional’, and ‘normative-political’ sorts – and the most pertinent, *categorical* level of metamorphosis refers to an abstract dimension. ‘Categorical metamorphosis refers to the metamorphosis of seeing the world – that is, how global risks and cosmopolitan situations change the meaning of basic concepts of sociology.’¹¹⁵

In Beck’s later work, his stance on postmodernism in general resembles the the programme of views inaugurated by Bruno Latour’s observation that ‘critique’ has ‘run out of steam’:

Those who bemoan the current Eurocentrism of philosophy, geography, sociology, the feminist movement, environmental criticism, or even politics in general cannot expect to inspire curiosity and command people’s attention. The surprising thing is, instead, how familiar and normal this decentralizing critical act has become. On the other hand, however, this ‘yawn’ with which the critique of Eurocentrism is greeted makes clear that the point of the criticism – namely the call to establish a worldview that is not centred on Europe – has long since arrived and been accepted, even if people still puzzle and argue over what it means and whether it has any practical effects.¹¹⁶

In respect of its sneering stance towards traditional critical theory, Beck is closely aligned with the revisionism that marks out many quarters of the climatological turn. Beck’s account

113. Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck*, 29.

114. Trüper, ‘Species and Salvation’, 3–5.

115. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 4.

116. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 4.3

of metamorphosis, furthermore, makes overt reference to sacral social functions, eschewing the skepticism that would often be associated with postmodernism:

A new cosmopolitan framework and space for action is emerging along with the new options presented by medical technology, in particular also where the old image of humanity still dominates people's thinking. To put it in a nutshell: what used to be an intimate and almost 'sacred' act has metamorphosed into a global cosmopolitized field of activities.¹¹⁷

As noted above, a key feature of Beck's metamorphosis thesis is the component of the 'unthinkable', which he in some sense adduces to his theories regarding the sacred:

The point or even the paradox of metamorphosis is that, unseen and unintentionally, beneath the surface of our imagined eternal concepts of being human, a new world and world picture is emerging with the normative power of the factual, perhaps even eventually a new world order for which we do not have any concepts, for which we literally lack a language. An uprising rebels against this, now here, now there, and immediately loses its way again in self-reflexive speechlessness.¹¹⁸

For Beck, a condition of unthinkability underpins the distinction between simple change and metamorphosis, the latter of which undoes facts of an existing order while the former simply rearranges circumstances within an existing order.¹¹⁹ The outcome is that metamorphosis is also a powerful source of social *ressentiment*:

This [reshaping] elicits embittered resistance at all levels and in all contexts by counter-reformers who defend the old certainties and their institutionalized order against the onslaught of a world that has become 'unhinged'.¹²⁰

117. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 2.

118. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 2.4.

119. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 2.4.

120. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 2.4.

Finally, Beck's theory of metamorphosis is closely linked to the idea of climate crisis.¹²¹ For Beck, it is not only that metamorphosis is a phenomenon to be described, but that describing this phenomenon requires a revision of methods:

'Methodological nationalism', the teachings of turning the world around the nation, has to be substituted by 'methodological cosmopolitanism', the teachings of the turning of the nation around the 'world at risk'.¹²²

This view of Beck's closely aligns with those of theorists who reject approaches of 'epistemic relativism' in favour of approaches grounded in deliverances of the natural sciences:

The risk of climate change generates an *Umwertung der Werte* (a revaluation of values) (Nietzsche), turning the system of value orientation upside down – e.g., from post-modern cultural relativism to a historical new fixed star by which to mobilize solidarities and actions. This is the case because the global climate risk contains a sort of navigation system in the otherwise storm-tossed seas of cultural relativism.¹²³

Beck thus sees metamorphosis at the global level emerging from failures at the level of the nation state. Beck's repudiation of pessimism is not an endorsement of optimism, but rather a recognition that inherited categories cannot account for the processes that are altering the world.¹²⁴ Beck specifies that metamorphosis is a 'descriptive' rather than 'normative' term, meaning that it is not a programmatic call to political action but rather an empirical account of global social order.¹²⁵

121. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 3.

122. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 3.1.

123. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 3.5.

124. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 2.5.

125. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 1.2.

Bruno Latour and the new climatic regime

Bruno Latour theorises that climate crisis has instantiated a ‘new climatic regime’ of global order. Adapting James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, Latour reimagines global politics in terms of a new vanguard elite that he refers to as the *Earthbound*. Latour thus theorises new forms of social or moral order with reference to various of the Earth sciences and Lovelock’s (and Lynn Margulis’s) Gaia hypothesis, and thus expresses central tendencies of the climatological turn. Many theorists of the climatological turn advocate a shift from one worldview to another – metaphorically, a Copernican revolution – from one in which the natural world is adjunct to human interests and flourishing to one in which *the human* per se must be decentred through new ontologies and metaphysics that are grounded in Earth’s unprecedented transformations. Giving priority, in this manner, to the material, immanent world as a source of foundations is to invoke an underlying ‘natural order of reasons’, according to which deliverances of the natural sciences rightfully underlie theories of order.

As noted above, Latour develops a sophisticated conception of the planetary that adapts the Gaia hypothesis, which lies in genealogical continuity with earlier accounts of the world as divinely infused. Throughout human history, visions of a world spirit have taken complex and multifarious forms, but in the modern era these can be related broadly to pantheism (or the closely related panentheism). ‘Even though the boundary lines distinguishing one pantheist from another are porous, one tenet is clear for everyone: God is nature, and nature

is God.¹²⁶ Pantheistic conceptions of world and cosmos have been an important and controversial strain in Western thought and culture since at least the time of the *Pantheismusstreit* in the late-eighteenth century, and their origins and development in the modern West may be traced through such figures as Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), John Toland (1670–1722), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882).¹²⁷ In the twentieth century, developments in the understanding of systems at a planetary scale, in the context of the then emerging, interdisciplinary field now known as Earth systems science (ESS), produced theories and models that, while conceived of far outside of theological or philosophical contexts, bore in their general features strong affinities with pantheism. The Gaia hypothesis, foremost among various new ways of understanding the Earth, was first put forward by the scientific polymath James Lovelock and evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis in the 1970s. Though nuanced and open to interpretation, the Gaia hypothesis essentially conceives of the planet as a single, discrete organism. On many interpretations of the Gaia hypothesis, the self-regulating capabilities of the planetary system are akin in many respects to the personal agency of human beings – ‘a new entity: the system composed of the entirety of life and the geological environment with which it interacts.’¹²⁸ Regardless of which interpretation of the Gaia hypothesis comes closest to the truth, the spiritual or religious dimensions of the

126. Lois Eveleth, ‘The Lure of Pantheism: Its Evangelical Flowering and World-Wide Design’, *Studia Gilsoniana* 4, no. 3 (2015): 286.

127. Eveleth, ‘Lure of Pantheism’, 286–99.

128. Sébastien Dutreuil, ‘James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis: Archetypical Visionary’, in *Dreamers, Visionaries, and Revolutionaries in the Life Sciences*, ed. Oren Harman and Michael R. Dietrich (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), 284, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226570075.003.0018>.

idea are easy to grasp, owing to its supposition of a planetary entity of deific magnitude and personal agency.

Prominent voices within the climatological turn, of whom Bruno Latour arguably leads the field, have energetically adopted and adapted the Gaia hypothesis, championing it as a cultural and political paradigm that is both ontologically grounded by the empirical facts of environmental change and a necessary corrective to the deleterious effects of climate crisis.¹²⁹ Latour, however, expressly rejects the interpretation of Gaia as a deity, insisting that ‘any attempt at invoking a controlling force *in addition* to what is controlled carries with it the same political danger. . . . We would suddenly be back to Hegel and Engels: *Gaia-Spirit-of-the-Earth*’;¹³⁰ in this way Latour counteracts, in a typically elliptical fashion, interpretations of his platform as religious per se. Latour, on the contrary, expressly defends his conception of Gaia as ‘the name of a shift in understanding how to approach many phenomena previously lumped together in the notion of nature. . . . In brief, a cultural paradigm shift, comparable in scope to the one introduced at the time of the scientific revolution by Galileo Galilei.’¹³¹

Significantly, Latour here ventures a positive affirmation, defining Gaia as a ‘paradigm shift’. The elliptical way that Latour expresses his ideas is a matter of method rather than mere rhetoric, as it allows him to evade reductive dichotomies, reflecting a career-long pre-

129. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

130. Bruno Latour, ‘Why Gaia Is Not a God of Totality’, in ‘Geosocial Formations and the Anthropocene’, special issue, *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, nos. 2–3 (2017): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416652700>.

131. Bruno Latour and Timothy M. Lenton, ‘Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand’, *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (2019): 661, <https://doi.org/10.1086/702611>.

occupation with the limitations of binary thinking. Barbara Herrnstein Smith says of Latour's conceptual idiom, '*emic* and *etic*, inside and outside, the experienced and the observed: the differences between them cannot be bridged, they can only be finessed.'¹³² The desideratum of keeping the natural sciences in conversation with a wider culture lies behind Latour's proposal that Gaia is more suitable as a world-organising paradigm than the highly formalised and scientifically traditional alternative of ESS, 'not in spite of but *because* of its [Gaia's] mythological baggage.'¹³³ Although self-consciously preserving Gaia's mythological character might resemble a quasi-religious act, the Latourian would find claims of a latent religious anteriority – such as is presupposed by the label *secularised eschatology* – to reflect outmoded viewpoints of a historical either-or. Nevertheless, despite Latour's insistence that Gaia must be approached through apophaticism, there is one point that Latour affirms positively: Gaia is a '*worldview*, by which we mean a distribution of traits affecting science as well as politics, morality, and the arts.'¹³⁴ Latour thus, through a specific rhetorical style, manages to evade classification while simultaneously putting forward a strong programme of revisionism that is *global* both figuratively and literally.

Latour's apophaticism reflects the slippery quality of sacral sources per se, and his oblique manner of speaking about the qualities of Gaia is not merely stylistic but rather emerges from a specific conception of Gaia's nature: 'defining such a phenomenon [as Gaia] requires a sort

132. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 'Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously', in 'Recomposing the Humanities – with Bruno Latour', special issue, *New Literary History* 47, nos. 2/3 (2016): 347, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24772783>.

133. Latour and Lenton, 'Extending the Domain', 661.

134. Latour and Lenton, 'Extending the Domain', 661.

of negative geology reminiscent of the apophatic ways that theologians had recourse to when trying to probe God's uniqueness.¹³⁵ If sources of order – which will tend to be indistinguishable from loci of sacrality under conditions of postsecularity – must remain hidden from public view, that necessary hiddenness can be explained in two broad ways: through an ontological dimension or through a social dimension. In portraying Gaia as being approachable only 'negatively' or 'apophatically', Latour seems to gesture towards the ontological dimension: sources of sacrality are, on this account, always just beyond the horizon of understanding for those who participate in the order that they generate. This supposition of a necessarily incomplete world picture allows for a convergence of otherwise separate domains that Latour sees as a consequence of Gaia's nature:

The uniqueness of Gaia opens a new definition of a polity just at the time when the situation summarized by the term *Anthropocene* reopens the connection between what philosophers used to call the *domain of necessity* – that is, nature – and the *domain of freedom* – namely, politics and morality. It would be odd, indeed, not to consider the new climatic regime as an occasion to draw new connections between the two domains. Drawing lessons from nature to define the order and regulation of society has been going on for as long as political thought.¹³⁶

While the attributes of order – here, what Latour refers to as 'the new climatic regime' – may be apparent and clearly discernible even to participants in that order, the source upon which that order depends – here, Gaia – may only be approached obliquely.¹³⁷

135. Latour and Lenton, 'Extending the Domain', 661.

136. Latour and Lenton, 'Extending the Domain', 678.

137. Accounts of environmental concern that point to the pantheistic resemblances in versions of the Gaia hypothesis, for instance, are easily parried through genealogical retorts. Nor is the religiously atavistic character of the climatological turn to be found in the apocalyptic language and metaphors that permeate both popular and academic literature on environmental topics. The aspect of the climatological turn that is germane to any version of an argument from religious atavism are

A laboratory scientist by training, Latour was instrumental in the foundation of science and technology studies (STS), a field within the philosophy of science that championed constructivist accounts of knowledge production and applied methods of ethnography to sites of science such as laboratories. The rise of STS was a major event in the history and philosophy of science, which had to that point been primarily shaped by the seminal work of philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn.¹³⁸ The disjunction of views between Kuhn and his admirers reflects the complicated state of the history and philosophy of science from the 1960s onwards. Latour later in his career adopted a distinctly different focus, partially rejecting his earlier embrace of methods and theories that challenge the objectivity and impartiality of the scientific enterprise:

If Ulrich Beck (1992) was crucial to think the technoscientific risk culture of late modernity, the latest work of Bruno Latour (Latour, 2017, 2018), in particular, has become critical to think our current predicament in the (so-called) Anthropocene. Latour, one of ANT's key founders and theorists, is nowadays a highly influential public intellectual of the contemporary, actively participating in current debates on climate change and planetary ecological crises. There is much irony and more than a little intellectual wiggling involved in this widening embrace of a thinker who, 30–40 years ago, found himself widely accused of the cardinal sin of 'relativism' amongst the scientific establishment.¹³⁹

Latour's career in this respect has tracked a general reorientation in political and academic spheres away from methodologies of epistemic relativism and towards empirically grounded approaches that make reference in particular to climate crisis.

the projects that attempt to establish new visions of social, moral, or global order from warrants of environmental change per se.

138. Kuhn was known for having late in his career rejected the constructivist bent of scholarship which his own work laid the way for.

139. Ignacio Fariás, Anders Blok, and Celia Roberts, 'Actor-Network Theory as a Companion: An Intellectual Inquiry into Intellectual Practices', in *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory*, ed. Anders Blok, Ignacio Fariás, and Celia Roberts (London: Routledge, 2020), xxi.

Latour's *relational ontology* is a late development in his career that is closely related to his earlier project of actor-network theory (ANT), a sophisticated system substantially influenced by the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) that reconceptualises the nature of agency, insofar as it 'entails a basic ontological claim that all entities in the world – from nanoparticles to bodies, groups, ecologies and ghosts – are constituted and reconstituted in shifting and hybrid webs of discursive and material relations'.¹⁴⁰ ANT thus decentralises referents, an aim that is aided by the heavily elliptical style for which Latour is known: 'the sometimes perplexing quality of the neologisms of STS corresponds to its departure from the modern regime of ontological 'common sense', effectively inventing a new language to speak about possible alternatives to it.'¹⁴¹ In consequence, ANT and Latour's work in general are often difficult to summarise:

Some actively resist defining ANT in any specific way, referring instead to the possibility of a multiplicity of versions and a concomitant undesirability to reify just one, rendering ANT as a collection of more-or-less disparate approaches, an assemblage of methods of exploration and of frameworks for analysis.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, the portrayal of agency as a property of decentralised 'assemblages' rather than a property of discrete entities is consistent throughout Latour's work: 'The principle of symmetry, the notion that there is no a priori distinction to be made between the human and non-human elements of any network, constitutes one of the paradigmatic elements of ANT.'¹⁴³

140. Farías et al., 'Actor-Network Theory', xx.

141. Holbraad and Pedersen, 'The Ontological Turn', 40.

142. Jonathan Tummons, 'Ontological Pluralism, Modes of Existence, and Actor-Network Theory: Upgrading Latour with Latour', *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 1 (2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2020.1774815>.

143. Tummons, 'Ontological Pluralism', 6.

In this regard, ANT aligns with a more general trend against the anthropocentrism of regnant ontologies in the context of climate crisis, which is epitomised in Latour's hypothesis of an emergent new climatic regime:

The hypothesis is that we can understand nothing about the politics of the last 50 years if we do not put the question of climate change and its denial front and center. Without the idea that we have entered into a New Climatic Regime, we cannot understand the explosion of inequalities, the scope of deregulation, the critique of globalization, or, most importantly, the panicky desire to return to the old protections of the nation-state – a desire that is identified, quite inaccurately, with the 'rise of populism.'¹⁴⁴

Beck's and Latour's preoccupation with new forms of order indicates the presence of *onto-theology* in generative sources – for culture and politics, for instance – informed by ecological concern. At the same time, the very theoretical disciplines from which the Heideggerian notion of ontotheology first sprang have become the champions of ecological concern, which then appears to be a sort of counter-ontotheology: a reaction to that dissolution of foundational narratives in Western culture which was the by-product of a generalised hermeneutics of suspicion. Indeed, treatment of ecological topics in critical theory has given rise to theories and concepts of monumental scope and ambition, such as are found in the various iterations of the Anthropocene. Such projects, however, are susceptible to being characterised as religious atavism by virtue of their very monumentality. The power of climate crisis to literally compel

144. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 11.

a revision of received concepts and systems is often stated plainly, with reference to consequences that are described as being all-encompassing in both conceptual and social terms:

[The Anthropocene] signals the end of Plato's age-old template in which material and biophysical agencies have no place, due to a division of the world in intransitive, transcendental (objective) ideal-real Forms on the one hand and their shadowy everyday (discursive/political) reflections on the other. The break with this divisionism, today called for by the Earth itself, is bound to end contemporary capitalism as we know it – even if it problematizes established discourse analytical practice as well.¹⁴⁵

Indeed, many interlocutors in the climatological turn put forward proposals explicitly motivated by a felt need for new 'environmentalisms', with different emphases according to field or discipline. From the standpoint of environmental politics, Frank Biermann argues that 'the mainstream "environmental policy" paradigm, shaped in the 1970s and 1980s, falls short when dealing with the novel challenges of the Anthropocene.'¹⁴⁶ Doing sociology informed by critical theory, Alexander M. Stoner describes the inherent inadequacies of 'neoliberal environmentalism' from a psychosocial viewpoint: 'Because it is impossible for neoliberal environmentalism to deliver on its promise of less environmental destruction via the market, environmentalist desire is constantly frustrated.'¹⁴⁷ The view of climate crisis as having an ontological dimension against which moral, social, or political order may be measured or constructed – of which Latour's worldview interpretation of Gaia is a strong version – is a commonplace of ecological discourse. On this sort of ontological take on climate crisis, the

145. van Eeden, 'Materializing Discourse', 4–5.

146. Frank Biermann, 'The Future of "Environmental" Policy in the Anthropocene: Time for a Paradigm Shift', *Environmental Politics* 30, nos. 1–2 (2021): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1846958>.

147. Alexander M. Stoner, 'Things Are Getting Worse on the Way to Catastrophe', *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 3 (2020): 500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520958099>.

way lies open for a bridge or convergence between different domains of human existence that have become disconnected from each other in recent Western history, and this disconnection is responsible for lamentable qualities of modernity. The mission statement of a recent academic series in the eco-humanities expresses the unifying potential of climate crisis in terms of methodology and interdisciplinarity:

Today's world agricultural and water crises, ocean pollution and resource depletion, global warming from greenhouse gases, urban sprawl, overpopulation, food insecurity and environmental justice are all crises of culture. . . . The reality of understanding and finding adaptive solutions to our present and future environmental challenges has shifted the epicenter of environmental studies away from an exclusively scientific and technological framework to one that depends on the human-focused disciplines and ideas of the humanities and applied social sciences.¹⁴⁸

Invoking the idea of a cleft between academic fields of different orders reflects the influence of C. P. Snow's classic 'two cultures' thesis, which saw a bifurcation in the world of knowledge, with separate domains for the natural sciences and the humanities. Although the above-cited mission statement describes the convergence of disciplines as a rejuvenating and perhaps even existentially necessary event, it also implies a hierarchy of disciplines according to which 'the humanities and applied social sciences' take as a warrant the 'present and future environmental challenges' that will be discovered within a 'scientific and technological framework'. As in the work of Latour, the invocation of hierarchy points towards a conception of human order as underlain by a natural order rather than emerging wholly from social construction. Accordingly, the conceptions of order that Latour and like-minded theorists put forward often

148. David Lowenthal, *Quest for the Unity of Knowledge*, Routledge Environmental Humanities (London: Routledge, 2018), v.

have a quality of absoluteness, such that – owing to their ontological groundedness – they convey a special legitimacy, being not merely options among many in a welter of pluralism but rather a catholic undergirding. ‘The ecological crisis places the experience of the both secular [*sic*] and the religious in a new light, revealing the limits of liberal and Enlightenment ideas of progress and suggesting the need for a spiritual re-enchantment of the world.’¹⁴⁹

There appears, then, to be a tension between, on the one hand, the enthusiastic uptake of climate crisis among theorists working in the tradition of critical theory, and critical theory’s traditional aversion to grand narratives. Accounts of all-encompassing crisis that underpin conceptions of order must answer the charge that they amount to ontotheology.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, many theorists of the climatological turn have reacted against long predominant forms of methodological constructivism, characterising these as insufficient for forging the cultural and political agendas demanded by climate crisis. The ordinal revision of the climatological turn has tracked with this revisionism among theorists. In this sense, the climatological turn is a set of academic discussions concomitant with trends in wider culture.

149. Newman, ‘Political Theology and Religious Pluralism’, 191.

150. For Kant, *ontotheologie* referred to the ontological argument for the existence of God and the first principles of deism. Ontotheology in that sense was attacked by Kant (along with other traditional forms of *gottesbeweise*). In Martin Heidegger’s use of *ontotheologie*, it was roughly synonymous with *metaphysics*, with deflationary connotations. In the Heideggerian sense of *ontotheologie*, it may be deployed to expose some normative paradigm as a decadent and surreptitious expression of metaphysical recidivism.



Throughout the twentieth century, the ecological has been a mark of particular worldviews, frameworks, attitudes, or orientations. There is an important distinction between one sense of the ecological, deriving from the deliverances of a scientific discipline called ecology, and the ecological in a sense pertaining to culture and politics. A classic paper by Holmes Rolston exemplifies the former:

The sense of anomaly will dissipate, though moral urgency may remain, if an environmental ethic proves to be only an ethic – utilitarian, hedonist, or whatever – about the environment, brought to it, informed concerning it, but not in principle ecologically formed or reformed. This would be like medical ethics, which is applied to but not derived from medical science.¹⁵¹

An example of *the ecological* in a cultural sense is the ‘ecological sensibility’ which Odin Lysaker sees as a necessary complement to Axel Honneth’s critical theory:

Through such an ecological sensibility – by which I mean humans’ bodily-sensuously attentive resonance and communicative interaction with nature in its entire diversity and complexity, receptivity and activity, vulnerability and violability – we can morally engage and interconnect with the nonhuman part of reality. In so doing, the Honnethian critical theory can be reframed as a *critical political ecology*.¹⁵²

References to a distinct *ecological turn* may be found in recent literature. The editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity* state that ‘the work emerging in conversation throughout this *Handbook*, and the fertile extant literature it grows from, demonstrates ways

151. Holmes Rolston, ‘Is There an Ecological Ethic?’, *Ethics* 85, no. 2 (January 1975): 93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2379925>.

152. Odin Lysaker, ‘Ecological Sensibility: Recovering Axel Honneth’s Philosophy of Nature in the Age of Climate Crisis’, *Critical Horizons* 21, no. 3 (2020): 216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2020.1790751>.

interdisciplinarity goes hand-in-hand with the ecological turn in scholarship.¹⁵³ The seismic shift in Roman Catholicism set off by Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'* has been described as an 'ecological turn' in the Catholic Social Teaching.¹⁵⁴

Latour's theory of the new climatic regime reflects this more general turn, as it is developed in his lectures *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*,¹⁵⁵ and the follow-up to those lectures *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*.¹⁵⁶ At the core of Latour's proposal in these later works is a shift in conceptions of agency particular to the Anthropocene. Latour elaborates this idea through an interpretation of the Gaia hypothesis:

I don't need to review those new *emotions* with which the Earth is now agitated in addition to its usual *motions*. Not only does it turn around the Sun (that much we knew), but it is agitated through the highly complex workings of many enmeshed living organisms, the whole of which is either called 'Earth system science,' or more radically, Gaia.¹⁵⁷

Latour frames his lectures in the aim of enumerating Gaia's attributes: 'So who is Gaia, the Gaia of mythology? It is impossible to answer this question without doing for her what we learned to do in the previous lecture: first of all, draw up the long list of her attributes in order to find her essence.'¹⁵⁸ Latour's personalisation of the Earth through the figure of Gaia underpins

153. Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor, 'Afterword: Surviving and Thriving: The Ecocultural Identity Invitation', in the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity*, ed. Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor (London: Routledge, 2020), 475.

154. Jaime Tatay-Nieto, 'Sustainability, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and the Catholic Church's Ecological Turn', *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 488, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100488>.

155. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

156. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

157. Bruno Latour, 'Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene', *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003>.

158. That the addresses presented in *Facing Gaia* were originally a series of Gifford Lectures suggests that Latour here is coyly invoking the language of eighteenth-century natural theology and

his *revelatory* approach to political order, which proposes that new political realities are generated by a sense of the Earth itself becoming a political actor. ‘We all agree that, far from being a Galilean body stripped of any other movements than those of billiard balls, the Earth has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged actor.’¹⁵⁹ Latour puts this vision in privative terms, a repudiation of the false dichotomies that traditionally set the parameters for recognising agential entities:

How can one render the entire world ‘inanimate’? It turns out that this is not a mystification but a *mystique*, a very interesting and respectable mystique in many respects, as well as a very spiritual form of contradiction – let’s say, an unexpected form of piety. . . . Every discipline, every specialty, every laboratory, every expedition *multiplies* the surprising agents of which the world is made.¹⁶⁰

At the centre of Latour’s new climatic regime is the Anthropocene, which is interpreted by a privative heuristic as having further dissolved traditional distinctions between the natural and the human. In Latour’s complex, elliptical style of exposition, the Anthropocene is an anchor, a central metaphor that continually refocuses attention:

To live in the epoch of the Anthropocene is to force oneself to redefine the political task par excellence: what people are you forming, with what cosmology, and on what territory? . . . We have to get used to it: we have entered irreversibly into an epoch that is at once post-natural, post-human, and post-epistemological!¹⁶¹

Latour thus makes geohistory a platform for conceptions of order and a revision of methods across a range of disciplines. At the same time, in drawing upon the Gaia hypothesis, Latour is careful to stay in the bounds of methodological atheism. ‘As a first approximation, it is

its preoccupation with the attributes of God through the observation of Providential design in the natural world.

159. Latour, ‘Time of the Anthropocene’, 3.

160. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, fifth lecture.

161. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, fourth lecture.

obvious that the people assembled under Gaia will resemble neither those who invoke Nature nor those who say that they worship a deity with all the appurtenances of religion. None of the eight attributes we have recognised up to now seems to be an attribute of Gaia.’¹⁶² A central aim of Latour’s throughout his lectures is to argue against ‘nature religion’ as the correct lens for understanding Gaia or the Anthropocene, which he frames in terms of his career-long repudiation of false dichotomies:

Going beyond the number two, putting in place a sufficiently ample comparison among the mechanisms that make it possible to distribute agency, avoiding the quarrel between ‘nature’ and ‘religion,’ all these could constitute vital resources for discovering the exact form of the Earth when the time comes to find a way of participating in the institution, or rather in the founding, of Gaia.¹⁶³

In defending a view of Gaia as generative of order, Latour expressly disallows any interpretation of Gaia in terms of a social (or global) sacred, whether pantheist or animist.

The revelatory heuristic of Latour’s new climatic regime is reflected in analyses of apocalypticism that understand this term in its original meaning of *an opening*. Yet, in the context of climate crisis, engagements with the apocalyptic tend to be framed in terms of the secular:

The modern world distinguishes between nature and sense and finally decides to concentrate on nature. This is why natural sciences do not include meaning. As an outcome of this, even the environment is silent around us, a senseless being. But to the extent that the environmental crisis marks a borderline situation, it reformulates fundamental questions of modern thought. . . . The apocalyptic expectation is not a renaissance of religion, but a sense-making program for the technical civilization. Technology is not a substitute for religion. From a religious perspective it is rather a deputy or proxy, waiting for the return of God.¹⁶⁴

162. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, fifth lecture.

163. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, fifth lecture.

164. Axel Siegemund, ‘Environmental Sciences, Apocalyptic Thought, and the Proxy of God’, in *The Apocalyptic Dimensions of Climate Change*, ed. Jan Alber (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 134, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110730203-008>.

The revelatory stance is also championed by an occasional collaborator of Latour's, the Australian philosopher Clive Hamilton. Among thinkers engaging with ecological issues from academic philosophy, Hamilton stands out as offering a particularly strong reading of the likely long-term consequences of climate crisis. The thesis that binds together the different strands of Hamilton's work is a revelatory interpretation of climate change. Hamilton makes explicit the connection between the emergence of the Anthropocene and the need for new ontologies. Citing the French anthropologist Philippe Descola's schema of four ontologies – naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism – Hamilton explains that

the world, the Earth, is so fundamentally transformed in the Anthropocene that it renders all previous ontologies (as modes of human relations with the natural world) obsolete. . . . It's for this reason that we need (or more accurately, will have thrust upon us) a new way of understanding what it is to live on the Earth beyond the four ontologies described by Descola, one that emerges from a sense of the distinctiveness of the Earth in the new epoch and the emerging relationship of humans to it.¹⁶⁵

This revelatory stance, by which climate crisis imposes a necessary correction or revision of ordinal or ontological premises, draws on a common notion of climate change as unprecedented in important respects. The view that Hamilton articulates here belongs to a class of interpretation by which climate crisis, somewhat paradoxically, becomes productive of certain types of epistemic goods (with echoes of Beck) – in this case a new ontology. Hamilton also echoes the Latourian stance of rejecting traditional critical methods of epistemic relativism:

Note that by making Earth System science the starting point I am taking an unapologetically Modern (naturalist!) standpoint, rejecting all relativisation of science and asserting an epistemological distinction between science and social science. As I have

165. Clive Hamilton, 'Towards a Fifth Ontology for the Anthropocene', *Angelaki* 25, no. 4 (2020): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1790839>.

argued elsewhere, the situation is too serious, the danger is too great, for us to indulge in post-modern intellectual games.¹⁶⁶

Here, Hamilton invokes the *ontological turn* in anthropology, many theorists of which suggest that any proper response to climate crisis and related ills of modernity will mean finding a way back to premodern ontologies.¹⁶⁷ The ontological turn in anthropology may be regarded as concomitant with the climatological turn, as it has been largely motivated by anti-anthropocentric imperatives and these have been related, in part, to ecological issues.¹⁶⁸ Anthropologists critical of this development in their field, in noting its theoretical excesses, point out the consequent development of new ontologies:

Instead of taking seriously the contingency of all ontologies that can be tested pragmatically, they develop an inconsistent meta-ontology. Ontologists insist in [*sic*] the ‘truth’ of indigenous ontology in the name of realism, and they attack Western ontology in the name of contingency.¹⁶⁹

Hamilton rejects the idea of returning to a prior state, stating unequivocally to ‘those who sense some larger meaning in the Anthropocene’s arrival and what it may be telling us about the role of humans on Earth’ that ‘there is no going back to pre-modern ontologies for an understanding’, postulating instead that climate crisis reveals ‘the evolution of modernity itself’.¹⁷⁰

166. Hamilton, ‘Towards a Fifth Ontology’, 112.

167. Martin Palecek, ‘The Ontological Turn Revisited: Theoretical Decline. Why Cannot Ontologists Fulfil Their Promise?’, *Anthropological Theory* 22, no. 2 (2021): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996211050610>.

168. Kathleen Lowrey, ‘Anthropology’s Three Ontological Turns: It Is Time for a Fourth, from Anti-Anthropology Back to Anthropology’, *Anthropology Today* 58, no. 3 (2022): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12755>

169. Palecek, ‘The Ontological Turn’, 160.

170. Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 70–71, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4875226>.

Conclusion

The multidisciplinary and inherently revisionary paradigm of the Anthropocene is the context and mediating element of a climatological turn in theory and culture, as represented here through the work of historian and philosopher of science Bruno Latour. Ulrich Beck's slogan of 'the goods of bads' is a heuristic that sums up the Nietzschean, transvaluating character of this climatological turn. Latour's and Beck's theories exemplify the climatological turn's constitutive motifs of revising order on the basis of warrants drawn from the natural sciences. The priority given to the natural sciences in interpreting the Anthropocene indicates assent to a natural order of reasons. Although Anthropocene discourse suggests different ways of linking Anthropocenic themes to coterminous notions in Christian theology regarding human agency and soteriological desert, the Anthropocene is theorised from positions of methodological atheism or agnosticism and is, consequently, an ostensibly secular phenomenon. The Anthropocene paradigm, insofar as it has both the form and function of a Lyotardian 'grand narrative', in particular evokes the West's ontotheological past. In consequence of being linked to theological antecedents through an argument from religious atavism, however, central tenets of the climatological turn become susceptible to traditional forms of *religionskritik*.

TWO

Religious Atavism and Postsecular Liberalism

Theories in the sociology of religion to the effect that modernity and secularity necessarily go together – developed along an arc of thought and research linking the work of Max Weber (1864–1920) in the late nineteenth century to that of Peter Berger (1929–2017) in the 1960s – have in recent decades been eclipsed by a paradigm of *postsecularity*. The long-standing and distinctly Western supposition that modern societies naturally tend to become more secular over time has been revised in view of two broad trends: religious belief in liberal democracies has not continued to wane but rather forms of religious expression have mutated in unexpected ways; and political philosophers have come up with theories of how the secular and the religious are culturally coterminous and historically co-determined. Theorists of the postsecular have been concerned in particular with the place of religious reason in the liberal public sphere; authorship of the term postsecular is, for instance, commonly attributed to German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who famously revised his early position that religious reason should be excluded from the public sphere.

The notion of *religious atavism*, as it is developed in this chapter, addresses issues of overdetermination in the climatological turn. Evoking the polemical and contested nature of climate crisis in liberal democracies, the historicist, critical, and redescriptive concept of religious atavism is modelled on the discursive convention of identifying cultural and intellectual phenomena as – in whatever sense – covertly religious. As a hermeneutical tool,

the concept of religious atavism is an abstract idea that is intrinsically *etic* in viewpoint and draws upon normative senses of secularization in redescribing ostensibly secular phenomena in terms of religious antecedents.¹

This chapter argues that the phenomenological experience of climate crisis segues with a normative sense of historical progression that the sociologist of religion José Casanova refers to as ‘philosophico-historical’ secularism. Furthermore, as conditions of postsecularity blur divisions between the secular and the religious, under those same conditions secular grand narratives become susceptible to redescription in terms normally reserved for religion. Conditions of postsecularity, by extension, arguably dilute the distinction between religious and secular reason, and historical critique reveals that political liberalism – the default option for Western societies – is overdetermined by both Enlightenment and Christian sources. Climate crisis, as a grand narrative of liberalism, then becomes susceptible to various kinds of religious atavism argument.

This is not to say, however, that climate crisis, in its susceptibility to religious atavism argument, is by any means *sui generis*; normative categories of all kinds can be addressed through historicist critique. But the differentiation of religious from non-religious reasons mat-

1. Although in vernacular usage the word *atavism* – a behaviour or attitude that is backward-looking – often has negative connotations, use of the term here is not intended to convey value judgements. Negative connotations may, nevertheless, be incidental to instances of religious atavism argument that are deployed for deflationary purposes, the resonances of which may enhance the word’s usefulness for formal purposes. A search for ‘atavism’ in the Google Books Ngram Viewer shows use of the word peaking sharply around the year 1895, then declining in the following decades and remaining low throughout the twentieth century. This pattern no doubt reflects the rise and fall in popularity, along a similar timeline, of Social Darwinism, in which reference to atavism in human culture or even – sadly – in the human species itself regularly featured. Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>.

ters greatly in discussions of what should be permitted within the public sphere, in reference specifically to climate change as a political issue, suggesting that the inordinate strife around climate crisis in liberal democracies is to do in some measure with postsecularity. Theorists like Clayton Crockett argue that climate produces a crisis of neoliberalism itself, which in turn raises questions regarding the traditional categories of religion and secularism:

What we call religion is an expression of modern liberalism that is becoming increasingly less useful for understanding both the social project of late liberalism and the possibility of alternative social projects. Postsecularism provides us a way to think late liberalism and neoliberalism more critically because we no longer have to view the material and the spiritual elements of agential elements as oppositions or as non-political.²

The blurring of distinctions between the religious and the secular lends a renewed importance to hermeneutics as a method, which is understood here as a means of sorting among viable alternatives. Drawing upon recent developments in hermeneutical research, the concept of religious atavism is an interpretive strategy, serving in particular as a counterargument to the revisionary imperative of the climatological turn and reinterpreting the drive towards revision in terms of antecedent theological and religious phenomena and categories.

Although *secularization* and *the secular* are polysemous across different disciplines, one may draw a distinction between secularised concepts – as found in theorists working in the tradition of Schmittian ‘political theology’ – and theories of secularized social phenomena – as found in the work of sociologists such as Steve Bruce. In thinking together theories of both types, religious atavism as a category is both synoptic and performs a methodological reduc-

2. Clayton Crockett, ‘Neoliberalism, Postsecularism, and the End of Religion’, *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 8, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080631>.

tion (similarly to the *epoché* of Edmund Husserl [1859–1938], for instance). Claims about the nature and function of secularization may be taken as discursive practices, a subset of social practices. The concept of religious atavism invokes a phenomenological experience of religion as a category of the bygone and retrograde, a sense that ‘that religion and religious practices have become atavistic and vestigial practices that are either in discord or are anachronistic – *unzeitgemässe* (untimely), in Nietzsche’s use of the term.’³ On this view, ‘to be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern. This is the ratchet effect of a modern historical stadial consciousness, which turns the very idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression.’⁴

The revisionary impulses of the climatological turn may be framed in terms of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Amitav Ghosh’s account of climate change as a species of the ‘unthinkable’. The etic and historicist view from religious atavism answers claims of unthinkability, tracing connections from present preoccupations to antecedents in the religious history of the West. As has been discussed, postsecularity challenges claims of covert religion when traditional boundaries between the secular and the religious are softened or erased, rendering dichotomies of *overt* and *covert* religion problematic. The issues raised by postsecularity are a subset of the more general problem of definition in the study of religion. The discursive study of religion, as a response to this problem, draws upon everyday understandings of religion as a

3. Eduardo Mendieta and Justin Beaumont, ‘Reflexive Secularization’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Justin Beaumont (London: Routledge, 2018), 429, <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.4324/9781315307831>.

4. José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895850-12340001>.

resource for studying religion without the requirement of formal definition. In thus looking at naturalised or ‘felt’ senses of the secular, theories of secularization have traditionally taken either sociological or conceptual forms. Philosophical genealogy attempts to bridge the conceptual and the sociological, such as in the work of Charles Taylor, who presents historical resources for an account from religious atavism.

The ‘unthinkable’ and religious atavism

Religious atavism is a shorthand for ways of seeing contemporary social, cultural, or intellectual phenomena in terms of underlying religious or theological historical antecedents.⁵ To view an ostensibly secular phenomenon in terms of religious atavism is to adopt an etic, critical viewpoint, to regard the described activity as a form of language game, and to tell a genealogical story about the origins of that phenomenon with reference to some theological or religious antecedent. With regard specifically to theories of order in the climatological turn, the religious atavism strategy is a response to arguments for the intrinsic novelty of climate crisis. Many theorists of the climatological turn have argued that, because climate crisis is intrinsically unprecedented and incomprehensible – ‘beyond the grasp of historical

5. The phrase ‘religious atavism’ has been used in various different senses by scholars across a diverse range of fields, usually referring to practices understood as being backwards *via-à-vis* a secular mainstream. For example, the scholar of Malaysia Johan Saravanamuttu states that ‘paradoxically, the emergence of social activism and an expressive civil society has also given rise to a backlash of religious atavism and religious intolerance in society, evidenced by incidents of Hindu temple desecration and demolitions and church burnings, hitherto absent in the country.’ Johan Saravanamuttu, ‘Introduction [Malaysia]’, in *Religious Diversity in Muslim-Majority States in South-east Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, ed. Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 237, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814519656>.

sensibility’, as one such theorist puts it – inherited conceptions of order have become obsolete and new ones must be invented. Arguments to the effect that climate crisis imposes a need for new categories often have a sense of moral urgency, generated through the pathos of collective loss and anticipated renewal.

