

The Challenges of Ideal Theory and Appeal of Secular Apocalyptic Thought

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Abstract

Why do thinkers hostile or agnostic toward Christianity find in its apocalyptic doctrines—often seen as bizarre—appealing tools for interpreting politics? This article tackles that puzzle. First, it clarifies the concept of secular apocalyptic thought and its relation to Christianity. I propose that, to avoid imprecision, the study of secular apocalyptic thought should focus on cases where religious apocalyptic thought's influence on secular thinkers is clear because they explicitly reference such thought and its appeal (e.g., Engels's fascination with Christian apocalyptic thought). Second, it argues that the political appeal of apocalyptic thought—and, specifically, what I term *cataclysmic apocalyptic thought* (CAT)—partly lies in offering resources to navigate persistent challenges in ideal theory. The ideal theorist faces competing goals: formulating an ideal that is utopian *and* feasible. One potential approach to this challenge is CAT, which embraces a utopian ideal and declares it feasible through identifying crisis as the vehicle to realize it.

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Christianity's apocalyptic doctrines strike many—believers and non-believers alike—as its most bizarre elements. Despite apocalyptic doctrines' presence in the Christian canon, there is a tendency, stretching back to the early church, to minimize their importance. Augustine, for instance, urges an allegorical interpretation of Revelation and criticizes predictions of Christ's imminent return to establish a millennial kingdom (1972: XX.7, XX.9). Today many churches rarely include passages from Revelation in their services, evident from the book's scant presence in the lectionary (Koester, 2001: 32). As Glenn Tinder puts it, the Bible's apocalyptic themes are among the “most outworn vestments of religious faith” (1965: 311). Yet attempts to suppress apocalyptic thought's influence never wholly succeeded. Apocalyptic prophecies and themes continue to emerge and impact various spheres of life, including politics. Part of apocalyptic thought's potency in politics stems from its ability to migrate beyond the confines of religion and take on new, secular forms—a somewhat puzzling development. If many Christians are embarrassed by their faith's apocalyptic heritage, why would thinkers hostile or agnostic toward Christianity find in its apocalyptic doctrines appealing tools for interpreting politics?

The first step in unpacking this puzzle is clarifying the concept of secular apocalyptic thought and its relation to the Christian tradition, which is the focus of sections 1-3 below. Despite scholarly interest in secular apocalyptic thought (e.g., Collins et al. 1998), there has been little methodological reflection on how to define and study it. More than a half-century ago, Judith Shklar (1965) and Hans Blumenberg ([1966] 1983) criticized the idea of secular apocalyptic thought for being vague and blurring important distinctions in the history of ideas. Curiously, more recent studies discussing secular apocalyptic thought ignore Shklar's and Blumenberg's concerns (e.g., Barkun, 1983; Gray, 2007; Hall, 2009), and often prove them to be well founded. To address their concerns and guard against reading into texts apocalyptic themes

that are not there, this article makes a methodological proposal: the study of secular apocalyptic thought should focus on cases where religious apocalyptic thought's influence on secular thinkers is clear because they *explicitly* mention such thought and its appeal. One example is Friedrich Engels's fascination with the Christian apocalyptic figure Thomas Müntzer and book of Revelation (Engels, [1850] 1978; [1883] 1990; [1894] 1990). For Engels, his political philosophy mirrors a strand in the Christian apocalyptic tradition that I term *cataclysmic apocalyptic thought* (CAT), which identifies crisis as the path to the ideal society. CAT takes secular form with the belief that natural or human forces, not divine ones, will direct crisis toward utopia.

