***The Revolt Against Humanity* by Adam Kirsch**

**Ian James Kidd** explores visions of a ‘humanless world’.

Adam Kirsch is an American poet, biographer, literary critic, a faculty member at Columbia University, and a widely-published public intellectual. His new book – *The Revolt Against Humanity* – appears in the Columbia Global Reports series: well-produced, short novella-length essays on contemporary political and cultural themes. The theme of Kirsch’s book is the dispiriting idea (and judgement) that ‘the end of humanity’s reign is imminent, and that we should welcome it’ (p.10). Humanity is beset by violence, the climate crisis, ecological destruction, and other developments that threaten our ongoing existence. Such pessimistic anticipations are common to a very diverse range of voices – ‘engineers and philosophers, political activists and would-be hermits, novelists and palaeontologists’ (p.10) – who respond with exultation, despair, or sober determination. *The Revolt Against Humanity* explores attitudes to and visions of our potentially imminent demise and is consistently clear, well-informed, and without any of the excesses of many of the writers he discusses.

 Systematic reflection on the end of humanity only really became a popular theme in the twentieth century when it became increasingly clear that science and technology gifted us the power of self-destruction. Scientists, environmentalists, and others started to imagine ‘a world without us’ – the title of Alan Weisberg’s 2007 book – but Kirsch is more interested in attitudes towards the possibility of our demise. Not everyone is alarmed by it, and many profess to delight in it. Chapter one identifies two contrasting sources of ‘the turn against human primacy’ (p.11). ‘Anthropocene antihumanism’ takes very familiar environmentalist litanies against humankind, such as destruction of ecosystems, but abandons the ‘meliorist’ conviction that we should try to stop it. For anti-humanists, self-destruction is inevitable and to be welcomed, however bitterly, as a ‘sentence’ we have passed on ourselves. I think this needs clarifying: are we talking about the destruction of *humankind* or certain *forms of life*? The British philosopher and ‘green’ activist Rupert Read’s book *This Civilization is Finished*, is clear that consumerist, carbon-intensive civilization is finished, even if other, better kinds of civilization might one day succeed it.

 Anthropocene anti-humanists regard science, technology, and human ambitions as the expressions of the hubris that spells our doom. By contrast, transhumanists see them as the means to our salvation: the *human* world cannot continue and must come to an end, but its successor should be populated by *post-humans* – engineered super-beings who are physically, morally, and cognitively superior to *Homo sapiens*, ‘Humanity 2.0’. The ‘revolt’ involves the end of humanity and the start of post-humanity. For Kirsch, antihumanists and transhumanists share ‘visions of a humanless world’ – one ‘from which we have disappeared, and rightfully so’ – and invites us to see them as ‘a new way of making sense of the nature and purpose of human existence’ (pp.12-13).

 The six chapters – erudite, clear, and concise – take up these explorations of the spiritual or existential issues raised by the serious prospect of the ending of human life, at least as we know it. Of course, the main threat to humanity is climate change, which Kirsch sees as a convergence of ‘our acknowledged vices’ – such as hatred, greed, and selfishness – and the pursuit of ‘aims that we ordinarily consider good and natural’, such as ‘prosperity, comfort, increase of our kind’ (p.19). The existential threats we face are not products solely of our worst sides, but also of our better sides – our curiosity about our world, for instance, and desire to live in comfort rather than misery.

Readers who expect chapter three to call for radical activist projects will be surprised and perhaps disappointed. Kirsch opens with honest pessimism: even modest climate goals unlikely to be met – too little has been done, too many ‘tipping points’ passed (p. 25). Those left-liberal critics like Naomi Klein or Jedediah Purdy might be right in calling for curbs to the power of corporations and greater social and economic equality, but neither are likely in the time available. Moreover, optimists must reckon with our depressing history and our moral failings. Purdy is right we lack the necessary capacities for ‘self-restraint’, echoed by Kirsch’s recognition that the ‘ultimate political challenge is to limit … the scope of human appetites’ (p.26). By rejecting fantastical, implausible scenarios, Kirsch offers an interesting neglected alternative, which we might call *quietism*. Inspired by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine’s *Dark Mountain Manifesto*, Kirsch describes less dramatic responses – small, personal acts of withdrawal, moderation, and careful stewardship – according to the principle that ‘action is not always more effective than inaction’ (p.31).

Chapter four tackles antinatalism and other ‘pro-extinction’ claims. Kirsch calls out the ‘outrageous’ rhetoric of some writers – like the one claiming to be ‘deeply saddened’ that ‘plague and war’ have not already finished us off (pp.43, 47). He also notes that any moral case for human extinction – like Benatar’s anti-natalism – will be ‘unlikely to prevail, on account of the very selfishness it bemoans’ (p.43). Like Claire Colebrook, Kirsch argues that pro-extinction ideas should not be dismissed as ‘inadmissible’, given the realities of ‘human brutality and life-destructiveness’ and ‘our malevolent relation to life’ (p.47). Unfortunately, the voluntary ending of humankind is unlikely to happen (as Benatar openly admits) and the prospect of our involuntary end or disruption far more likely. Kirsch is sensible and compassionate – unlike writers who causally call for suicide and ‘mass human die-offs’ – and remains sober-minded in the fifth and sixth chapters on transhumanism.

For Toby Ord and others, humanity has power without the moral capacity to handle it wisely, because we are ‘morally and physically circumscribed’ and we need what Kirsch dubs ‘species transformation’ (pp.54-55). These transformations are fantastical and merit the criticisms they receive, including their blasé conviction that human beings are endlessly plastic creatures to be moulded as one wills. Calls for ‘transformation’ may be exciting and chime with the moral ethos of our times, but the word ‘radical’ has pejorative senses, too. The book ends on a sober note. We are obviously incapable of the necessary ‘drastic forms of human self-limitation’, with most of us too ‘committed to preserving the species status quo. (pp.90-91). Kirsch concludes misanthropically that ‘the revolt against humanity casts doubt on the goodness of the human species and its whole history’ (pp. 94-95). It is difficult to disagree.

*Ian James Kidd teaches and researches philosophy at the University of Nottingham and is writing a book on misanthropy. His website is www.ianjameskidd.weebly.com.*

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