The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty gives a programmatic instance of the view that the unprecedented nature of climate crisis underwrites wholesale revisions of Western methodological assumptions, with special reference to the Anthropocene. The originary statement of Chakrabarty’s project refers to Alan Weisman’s thought experiment of what happens to the built infrastructure of civilization in the event that human beings disappear from the planet:⁶

I am drawn to Weisman’s experiment as it tellingly demonstrates how the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility. The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience.⁷

Chakrabarty comments on his own experience of facing, as a professional historian, a disciplinary crisis, in view of the challenge that global warming poses to his professional competency:

As the crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and post-colonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today.⁸

6. Alan Weisman, *The World without Us* (London: Random House, 2008).

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>.

8. Chakrabarty, ‘Climate of History’, 199.

Chakrabarty puts his aims in the following terms: ‘How does the crisis of climate change appeal to our sense of human universals while challenging at the same time our capacity for historical understanding?’⁹

Reflecting on the problem that he has posed, Chakrabarty presents four methodological implications – which he calls *theses* – of climate change for history as a discipline. After positing a complication of traditional barriers between the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’ (‘Thesis 1: Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Age-old Distinction between Natural History and Human History’), Chakrabarty identifies the Anthropocene as a constitutive element of the emerging global order: ‘Thesis 2: The Idea of the Anthropocene, the New Geological Epoch When Humans Exist as a Geological Force, Severely Qualifies Humanist Histories of Modernity/Globalization’¹⁰ For Chakrabarty, climate crisis reveals the need for a new category of history, ‘species history’, to complement traditional critical histories of ‘capital’, in view of the obscurity of terms in the new dispensation: ‘Thesis 4: The Cross-Hatching of Species History and the History of Capital Is a Process of Probing the Limits of Historical Understanding’¹¹ Giving an example of how ready-to-hand historical analogies often fail to provide analytical traction in the new situation, Chakrabarty says that

the anxiety global warming gives rise to is reminiscent of the days when many feared a global nuclear war. But there is a very important difference. A nuclear war would have been a conscious decision on the part of the powers that be. Climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions and shows, only through scientific analysis, the effects of our actions as a species. Species may indeed be the name of a placeholder

9. Chakrabarty, ‘Climate of History’, 201.

10. Chakrabarty, ‘Climate of History’, 201–7.

11. Chakrabarty, ‘Climate of History’, 220.

for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change. But we can never *understand* this universal. . . . Climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe.¹²

The revelatory character of Chakrabarty's unthinkability hypothesis is only adumbrated in these lines, but it becomes explicit in conversation between Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour.¹³

On the view jointly arrived at in the Chakrabarty–Latour discussion, a sense of *the planetary* emerges from the facts of climate crisis, leading to a situation fundamentally misaligned with inherited institutions and concepts:

It [the planetary] emerges very gradually. . . . The climate crisis has brought the planet into view, but we don't have a planetary form of governance. Geoengineering and all of these things are taking the place of that politics. On the ground there is already an argument for not mounting global, but local, heterogeneous, multifarious forms of resistance to actions based on the 'good Anthropocene' argument.¹⁴

Indeed, the Anthropocene is crucial to Chakrabarty's view that the planetary is a category that emerges from the facts of climate crisis:

Whether or not geologists agree to formalize the label 'Anthropocene' one day, the data amassed and analyzed over the last several years by the Working Group on the Anthropocene set up by the International Commission of Stratigraphy in London makes one thing clear: ours is not just a global age; we live on the cusp of the global and what may be called 'the planetary'.¹⁵

12. Chakrabarty, 'Climate of History', 221.

13. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postscript: The Global Reveals the Planetary. A Conversation with Bruno Latour', in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 205–17, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.7208/9780226733050-005>.

14. Chakrabarty, 'Postscript', 214–15.

15. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 3, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.7208/9780226733050>.

Chakrabarty then interprets the category of the planetary as ‘humanist’ in conversation with Heideggerian categories of ‘*earth, world, and globe*’,¹⁶ and Schmittian phenomenological distinctions of the Earth, using this analysis to complicate established paradigms in environmentalist discourse such as ‘habitability’:

The planetary as such, disclosing vast processes of unhuman dimensions, cannot be grasped by recourse to any ideal form. There is no ideal form for the earth as a planet or of its history or for the history of any other planet. While the planetary mode of thinking asks questions of habitability, and habitability refers to some of the key conditions enabling the existence for various life-forms including *Homo sapiens*, there is nothing in the history of the planet that can claim the status of moral imperative.¹⁷

In short, at the core of Chakrabarty’s project is a concern with the *generative* potential of climate crisis. ‘I look on the present crisis as providing an opportunity for working toward Karl Jaspers’s idea of an “epochal consciousness”, a form of argumentation that seeks to make a conceptual place for thinking the human condition *before* committing to any particular version of practical or activity politics.’¹⁸

The hermeneutic concept of religious atavism is proposed here as one response to revelatory accounts of the sort put forward by Chakrabarty. Over against claims for the novelty and productiveness of concepts and categories, religious atavism points to features of discourse that link the desiderata of novelty and productivity to historically anterior religious or theological commitments. The notion of religious atavism is thus a tool of discourse analysis,¹⁹

16. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category’, *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (2019): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/705298>.

17. Chakrabarty, ‘The Planet’, 25.

18. Chakrabarty, ‘Planetary Age’, 19.

19. As noted briefly above, although in colloquial usage the word atavism often has negative connotations, its appearance here is not meant to invoke any connotations of correctness relating

and one that refers to a meta level of analysis. Use of the phrase religious atavism does not presuppose any particular historical ontology or theory of development – different instances of argument from religious atavism draw upon different theories and ontologies. In developing religious atavism as a category of argument, the intention is to perform a type of methodological reduction by which the range of such arguments may be thought together. References to religious atavism argument are neutral towards different kinds of historical ontology, and the underlying hypothesis is to do with the discursive normativity of historicist reasoning.

Substantiating a sense that some ostensibly secular belief or practice has an underlying religious meaning or significance inevitably involves reference to history. Instances of religious atavism argument point to religious antecedents in explaining social, conceptual, or discursive phenomena. Different forms of religious atavism argument track different definitions of religion, which broadly speaking tend to be either functionalist or substantive. Specific instances of religious atavism argument tend to be either analogies or genealogies, according to the degree of detail required by the historical account in question.

As a synoptic category by which diverse examples can be considered in a common framework, the concept of religious atavism argument is capacious by design. The essential components of an instance of religious atavism argument are relatively few in number, being, first, the selection of some social, cultural, or intellectual phenomenon as definable through a religious or theological antecedent, and second, the adoption of an *etic* viewpoint. Moreover,

to historical sequence. The word atavism in the phrase indicates only a historically anterior referent coupled with a normative sense of historical progression.

concepts and paradigms for a latent connection to religious and theological antecedents may be divided according to those in intellectual history and those in historically informed sociological analysis. For instance, prominent in intellectual history is a notion of *political theology* that derives from the work of the twentieth-century German jurist Carl Schmitt. The political theology construct has given rise to analogous formulations such as ‘economic theology’, which was developed by Giorgio Agamben in the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis. The pairing of the prosaic with the profound in these phrases invokes a sense that religion and *the religious* are retrograde vis-à-vis a contemporary mainstream of culture and society, and tropes to that effect may be located in genealogies extending back far beyond Enlightenment critiques of religion.

The view of social or intellectual phenomena as being retrograde according to a conventionally accepted model of development may be analogised, for example, to the identification of different religious groups as heretical. Within frameworks that juxtapose religion to non-religious others in value-bearing terms, the question of what does and does not count as religion naturally comes to the fore. The question of what constitutes *true* religion, as opposed to some ersatz option, has likely been posed for as long as religion has existed. The notion of idolatry, for instance, may be understood by analogy as an ancient counterpart to the contemporary practice of referring to a given practice or belief as latently religious. The Bible, for instance, is pervaded by the theme of contest between priestly and prophetic forms of religion. Overall, the matter is highly perspectival, giving rise to intriguingly counter-intuitive

analogies: what was once a charge of false religion against the overtly devout is transmuted, in a secular age, into the claim that what purports to be secular is, in fact, covertly religious. Within genealogies that identify practices, alternatively, as either falsely or actually religious, what may mark out the contemporary convention of religious atavism argument is a requisite sense of historical progression, and the presupposition – in comparing historical epochs – that social and intellectual domains are inherently subject to both development and decay.

Meanwhile, the class of argument that recasts sociological or intellectual phenomena in terms of secularization – that is, in which the nominal self-description (or *emic* viewpoint) of a given phenomenon is argued to be overlooking a religious component, essence, or function thereof – takes many forms and fulfills many different purposes. To refer generically to such arguments – to clarify – this thesis uses the phrase *religious atavism*, in reference to those features of covert religion themselves, and *religious atavism argument* to refer to the *sort* of claim that identifies those features as such. While describing ostensibly secular phenomena as containing traces of a religious component is widespread and generally accepted as a discursive practice, it has not been greatly considered by theorists, and there are consequently few parameters for discussion of it. Reflecting the paucity of theory, the German sociologist Hans Joas – in working towards a vocabulary for the interconnections between sacral objects in the religious past and their putatively non-religious analogues in the present – remarks that

the conceptual difficulties become very clear in efforts to honor the intuition that the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century somehow recall the historical religions: ‘surrogate’ or ‘ersatz’ religion, ‘political religion’ or ‘secular religion,’ ‘pseudo-religion,’ ‘crypto-religion,’ ‘disguised’ or ‘new’ religion, ‘loss of transcendence,’ or ‘practical transcendence’ are just some of the suggestions that have been made here. My objective

is not to achieve seeming independence from these conceptual struggles through a definition of religion but rather to gain an overview of the whole range of phenomena that emerge when we contemplate the experiences that human beings undergo and that prompt the attribution of sacred qualities.²⁰

As noted above, one potential model for discussion of covert or latent religion is the notion of *political theology*, which may be regarded as both a concept and a method, and begins in the work of the twentieth-century German jurist Carl Schmitt,²¹ whose primary concerns were not historical or theological but were rather with the Hobbesian question of the modern state and the sources of its political legitimacy. As a term, political theology may be read as having two main senses, the first of which is not necessarily related to religious atavism as discussed here. Reflecting the sophistication of Schmitt's thought, political theology may potentially be understood in various ways. It can be stated confidently, however, that political theology is above all a historical thesis in modern intellectual history that is applicable across a wide range of concepts, institutions, and traditions. The opening line of the third chapter of Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922), as it has been widely interpreted, presents the kernel of a political theology approach:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.²²

20. Hans Joas, *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford University Press: New York, 2021), 245–46, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190933272.001.0001>.

21. Schmitt's precursors are canonically seen to be Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), who is recognised as having been the first to use the phrase 'political theology', and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), whose protoliberal theory in *Leviathan* is substantially the point of departure for Schmitt's enquiry.

22. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 37, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ox->

This programmatic statement of Schmitt's has been read as the general method of a political theology approach, and in many cases specific applications of the principle do not necessarily engage with Schmitt's ideas per se. Alongside Schmitt, Karl Löwith (1897–1973) has in particular been influential in the tradition of conceptual approaches to secularization that generalise a principle of covert religion:

Löwith's and Schmitt's *Geistesgeschichten* can be condensed to single evocative templates – respectively, 'progress is secularized eschatology' and 'the political is analogous to the theological' – that invite the reader to project the image they evoke beyond the scope proposed by their authors.²³

Naturally different scholars have put forward different views on the significance of theology per se in Schmitt's thought. Heinrich Meier defends the view that Schmitt propounded an entire system of theology, with the historical principle of secularization amounting to a minor feature or byproduct of that larger undertaking.²⁴ At the same time, important commentators note that '*Political Theology* from 1922 contains only a very limited amount of theology. The "theology" provided in the text is incidental rather than systematic, and the word is used synonymously with "metaphysics". There are no dogmatic, moral or pastoral questions addressed.'²⁵

[ford/detail.action?docID=581738](#).

23. Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate: Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt in Political Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 456, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004504523_010.

24. Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, rev. ed., trans. Marcus Brainard and Robert Berman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

25. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, editors' introduction to *Political Theology II*, by Carl Schmitt, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 10, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4030046>.

In a second sense – one related to the sense described above – political theology may refer to the study of concepts, institutions, or traditions understood as genealogically connected to anterior religious/theological archetypes, but with a focus not on historically reconstructing processes of secularization but rather on how those ideas, concepts, or institutions function in present-day societies. By this more practical application of the political theology idea, historical genealogies of religious precursors may also belong to the discipline of sociology. Without suggesting any theory of essentialism in history, genealogies of this sociological kind may be regarded as a form of hermeneutics at the intersection of the social and the conceptual.

In a third sense, political theology may refer to ways in which present-day political agendas are underpinned by religious or theological warrants or impetuses, whether latent or explicit, without reference necessarily to notions of secularized antecedents. Political theology used in this more prosaic sense may refer straightforwardly to programmes that are overtly associated with religion, without any suggestion of secularizing processes or etic redescription. Political theology from an emic viewpoint would include any political movement, party, idea, or agenda that self-consciously recognises theology as a motivating source.²⁶ In short, political theology is a polysemous notion whose use presupposes a kind of pluralism – various forms of political theology may coexist in the same field, just as various ideologies or overt theologies exist side by side.

26. As a self-applied label, political theology generally telegraphs no deflationary intentions, being perhaps merely diagnostic. For example, Marinos Diamantides and Anton Schütz describe a ‘world society’ as resting ‘on the religious ruins of the premodern West, with which most of the global population, availing itself of its own ruins, has no affective relationship.’ Marinos Diamantides, *Political Theology: Demystifying the Universal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 2.

While the category of political theology is a model for the general form of argument from theology in history, the concept's usefulness is limited for critiques of ecologism insofar as the ordinal arguments of the climatological turn are not strictly political in their nature. The aspect of Schmitt's original conception of political theology that deserves to be preserved, however – and the character of secularization that it primarily draws upon – is that of *hiddenness*.²⁷ On this view, the religious valences of climate crisis are in some sense covert or undisclosed from the point of view of a social mainstream:

Today, the 'old' Western political theology that is centered on the question of authority, legitimacy, and political power is often identified with the name of Carl Schmitt who wrote from the particular context of German legal philosophy in the early and mid-twentieth century. He argued for a theology that is like the dwarf in Walter Benjamin's chess machine, hiding under the chess table and secretly steering the moves the visible puppet seems to make.²⁸

The study of religious atavism argument, in particular, can make the significant and distinctive contribution of elucidating *normative* understandings of the secular and the religious in specific discursive contexts. While much theory on secularization in the past generation has shown how categories of the religious and the secular rarely break cleanly, the currency and prevalence of religious atavism argument point to a presupposition *in practice* that the

27. It must be noted that 'covertness' in this sense does not imply and cannot support any sort of conspiracy theorising, but rather is to be understood according to Nietzsche's dictum that 'we are unknown to ourselves, we who make it our business to know – we, our very selves, to ourselves' (wir sind uns unbekannt, wir Erkennenden, wir selbst uns selbst), an idea which now so thoroughly informs Western conceptions of the *critical* as to be virtually a statement of Occidental common sense. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift*, in *Zur Genealogie der Moral (1887). Götzen-Dämmerung (1889)*, ed. Claus-Artur Scheier (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2013), 3 (my translation).

28. Hille Haker, 'What Is Political Theology and Why Does It Matter Today?', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 548, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567670427.ch-035>.

secular and the religious may in fact be distinguished. Analysing religious atavism argument at this meta level, therefore, is a way of attempting ‘to capture the level of understanding prior to philosophical puzzlement.’²⁹ Approaching the covert religious dimensions of climate crisis through philosophers of political liberalism, furthermore, moves the focus to a deeper level in the context of liberal democracies.



Arguments from secularized eschatology, political theology, or similar formulations are made in different ways in different contexts, disciplines, and forums. Leaving to one side questions of correspondence to truth, redescription of a given phenomenon as covertly religious achieves a basic level of *coherence* only if certain conditions are met. To declare in a polemical context that a belief or idea is secretly religious serves an argumentative purpose only if the idea or position in question is nominally secular. Charging an ecotheologian, for example, with trading in ‘green religion’ would, *prima facie*, simply state the obvious.³⁰ The deflationary effect of a *covert religion* charge may issue from different factors, but in most cases the aim will be met by presenting a disjunction of essence and appearance: to claim a secular identity while being ‘religious’ all along means either to lack self-transparency or to be dissimulating. The faithful may just as effectively as non-believers find polemical use in levelling the charge of

29. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.

30. Considering degrees of authenticity in overt religious sentiment, in the vein of John Webster’s notion of ‘theological theology’, may be one viewpoint that complicates the ways in which religious atavism is being discussed here, but for the present purposes such nuance may be left to one side. John Webster, ‘Theological Theology’, in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11–32.

secularized eschatology, as shown for example by the programme of modern theology called *radical orthodoxy*. The form of religious atavism argument is, in other words, intrinsically perspectival, and the charge of being latently religious will tend to depend for its force upon cultural connotations of the religious as retrograde or deleterious as against a background of mainstream secularism.

Social, psychological, or intellectual phenomena are labeled as ‘crypto-religion’ for many reasons. Claims taking the form ‘x is merely/secretly a form of religion’ – where x is a concept or social phenomenon that would not ordinarily be thought of or described as religious – will tend in colloquial contexts to be explicitly deflationary or polemical. As an instance of polemical uses of religious atavism claims, the American writer William F. Buckley (1925–2008) – borrowing from the German philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) – made the imperative ‘don’t immanentize the eschaton!’ a conservative catchphrase in 1960s America.³¹ Buckley’s analogical adaptation of Voegelin juxtaposes ironic polysyllabicism to the deflationary, psychological hypothesis that leftist politics, in its tendencies towards the utopian, is actually an expression of latent religious impulses. Buckley’s imputation of religious motivations was meant as a form of negative critique, in effect saying that leftists either did not understand their own motivations or had aims as unrealistic as the project of making heaven on Earth. Buckley’s source for obscure theological ideas,³² Eric Voegelin, had a specific genealogical

31. William Kristol, ‘The Indispensable Man’, *New York Times*, 3 March 2008, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/indispensable-man/docview/897103771/se-2?accountid=13042>.

32. Buckley was clearing making play with a show of erudition in using terms that would, it is safe to say, not have been familiar to the majority of Americans in his era.

story in mind in referring to ‘immanentization’ and the ‘eschaton’, a story that characterised certain features of modernity as being, in actuality, reflections (or actual forms) of the early Christian heresy known as Gnosticism.³³ Voegelin, being a philosopher, naturally had aims very different from Buckley’s, the latter of whose were overtly political. Voegelin’s own aims were critical, to be certain, in particular of twentieth-century totalitarianism, but not necessarily polemical in the demotic fashion of Buckley. Since the period when Voegelin was active, the Gnosticism thesis – by which some account of the early Christian heresy serves as a heuristic or hermeneutic for otherwise cryptic aspects of modern societies or civilization overall – has become a commonplace of Western literary and critical culture.³⁴ Harold Bloom, to give one example, used the thesis of Gnosticism in his characterisation of the United States as a nation not altogether Christian.³⁵ These instances of religious atavism argument suggest something of the versatility, richness, and resonance of claims to the effect that some contemporary phenomenon may be linked, in its essence, to an imagined religious past.

As has been seen, religious atavism argument draws upon a phenomenological sense of religious anteriority in order to comment critically – in the sense of objective observation rather than negative comment – on contemporary social or cultural phenomena. Being in its nature protean, specific instances of religious atavism argument may belong to specific

33. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

34. April D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

35. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

theories, programmes, or ideas, such as (as has been seen) the Schmittian idea of political theology. Another thematic grouping for religious atavism may be found in the genealogical hypothesis that the roots of the modern secular West are to be located historically in particular events and ideas of the Protestant Reformation. Many instances of religious atavism argument, meanwhile, are *sui generis*. Defining a category that subsumes both the programmatic and *sui generis* or ad hoc instances of religious atavism is to perform a methodological reduction so that diverse instances of the argument may be viewed under a common taxonomy. The key characteristic of religious atavism argument, as it is conceived here, is the act of redescription that it effects. Religious atavism argument is, in the final analysis, a discursive practice like any other.

Buckley invoked the 'eschaton', for example, in mockery of mid-twentieth century leftism, the majority of adherents of which would never – leaving perhaps to one side those with an accompanying faith commitment – have described their own aims with reference to an overtly theological idea. The relationship between the insider's and outsider's perspectives – one critical, the other self-descriptive – may be described in terms of the anthropological distinction between *emic* and *etic* methodological viewpoints. As the *emic* refers to 'a perspective of . . . subjects within the social group in order to comprehensively understand how they perceive the world and explain things', the *etic* 'describes an observer's perspective from outside of the social group, trying to abstract from a limited scope of the group members'.³⁶

36. Heinz Streib and Constantin Klein, 'Religion and Spirituality', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198729570.013.5>.

The instances of religious atavism argument in the political philosophy of Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty are critical and historicist in character, and thus essentially etc. Historicism as it is used by both Rorty and Taylor draws upon the critical potential in comparing different historical epochs. Viewing the human past as a sequence of distinct episodes or ages creates the conditions for analogies between different epochal worldviews. Comparison of worldviews simultaneously has the potential to elucidate contemporary phenomenon, but its relativising implications may also deflate the living force of contemporary mores and worldviews. The critical-comparative sense of historicism, in other words, makes the past coherent through some schema of epochs that are intrinsically differentiable. A critical comparison of epochs involves a constructivist engagement with the past that is related to but separate from academic history or historiography.³⁷ Separating this critical-comparative sense of historicism from demotic ways of referring to the past overall is a matter of conventions and norms, and viewing the human past as a series of discretely definable episodes is deeply normative in Western societies.

There is thus an important link between historicism and a sense of the *stadial* that bears upon the very essence of secular experience from a phenomenological point of view. Adopting the argument that Charles Taylor makes to the effect that mere ‘subtraction stories’ of secularism do not suffice to explain the religious multiplicity of contemporary liberal democracies, a phenomenological account must present the case for secularism as a positive option. Under-

37. Crucially, a given periodization need not necessarily be strictly ‘true’ for this method to succeed, for such a universe of epochs – even if only inspired by actual history – offers a set of resources for acts of critical *imagining*.

standing the secular as a positive option amid a welter of traditional religions requires a felt sense of progression. ‘Self-sufficient secularity, that is, the absence of religion, has a better chance of becoming the normal taken-for-granted situation if it is experienced not simply as an unreflexively naïve condition, as just a fact, but actually as the meaningful result of a quasi natural process of development.’³⁸ The normative sense that Western history is a story of development and requires such a progression is felt not simply as a theoretical possibility but rather as a fact that informs everyday self-consciousness. The sense of history as a phenomenological anchor for contemporary forms of religious expression and belief is a core part of Charles Taylor’s methodology in *A Secular Age*:

Intrinsic to this phenomenological experience is a modern ‘stadial consciousness’, inherited from the Enlightenment, which understands this anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief as a process of maturation and growth, as a ‘coming of age’ and as progressive emancipation. For Taylor, this stadial phenomenological experience serves in turn to ground the phenomenological experience of exclusive humanism as the positive self-sufficient and self-limiting affirmation of human flourishing and as the critical rejection of transcendence beyond human flourishing as self-denial and self-defeating.³⁹

The investigation of social and moral order and their sources, in turn, may be speculative – comprising metaphysics – or may be empirical – comprising studies of how actual societies or nations are formed, developed, and maintained. In political thought, it is self-evident that the topic of order has both conceptual and empirical aspects. Conceptual approaches to social order can be related to actual social practices or institutional arrangements, and

38. José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004411982>.

39. José Casanova, ‘The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms’, in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 59, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=746637>.

understanding these will usually involve some degree of intellectual history that demonstrate the genetic development of a national ethos or worldview.

To integrate explanations at both the conceptual and the empirical levels into a single method requires some way of relating material factors (i.e., empirical facts of a society) to the immaterial (i.e., concepts or beliefs that prevail in that society) – a problem that may be styled one of pneumatology. The problem of relating material and immaterial factors is always in the background of attempts to make inferences or deductions of background social assumptions. Academic use of the term *imaginaries* has been one highly productive approach to speculation on background assumptions with aid of material analysis. An important source for the term imaginaries is Benedict Anderson's 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, which took an innovative social constructivist approach to the study of nation states and was a major intervention in the field after a generation of scholarly work on the nation state had been dominated by materialist approaches.

Bringing a hermeneutics of religious atavism to the climate crisis and the climatological turn is one way of approaching the question of why climate change – a largely material phenomenon – has spurred so much cultural productivity. For theorists of the climatological turn such as Ulrich Beck, Bruno Latour, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, ecological warrants implicitly underpin conceptions of order with greater efficacy than warrants from other kinds of global issues such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The submission of warrants per se is a discursive or social practice, and the underlying ideas and presuppositions against which

climate crisis offers guidance on moral or social order may be separated from the question of why climate crisis should have a special plausibility as a source of warrants – a separation effected by the interpretive principle of religious atavism.

As touched on briefly above, in colloquial terms instances of religious atavism argument take the form of claiming that their subjects are ‘secretly’, ‘merely’, or ‘actually’ religious in either a functionalist or substantive sense. As has also been discussed, the viewpoint of religious atavism argument is etic by necessity, insofar as instances of it are intrinsically acts of redescription. In applying the heuristic of religious atavism, therefore, care must be taken to account for nuances in the interrelation of emic (insider) and etic (outsider) viewpoints. The scholarly category of religion may in itself be regarded as intrinsically etic, which the anthropologist Jonathan Benthall describes in the following way: ‘the problem here is to convert the “folk category” of religion – which always means different things to different people – into an analytical category; in other words, to borrow the jargon of anthropology, to turn an “emic” (insider) category into an “etic” (outsider) category.’⁴⁰ However, because the concept of religion emerged in Western discourse through iterative processes of self-understanding, the connection between etic and emic viewpoints may often be quite complex:

The category religion is an etic category developed within western intellectual tradition. The term “etic” is from “phonetic” and denotes an “outsider” discourse in the sense that phonetics is the science of the sound of words which is available to all, in contrast to “emic,” from “phonemic,” designating the semantic properties of words available

40. Jonathan Benthall, *Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age Is Haunted by Faith* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 10.

only to those who speak the language. . . . Religion might be seen as a western emic category that has become an etic category with the development of scientific discourse.⁴¹

Alongside two basic criteria of an etic viewpoint and the identification of an anterior religious referent, a taxonomy of religious atavism argument may be divided according to form, purpose, and register. In form, instances of religious atavism argument tend to be either analogical or genealogical, while the purposes of religious atavism argument tend to be either deflationary or explanatory. Being pervasive across levels of Western culture, instances of religious atavism argument appear in low, middle, and high registers of expression.⁴²

Meanwhile, trends of revisionism in theory disciplines have created new pathways in hermeneutical and phenomenological research. ‘One of the most important and interesting debates, catalyzed by posthumanist, new materialist, and object-oriented ontologies, recently has focused on *the centrality and stability/instability of the human* in qualitative and postqualitative inquiry.’⁴³ As mentioned above, the category of religious atavism may be developed through a taxonomic approach that allows instances across the scope of the category to be thought together through a *synoptic* reduction. Scholarly paradigms with which the category of religious atavism may productively enter into conversation with include that of *implicit religion*, alongside Schmitt’s political theology and theories of worldviews. Like the paradigm

41. Gavin Flood, *The Importance of Religion: Meaning and Action in Our Strange World* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 13, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=822692>.

42. The distinction between registers made here does not connote value judgements, but rather aspects of discursive context such as formality of presentation and differential levels of rigour in reasoning.

43. Mark D. Vagle, Jaye Johnson Thiel, and Brooke Anne Hofsess, ‘A Prelude – Unsettling Traditions: Reimagining the Craft of Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Inquiry’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 5 (2020): 428, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419829791>.

of implicit religion, religious atavism is a heuristic for understanding how felt notions of secularization draw upon the normativity of historicist thinking, and as such potentially contributes to methods in the discursive study of religion.

A discursive approach to religious atavism engages nominally secular features of a contemporary scene rather than analysing ‘family resemblances’ to the religious or theological. In regard to liberal democracies in particular, the problem of sacrality must be approached through the proxy of order, because explicit sacrality will be attrited by the pluralistic cross currents of liberal societies, as in Charles Taylor’s theory of fragilisation and Richard Rorty’s of liberal irony. Owing to the endurance of such cross pressures, attempts to reprisinate the sacred artificially will fail to achieve the status of Jamesian live options. In this sense, as a hermeneutical concept, religious atavism preserves the coherence of covert religion claims under conditions of postsecularism.

Postsecularity and covert religion

As has been seen, the hermeneutical concept of religious atavism concerns arguments about latent religious commitment or association. Attempts to define religion against the non-religious, however, are complicated in two different ways. First, there is a long-standing definitional issue in the study of religion. Second, the paradigm of postsecularity problematises the notion of clear boundaries between the secular and the religious and emphasises the inherent porousness of such boundaries. The concept of religious atavism may borrow from

methodologies in the discursive study of religion that solve this dual definitional problem by centralising *normative* understandings of religion and the religious as these are expressed in real-life discursive contexts – thus, in a sense, domesticating understandings of religion and the religious found in the wild.

Many methodological issues in the study of religion have arisen from this definitional issue. Nevertheless, the prevalence of religious atavism argument in both popular and academic discourse points to the enduring normativity of secularization as a social, cultural, and conceptual process. The normative legitimacy of secularization allows religious atavism to serve as an interpretive principle that obviates the requirement of formally defining religion as such. Since the beginnings of the study of religion as an academic discipline at the end of the nineteenth century, with the work of the field's canonical originators William James (1842–1910), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber, there have been many different theories and definitions of religion.⁴⁴ While there has been no shortage of different formal definitions and theories for scholars of religion to choose from,⁴⁵ the field's ongoing lack of consensus on a single definition has led some scholars to question the very existence of religion per se. The pre-eminent scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith famously declared that 'there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the

44. The editors of a recent volume in the study of religion include an appendix listing 32 different definitions of religion, modelled on the appendix of 48 definitions in James H. Leuba's *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future* from 1912. Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, 'Appendix: Definitions of Religion and Critical Comments', in *What Is Religion? Debating the Academic Study of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 297–355, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190064976.001.0001>.

45. Daniel Pals, *Ten Theories of Religion*, first saw print as *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization',⁴⁶ and the deconstructivist move performed by those words has shaped the study of religion for a generation. The first six words of Smith's famous declaration have been identified as 'the most frequently cited sentence in theoretical/methodological discussion in the field of religious studies the last two decades'.⁴⁷ Smith's disciplinary heirs, proponents of *critical religion* such as Russell McCutcheon hold a position that 'denies that there is some stable, ontologically distinct domain, entity, or thing "out there" in the world to which the word "religion" refers. It holds that "religion" is a discursively constructed concept, with no extra-linguistic referent: it is a word that refers to other words, not a word that refers to a thing.'⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the sheer variety of forms taken by the religious and the secular in contemporary Western societies complicates efforts to create categories of enduring analytical power and scope. Paul Deal and Kari O'Grady succinctly present the issue of multiplicity that vexes comprehensive categorisation of religious expression in the twenty-first century West:

As Hurricane Irene swept the Atlantic coast, environmentalists underwent civil disobedience training in a DC church. That a self-identified *unaffiliated* and *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR) group, was preparing in a *religious* space, for a *secular* protest, to protect a *sacred* earth is indicative of the complexity in American religiousness and spirituality (R/S). Key terms are in flux (Ammerman 2013) and wide disagreement exists as to what that flux means.⁴⁹

46. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jamestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

47. Gustavo Benavides, 'There Is No Data for Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003): 895, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfg105>.

48. Michael Stauberg and Steven Engler, 'Theories of Religion', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57.

49. Paul Deal and Kari O'Grady, 'Environmental Justice Activism: A Transformative, Contemporary Nature Religion', *Review of Religious Research* 62, no. 2 (2020): 315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-020-00409-y>.

As described above, interrelations of the secular and the religious complicate the use of methodological approaches to the study of religion that rely on fixed definitions. The study of religion has recently produced a rich literature on these interrelations, which has appeared in response to the significant religious mixing in Western societies in recent decades. As an approach to the definitional issue, scholars have drawn upon self-understandings of the religious by studying the ways in which religion is identified in real-life social contexts. The chief benefit of a discursive-practices approach in the study of religion, already suggested in the phrase's first use by Hans Kippenberg,⁵⁰ is in how it potentially deals with the definitional problem, and instances of religious atavism argument are, in effect, hypotheses that contain definitions or conceptions of religion within them. Explanatory or deflationary claims of secularized eschatology may be taken as evidence for what does and does not count as religion within the discursive context in which such claims are regarded as basically credible. Studying instances of religious atavism argument in real-world discourse is, in short, to observe the power of religion as an interpretive principle, and modelling a hermeneutic principle of religious atavism on real-world arguments makes a resource of lived experience.

Having appeared in recent years as an important subfield in the study of religion, the discursive study of religion is 'in critical conversation with earlier theories of the social construc-

50. Hans G. Kippenberg, 'Diskursive Religionswissenschaft: Gedanken zu einer Religionswissenschaft, die weder auf einer allgemein gültigen Definition von Religionen noch auf einer Überlegenheit von Wissenschaft basiert', in *Neue Ansätze in der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Burkhard Gladigow and Hans G. Kippenberg (Munich: Kösel, 1983), 9–28.

tion of reality and knowledge (particularly Berger and Luckmann; Schütz and Luckmann)',⁵¹ whose practitioners seek 'possible means of studying the category of religion without applying scholarly definitions of religion.'⁵² As Kocku von Stuckrad, an innovator and leader in the subfield, explains,

discursive approaches provide a solution to another problem, as well. It is no longer necessary – in fact, it would be counterproductive – to apply a generic definition of religion (see also von Stuckrad 2010b: 165–167). Definitions of religion are statements and utterances that attribute meaning to things and that provide orders of knowledge. As contributions to a discourse on religion, these definitions are objects of discursive analysis, rather than its tools.⁵³

A discursive-practices approach that applies religious atavism as a category resonates, furthermore, with the ongoing programme of critical religion, a prominent exponent of which explains the study of religion as the study of discourse:

Starting from the position that sees not religion but the *discourse* on religion as a fairly recent historical occurrence of practical effect allows us to ask a whole new set of questions about how people like us continually create, govern, and police the usually taken-for-granted environments in which we live our lives, arrange our affairs, distribute our resources, and establish and contest our identities, doing so by designating and then treating certain things in the past or present *as* religion.⁵⁴

Just as philosophical genealogy and historicist analogy may serve intended purposes even when referring to pasts that do not necessarily comport with the deliverances of academic

51. Kocku von Stuckrad, 'Secular Religion: A Discourse-Historical Approach to Religion in Contemporary Western Europe', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, no. 1 (2013): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2013.750828>.

52. Teema Tairu, *Taking 'Religion' Seriously: Essays on the Discursive Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004511682>.

53. Kocku von Stuckrad, 'Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25, no. 1 (2013): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341253>.

54. Russell T. McCutcheon, *On Making a Shift in the Study of Religion and Other Essays* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 66, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1515/9783110721713>.

history, so a hermeneutics of religious atavism is concerned more with the structure of discourse than with the truth value of any given claim.



As described above, postsecularity has emerged in the past decade as a paradigm within the study of religion and secularism studies per se, whose principle aim is to contextualise the porousness of traditional boundaries between the religious and the secular. The prominent issues of postsecularity complement the definitional problem in the study of religion. At the same time, other approaches in the study of religion have sought to address the definitional issue through observation of real-world clues as to what counts as religion or the religious.⁵⁵

A recent overview of the *implicit religion* paradigm, for instance, opens with the following statement of purpose:

It [sc. the meaning of religion] is not a static ahistorical meaning, but one that has changed over time and context and will continue to do so. Therefore, a clear definition of how the term religion is being understood and why it matters within that specific moment, event, community, or culture is vital to good scholarship. So how does one define religion?⁵⁶

The prevalence of religious atavism argument in scholarship, literature, and cultural commentary attests to its discursive normativity. As such, the study of religious atavism argument potentially contributes something to methods in the study of religion that seek to understand religion in terms of real-world understandings. Such approaches may take the form of

55. Francis Stewart, 'Implicit Religion: Reshaping the Boundary between the Religious and the Secular?', in 'Implicit Religion Revisited', ed. Stewart Francis, special issue, *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 43, no. 1 (2022): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2022.2005707>.

56. Stewart, 'Implicit Religion', 1.

studying social practices, as a route that bypasses the traditional problem of defining religion by taking as its object of study *claims about* religion that have normative legitimacy within specific contexts. The ubiquity and diversity of form taken by arguments from religious anteriority suggest that the religious past acts as a kind of *indispensable analogy* in contemporary self-understanding – a suggestion that resonates with Jonathan Benthall’s question, ‘Has religion become a metaphor for everything but itself?’⁵⁷ The indispensable analogy hypothesis also resonates with Hegelian accounts that understand modernity as intrinsically dialectical and thus unable to perceive itself except for the shadows cast by bygone magisteria.

Religious antecedents may take a variety of forms in religious atavism argument, and may or may not carry connotations of superstition, cravenness, and unsophistication. Religious antecedents may also underpin cultural and institutional virtues, insofar as these may be understood as being transferred from one worldview to another. On many instances of religious atavism argument, the contemporary valorisation and celebration of institutional science, for instance, reflects the persistence of a prior, theological stage of civilization in which theology was ‘queen of the sciences’. In a contemporary cultural moment shaped by a prior generation’s preoccupation with postmodernism and an avant-gardist valorisation of the irrational, norms governing the role of truth in public discourse have been revitalised, suggesting a generalised longing for the sort of certainty that religion has traditionally supplied. More generally, to deploy the indispensable analogy of religion is to invoke a sense of anachronism that functions heuristically, as a guidepost indicating social or cultural novelty or metamorphosis.

57. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 5.

Insofar as religion is a polysemous concept, religious aspects in ecological discourse may be characterised in different ways. A medial approach, between reading religious metaphor literally, on one hand, and theorising a covertly operative element of secularized eschatology, on the other, would be to observe resemblances between expressions of ecological concern and theological ideas. In view of the well-known definitional issue in the study of religion, versions of the resemblances approach are common and often formalised according to adaptations of Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance',⁵⁸ or Weber's form of 'ideal' typification,⁵⁹ among others. Reading resemblances may also take the form of commonsensical analogising, without recourse to formal models. An example would be the observation that 'for bourgeois ecologists, green politics functions as the new age's religion, and like all other religions it serves to absorb the negativity of the potential forces of dissent by channelling them into illusionary spheres of salvation.'⁶⁰ As has been noted, taking notice of the epiphenomenal forms in ecological discourse – the content of metaphors, imagery, and figurative language – is one approach to the problem of religious atavism in the climate crisis. Accounts to the effect that nominally secular expressions of ecologism contain a latent religious component often do analogise straightforwardly to Christian ideas, for example, suggesting that environmentalism

58. Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 30, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.4159/9780674981560>; Jon Wittrock, 'Liberalism, Nationalism and Religion: Multidimensional Autonomy, Trade-Offs and Analogies', *Nations and Nationalisms* 28, no. 3 (2022): 1117–30, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12846>.

59. Avi Astor, 'Religion and Its Modifiers: Making Sense of the Definition and Subtypification of a Contested Concept', *Theory and Society* 52, no. 1 (2021): 219–21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-021-09447-z>.

60. Saladdin Ahmed, 'The Ecological Crisis, Apocalypticism, and the Internalization of Unfreedom', *World Review of Political Economy* 11, no. 1 (2020): 135, <https://doi.org/10.13169/worldreview-poliecon.11.1.0115>.

amounts to a form of covert nature-worship – a deification of the planet itself – or represents a sociological transmutation of Christian doctrine into forms of modern activism.