Sections 4-6 turn to examining the political appeal of apocalyptic thought, particularly CAT, for secular thinkers. A helpful approach for understanding CAT's appeal is the lens of ideal theory—i.e., theorizing about the best, most just society, rather than a marginal improvement over the present. Ideal theory that aspires to be navigational and a moral guide to action, I argue, faces the daunting task of outlining an end goal that is utopian and feasible. To be worth striving for, the ideal must be utopian in the sense of possessing sufficient moral appeal to justify the transition costs needed to achieve it, while remaining feasible. These competing goals result in a catch-22 for ideal theory: a more utopian ideal is a less feasible moral goal, which diminishes reasons to strive for it and its normative force, but a more modest and feasible ideal is a less appealing moral goal, which also diminishes the reasons to strive for it and its normative force. In CAT is found a potential escape from this dilemma. CAT embraces a utopian goal and declares it feasible by pointing to crisis as the vehicle to achieve it. This approach gives a particular crisis meaning and creates a sense of urgency to take advantage of the historic opportunity at hand. For some secular thinkers, then, apocalyptic thought's appeal lies in offering

apparent resources to navigate persistent challenges in ideal theory and make the case for urgent action in pursuit of the ideal state.

1. Cataclysmic Apocalyptic Thought in the Christian Tradition

Apocalyptic thought can take secular forms, but its roots go back to the Jewish and Christian traditions. Though the term apocalypse today often means cataclysm or disaster, its original meaning in the Greek was revelation or unveiling (Collins, 1979: 2). Apocalypse refers to an ancient genre of literature in which authors share with their audience a divine revelation they received. Apocalyptic writers recount visions of a hopeful and just conclusion to history, and establish their authority by citing divine messengers as the source of their inspiration (Collins, 1979: 9). Apocalyptic literature emerged in the Jewish tradition following the Babylonian exile (Collins J, 1984; Hanson, 1975), functioning as resistance literature during a period of persecution (Horsley, 2010; Portier-Young, 2011). Perhaps the most influential apocalypse, the book of Revelation or Apocalypse of John, continued this tradition but shifted to a Christian vision in which Jesus, the Lamb of God, would conquer the forces of sin and idolatry to realize his perfect kingdom, the New Jerusalem.

In Revelation and many other apocalyptic writings, crisis plays a central role in interpreting events. Crisis takes on a redemptive quality due to its ability to bring about ideal conditions never before experienced and believed to be beyond reach. Though crisis prompts fear, it also opens up new opportunities. Rather than seeing crisis as something to avoid, the apocalyptic mindset welcomes it as a disruptive event necessary to wipe away corruption and perfect society. Crisis is part of a larger plan to overcome evil once and for all.

For this worldview, I opt for the term *cataclysmic apocalyptic thought* (CAT),¹ which in the Christian tradition consists of four principal beliefs:

- (1) Present corruption
- (2) Impending crisis
- (3) A divine force guiding crisis
- (4) Finally, lasting utopia in the form of the kingdom of God²

A helpful illustration of CAT comes from examining these elements in the book of Revelation.

(1) *Present corruption*. The apocalyptic mindset sees societal institutions and values as morally bankrupt and in need of radical change. There is desperate need for renewal, yet attempts to spark it seem unlikely to succeed. Nothing is how it should be: those deserving honor are powerless, persecuted by a ruling class motivated by idolatry, cruelty, self-glorification, and greed (Collins A, 1984: 123). In Revelation, the Roman Empire embodies this entrenched corruption. Revelation's author, John, calls the Roman Empire the "beast" to communicate its overwhelming power. "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" ask those worshipping it (Rev. 13:4). In this environment of pervasive corruption, many become numb to it. Apocalyptic writing seeks to awaken people from blind acceptance of the status quo, and therefore is often gritty, shocking, and unrelenting in its attacks on social and political structures. John exemplifies this style, calling Rome the "mother of whores and of earth's abominations" ... drunk with the blood of the saints" (Rev. 17:5-6). What should be revolting—killing the righteous—has become normal and accepted. Though New Testament scholars question whether Christian persecution was as widespread as Revelation implies, John certainly *perceives* it as ubiquitous (Collins A, 1984: 84). This conviction leads to a damning portrait of Rome: its corruption has reached such a point that, for Christians, compromising with it is not an option.

(2) *Impending crisis*. Surrounded by corruption, believers hold onto the hope that, though the ruling authorities appear unassailable, their hold on power is actually tenuous. A coming

crisis will disrupt the status quo, rooting out corruption at its source. In Revelation an angel proclaims the crisis that will befall Rome (referred to as Babylon): “With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more” (Rev. 18:21). Rome’s persecution of the righteous has put it on a path culminating in destruction. Importantly, the apocalyptic crisis awaiting Rome is distinct from banal forms of crisis—wars, plagues, famines, and the like—that previously afflicted it. Rather than the latest in a seemingly endless string of crises, the coming crisis represents the one to end all others. Such knowledge encourages believers to remain steadfast in their faith, regardless of what they suffer. They know that the powers persecuting them ultimately will fall. By foretelling Rome’s impending destruction, John hopes to instill in his readers urgency to resist it. As John Collins explains, “apocalyptic language is *commissive* in character: it commits us to a view of the world for the sake of the actions that are entailed” (1984: 283). In Revelation, the prediction of coming crisis serves the role of spurring action.

(3) *A divine force guiding crisis.* A key element of the crisis to come, which helps guard against despair, is the promise that God will direct it. Despite the fear and chaos associated with the looming crisis, believers take hope knowing that God has control over it. When the forces of the beast “make war on the Lamb,” John assures his readers that “the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14). It will be a moment of justice, in which God “judge[s] the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and ... avenge[s] ... the blood of his servants” (Rev. 19:2). There is no doubt concerning the outcome of the coming crisis, which will realize God’s ultimate plan for history and humanity. All eventually will recognize God’s authority over these events, even those engaged in idolatry, who cry to the mountains: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the

wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (Rev. 6:16-17). For believers in the midst of the crisis, they have faith that God’s will is being fulfilled. This hopeful view differs from what Jürgen Moltmann calls “exterminism” (1996: 203), which anticipates mass extermination of life due to war, economic collapse, or environmental destruction. Exterminism lacks hope because it anticipates devastation without redemption. Christian apocalyptic beliefs, in contrast, embrace the hope that God will realize his perfect kingdom through crisis and upheaval. Without such intervention, society’s corruption would continue indefinitely.

(4) *Lasting utopia in the form of the kingdom of God.* Crisis wipes away corruption and prepares the way for God’s kingdom. Rather than a marginal improvement, God’s coming kingdom embodies perfection and surpasses all others. In Revelation, this promised kingdom is the New Jerusalem, where “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev. 21:4). John’s vision taps into deep human hopes. Death, sorrow, pain, and all that has tormented humankind will end when Christ returns to “reign forever” (Rev. 11:15). This hope motivates believers to prepare themselves for the coming kingdom, which requires sacrifice: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Sacrifice resulting in apparent defeat represents, from God’s perspective, victory over the forces of corruption (Bauckham, 1993: 66-108). Such knowledge consoles believers facing persecution, who see God’s perfect kingdom as possessing transcendent value and worthy of sacrifice.

2. Secular Apocalyptic Thought

Even in religious form, notes J.G.A. Pocock, apocalyptic thought often operates as a “powerful instrument of secularization” (2003: 46). With this remark, Pocock highlights apocalyptic thought’s power to heighten the importance of social and political events by infusing them with transcendent meaning. Apocalyptic thought can give the divine concrete form in the present. *This war, this uprising, this religious revival, or this natural disaster*, proclaims the apocalyptic prophet, is God’s plan unfolding before us. By interpreting change in this way, apocalyptic thought confers significance to the forces causing upheaval, while undermining the authority of institutions resistant to it.

Established church authorities have long recognized the potentially explosive and destabilizing nature of apocalyptic thought and, not surprisingly, worked to disarm it. From a pragmatic perspective, a certain level of social stability facilitates routine church activities—weekly services, administering the sacraments, providing aid to the poor, and the like. Apocalyptic thought that fosters social upheaval and hinders these activities necessarily prompts concerns. So do forms of apocalyptic thought that deify earthly events by proclaiming them to be God’s instruments for bringing history to a close. Traditionally, church authorities have cautioned against ever placing one’s faith in the world and its imperfections, emphasizing that it is beyond human understanding to know how sacred history may be unfolding today. Augustine questions those claiming to know the hidden eschatological meaning of world events, and closes the *City of God* by citing Acts 1:7: “It is not for you to know the dates [e.g., of Christ’s return]: the Father has decided those by his own authority” (1972: XXII.30; see also Markus, 1970).