Meanwhile, instances of religious atavism argument are found across discursive registers, variously taking high, middle, and low forms.⁶¹ Designations of high, middle, and low, as described here, are meant to refer only to different strata as defined by differing levels of institutionally governed convention and formality of expression.⁶² For simplicity's sake, a high register may be understood as comprising academic, scholarly, or research-oriented contexts. An genealogical instance of religious atavism argument in a high register, for instance, would be Michael Rosen's *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History*.⁶³ Rosen aims to show how the soteriological notion of personal immortality in Latin Christianity was transformed, in the course of an intellectual movement from Kant to Hegel, into the contemporary notion of achieving a place in human history. Meanwhile, discursive outputs in a middle register may be found in the literary domains of trade publishing, journalism, or other forms of cultural commentary, while a low register would refer to informal, demotic, and otherwise unrehearsed forms of exchange.

61. Categorising discourse according to such tiers does not suggest a hierarchy according to which particular instances are inferior or superior in terms of quality or worth, but merely differentiates among contexts. Although such a schema is bound to be subjective, it is important for recognising the pervasiveness of religious atavism argument across different contexts and groups.

62. Discussion of religious atavism argument in this thesis makes uses primarily of Anglophone resources and focuses on Anglophone discourse. A comparative study of religious atavism argument across different linguistic fields and national discourses would potentially be a significant contribution to the discursive-practices approach to the study of religion.

63. The phrase that Rosen adopts for his title is taken from section 108 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Michael Rosen, *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2022), 3–4.

What is indicated by the range of registers in which instances of religious atavism argument may be found is that the felt norms they reveal are not specific to just one aspect of society or particular sort of institution. Importantly, the concept of implicit religion adopts an emic approach to the question of secular religion, in accordance with Edward Bailey's original understanding of the methodology's purpose, that of capturing personal experiences of meaning and connection with transcendence that might otherwise go unnoticed due to the limitations of existing scholarly categories:

It is important to be clear that these analytical tools are not intended as a means of declaring something to be a religion against the understanding or, importantly, intent and wishes of those engaged with the focus of study. Moreover, they are not intended for the purpose of artificially layering existing, or assumed, understandings of religion over a secular activity.⁶⁴

In its original formulation by Bailey, then, implicit religion is decidedly different from the discursive practice of etic redescription in which social or intellectual phenomena are related to religious antecedents in ways that potentially become deflationary or polemical. As Bailey himself frames the matter:

Implicit Religion looks at what people are determined about, as distinct from what they are determined by; at the Causes (with a capital C) for which they live, and sometimes die, as distinct from the causes (with a small c) of their living and dying.⁶⁵

The religious atavism approach, insofar as instances of religious atavism argument are acts of redescription, is an inherently etic approach to the definitional problem that may be understood as complementing emic approaches such as Bailey's in important ways. Insofar as

64. Stewart, 'Implicit Religion', 4–5.

65. Edward Bailey, "'Implicit Religion?' What Might That Be?", *Implicit Religion* 15, no. 2 (2012): 196.

religious atavism claims have at their core some notion of conceptual or social secularization, taking a range of examples of religious atavism argument from different discursive contexts may offer insights into the enduring normativity of secularization and the secular as felt realities. As has been discussed, recent developments in scholarly understandings of secularization and the secular have complicated long-standing categories, such that the field as a whole has become far more attuned to what nominally secular culture and society has inherited from the religious and theological past. The large and specialised literature that has emerged in the past two decades has instantiated many subfields, and the view of secularization as a linear, inexorable, and inevitable force in modern societies – once referred to generically as the ‘secularization thesis’ – has been challenged and revised from an array of perspectives.⁶⁶

The traditional secularization thesis has been challenged not only by analyses of specific societies but also in global developments. Where Western paradigms were once thought to provide a universal template for the development of nation states in general, trends around the world have combined to present scholars with a tapestry of social and religious phenomena. The link between the modernisation of a society in material terms and its secularization has been shown not to follow any linear pattern:

This teleological projection of increasing secularization and religious decline has not been confirmed by general historical developments around the globe in the last fifty years. The undeniable modernization (or the growth in urbanization, industrialization and education), which has taken place in many non-European societies, in the Americas, in Asia, in Africa, has been accompanied frequently by different forms of religious revival and by religious pluralization rather than by religious decline. It

66. The traditional view of secularization still has defenders. Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Idea* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

should be obvious therefore, that modernization per se does not produce necessarily secularization.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, Anglophone scholarship has seen the emergence of subfields such as ‘secularism studies’ and the ‘study of non-religion’. The proliferation of scholarly views on secularization has made consensus on its meaning and import as elusive as consensus on the definition of religion itself; scholarly formulations such as ‘secular religion’ demonstrate the enduring reciprocity of the secular and the religious. In the conceptual movement from secularism as a privative category to ‘the secular’ as a positive mode of religious expression – one which is in many cases resonant with forms of liberal Protestantism – one senses the status of religion as an ‘indispensable analogy’. Meanwhile, instances of religious atavism argument may be reflections of specific programmes of research or schools of thought. Particular schools of thought that produce instances of religious atavism argument are the Schmittian lineage of political theology; the programme of modern theology known as radical orthodoxy; the tradition of the concept, first suggested by Robert Bellah, of civil religion; and the theory, associated with the German philosopher Karl Jaspers and Israeli sociologist Schmuël Eisenstadt, that an era – called the Axial Age – occurring roughly around 500 BCE was a global time of origins for the modern world.

Different types of religious atavism argument will track closely with theories and definitions of religion. Daniel L. Pals distinguishes between definitions of religion and theories of religion, subdividing the category of definition according to a standard taxonomy of ‘substantive’

67. José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004411982>.

and 'functionalist'. By Pals account, theories of religion may refer to a given religion's origins and, like definitions, also come in substantive and functionalist varieties. Theories regarding the origin of religion per se may be distinguished according to whether they describe those origins as 'prehistorical' or 'social or psychological'.⁶⁸ Genealogical instances of religious atavism argument have an affinity with substantive notions of religion, whereas analogical instances of religious atavism argument have an affinity with functionalist accounts. Theories of religious origins are not necessarily instances of religious atavism argument in themselves, but easily veer into the category once their arguments take contemporary phenomena as evidence or warrant for their claims. For instance, Robert Bellah's speculation regarding the transformation of archaic societies into Axial ones may stand on its own, without reference to any specific reflection of that movement in contemporary societies or religion, but once Bellah invokes the observation that 'nothing is ever lost' the claim then becomes an instance of religious atavism argument.⁶⁹

Pals observes that 'functional theorists strive to look beneath or behind the conscious thoughts of religious people to find something deeper and more hidden. They routinely contend that certain underlying social structures or unnoticed psychological pressures are the real causes of religious behavior.'⁷⁰ Religious atavism argument essentially reverses the direction of relationship in functionalist explanation, contending that certain underlying theological ideas

68. Daniel L. Pals, *Ten Theories of Religion*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 10–11.

69. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011), 267.

70. Pals, *Ten Theories*, 12.

or unnoticed religious impulses are the real causes of social and psychological phenomena. David N. Myers illustrates the explanatory–deflationary split between Schmitt and Weber in developing his dichotomy of ‘supersessionist’ versus ‘atavistic’ conceptions of secularism in the context of Judaism. Myers rightly refers to Schmitt as crucial to the development of the historicist normativity by which instances of religious atavism argument make sense in contemporary discursive practice. For Myers the terms ‘supersessionist’ and ‘atavistic’ are roughly equivalent to the taxonomic classification used here of ‘deflationary and explanatory’. Myers says of Schmitt that ‘he reversed the process analyzed by Weber’ stating further that

this recognition of the earlier theological roots of the secular seems to gesture toward what we might call an *atavistic* perspective that identifies the inescapably religious origins of all things modern. By contrast, the Weberian legacy points toward what we might call with more than a tinge of irony – given its religious overtones – a supersessionist perspective. Such a perspective announces the triumph of a modern secular, rational, disenchanted sensibility over mystical, enchanted, and superstitious religion.⁷¹

Over against the typology that Myers presents above, within the typology of religious atavism argument Weber and Schmitt may both be seen as deploying instances of it. Weber explains modern capitalism by identifying a component of norms inherited from Calvinism. Myers emphasises that Weber’s focus was disenchantment, but this analysis may run in either of two directions: is the modern condition one of disenchantment with remnants of the religious? or is the religious undergoing a process of disenchantment? Understanding religious atavism argument as discursive practice – and therefore, by extension, social practice – means per-

71. David N. Myers, ‘Between Supersessionism and Atavism: Toward a Neo-Secular View of Religion’, in *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, ed. Ari Joskowitz and Ethan B. Katz (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2015), 264, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3442541>.

forming a methodological reduction whereby questions of correspondence to the world are bracketed, and the focus moves to a narrower band of rhetoricity in invoking ‘the religious’ as either explanation or as deflationary tactic. In this regard, the dichotomy that Myers proposes between ‘atavistic’ and ‘supercessionist’ conceptions of the secular corresponds roughly to the distinction in the taxonomy of religious atavism argument between ‘deflationary’ and ‘explanatory’ argumentative purposes.⁷²

Looking at further applications of religious atavism argument, instances of the form may be found in John Milbank’s account of modern secularity in the programme of modern theology referred to as radical orthodoxy; the evolutionary approach to religion in Robert Bellah’s account of the Axial Age; and Milan Babik’s interpretation of Wilsonian foreign policy as ‘secularized eschatology’. In the first case, religious atavism argument underpins an entire research agenda in the work of John Milbank and the subsequent establishment of an expansive and energetic programme of theology under the name of radical orthodoxy.⁷³ Although the richness of radical orthodoxy means that care must be taken lest the religious atavism label have a reductionistic effect, Milbank’s seminal observation that “‘scientific’ social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise’ remains at the programme’s core.⁷⁴ The leading proponents of radical orthodoxy, in a classic formulation of the position, refer to

72. At a further level of subtlety, the deflationary–explanatory dichotomy might reveal distinctions between ‘valences’ or ‘connotations’ of specific instances of religious atavism argument, but that level of granularity is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

73. The radical orthodoxy label was first used in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

74. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 3.

their programme as ‘a contemporary theological project made possible by the self-conscious superficiality of today’s secularism’, expressly positioning this project as an alternative to ‘liberal theology, transcendentalist theology, and even certain styles of neo-orthodoxy’ which ‘seek in the face of this drift [of secularism] to shore up universalist accounts of immanent human value (humanism) [and] defences of supposedly objective reason’.⁷⁵

At the core of Milbank’s original conception – and carried forward in the programme subsequently referred to as radical orthodoxy⁷⁶ – is stylistically complex and sophisticated genealogy that finds an originary moment in medieval debates over the theological implications of philosophical nominalism and realism. Of the various programmes of religious atavism argument considered here, radical orthodoxy stands out for its inherent reversal of a standard claim. Those who use religious atavism argument to claim latent connection to a religious past often do so to suggest the fact of a hidden religious essence as in some sense invalidating the subject in question. Radical orthodoxy, by contrast – especially when considered from John Milbank’s initial formulations in *Theology and Social Theory* – makes the standard claim of hidden connection to the religious past to argue for the *priority* of theology and to delegitimise contemporary society and institutions on grounds of being oblivious to their own antecedents and inheritances.

75. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, ‘Introduction – Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy’, in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=169293>.

76. Milbank et al., ‘Suspending the Material’, 2.

A second example of programmatic religious atavism argument is the hypothesis of an *Axial Age* as a global phenomenon occurring roughly around 500 BCE, an idea which is conventionally recognised as having originated in mature form with the German philosophy Karl Jaspers (1883–1969).⁷⁷ The Axial Age hypothesis emerged from Jaspers’s attempt to establish a universalist paradigm for human civilization in the aftermath of the Second World War, a context in which universalist theories had become unfashionable. Although the Axial Age formulation has been the basis for genealogical work of sophistication and sweeping breadth, Jaspers’s original idea rested on the simple observation of temporal simultaneity between golden ages in different civilizations around the globe. On this view, the Hebrew prophets, the flourishing of Athens, the life of the Buddha, the emergence of Zoroastrianism, and the teaching of Confucius all occurred within a span of time that appears like a discrete event – an ‘axis’ – when viewed against the entirety of known history:

An axis of world history, if such a thing exists, would have to be discovered *empirically*, as a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men. . . . This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be. . . . Its character would have to be, if not empirically cogent and evident, yet so convincing to empirical insight as to give rise to a common frame of historical self-comprehension for all peoples. . . . It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 BC, in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 BC.⁷⁸

Building on Jaspers’s initial formulation, the Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt substantially developed the Axial Age idea. While the historical details implied by the Axial Age

77. Jaspers himself noted that ‘the earliest discussion of the facts of the Axial Period known to me is to be found in the works of [Ernst] Lasaulx and Viktor von Strauss’. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge, 1976), 16.

78. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 8–9.

hypothesis have been contested, the concept has served as an imaginative template – a critical heuristic – in a range of different fields. For instance, at the centre of Charles Taylor’s narrative account of secular modernity’s emergence from the Protestant Reformation is the claim that those processes were governed by an Axial logic of full, uncompromising social reform. In elaborating the details of this reform process, Taylor draws upon Robert Bellah’s use of the Axial paradigm, which develops a speculative hypothesis regarding the transformation of ‘archaic’ religion into ‘axial’ forms.⁷⁹ Taylor links a society-wide process of ‘reform’ to Axial patterns of social ‘disembedding’; reform, as a general process, is a drive to social purification according to a distinction between the elect and the reprobate. For Taylor, this process of reform mirrors the disembedding from traditional modes of social belonging that marked the archaic–Axial transition in Axial Age societies. Along with disembedding is the adoption of cosmic perspectives, which tend to decentre the human.⁸⁰

A third topic which has programmatically produced instances of religious atavism argument is the emergence in the early twentieth century of liberal internationalism as set of doctrines for the management of global affairs. Milan Babík suggests that ‘although originally formulated as an analytically wide theory covering the modern idea of progress in general, secularization theory has been applied only to some of the idea’s expressions: specifically,

79. Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011).

80. It is plausible that the Axial tendency to adapt cosmic perspectives is related to the anti-anthropocentrism that is prominent among theorists of the climatological turn.

to its illiberal and totalitarian varieties.’⁸¹ The viability of contemporary liberal democracies may, in fact, depend upon such societies fostering belief in the inherent ‘naturalness’ of fit between liberalism and democracy – a pairing of institutional arrangements in some sense privileged by nature itself. The hypothesis of a privileged status for liberalism and democracy is related to the Kantian and Fukuyaman thesis that democracies are naturally predisposed to maintaining stable alliances with each other, with the effect that a global order sustained by democracies will tend to enjoy a general peace. The tenets of what is known variously as either Wilsonianism or neo-Wilsonianism – the state policy of encouraging or actively building democratic societies as a strategy by which the United States secures its own interests – has guided American governments since the formulation of American foreign policy following the First World War. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the liberal international system attained an unprecedented global regnancy and new respectability as a theory of geopolitics. Although liberal internationalism has in recent decades been rebranded with the denigrating label of ‘globalism’ by proponents of right-wing populism, and ‘revisionist’ powers have sought to shift the balance of power in their respective regions of the globe, the constituent institutions of the liberal international order remain essentially unaltered.

81. Milan Babík, *Statecraft and Salvation: Wilsonian Liberal Internationalism as Secularized Eschatology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 14.

Liberalism and historical progression

A key factor in the acceptance of religious atavism argument in specific discursive contexts is a normative background in those context for progressivist notions of history. Historical analogies may be made between the general form of religious atavism argument and antecedent ways of addressing similar issues; for instance, early Christians invoked the notion of the ‘virtuous pagan’ to preserve their admiration for pre-Christian exemplars, even postulating the existence of ‘unknowing Christians’. Meanwhile, stadialism has a long history in the modern era.⁸² The Neapolitan jurist and historian Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) is often credited with having put forward the first distinctively modern account of stadial civilizational development. Closer to the present day, the significance of Auguste Comte (1798–1857), for instance, lies principally in his historical hypothesis – *les trois états* – which describes a movement through distinct civilizational stages of the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. With the emergence of historicism in the early nineteenth century, the problem first arose of classifying and explaining variation in human experience as demonstrated in the sundry *genres de vie* of different historical epochs, in turn giving rise to the use of ‘umbrella’ concepts or categories by which to identify distinguishing features of a given era, an important factor in the formation of classical sociology.⁸³

82. The term stadial derives from the ‘stade’ or ‘stadium’ as a unit of measurement, applying the sense to historical time.

83. Peter Ghosh, ‘History and Theory in Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic”’, *Global Intellectual History* 4, no. 2 (2019): 129–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2018.1437327>.

The long-term influence of a purely Comtean sociological positivism may be delineated in the works of canonical figures of classical sociology, such as Marx, Mill, Weber, and Durkheim. Comte's importance lies significantly in his use of historicism and analogy, and his 'religion of humanity' may be seen as an important precursor to the contemporary normativity of religion as an indispensable analogy: a germination point of present-day religious atavism argument. Historical precursors of religious atavism argument nearer to the twenty-first century may be found in the anthropology of the nineteenth and twentieth, and anthropological attempts to theorise a universal model of human civilization. Occidental self-confidence throughout the nineteenth century lent support to claims that the Western form of life was the telos of human societies generally. The carnage and devastation of the First World War turned the Western intellectual mood towards paradigms of civilizational multiplicity. The breadth and speed of global change, with the end of two world empires, undermined certainty and inaugurated an era of cultural pessimism, of which Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* may be taken as a representative example.⁸⁴ The shift of cultural mood in the aftermath of the First World War put universalism on the defensive. The Second World War only deepened the sense of history as governed by contingency, and of Eurocentric premises as a waning force.

Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche in particular have canonically been recognised as representing a shift in Western thought through which it became possible to describe human behaviour in terms wholly separable from first-person accounts of it. Freud is a complex figure

84. Famously, Spengler's book was written in the years leading up to the First World War, and the widespread sense that it had been prophetic contributed to its subsequent popularity.

who has had a complex reception, being derided by many psychologists for pseudoscience and even charlatanism while remaining a figure of enduring importance in disciplines beyond the psychological sciences.⁸⁵ Freud remains a fixed point of reference, one which marks a turning point in Western thought, culture, and society. Contemporary culture wars, for example, may be redescribed as clashes between Freudian and post-Freudian notions of the individual and of human behaviour generally. Freud belongs to the triumvirate that Ricoeur famously referred to as the ‘masters of suspicion’; as such, the trend of dismissing Freud may appear to be intrinsically ironic, insofar as Freud himself has become the subject of suspicion. Although Ricoeur’s initial thesis concerning the masters of suspicion focused on the eponymous figures’ critiques of religion, the act of casting a phenomenon under suspicion has arguably been generalised and absorbed into Western common sense. In an age of conspiracy theories, on the one hand, and various forms of reductive naturalism, on the other, the habit of suspicion is not the property solely of philosophers and cultural critics, but rather a normative intellectual reflex. The significance of a figure such as Freud lies, therefore, not necessarily in the value of his own theories per se, but rather in the extent to which he may be seen as the incarnation of a ‘hinge moment’ in a genealogy of contemporary discursive and critical norms.

The social normativity of historicism throughout the twentieth century, moreover, was shaped by relatively direct experience of social change. The optimism and energy of belle époque Europe – evident as much in material expression as in intellectual and artistic output – starkly contrasts with products of Western culture in the aftermath of the First World War. The

85. Jonathan Lear, *Freud*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

apocalyptic strain in Western philosophy and culture, whose inauguration may be represented above all by the figure of Nietzsche, attained a thematic predominance over the course of the twentieth century. The revisionist geopolitical consequences of the First World War in themselves heralded transformational possibilities. Intellectual and political elites of the interwar Atlantic world were keenly attuned to the reality of historical contingency and the potential malleability of prevailing orders – whether imperial, national, or social. The apocalypticism that prevailed in the lead-up to the Second World War was a cultural mode of nostalgia and heroism – a revision of the Victorian ‘Arnoldian lament’ – which held the modern world as a trade-off between abandoned inheritances (principally theological or metaphysical) and the deliverances of innovation. The apparently natural harmony to be observed in social order appeared naive and untenable in view of what had just been learned of war’s destructive potential. The very end of civilization became freshly conceivable. Sustained order could be redescribed as transmogrified belief in providential order.

A distinct form of pessimism began to colour Western thought after the First World War; the faith in progress that had characterised the belle époque was shattered, and the knock-on effects of political upheaval spurred theoretical innovations. For instance, Freud developed the subsequently influential idea that human beings, considered as a collective, may tend by their natures to behave self-destructively – quite possibly to the point of collective suicide – as the by-product of an inherent human ‘death drive’ (*todestrieb*). Throughout this interwar period, a climate of radicalism found expression in different ways in different national societies. In

the United States, for example, the period was marked by both economic exuberance and an energetic social reform movement that prevailed in its institutionally unlikely campaign for a national ban on alcohol. While the societies most adversely affected by the war – those of Western European – entered into a period marked by pessimism, revisionist powers in the nascent international order, notably Japan and the USSR, saw new global possibilities. The disappearance of empires further stoked the ambitions of international revisionists, in a moment similar to the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, when possibilities in the political realm were newly free of the *ancien régime*.

Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* exemplifies the apocalyptic tendencies of interwar European thought. An intellectual current inflected by the context of global warfare and social disruption, apocalypticism after the First World War spurred the reinvigoration of historicism as a method, while the naivety of antebellum elites had become palpable. The appearance of pessimistic narratives such as Spengler's demonstrates the displacement of belle époque progressionism by historical organicism. The central point of Spengler's project was the inevitability (and the plausible imminence) of civilizational denouement, following in Nietzsche's development of civilizational themes at the end of the nineteenth century. The multiplicity of available interpretations of civilizational direction would expand later in the twentieth century due to a series of real civilizational and technological advances, which counterbalanced the legacy of destruction of the century's first half.



As touched upon above, the traditional split in conceptions of secularization fall along a divide on one side of which is the conceptual and on the other the sociological. Examples of both approaches may be considered as case studies to bring out wider features of their respective fields. Much literature relating an idea of covert religion and climate crisis largely follows Lynn White Jr. in seeing environmental devastation as a legacy of Christianity. White's thesis supposes a substantive link between contemporary and historically anterior habits of thought, with strong patterns persisting over the course of a cultural shift to secular forms:

It has become fashionable today to say that, for better or worse, we live in 'the post-Christian age.' Certainly the forms of our thinking and language have largely ceased to be Christian, but to my eye the substance often remains amazingly akin to that of the past. Our daily habits of action, for example, are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient. It is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from, Judeo-Christian teleology. . . . We continue to live, as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms.⁸⁶

Scholars presenting White's thesis in programmatic terms have understood it as having three components. 'First, [White] argues that ideological and cultural factors, especially religion, are the root causes of the 'ecologic crisis' facing contemporary humans. Second, he identifies Western Christianity as particularly influential in creating environmentally destructive attitudes.'⁸⁷ As a historian, White's exposition of the problem of ecological crisis was genealogical,

86. Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–07, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.

87. Todd LeVasseur, and Anna Peterson, 'Introduction', in *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The 'Lynn White Thesis' at Fifty*, ed. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson (London: Routledge, 2017), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315629018>.

pinpointing Western and specifically medieval Christianity as the source of a mentality that fosters human domination of the natural world. 'White contrasts the anthropocentrism and dualism of Western Christianity not only to pre-Christian paganism in Europe but also to non-Western traditions, which do not devalue the human world as thoroughly.'⁸⁸ Part of White's programme is an insistence that, while ecological devastation has religious roots, ecological problems must likewise be solved through religious motivations. 'The power of religion to motivate ecological concern and activism . . . comes to the fore in [White's] later work, giving fuel to interpreters who believe his original essay was not as much a condemnation of Christianity as it was a call to uncover and strengthen the tradition's environmental promise.'⁸⁹

White was writing at a point in time that was arguably the zenith of the traditional secularization thesis, providing the context for his reference to 'the post-Christian age'. By contrast, the regnant paradigm for the study of religion in the era of climate crisis is postsecularity. Within the sociology of religion, Jonathan Benthall has done the most comprehensive study of forms that he refers to as 'parareligion'.⁹⁰ In this he follows the work of Robert Wuthnow, who noted the fluidity of religion in the United States, in particular in the second half of the twentieth century. 'Any study of American religion has to take account, in particular, of the synthesizing force of Robert Wuthnow's publications.'⁹¹ One of the core claims of Benthall's book is tucked away in an otherwise unexceptional paragraph: 'By and large, it appears that

88. LeVasseur and Peterson, 'Introduction', 3.

89. LeVasseur and Peterson, 'Introduction', 6.

90. Jonathan Benthall, *Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age Is Haunted by Faith* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 11.

91. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 6.

the religious field was pushed to the background towards the end of the twentieth century, but has now renewed some of its strength. Much is written about the “return of the sacred” or the “spiritual”, but we argue here that the religious field has never gone away, but has merely undergone transformations, swelling up in unexpected places and forms.’⁹² Benthall takes a functionalist view of religion, explaining that ‘the starting-point of this book is that a “religious inclination” is essential for the functioning of any society.’⁹³ The postulating of religious atavism argument differs from Benthall’s study insofar as Benthall is concerned with identifying and categorising forms of parareligion. Benthall develops ‘[nineteen] criteria for the polythetic category “religion”, together with some comments intended to illustrate sketchily both the elusiveness of some of them, and also the wide variety of phenomena that must be considered if we are to grasp the issue comparatively.’⁹⁴ In commenting on his criterion of ‘appeal to an ideal world’, Benthall notes that ‘as has often been pointed out, [the] appeal to an ideal world has morphed into many political utopias. John Gray has founded his deeply pessimistic philosophy on the proposition that not only the obviously religioid political ideologies such as communism and nazism . . . but also free market economics, for instance, or the Bush–Blair mission to spread democracy and good conduct through the “war on terror”, are kinds of religion – in that they depend on utopian thinking rather than realism.’⁹⁵ Benthall’s criterion of ‘ontology, or an explanation of human beings’ place in nature’ is the closest to

92. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 65.

93. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 10.

94. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 22.

95. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 24–25.

a general category for understanding how ecological concern may be traced to conceptions of order through some form of religious atavism argument. Remarking on some particular instances that Benthall sees as fulfilling this criterion, he writes that

philosophies can become religions when they are socially organized, but a philosophy of agnosticism or one of nihilism is unlikely to underwrite a religion. The most we can say is that some extremely articulate exponents of an ultra-sceptical negation, such as the dramatist Samuel Beckett or the painter Francis Bacon, can become cult figures – in the religioid fields of literature and visual art respectively. . . .

Atheism, the active rejection of all gods, can exhibit some of the characteristics of a religion if it becomes a collective enterprise – as in the heyday of the Soviet revolution, when it was allied to the destruction of old social hierarchies, and churches and mosques were converted into ‘museums of atheism’.⁹⁶

Another of Benthall’s criteria that serves to make religious sense, heuristically, of the link between climate crisis and conceptions of order is ‘solace in the face of death and suffering, and eschatology’.⁹⁷ Benthall was writing at least a decade before the emergence in Western societies of ‘woke politics’, which have become the frequent target of religious atavism argument from all sorts of directions, from John McWhorter to Tara Isabella Burton to Michael Rosen.⁹⁸ Benthall’s model for defining parareligions depends on his development of the nineteen criteria and their use in what he refers to as a ‘cornucopia model’, whereby ‘weak’, ‘medium’, and ‘strong’ tiers of a ‘religious field’ are identified by their level of saturation with his criteria. ‘Clearly the world religions belong at the top, each satisfying most of the criteria.’⁹⁹ Benthall

96. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 30–31.

97. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 40–42.

98. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 50–51.

99. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 62.

places ‘ecologism’ in the medium tier of the religious field.¹⁰⁰ Benthall eschews close attention to ‘political parareligions’

for the simple reason that the point is widely recognized already thanks to the insights of writers as diverse as Carl Schmitt . . . Bertrand Russell, Richard Crossman, T.S. Eliot and Raymond Aron. The dangers of overarching political ideologies with parareligious aspects are not confined to the grandiose aberrations of the twentieth century, but, as argued by John Gray and others, extend to the advocates of universal liberal democracy.¹⁰¹

Benthall also devotes space to the subjects of communism and Nazism as parareligions,¹⁰² speaking of gradations of religion in a sense analogous to Abrahamic ideas of heresy: ‘These ideologies [sc. National Socialism or Communism] were merely caricatures of religion, or its “illegitimate brothers”. For Voegelin, nazism was a “latterday immanentist heresy”.’¹⁰³ In a section of his book entitled ‘The Environmental Movement Today; “Churches and Sects”’, Benthall outlines some interpretations of groups within the penumbra of environmentalism, including ‘Radical Environmentalism’, under which he places ‘The Gaia Hypothesis’, ‘Neo-Paganism’, ‘Green Anarchism’, ‘Direct Action Groups’, and ‘The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement’.¹⁰⁴ Benthall also notes that ‘much has been written about the sacred-profane distinction, but the concept of the “sacred” is ambiguous.’¹⁰⁵

A number of studies similar to Deal and O’Grady’s reach conclusions similar to theirs, which posits that the particular form of environmentalism that they consider – identified as ‘environmental justice activism’ – may be seen through ‘framing [that] permits environmental

100. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 63.

101. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 65.

102. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 65–68, 68–72.

103. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 70.

104. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 135–38.

105. Benthall, *Returning to Religion*, 51.

activists and the researchers studying them to recognize these commitments as expressions of a fully-fledged twentyfirst century earth-based religion.¹⁰⁶ Many approaches to this problem may potentially be adopted and each comes with its own methodological advantages and potential issues. Achieving a sufficient level of scholarly precision, for example, requires sui generis categorial distinctions, as where Deal and O’Grady conclude that ‘ENVJ [environmental justice] activism is a bricolage nature religion that blends a scientific-spiritual cosmology of transcendence grounded within an immanent frame.’¹⁰⁷ As described above, implicit religion is a paradigm in the sociology of religion that focuses on how religion shows up in everyday life, and its identifying criteria give priority to functionalist definitions of religion. Similar to implicit religion is the term ‘quasi religion’; Bron Taylor reports that ‘Benthall’s preference for *parareligion* over *implicit* or *quasi religion* is for stylistic reasons (personal communication, June 2008), as it is for me as well.’¹⁰⁸ Concepts such as implicit religion, quasi religion, non-religion, and secular religion belong to a long process in the study of religion of realising the inadequacies of stark categories for making sense of people’s everyday experiences. Ninian Smart, for instance, describes his phenomenological approach to comparative religion as incorporating the study of worldviews alongside religions, in a spirit similar to Edward Bailey’s attempt to capture religious experiences that might ordinarily go unobserved by scholars:

I believe that there are sufficient affinities between religious and secular worldviews (such as applied Marxism and nationalisms) to include the secular in the scope of

106. Deal and O’Grady, ‘Environmental Justice’, 330.

107. Deal and O’Grady, ‘Environmental Justice’, 329.

108. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 278.

this work. . . . To split a category can be dangerous if taken too far. Because religion is separated from secular worldviews, for instance, it is assumed that East Germany was a secular state; in fact Marxism functioned in that country much as a state religion, as Lutheranism once had.¹⁰⁹

For Evan Berry, the genealogical approach to environmentalism as ‘implicit religion’ means rejecting any methodology of family resemblances: ‘American environmentalism is related to religion, not out of serendipitous resemblance but by way of historically demonstrable genealogical affinity with Christian theological tradition.’¹¹⁰

In intellectual history, secularization refers to a transformation of ideas, concepts, or paradigms; in the social sciences, in contrast, secularization tends to refer to transformations in institutional arrangements or patterns of belief. The mapping that Charles Taylor presents in the opening passages of *A Secular Age* provides a useful way of thinking these distinctions and the interrelations between them. Taylor presents a series of three ‘senses’ of the secular, and these move from one to the next according to a gradation of materiality, from ‘institutions’ to ‘common beliefs and practices’ to ‘conditions of belief’. Common beliefs and practices are the mediating step between sociological and conceptual understandings of secularization, insofar as practices and beliefs have both a social component and an individual component. One might in principle take a variety of approaches in getting at ‘conditions of belief’; Taylor’s own method is through intellectual history. In following this method he invokes ‘the implicit, largely unfocussed background of this experience and search, its “pre-ontology”, to use a

109. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), 2.

110. Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520961142>.

Heideggerian term.¹¹¹ Taylor's method thus bridges a gap between approaches that might be described through the traditional labels of materialist and idealist.¹¹² The awareness of a space for such 'spanning' approaches has been recognised by scholars innovating in the discursive-practices approaches in the study of religion.¹¹³

Conclusion

This chapter has described a hermeneutical concept of religious atavism, which is a method for performing critical-historicist redescription through discursive interpretation. Deflationary forms of religious atavism argumentation obtain their force in part by rendering their subjects prone to contemporary forms of *Religionskritik*. The intentionally capacious category of religious atavism argument allows a range of different instances to be thought together in the context of different ways of conceptualising secularization. Drawing on conceptual and methodological resources from the discursive study of religion, religious atavism argument is a methodological template by which to adapt historicist accounts of religious inheritance, obviating the need for strong definitions of religion per se.

111. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 3, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3300068>.

112. Taylor addresses the potential objection that he is merely reiterating a form of idealism by describing his method as an 'interweaving of the two levels' of the material and the conceptual. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 212–18.

113. George Ioannides, 'The Matter of Meaning and the Meaning of Matter: Explorations for the Material and Discursive Study of Religion', in *Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 51–73.

THREE

Crisis and Modern Moral Order (Taylor)

Charles Taylor's philosophical genealogy of secular modernity, as developed principally in *A Secular Age*,¹ is a specific historical account by which climate crisis may be seen to reflect a tension at the core of Western liberal societies. Taylor hypothesises that an ambivalence – reflecting in large part an interaction between Enlightenment and Christian ideals – towards religion and teleological conceptions of order expresses itself as spiritual malaise throughout Western societies. To understand how climate crisis may be redescribed as an expression of Taylor's hypothesised ambivalence, it is important to see how the three elements of philosophical genealogy, social imaginary, and epistemological realism come together in Taylor's method. This chapter begins with an exposition of social imaginary, as Taylor interprets it, and of how Taylor's realist epistemology underpins his style of doing philosophy through historical narrative (that is, genealogy). Taylor's epistemological position of 'robust realism', developed jointly with Hubert Dreyfus, underpins the 'contact theory' by which Taylor refers to social imaginary as an abstract space of shared values whose contents are in principle immediately accessible to all members of a given society.

Crucially for a religious atavism reading of climate crisis, Taylor's genealogy of Western modernity develops the idea that modern liberal societies are governed by a *modern moral order*, which depends for its force and legitimacy on certain 'ontic' sources. Taylor describes

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

the modern moral order through a historical schema of Durkheimian social stages, along the historical trajectory of which, a society's ontic sources of normative meaning – whose origins can be shown genealogically to lie in religious transcendence – become increasingly rarefied and abstract but nevertheless retain their essential function. The next part of the discussion in this chapter relates Taylor's account to moral imperatives of the climatological turn, with reference to Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism. Beck's theory elucidates a tension in Enlightenment rationality between teleology and anti-teleology. On this view, climate crisis resolves a tension of senseless human flourishing, which Taylor sees as rooted in a monological principle of *mutual benefit* that gives rise, owing to its thinness, to a modern sense of malaise.

In identifying Taylor's work as a methodological resource for interpreting climate crisis, it is important to note how Taylor's practice of genealogy is a distinctive form of philosophical hermeneutics. What characterises Taylor's work above all is an eclectic synthesis of methods, 'interlacing historical, ontological, phenomenological, hermeneutical, theistic, and ethical strands.'² The hermeneutics in Taylor's work reflects a central, unifying preoccupation of his: the problem of articulating abstract aspects of human experience such that they might be made legitimate subjects of philosophical discussion. Interpreters sympathetic to Taylor characterise his concern with dimensions of human experience that are profound but unclear as opposing a powerful trend in the mainstream of academic philosophy 'to remove from the

2. Maeve Cooke, 'Immanent Critique of the Immanent Frame: The Critical Potential of *A Secular Age*', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 29, no. 5 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2021.2017716>.

purview of philosophical discourse . . . ways of considering the human that invoke notions that are not easily quantifiable or observable.’³ Taylor’s resistance to the constricted view of philosophy is carried out largely through a hypothesis of the social imaginary as a space of *unarticulated*, shared understandings against which *explicit* norms and practices make sense. Taylor’s use of social imaginary is, in turn, underpinned by an anti-mediational epistemology – called robust realism – that understands knowledge in terms of direct contact with the world.

At the core of Taylor’s epistemology is a strong view of articulation and method. Taylor thinks that reductive approaches to the human sciences tend to occlude aspects of existence that resist being verbally expressed, a difficulty that means such aspects are often dealt with by being simply ignored. In his epistemology, Taylor – like Richard Rorty – presents Descartes as the avatar of a specific set of methodological presuppositions, chief among which is the existence of an ‘order of reasons’ that governs domains of knowledge:

These are the assumptions Descartes gave articulation to; central is the view that we can somehow come to grips with the problem of knowledge, and then later proceed to determine what we can legitimately say about other things: about God, or the world, or human life. . . .

I believe this to be a terrible and fateful illusion. It assumes wrongly that we can get to the bottom of what knowledge is, without drawing on our never-fully-articulable understanding of human life and experience.⁴

Taylor’s epistemological realism supposes that the Cartesian propaedeutic is unnecessary because the domain of the ‘never-fully-articulable’ can be accessed through hermeneutics

3. Daniel M. Weinstock, Jacob T. Levy, and Jocelyn Maclure, ‘Introduction: Charles Taylor: A Biographical Sketch’, in *Interpreting Modernity: Essays on the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Daniel M. Weinstock, Jacob T. Levy, and Jocelyn Maclure (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 6, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/reader.action?docID=6348483>.

4. Charles Taylor, preface to *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), vii–viii.

or phenomenology. The fullest expression of Taylor's realism appears in *Retrieving Realism*,⁵ which is co-authored with Hubert Dreyfus. The programme of robust realism developed by Taylor and Dreyfus has at its core a 'contact theory' of knowledge that is explicitly anti-mediationalist (that is, anti-Cartesian):

Where a mediation theory seeks knowledge as arising through some mediational element, so that we have contact with the real in knowledge only through some intermediary, depiction, or category, contact theories give an account of knowledge as our attaining unmediated contact with the reality known.⁶

Taylor and Dreyfus refer to a more fully articulated form of their programme as 'pluralist robust realism', which is meant expressly to exclude reductionist and deflationary species of realism:

Pluralist robust realism can avoid *reductive realism*, which holds that science explains all modes of being, and *scientific realism*, which holds that there is only one way the universe is carved up into kinds so that every user of such terms must be referring to what our natural-kind terms refer to, while yet rejecting *deflationary realism's* claim that we cannot make sense of true statements in science corresponding to the way things are in themselves.⁷

Taylor's and Dreyfus's position is developed substantially through discussion of Richard Rorty, whose work is a consistent point of reference throughout *Retrieving Realism*. Dreyfus and Taylor distinguish their own position on mediationalism from Rorty's using a dichotomy of minimalism versus maximalism:

For Rorty we escape from 'the collapsed circus tent of epistemology – those acres of canvass under which many of our colleagues still thrash aimlessly about' – mainly by getting rid of certain traditional distinctions and questions, like, for instance, the scheme/content way of talking, or the issue of correspondence with reality; while we think that these questions and distinctions have to be recast. Rorty is a minimalist: he thinks we had best just forget about the whole range of issues that concern how our

5. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

6. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 17.

7. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 160.

thought relates to reality, the relation of Mind and World, if we can relapse again into those great uppercase terms about which Rorty likes to wax ironic. We are maximalists: we think that our colleagues must retain the issues but badly need to recast their distorted understanding of these matters, inherited from the epistemological tradition.⁸

The maximalism of Taylor's and Dreyfus's programme means that it can support purposes and commitments beyond theories of knowledge. Although Taylor and Dreyfus do not draw the connection explicitly, their contact theory may be read as underlying Taylor's genealogical use of social imaginary, which is especially apparent, for instance, when they observe that 'the body is, in particular, the site of social meanings, because of what we can call intercorporeality, the ways in which our bodies are attuned to each other from the very beginning of human life.'⁹ Epistemology and social imaginary come together in Taylor's commitment to a 'fusion of horizons' methodology inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). 'There is here another kind of contact, analogous to the one we have been pointing to in our everyday coping with our world.'¹⁰ Taylor and Dreyfus describe the outcome of this natural human facility in coping:

The 'contact' in one case consists of actual dealings with the world, and enables us to get behind our representations (formulated beliefs); in the other case, it consists of a capacity to respond, resonate with, make sense of human meanings; and it enables us to get beyond and beneath, not so much representations – though they are involved here – but a kind of imprinting, whereby a certain range of meanings have become for us the human meanings.¹¹

Insofar as the contact theory postulates a natural human capacity to obtain knowledge of the world directly through affordances in proximate environments of all kinds, it underpins the use of social imaginary as a spatial hermeneutics by which to present ordinarily unarticulated

8. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 41.

9. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 118.

10. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 127.

11. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 128.

social norms. In Taylor's work, norms of secularity and values at the core of Western liberalism come to articulation through a robust and detailed genealogy of secular modernity that Taylor refers to as a 'reform master narrative'.¹² The consequences for social thought of Taylor's and Dreyfus's epistemological programme is an opposition to any theory of worldviews that emphasises inherent non-communicability or 'incommensurability', which Richard Bernstein describes in interpreting Taylor's social epistemology as 'engaged fallibilistic pluralism':

[Taylor] is affirming that there are real incommensurabilities in our cultures, religions, politics, and morals, but he does *not* think that they are rigid epistemological and metaphysical barriers. These incommensurabilities present us with *practical* challenges that can be difficult and painful to confront. Nevertheless, we can achieve a more subtle and sensitive understanding of what is radically different from ourselves and, at the same time, gain a deeper understanding of ourselves.¹³

Another idea of Taylor's that elucidates his distinctive style of social philosophy is a bipartite view of knowledge as comprising both 'human' sciences and 'natural' sciences.¹⁴ With the view of different sciences as qualitatively distinct, Taylor means that while methods of objectivity and distance are suitable for use in the natural sciences, there is an altogether different class of investigation whose questions and concerns must be orientated towards terms from the enquirer's own self-understanding.¹⁵ On Taylor's view of the human sciences, many problems worthy of discussion require – as a matter of methodology – interpretive judgment

12. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774.

13. Richard J. Bernstein, 'Taylor's Engaged Pluralism', in *Interpreting Modernity*, 50.

14. See in particular Charles Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–57.

15. This point concerning the qualitative difference between different methods of enquiry is one on which Taylor and Rorty were famously of different minds. Tracy Llanera, 'Coming to Grips with Realism', *Critical Horizons* 18, no. 3 (2017): 285, 287n8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2017.1293901>.

informed by irreducible values. Where the matter at hand exists in a space of shared human values, it can only be decided by applying a principle of the ‘best account’:

How can we ever know that humans can be explained by any scientific theory *until* we actually explain how they live their lives in its terms?

This establishes what it means to ‘make sense’ of our lives. . . . The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense is trumps. Let me call this the BA [best account] principle.¹⁶

The philosophical genealogy that Taylor performs in *A Secular Age* may be understood as an application of *best account* hermeneutics, in the sense described above, and the programmatic notion of the modern moral order is at the core of that genealogy.

The details of the modern moral order are worked out by Taylor across two major works, *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, and continuity between these books appears in some of Taylor’s reflections on his own work, as where he refers to his early thinking on the constitution of modern self-understanding: ‘these explorations of our public culture are like additional chapters to my *Sources of the Self*’.¹⁷ Moreover, a version of the modern moral order appears in précis in Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries*,¹⁸ a comparatively minor work that sets the stage for the comprehensive view taken in *A Secular Age*. Through his hermeneutics in *A Secular Age*, Taylor’s describes the modern moral order in a synthesis of history, sociology

16. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 58.

17. Taylor, preface to *Philosophical Arguments*, xi.

18. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 3–22.

(with reference in particular to Durkheim), and an abstract idea of social connection that Taylor refers to as ‘social imaginary’. Taylor describes his method as revealing the contents of an ‘unarticulated background’ of social understanding by the making of transcendental deductions from prevailing norms and practices of liberal societies. In invoking the idea of unarticulated backgrounds, Taylor acknowledges the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), among others:

All beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated. This is what philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Polanyi, have called the ‘background’. As Wittgenstein points out, my research into rock formations takes as granted that the world didn’t start five minutes ago, complete with all the fossils and striations, but it would never occur to me to formulate and acknowledge this, until some crazed philosophers, obsessively riding their epistemological hobby-horses, put the proposition to me.¹⁹

With reference to his conception of social imaginary, Taylor notes the influence of Benedict Anderson (1936–2015) and Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997).²⁰ Taylor’s use of social imaginary may be understood as a form of phenomenology, a description of Taylor’s method that he himself partly endorses in *Sources of the Self*:

The naturalist might protest: Why do I have to accept what emerges from this phenomenological account of identity? For so he might want to describe it, and he wouldn’t be entirely wrong. The answer is that this is not only a phenomenological account but an exploration of the limits of the conceivable in human life, an account of its ‘transcendental conditions’.²¹

19. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

20. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

21. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 32.

Different areas of Taylor's broad oeuvre thus come together in the concept of social imaginary, as is apparent in Taylor's description of the trajectory along which he developed the concept:

In a certain sense all the work I did in the 1960s and 1970s was because I was in a political science department, and because the challenges of reductivism there came from modernization theory, which was applied across all societies as though they faced exactly the same set of stages. . . .

The issue I kept raising with the comparative politics of that kind, was that they're ignoring these tremendous differences in culture. . . . And so what I was really looking for through all that was some kind of language to talk about what we sometimes refer to as political culture or what Montesquieu referred to as 'les moeurs' and Tocqueville following him, and Hegel referred to as *der objektiver Geist* or Objective Spirit. And in a certain sense the idea, that I really stole from Castoriadis with a little bit of changes, of [the] 'social imaginary', was an attempt to do that, particularly when it comes to comparing democracies.²²

Although far less of *A Secular Age* as compared with *Sources of the Self* is concerned with issues of methodology, both works feature rich genealogical accounts that may be classed as instances of *entstehungsgeschichte*. In both of these elaborate accounts of Western modernity, social norms of contemporary liberal democracies are presented in terms of counter-intuitive distinctions, which are then substantiated by being traced back to their origins in distant historical milieux. In this method, the aspects of contemporary self-understanding that are the explicanda of Taylor's account are taken to be intuitively familiar features of contemporary social life, in line with Taylor's view of enquiry in the human sciences as being reliant upon some hermeneutics of self-understanding. In Taylor's method, initially intuitive features of

22. Charles Taylor, 'Conclusion: A Conversation between Charles Taylor, Jacob T. Levy, Daniel M. Weinstock, and Jocelyn Maclure', in *Interpreting Modernity*, 266.

social life are historicised by being shown – through a genealogical account – to be outcomes of contingent historical processes.²³

The focus of *Sources of the Self* is the process by which the liberal West came to understand human beings as entities possessing ‘inner depths’ and the capacity for a type of experience distinguishable as ‘subjective’ – on the basis of which individual worldviews might be distinguished and continual transformation of both the individual and the collectivity might be effected. Taylor’s account of subjective experience, then, dovetails with an account of social change as occurring on a model of metaphors in natural language. *Sources of the Self* describes the episodes of its genealogical account in the Romantic terms of continually deepening ‘subtler languages’, a process in which human beings gain access to ever deeper levels of reality through the development of ever richer language. ‘Subtler languages which have taken this “absolute” turn, unhooked themselves from intentional objects (music), or the assertoric (poetry), or the object represented (painting), are moving in a new field. The ontic commitments are very unclear.’²⁴ In this way, the formulation of new language opens new avenues in phenomenological enquiry.

Taylor’s views on linguistic and conceptual evolution are developed further forward in a much later book of his, *The Language Animal*, which takes up the problem of how language first emerged and how it generally evolves. A central component of Taylor’s argument in *The*

23. In this sense, Taylor’s method is *historicist*, insofar as historicism means that objects of enquiry attain depth through iteratively produced chronicles of their development. Taylor’s is a form of historicism that instrumentalises past epochs as models that function as analogies to contemporary cultural figures or phenomena.

24. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 356.

Language Animal is the postulation of a ‘ladder’ along which possibilities in language ascend; what begins as faint and indescribable intimation eventually reaches an established place in the lexicon.²⁵ *The Language Animal* secondarily defends a ‘Cratylist’ conception of language,²⁶ according to which a word’s shape and form are not arbitrary but rather bear the direct impress of the word’s meaning. On the Cratylist view, features of language that might ordinarily be viewed as extraneous or accidental are in fact essential to its rightly functioning. Taylor’s hypothesis that expressive capabilities are by their nature subject to continual refinement is influenced by German Romanticism and, as noted, expressed by the phrase *subtler languages*, which Taylor first develops in *Sources of the Self*.²⁷ The subtler languages concept underwrites a theory of language development that sees language per se as interacting with the non-human environment. ‘The language needed to interpret the order of nature is not one we read off a publicly available gamut of correspondences; it has to take shape out of the resonances of the world within us. It is a “subtler language”.’²⁸ In effect, Taylor’s philosophical genealogy is an act of developing subtler languages in this sense.

Indeed, understanding how Taylor uses social imaginary in general is aided by discussion of specific terms in the genealogy that he presents in *A Secular Age*, which is specifically con-

25. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

26. After Cratylus, the Platonic interlocutor in whose eponymous dialogue the idea is famously propounded.

27. The subtler languages phrase appears in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘The Revolt of Islam’ and was adopted by the twentieth-century literary critic Earl Wasserman as a synecdoche for the constitution in dramatic poetry of truths beyond ‘publicly acknowledged conceptions of order’. Earl R. Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), 12.

28. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 302.

cerned with contemporary liberal secularism and expressly intended to counter what Taylor sees as a predominant *subtraction story* explanation of modern secularity. Taylor's notion of 'subtraction' in this sense invokes the idea that religion is a categorically superfluous part of human life – or even one that hinders essential aspects of human nature. On such essentially privative subtraction story accounts, conditions of secular, Western democracies can be explained as emerging naturally once religious and theological institutions and practices have fallen away. The account that Taylor presents as an alternative to subtraction stories has two parts, with one half making sense of the modern social imaginary and its relation to an Axial Age inheritance from a *presentist* viewpoint, and the second half presenting the emergence of the modern moral order as a historical account of secularity's meaning *over time*. Taylor's use of the Axial Age relates as well to his robust realism, insofar as that realism is an intervention that defends possibilities of convergence:

If we look at history in a longer perspective, we can perhaps descry a certain convergence. For example, what have been called the 'Axial' revolutions brought about analogous changes in different world civilizations, so that we can see some affinities between philosophy in the age of Plato and Aristotle, on one side, the teaching of the Hebrew prophets in ancient Israel, the new thinking we associate with the name of Confucius in China, the new teaching of the Upanishadic thinkers, as well as those of the Buddha and other reformers in ancient India. These great changes seem to exhibit common features: a new universalism, a critical stance to previous religious life, the introduction of higher notions of the good, and a focus on individual religious and moral development.²⁹

As noted above, Taylor's manner of presenting the genealogical account in *A Secular Age* depends on his own interpretation of social imaginary, a concept and scholarly apparatus that has been used by different thinkers and scholars for different purposes that may, therefore, be

29. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 166.

found in different formulations and contexts.³⁰ Taylor's own interpretation of social imaginary is coloured chiefly by two features: an emphasis on the dynamic relationship between individual and communal forms of self-understanding, and a historicist methodology by which to identify and analyse the contents of a given imaginary. Crucially, Taylor understands social imaginary as standing in the place of any traditional social theory. 'Unlike theories, imaginaries are shared by large groups of people and are articulated in images, stories, and legends, not expressed in theoretical terms.'³¹ In being based upon the pre-theoretical, pre-critical social imaginary, Taylor's social thought reflects his direct contact epistemology. Yet, although Taylor's social imaginary stands in place of theory as a matter of methodology, the social imaginary itself – in its *content* – does contain specific theories:

It very often happens that what start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of élites perhaps, and then of the whole society. This is what has happened, *grosso modo*, to the theories of Grotius and Locke, although the transformations have been many along the way, and the ultimate forms are rather varied.³²

Taylor's use of social imaginary to explore the dynamics of self-understanding between individual persons and society is described by Kathleen Lennon in her exhaustive taxonomy of 'the imaginary' as a concept that is 'pervasive within contemporary writing concerning the self, the body and social groupings';³³ Lennon refers to Taylor's conception of the imaginary

30. The standard guide to social imaginary, covering its many forms and uses, is Kathleen Lennon, *Imagination and the Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2015).

31. Guido M. Vanheeswijck, 'The Philosophical Genealogy of Taylor's Social Imaginaries: A Complex History of Ideas and Predecessors', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78, no. 3 (2017): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2017.0026>.

32. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

33. Lennon, *Imagination*, 1.

as ‘*constitutive of social groupings*. . . . Society, on this account, does not simply consist of inter-subjective material encounters and thing-like structures but also of patterns of meaning and significations which structure experience and condition such encounters and structures.’³⁴ That Taylor’s approach to the imaginary is idiosyncratic is indicated in Lennon’s qualification of the idea that the imaginary as a method can reveal the contents of social consensus. ‘It is . . . a contested question as to how much communality of imaginary signification can be assumed within social groups, and the question of differing imaginaries turns out to be a central one.’³⁵

A second characteristic of Taylor’s use of social imaginary – its inherent historicism – appears in particular in his reference to the ‘*modern social imaginary*’ of contemporary liberal democracies, where the qualifier *modern* gestures towards a methodology by which a given imaginary – in its conceptual content – is unpacked by delineating a progression of different imaginaries across preceding epochs. Taylor’s method is thus historicist because it entails demonstrating the historicity and conditionality of the norms and practices in question.³⁶ In its historicism, therefore, Taylor’s cultural approach to history draws upon presuppositions of an assumed audience’s own cultural milieu.³⁷ Taylor’s account presents a picture of the

34. Lennon, *Imagination*, 74.

35. Lennon, *Imagination*, 74.

36. Despite Taylor’s generally irenic style as a theorist and interlocutor, the historicism of his methodology gives his genealogical account in *A Secular Age* a slight valance of deflation, insofar as it effects a historicist redescription by which features of a lifeworld are revealed not to be universal. The historicism of Taylor’s thought thus has an effect similar to Richard Rorty’s rejection of final vocabularies through ‘liberal irony’.

37. Charles Taylor, ‘Two Theories of Modernity’, *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 153–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-11-1-153>.

Western past by which it is both recognisably related to the present but also alien enough to appear another culture or civilization.³⁸ On the picture that Taylor presents, antecedents ideas and practices from theological stages of Western civilization shape contemporary Western self-understanding, but the relationship is to be understood as one of iteration and inheritance rather than of unbroken essence or continuity. The standard of evidence that Taylor relies on to build up his genealogy is the best account principle that, as discussed above, he develops in *Sources of the Self*.³⁹

In Taylor's account, the modern social imaginary of liberal democracies has three main features: the economy, the public sphere, and the direct access society. Versions of this tripartite scheme of modernity may be found, in various stages of development, throughout Taylor's corpus; an early iteration, for instance, appears in the preface to Taylor's *Philosophical Arguments*:

The repertory of means available to understand how we relate to others in society has altered in a fundamental way. We see ourselves linked, for instance, in an 'economy,' global or national, which is at least notionally distinct from the ties that bind us into nation-states. We see ourselves participating in public spheres, exchanging and (sometimes) reaching consensus with people we have never met and will most likely never meet. We think there is something called 'society' distinct from and sometimes in opposition to the state. . . . But the most powerful mode of solidarity that people in our age have felt is independent of the state; it is that of the 'nation,' an imagined community which is peculiarly modern.⁴⁰

38. Taylor, 'Two Theories', 153.

39. Although not primarily an academic historian, much of Taylor's genealogical account is built from works of academic history. The aims of a genealogist in the mould of Taylor are different from those of the academic historian, but the products of this genealogical method still need to be in harmony, in their style and aims, with treatments of the same topics by academic historians.

40. Taylor, preface to *Philosophical Arguments*, x.

In describing these phenomena as facets of the modern social imaginary of contemporary Western democracies, Taylor is asserting that members of such societies reflexively take them as real features of the world, which are not constructed explicitly but rather are grasped intuitively and accepted as *natural* features of the world. The norms and practices of the social imaginary, therefore, do not necessarily show up as such to those who partake of them but rather make intuitive sense against an unarticulated background of shared understanding. As mentioned above, the notion of background in this sense is chiefly a phenomenological idea with a complex line of sources in Continental thinkers of the twentieth century:

In the wake of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Taylor urges us to see that our status as beings-in-the-world is both social and practical, and that the background we are dependent on consists of evaluations and social norms, most of which remain implicit and are only seldom formulated as explicit beliefs. . . . The same notion of background reappears in Wittgenstein's argumentation against the possibility of private language; it is also seen in his remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* that human meaning is always constructed against the background of a form of life.⁴¹

For Taylor the social imaginary is thus a construct for referring to the specific background of Western liberal democracies. As it relies upon the making of transcendental deductions from contemporary norms and practices, the social imaginary for Taylor is also a method to be identified with Kant:

'Transcendental argument' is a certain mode of argument which comes down to us from Kant, of which the first and paradigm instances are to be found in the Transcendental Analytic, but which has been tried in other forms by contemporaries.

The arguments I want to call 'transcendental' start from some feature of our experience which they claim to be indubitable and beyond cavil. They then move to a stronger conclusion, one concerning the nature of the subject or his position in the

41. Vanheeswijck, 'Taylor's Social Imaginaries', 481.

world. They make this move by a regressive argument, to the effect that this stronger conclusion must be so if the indubitable fact about experience is to be possible.⁴²

Where Taylor departs from Kant, however, is in the contingent, historical, and situated nature of the realities that can be known through observation of the social imaginary. ‘Whereas Kant’s transcendental schemes are universal and mainly tailored to the use of concepts in positive sciences, Taylor’s social imaginaries are historical and for the most part applied to our understanding of concepts in the humanities.’⁴³

The social imaginary, then, is the starting point for Taylor’s explication of an unarticulated background: contemporary norms and practices are taken to be the initial ‘features’ of experience that are ‘indubitable’ and ‘beyond cavil’. Taylor’s development of the modern social imaginary is meant to capture the basic points of agreement in a given society, and his specific account of the modern social imaginary hypothesises the nature and function of a liberal-democratic consensus in the West. That Taylor’s aim is to capture a consensus view appears in his description of the purposes and orientation of *A Secular Age*:

What I tried to do in the book . . . is to lay out a picture of the scene in which we are all involved, a scene that people could agree on even if they are coming from different positions. . . . I think everyone who is really open and honest will acknowledge that this is our scene, or our common situation, and that it has these three features that I outline in my book; great variety, great movement, and a great potential to be deeply shaken by other positions.⁴⁴

42. Charles Taylor, ‘The Validity of Transcendental Arguments’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 79, no. 1 (1978–79): 151.

43. Vanheeswijck, ‘Taylor’s Social Imaginaries’, 475.

44. Quoted in the editor’s introduction to *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4n3.

Once Taylor has identified the core features of the modern social imaginary – the economy, the direct-access society, and the public sphere – their present-day nature and function may be explicated through genealogical description of their origins and developments.⁴⁵



Taylor's account of the modern social imaginary is substantially a history of ideas that focuses on figures in a traditional canon of Western philosophy.⁴⁶ Taylor refers to thinkers such as John Locke (1632–1704) or Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), for instance, on the hypothesis that the social imaginary develops through a process of cultural inheritance from the few to the many. 'My basic hypothesis is that central to Western modernity is a new conception of the moral order of society. This was at first just an idea in the minds of some influential thinkers, but it later came to shape the social imaginary of large strata, and then eventually whole societies.'⁴⁷ On Taylor's conception of a genealogy that joins the social and conceptual, the content of the social imaginary begins as high theory and is transmuted over time into tenets of social common sense.⁴⁸ In taking this top-down approach to conceptual development, Taylor constructs an itinerary of thinkers whose work is the basic source of content in the

45. Whereas transcendental deduction is an important part of Taylor's method of genealogical exposition, Rorty sees recourse to transcendental deduction as belonging to the tradition of metaphysical speculation. As noted above, for Taylor 'transcendental argument' is a philosophical move that has featured importantly in each generation of philosophy since Kant.

46. The history of ideas may be distinguished, methodologically, from intellectual history, with the former placing more emphasis on individuals as the progenitors of specific programmes.

47. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 2.

48. A parallel may be observed between Taylor's account of top-down influence from elites to mass society and Rorty's *great man* account of theory generation, by which theory is what comes into view when the rough work of a genius is formalised and rendered into formulas.

social imaginary.⁴⁹ In tracing the gradual addition of atheism to the class of acceptable ideas, for instance, Taylor begins with the work of the natural law jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), showing how this became the basis on which early modern thinkers framed conceptions of natural order without appeal to divine government of the world, as a strategy for avoiding interconfessional religious acrimony. ‘We can recall here that the modern moral order, in its earliest formulations, with Grotius, for instance, was meant to give political authority a place to stand, independent of confessional strife.’⁵⁰ Another example of the figures that appear on Taylor’s genealogical itinerary is Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), whom Taylor presents as one of the first philosophers with an account of human origins from naturalistic premises:

At the centre of [Vico’s] theory is a kind of intra-cosmic mystery, how reason, consciousness, civilized order come to be out of their absence. He introduces another kind of deep time than that which ruins open us onto, a time that leads back into darkness, the ‘sombre abîme’ [dark abyss] prior to light.⁵¹

In developing themes without necessarily approaching his subjects systematically, Taylor builds his account of the social imaginary piece by piece, through the gradual accumulation of intellectual touchstones – a method that achieves breadth while perhaps sidestepping ordinary scholarly expectations of topical depth.

Among the thinkers who figure in the itinerary of Taylor’s reform master narrative, John Locke is presented as having in particular exerted an outside influence on the modern social

49. Taylor treats the ideas that fill the social imaginary as constitutive. Where historians concerned with explicating ideas in terms of context would wish to demonstrate the relation of such ideas to contingent factors, Taylor is not concerned with historical questions of context but rather is content to see the ideas in question as legitimated by their absorption into the *sensus communis* of modern liberal democracies.

50. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 237.

51. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 335.

imaginary. Taylor sees Locke's influence principally in the element of the modern social imaginary that he identifies as the *direct access society*, the phenomenon by which pre-Enlightenment views of social hierarchy – in which participation in public affairs is the prerogative of only certain classes – are replaced by the sense that civic matters are open to all members of a given society. Taylor finds the basis for this contemporary expectation of openness in public life in Locke's contract theory of government, which built upon the natural law theory of Grotius. Insofar as Locke's milieu was one in which the deliverances of natural law were understood as dovetailing with divine purposes, Taylor's use of Locke in this connection exemplifies a standing feature of the reform master narrative, of conceptual changeover: an initial, theological framework out of which particular theories are developed gradually fades while the theories themselves persist and attain axiomatic status and function.

David Hume (1711–1776), for instance, may be seen in Taylor's itinerary of canonical figures as a bridge from early modern formulations of natural order in terms of natural theology to the modern conceptions of order that first emerged in the Enlightenment. Responding to Hume's newly articulated standard of naturalism, Kant constricted the domain of objects on which speculation would be permissible. Kant then opened the way for Hegel to theorise human history as a platform of divine revelation.⁵² Hume's position in history between the thought-worlds of natural theology, on one side, and critical rationalism, on the other, arguably makes

52. Hume's is the most important of recognisably modern attempts at fashioning forms of naturalism that can be deployed to undercut self-elevating stories. As described here, Hume may be seen as an incarnation of the sort of 'hinge moment' on the timeline of Western thought that becomes a candidate for inclusion in grand narrativising.

him a figure of continuity across sensibilities. A genealogical itinerary such as Taylor uses may, moreover, be filled by historical events as much as by theorists and philosophers. An event widely recognised as having had a definite effect on the thought-world of the era in question, would be the earthquake that destroyed much of Lisbon of 1755.⁵³ Enduring touchstones of the Western cultural imagination become critical resources in hermeneutical methods such as Taylor's, as contemporary interpretations of them implicitly contain analogies to contemporary self-understanding.

Another resource that Taylor uses for his account of social imaginary is the historical hypothesis of the Axial Age as a time of origins for global cultures and civilization overall.⁵⁴ In its essential form, the Axial Age hypothesis contends that there was a global convergence of cultures and civilizations around the year 500 BC, from which emerged virtually all of the religious, intellectual, and cultural systems of the modern world. By standard accounts of the Axial Age hypothesis, the systems that emerged in the Axial period possess broadly analogous features, such as the development of second-order thinking. Taylor's use of the Axial Age construct substantially follows that of Robert Bellah, who uses the concept as a

53. The special literary and intellectual significance of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake has been recognised since its occurrence, owing largely to Voltaire's contemporaneous reflections upon it, which related to the subject of theodicy.

54. As noted in chapter 2, the original formulation of the Axial Age hypothesis is commonly attributed to a work by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in the mid-twentieth century – but the idea's pre-Jaspers history goes back at least to the eighteenth century – and it was substantially developed in the 1980s by Shmuel Eisenstadt and later by scholars such as Jan Assmann, Robert Bellah, and Hans Joas. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

heuristic for contrasting contemporary religion to hypothesised forms of ‘archaic’ religion.⁵⁵ Taylor’s genealogy is organised around a stadial – i.e., sequential – conception of history that Taylor describes as unfolding according to an Axial logic. In his stadial scheme Taylor interprets the Protestant Reformation in particular as a crucial source of ideas and motifs of secular modernity, in which regard the French theorist Marcel Gauchet is a notable forebear of Taylor’s.⁵⁶ To be sure, using the Protestant Reformation as the lynchpin of an explanatory genealogy of modernity is a widely used strategy, going back at least to Max Weber (1864–1920) and his theory on the role of a Protestant ethic in the formation of modern capitalism.⁵⁷ Crucial to Taylor’s own argument is the idea that the Reformation was propelled in particular by hypertrophied Axial logic.⁵⁸ The specific work of reform, in Taylor’s view, had the effect of changing the terms of membership in society: the spiritual purity once expected only of a spiritual elite became mandatory for all members.⁵⁹ Taylor combines this Axial version of stadialism – by which eras are distinguished according to the degree of the Axial impulses at

55. Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011).

56. Charles Taylor, foreword to *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, by Marcel Gauchet, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), ix–xv.

57. Recent examples include Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution – A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: SPCK, 2007); and Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012).

58. Taylor’s interpretation of Axial logic as a motor of social disembedding may be compared with Nietzsche’s identification of self-overcoming (*selbstüberwindung*) as a distinctive feature of Western individualism.

59. Taylor’s debt for this observation to Max Weber is obvious.

work in them – with a concept of cyclical renewal within Christianity itself, which he borrows from the work of David Martin.⁶⁰

Taylor thus uses the Axial Age to carve out a historicising viewpoint on contemporary life and thought. For instance, Taylor (following Bellah) understands trends by which individuals become socially disembedded from communal forms of identity as a quintessentially Axial phenomenon. Taylor then overlays these heuristics onto a second, historical hypothesis of origins that centralises the Protestant Reformation in understanding the genealogy of contemporary liberal democracies:

There is another important piece, which deals with the thrust to complete the Axial revolution; I mean Reform, which strives to end the post-Axial equilibrium, that is, the balance and complementarity between pre- and post-Axial elements in all higher civilizations. It is this process, occurring in Latin Christendom, that I have been focusing on, through the various social and cultural changes which have been generated on the way. Let's refer to this as the Reform Master Narrative (RMN).⁶¹

For Taylor, then, the Protestant Reformation initiates the specific process of reform whose unfolding and consequences can be traced up to the present day, and the heuristic of the Axial Age substantiates the idea of reform as an ongoing social process:

Briefly summed up, Reform demanded that everyone be a *real, 100 percent* Christian. Reform not only disenchant, but disciplines and re-orders life and society. Along with civility, this makes for a notion of moral order which gives a new sense to Christianity, and the demands of the faith. This collapses the distance of faith from Christendom. It induces an anthropocentric shift, and hence a break-out from the monopoly of Christian faith.⁶²

60. David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

61. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774.

62. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774.

On Taylor's account, reform was an amplification – or, hypertrophy – of the Axial tendency towards social disembedding, generalising to all members of a given society the responsibility for religious observance that in archaic, pre-Axial societies would have belonged only to a priestly class.⁶³ The Axial social disembedding in archaic societies, on the view adapted by Taylor and Bellah, occurred in three dimensions but all of which were alike in granting greater autonomy to the atomic individual, with movements away not only from centralising institutional arrangements but also centralising sources of meaning. The crucial Axial development was that of equating transcendent goods with social goals or aims, putting social goods beyond mundane notions of flourishing yet keeping them tied to the immanent. This process of disembedding culminates in the contemporary set of attitudes that Taylor's refers to as *exclusive humanism*. This account of modern individualism from Axial logic, in conjunction with a Durkheimian scheme of stadial social development, is how Taylor builds his conception of the 'modern moral order of mutual benefit'.

63. Beyond customs and practices that may be interpreted as narrowly concerned with the sacral, many folk traditions have imagined worlds of non-human creatures that behave in distinctively human ways. With the appearance of monotheism, most importantly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (most likely in its initial stages with some inspiration from Egyptian models) the range of non-human entities of significance (those having sentience and some facility for communication in language, broadly construed) began to narrow sharply. Arguably one of the crucial moments in this process of narrowing possibilities came in the early modern period, in particular with the various movements falling under the heading of Reformation (of which there were of course varieties, including Roman Catholic) which witnessed a new aversion to superstition as well as the beginnings of what are now commonplace forms of atheism.



Taylor's exposition of the reform master narrative as an overarching interpretation – a grand narrative – of Western liberalism reflects his principle that societies cohere around large, shared stories regardless of whether the details of those stories can be articulated by their own members. This equating of grand narratives with unarticulated backgrounds, an adaptation (as has been noted) of figures like Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), is another point of connection between Taylor's style of philosophical genealogy and his epistemological realism:

You can't just walk away from these deep, pervasive, half-articulated, taken-for-granted pictures which are embedded in our culture and enframe our thought and action. You can't free yourself from them until you identify them, and see where they're wrong, and even then it's not always easy. Just saying you've abandoned them, and then not giving them any thought, à la Davidson and Rorty, is a sure recipe for remaining in their thrall.⁶⁴

The view of grand narratives as virtually indispensable is in contrast to post-structuralist stances towards grand narratives as retrograde, untenable, or inherently unstable, which are canonically associated with Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98) and the Derridean movement of deconstruction that followed,⁶⁵ and more broadly with generalised habit of thought in the humanities and broader culture that was famously identified by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Taylor's embrace of grand narratives is also a substantive response to Rawlsian and Habermasian conceptions of political liberalism, which theorise the

64. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 41.

65. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

possibility – and even the desirability – of liberal democracies persisting without common visions of what counts as the good life. On Taylor’s view, to the contrary, some form or another of master narrative will also lie behind ordinary social life, and the failure to acknowledge – or at least attempt to know – a communal telos results only in the occlusion of that telos, with generally deleterious consequences.

As has been noted, Taylor’s reform master narrative presents a stadial view of historical progression, insofar as it draws on Durkheim in postulating ideal-typical categories of social development.⁶⁶ The genealogy of *A Secular Age* extensively uses these ideal-typical stages, distinguishing between *paleo-*, *neo-* and *post-Durkheimian* stages, genealogical waypoints in a transformation by which the sacrality underpinning social order becomes gradually less and less ‘immanent’ over time. Taylor hypothesises the precise mechanism of the transformation in Western conceptions of civilizational order:

At first, the social order is seen as offering us a blueprint for how things, in the human realm, can hang together to our mutual benefit, and this is identified with the plan of Providence, what God asks us to realize. But it is in the nature of a self-sufficient immanent order that it can be envisaged without reference to God; and very soon the proper blueprint is attributed to Nature.’⁶⁷

66. Durkheim’s stadialism may be read as a juxtaposition of inheritances from Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Spencerian evolutionary thought. In Durkheim, the religious valences of Comte’s scheme of epochs are replaced by the rationalism of a Darwinian take on order and development in physicalist terms. On the Durkheimian model, religion is understood by analogy to future developments, as foundationally Judeo-Christian societies mutate into new forms (ones that give sense to Durkheim’s replacement of an Abrahamic creator-deity with *l’objet sacré*, for example); or can be understood by analogy to the past, enabling the study of religion’s ‘elementary’ forms.

67. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543.

Although Taylor's realism prevents any ascription of him as a pragmatist,⁶⁸ his philosophical genealogy at this point shows the influence of William James. In fact, Taylor's Gifford Lectures are substantially a comment on James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and that series contains the argument of *A Secular Age* in embryonic form (especially lecture 3).⁶⁹ The provenance of the crucial phrase 'moral order' – which Taylor adapts into the form *modern moral order* – in *A Secular Age* may be traced to James:

The 'more' that is, in [James's] words, continuous with the higher parts of the self and operative in the universe outside it, is the product of the desires, imaginations, and actions of men and women, and it is a force available for both good and bad. This order consists of ideas, social practices, and institutions, many of which may be unseen in the sense that we are not conscious of the ways in which they shape actions and the world.⁷⁰

Taylor's reform master narrative may also be compared to other projects in intellectual history that tell overarching stories regarding the formation of the modern world. For instance, in focussing on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a period of constitutive importance in the West, Taylor's project shares important similarities with the programme in the history of concepts formulated by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006). Influenced by luminaries of German history and the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, Koselleck developed the historiographical paradigm of a 'saddle period' (*sattelzeit*) in reference to the

68. Taylor's belief in a qualitative difference between methods in the human and natural sciences places him close to the 'hard' side of a dichotomy that Nicholas Rescher uses to distinguish between hard and 'soft' forms of philosophical pragmatism.

69. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 63–107, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/stable/j.ctv1p6hqbp>.

70. Wayne Proudfoot, 'Pragmatism and "an Unseen Order" in *Varieties*', in *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 44.

decades falling roughly in the range 1750–1850, in the space of which emerged many phenomena important for modern civilization. The crux of Koselleck's theory may be summed up in the observation of a *bedeutungswandel*, a broad shift in linguistic meanings – nominally *meaning* in the sense of the definitions of individual words, but these may also be read as reflections of shifting societal habits, norms, mores, and possibilities for self-expression of the liberal individual. At the core of the *sattelzeit* paradigm is a conception of modernity as formed by the twin movements of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, where the former reshaped the horizons of political thought and the latter opened new vistas of possibility through technological mastery.

Other aspects of style also shape Taylor's mode of philosophical genealogy. The irenicist, ecumenist voice that Taylor adopts throughout his work, and particularly in *A Secular Age*, has been noted by many as an important factor in his renown as a theorist. Taylor's irenicism of tone may be regarded as methodological rather than merely accidental or incidental. Insofar as bias and partisanship are more likely to emerge from presentist perspectives than from those which reflect upon their subjects at a critical distance, the appearance of good faith is important to any 'history of the present'. Hans Joas remarks on how Taylor's style enhances the effectiveness with which his ideas are communicated.⁷¹

71. Joas goes on to examine 'a case in which Taylor's voice shed its mild intonation': an exchange with Quentin Skinner concerning Skinner's criticisms of Taylor's first major work of philosophical genealogy, *Sources of the Self* – in Joas's view, an exception proving the rule. 'Charles Taylor as Polemicist', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44, no. 7 (2018): 756–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718779721>.

In a famous passage of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche describes a habit of ‘naive’ genealogy by which a hypothetical genealogist’s contemporary categories of understanding are anachronistically applied in the crafting of a historical story. Behind Nietzsche’s account of true genealogy – although not stated explicitly as such – is a claim regarding step-wise development in history as a series of analogies: what are sometimes referred to as ‘hinge moments’ in intellectual or cultural history are, in essence, crucial points of historical analogising. In Nietzsche’s account of naive genealogy, the alternative to the properly analogical view of history is an essentialising view of the present anachronistically projected into the past. Nietzsche illustrated his point with the example of punishment, in the sense of penitential retribution. In considering the case of punishment and its origins, Nietzsche supposed, the naive genealogist was apt to begin from the sanctimoniousness of his own Victorian milieu and read this back, erroneously, into the worldviews of his forebears. Nietzsche’s point was that the patina of virtue that legal punishment had acquired by his own time would have seemed alien to the denizens of historically remote eras, for whom guilt (in German homonymous with ‘debt’ as *schuld*) was nothing more or less than a means for the powerful to subjugate their fellows. Finding Nietzsche’s account plausible requires one to accept the analogy between worldviews within which the subject (in this case punishment) is experienced, moving the focus away from the subject itself. Avoiding the sort of mistake that Nietzsche ascribed to naive genealogists has been an important desideratum of historically inclined philosophers sensitive to the Nietzschean legacy, among whom Charles Taylor is a notable example.

For Taylor's purposes, using genealogy as a method in philosophy thus necessarily means invoking the first-person plural, insofar as its aim is to historicise ideas and practices taken as normative by a specific imagined audience. Taylor is convinced that order per se cannot be understood – and cannot be philosophically explicated – without engagement at the level of the first person. 'An order conceived in this way [in terms of perfections] can be called a "meaningful" order; one involving an "ontic logos". It sets the paradigm purposes for the beings within it. . . . No one can understand this order while being indifferent to it or failing to recognize its normative force.'⁷² This view of order as requiring first-person understanding relates to Taylor's earlier formulation of hermeneutics as a form of knowing that requires an intrinsically different approach to enquiry, because requiring reference to a first-person plural perspective:

On the phenomenological level or that of ordinary speech (and the two converge for the purposes of this argument) a certain notion of meaning has an essential place in the characterization of human behaviour. This is the sense in which we speak of a situation, an action, a demand, a prospect having a certain meaning for a person.⁷³

As a method, then, Taylor's practice of genealogy does not align with conventions in the natural sciences of eschewing first-person perspectives. One importance consequence of Taylor's distinctive methodology of the human sciences is a feature of his style that may be described as 'discursive ventriloquism',⁷⁴ whereby the particular positions or points of view within a multivocal conversation are recreated with maximum verisimilitude and principle

72. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 284.

73. Taylor, 'Sciences of Man', 21.

74. In another parallel between the principals of this thesis, Taylor's ventriloquising may be read as a modality of the 'conversational philosophy' theorised by Rorty.

of charity. Indeed, the genealogy presented in *A Secular Age* juxtaposes different religious, ideological, and philosophical viewpoints as these represent different possibilities of identity and self-expression within Taylor's theorised modern moral order. It often happens in this narrative that once a given viewpoint is introduced Taylor's exposition of it continues in the first person – as if being related by one holding the views in question – without standard indicators of indirect speech. Although Taylor describes this use of the first person as a matter of convenience,⁷⁵ the effect is to methodologise the reader's own first-person experiences and intuitions. 'Grand philosophical histories or *Geistesgeschichten* tend to reflect the time in which they are written. They address, directly or indirectly, the perceived needs of a period, culture or a "we-subject".'⁷⁶

The most common sort of objection to Taylor's signature manner of genealogy combines methodological and substantive concerns. Instances of critical-comparative historicism are often criticised as historical accounts that do not to meet standards of rigour and evidence that conventionally pertain in academic history. In necessarily covering a vast historical terrain, Taylor's account presents many openings for critics to point out factual inaccuracies or

75. Taylor's ventriloquising indirectly led many of his readers to wrongly attribute positions to Taylor positions that he was only recapitulating, a misunderstanding that occurred with such frequency that Taylor was compelled to clarify the matter in his contribution to *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, where he states that his convention of leaving out ordinary indicators of indirect speech was down merely to expedience.

76. Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate: Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt in Polemical Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 461, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004504523>.

historiographical mischaracterisations. Representative of criticisms that Taylor has garnered throughout his career are the responses to *Sources of the Self* by the historian Quentin Skinner:

Taylor's history contains some bewildering gaps. Consider for example his pivotal account of how the 'disengaged' self first came to make moral claims on its own behalf. . . . How and when this change occurred has been a major theme of recent studies in Medieval thought. . . . As Taylor hurtles along the road 'on the way from Plato to Descartes' (p. 127), virtually the only figures he encounters are St. Augustine and Montaigne.⁷⁷

Objections to Taylor along the lines of Skinner are answered by Alasdair MacIntyre as being, in effect, misinterpretations or mischaracterisations of Taylor's overall undertaking:

They fasten on this or that particular argument or this or that particular historical claim and quarrel with it in an academic and impersonal way, as though nothing very much is at stake for them. . . . What such critics have failed to recognize is that the only adequate critical and dissenting response to Taylor would be to construct or at least to gesture towards the construction of an alternative and rival narrative, one that accounted for all that Taylor accounts for and more, one that in addition explains why Taylor's narrative advances a defective account of modernity and of secularization.⁷⁸

MacIntyre here indicates something of what is distinctive about Taylor's way of doing social theory with the hermeneutics of a Wittgensteinian 'unarticulated background', against which social practices and norms appear as natural features of a given social world. Taylor's notion of social imaginary is a manner of speaking about consensus, so as to retrieve terms of social foundations that are not contested and subject them to scrutiny.

Consensus has been a polemical catchword in conversations about climate crisis. The idea that consensus necessarily operates at a level not subject to scrutiny in mainstream public

77. Quentin Skinner, 'Who Are "We"? Ambiguities of the Modern Self', in 'Symposium: Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*', special issue, *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201749108602249>.

78. Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Charles Taylor and Dramatic Narrative: Argument and Genre', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44, no. 7 (2018): 762, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718781243>.

discourse suggests a distinction between contested and uncontested forms of consensus, with the latter being intrinsically submerged or hidden from view.⁷⁹ Matters of ‘uncontested’ consensus – the content of social ‘unarticulated backgrounds’ – may appear so trivial as not to deserve special consideration. Taylor’s description of the modern social imaginary, for instance, as consisting of ‘the economy’, the ‘direct-access society’, and the ‘public sphere’ suggests something of the anodyne character of real consensus.⁸⁰ Observing a distinction between contested and uncontested consensus is useful in understanding why invocations of consensus often seem to go along with polemical purposes, and why aggressively contesting points of consensus may be inherently self-defeating. Discursive rancour or special pleading in themselves may demonstrate a claim’s great distance from the domain of views truly held in common. Invocations of consensus in themselves, in short, may be diagnostic of its absence.

As noted, the idea of consensus has figured prominently in discussions of climate crisis. This may be taken as diagnostic of the cultural – over and above the political or technocratic – importance of ecological discourse in Western societies. Although in polemical contexts consensus may be invoked to adduce the force of the axiomatic, its meaning will vary according to purpose and context. Consensus may gesture towards very real communities of scientists and the rules by which they conduct themselves, or it may function as a slogan for the idea that the

79. Although the phrase ‘contested consensus’ may have an oxymoronic quality, it is meant to underscore the performative contradiction involved in invoking consensus in polemical contexts.

80. This point is similar to Donald Davidson’s epistemological observation that participants in discussion by necessity hold a great many views in common, because such is a precondition for the interlocutors’ exchange to be regarded in any coherent sense as a *meeting*. Davidson’s hypothetical discussants are unlikely to be concerned with such conditions of background agreement in themselves. So, too, are the participants in modern society unlikely to be concerned with points of ‘uncontested’ consensus.

scientific enterprise is organised around the aim of producing consensus, underscoring that the superlative respect commanded by scientific institutions is to do with the effectiveness of institutional science in generating consensus. When put to polemical purposes, the word may gesture at the social disapprobation of denying or failing to recognise the authority generated by well-formed deliverances of the scientific enterprise. For Taylor, it is not philosophically helpful to consider matters that are inherently contested. Rather, in delineating the origins and nature of moral order, Taylor focuses on the sustaining sources that everyone implicitly agrees on, sources that he refers to as *ontic*.

Ontic sources of moral order

As has been seen, in contrast to views that take liberal democracies to be capable of functioning without grand narratives or widely shared conceptions of the good, Taylor argues that sources constitutive of commonly shared meaning remain necessary even if these are abstract and obscure. As has also been seen, for Taylor grand narratives may be explicated through the abstract apparatus of a Wittgensteinian unarticulated background. Taylor articulates the background of liberal democracies through a specific genealogical reconstruction of secular modernity that describes a gradual transformation of ‘ontic’ sources over the course of a tripartite historical process of paleo-, neo- and post-Durkheimian stages. In the course of the historical progression that Taylor describes, ontic sources gradually lose their immanent embodiedness, gradually becoming decentralised and abstract while nevertheless being

understood as still in rooted in actual, physical, persistent aspects of the world. Moving from an account of norms within social imaginary, Taylor hypothesises the need for constitutive sources of those norms. 'It is very clear that a moral order is more than just a set of norms; that it also contains what we might call an "ontic" component, identifying features of the world which make the norms realizable.'⁸¹ As has been noted, a key intervention of Taylor's in conversations about contemporary order is his rebuttal of the idea that contemporary, secular societies have no need of grand narratives, and therefore by extension have no need of ontic components for their norms:

What is the 'ontic component' in the modern understanding of moral order? I argued earlier that our notions of moral order contain more than just a definition of norms or ideals; they also offer us a picture of what is in God's will, or the universe, or ourselves, which makes these norms appropriate and possible of realization. . . . We are tempted to believe that the move to human-centred definitions, particularly those which see the order not as self-realizing but as to be constructed, leaves this component quite aside; it offers nothing but a set of norms.⁸²

Against theories that see no need for norms to have sustaining sources, Taylor identifies the ontic component of the order of mutual benefit as being the very benevolence of which human beings are inherently capable. Taylor substantiates his supposition of benevolence in itself as an ontic source through the genealogical story of a changeover: from understandings of order in the world as an outcome of God's benevolent governance of that world directly to God's benevolence being expressed through the actions of human beings, and finally to benevolence becoming a trait of human beings apart from any reference to a creator-deity. Taylor's

81. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 164.

82. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 255.

story, in other words, presents a series of hinge moments through which the theological idea of God's benevolence becomes an anthropological or psychological fact concerning human beings. The order of mutual benefit is thus the mechanised version of an earlier conception of God's benevolence operating in the world directly. 'God still has a role, of course; indeed, he often is given two. First he made us, and endowed us with reason, and in some cases also, with benevolence, and it is these faculties which enable us to get things together, and carry out his plan.'⁸³ Once the notion of natural benevolence is established, the need for God's presence in the background of order lessens over time, until only the system is left and its development is forgotten. This process of a changeover from a creator-deity as the bearer of divine attributes to a world in which those attributes exist wholly autonomously sets the stage for the possibility of what Taylor refers to as 'exclusive humanism':

However it is conceived, the discovery/definition of . . . intra-human sources of benevolence is one of the great achievements of our civilization, and the charter of modern unbelief. What has made this great shift possible? . . . Clearly, the context for the leap into exclusive humanism was set by . . . the focus more and more on the order of mutual benefit, or even on 'civilization', as the agenda of humanity; and then the very relative, but nevertheless unprecedented, progress in realizing this order; the confidence this generated in human powers, and in the tractability of the universe to human ends.⁸⁴

Yet, against the superficially cheering valences of 'benevolence' and 'mutual benefit', Taylor hypothesises 'malaise' – citing this as a widespread experience in contemporary liberal democracies – as a function of felt dissatisfaction with the *calcified* system of mutual benefit.

'This malaise, and other similar ones, speak to the condition of the buffered identity. This

83. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222.

84. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 257.

condition is defined by a kind of cross-pressure: a deep embedding in this identity, and its relative invulnerability to anything beyond the human world, while at the same time a sense that something may be occluded in the very closure which guarantees this safety.’⁸⁵ Taylor’s narrative of decline joins up his philosophical hermeneutics with those works of his that deal more directly with politics, which, for instance, consider the problem of disillusionment with democracy as a form of government.⁸⁶ Climate crisis, in fact, shows up overtly in Taylor’s work on democracy: ‘Our future direction of travel ought to be clear. The growing inequality of wealth and power, plus the urgent challenge of climate change means that any programme which doesn’t seriously deserve the description of Green New Deal will be obviously inadequate to our situation.’⁸⁷

As has been seen, on Taylor’s reading of Durkheim a Durkheimian society in its basic form is one organised around a sacred object (*l’objet sacré*), as understood by analogy to Christianity in particular:

The Church is that of the whole society, to which everyone must belong; and moreover, the force which inheres in social obligations comes from the sacred of which the Church is guardian and articulator. Societies organized by such a church are in this (loose) meaning ‘Durkheimian’, in the sense that church and social sacred are one – although the relation of primary and secondary focus is reversed, since for Durkheim the social is the principal focus, reflected in the divine, while the opposite is true for ultramontane Catholicism.⁸⁸

85. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

86. Charles Taylor, Patrizia Nanz, and Madeleine Beaubien Taylor, *Reconstructing Democracy: How Citizens Are Building from the Ground Up* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

87. Charles Taylor, ‘Charles Taylor Responds’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 29, no. 5 (2021): 811, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2021.1992479>.

88. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 442.

From the basic distinction of Durkheimian societies, Taylor creates a scheme of ideal development according to paleo-Durkheimian, neo-Durkheimian, and post-Durkheimian stages. 'Paleo-, neo-, post-Durkheimian describe ideal types. My claim is not that any of these provides the total description, but that our history has moved through these dispensations, and that the latter has come to colour more and more our age.'⁸⁹ Over the course of that historical progression, the social sacred passes from one stage to the next while also being subtly transformed in the process, and over time the central role of church is taken over from it by the state. Importantly, Taylor does not see his Durkheimian categories as absolute:

My terms 'neo-Durkheimian' and 'post-Durkheimian' designate ideal types. My claim is not that our present day is unambiguously post-Durkheimian, as say, mediaeval France was unquestionably paleo-Durkheimian, and say, the nineteenth-century U.S.A was neo-Durkheimian. Rather there is a struggle going on between these two dispensations.⁹⁰

At the same time, Taylor identifies the post-Durkheimian distinction as being in a sense constitutive of the culture wars in liberal democracies: 'But it is just this, the availability of a post-Durkheimian dispensation, which destabilizes us and provokes the conflict.'⁹¹ By the paleo-Durkheimian variant, Taylor refers to a stage of development at which the unifying role of religion is unambiguous and the collective is committed to the vision of a single, indivisible church. 'The "paleo" phase corresponds to a situation in which a sense of the ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times is still alive, even though it may be weakened by disenchantment and an instrumental spirit.'⁹² Crucially, allegiance to the one church by all

89. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 487.

90. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 488.

91. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 488.

92. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455.

members of the society is understood as being essential to the maintenance of the society's flourishing and prosperity. By contrast, societies at the neo-Durkheimian stage experience the sacred object as something all-pervading and general, not locatable in any particular institution or at any discrete point of access. 'In "neo" societies, God is present because it is his Design around which society is organized. It is this which we concur on as the identifying common description of our society, what we could call its "political identity".'⁹³ Neo-Durkheimian societies contain various institutions descended from what was previously the single church, and Taylor identifies these as the Christian denominations – as distinct from mere sects – that began to appear in the early eighteenth century. At this neo-Durkheimian stage, it is still thought that the maintenance of human flourishing requires religious observance across the society, but the ontic component of sacrality underpinning order has become much more diffuse and rarefied than it is at the paleo-Durkheimian stage.

In the next iteration, the post-Durkheimian, ontic sources have become diffuse and abstract to such an extent that the need for unifying stories at all comes under question: the previous requirement of participation by all members of a society in communal observance (whether religious or post-religious) has ceased to be relevant to the maintenance of order. 'And so we come to understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order; or better, a constellation of orders, cosmic, social and moral. . . . This understanding of our predicament has as background a sense of our history: we have advanced to this grasp of our

93. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455.

predicament through earlier more primitive stages of society and self-understanding. In this process, we have come of age.’⁹⁴

Teleology in the modern moral order

Taylor’s account of contemporary liberal democracies in terms of ontic sources and Durkheimian social stages has at its core a hypothesis about the role of *telos* in liberal social order. Within this account are tensions that parallel those implicitly in the Beckian hypothesis of climate crisis as a source of ‘goods’ from ‘bads’. Specifically, Taylor’s hypothesis of the modern moral order of mutual benefit presents a teleological vision of social order in tension with an anti-teleological naturalism of Enlightenment rationality. On an interpretation that gives sense to the feeling that climate change is productive of new directions for theory, climate crisis suggests the bankruptcy of the ‘mutual benefit’ model, thus resolving the tension that emerges in societies where human flourishing appears to proceed without foundations, generalised anxiety about which Taylor refers to as contemporary ‘malaise’.

The repudiation of the mutual benefit principle effected by climate crisis does not disprove that benevolence is a property of human beings but rather disproves the efficacy of the mutual benefit principle alone in maintaining natural and human order. The revelation that benevolence in itself no longer suffices to maintain order then becomes a warrant for supposing that some greater principle must be established. The interpretation of climate

94. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543.

crisis from Taylor's reform master narrative genealogy, then, is one way of understanding the unarticulated background of liberal democracies as still shaped by theological presuppositions and thus tending towards religious atavism. Of course it is often imagined that *overt* theology still plays a major role in shaping views on climate, with many critics within the climatological turn supposing that the correlation between evangelicalism and denialism has direct doctrinal causes alongside being mediated by right-wing political partisanship. Such doctrinal commitments would see order in the world as maintained by divine providence. But this sort of idea is relatively unsophisticated. Behind Taylor's conception of the modern moral order lies the hypothesis that some idea of divine providence has never fully been overcome, being instead simply transmogrified over the course of conceptual and social secularization. On this view, climatological worldviews are experienced as the default option in contexts where progressively intensifying secularization is understood as a normative end of human flourishing.

On Taylor's account of the emergence of the modern moral order, that order in its embryonic stages drew upon overtly theological sources of meaning. Over the course of a declension throughout the modern era, the same reference to constitutive sources continued to occur, but the character of those sources gradually lost their theological character. An interpretation of Taylor's account of modern moral order through the idea of religious atavism, therefore, develops a hypothesis on the general causes and character of crisis in liberal democracies. This interpretation understands Taylor's reform master narrative as having at its core a particular

role for teleology in conceptualising the nature of social order in liberal democracies. Along the trajectory of Taylor's account, adherence to teleological conceptions of history and order have gradually fallen away, as explicitly providential (often Paleyan) accounts of social order are gradually replaced by an understanding of the natural world as being ordered in and of itself, without any requirement of a divine overseer. On the interpretation from religious atavism, the legacy of this genealogical movement is a tension in contemporary societies between the persistence of teleological conceptions of order as underpinned by 'ontic' sources, and an anti-teleological imperative in Enlightenment thought. In the connection of teleology, the development of Christian natural theology across the confessional spectrum in early modern Europe is an important point on the itinerary of Charles Taylor's reform master narrative. In Taylor's account, the predominance and subsequent desuetude of natural theology is a key movement in the gradual changeover from visions of order with a special place for a creator-deity. In the context of Anglophone societies in particular, the legacy of Paleyan natural theology plays an important role in Taylor's account of secular modernity, insofar as it underlies the movement through Durkheimian social stages, in the course of which there is a transformation in how the link between order and the sacred is perceived. That phenomena conducive to human flourishing continue to be interpreted as reflecting some principle of transcendent order is a byproduct of this Paleyan legacy.

As has been seen, the basis for a religious atavism account developed from Taylor's work is the conception of the modern moral order, and the core of that conception is a principle of

mutual benefit that is understood as having originated in Paleyan natural theology and still operates in some form in the modern social imaginary. On Taylor's reform master narrative, mutual benefit is the telos of modern liberal democracies, being the common aim to which all members are implicitly committed. 'Four strong benchmarks of the new order are: liberty: the move is meant to liberate; power: it is meant to empower; mutual benefit: this is the basic point of the society; and reason: whether freedom, power, mutual benefit has been achieved, or how to achieve them, is meant to be arbitrable by rational discussion.'⁹⁵

The principle of mutual benefit points to an intersection between self and society. In précis, mutual benefit refers to a self-reinforcing relationship: one's pursuit of their own interests conduces to the common good, and the sustaining of the common good in turn enables the conditions for individuals to continue pursuing own interests:

The order here is that of a good engineering design, in which efficient causation plays the crucial role. In this it differs from earlier notions of order, where the harmony comes from the consonance among the Ideas or Forms manifested in the different levels of being or ranks in society. The crucial thing in the new conception is that our purposes mesh, however divergent they may be in the conscious awareness of each of us. . . . God's design is one of interlocking causes, not of harmonized meanings.⁹⁶

In Taylor's account, mutual benefit is a heuristic for developing the reform master narrative, within which variations and nuances with regard to specific cultures and exceptions can be explored. For instance, Taylor observes the particularly Protestant character of mutual benefit with reference to the sociology of religion of David Martin. 'David Martin . . . has developed an interesting account of the "Protestant", more particularly "Anglophone" path [of secular-

95. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 578.

96. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 70–71.

ization]. This comes about in societies in which the reigning forms of social imaginary centre more and more on the order of mutual benefit, and the “baroque” order is seen as distant and somewhat abhorrent, in short “Papist”.⁹⁷ In the declension of Taylor’s grand narrative, the gradual displacement of Paleyan natural theology coincides with the emergence of a norm by which pluralism of belief and practice in a given society is taken as axiomatic. The historical dissolution of single, large, shared stories is the basis for Taylor’s notion of *fragilisation*: under the conditions of modern pluralistic societies, the mainstream is defined by a range of viewpoints from within which doubt can, with nearly uniform justification, be cast upon any one given position. Questions of pluralism point back to the originary question of *A Secular Age*, which problematises the shift by which atheism went from being unthinkable in early modern European societies to being one option among many in contemporary liberal democracies. Taylor conjectures that the present-day members of those societies not only have every conceivable view on the question of theism available to them but also find it difficult to characterise other views as wholly unreasonable.

On the hermeneutical reading from religious atavism, the consequence of the trajectory that Taylor charts is a psychological tension between confidence in the autonomy of order, on the one hand, and increasing anxiety from the felt need to ground that order in explanations of how it is sustained. The teleological character of the modern moral order of mutual benefit makes it seem unsuitable from the point of view of the Enlightenment rejection of teleology – yet no better explanation seems likely to appear. Insofar as the historical tensions in societies

97. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 449.

that have ended up with norms without sources may be resolved by crises of order – which implicitly repudiate the mutual benefit principle of the modern moral order – crisis then appears as an example of what Ulrich Beck theorised as ‘the positive goods of bads’. For instance, traceable within a hypothesis on the revelatory model – e.g., Chakrabarty’s on the ‘unthinkable’ – is a vision of the cosmos in which its defining characteristic is bleakness. On this view, the apparent character of a cold and uncaring cosmos underpins the rejection of any sense of teleology, insofar as this is contrary to naturalism, on the premise that the character of the cosmos (perceived to be cold and uncaring) may be a guide to what natural law consists of. On the view from naturalism, then, catastrophe and loss are in some sense more consonant with a higher order, and may even become positive values in the sense of Beck’s ‘positive side effects of bads’. On this view, the historical failure of teleology becomes the basis for actively embracing *anti-teleology*.⁹⁸

Taking a more broadly methodological view, on a hermeneutical reading the very idea of social or moral order implies a basis of metaphysics. The problem of social order, of why societies are able to function and cohere at all, is sometimes referred to as ‘the Hobbesian problem’, with reference to its modern articulation in the thought of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679).⁹⁹ For Hobbes’s seventeenth-century contemporaries, social order would have tended to be explained

98. Taken to extremes, expressions of the naturalistic view may even resemble reveling in senselessness, catastrophe, and cosmic pessimism, with important precursors in Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, among others. Thomas Dekeyser, ‘Pessimism, Futility and Extinction: An Interview with Eugene Thacker’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, nos. 7–8 (2020): 367–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420907127>.

99. David Dyzenhaus, ‘The Inevitable Social Contract’, *Res Publica* 27, no. 2 (2021): 187–202, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-020-09467-z>.

in terms of providential economy. William James may be regarded as offering an updated account of order from principles of religious psychology:

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.¹⁰⁰

In the terms of Charles Taylor's reform master narrative, then, for those participating in the modern social imaginary there is implicit trust in a modern moral order of mutual benefit but also, consequently, anxiety regarding the apparent lack of foundations for that order,¹⁰¹ and expressions of that anxiety may be regarded as forms of religious atavism. A common reaction to anxiety about missing foundations is to embrace *anti-teleology* as a principle of order, a view from which the perpetuation of conditions for human flourishing in itself comes to be seen as something unnatural.¹⁰²



As has been seen, Taylor's modern moral order of mutual benefit is the basis for a social order that emerges from a natural harmony of interests between members of a given society, and

100. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Dover, 2013), 64.

101. In Taylor's genealogy as with others of its kind, the modern moral order is inherited from a paradigm of Paleyan natural theology, by which the beneficence of natural order was understood as having been instilled in it by a providential creator-deity whose role subsequently became increasingly abstract until it disappeared altogether.

102. To use a phrase of Rorty's, to revel in ecological catastrophe through a principle of anti-teleology is to imagine that loss and catastrophe have a privileged status in a language of 'nature's own'. Yet, to so valorise disorder from a position of philosophical naturalism would also be a failure of nerve, in Rorty's view, insofar as the radical neutrality of a cosmos consisting of nothing more than atoms and the void offers no basis on which to prize conditions for human flourishing more than conditions leading to an abrupt and ignominious end to the human enterprise.

between individual and corporate interests. On the hermeneutical reading from religious atavism, climate crisis repudiates the notion of an inherent link between human flourishing and the 'order of mutual benefit', insofar as the catastrophes threatened by climate crisis are an expression of natural *disorder*.

To be sure, Taylor's account of secular modernity and the modern moral order is filled with tensions and ambivalences, being neither wholly triumphalist nor dominated by lament and pathos. On the one hand, the emergence of exclusive humanism has given the world much to be grateful for; on the other, the thinness of the mutual benefit principle leaves inhabitants of the modern order dissatisfied and longing for contact with something beyond the immanent. In Taylor's preferred idiom, inhabitants of the immanent order long for a sense of 'fullness'. The loneliness and even despair engendered by the prevailing order gives rise to the 'malaises of modernity'.¹⁰³ The malaise that Taylor theorises, in turn, gives sense to new forms of Nietzschean self-overcoming, by which redemption is achieved by courageously facing up to the bleak and uncaring character of the cosmos. Indeed, the influence of Nietzsche on many standard accounts of order is a prominent theme in Taylor's work:

The concern about leveling, the end of heroism, of greatness, has also been turned into a fierce denunciation of the modern moral order and everything it stands for, as we see with Nietzsche. Attempts to build a polity around a rival notion of order in the very heart of modern civilization, most notably the various forms of fascism and related authoritarianism, have failed. But the continued popularity of Nietzsche shows that his devastating critique still speaks to many people today.¹⁰⁴

103. Taylor's account of malaise may be read as an update of the traditional Weberian thesis of disenchantment.

104. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 82.

Indeed, the global system of economic neoliberalism is often singled out for responsibility in discussions of the routinised and mechanised character of modern human existence. Taylor himself draws a link between, on the one hand, the felt dissatisfaction with dominant conceptions of reason that understand it in purely instrumental terms and, on the other hand, ecological movements generally. Taylor frames dissatisfaction with the normative order in terms of ‘cross pressures’, and observes that it is often at points of just such cross pressure that the nominally secular make common cause with the traditionally faithful:

There are other lines of cross pressure in our world, with other starting points, that is notions or forms of life which have been generated along with the rejection of religion. . . . One such starting point is a doctrinaire utilitarianism, where all value is homogenized in terms of utility consequences, and the difference between higher and lower motivations denied. . . . Another, connected starting point is a thoroughgoing stance towards nature and the world as simply instrument and raw material for human purposes. The reactions against this are evident, above all in the ramifying ecological movements, and also in the anguished questioning about the limits of medical research and engineering of the human make-up. Many of those who raise these questions are believers, but many are not, but find themselves seeking common ground with those who are.¹⁰⁵

As has been noted, Taylor discusses the widely felt urge to be free of the modern moral order in terms of a modern quest after ‘fullness’. His diagnosis of malaise in Western societies presents another heuristic for understanding the embrace of ecological warrants in terms of religious atavism. In Taylor’s declensionist narrative, it is decadence and torpor of the sort described in Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ narrative that drives quests for cultural

105. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 599.

renewal. Taylor invokes this Fukuyaman–Nietzschean story of the ‘age of “last men”’ as one in which

humans will at last be satisfied, and the restless search for improvement will at last find a stable form. History will be at an end. This kind of outlook is implicit in much of the optimistic discourse today about free trade and globalization: when market democracies are established everywhere, there will be no more reason to fight. A reign of endless peaceful production and mutual enrichment will have dawned.¹⁰⁶

Despite the tragic register of such accounts, the sense of a common experience – albeit of emptiness – that they evoke may also give them a privileged epistemic status, validated by the ‘revelation’ of climate crisis, which is read to mirror civilizational malaise in a reaction of the very planet itself – thus functioning somewhat like what Richard Rorty referred to (sardonically) as ‘Nature’s Own Vocabulary’.¹⁰⁷ It is notable in this connection that Taylor himself regularly espouses concern for the environment. Taylor indeed often presents an ecologically sensitive worldview as one cure for the ‘malaises of modernity’:

It would greatly help to stave off ecological disaster if we could recover a sense of the demand that our natural surroundings and wilderness make on us. The subjectivist bias that both instrumental reason and the ideologies of self-centred fulfilment make dominant in our time renders it almost impossible to state the case here. Albert Borgman points out how much of the argument for ecological restraint and responsibility is shown as necessary for human welfare.¹⁰⁸

It remains to be seen whether Taylor’s penchant for environmental and climate concern speaks against the use of his framework of the modern moral order in an account of climate crisis as religious atavism.

106. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 641.

107. Richard Rorty, ‘Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism’, *The Monist* 64, no. 2 (1981): 155, <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist198164211>.

108. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 90, <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.4159/9780674237117>.

Ulrich Beck's original risk thesis – at the core of which is an account of 'bads' emerging from 'goods' – challenged traditional sociological accounts of modernity that emphasised progress in industrial civilization. This much is familiar in mainstream climate discourse, where it has become conventional to attribute the systemic problems of climate crisis to the very nature of industrial civilization itself. 'Capitalism as currently practiced has imperilled the existence of millions of planetary species, as well as the health and well-being of billions of humans. It also threatens the prosperity that it was intended to create.'¹⁰⁹ Beck's updated account, however, flips the order of causation, asking rather about the 'goods' of 'bads'. Here, too, one may find analogous commonplaces in climate discourse. At the core of Beck's sociological theory of metamorphosis is a concept of 'norms' whose violation initiates a process of emancipatory catastrophism – the violation of a norm initiates a phenomenon of collective catharsis. The characterisation of these norms is sometimes given as 'sacred', but there is ambiguity on this point throughout Beck's treatment of the subject.¹¹⁰ Beck's description of the transformation of the global order in the aftermath of the Second World War is presented as a model for the process that Beck theorises to be happening in the present day: 'The experiences and horrors of the Second World War . . . led to a series of cosmopolitan institutions. . . . It is the experience of the catastrophe that violates the "sacred" norms of civilization and humanity

109. Naomi Oreskes, 'Why Didn't They Act?', in *The Climate Book*, ed. Greta Thunberg (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 30.

110. The idea that conceptions of 'the sacred' are intimately connected with lived experiences of social and political order has been a common point of reference (but by no means an uncontested hypothesis) in the sociology of religion since the field's genesis at the end of the nineteenth century. Randall Collins, 'The Classical Tradition in Sociology of Religion', in *The SAGE Handbook of Sociology of Religion*, ed. James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007), 19–38, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848607965>.

and, with that, creates an anthropological shock from which institutional answers become possible and can be institutionalized on the global level.’¹¹¹ The question of how to define and identify vulnerable norms in specific instances thus becomes central to Beck’s programme, and ambiguity around the sacredness of a given norm is a significant point of tension in Beck’s programme. Even in Beck’s example of the Second World War, there is no indication of what specific norm is understood to have been violated; insofar as this is left unsaid, Beck may be read as invoking normative understandings of the Holocaust as the epitome of evil. In view of ambiguity on this point, Beck’s exact meaning in regard to the nature of norms violated in the process of emancipatory catastrophism is open to interpretation. Beck elsewhere specifies that the norms in his theory are ‘unwritten’, while also emphasising that they are ‘sacred’. ‘The anticipation of global catastrophe violates *sacred* (unwritten) norms of human existence and civilization. A violation of sacred values causes, second, an *anthropological shock* and, third, a *social catharsis*.’¹¹² In recapitulating Beck’s process of emancipatory catastrophism, Klaus Rasborg describes the first stage of emancipatory catastrophism thus: ‘The anticipation of a global catastrophe violates unwritten norms concerning human existence and civilization.’¹¹³ However the norms in Beck’s theory are to be understood, they are crucial for his account of the ‘positive side effects of bads’.

111. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 7.

112. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 7.1

113. Klaus Rasborg, ‘From “the Bads of Goods” to “the Goods of Bads”’: The Most Recent Developments in Ulrich Beck’s Cosmopolitan Sociology’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, nos. 7–8: 166, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418810418>.

Following on from Beck's reference to the globally transformative outcomes of the Second World War, he asks, 'does the unfolding catastrophe of climate change constitute, in the same way as the Second World War, a potential for emancipatory catastrophism and the implied realization of cosmopolitan institutions?'¹¹⁴ As has been noted, this raises the question of how to identify sacred norms on an account of emancipatory catastrophism initiated by climate crisis. Throughout his discussion, Beck repeatedly invokes the sacred without specifying how it is to be defined, rather leaving the answer implicit or to be grasped intuitively:

I did not argue in terms of a philosophical-normative cosmopolitanism. I argued that climate change *empirically* produces a basic sense of existential and ethical violation of the sacred, which creates the potential for all sorts of normative expectations and developments – norms, laws, technologies, urban changes, international negotiations and so on.¹¹⁵

The lack of any substantive proposal for identifying the sacred in particular instances of emancipatory catastrophism, however, introduces a tension into Beck's programme. Beck elsewhere characterises risk as an essentially secular paradigm:

I would say that risk is a modern concept. Some people say there has always been risk, but I don't think this is the correct way of understanding matters. Risk runs contrary to religious interpretations of the world because it puts the decisions of humans at the centre and not gods, faith or nature. So, risk emerges as a way of comprehending and coping with the decisions and actions of people.¹¹⁶

Moreover, Beck's methodological invocation of climate change as a 'fixed star' centralises nature in a way that may conflict with the characterisation of risk as essentially secular.

114. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 7.

115. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 7.3

116. Gabe Mythen, 'Exploring the Theory of Metamorphosis: In Dialogue with Ulrich Beck', *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 7–8 (2018): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418810420>.

In placing sacred or unwritten norms at the core of emancipatory catastrophism, Beck comports with Taylor on the centrality of ontic sources. Yet, where Beck refers to ‘norms’, the significance of Taylor’s sources is that they have an immanent aspect. In this regard, a religious atavism argument built on top of Taylor’s account potentially clarifies the ambiguity in Beck’s programme on this point. Indeed, in certain respects Beck’s account may be seen as complementing Taylor’s. On a Beckian reading of Taylor’s account, the sacred norm violated by climate crisis is the principle of mutual benefit at the heart of the modern moral order. Yet, Beck’s revisionary impulse may simultaneously be understood in terms of Taylor’s hypothesised longing for fullness. Taylor’s account of the mutual benefit principle is one in which the placement of this principle at the centre of social order is an impoverishment of human possibilities, insofar as mutual benefit began as just one dimension of providential aims for human beings:

We saw above how the discourse of the modern moral order reshaped the understanding of Providence. It led in a sense to an ‘economistic’ view of it. But the change which is fateful for the story I’m following here is the narrowing of the purposes of Divine Providence. God’s goals for us shrink to the single end of our encompassing this order of mutual benefit he has designed for us.¹¹⁷

On Taylor’s view, the phenomenological experience of the immanent frame and the corresponding affirmation of everyday life leaves people longing for some transcendental frisson, which Taylor traces to the notion of the sublime in Western culture:

Both Burke and Kant, in their writings on the sublime, see [an] element of personal safety as a necessary condition of being moved by it. But it is far from being the whole story. The sublime can give us an agreeable frisson; and it is a feature of the buffered

117. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221.

identity that we often experience such a frisson where our ancestors were genuinely terrified, as in horror movies about witches and possession.¹¹⁸

Beck's revisionary stance towards methods might too be understood in terms of a dissatisfaction with the post-Durkheimian dispensation, in which the increasing abstraction of ontic sources is understood as constricting human possibilities. Much of Taylor's programme emerges from analysis of tensions within the modern moral order, and Taylor is concerned with a problem of overdetermination within that order:

Freedom as a central good is overdetermined in the modern moral order: it is both one of the central properties of the humans who consent to and thus constitute society, and it is inscribed in their condition as the artificers who build their own social world, as against being born into one that already has its own normal form.¹¹⁹

In this sense, the overdetermination of norms in itself may also contribute to Taylor's theorised malaise, being contrary to the (religiously) atavistic instinct to value monological principles over multiplicity.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Taylor's genealogical account of the modern moral order in contemporary liberal democracies, the norms to which theorists of the climatological turn appeal require ontic sources for their sense, and these may in turn be linked to legacies of the West's theological past. Religious tensions at the heart of Enlightenment rationality, which persist in contemporary Western societies, are reflected in certain aporias of ecological discourse,

118. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 337.

119. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 80.

for which Ulrich Beck's theory of 'emancipatory catastrophism' provides one model. Despite Taylor's irenic voice and essentially explanatory purposes, his redescription of contemporary liberal democracies in terms of theological and religious antecedents produces a critique that emphasises the contingency of prevailing paradigms, thus militating against any interpretation of those societies as being formed on ahistorical and transcendentally valid values. Taylor's account in particular of a progression through Durkheimian stages of society, in the course of which ontic sources become increasingly rarefied and occluded from public scrutiny, presents one form of religious atavism account by which to reframe the revisionary impulses of the climatological turn. On redescription through the hermeneutic of religious atavism, the ambiguous role of the 'sacred' in Ulrich Beck's account of emancipatory catastrophism reflects a tension in Enlightenment accounts of secularization: between the teleological modern moral order of mutual benefit and the anti-teleological stance of methodological atheism (a legacy of the Enlightenment). In view of the foregoing, the reliance among theorists of climatological turn upon deliverances of the natural sciences may reflect an underlying longing to repristinate sacral sources of order.

FOUR

Atavism and Cultural Politics (Rorty)

The philosopher Richard Rorty is known principally as a central figure in the tradition of North American pragmatism. Like Charles Taylor with his genealogy of secular modernity, Rorty provides a specific historicist interpretation of belief in liberal democracies, and – also like the case of Taylor – this may be used as a resource for critically redescribing climate crisis in terms of religious atavism. In contrast to Taylor’s genealogy, which puts forward a positive account of the ‘modern moral order’, Rorty’s interpretation of secular modernity may be characterised as privative, being determined by a quietistic orientation towards philosophy overall. In many respects, Rorty’s thought presents a rich set of contrasts to Taylor’s. Where Taylor tends to be constructive in aims and pursues largely explanatory purposes, Rorty is revisionist and broadly deflationary. Moreover, the historicism in Rorty’s work is aphoristic and elliptical, and thus markedly different in structure and form from the expansive genealogies of Taylor. For Rorty, broad philosophical truths can be invoked through historicist analogies that take historical progression for granted and treat as axiomatic the tendency for regnant paradigms to drift into desuetude. Nevertheless, as philosophers, notwithstanding the differences in their specific positions, Rorty and Taylor both develop bodies of social thought underpinned by distinctive epistemological commitments. On Rorty’s pragmatism, as on Taylor’s realism, conceptual and sociological accounts of secularization may be linked without any need of a mediating framework.

This chapter begins with a broad description of Rorty's philosophical pragmatism, with reference to Nicholas Rescher's distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' varieties of pragmatism, where the latter is akin to deconstruction and similar methodologies of epistemic relativism. Although epistemic relativism is often associated with anti-anthropocentrism – as in the views commonly represented among theorists of the climatological turn – the soft character of Rorty's pragmatism is linked to a thoroughgoing anthropocentrism, on the basis of which Rorty rejects the need for transcendent sources in validating human projects. Rorty's stance of 'anti-authoritarianism' is strongly critical of contemporary quests for more-than-human validation, redescribing these as latent vestiges of Western monotheism – in short, as religious atavism. Similarly, a Rortyan form of religious atavism argument interprets Ulrich Beck's hypothesis of 'goods' emerging from 'bads' as an appeal to non-human sources of validation for cultural projects.

Rorty and historicist analogy

Rorty's epistemological pragmatism underpins his use of historicist analogy in acts of critical, deflationary redescription. Rorty's career, beginning with the appearance of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, is marked by the influence of thinkers both within and without the Analytic tradition (similarly to Taylor's). The influence of philosopher and historian of science Thomas Kuhn, and Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts, shows up in particular to a significant degree extent in Rorty's understanding of conceptual, social, and cultural change.

The end point of Rorty's overall revisionary trajectory is philosophy conceived as a largely narrative and socially engaged undertaking, which Rorty calls *cultural politics*. Rorty makes a trope of a particular historical analogy that redescribes contemporary problems in terms of bygone antecedents, of which faith in a creator-deity is the usual predicate. The complex interrelations between the different elements of Rorty's thought may be understood by linking each back to Rorty's metaphor of *skyhook* as description of any vestige of dependency on transcendent sources of validation for human endeavours, a form of atavism particular to politically liberal societies.



Rorty's historicism, in contrast to Taylor's, is a largely 'negative' or privative aspect of his philosophical pragmatism. Overall, Rorty's philosophical pragmatism may be divided into two strands:

One is negative – a critical diagnosis of what Rorty takes to be defining projects of modern philosophy. The other is positive – an attempt to show what intellectual culture might look like, once we free ourselves from the governing metaphors of mind and knowledge in which the traditional problems of epistemology and metaphysics . . . are rooted.¹

Rorty's philosophical quietism underpins his dismissive attitudes towards religion in general and forms of Christianity in particular, and Rorty broadly uses the concept of religious faith as a metaphor in redescribing appeals to non-human sources of validation for human projects.

1. Bjørn Ramberg and Susan Dieleman, 'Richard Rorty', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2023 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/rorty/>.

Rorty's critical quietism reflects his place and impact in the tradition of philosophical pragmatism overall. The philosophical tradition of pragmatism is a broad, multiplicitous topic that necessarily covers diverse positions and figures spanning over a century and a half, and tends to be divided according to a periodization of classical pragmatism – corresponding to the period of its founding figures, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952) – and pragmatists of the twentieth century:

*Pragmatism is the name of an unruly philosophical family. The first pragmatists . . . disagreed over fundamental philosophical issues; and when post-Deweyan pragmatists, such as Sidney Hook, C.I. Lewis, Nelson Goodman, W.V.O. Quine, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, Richard Posner, and Susan Haack are included, the discord becomes more pronounced.*²

The early pragmatists ‘took evolutionary theory to open up a new epoch in philosophy and intellectual life generally’,³ reframing received philosophical paradigms in terms of contingent forces of development and progression under the influence both of ‘Darwinian naturalism’ (as opposed to ‘Newtonian naturalism’) and late-nineteenth century Hegelianism.⁴ The synthesis of influences in the early pragmatists’ philosophical naturalism is advanced by Rorty in the latter half of the twentieth century in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which substantially revitalised a tradition that had by that time (the year 1979) fallen somewhat into abeyance.⁵

2. Robert B. Talisse, ‘Pragmatism and Political Theory’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Stephen P. Turner, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), 131, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111399-10>.