The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also raises concerns with apocalyptic thought, and warns against “every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic

hope which can only be realized beyond history.” The *Catechism* specifically emphasizes the danger posed by apocalyptic beliefs that take “intrinsically perverse” form through denying God and trusting entirely in political forces to bring about earthly perfection (Catholic Church, 2000: 676). So beyond its potential for disruption, apocalyptic thought worries the Catholic Church because, in deifying the political, it can jettison belief in God altogether.

This form of apocalyptic thought, which functions not only as an *instrument* of secularization but is *itself* secular, is the focus here. Apocalyptic concepts that originated in religious thought can migrate into new ideological frameworks where they become disconnected from belief in God and his providence. In such instances, apocalyptic thought places its trust in non-divine forces to realize a utopian future.

One finds a heightened interest in secular apocalyptic thought during the mid-twentieth century, not coincidentally after the rise of communism and National Socialism. This past debate over secular apocalyptic thought—one too often neglected in studies of apocalyptic thought today—helps illustrate the concept and potential pitfalls in studying it. One of the first thinkers during this period to bring attention to secular apocalyptic thought is Eric Voegelin. In *The Political Religions*—published in Vienna in 1938, the year Nazi Germany invaded Austria—Voegelin identifies the secularization of religion, and particularly apocalyptic thought, as part of fascist and totalitarian regimes’ appeal. Apocalyptic thought helps satisfy people’s desire for perfection and transcendence. When religion loses its holds, Voegelin argues, political entities step into the void as a source of meaning. The apocalyptic symbolism of the Middle Ages, which envisioned a perfect empire on the horizon, “lives on in the symbolism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: in the three empires of Marx and Engels’s philosophy of history, in the Third

Reich of National Socialism, and in the fascist third Rome” (Voegelin, [1938] 2000: 52). For Voegelin, the secularization of apocalyptic thought has a dramatic effect on politics.

A decade later, Karl Löwith in his influential work *Meaning in History* draws a connection between apocalyptic thought and modern conceptions of history and politics. For many, Löwith’s analysis hits closer to home because he sees apocalyptic thought’s influence not only in fascist and communist ideology, but also in the widespread faith in human progress. Löwith makes the bold claim that a concept central to modernity, progress, has its roots in Jewish and Christian eschatology: “We of today, concerned with the unity of universal history and with its progress toward an ultimate goal or at least toward a ‘better world,’ are still in the line of prophetic and messianic monotheism; we are still Jews and Christians, however little we may think of ourselves in those terms” (1949: 19). According to Löwith, Christian eschatology’s conception of linear time moving toward an ideal end point grounds modern understandings of history. The secularization of apocalyptic thought produces the widely held belief in human progress, while leaving many unaware of its religious heritage.

Norman Cohn’s 1957 classic *Pursuit of the Millennium* also contributed to burgeoning interest in secular apocalyptic thought around the mid-twentieth century. Cohn studies medieval apocalyptic sects, but ends by noting similarities between these sects and revolutionary movements such as communism. Like apocalyptic sects of old, modern revolutionaries are motivated by “phantasies of a final, exterminatory struggle against ‘the great ones’; and of a perfect world from which self-seeking would be for ever banished.” Cohn continues: “The old religious idiom has been replaced by a secular one, and this tends to obscure what otherwise would be obvious. For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still” ([1957] 1970: 286).

The idea that Christian apocalyptic thought shapes modern conceptions of politics gained prominence through the writings of Voegelin, Löwith, and Cohn, but it also faced criticisms that are important to remember today. Notably, Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* objects to what he calls the “fashionable pastime to interpret expectations of political redemption ... as secularizations either of biblical paradise or of apocalyptic messianism” ([1966] 1983: 14-15). Blumenberg challenges Löwith’s understanding of modernity by distinguishing between the modern concept of progress and Christian eschatology: “It is a formal, but for that very reason a manifest, difference that an eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and is heterogeneous to it, while the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history” ([1966] 1983: 30). For Blumenberg, Christian eschatology presents a significantly different vision for the future—marked by abrupt supernatural intervention—than that offered by the idea of progress, which envisions the gradual perfecting of what is already present (cf. Olson, 1982; Tuveson, 1949).

Shklar, like Blumenberg, prefers to emphasize distinctions rather than continuities between modern political ideologies and apocalyptic thought. In her 1965 essay, “The Political Theory of Utopia,” Shklar writes: “It has of late been suggested that the radicalism of the last century was a form of ‘messianism,’ of ‘millennialism,’ or of a transplanted eschatological consciousness.” Shklar resists this claim on the grounds that radical political movements such as communism do not make promises of eternal salvation, an essential element of millennialism on her view (1965: 376). She therefore concludes:

Neither the view of history as a dualistic combat of impersonal social forces nor the confident belief in a better future which would at last bring rest to mankind was a “millennial” fancy, nor was either really akin to the chiliastic religious visions that inspired ... apocalyptic sects.... The desire to stress similarities, to find continuities everywhere, is not always helpful, especially in the history of ideas, where the drawing of distinctions is apt to lead one more nearly to the truth. (Shklar, 1965: 377)

Looking for linkages between Christian apocalyptic thought and secular political movements strikes Shklar as misguided. Her argument implies that it would be best to discard the concept of secular apocalyptic thought altogether.

Shklar's and Blumenberg's critiques draw attention to a pitfall common to the study of secular apocalyptic thought: characterizing a wide range of thought as apocalyptic, despite it having little or no connection to the religious traditions in which apocalyptic concepts originated. If one is interested in *secular* apocalyptic thought, it of course is necessary to look beyond religious modes of thought. But the lack of this delimiting factor can render the study of secular apocalyptic thought unfocused, as the term apocalyptic gets applied in an overly broad fashion. Indeed, some use the term apocalypse as a synonym for any sort of ending (e.g., Corcoran, 2000; Kermode, 2000). Others use the term as a rhetorical weapon against various political ideologies with, in their view, catastrophic effects (e.g., Gray, 2007). Such broad use of the concept largely deprives it of unique content and leaves it with only tenuous ties to the original apocalyptic traditions. Not surprisingly, some scholars of religion bemoan the lack of specificity characteristic of many studies of apocalyptic thought (Moorhead, 1987: 22).

Shklar and Blumenberg identify key problems with the study of secular apocalyptic thought, but their critiques do not necessarily doom it. In fact, it is difficult to wholly dismiss the concept of secular apocalyptic thought in light of cases where thinkers critical of or agnostic toward Christianity explicitly mention Christian apocalyptic figures and texts they find appealing. The study of secular apocalyptic thought would benefit from focusing on such cases. This proposal admittedly narrows the field of study, excluding cases where religious apocalyptic thought exerts unspoken influence. But, with this tradeoff, the study of secular apocalyptic thought grounds itself in more solid evidence and makes itself less vulnerable to attack than the

alternative—speculating about religious apocalyptic thought’s influence without explicit textual support for one’s claims. The methodological approach recommended here still yields examples for analysis. For instance, Niccolò Machiavelli combines with his trenchant criticisms of Christianity admiration for the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola and the power of his apocalyptic preaching in reviving republican rule in Florence (McQueen, 2016; forthcoming). More recently, environmental writers reference Christian apocalyptic thought and deploy apocalyptic language to describe climate change (e.g., McKibben, 1989: 147; Zencey, 1988). Such examples suggest that secular apocalyptic thought is indeed a coherent concept.

3. Engels as an Illustration of Secular CAT

A closer look at an example of secular apocalyptic thought sheds further insight on the concept and how it manifests itself. Engels’s engagement with Christian apocalyptic thought proves especially instructive because it provides a vivid illustration of CAT taking secular form. When secular, CAT consists of beliefs similar to those found in Christianity—present corruption, impending crisis, a divine force guiding crisis, and lasting utopia—but modified in an important way. Specifically, secular CAT anticipates a crisis guided by human or natural forces that will wipe away corruption and realize the ideal society, and departs from the Christian tradition by denying any role for divine forces. Engels’s understanding of social change embodies CAT, and his explicit interest in Christian apocalyptic thought shows his ties to this tradition.