3. Steven Levin, ‘Classical Pragmatism and Liberal Naturalism’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*, ed. Mario De Caro and David MacArthur (London: Routledge, 2022), 83, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351209472-10>.

4. Robert Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, foreword to *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, by Richard Rorty, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), xii, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv33mgbns>.

5. Pragmatist philosophers working since the appearance of *Mirror of Nature* are sometimes referred to as neopragmatist, especially in reference to those seen as championing forms of epi-

Rorty's synthesis, in particular, of twentieth-century Analytic and Continental thinkers in *Mirror of Nature* is radical in the context of mid-twentieth century Anglophone philosophy.

At its core, Rorty's programme rejects the idea of philosophy as an enterprise with privileged methods for enquiry into essences and universals, in which regard Rorty challenges assumptions in Analytic philosophy of the era so fundamental as to be tenets of common sense. In this early phase of Rorty's mature thought, he takes aim specifically at the idea of 'representation', describing it as both central in modern philosophy and irredeemably flawed. 'In *PMN* Rorty argued that representationalist understandings of mind and meaning originally developed by early modern philosophers and still dominant in updated-form twentieth-century analytic philosophy [sic] doomed their advocates to an unfruitful oscillation between skepticism and foundationalism.'⁶ Rorty's retrieval of the pragmatist tradition with *Mirror of Nature* is a pivotal moment in Analytic philosophy, inaugurating a retooled and refocused philosophical pragmatism that questions core assumptions of the tradition. *Mirror of Nature* has naturally elicited polarised reactions among Rorty's colleagues, and Rorty has remained a controversial figure since its publication.⁷ Chief among *Mirror of Nature*'s innovations is the use of philosophers who were either little regarded or virtually unknown in post-war Analytic philosophy, principally John Dewey (1859–1952), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and Ludwig

stemic relativism. Martin Palecek, 'The Ontological Turn Revisited: Theoretical Decline. Why Cannot Ontologists Fulfil Their Promise?', *Anthropological Theory* 22, no. 2 (2021): 170n11,

6. Brandom, 'Achieving the Enlightenment', xv.

7. Rorty's intervention in Analytic philosophy came somewhat unexpectedly, as he had been best known before *Mirror of Nature* for an incisive and influential essay in philosophy of mind (below) but not as a theoretical bomb-thrower of any description. Richard Rorty, 'Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental', *The Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 12 (1970): 399–424, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2024002>.

Wittgenstein (1889–1951).⁸ To many of Rorty's colleagues, *Mirror of Nature* set out an agenda that appeared to challenge the foundations of philosophy as a field of enquiry altogether.

For pragmatists, Rorty thinks, there is no sense in regarding essences and universals as objects of reference but rather the only sort of things – in areas of abstraction – that one can reliably refer to are vocabularies.⁹ On the Rortyan view of vocabularies as anchoring objects of reference, notions of essence or any naturally legitimated 'order of reasons' emerge not from correspondence to anything in the world itself but rather from conventions of privileging certain ways of talking about the world over other ways of talking about the world. The conventions of privileging one vocabulary over another may, in turn, be understood in cultural and historical terms. The consequent view is strikingly similar to that articulated by Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus in their epistemological programme of robust realism: 'we should not be held captive by the world-picture picture. We do not need a synoptic view of something called "the world". At most, we need a synoptic narrative of how we came to talk as we do.'¹⁰ Without access to any eternal account of things in a Platonic sense, Rorty thinks, the best that human beings may hope for is the instantiation of consensus among themselves, and the very notion of essences and universals should be seen as an expedient that has – for historical reasons – attained certain privileges through convention.

8. Rorty's embrace of Continental figures is unusual among Analytic philosophers at the time of *Mirror of Nature*'s publication, and traditional boundaries between the two domains become more porous in the following decades.

9. Rorty's focus on vocabularies indicates the influence of the linguistic turn in Analytic philosophy of the twentieth century.

10. Richard Rorty, 'Naturalism and Quietism', in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Philosophical Papers 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 150, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812835>.

Where *Mirror of Nature* is concerned with demolishing what Rorty sees as the pernicious paradigm of representation, the follow-up volume to *Mirror, Consequences of Pragmatism*, presents a positive account,¹¹ ‘a pragmatism inspired by James and Dewey, but expanded so as to encompass also the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein’.¹² Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, equal parts philosophy, political theory, and literary criticism, is notable in its sympathetic account of the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida.¹³ Where *Mirror of Nature* focuses, fairly narrowly, on topics of epistemology and philosophy of mind, *Contingency* connects Rorty’s epistemological anti-foundationalism to political ideas, presenting a vision of liberalism in which irony – as a broadly diffused historicist habit of mind – plays an ameliorative role, allowing new and better vocabularies to supersede superannuated ones.

It should be noted that many among Rorty’s Analytic colleagues who themselves identify with the pragmatist tradition find his interpretation of that tradition to be idiosyncratic or distorting. Susan Haack, in particular, insists that Rorty significantly misinterprets Dewey. Brian Leiter and Bernard Williams describe Rorty as an epistemic relativist in generally disapproving terms, and Taylor is among Rorty’s prominent critics. In considering the variety of epistemological stances that may be covered by philosophical pragmatism, two kinds of

11. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

12. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, xxiv.

13. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

distinction are helpful. The first is Nicholas Rescher's broad categorisation of 'soft' and 'hard' forms of pragmatism:

The first 'soft' version is deflationary and deconstructionist. Its motto is 'Forget about truth and focus on praxis.' It is pointless to think of truth as correspondence to reality because, after all, we have no way to get at reality independently of what we think to be true. . . .

But there is also a very different, 'hard' version of pragmatism. This position insists on retaining the traditional conceptions of truth as adequation to fact (*adaequatio ad rem*) and maintains the traditional definition of the concept in its gearing to truth-reality coordination.¹⁴

For Rescher, Rorty's pragmatism unequivocally belongs on the soft side of the pragmatist ledger: 'Richard Rorty's post-modern version of pragmatism is particularly radical in this regard. With Rorty, pragmatism collapses into a free-wheeling speculative free-for-all.'¹⁵ In contrast to Rorty's orientation, hard pragmatists retain a commitment to what Rescher calls 'a self-subsistent and person-indifferent reality principle'.¹⁶

A second idea that helps make sense of differences between different pragmatisms is Huw Price's account of different forms of naturalism. Although any instance of pragmatism, by virtue of the tradition's historical debt to evolutionary theory, arguably involves some degree of naturalism, different pragmatists can be distinguished from each other according to the nuances of their naturalist commitments. Price distinguishes between 'object' naturalism and 'subject' naturalism, where the former corresponds to a traditional, Enlightenment naturalism and the latter 'focuses on the human being qua natural creature, and why we have come

14. Nicholas Rescher, 'Pragmatism at the Crossroads', in *Studies in Pragmatism*, ed. Nicholas Rescher, vol. 2, *Collected Papers* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 68, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110326284>.

15. Rescher, 'Crossroads', 73.

16. Rescher, 'Crossroads', 71.

to have the concepts we do, rather than focusing on what things in nature – if any – those concepts are *about*.¹⁷ Rorty largely concurs that object naturalism, in a formulation along the lines of Price's, partakes of the Cartesian foundationalism that pragmatism is supposed to have left behind, agreeing that 'philosophers should shift, as Price puts it, "from philosophizing about objects to philosophizing about vocabularies" (and thus change from being, in Price's language, "object naturalists" to being "subject naturalists").'¹⁸

For Rorty, shifting philosophy's focus from essences to vocabularies means emphasising how particular ways of talking developed, and – in the absence of transcendent standards – historical accounts exhaust the possibilities of explanation. Yet, in contrast to the rich genealogical accounts in Taylor's work, Rorty's historicism in practice takes the form of simple analogies that draw upon a normative sense of cultural, social, or civilizational progression. The quintessential predicates of the standard Rortyan historicist trope are, first, relationship with a monotheistic creator-deity as source of access to transcendence, and second, Platonic conceptions of 'the true' as correspondence between transcendence and the mundane. On Rorty's view, talk of correspondence between this world and another is fundamentally driven by desire for more-than-human validation of human projects and the bad intuition that the most potent sources of legitimacy must lie beyond the anthropic. By the Rortyan historicist trope, then, any appeal to non-anthropocentric warrants for cultural or political projects may

17. Brandon Beasley, 'Naturalism without a Subject: Huw Price's Pragmatism', *Inquiry* 66, no. 10 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1820903>.

18. Richard Rorty, 'Reply to Huw Price', in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), 292.

be critically redescribed in terms of crypto-theological inheritance – in short, as religious atavism.¹⁹

As an example of how Rorty uses his historicist trope, in reflecting on the aims of his own *Mirror of Nature*, Rorty writes that

the pathos of epistemology is the pathos created by setting ourselves an unreachable goal – defining the point of inquiry as the attainment of a description of reality which would swing free of human needs and interests. Epistemology restages the orthodox Christian narrative of the impossible attempt of a soul burdened by Original Sin to imitate God – the impossible attempt of a conditioned being to live up to the unconditioned.²⁰

Another example of the historicist trope that Rorty so frequently invokes is a sloganised version of an idea by the mid-twentieth century philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996), whereby secularization is a relatively simple conceptual transformation in which soteriological hope for a future life is transmuted into the utopian hope of a better world for future generations.²¹ Yet, despite Rorty’s reliance on the story of secularization, throughout Rorty’s corpus there is no extended instance in practice of the *geistesgeschichte* that he theorises.²² The comparatively straightforward way that Rorty invokes historicist difference is reflected in the style in which he

19. In his historicism, Rorty follows the philosopher he describes as his ‘intellectual hero’, John Dewey, for whom the way was paved by others in the tradition of American pragmatism, in particular William James.

20. Richard Rorty, *Anti-Authoritarianism*, xxviii.

21. The hypothesis of transmuted soteriology comes from Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, which is largely a rebuttal of Karl Löwith’s religious atavism argument that modernity and its historically peculiar institutions are best understood in terms of antecedent concepts from the West’s theological phase of civilization. Sjoerd Griffioen, ‘Modernity and the Problem of Its Christian Past: The *Geistesgeschichten* of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet’, *History and Theory* 55, no. 2 (2016): 185–209, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10796>.

22. Richard Rorty, ‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’, in *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, Ideas in Context 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49–76.

discusses secularization. In contrast to Taylor's nuanced and expansive approach to questions of secularization, Rorty espouses a traditional, streamlined, and largely linear story that bears the marks of fin-de-siècle optimism and belief in a process of ongoing improvement in Western foundational premises.²³ Moreover, although Rorty understands social and conceptual change as a process of new vocabularies replacing previously inherited ones, for Rorty the process of iteration and replacement does not reflect a progression of increasing incorrigibility but rather is understood in terms of conditionality and contingency.²⁴ In his conception of social and cultural change as occurring through the continual replacement of vocabularies, as noted above, Rorty was substantially influenced in particular by Thomas Kuhn and the idea that theory change occurs not gradually but rather through relatively abrupt paradigm shifts.²⁵

Rorty adapted Kuhn's basic notion of conceptual change for a paradigm of cultural discourse. The influence of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* extends well beyond fields of science scholarship, and the concept of the paradigm shift has been deeply absorbed by the wider culture. Kuhn's core insight is that the history of science – as represented by continuity and change in scientific theories – does not show theories developing according to iterative cycles of hypothesis, testing, and verification but rather indicates that covering

23. Rorty's account of secularization in this linear, non-problematized fashion owes much to Darwinian views of moral and social order and may be referred to as Deweyan secularization, in view of Dewey's influence on Rorty.

24. For Rorty, it is awareness that vocabularies inevitably come to be abandoned and superseded that characterises the *liberal ironist*, who realises that there will be no arriving at a 'final' vocabulary, an idea that Rorty develops in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

25. Rorty's treatment of Kuhn and his work may also be related to Mary Hesse's 'principle of no privilege' and Hilary Putnam's notion of 'pessimistic meta-induction'. Stathis Psillos, 'Realism and Theory Change in Science', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2022 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/realism-theory-change>.

theories appear suddenly and as if from nowhere, and often with the effect of abruptly transforming disciplinary agendas. The gradual increase of explanatory power, Kuhn thinks, has a privative or destructive effect on the field in question, insofar as a paradigm shift occurs only once a given covering theory must answer for anomalous findings beyond a certain threshold. In other words, Kuhnian progress occurs not through triumph but through failure. Rorty took Kuhn's distinction between 'normal science' and 'abnormal science' and turned it into a dichotomy of 'normal discourse' and 'abnormal discourse'. Abnormal discourse on Rorty's account produces conditions under which there emerge new ways of speaking about given topics, just as in Kuhn's formulation paradigm shifts happen under the conditions of abnormal science.²⁶

For Rorty, the consequence of an epistemic focus on vocabularies, together with a Kuhnian model of conceptual change, is an account of disciplinary hierarchy as being essentially flat.²⁷ On the view of disciplines as being governed by no transcendentally validated hierarchy, different fields of knowledge cannot be adjudged as qualitatively different from each other according to an objective standard of reference but rather represent just so many language games having no relative priority to each other. To suggest that the humanities and the natural sciences, for example, are in some sense really, qualitatively different to each other is simply to engage in just one further language game. Another consequence of Rorty's anti-realist

26. The later Kuhn distanced himself from the forms of epistemic relativism whose authors were substantially influenced by his work.

27. This account of disciplines as lying on a flat hierarchy is related to Rorty's rejection in principle of any Cartesian 'natural order' of reasons.

position on theory change and disciplinary hierarchy is his ‘great man’ theory of theory production, which reflects and is part of an antipathy to theory in general. Insofar as there is no transcendent basis for the validity of a given theory, and no single given theory brings one closer to the truth in a given matter, theories in themselves – regardless of their apparent outward efficacy – have no special significance beyond their association with the individuals who promulgate them.²⁸ Rorty sees accounts in which the natural sciences categorically merit top place in the hierarchy of vocabularies as little more than cultural chauvinism. Moreover, although specific disciplines are obviously capable of producing knowledge within a context defined by specific aims, no single method common to the disparate fields of the natural sciences can be described except at high levels of generality and abstraction. Thus, scientism in a Rortyan sense refers to the idea that there is some pan-disciplinary method in the natural sciences, and the Rortyan rejection of scientism is a version of the historicist trope by which such unifying hypotheses are redescribed as instances of metaphysics or ontotheology.

The various strands of Rorty’s critical programme can be brought together in Rorty’s notion of the *skyhook*, which is a versatile metaphor for any putative point of access to incorrigible foundations.²⁹ The Rortyan skyhook, broadly speaking, will tend to refer to expressions of

28. In Rorty’s manner of distinguishing between theory and intuition, theory is demoted to being little more than dressed up versions of the well-worn tricks and gimmicks that societies and individuals use to meet their needs.

29. Rorty seems to be influenced in his use of the skyhook metaphor by Daniel Dennett’s use of it, and in both cases there are distinct overtones of a religious atavism argument: ‘In calling certain explanations skyhooks, Dennett is linking them to the concept of God. He is suggesting that if we take the nonexistence of God seriously, certain possibilities are closed to us, and we have to honestly face this and make do with what is available. In this he is echoing Richard Rorty, who said much the same in his defense of pragmatism and coherence theories of truth and knowledge.’ Jim Slagle, *The Epistemological Skyhook: Determinism, Naturalism, and Self-Defeat* (London: Routledge, 2016), 230.

scientific realism. ‘What we cannot do is to rise above all human communities, actual and possible. We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence – mere agreement – to something like “correspondence with reality as it is in itself.”’³⁰ For Rorty – contrary to influential views since at least the early twentieth century – the attainments in science and technology of the modern era do not indicate that institutional science is converging on truth. Although modern societies may fairly take proud in their accomplishments, there is no basis for characterising a contemporary scene as more fully realised than its predecessors according to a transcendent, more-than-human standard of comparison.

The sort of scientific naturalism dependent on a skyhook would hold that one can be more eidetic about *things in the world* – what the philosopher of language J.L. Austin famously referred to as ‘medium-sized dry goods’ – than about such abstract objects as social norms, conventions, and practices. In contrast, on the Rortyan view, abstract or linguistically constructed features of the world are every bit as natural as those with physical properties:

One of the benefits of getting rid of the notion of the intrinsic nature of reality is that you get rid of the notion that quarks and human rights differ in ‘ontological status’. This, in turn, helps you reject the suggestion that natural science should serve as the paradigm for the rest of culture, and in particular that philosophical progress consists in philosophers’ getting more scientific.³¹

Although Slagle here gives priority to Rorty, it is not altogether clear who is influencing whom as a matter of provenance.

30. Richard Rorty, ‘Science as Solidarity’, in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Philosophical Papers 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173643.003>.

31. Richard Rorty, ‘Introduction’, in *Truth and Progress*, Philosophical Papers 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

The views of Rorty on skyhooks and scientific realism are largely contrary to the robust realism developed by Taylor and Dreyfus, who paraphrase Rorty to the effect that ‘there is nothing more we can say about what makes the propositions of science true than what makes our beliefs about everyday objects true. Both correspond to how things are, and to do so both depend on our embedding.’³² In other words, disciplines on either side of a divide between epistemic cultures are on a level with each other, and scientific realists can only adjudicate between different covering theories on the basis of extra-scientific commitments. Rorty feels, furthermore, that although modern science has contributed a great deal to philosophy, further such contributions will not be forthcoming. The scientific enterprise – throughout the early modern and modern eras – verified the sort of naturalism that precludes the presence or operation of non-corporeal forces (‘ghosts’) in the physical world and thereby made possible forms of philosophical materialism. Beyond this point, however, Rorty thinks philosophers will gain nothing further from the natural sciences.

As has been noted, Rorty’s epistemological commitments underpin and inform his social thought, which is characterised by a thoroughgoing anthropocentrism. The latter part of Rorty’s career is marked by a turn away from technical issues in philosophy, such as epistemology and philosophy and mind, towards theorising a form of philosophy that he refers to as ‘conversational’. Building upon Rorty’s ideas, as described above, about theory change and the flatness of disciplinary hierarchies, Rorty supposes that philosophy ought to abandon its

32. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 137.

traditional preoccupation with apodeictic demonstration and instead be a narrative form of utopian social thought that he calls ‘cultural politics’. Rorty’s notion of philosophy as cultural politics refers to a process of adjudication, through discursive engagement in liberal democracies, between different visions of the collective good.³³ Rorty thinks that just as disciplinary hierarchies correspond to no natural order of reasons, neither do cultures or social institutions, all of which may be up for grabs in a contest between different dreams of desirable human futures. Just as a given culture is distinguished in nothing more than having its own language game to play, different cultures can be understood naturalistically, with need of no greater ontological depth than is supplied by the idea of ‘discursive practice’:³⁴

We should stop trying to put our discursive practices within a larger context, one which forms the background of all possible social practices and which contains a list of ‘neutral’ canonical designators that delimit the range of the existent once and for all. If there were such a context, it would of course be the proper object of study of an expert culture charged with determining the future direction of the Conversation of Humankind. But there is no such context. ‘Ontology’ is not the name of an expert culture, and we should stop imagining that such an expert culture would be desirable. Only when we do so will we put what Heidegger called ‘onto-theology’ behind us.³⁵

Philosophy as cultural politics in liberal democracies, Rorty thinks, should focus on thinking up new and better human futures, without any need of the more-than-human for guidance or validation. Utopian proposals in the vein of Rorty’s cultural politics simply present visions of

33. One may note here an analogy to Charles Taylor’s ‘best account’ principle, by which topics in the human sciences may only be dealt with by posing one genealogical account against another, and the genealogical accounts will be formulated in terms fully understandable only from a first-person perspective.

34. For instance, Roman Catholicism is no more or less entitled to be regarded as a distinct culture than particle physics; for Rorty, both are on a par with each other.

35. Richard Rorty, ‘Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God’, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Philosophical Papers 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812835.002>.

hitherto unbroached possibilities – similarly to how works of literature have often played a significant role in reform movements – and thus Rorty’s vision of philosophy as done ‘without theses and arguments’ is that of a discipline concerned with getting behind appearances transforming into one that is simply a resource for new ways of talking.³⁶

Rorty’s conversationalist stance on philosophy presents it as having two broad modes: the ‘eidetic’ and the ‘palliative’ or ‘therapeutic’.³⁷ On Rorty’s view, eidetic philosophy understands its purpose as producing pictures of the world to a high degree of verisimilitude but, Rorty thinks, the legacy of eidetic purposes in Western philosophy has diminished the Analytic tradition to little more than a set of formal exercises. Therapeutic philosophy, on the other hand, is a process of identifying ‘pseudo-problems’, which philosophers should not attempt to solve but rather should discard.³⁸ The philosophical quietism that Rorty expresses in his vision of philosophy’s proper purposes is related to his anti-foundationalism, and it is principally this point that has led Rorty’s critics to charge him with practicing a broadly deleterious form of relativism, although Rorty rejects that term:

Rorty . . . has a distinctive stance in the contemporary philosophical world. It is one that is often described as ‘antirealist’, ‘relativist’, ‘subjectivist’. But Rorty repudiates such labels. His point rather is that we should get away from a number of philosophical dichotomies which have supposedly outlived their usefulness; we should learn that we can lay them to rest, that they add nothing of value to our thought.³⁹

36. There are reasons to think, however, that Rorty’s conception of conversational philosophy does not support a stance of ‘anything goes’. Stylistically Rorty relies on building arguments carefully through adducement of non-controversial lemmas, basic building block of argumentative discourse.

37. The ‘palliative’ in this sense is sometimes referred to as ‘therapeutic’. Rorty also uses the terms ‘historicist’ and ‘conversational’ interchangeably with ‘therapeutic’.

38. Rorty saw his notion of therapeutic philosophy as a synthesis of Wittgenstein and Dewey.

39. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 40.

As has been seen, for Rorty philosophy is therapeutic insofar as it shifts ossified boundaries of discourse. Dewey's pragmatism in particular guided Rorty towards the view that the best outcome anyone can hope for in doing philosophy is the production of commentaries on one's own time and place.⁴⁰ On the view of philosophy as a form of social thought, problems of the canon are never so much solved as abandoned and moved on from. Indeed, shifts in philosophy tend to track social and cultural developments, as opposed to being linked to causes internal to philosophy itself.⁴¹ Therapeutic philosophy, then – in another parallel between the social thought of Rorty and Taylor – is parasitic upon the unarticulated consensus of a given time and place.



As has been touched upon above, the form that historicism takes in practice in Rorty's work is a broad analogy that most commonly relates contemporary phenomena to religious and theological antecedents. For Rorty, the prime historicist analogy refers to an epochal shift in Western history that has taken both conceptual and sociological forms and over the course of which the Western world has left behind a religious past in favour of a secular future. The

40. This Deweyan notion echoes Hegel's description of philosophy as 'its own time comprehended in thoughts'. Paul Redding, 'Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2020 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hegel>.

41. Marxism in the present day might be regarded as an example of a disused (rather than theoretically solved) philosophical system, insofar as the comparative irrelevance of Marxism after the fall of the Soviet Union has not come about through any breakthrough in political philosophy but rather has followed the language game that it constituted ceasing to persuade, in view of the geopolitical failure of the national system it had sustained.

Rortyan historicist trope also portrays Platonic questions about the nature of the ‘true’ and the ‘good’ as a contemporary analogue to inherently religious quests for more-than-human, transcendent sources of validation. A representative example of Rorty’s historicist trope would be the following short passage, in which a normative sense of historical progression is made to do a great deal of work:

The lectures in this volume attempt to envisage what philosophy would be like if our culture became secularized through and through – if the idea of obedience to a non-human authority were to disappear completely. One way of putting the contrast between an incompletely and a completely secularized culture is to say that the former retains a sense of the sublime. Complete secularization would mean general agreement on the sufficiency of the beautiful.⁴²

Rorty’s use of the historicist trope aligns with his view that philosophy should cease to be apodeictic and instead be practiced as a form of narrative or storytelling.⁴³ Importantly, Rorty’s historicist trope is often put to broadly deflationary purposes. In contrast to methods of historicism used for explanation and insight, Rorty understood his philosophical quietism as a stance from which to declare that a given problem or idea had outlived its cultural usefulness. Rorty often adopts this revisionary stance against fashionable anti-anthropocentrism.

Rorty’s thoroughgoing anthropocentrism

An important consequence of Rorty’s anti-foundationalism and his commitment to philosophy as a form of cultural politics is his rejection in principle of appealing to sources of validation

42. Rorty, *Anti-Authoritarianism*, xxvii.

43. This style is referred to in different ways in Rorty’s corpus, including ‘conversational philosophy’, ‘historicist philosophy’, ‘quietism’, and philosophy ‘without arguments or theses’.

for cultural and political projects that lie beyond human consensus and imagination. The most mature form of Rorty's philosophy presents pragmatism as a whole as a form of cultural 'anti-authoritarianism', and this may be linked to the previously mentioned notion of the epistemological skyhook. In short, Rorty's rejection in principle of transcendent sources of validation for human projects commits him to an uncompromising anthropocentrism. For Rorty, contravention of anthropocentrism encompasses traditional religion along with forms of realism that see truth in terms of correspondence to a reality behind mere appearances, among other commitments. 'The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that.'⁴⁴ As a corollary of his view that the liberal individual is the only source of visionary proposals, Rorty characterises attempts to seek validation elsewhere – or attempts at achieving communion with non-human sources of underlying unity – as latent remnants of Western monotheism.

On Rorty's historicist trope, the attempts by contemporary philosophers to find incorrigible foundations for epistemology should be understood as a historical permutation of Judaeo-Christian monotheism, with both cases requiring the sense of being in touch with some non-human source of validation.⁴⁵ Rorty's historicist trope implicitly invokes the Kantian idea of Enlightenment as freedom from 'self-imposed immaturity'. Hermeneutically, Rorty's

44. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6.

45. In Rorty's early work, reference to religion as such often serves as a vernacular shorthand for superstition and naturalistic fallacies, although in the latter part of Rorty's career his views on religion become significantly more nuanced.

charge of religious atavism has the effect of psychologising the enduring force of foundationalism, whose proponents implicitly fail to understand their own motivations. For Rorty, self-knowledge means historicist awareness of epochal change, and such knowledge legitimates a thoroughgoing, self-conscious anthropocentrism.⁴⁶ For Rorty, then, anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism – so far from the standard stance in the climatological turn – are natural expressions of one's emergence from Kantian *unmündigkeit*:

In seeing the humanizing of the norms governing our practical activity as the core Enlightenment insight, Rorty is at one with Kant's account. . . . For there Kant construes the Enlightenment as announcing the emancipation and coming to maturity of humanity, our casting off our juvenile need for and dependence on normative tutelage from without, in favor of the adult dignity that consists in ourselves taking responsibility for our ultimate commitments.⁴⁷

Reference to more-than-human or transcendent sources has, Rorty believes, become *flyblown* by association with bygone worldviews. In practical terms, the hope for salvation through contact with a source of sacrality, whether this takes the form of Christian sacraments or the philosophers' 'Truth with a capital T' will divert attention from the serious business of utopian dreaming. Rorty's historicist trope, therefore, is a means of historicist redescription. 'Rorty practices, preaches, and theorizes about the sort of self-consciousness that consists in

46. Rorty's conception of 'liberal irony' is developed in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, and refers to a phenomenon whereby awareness of historical change both critiques one's personal ideological commitments and also creates a sense of expanded possibilities by invoking the inherent revisability of received vocabularies. The Rortyan liberal ironist is capable of recognising her own preferred vocabulary as the outcome of contingent historical forces and as therefore being ephemeral. A generalisation of Rorty's argument regarding epochal change may be given in the formula 'just as [superseded norm], so [operative norm]'.

47. Brandom, 'Achieving the Enlightenment', viii–ix.

redescription: in deploying new vocabularies that alter what we take to be a reason for what, and so what we can mean and think.’⁴⁸

Reference to the skyhook appears in two different senses in Rorty’s work, with the first being an epistemological or methodological idea. With reference to the natural sciences in particular, Rorty describes the skyhook as ‘something which might lift us out of our beliefs to a standpoint from which we glimpse the relations of those beliefs to reality.’⁴⁹ Where Rorty invokes the skyhook with reference to the natural sciences – that is, as an epistemological idea – the influence of Daniel Dennett is important to note,⁵⁰ and Rorty concurs broadly with Dennett, for whom, Rorty notes, skyhooks are

such inspiring and mysterious nonphysical mechanisms as the imitation of Platonic Forms by material things, the approximation of Divine perfection by the revolutions of Dante’s lovesick stars, the framing of Nature’s Laws by Nature’s God, the call to moral obedience from the depths of Kant’s noumenal realm, and the Descents of the Dove and of the Muse.⁵¹

Rorty cites some of the specific instances that Dennett describes in his book:

Dennett treats Chomsky (who thinks that a ‘language organ’ in the brain emerged by a process distinct from natural selection), Roger Penrose (an eminent physicist who has revived Gödel’s attempt to milk some philosophy out of his theorem), and John Searle (the great would-be debunker of Artificial Intelligence) as united by a yearning for skyhooks. All three hope that Darwin will turn out not to have been the last word.⁵²

48. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, xxvi.

49. Richard Rorty, ‘Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism’, in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Philosophical Papers I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173643.001>.

50. Dennett develops his own notion of the skyhook in his *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (London: Penguin, 1995); and *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).

51. Richard Rorty, ‘Cranes and Skyhooks’, review of *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, by Daniel Dennett, *Lingua Franca* 5, no. 5 (August 1995), <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9505/rorty.html>.

52. Rorty, ‘Cranes and Skyhooks’.

Rorty here is emphasising the deflationary purpose in Dennett's use of the skyhook term, with the bad implement of the skyhook counterposed to the good implement of the 'crane'. The second sense of the skyhook as Rorty uses the term is more broadly cultural:

I argue that an anti-representationalist view of inquiry leaves one without a skyhook with which to escape from the ethnocentrism produced by acculturation, but that the liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantage of ethnocentrism.⁵³

In this broader sense of the skyhook metaphor there is a link between Rorty's epistemological anti-foundationalism and his later, more general position of anti-authoritarianism in politics and culture. The later, enhanced conception of the skyhook refers not to a point of access for incorrigible knowledge at the level of epistemology but rather any sort of object – physical or abstract – understood as potentially providing transcendental legitimation. The cultural skyhook represents a conceptual movement in Rorty's career, from the principle of there being no foundations for epistemological knowledge to the principle of there being no philosophical foundations for cultural or political projects. Furthermore, a fortiori, as philosophy in itself has no privileged access to foundational sources, there is no basis on which to claim that philosophy serves as a foundation for other areas of enquiry or human endeavour.⁵⁴

A rejection of foundationalism across different contexts and domains is the keystone of Rorty's thought, according to the summation of Rorty's career put forward by the philosopher

53. Rorty, 'Introduction: Antirepresentationalism', 2.

54. Rorty is critical of what he sees as the 'overphilosophication of politics', by which he refers to various features of contemporary leftism with origins in the New Left. Rorty rejects the notion that political movements require or benefit from anything like philosophical grounding. Despite the broad methodological affinities between Rorty's pragmatism and deconstruction, Rorty decries what he sees as intellectual excesses in critical theory. Richard Rorty, 'The Overphilosophication of Politics', *Constellations* 7, no. 1 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00174>.

Robert Brandom. In his foreword to a volume that Brandom describes as ‘Richard Rorty’s long-lost, last book’,⁵⁵ Brandom presents an account of Rorty in which ‘the principal animating and orienting impulse of pragmatism is now identified as its anti-authoritarianism. Its ultimate goal is our emancipation, both in practice and theory, from subjection to non-human authority’.⁵⁶ As Brandom presents the matter, the constitutive movement in Rorty’s philosophy is an analogy from Enlightenment ethics to epistemology:

Just as we should be anti-authoritarian in ethics in rejecting the authority of God over the correctness of what we do, we should be anti-authoritarian in epistemology by rejecting the authority of objective reality over the correctness of what we believe. Construed as the non-human locus of this sort of authority, Reality no more exists than God does.⁵⁷

As a framing for Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism, Brandom invokes the idea of the Enlightenment as having initiated a secularizing process: ‘As Rorty is thinking of it, the great achievement of the original Enlightenment is on the side of ethics. In broadest terms, it is substituting the secular for the sacred in our understanding of the source and nature of our most fundamental obligations.’⁵⁸ Yet, Brandom also describes Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism in terms of a tension in the legacy of the Enlightenment:

Rorty diagnoses a fundamental, but hitherto unremarked, tension in the most basic commitments of Enlightenment philosophy. It is a tension between its critical, humanistic, anti-authoritarian reclamation of ethical and political authority and responsibility from non-human usurpers, on the one hand, and on the other the core strategy of its epistemology: understanding mindedness and meaning in terms of *representation*. . . . For the proper Enlightenment teaching, he argues, is that we should give up (as prag-

55. Brandom, Rorty’s doctoral student at Princeton, bids fair to be regarded as one of Rorty’s most important interpreters. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, vii.

56. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, vii.

57. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, xi.

58. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, vii–viii.

matically unintelligible) the normative notion of ‘ultimate correctness’ that is correlated with that concept of ‘overriding nonhuman authority’, in both the practical and the cognitive domains.⁵⁹

The conceptual movement in Rorty’s thought from skyhook to anti-authoritarianism links Rorty’s epistemology and his social thought. Combining the figure of the skyhook with Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism suggests the figure of a ‘cultural’ skyhook as shorthand for a comprehensive Rortyan position. Insofar as Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism is understood through the historicist trope of ameliorative secularization, the cultural skyhook is a resource for religious atavism accounts of climate crisis. The interpretive principle in such an account is the anthropocentrism and utopianism that understands cultural projects in themselves as worthy of being advanced without requiring justification from ancillary sources.

‘The goods of bads’ as Rortyan cultural skyhook

Beck’s thesis of ‘goods’ issuing from the ‘bads’ of climate crisis may illustrate a distinctively Rortyan religious atavism account. Rorty famously espoused a robust utopianism, and thus would applaud projects of ordinal revision on their own terms, but his cultural anti-authoritarianism would reject the suggestion that such projects require backup from prognoses of ecological peril:

Intellectuals cannot live without pathos. Theists find pathos in the distance between the human and the divine. Realists find it in the abyss separating human thought and language from reality as it is in itself. Pragmatists find it in the gap between contem-

59. This tension is broadly analogous to the tension between teleology and anti-teleology in Taylor’s account of modern moral order, as observed in chapter three. Brandom, ‘Achieving the Enlightenment’, xxiii–xxiv.

porary humanity and a utopian human future in which the very idea of responsibility to anything except our fellow-humans has become unintelligible, resulting in the first truly humanistic culture.⁶⁰

Environmentalism of a utilitarian nature, then, may be applauded, and forms of ecologism that revise existing models of a human-nature relationship are not necessarily to be rejected in themselves, but the idea that climate crisis is a privileged – or ‘revelatory’ – source of guidance for human projects, such as is proposed by Bruno Latour and Clive Hamilton, is to be understood as a vestige of monotheistic dependency. The idea that Christianity in its formal iterations should be replaced by a ‘religion of nature’ is a trope at least as old as Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as old as the Creation*.⁶¹ William James saw Darwinism as a catalyst for such a religion:

In that ‘theory of evolution’ which, gathering momentum for a century, has within the past twenty-five years swept so rapidly over Europe and America, we see the ground laid for a new sort of religion of Nature, which has entirely displaced Christianity from the thought of a large part of our generation.⁶²

What is new – according to a religious atavism critique – in climate crisis grand narratives is the supposition of catastrophe as a vehicle of revelation. Whereas the cruelty and arbitrariness of the Old Testament Yahweh is a traditional point of Western *religionskritik*, in the contemporary climate-centric account it is catastrophe that steers human beings back towards rationality, away from a system predicated upon the mad myth of unlimited economic growth.

60. Richard Rorty, ‘A Pragmatist View of Contemporary Analytic Philosophy’, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Philosophical Papers 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812835.010>.

61. [Matthew Tindal], *Christianity as old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature. Volume 1*. (London: [s.n.], 1730).

62. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Dover, 2013), 111, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=1889337>.

Indeed, Rorty often explains the motivations behind what he sees as outmoded philosophical platitudes in terms of Nietzsche's notion that tragedy provides human beings with 'metaphysical comfort'. In this connection, Rorty understood his own project as a deepening of received naturalism, in a sense turning the premises of a quintessentially modern sensibility critically back on itself. Fearlessness in the face of a cosmos essentially characterised by its indifference to human perspectives – on views that understand there to be nothing but 'atoms and the void' – may be seen as a mode of heroism: the flourishing on the other side of hope's abandonment. On Rorty's deepened naturalism, belief in the heroic character of existentialist enduring might, too, be understood in terms of religious atavism, as the exchange of one kind of metaphysical comfort for another. Thus, the heroism that is implicit in anti-anthropocentrist stances such as those common across the climatological turn is challenged by the historicist sense, by which the certainties of past ages seem to have become inaccessible. This deepened naturalism of Rorty's pragmatism is glossed by Brandom in the following way:

Rorty insists that he is being more resolutely naturalistic than the fans of natural science among analytic philosophers. From his point of view, they have been taken in by [a certain] tradition in modern philosophy . . . and have allowed normative notions of authority and responsibility, correctness and incorrectness, evidence and justification to intrude into what should be a purely naturalistic story about our causal transactions with our environment. . . . Inheriting from the Descartes-to-Kant tradition the idea that thinking and believing should be understood in terms of representing reality, they resist the thought that the picture of reality as authoritative for the correctness of our representations is incompatible with that naturalism. For Rorty, that picture is a quasi-religious remnant that a thoroughgoing naturalism should sweep away.⁶³

63. Robert B. Brandom, introduction to *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), xiv.

Brandom's comments here refer to Rorty's philosophy of mind and epistemology, but in their import they may be read as expressing Rortyan 'anti-authoritarian' views of culture and politics.

Contemporary cultures marked out by opposition to anthropocentrism – such as forms of cosmopolitanism that valorise the 'planetary' in the context of the climatological turn – often appeal to ahistorical values, which appear as conditional and contingent in the light of a Rortyan religious atavism argument. In finding special privileges in the warrants it adopts, the climatological turn effects a 'scientific valorisation' that instantiates quasi-sacred narratives, large stories on the model of what Lisa H. Sideris refers to as 'the new cosmology' that effectively 'consecrate' deliverances of the natural sciences.⁶⁴ Consecrational responses to climate crisis are vulnerable to the Rortyan skyhook critique on the analogical idea that they place at the centre of secular morality and culture something on the order of a repristinated sacral source. Moreover, a Rortyan critique might continue that such a consecrational programme selects candidates for the sacral role on the basis of arbitrary qualities such as relative size, remoteness, and inscrutableness (e.g., the sense of awe and wonder evoked by interstellar panoramas).

In an analogous way, Beck's theory of 'emancipatory catastrophism' presents the deliverances of environmental catastrophe in terms of the 'positive side effects of bads'. As interpreted through a Rortyan skyhook account, theorists of the climatological turn using facts of eco-

64. Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

logical change as warrants for new conceptions of order express a latent longing for sources of direction in human affairs; the abstract attributes of climate crisis – of magnitude and unprecedentedness – imbue such phenomena with a sense of the sublime that foregrounds human finitude. As Rorty avers, in a psychologising form of religious atavism redescription ‘the attempt to make sublimity central to reflection on the human future is as dangerous as making God, or Sin, or Truth central to such reflection. As I see it, philosophy should treat the quest for the unconditioned, the infinite, the transcendent and the sublime as a natural human tendency – one which Freud has helped us to understand.’⁶⁵

Legitimate concern over ecological threats need not be regarded as invalidated by this Rortyan strategy but rather the consequence is a distinction between technocratic – or, traditionally environmentalist – approaches to ecological problems over against approaches that call for widescale social or civilizational reorganisation. On the Rortyan deflationary account, then, revelatory or redemptive interpretations of climate crisis are read as appeals to the cultural skyhook. Revelatory interpretations may be understood in terms of aspects such as voice, justice, and magnitude. In contrast to Rorty’s dictum that ‘the world does not speak’, many theorists in the climatological turn personalise the planet in order that it may play a testimonial role. Clive Hamilton’s insistence that ‘notions of the Earth as passive and fragile, including the loving Mother Earth and Pope Francis’s “sister who cried out to us,” no longer fit with the violent, angry behaviour of the Earth in the Anthropocene’ portrays the planet

65. Richard Rorty, *Anti-Authoritarianism*, xxxii.

itself as a participant in Rortyan cultural politics.⁶⁶ The skyhook, in the case of Hamilton's argument, is communion with the planet and the attribution of it as non-human source of evaluation.