A number of critics level against Marxism the charge that it is a secular transformation of Christian apocalyptic thought (e.g., Arneson, 1985: 639; Cohn, [1957] 1970: 251; Friesen, 1974: 236-39; Löwith, 1949: 33-51). Others such as Roland Boer, though, resist this view. Boer rejects the notion that there are significant links between Marxism and apocalyptic thought, seeing the

charge “as ammunition in the hands of conservative and liberal critics” (Boer, 2014: 219). He rightly dismisses claims that Marxism is a secular outgrowth of Christianity without originality. Marxism offers too much original in terms of its understanding of economics and oppression to reduce it to religious beliefs in secular garb. But Boer’s alternative—denying any meaningful connection between Marxism and Christian apocalyptic thought—also proves unsatisfactory, for it fails to make sense of textual evidence where Marxists use Christian apocalyptic thought as a lens to understand socialism.

This point comes out in Engels’s writings on Müntzer, an apocalyptic figure from the sixteenth century who helped lead the German peasants revolt (Friesen, 1990; Riedl, 2016). In Müntzer’s writings, he sees himself as a prophet among God’s elect, chosen to advance God’s plan to cast down the godless and establish his kingdom. This apocalyptic mindset comes through in the *Prague Manifesto* where Müntzer proclaims: “The time of harvest has come! That is why [God] himself hired me for his harvest. I have sharpened my sickle, for my thoughts yearn for the truth and with my lips, skin, hands, hair, soul, body and life I call down curses on the unbelievers” (1988: 371). Müntzer’s thought features the four basic features of CAT. First, corruption fills the world, given that the “time of the Antichrist” has come according to Müntzer (1988: 35). Second, he sees an imminent crisis: “the time has come when a bloodbath will befall this obstinate world because of its unbelief” (Müntzer, 1988: 90). Third, Müntzer believes that God is directing this crisis toward the goal of “sweeping aside those evil men who obstruct the gospel” (1988: 246). Fourth, this apocalyptic crisis will lead to God’s kingdom on earth, which Müntzer eagerly anticipates: “the assembly of the elect [will] lay hold on the whole wide world, which will acquire a Christian government no sack of gunpowder can ever topple” (1988: 246).

Despite Müntzer's commitment to Christian apocalyptic hopes, Engels interprets him in secular terms. In *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels portrays Müntzer as motivated by reason rather than scripture:

[Müntzer's] philosophico-theological doctrine attacked all the main points not only of Catholicism, but of Christianity generally, which curiously resembled modern speculative contemplation and at times even approached atheism. He repudiated the Bible both as the only and as the infallible revelation. The real and living revelation, he said, was reason, a revelation that has existed at all times and still exists among all peoples. To hold up the Bible against reason, he maintained, was to kill the spirit with the letter, for the Holy Spirit of which the Bible speaks is not something that exists outside us—the Holy Spirit is our reason. ([1850] 1978: 421)

Engels then concludes: "As Müntzer's religious philosophy approached atheism, so his political programme approached communism" ([1850] 1978: 422). So in Engels's hands, Müntzer is transformed: instead of a Christian apocalyptic figure who believed himself guided by the Holy Spirit to realize biblical prophecies, Müntzer becomes a secular figure committed to communist goals.

Engels develops this interpretation by focusing on Müntzer's understanding of the kingdom of God. When the peasant revolt failed and Müntzer was put to death, the charges against him included starting a revolt to create a community where all "things are to be held in common and distribution should be to each according to his need" (Müntzer, 1988: 336-37). In light of this belief, Engels claims that Müntzer's conception of God's kingdom is, in fact, a communist ideal. Müntzer's program calls for "the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God on Earth, of the prophesied millennium," notes Engels. But, he continues, by kingdom of God Müntzer "meant a society with no class differences, no private property and no state authority independent of, and foreign to, the members of society. All existing authorities, insofar as they refused to submit and join the revolution, were to be overthrown, all work and property

shared in common, and complete equality introduced” (Engels, [1850] 1978: 422). For Engels, Müntzer transforms the kingdom of God into a Marxist ideal.