Another way of interpreting climate crisis in 'revelatory' terms applies the logic of the 'fiat justitia, et pereat mundus' (let justice be done, though the earth should perish) to the problem of how to define human flourishing in an indifferent cosmos. The operative force of justice, in this sense, is not to do with retribution for violation of a code but rather interprets the apparent uniqueness of human beings as a cosmic anomaly. On especially pessimistic accounts, human flourishing may be seen even as compounding the basic absurdity of the human anomaly. That planetary peril – due to climate crisis – follows from the flourishing made possible by industrial civilization, in effect, rights an apparent cosmic imbalance. In these cases, the skyhook functions through human cognizance of the greater cosmos and the resultant sense of the sublime.

Yet another instance of the revelatory interpretation draws upon a commonplace of Anthropocene discourse: that the very magnitude of the new epoch represents – in and of itself – a source of order-giving meaning. An example of this emphasis on magnitude is Latour's interpretation of Gaia's significance, which presents a vision of the planet as a quasi-personal entity that stands in horizontal rather than vertical relation to human beings. Redescription of the planet as an entity with human attributes such as agency is often done with the self-con-

66. Clive Hamilton, 'Towards a Fifth Ontology for the Anthropocene', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 25, no. 4 (2020): 114–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1790839>.

scious aim of countering anthropocentrism, by qualifying human beings' sense of their own uniqueness: an anti-Protagorean idea that rejects the adage of 'man is the measure of all things'. For Rorty, debates on the status of the Anthropocene are not at issue – the veridicality of the Anthropocene does not necessarily enter into a consideration of its legitimacy as a platform. The issue for Rorty would be that the theorists' embrace of the Anthropocene reflects a tension between the wish for validating paradigms of order and the legacy of the Lyotardian rejection of grand narratives. To be sure, many observers have interpreted the paradigm as a form of cultural imperialism. On the Rortyan critique, however, what marks out the Anthropocene as an especially appropriate candidate for deflation is the widespread perception that it has been put forward for the role of grand narrative by the cosmos itself, an expression in the language that is 'nature's own'.

In the current discussion, Rorty's views on environmentalism or climate change per se are of interest, but there is little to no comment on these topics in Rorty's works. One somewhat obscure source, nevertheless, offers some clues as to Rorty's disposition generally. In a conversation with Stanford professor Robert Harrison, Rorty reveals his relative indifference to ecological issues.⁶⁷ Harrison steers the conversation with Rorty towards the claim that philosophy will have discovered a new central topic for itself through the cultural zeitgeist, which is energised by environmental issues. For Harrison, the turn in thought would not be arbitrarily opted for but rather undertaken out of recognition of its necessity. Rorty dismisses

67. Among discussants at a conference on Rorty's thought that took place at the University of Cambridge in September 2019, Harrison's interview of Rorty seemed not to be widely known, with many lamenting the paucity of sources available for determining Rorty's outlook on climate change.

the notion of Harrison's hypothetical turn out of hand, posing the rhetorical question whether philosophy should, on the same logic, turn towards the topic of asteroids, reasoning that because an asteroid wiping out human civilization would be an event of awesome import then asteroids as a topic must participate in that same degree of importance. On the view Rorty expresses in this interview, essences are no more to be found in anthropogenic sources of civilizational destruction than in extraterrestrial ones.

In a similar way, Beck's attitude towards climate crisis becomes a form of cultural skyhook on the Rortyan iteration of a religious atavism hermeneutic:

The risk of climate change generates an *Umwertung der Werte* . . . turning the system of value orientation upside down – e.g., from postmodern cultural relativism to a historical new fixed star by which to mobilize solidarities and actions. This is the case because the global climate risk contains a sort of navigation system in the otherwise storm-tossed seas of cultural relativism.⁶⁸

The Rortyan hermeneutic underwrites redescription of such metaphors as 'fixed stars' and 'navigation systems' in the psychological terms of a *longing* for certainty that may be placed within a narrative of secularization and the trade-offs it has entailed. Such a psychologising account does not underwrite a stance of denialism but rather presents a deflationary challenge. Insofar as Beck's discussion of metamorphosis begins with the observation of general disorientation in a world of complexity and fearsome contingency, hypothesising a psychological longing for certainty in the form of cultural skyhooks introduces a factor of overdetermination in assessing the magnitude and nature of risk.

68. Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World: How Climate Change Is Transforming Our Concept of the World* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2016), chapter 3.4, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4673091>.

Beck does not elaborate on how to understand the sense in which risk ‘generates’ a transvaluation of values, but he does specify the location of such a process in discourse:

The environmental conflict is taking place *not* in the environment itself but in institutions, political parties, trade unions and global corporations. . . . Here, the viewpoint that is crucial for metamorphosis repeats itself: the complaint and criticism that in the end nothing is happening, that everything is remaining as it is, is precisely the paradoxical way in which the radical change in horizon is occurring, in which the new fixed stars are being established that bear the proud names of “world”, “humanity” and “planet”.⁶⁹

The question of how Beck would qualify his own account of the nature and function of such ‘fixed stars’ suggests ambiguities in his programme. In addressing the question of an ontology for risk and knowledge of it, [Beck’s] position can be described as a rejection of both, on the one hand, what he calls “naïve realism” and, on the other, “naïve constructivism” instead comprising a form of ‘reflexive realism’.⁷⁰ The British sociologist Anthony Giddens felt that ‘the “risk society” is . . . not necessarily synonymous with a significant increase in “real riskiness”. Rather, it is that *we*, as a result of late modernity’s increased reflexivity, are more *aware* of risks.’⁷¹ The instability of conception implied by this kind of constructivism raises the question of how to understand the fixedness of Beck’s fixed stars, in view of the tendentiousness suggested by the Rortyan critique from religious atavism. ‘In his later writings, Beck – despite some ambiguities – moves closer to this view, and points out that the decisive criterion for whether we live in a risk society is not necessarily that there is an objective increase in risk

69. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 4.3.

70. Klaus Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck: Theorising World Risk Society and Cosmopolitanism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 38–9, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89201-2>.

71. Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck*, 184.

(realism), but that risks are an increasingly important part of the social agenda (constructivism).⁷²

Questions of how much theorists like Beck are motivated by their own explicanda and how much by larger cultural imperatives may be approached through Rorty's conception of liberal irony, which relates to his theory of cultures as vocabularies, and his Kuhnian hypothesis of vocabular and discursive change. The liberal ironist is aware of continual desuetude and turn-over in history, and in being so aware does not harbour illusions regarding the prospect of a 'final' vocabulary. A final vocabulary in this sense means a person's self-constituting narrative or story, 'the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.'⁷³ For Rorty, importantly, not all members of liberal democracies are ironists, but liberal democracies present conditions conducive to the exercise of irony:

I shall define an 'ironist' as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) she has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses . . . (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others.⁷⁴

The revisionary power of climate crisis makes irony a poignant theme in climate discourse.

Many commentators see in the excessive irony of the *post*-postmodern a cultural and rhetorical corrolary to the destruction of the planet in which both are deleterious:

Indeed, an event can never happen that will signal the tipping point of climate change, of an extinction that can be avoided, but [*sic*] this event will never happen to human

72. Rasborg, *Ulrich Beck*, 184–85.

73. Rorty, *Contingency*, 73.

74. Rorty, *Contingency*, 73.

beings, to “us” who continue to wage war against nature by imagining property devoid of a co(i)mmunity, imagining an event as property with a pronoun in front of it.⁷⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has considered how Richard Rorty’s distinct form of philosophical pragmatism provides resources for a critique of the climate crisis worldview as an expression of religious atavism. Whereas the Beckian ‘goods of bads’ stance, widely shared among theorists of the climatological turn, is characterised by an argument from the necessity of categorial revision, a redescription of its aims in terms of a cultural skyhook is a counter-hypothesis in terms of latent religious impulses.

75. James Dutton, ‘Ironic Immunity: Proust’s Sustainable Extinction’, *SubStance* 49, no. 3 (2020): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/SUB.2020.0018>.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has interpreted climate crisis as a distinct worldview, through a philosophical hermeneutics that fosters interdisciplinarity and a synoptic approach to scholarship. It describes that worldview in the terms of a particular historical story – or genealogy – that is by, for, and about liberal societies. Using a postsecularity theory of liberal democracies, and with reference to the concept of religious atavism as a mode of critique within such societies, the thesis traces the concept of climate crisis back to religious and theological antecedents in Western liberal history. In its use of Charles Taylor’s concept of the modern moral order, the thesis responds to scholarly calls for Taylor’s work to be developed in the direction of ‘immanent critique’.¹ This conclusion reflects on specific ramifications of the foregoing investigation for climate change as a political issue. While mainstream interpretations would tend to locate climate crisis in various radical-revolutionary traditions, the religious-atavism critique reads it as an expression of reaction.

The thesis develops an account of Western secular modernity that synthesises the work of Taylor and Richard Rorty. While these two thinkers have different approaches, each in part reveals that climate crisis offers secularly coded access to transcendence in contemporary liberal democracies – societies which, importantly, by their nature generate high demand for such possibilities. A distinct worldview of climate crisis is nominally secular and fostered by an

1. Maeve Cooke, ‘Immanent Critique of the Immanent Frame: The Critical Potential of *A Secular Age*’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 29, no. 5 (2021): 738–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2021.2017716>.

interdisciplinary discourse that includes both academic scholarship and popular commentary. This *climatological turn* is outlined in the work of some of its representative theorists.² Rortyan and Taylorian accounts of religious atavism – represented by the metaphors of *skyhook* and *ontic sources*, respectively – render the concept of climate crisis in social-psychological terms, with reference to specific theological and religious antecedents in Western history.

On the Taylorian account, important tensions in a liberal-democratic *modern moral order* are resolved by climate crisis, because that crisis is felt to puncture the immanent frame of a liberal-democratic *lebenswelt*, thereby generating a sense of contact with the transcendent. On the Rortyan account, the treatment of the natural sciences in the climate crisis worldview suggests that a natural but ultimately dispensable longing for extra-human validation is at work within that worldview. These Rortyan and Taylorian critiques historicise climate crisis and thereby reveal its links to a distinctly liberal-democratic conception of social, moral, and natural order. Insofar as the objectives of the climatological turn can be cast as quasi-religious reformulations of cultural inheritances, claims for the *sui generis* quality of climate crisis come under pressure.

Leaving capitalist consumerism and market economics as the dominant stewards of the only known civilization in the universe will most likely seem, in retrospect, to have been a terrible idea. But let us keep in mind that when it comes to sustainability, all previous systems have failed too. Just like all current political ideologies – socialism, liberalism, communism, conservatism, centrism, you name it. They have all failed. But, in fairness, some have certainly failed more than others.³

2. The links between such theorists in academic contexts and their analogues in the wider culture are important for the predominance of ecological issues in early twenty-first century Western culture generally.

3. Greta Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, ed. Greta Thunberg (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 202.

The claim that political and cultural initiatives of climate crisis may be underwritten by purely universal, necessary, or primeval justifications comes under pressure. The religious atavism argument qualifies the claims that climate change is a matter of concern that transcends specific worldviews or ideologies, and thus qualifies the claims for ordinal renewal advanced on its behalf.

This conclusion also frames the findings of the thesis in a broad comparison of Rorty and Taylor. With reference specifically to the topic of liberal democracy, this conclusion reflects on the idea that pluralist societies require their foundational stories to remain unarticulated. On this theory, any contemporary locus of the sacred in the liberal West must necessarily remain occluded from a public viewpoint. If true, this apophatic condition of ordinal sources will tend to obstruct projects of self-conscious reenchantment, such as those advanced in the name of climate crisis.

The discussion first considers aspects of Taylor's and Rorty's work that make them suitable figures for a hermeneutics of religious atavism. In this regard, the synthesis of Continental philosophy with themes and problems from the Analytic tradition is a particularly important point of commonality between the two thinkers. The discussion then reviews constitutive features of climate crisis as a worldview, linking these to general dissatisfaction with systems of political liberalism and economic neoliberalism. Specific articulations of that dissatisfaction suggest that the apophatic condition of order in liberal societies triggers an atavistic desire for strong accounts, such as those provided by climate crisis.

As noted above, Rorty's and Taylor's views on epistemology may be linked to their respective approaches to social thought. In this regard, there are both convergences and dissimilarities between the Taylorian and Rortyan programmes. Where Rorty's style of argument is quietistic and deflationary, Taylor's is explanatory and irenic.⁴ Where Rorty adopts a quietistic position by which philosophical or scientific problems can be declared passé and consequently discarded, Taylor's builds a mosaic of contemporary and historical viewpoints to reveal a contemporary *sensus communis*. In each case, there is a link between epistemology and method in social thought. Rorty's willingness to abandon problems is a consequence of his philosophical pragmatism, while Taylor's principle of including the greatest number of voices in a given conversation is a corollary of his epistemological realism.

Alongside these divergences, there are many points on which Taylor and Rorty concur. An important example would be the indispensability of value systems for both societies and individuals. Rorty's version of this theory is the idea that *ethnocentrism*, in the absence in universally shared foundations, is an unavoidable aspect of any given social or personal outlook. 'An antirepresentationalist view of inquiry leaves one without a skyhook with which to escape from the ethnocentrism produced by acculturation, but . . . the liberal culture of

4. While Taylor's genealogy of modernity is expository overall, its potential to be used for critical purposes is high, insofar as its historicising method takes for granted the contingency of contemporary values and norms. Similarly, just as the subversive qualities of Taylor's thought tend to remain submerged, Rorty's conception of disciplinary hierarchies as being essentially flat makes possible an interpretive charity that has tended to be overshadowed by his generally dismissive tone.

recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantages of ethnocentrism.⁵ Taylor puts the indispensability of value systems in terms of inescapable *frameworks*:

I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us. . . . Moreover, this is not meant just as a contingently true psychological fact about human beings, which could perhaps turn out one day not to hold for some exceptional individual or new type. . . . Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.⁶

Thus, Taylor and Rorty reach a common position on the indispensability of value systems, despite having opposed methodological starting points. The outcome in both cases is a challenge to tendencies within the climatological turn, and in particular its attempts to derive legitimacy for its revisionary proposals from transcendental sources. Nor is this all. Rorty and Taylor converge as well in their both being Analytic philosophers who read and responded to Continental thinkers before doing so was common among their colleagues. Owing in large part to this common Continental factor, Taylor and Rorty are in agreement that philosophy should move beyond the epistemological truisms of body-mind dualism and mediationalism that are conventionally associated with Descartes.⁷

5. Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism', in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Philosophical Papers 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.

6. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

7. Although Taylor and Rorty both reject the legacy of Cartesian mediationalism, each has charged the other with having fallen back into mediationalist habits of thoughts. For instance, in *A Secular Age* Taylor refers to 'the development of [an] Inner/Outer distinction in a whole range of epistemological theories of a mediational type from Descartes to Rorty'. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 539.

Moreover, Taylor and Rorty agree in valuing genealogy in a philosophical sense as a resource for social thought, and they both draw upon historical narratives in which exceptional individuals have constitutive or even causal significance. Taylor hypothesises the social imaginary as being filled up, as it were, over many centuries in a top-down fashion, such that the ideas of high theorists – John Locke, for example – gradually become the tenets of common sense. This means that Taylor’s genealogy of modernity – innovative in so many respects – regularly treats traditional figures of the Western canon in much the same way as a traditional history of ideas would do. Similarly, Rorty embraces a Carlylean ‘great man’ conception of intellectual and social change,⁸ insofar as he believes that producing accounts of such change requires nothing more than reference to the apparent progenitors – *geniuses*, as Rorty puts it – of the new ideas at issue. Rorty’s recognition of exemplars as generative sources, however, in no sense necessarily ascribes virtue to the figures in question – rather, responsibility for seminal ideas is regarded simply as a matter of contingency and historical fact. On this view, Rorty suggests, theory is what comes about when the rough, unstructured work of geniuses is formalised, in a process much like that by which Taylor sees the social imaginary taking shape.

With reference to climate crisis in particular, Rortyan and Taylorian positions converge on explanations as to why the ecological might be a privileged resource for cultural renewal. On both Rortyan and Taylorian accounts of the natural or physical world, immanence is pre-

8. The phrase *great man theory* is used here as the canonical label for this class of ideas, and no sexist implications are intended by it.

sented as a form of constraint. Rorty's *eliminative materialism* may be analogised to Charles Taylor's interpretation of the modern condition as one in which individuals experience the world in terms of being 'buffered selves' within an *immanent frame*. By analogy, the immanent frame concept reflects Rorty's slogan of eliminative materialism, which is summed up in the observation that the natural world contains 'no ghosts':

Every speech, thought, theory, poem, composition, and philosophy will turn out to be completely predictable in purely naturalistic terms. Some atoms-and-the-void account of micro-processes within individual human beings will permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered. There are no ghosts.⁹

Yet, while Taylor holds out the immanent frame as a figure of pathos, an expression for the sense of entrapment – and foreclosure of communion with transcendence – which characterises the modern experience, Rorty's eliminative materialism is a prescribed position, in accord with his theory of philosophy's hygienic function.

Politically Rorty and Taylor are both leftists, but each represents a different strand of North American leftism. Where Rorty identifies throughout his career with the New Deal liberalism of the early twentieth-century US, much of Taylor's own thought is inflected by the role he personally played in the New Left of the 1960s. Taylor's work in leftist politics during his time as a student at Oxford was motivated by the same dissatisfaction with methodological reductiveness and naturalism that informs his approach to political and social thought. 'From his earliest days on the British New Left, Taylor launched a sharp rebuke of varieties of Marxist communism that were naturalistic, top-down, and technocratic. Central to his argument was

9. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 30th anniversary ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 387, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2116/stable/j.ctvc77b6z>.

the claim that Marxism had a problem of agency in the transition to post-capitalism.¹⁰ For Rorty, a commitment to more traditional ideals in leftism was of a piece with his skepticism towards the role of philosophy in post-war and in particular post-Cold War political thought.

Rorty has always been proud of his Leftist (anticommunist) legacy. At a time when it was unfashionable to be an anticommunist Leftist, when it was thought that all fervent anticommunists were conservatives or reactionaries, Rorty held to his Leftist reformist liberal commitments and his anticommunism. He certainly doesn't want to gloss over the violence, the racial hatred, the hypocrisy, and the unrestrained greed that have marked much of American history. But for him, Leftist leanings are not at all incompatible with a sense of patriotism and pride in the promise of the story of the displacement of a 'discredited older Left' by the New Left that was told by Christopher Lasch in *The Agony of the American Left*. He thinks it is a disaster that this influential narrative of the alleged failure and 'sellout' of reformed intellectuals is still taken as authoritative.¹¹

These political preoccupations have, in turn, made the nature of pluralism in liberal democracies a central focus for both Taylor and Rorty throughout their careers.¹² As a topic in phenomenology, pluralism refers not to specific social circumstances in a materialist sense, but rather to a domain of lived experience. At this deep and usually unarticulated level, the welter of disparate *lebenswelten* in a single society challenges the maintenance of foundational stories – at both personal and social levels – of which climate crisis has become a pre-eminent instance. Climate warrants become attractive in particular as the basis of personal and social

10. Jason Blakely, 'Radicalizing and De-Radicalizing Charles Taylor', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 29, no. 5 (2021): 696, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2021.1992476>.

11. Richard Bernstein, 'Rorty's Inspirational Liberalism', in *A Companion to Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 136, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118972199>.

12. Pluralism generally is a topic developed at length in those writings of Taylor's that look beyond theory and scholarship to address political questions directly. Recent examples include Charles Taylor, Patrizia Nanz, and Madeleine Taylor, *Reconstructing Democracy: How Citizens Are Building from the Ground Up* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); and Craig J. Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

projects of reenchancement. In this way, the concept of climate crisis can be understood as a product of liberal democracies per se, with reference to both Taylorian and Rortyan positions.

The idea of climate crisis as a reaction to liberal-democratic pluralism is, in turn, amenable to description in terms of religious atavism. Shifting understandings of social order have historically always generated reactions, as Taylor observes with reference to mutating relations between church and civil society in early modernity:

It is absolutely crucial to much Christian apologies from the French Revolution onwards, that the Christian faith is essential to the maintenance of civilizational order, whether this is defined in terms of the Modern Moral Order, or in terms of their earlier hierarchical complementarity. This is the very staple of counter-Revolutionary thought, as it flows from the pen, for instance, of Joseph de Maistre.¹³

A concept of climate crisis underpinned by a phenomenological sense of being unmoored from hitherto stable foundations may, thus, be interpreted with analogy to reactionary moments in political and cultural history. Such an interpretation is counter-intuitive if climate crisis is viewed as an inherently left-wing paradigm, but it echoes the historical fact that ecological thought underwrote reactionary movements in twentieth-century Europe, for instance. The preoccupation with pluralism on Taylor's part features throughout *A Secular Age*, in particular in Taylor's theories on the fragilisation of viewpoints and the *nova effect* of new belief formation. By fragilisation, Taylor refers to a phenomenon whereby commitment to any given

13. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 456.

viewpoint, belief, or ideology is implicitly weakened by proximity to opposing viewpoints, beliefs, or ideologies within a given society:

[The contemporary world] is a pluralist world, in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other. It is a world in which belief has lost many of the social matrices which made it seem 'obvious' and unchallengeable. Not all, of course; there are still milieux in which it is the 'default' solution: unless you have powerful intuitions to the contrary, it will seem to you that you ought to go along. But then we also have milieux in which unbelief is close to being the default solution (including important parts of the academy). So over-all fragilization has increased.¹⁴

The closely related theory of the nova effect refers to a self-propelling chain of novel religious belief and personal self-expression, which is characteristic of modern liberal democracies, and in which each wave of new positions creates yet another wave of new positions (with the word 'nova' indicating a spiralling figure). Taylor identifies the initial impetus of this spiral as the emergence of *exclusive humanism* as an alternative to Christian faith in Western societies. 'It's as though the original duality, the positing of a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond.'¹⁵ But, at the same time, it is precisely this situation of multiplicity in which unifying narratives, such as climate crisis, will tend to become increasingly attractive.

14. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 531.

15. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

There are further areas of concurrence between Rorty and Taylor, each of whom argue for a form of principle by which judgement in human affairs is *self-certifying*. For Rorty, the only version of truth that matters is the sort that emerges from consensus in human communities:

To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance. To attempt to evade this contingency is to hope to become a properly-programmed machine. This was the hope which Plato thought might be fulfilled at the top of the divided line, when we passed beyond hypotheses. Christians have hoped it might be attained by becoming attuned to the voice of God in the heart, and Cartesians that it might be fulfilled by emptying the mind and seeking the indubitable. Since Kant, philosophers have hoped that it might be fulfilled by finding the a priori structure of any possible inquiry, or language, or form of social life.¹⁶

This statement of Rorty's bears strong affinities with Taylor's account of what he terms the *human sciences*. For Taylor, hermeneutics as a methodology follows from the observation that human self-understanding can never obtain new starting points from philosophical naturalism, insofar as human beings are 'self-interpreting animals':

We have to think of man as a self-interpreting animal. He is necessarily so, for there is no such thing as the structure of meanings for him independently of his interpretation of them; for one is woven into the other. But then the text of our interpretation is not that heterogeneous from what is interpreted; for what is interpreted is itself an interpretation; a self-interpretation which is embedded in a stream of action. It is an interpretation of experiential meaning which contributes to the constitution of this meaning. Or to put it in another way: that of which we are trying to find the coherence is itself partly constituted by self-interpretation.¹⁷

Yet, at the same time, a great point of divergence between Taylor and Rorty is the matter of theism. While Taylor is open and frank about his own faith commitments, declaring his Roman Catholicism plainly and discussing the implications of it in his work, Rorty takes it for granted

16. Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism', in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166.

17. Charles Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 26.

that atheism and secularism will be the default positions of serious intellectuals. Rorty, in fact, often speaks of secularization as a linear and uniform process, much like the accounts that Taylor classifies in *A Secular Age* as *subtraction stories*. In one formal exchange between Taylor and Rorty, the former's forthright theism comes up against the latter's therapeutic quietism. In the context of a symposium on Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, Taylor rebuffs Rorty's insistence that human beings ought not to recognise any obligation beyond their links to one another. Taylor suggests that constitutive goods (an idea analogous to his ontic sources of social norms) are *necessarily* extra-human:

Why am I not happy to make my peace with Deweyan social-democracy, plus a sense of the importance of expressive creativity? Because I'm not yet satisfied with the Deweyan constitutive goods. . . . It seems to me that every anthropocentrism pays a terrible price in impoverishment in [regard to the human good]. Deep ecologists tend to concur from one point of view; theists from another. And I am driven to this position from both.¹⁸

Rorty, meanwhile, imagines religions as being on a par with cultures. On views of this kind, there will be no sense in drawing lines of demarcation between the cultural and the religious, as there will be no sense in placing any given culture or religion higher or lower on any sort of hierarchy. Hierarchical sorting would be simply one further instance of language game, or perhaps a positive proposal within the domain of cultural politics. There will, in short, be no adequate criteria by which to establish hierarchical relations among cultures and religions in a universal sense:

We regret the imminent loss of the birds of paradise and the great whales because we know it will take 10 million years for new species of equal grandeur to evolve, but when

18. Charles Taylor, 'Reply to Commentators', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, no. 1 (1994): 213, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2108369>.

it comes to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the secular humanism of the modern West, we suspect that – given peace, wealth, luck, and utopian rationality – these cultures will be extirpated only when new cultures, of at least equal grandeur, are available to take their places.¹⁹

On this view, there is no ontological deliverance that one can appeal to in choosing among different values within a given cultural or religious paradigm. This idea runs precisely counter to Taylor's theory that some sense of transcendence always underpins the ontic sources of value or constitutive goods of a given society, in particular liberal democracies. Talk of such goods is for Rorty just a move in one further language game: 'I want to argue that cultural politics should replace ontology, and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics.'²⁰ Yet Rorty, in the latter phase of his career and in particular in conversation with Gianni Vattimo,²¹ becomes more open to the idea of a postsecularity in which the traditional concept of religion is more complex, qualified, and potentially useful than is allowed for by his flat hierarchy of religions and cultures.

Rorty, then, is among the political philosophers of the early twentieth century – notable among them being Jürgen Habermas – who revised their earlier views of the public sphere as a space in which religious reason ought not to factor. Habermas, for example, went from a secularist to a postsecularist understanding of the proper relationship between religion and

19. Richard Rorty, 'Rationality and Cultural Difference', in *Truth and Progress*, Philosophical Papers 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 194–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625404.011>.

20. Richard Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God', in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Philosophical Papers 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812835.002>.

21. Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

politics. On the postsecularist view, religion may well be a personal matter but that does not mean that it must be confined to the realm of the private and considered to be without any public, or political, consequence. It seems that Rorty at least gestures towards the same idea in an important public exchange when he says, immediately after insisting on the secular being the political, 'Let us give up even secular ways of trying to assure ourselves that there is something large and powerful on our side. Let us try to make progress simply through hope for cooperation with one another, rather than in hope of achieving universal truth or contact with the transcendent.'²²

The Taylorian and Rortyan positions are ideal types by which to construct hypotheses about the lived experience of climate crisis. On the Taylorian, anti-anthropocentric position, the concept of climate crisis may be motivated by a longing to connect with sources of validation that lie beyond human self-governance and agency. On the Rortyan, anthropocentric position, political agendas motivated by the concept of climate crisis require no justification with reference to ecological calamity but rather may stand wholly on the basis of utopian speculation. On either account, climate crisis emerges from a dissatisfaction with the modern condition that operates independently of scientific reason, effectively serving as a template for the production of new unifying stories.

22. Jeffrey W. Robbins, foreword to *An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground between Philosophy and Religion*, by Richard Rorty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xix, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=908319>.



Rorty does quite a lot of work theorising historical genealogy as a philosophical genre, and an account of what he refers to as *geistesgeschichte* in the history of philosophy has been especially influential. In describing *geistesgeschichte* as a method of rational reconstruction, Rorty – in another parallel to Taylor – accords prime significance to *first-person plural* perspectives in mapping out large and important historical narratives:

For purposes of rational reconstruction and ensuing argument, there is no need to worry about whether a topic is ‘inescapable’. For *Geistesgeschichte*, the sort of intellectual history which has a moral, there is such a need. For the moral to be drawn is that we have, or have not, been on the right track in raising the philosophical questions we have recently been raising, and that the *Geisteshistoriker* is justified in adopting a certain problematic.²³

Rorty, however, does not himself carry out such genealogy in any sustained way, instead simply invoking a shared, underlying sense of such stories through the use of relatively thin historicist analogies. Furthermore, where Taylor both implicitly and explicitly emphasises continuity of cultural experience, Rorty’s philosophical quietism is inherently a recognition of the radical discontinuity in ideas and paradigms.

The role of continuity in Taylor’s thought echoes Robert Bellah’s heuristic of the conservation of cultural phenomena over time. Reflecting on whether processes that began in the Axial Age (conventionally thought to have occurred around 500 BCE) can be directly felt in contemporary societies, Taylor asks, ‘Is this merely superseded, relegated to an unrecoverable

23. Richard Rorty, ‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’, in *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, Ideas in Context 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625534.006>.

past? Or is it in various ways still present, and inescapably so, in postaxial life? Robert Bellah's crucial insight, formulated in the phrase "nothing is ever lost," points us toward some version of the second answer.²⁴ As explained in chapter three, this view is consonant with Taylor's epistemological realism, which understands knowledge of the world as an unproblematic outcome of direct, unmediated proximity to objects of enquiry. This dictum is significant in the attitude it expresses towards the recovery of past sources. 'The historic sediments of foregone ages may always be dug up again and may provoke us to criticize our contemporary ways of living. It is by no means predictable which road the future will take: will our society eventually ban all references to religion, or will it rediscover the richness of its religious past?'²⁵ By contrast, Rorty is content to speak of simply discarding paradigms that no longer serve their original ends, employing the language of *dropping* or *abandoning* – for instance, 'to think of metaphor as a third source of beliefs, and thus a third motive for reweaving our networks of beliefs and desires, is to think of language, logical space, and the realm of possibility, as open-ended. It is to abandon the idea that the aim of thought is the attainment of a God's-eye view.'²⁶

Principles of both continuity and disruption can be observed in the climatological turn. The thesis of Lynn White Jr. – an important point of reference for religiously inflected commentary

24. Charles Taylor, 'What Was the Axial Revolution?', in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011), 379.

25. Herbert De Vriese and Guido Vanheeswijck, 'The Performative Force of the Postsecular', in *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, ed. Justin Beaumont (London: Routledge, 2018), 94, <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.4324/9781315307831>.

26. Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511609039.002>.

and scholarship on climate change – is a vision of genealogical continuity (but without any corresponding theory of substantive transmission through history):

Our daily habits of action . . . are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient. It is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from, Judeo-Christian teleology. . . . We continue today to live, as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms.²⁷

While both Taylor and Rorty present Western secularization in terms of civilizational pathos, they frame the consequences of that pathos in different ways. Both describe the West's narrative trajectory as a shift away from frameworks of moral order being underwritten by divine or otherwise extra-human sources. For Rorty, however, the aspect of pathos is found in the persistent longing for extra-human guidance, which manifests most often in premises of realist epistemology and in cultural projects that seek to rebuild metaphysical foundations. For Rorty, this longing is a remnant of cultural monotheism that it is best simply to abandon. A similar sense of longing appears in Taylor's account, which characterises modernity as an ambivalence before palpably narrowed horizons of experience: a movement away from understandings of Providence and social order owing much to eighteenth-century natural theology, towards a thoroughgoing rationalism that renders foundational stories problematic, generates – as a by-product – a generalised longing for fullness.

If the concept of climate crisis is a specifically liberal-democratic construction, it is also an expression of religious atavism by virtue of religion's special role in the history of liberal democracies. Claims by revisionary theorists who hold out warrants of climate crisis are ne-

27. Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1205, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.

cessarily claims about the common good and shared values. The definition of common goods and shared values is a political matter in any society, but in the case of liberal democracies under conditions of pluralism it is famously difficult.

What is called neutrality in contemporary liberal philosophy should be seen as a generalization of the original ideal of religious toleration. . . . The liberal state is no longer required merely to be neutral between religions; it has to be neutral also between almost all aspects of its citizens' conceptions of the good, whether these are spiritual or secular.²⁸

Appeals to universality in such societies necessarily involve participation in Rortyan cultural politics. Theorists of climate crisis ask 'how to overcome the bias of human exceptionalism in the ethical appraisal of climate-adaptation measures. . . . To address the eco-centric challenge, it is necessary to think about ways in which we can re-design institutions so to give a voice to nature.'²⁹ As has been shown, ecological warrants draw their efficacy, in part, from the immensity and ubiquity of climate crisis. But strategies of redescription in terms of religious atavism make universality in itself a point of vulnerability: in view of the postmodern critique of grand narratives per se, claims to universality in themselves indicate the influences of retrograde principles.

The tendency for climate crisis to more and more resemble a grand narrative suggests that a factor of overdetermination is at play. Insofar as members of liberal democracies are subject to conditions of fragilisation, according to Taylor, and liberal irony according to Richard Rorty,

28. Cecile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 27, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674981560>.

29. Edo Pesch, 'The Good Life and Climate Adaptation', in 'Ethics of Climate Adaptation', special issue, *Sustainability* 14, no. 1 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14010456>.

any source of values or order – whether Durkheim’s social sacred or grand narratives in the vein of Lyotard’s *grand récits* – will be susceptible to deflation through critical redescription.

In the case of Taylor’s fragilisation, any given individual in a pluralist society will find her personal convictions, beliefs, or ideologies subject to attrition through contact with the convictions, beliefs, and ideologies of others:

Through increased contact, interchange, even perhaps intermarriage, the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith. . . . Then the issue posed by difference becomes more insistent: why my way, and not hers? There is no other difference left to make the shift preposterous or unimaginable.³⁰

In Richard Rorty’s conception of liberal irony, members of a given society with awareness of epochal change and historical contingency will be predisposed against adhering to any final vocabulary – some description of self and world that can be accepted as incorrigible – owing to the normativity of analogies between the forgotten verities of past epochs and present verities that will – it may be reasoned by induction – inevitably undergo the same fate:

The ironist, by contrast [with the metaphysician], is a nominalist and historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. So she thinks that the occurrence of a term like ‘just’ or ‘scientific’ or ‘rational’ in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the language games of one’s time.³¹

The phenomena of fragilisation and liberal irony are distinctive features of liberal democracies per se, and insofar as such societies require the animating sources of their Jamesian live options to remain at least partially submerged – lest they become subject to the agonistic cross

30. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 304.

31. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 74–75.

currents of public scrutiny – contemporary forms of the social sacred are necessarily hidden, as sources capable of being identified outright become susceptible to discursive critique.

Taylor's project in effect demonstrates that a Durkheimian social sacred persists even in those societies, such as contemporary liberal democracies, where the default option of secularism nominally precludes overtly delineating any unifying story. The social sacred in this sense refers to Durkheim's hypothesis that there will be an intimate link between a sense of social order and some underlying, constitutive element of sacrality that is publicly knowable:

If, following Durkheim, one identifies religion with the socially sacred, then by definition religion is the system of beliefs and practices in relation with 'the sacred' which serves to unify its adherents into a single moral community, 'the church'. This church for Durkheim is, however, coextensive with society, which in the modern context would mean 'the nation', rather than with what customarily we would call ecclesiastical institutions or religious communities. . . .

From this perspective, the process of early modern state confessionalization and the later process of de-confessionalization . . . can best be understood as processes of fusion, dissociation and relocation of the socially sacred, of ecclesiastical institutions and of individualized religion.³²

The ideas described here are, to be sure, highly abstract, and are not to be confused with specific, concrete critiques or descriptions of particular individuals or groups.

Conditions inherent to pluralistic societies make strong accounts of order susceptible to continual redescription. This raises the question of stability in the face of public scrutiny. Many theorists have presented climate crisis as *revelatory* in function – as a state of affairs that brings certain truths to light. The revelatory outlook is especially supportive of ordinal redefinition or revision. That climate crisis should supply warrants for accounts of moral order

32. José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 14, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004411982>.

(as in the case of environmental ethics) or social order (as in the case of Bruno Latour's claim that Gaianism is a worldview shift) naturally raises a Durkheimian question about the nature of the sacral sources that sustain those accounts. Over against claims that climate crisis makes social or civilization transformation a matter of urgent necessity, redescribing climate crisis in the terms of historically anterior religious archetypes is a way of linking its strength as a concept or paradigm to anxieties about ordinal stasis or stagnation.

Taylor interprets the Jamesian moral order as a framework of 'the rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other, even prior to or outside of the political bond.'³³ The challenge that climate crisis poses to the modern moral order of mutual benefit has a dual effect: it simultaneously breaks the logic of those bonds, and creates a sense of new ordinal possibilities. 'Our entry into the new climatic regime prompts renewed reflections on . . . questions of attachment and binding, and the obligations that this new sense of being-bound to – both shaped by and shaping – the earth's systems and process might entail.'³⁴ Here again the overdetermination problem becomes apparent. The sense of ordinal stasis as producing reactions to the modern moral order is remarked upon by Taylor, who remarks on specific historical antecedents thus:

We can see . . . the unease that the advent of a polite commercial society aroused among many people in the eighteenth century. This modern society was more pacific, productive, and egalitarian than what had preceded it, and all these things were seen as good. But there was a nagging fear that something was lost in all this; that manliness,

33. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385806>.

34. Daniel Matthews, *Earthbound: The Aesthetics of Sovereignty in the Anthropocene* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 20, <https://doi-org.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/10.1515/9781474455329>.

heroism, greatness of soul was being eroded; that the superiority of certain exceptional people was being drowned in the love of mediocrity.³⁵

Insofar as secularity goes together with pluralism, the proliferation of different religious or metaphysical commitments puts pressure on the cohesion of plural societies. On this point, Taylor makes an analogy between religious commitments and languages:

The nature of democratic society is such that there has to be one or two languages, or maybe three in the case of Switzerland, but the languages can't be infinite in number. People have to master enough of them to be able to deliberate together. But in the nature of modern Western society, the religious or metaphysical positions, I think that it's part of the analysis of *A Secular Age* that this multiplicity is galloping; it is increasing all the time.³⁶

In interpreting the religious resonances of climate crisis, much depends on how sources of discernible social, moral, or global order are necessarily occluded – through such mechanisms as Taylorian fragilisation or Rortyan liberal irony – under conditions of pluralism. This *apophatic principle* may then become a heuristic in discourse analysis. In applying the principle to climate crisis, one widens the potential sources of religious resonances therein, beyond those features traditionally associated with religion or the religious – for instance, contemporary forms of animism or panentheism. Under conditions of pluralist postsecularity, socially shared conceptions of civilizational order embedded in an unarticulated background become answerable to the description of the religious.

35. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 180, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385806>.

36. Charles Taylor, Jacob T. Levy, Daniel M. Weinstock, and Jocelyn Maclure, 'Conclusion: A Conversation', in *Interpreting Modernity: Essays on the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Daniel M. Weinstock, Jacob T. Levy, and Jocelyn Maclure (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 274, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=6348483>.

The social sacred is a fraught topic in the context of liberal democracies. The question of the place of the sacred, as it were, may even be approached through a consideration of whether liberalism itself is a political religion, chiefly owing to Schmittian views of legitimacy as being always inherently traceable to historically anterior, overtly theological societies in which legitimacy derived from transcendence:

In modernity, in Western societies at least, liberalism has become a political culture . . . and secular governing rationality through which this sacred power of sovereignty is articulated. . . . When the liberal state seeks to mediate religious conflicts, when it decides on matters of religious freedom, toleration and accommodation, when, in short, it determines the boundaries of the secular public space, it does so with a symbolic authority that has its foundations in theology and which continues to bear its legacy and imprint.³⁷

In a sense the problem of an occluded social sacred is the problem of political theology itself. This appears in Schmitt's original problem of legitimacy. 'What Schmitt's political theology is really averse to is pluralism. The sovereign state must be the single, transcendent authority in society, the unilateral decider of the borders and boundaries of the political community.'³⁸

The problem of the occluded social sacred raises questions about the feasibility of intentionally re-creating the sacred. Many such projects are specifically ecological in nature. Bronislaw Szerszynski, for instance, proposes that the Anthropocene presents human beings with an imperative to reform societies beyond conditions even of postsecularity:

We need not only to 'decolonize' the Anthropocene but also to 'desecularize' it – to be aware that we will share any new epoch of the Earth with spiritual agencies of different kinds. . . . The gods and spirits enumerated here are not mere epiphenomena of more

37. Saul Newman, 'Political Theology and Religious Pluralism: Rethinking Secularism in Times of Post-Secular Emancipation', *European Journal of Social Theory* 24, no. 2 (2020): 180–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020968673>.

38. Saul Newman, 'Political Theology', 183.

fundamental social, economic, technical and natural processes, but an integral part of what makes things flow, tune and distribute entropy and order in the changing body of the Earth.³⁹

Insofar as the concept of climate crisis is sustained principally by the discourse of liberal democracies, proponents of the climate crisis worldview tend to be sanguine towards ideas like international cooperation, free enquiry, and putting the common weal above the interests of privileged minorities:

There are others – a very small number of people – who think that some kind of dictatorship would be better suited to handle this huge global crisis. But there are no good dictatorships. . . . The idea of a non-democratic rule that would somehow seek the best for its citizens is nothing less than absurd. Justice and equal rights are essential for solving this crisis.⁴⁰

Proposed solutions to climate crisis tend accordingly to reflect a Western bias. ‘Democracy is the most precious thing we have, but as we have been reminded far too many times it is a fragile system and, unless the citizens are well informed and well educated in the matters that fundamentally shape their lives, democracy is easily manipulated.’⁴¹ Thunberg’s remarks reflect the widely observed tensions between the values of liberalism and the possibility that liberal societies may be ill-equipped to deal with the realities of climate change. Many theorists have observed that climate crisis and the Anthropocene undermine various presuppositions of liberalism, on the grounds that climate change is threatening various givens of everyday life.

The world in which we now live, where even our most mundane everyday behaviors such as using a computer and flipping a light switch have global ripples, puts pres-

39. Bronislaw Szerszynski, ‘Gods of the Anthropocene: Geo-Spiritual Formations in the Earth’s New Epoch’, in ‘Geosocial Formations and the Anthropocene’, special issue, *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, nos. 2–3 (2017): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276417691102>.

40. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 42.

41. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 42.

asures on the [public/private] Distinction that seem qualitatively different in scale and ubiquity. These intensifying tensions and novel pressures provoke questions about whether liberalism can survive the Anthropocene; if so, in what form; and what may be the role of the Distinction in this new epoch.⁴²

While attempts to galvanise political support for climate action often appeal to some sense of universal values, such appeals may sit uneasily alongside the pluralism of liberal democracies.

A dissatisfaction with received conceptions of order must be read through trends in Western culture since the end of the Cold War that suggest cultural pressure exerted by a sense of geopolitical suspense, stasis, and anticipation. The demise of the Soviet Union at the end of the twentieth century created a vacuum in received conceptions of global order and began a period of relative systemic stability and resilience in which a global political order based on liberal ideals and an economic system commonly referred to as neoliberal has been sustained. The resiliency of economic neoliberalism is underscored by anticipation of its imminent demise:

On the basis of a vastly improved understanding of what neoliberalism is, we can at least now agree that it is unlikely to terminate with any definitive paradigm-shifting crisis. In that sense ‘post-neoliberalism’ cannot refer to something that comes *exclusively* after neoliberalism, but rather . . . to a set of emergent rationalities, critiques, movements and reforms that take root in neoliberal societies and begin to weaken or transform key tenets of neoliberal reason and politics.⁴³

Much formal speculation has gone towards naming the successor of economic neoliberalism as the paradigm of global order. In this context, in which there is virtually an open-ended

42. Dale Jamieson and Marcello Di Paola, ‘Climate Change, Liberalism, and the Public/Private Distinction’, in *Philosophy and Climate Change*, ed. Mark Budolfson, Tristram McPherson, and David Plunkett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 379, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198796282.003.0017>.

43. William Davies and Nicholas Gane, ‘Post-Neoliberalism? An Introduction’, in ‘Post-Neoliberalism?’, special issue, *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211036722>.

search for alternatives or successors to the prevailing dispensation, climate crisis becomes a fecund source for new accounts.

Francis Fukuyama's *end of history* thesis remains a virtually indispensable point of reference in geopolitical and cultural discourse, having exerted an influence on theorists of all sorts since the end of the Cold War, when it emerged from a context of Western triumphalism following the long Soviet–US stalemate. In precis the theory predicts a long global hegemony of liberal-democratic order. At its core the theory observes that liberal democracies will be naturally disinclined to regard each other as geopolitical competitors.⁴⁴ But the emergence of liberal democracy as an ideological or systemic default was naturally the outcome of contingent circumstances and events. The twentieth century seems to have been marked, above all, by great alternations of calamity and achievement, and its legacy for the twenty first may be read, hermeneutically, as a yoking together of optimism and despair in human affairs. From the national aspirations that led to the First World War to the civilizational ideologies of the Second World War, the emergence of expressly civilizational ideals – to ensure the very continued viability of the human race – may be understood as a reaction to the collective shock felt at the senselessness of total warfare and unprecedented atrocity. Meanwhile, while early in the twentieth century Wilsonian liberalism, international Communism, and the various iterations of fascism were each held out as the answer to contemporary nihilism, in the end it was political liberalism that triumphed. From Taylor's account of the modern

44. This, then, may be regarded as a geopolitical corollary of Taylor's modern moral order of mutual benefit.

moral order, economic neoliberalism may be understood as having at its core the principle of mutual benefit, and a corollary of this is the importance of the atomic individual being allowed the greatest freedom of action within necessary limits. Economic neoliberalism is often portrayed in terms analogous to those that Taylor uses to characterise the order of mutual benefit, being simultaneously inescapable and perfidious in its mechanisation of lifeworlds organised around narrowly defined economic considerations.

The principle of religious atavism provides a psychological lens with which to read the relationship between climate crisis and economic neoliberalism. Far from straightforwardly suggesting a story of linear decline, that relationship is one both of affinity and opposition: affinity because capitalism is understood either in its industrial features or as a set of mentalities as being the root cause of climate crisis; opposition because the consequences of climate crisis are understood as spelling the end of capitalism either practically or politically.⁴⁵ Patrick Deneen suggests that it is a fallacy to believe that the very institutions of technoscience which have given rise to climate crisis in the first place can successfully contend with it:

Many elements of what we today call our environmental crisis – climate change, resource depletion, groundwater contamination and scarcity, species extinction – are signs of battles won but a war being lost. Today we are accustomed to arguing that we should follow the science in an issue such as climate change, ignoring that our crisis is the result of long-standing triumphs of science and technology in which ‘following science’ was tantamount to civilizational progress. Our carbon-saturated world is the hangover of a 150-year party in which, until the very end, we believed we had achieved the dream of liberation from nature’s constraints. We still hold the incoherent view that

45. Felix Creutzig, ‘Limits to Liberalism: Considerations for the Anthropocene’, *Ecological Economics* 177 (2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106763>; Minqi Li, ‘Anthropocene, Emissions Budget, and the Structural Crisis of the Capitalist World System’, *Journal of World-Systems Research* 26, no. 2 (2020): 288–317, <https://doi.org/10.5195/JWSR.2020.977>.

science can liberate us from limits while solving the attendant consequences of that project.⁴⁶

The tension between affinity and opposition indicates the problem of overdetermination. Does climate crisis drive a reaction against economic neoliberalism, or does a pre-existing animus towards economic neoliberalism motivate the concept of climate crisis? Being a term of art in different academic disciplines, economic neoliberalism is – like the Anthropocene – polysemous and adaptable, referring just as readily to an ideology, an economic ‘world system’, and ‘a complete way of life and a holistic worldview, in a way that previous models of capitalism’ were not.⁴⁷ Also like the Anthropocene, neoliberalism is often invoked as a shorthand for the effects of globalisation in the West. Prominent strands of Anthropocene discourse are overtly concerned with linking economic neoliberalism to the deleterious effects of climate crisis.⁴⁸ Also like the Anthropocene, the concept of economic neoliberalism remains only provisionally defined while still being a productive heuristic for theory and policy. ‘If U.S. policymakers remain beholden to neoliberal principles – despite much rhetoric to the contrary – the warming targets outlined in the Paris Agreement are a dead letter. Transcending neoliberalism, however, may offer real solutions.’⁴⁹

46. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 14–15, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300223446.003.0001>.

47. Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 6, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=5482831>.

48. Sally Weintrobe, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberalism Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

49. Anders Fremstad, and Mark Paul, ‘Neoliberalism and Climate Change: How the Free-Market Myth Has Prevented Climate Action’, *Ecological Economics* 197 (2022): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2022.107353>.

Applying the principle of religious atavism – and taking generalised anxiety about the hollowness of economic neoliberalism as a form of evidence – theories like Ulrich Beck’s emancipatory catastrophism may be redescribed in terms of a longing that the global order be revised. Climate crisis is simultaneously a justification for neoliberalism’s undoing – owing to the urgency of climate change’s chief effects – and confirmation of its nefarious character, because it repudiates the Taylorian mutual benefit principle. Having such powerful guidance for revisionary projects is desirable in itself, a point which is often made. Criticisms of ‘green economy’ approaches to the climate crisis, for example, state plainly the advantages of drawing upon ecological concern as a galvanising force:

By mitigating popular anxiety, the green economy stultifies effective action, and rehashes the tired violence vs nonviolence debates . . . which seek to moralize tactical questions and isolate militant actions as ‘extremist’ or unjustified. The green economy as a device, or weapon, implies coercion and manipulation.⁵⁰

The religious atavism principle also reads together trends that might otherwise be separated by disciplinary boundaries. Observing the historical coincidence of four distinct movements or turns in Western culture of the early twenty-first century, these might include the sustained global hegemony of economic neoliberalism; the rise of the Anthropocene as a paradigm; the re-evaluation of secularization paradigms among scholars of religion; and the emergence of a new features on the landscape of religious lived experience, in particular the trend of declining adherence to traditional or mainline forms of Christianity, the rise of self-identified

50. Alexander Dunlap, ‘The Green Economy as Counterinsurgency, or the Ontological Power Affirming Permanent Ecological Catastrophe’, *Environmental Science and Policy* 139 (2023): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2022.10.008>.

religious ‘nones’, and increasingly rich scholarship on the porousness of religious categories that has given rise to concepts such as *secular religion*.

As is conventionally recognised, the stadial concept of the Anthropocene came into existence with the coining of the term by Paul Crutzen in the year 2000.⁵¹ Over the course of the next decade the concept has gradually been developed and expanded, first by Earth scientists and then increasingly by scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Over the course of that development there has arisen an entire Anthropocene universe, with variations, iterations, and modalities that are informed by sundry fields.⁵²

At the same time, scholars of religion and social theorists began to revisit and revise the traditional view of secularization as an inexorable, inevitable, and linear process in modern societies. This academic re-evaluation of the secularization paradigm that had been dominant since the 1960s occurred just as patterns of faith self-identification in Western societies began to change. These developments were marked by an apparent paradox: whereas the force of traditional religion appeared to be waning, the overall landscape of religion was growing more multiform and syncretic. For instance, in Western societies since around the turn of the millennium there has been an increased tendency on the part of social research respondents

51. Peter Sloterdijk recognised early on what is now a commonplace: the Anthropocene resembles the revival of a ‘nineteenth-century epistemological habit’. Sloterdijk, ‘The Anthropocene – A Stage in the Process on the Margins of the Earth’s History?’, in *What Happened in the 20th Century?*, trans. Christopher Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 4.

52. Some of these, such as Jason Moore’s ‘Capitalocene’ or Donna Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’, have developed programmatically in their own right, while others are more ephemeral and even jocular or playful.

to self-identify as having no particular religious commitment or beliefs, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as ‘the rise of the nones’.⁵³

Yet scholarship has strongly indicated over the past few decades that religion often takes forms that cannot be accounted for fully by current theory. In recognition of this fact, scholars have developed categories of religious outlook that defy straightforward classification.⁵⁴ Those forms furthermore have modes and subvariants. For instance, Charles Taylor remarks on the phenomenon of ‘vicarious religion’, by which people who do not attend a mainline church still report being satisfied that those institutions remain extant and healthy and wishing for them to continue so:

This phenomenon means that we sometimes exaggerate the degree of ‘secularization’, in the sense of abandonment of religion, in some societies, measuring it simply by the drop in regular attendance at church. In many cases, this distance reflects ambivalence, uncertainty, or even something more positive, rather than abandonment of the faith.⁵⁵

This trend of increasing complexity in the landscape of religious studies has been more or less coterminous in time with the rise of climate crisis as a paradigm, and the concomitant

53. This finding is, of course, open to interpretation according to intrinsic factors in public polling research. For instance, ‘religious incongruence’ refers to the issue of respondents’ own conceptions of their faith commitments not corresponding closely to formal definitions as presented in polling prompts. Christopher P. Scheitle, Katie E. Corcoran, and Caitlin Halligan, ‘The Rise of the Nones and the Changing Relationships between Identity, Belief, and Behavior’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 33, no. 3 (2018): 567–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2018.1535379>.

54. Mikael Stenmark, for example, develops a sophisticated typology of worldviews, comprising such distinctions as ‘articulated’ in contrast to ‘lived’ worldviews and ‘reflective’ in contrast to ‘unreflective’ worldviews. ‘Worldview Studies’, *Religious Studies* 58, no. 3 (2022): 578, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412521000135>.

55. Charles Taylor remarks on many of these topics, including the notion of the Axial Age and ‘the older “official story” of sociology, that “modernization” ineluctably brings “secularization”’, in a retrospective that serves as a useful summation of his thought since *A Secular Age*. ‘A Catholic Modernity 25 Years On’, *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 75, nos. 3/4 (2021): 489, <https://doi.org/10.5117/ntt2021.3/4.009.tayl>.

questioning of normative order in the West. To substantiate any connection between these development with empirical methods is beyond the scope of the thesis, but it is referred to here as an indication of one possible pathway of theoretical development.

There may, moreover, be a correspondence between the diminishing fortunes of traditional religion and the rise of the climate crisis worldview in certain national polities. There is, in particular, a coincidence of high concern about climate change and low religious self-identification in Scandinavian societies. ‘For the typical, average, or “normal” person in Denmark or Sweden, religion just isn’t all that significant an element in their lives. They don’t think about it much, and they have relatively little to share or offer.’⁵⁶ At the same time, Sweden has produced a striking amount of climate change research, commentary and activism,⁵⁷ being the home of international figure Greta Thunberg and having a national electorate that supports world-leading climate mitigation policies.⁵⁸ Conversely, the major outlier among Western countries in declining religious observance, the US, at the same time shows a divergence from other liberal democracies in having relatively high levels of climate denial.

56. Phil Zuckerman, *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 94–95, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.18574/nyu/9781479851119.001.0001>.

57. Joseph Anthony L. Reyes, ‘How Different Are the Nordics? Unravelling the Willingness to Make Economic Sacrifices for the Environment’, *Sustainability* 13, no. 3 (2021): 1294, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13031294>.

58. Sweden and Denmark, for example, consistently rank ahead of all other countries in the Climate Change Performance Index, ‘an independent monitoring tool for tracking the climate protection performance of 59 countries and the EU.’ Jan Burck, Thea Uhlich, Christoph Bals, Niklas Höhne, and Leonardo Nascimento, *Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2023* (Berlin: Germanwatch, NewClimate Institute & Climate Action Network, 2022), 6, <https://ccpi.org/download/climate-change-performance-index-2023/>.

Redescribing the concept of climate crisis as a reaction to perceptions of ordinal stasis is, at its core, an act of deflationary historicism. This approach, as discussed in the thesis's introduction, may be illustrated through analysis of apocalyptic rhetoric in various kinds of discourse. On one hand, such rhetoric is seen as potentially unhelpful in political terms. Ulrich Beck refers to an 'apocalyptic imaginary' that inhibits a necessary process of rethinking received categories and paradigms. Referring to a pattern of regular disappointment with the outcomes of COP summits, Beck writes that 'in place of the re-emergence of politics, an *apocalyptic imaginary* now dominates the public sphere. . . . The climate pessimists promulgating this apocalyptic imaginary . . . the storm of climate change irresistably propels them into a political future to which their backs are turned and which they remain unable to see or grasp.'⁵⁹ Conversely, apocalypticism may be seen as a galvanising force for climate agendas. Alison McQueen considers apocalypticism in contemporary political realism through analysis of realist thinkers Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans J. Morgenthau.⁶⁰ McQueen, like Beck, invokes the idea of an apocalyptic imaginary, but in McQueen's case this is done to link her historical principals to contemporary topics. In considering the function of apocalypticism in present-day contexts, McQueen refers to the problem that political realism may have a deflating influence, insofar as it is – prima facie – opposed to notions of historical directionality that are inherent to apocalyptic thinking. 'The tragic worldview struggles to recognize or guide us through genuinely novel situations. . . . Given its difficulty in coming

59. Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), introduction.

60. Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 192–205, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316588307>.

to grips with novel threats, we might expect the tragic worldview to be similarly unhelpful today in orienting our response to, for example, global climate change.’⁶¹ McQueen addresses this problem by suggesting that political realism, and the tragic worldview that it engenders, can make use of apocalypticism as a form of ‘redirection’, by which the impelling force of apocalypticism is consciously directed to productive political ends. McQueen observes her historical principals doing something like, as when she sees that

Hobbes pursues two paths in his project – one that is overtly scriptural and another that is seemingly secular. His scriptural argument offers a deflationary reinterpretation of the end times, making its radical promises consistent with the demands of political order. Hobbes’s political argument stages a secular apocalypse, in which the terror and chaos of the state of nature usher in an enduring commonwealth ruled by a mortal God. In pursuing these two paths, Hobbes does not escape apocalypticism, but rather redirects it and tries to return it safely into sovereign hands.⁶²

McQueen’s notion of redirection therefore analogises from substantive religious conviction to self-consciously secular political commitment. In this formulation, apocalypticism potentially loses its association with moribund superstition or fanaticism by becoming little more than a narrative colour. McQueen distinguishes between the usefulness of a given apocalyptic claim and the truth value of that claim, arguing that ‘the apocalyptic imaginary makes the crises of the day intelligible. It imposes a narrative coherence on them.’⁶³ But, although McQueen recognises that the dangers of apocalypticism which her three thinkers recognised are no less real for present-day issues, she does not address the point that the principle of intelligibility may explain present-day apocalypticism as well as it explains bygone worldviews. Insofar as

61. McQueen, *Political Realism*, 198.

62. McQueen, *Political Realism*, 20–21.

63. McQueen, *Political Realism*, 193.

a bracketing method may ignore distinctions between narrative colour and true commitment, McQueen's interpretation indirectly raises the question whether apocalypticism is the right way of framing contemporary concerns at all, in view of interpretations by which apocalypticism functions predominantly as a source of frissons in a time of 'buffered selves'. On this view, the apocalypse – even if dark and terrible in character – would be welcomed as a respite from an interminable and rudderless modernity of the immanent frame.

One way of dealing with historicist deflation of inherited categories is to call into question the legitimacy of those categories overall. This strategy is used by novelist Amitav Ghosh and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. Both Ghosh and Chakrabarty argue that climate realities, by virtue of their scale and consequences, cannot be contained in the conceptual categories available in twenty-first century liberal democracies. This sort of view may be summed up as the *unthinkability* hypothesis, evidence in support of which is likely to be of a privative kind. For instance, Ghosh sees the unthinkability of climate crisis in the paucity of references to climate change in contemporary literary fiction. Ghosh describes this paucity with the rhetorical question 'why is the [literary imaginary] open to certain conceptions of the political while remaining closed to an issue that concerns our collective survival?'⁶⁴

Ghosh's stance dovetails with Dipesh Chakrabarty's thesis of the 'planet' as 'an emergent humanist category':

Planet emerged from the project of globalization, from 'destruction' and the futile project of human mastery. . . . Yet it is neither the globe nor the world and definitely not the

64. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 126–7.

earth. It belongs to a domain where this planet reveals itself as an object of astronomical and geological studies and as a very special case containing the history of life – all of these dimensions vastly out-scaling human realities of space and time.⁶⁵

Chakrabarty's invocation of *emergence* resonates with Ghosh's reference to the unthinkable: anything that emerges to awareness is, perforce, hitherto unknown or uncaptured. Chakrabarty's category of the planet is thus intended to get things right in a way that inherited frameworks cannot do. For Chakrabarty, some of those inherited frameworks are the ones the contemporary critical theory has inherited from Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. To argue for the insufficiency of Heidegger and Schmitt, Chakrabarty brings in the concept of the Anthropocene and points in particular to its foundations in the Earth sciences. He says that, for instance, 'Heidegger's stance against science and his assumption that the nature of human dwelling can be imagined without thinking of the "astronomical" object, our planet, are positions we can't support in the time of the Anthropocene.'⁶⁶

Ulrich Beck's theory of metamorphosis depends, similarly, on a heuristic of the unthinkable that underpins a pragmatic stance on climate crisis:

This book is not about being an optimist or a pessimist, but about unpacking the dystopian and pessimistic constellation by way of identifying its sociological, political and cultural roots and conditions. We are totally confused because what was unthinkable yesterday is possible and real today on account of the metamorphosis of the world: yet, in order to be able to grasp this metamorphosis in a meaningful way, it is necessary not just to explore the dissolution of socio-political reality but to focus on new beginnings, on what is emerging and on future structures and norms.⁶⁷

65. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category', *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 1 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1086/705298>.

66. Chakrabarty, 'The Planet', 5.

67. Beck, *Metamorphosis*, chapter 1.2.

That ascertaining 'future structures and norms' is a desideratum of scholarship in general presents again the issue of overdetermination. The thesis of unthinkability is vulnerable to deflationary historicism, insofar as it provides a warrant for intellectual vanguardism. From a tragic worldview that both historicises and psychologises, the thesis of unimaginability appears as a reaction to the hiddenness of sacrality, one that expresses a fear that the sacred may have moved beyond the reach of secular moderns. Climate crisis is not in itself a sublime object of transcendence, but rather provides the conditions in which it remains an important task of theorists to identify possible candidates for such an object.

Thus, the image of Earth being ravaged by climatic havoc – being subjected, that is, to climate crisis – may support a perennial impulse against anthropocentrism in different ways. First and foremost, the ravaged Earth validates a pervasive sense that the universe, in its essential character, is indifferent to the fate and well-being of human beings and that, therefore, aligning human viewpoints and projects with the cosmos will mean decentering the human. On this view, it is a gross error to imagine that human beings are chosen or privileged in any sense. The view from cosmic indifference is deeply ingrained across liberal-democratic societies, and that view contrasts starkly – in a way that is deeply counter-intuitive – with the flourishing that the human species seems to have enjoyed under a world order shaped predominantly by liberal-democratic values, rules, and regimes. Climate crisis, then, ameliorates a collective feeling of exasperation and anxiety that is triggered by the apparent flourishing of global civilization, which appears unreasonable in light of cosmic indifference and the

twentieth-century succession of self-inflicted catastrophes. Taylor remarks on the burden that moral self-responsibility becomes in the face of an impersonal cosmos, leading to a sense of ambivalence in the recognition of human beings' uncontested authority over themselves.

Remarking on the Kantian idea of 'acting out of our nature as rational agents' Taylor says that

what is striking about [this narrative line] is the claim to issue the norms we live by on our own authority. This thought can set off a tremor, a frisson in us, as we sense how much we are defying an age-old sense of higher, more-than-human authority; and at the same time, it can galvanize us with a sense of our own responsibility, and the courage we need to take it up. Beyond this, we can be struck by the sense that we stand, as it were, before a normative abyss, that this blind, deaf, silent universe offers *no* guidance whatever; we can find here an exhilarating challenge, which inspires us, which can even awaken a sense of the strange beauty of this alien universe, in the face of which we stake our claim as legislators of meaning.⁶⁸

Climate crisis also subjects the planet to the putative consequences of selfish – literally human-centred – decisions, and thereby foregrounds the fact that human beings coexist with the rest of Earth's flora and fauna. It is by this dynamic that the celebration of finitude and assured demise becomes coherent, even attractive and popular. Modes of tragic heroism create expressive spaces where the link-up between private projects and a public trajectory is not vulnerable to the deflationary acid of methodological irony.⁶⁹ Similarly, Beck's cosmopolitan theory of metamorphosis decentres the nation state in a global viewpoint. Dislodging the nation state from its role as the primary unit of global analysis may be done in different ways, but broadly speaking there are two strategies: a realist, cautionary attitude that views the geopolitical catastrophes of the twentieth century – exemplified above all by the Second

68. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 580–81.

69. Sam Solnick, "The Disease of the Interregnum: Irony and Climate Change", *Green Letters* 18, no. 2 (2014): 143–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2014.901897>.

World War – as different consequences of unalloyed nationalism; and a related aesthetic, avant-garde sense of the nation state as backward and moribund. This aesthetic aversion to nationalism goes along with similarly motivated rejections of anthropocentrism, and both attitudes are pre-eminent within the climatological turn. The nation state, on this sort of view, becomes the locus, telos, and expression of flourishing in *unreconstructed* political liberalism. Such aesthetic cosmopolitanism associates the perennial higher good with some international or planetary sense of human belonging. This ideal is validated by the putative necessity of planetary cooperation for managing the causes and threats of climate crisis.

Indeed, a collective sense of *cosmological agonism* – a distinction that complements the Taylorian principle of mutual benefit – might be described variously as an ethic, a set of principles, an attitude, an orientation that plays a heuristic role in belief and theory adoption. Cosmological agonism emerges, first, from an underlying principle of naturalism by which it is felt that human order should correspond in some way to the character of the universe. Taylor describes the abiding sense that mundane orders are detached from transcendental orders as a phenomenological feature of the contemporary immanent frame:

These are two understandings – more than just ‘ideas’ – two ways of understanding ourselves in terms of magical forces and cosmic order which I think have totally disappeared in what I call the ‘immanent frame’ we now live in, where the natural world is understood through today’s best natural science, and the human world is understood as created by human beings. No regime reflects the order of things: regimes are set-up by datable times and by identifiable people (fathers of the United States Constitution or whatever), and there is a human decision all the way down.⁷⁰

70. Michel Meijer and Charles Taylor, ‘Fellow Travellers on Different Paths: A Conversation with Charles Taylor’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46, no. 8 (2020): 987, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719866233>.

Cosmological agonism is not a self-conscious ideology, but rather a normative, collective attitude – absorbed through a social imaginary – whose salient feature is a *critical* principle that valorises the act of looking beyond whatever is taken within a contemporary scene to be naively orientated towards the human. It is, effectively, a norm of casting suspicion on the normative per se. The logic of cosmological agonism is a progression, from a skepticism that questions the immediate deliverances of sense and intuition to a social and political stance of revision as a standing desideratum.

While warrants for revision of existing norms and institutions on the basis of climate crisis are diverse in kind, the hermeneutics of religious atavism developed here is concerned specifically with projects concerning *ordinal* revision, which is a matter for phenomenology and social thought. Such a strategy has no claim to consider or challenge developments in the natural sciences, and the thesis by no means speaks directly to the geophysical realities that climate crisis refers to. At a minimum, the thesis underscores an issue of overdetermination that softens the force of warrants derived from climate crisis. Overdetermination is necessarily at issue wherever climate science overlaps with cultural, political, or social prescriptions.

On Rorty's view, progress in human affairs will be impeded to the extent that human beings imagine themselves to be answerable to non-human forces of whatever description. For this idea Rorty owes a debt not only to Kant, in his summation of the Enlightenment as a repudiation of human beings' self-imposed *unmündigkeit*, but also to Nietzsche, for his critique of religion and Christianity in particular. Nietzsche is particularly important for the

idea that societies and individuals – with reference in particular to the liberalism of late nineteenth-century Europe – who cling to moribund doctrines are motivated by a sense of nihilism, of an inability to formulate replacements for bankrupt ways of life and thought. In the context of climate crisis, Nietzschean self-overcoming may begin with a recognition that societies organised around the goal of unending economic growth are premised upon an absurdity, and that defining the good life in narrowly economic terms has become untenable. In a whole category of ‘bad Anthropocene’ iterations, for instance, the contemporary moment is a turning point triggered by precisely this type of awareness.⁷¹ But Nietzsche also has much to do, arguably, with the fact that liberal democracies under conditions of pluralism will subject grand narratives to redescription, and therefore that it may be necessary for sacral sources in such societies to remain apophatic, necessarily embedded in a Wittgensteinian-Taylorian *unarticulated background*. Nietzsche is therefore, in some sense, on both sides of the matter.

The apophatic quality of ordinal sources is a challenge to projects of reenchancement, in which area of concern Taylor locates much of his own work. Indeed, for Taylor the notion of reenchancement follows directly from his account of the malaises of modernity. A constructivist challenge to strong accounts of extra-human sources is front and centre in Taylor’s discussion of the problem:

The issue about reenchancement can be put this way: when we have left the ‘enchanted’ world of spirits, and no longer believe in the Great Chain, what sense can we make of the notion that nature or the universe which surrounds us is the locus of human

71. The Anthropocene overall might be interpreted as inherently supralapsarian, marking some constitutionally definitive loss of innocence.

meanings which are 'objective', in the sense that they are not just arbitrarily projected through choice or contingent desire?⁷²

Nevertheless, Taylor himself strongly sympathises with the longing for reenchantment, while conceding that any dispensation preceding the modern moral order is unlikely to return:

My point is that reenchantment is neither of those two conceptions of the world (magical and cosmic) coming *back*. . . . So what is it? One way of putting the issue is: can we just look on the physical universe surrounding us as a lot of matter which has its own internal laws for their own sake, so that otherwise there is no claim on us, not something we need to be somehow in contact with? I think that there is a very strong set of intuitions that this is not the case, that there is something more than that.⁷³

Unifying narratives that remain hidden – at the level of an unarticulated background – can perforce be discovered by reason and scientific investigation (in the German *wissenschaftlich* sense), but this is not necessarily the same as the public reason by which societies come to collective agreement. Taylor's commitment to democracy looks especially paradoxical in this light, pointing perhaps to some of the underappreciated tensions not only in Taylor's thought but also in contemporary political liberalism. In this context, climate change presents warrants of special power and efficacy by virtue, in part, of its visibility.

Taylor therefore regards reenchantment as a worthy aim, in spite of his demonstration that liberal societies are continually tripping themselves up on aspirations to it. Here a distinction should be invoked between reenchantment as a question of individual fullness and reenchantment as a matter of social ontology. Social reenchantment is obstructed by the

72. Charles Taylor, 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment', in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 294.

73. Michel Meijer and Charles Taylor, 'Fellow Travellers on Different Paths: A Conversation with Charles Taylor', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46, no. 8 (2020): 987, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719866233>.

conditions of pluralist societies, in which unifying narratives tend to operate most effectively at the level of an unarticulated background. It remains a topic of standing interest whether sources of individual fullness can ever be truly satisfactory when these are recognised as options that are not validated by some larger social reality or consensus. And – although it has become a trope of climate crisis discourse that continued resistance to climate initiatives is unreasonable and even nefarious in view of the scientific evidence for action – such a view fails to account for the problem that, in specific segments of Western culture, climate crisis swings freely of scientific deliverances, functioning rather as a kind of ideological default owing to the way in which climate change dovetails with the inherited liberal-democratic default of Taylor’s modern moral order.

Pluralist societies necessarily accommodate a diverse range of viewpoints, faiths, and ideologies. The open knowability of a social sacred in such pluralist contexts may be read as a virtual contradiction in terms. Theorists such as Catherine Keller acknowledge that some degree of apophaticism is unavoidable. By contrast, ‘global consensus’ itself is presented as warrant for the re-creation of bygone intellectual modes.⁷⁴ Accounts proceeding from the hermeneutical principle of religious atavism reveal contemporary worldviews which build on the features of past eras within a conceptual framework. By this redescriptive exercise, for example, the anti-anthropocentrism of the climatological turn may be read as an issue of

74. Andreas Gonçalves Lind, and Bruno Nobre, ‘Ecology as a New Foundation for Natural Theology’, *Religions* 12, no. 8: 600, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080660>.

the malaise induced by a spiritually stultifying liberal order as predicated upon the mutual benefit principle of Charles Taylor's modern moral order.

Although climate change and climate crisis are nominally global in nature, the outside influence of the Western imaginary around the globe means that their discourses will tend to be articulated through Western ideas, styles, and preoccupations. The Western imaginary, for example, clearly shapes the globalization of religion. 'The particular Western Christian dynamic of secularization . . . has become globalized through the process of Western colonial expansion. The entire globe now has to contend with the same binary religious/secular system of classification.'⁷⁵ Tying climate crisis to a distinctly Western imaginary suggests that an issue commonly assumed to be self-evidently universal and global is perhaps more narrowly to do with a particular culture. The issue of Western elites imposing their preferred narratives on the rest of the world is, in fact, another trope of climate crisis discourse:

Climate justice is not about the Global North saving the world in some act of white saviourism. That idea belongs to the same colonial mindset that got us into this mess in the first place – the idea that some people are worth more than others and therefore have the right to determine the world order.⁷⁶

But the principle of religious atavism complicates the way in which reason may be adduced in public discourse – a problem in political philosophy that is far from trivial. Different theorists of liberal order propose different criteria for participation in a space of public discourse, and the status of religious reason in public deliberation has been an issue of particular note among such theorists. This point has been of particular importance in discussion between Taylor, on

75. Casanova, *Religious and Secular Dynamics*, 16.

76. Thunberg, *The Climate Book*, 436.

one side, and John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas on the other. In their early work, Habermas and Rawls each argued that the public sphere should remain off limits to religious reason:

Habermas's argument presumes that . . . absolutes, or higher-order values, are absent from ordinary rational discourse and introduced only by religious beliefs (or close analogues such as the nationalist politics informed by [Carl] Schmitt). But it is in this context that [Charles] Taylor makes a helpful suggestion: that all normative orientations, even those that claim to be entirely rational, in fact depend on higher-order values. Being completely rational can be one such value. Some higher values are very this-worldly, as, for example, in economic discourses in which either some indicator of utility or some hedonic principle of human happiness is clearly the utmost good by which the entire analytic framework is organized and which has a standing apart from any merely incremental values. So it is not clear that reference to higher values clearly demarcates religious from secular reason. The question of how 'secular' the public sphere can and should be remains contested.⁷⁷

Rorty agrees that religious reason ought to be excluded from the public sphere, but with the anticlericist caveat of 'a distinction between congregations of religious believers ministered to by pastors and what I shall be calling "ecclesiastical organizations" – organizations that accredit pastors and claim to offer authoritative guidance to believers. Only the latter are the target of secularists like myself. . . . We think that it is mostly religion above the parish level that does the damage.'⁷⁸

Rorty's observation informs the religious-atavism redescription of climate crisis with regard to commonly expressed frustrations of climate activists. If the concept of climate crisis is an expression of postsecular longing for lost foundations, then terms heretofore meant for the religious domain may potentially shed light on the relevant culture, as in Rorty's distinction

77. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, introduction to *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=746637>.

78. Richard Rorty, 'Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2003): 141, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40018207>.

between ‘the parish level’ and ‘ecclesiastical organizations’. The question of what sorts of views are allowed in public discourse is a topic just as hot within climate circles as among political philosophers:

Worldwide, climate deniers were for years given equal or greater standing than climate scientists. ‘Think tanks’ which refuse to reveal their sources of funding, and often look more like corporate lobby groups, are still invited to attack environmentalists without disclosing their interests. Advertising, on which most of the media rely for their money, helps to sustain levels of consumption that Earth systems cannot bear.

Without the media, governments would have been forced to act. Without the media, the world’s most destructive industries would not have been able to fend off demands for change.⁷⁹

Yet, the anticlericalist view espoused by Rorty is not a merely theoretical position among political philosophers, but a living attitude in liberal democracies. In a postsecular age, in which the categorisation of reasons in itself becomes problematic, a position may be assessed according to its structural features such that claims about order effectively resemble religious ones.

In consequence climate denialism can be understood, through these genealogical stories of modernity, as an act of social sorting rather than as an expression of social pathology. The idea of *organised* climate denial as especially powerful is significant in climate crisis discourse. In the usual form of this view, corporate interests within or connected to the fossil fuel industry have for many decades supported campaigns against greater public awareness of climate issues:

When future historians ask, ‘Why didn’t people take action to stop the climate crisis when they had known about it for decades’, a prominent part of the answer will be the history of denial and obfuscation by the fossil fuel industry, and the ways in which

79. George Monbiot, ‘Changing the Media Narrative’, in *The Climate Book*, 370.

people in positions of power and privilege refused to acknowledge that climate change was a manifestation of a broken economic system.⁸⁰

Behavioural psychology too is an important strain of explanation for denialism. ‘Five shortcomings of the human brain explain why it’s so hard for us to go from climate alarm to climate action.’⁸¹ But neither behavioural psychology nor narratives of organised denial account for the dialectical relationship that requires reference to large-scale stories of Western modernity, because such stories make sense of profound but ordinarily unarticulated concerns about order, stability, and civilizational malaise. These explain, above all, the explicit description of climate crisis as an occasion for revolution and reenchantment:

It is . . . important to appreciate the degree to which environmentalism has also recently begun a process of desacralisation. After decades of environmental science and public communication of findings, there is an emerging consensus that public response to problems like habitat loss, climate change, or mass species extinction, cannot be provoked by the dissemination of scientific studies. One can see a turn in environmental science, and particularly in the environmental values literature, towards explorations of the value of culture, aesthetics and religion. Underpinning this turn is an emerging sense that there are ways of thinking and being which sit much deeper and which are embedded in cultural and religious ways of knowing which inflect, dampen and prohibit moral response to these emerging crises.⁸²

In this regard, Nietzsche’s importance endures. The concept of climate crisis is so powerful because it simultaneously channels sources of contemporary liberalism that are in tension with each other. Climate crisis supplies a reason to doubt the moral order – which is based on a deleterious process of codification – while still allowing one to express the benevolence that has been understood as the ontic source of that order. To adopt this worldview is, in effect, to

80. Naomi Oreskes, ‘Why Didn’t They Act?’, in *The Climate Book*, 29.

81. Per Espen Stoknes, ‘Overcoming Climate Apathy’, in *The Climate Book*, 338.

82. Jeremy H. Kidwell, ‘Re-Enchanting Political Theology’, *Religions* 10, no. 10 (2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100550>.

detach the actuality of beneficence from the code of beneficence. The climate crisis worldview, thus, allows one to be both Christian and Nietzschean. In this respect, the early twenty-first century bids fair to be recalled as a ratchet moment in Western history – a moment in which the teleological aspect of the Western moral order has undergone a significant revision, owing to the demonstration by climate crisis that a system on the principle of mutual benefit has not been sufficient for global circumstances to conduce to human flourishing. Although Taylor, throughout his work, expresses sympathy with ecologism, in places presenting ecology as a source of strong sources for ordinal renewal, his account of secular modernity provides a vocabulary and genealogical framework with which to challenge pre-eminent accounts of climate crisis, which appears – with reference in particular to the use of it as a warrant for undoing established orders – as a reaction against the sort of nihilism that Nietzsche saw at the heart of modern political liberalism.

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