Notably, Engels’s interest in apocalyptic thought continues well after his writings on Müntzer. In his 1894 essay “On the History of Early Christianity,” he finds points of commonality between early Christianity’s apocalyptic beliefs and those embraced by socialists:

[W]e have [in early Christianity] neither the dogma nor the morals of later Christianity but instead a feeling that one is struggling against the whole world and that the struggle will be a victorious one; an eagerness for the struggle and a certainty of victory which are totally lacking in Christians of today and which are to be found in our time only at the other pole of society, among the Socialists. (Engels, [1894] 1990: 457)

Engels conveys a similar sentiment in his essay on the book of Revelation, where he notes that early Christianity and modern socialism both succeed in captivating the attention of the masses through a message “opposed to the ruling system, to ‘powers that be’ ” ([1883] 1990: 113).

Some like Boer see Engels’s writings on Christian apocalyptic thought as an idiosyncratic interest and not central to his thought. But that is a mistake, for Engels’s engagement with apocalyptic thought provides insights into Marxism. For Engels, Christian apocalyptic thought, though false, contains a kernel of truth: it identifies crisis as the vehicle for bringing about the triumph of the proletariat. Whereas Christianity looks to heaven for this change, Marxism points to economic crisis—the collapse of capitalism—as the force to end oppression of the working class, usher in the dictatorship of the proletariat, and bring about the withering away of the state. Marxism, like Christian apocalyptic thought, solves the problem of the vast gap between the corrupt present and ideal future by identifying a crisis that will radically transform society and make the ideal possible. Ultimately, such hope is an inescapable element of Marxism. Engels recognizes this point, seeing the seeds of Marxism’s truth and power in inchoate form in early Christianity.

4. Apocalyptic Thought as Ideal Theory

The apocalyptic worldview, both in Christian and secular forms, envisions more than a mere improvement over the present society. It puts forward a vision of the most perfect society imaginable. Through offering this vision, the apocalyptic tradition theorizes about the ideal society and the path to realizing it. CAT in particular emphasizes crisis as the vehicle for reaching the ideal society. In this way, apocalyptic thought can be understood as one approach to ideal theory.

Some may object to this claim, deeming any equation between apocalyptic thought and ideal theory as an anachronistic mistake. Indeed, political philosophers today rarely if ever make connections between the apocalyptic tradition and ideal theory. Part of the reason why is the ahistorical nature of the debate over ideal theory in contemporary political philosophy. The ever-growing literature on ideal theory sometimes gives the impression that it suddenly emerged in 1971 with the publication of *A Theory of Justice* (e.g., Valentini, 2012: 655). Here John Rawls argues that “the nature and aims of a perfectly just society” play a fundamental role in a theory of justice: one must understand what justice requires under ideal conditions to understand its requirements under non-ideal conditions ([1971] 1999: 8). Rawls’s important distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory certainly sparked a flurry of philosophical debate, but sometimes lost in this debate is Rawls’s place in a broader tradition of theorizing about the ideal state. The tradition of utopian thought has long been concerned with the nature of the ideal state and goes all the way back to Plato (2003), as Lea Ypi (2011: 537) and Gerald Gaus (2016: 2-3) point out. And apocalyptic thought shares with the utopian tradition an interest in theorizing about the ideal state or society. Scholars of utopian thought note that these two traditions sometimes become intermingled when apocalyptic concepts appear in and influence utopian writings.³ So when

viewed in the context of these traditions, ideal theory is not entirely distinct from utopian and apocalyptic thought, but rather overlaps with them in important ways.

In *Tyranny of the Ideal*, Gaus speaks of “models of utopian-ideal thought” to emphasize the continuous tradition shared by utopian thought and contemporary ideal theory (2016: 3). “Utopian” and “ideal theory” are certainly contested terms (e.g., Goodwin and Taylor, 1982; Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012; Levitas, 1990; Stemplowska and Swift, 2012; Valentini, 2012), so it is important to be clear on their meanings here. One common understanding of ideal or utopian theory, followed here, is an approach within political philosophy that aims to identify the *most perfect, most just* state rather than merely a *better, more just* state (e.g., Gaus, 2016; Sen, 2006).

Sometimes utopian implies the impossible (Jubb, 2012: 231), but that view is far from universal or even standard (Gaus, 2016: 2-3; Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 210-14). For our purposes, ideal or utopian theory sets forth a vision of the most perfect, most just state with the potential of being realized at some future point.⁴ In many forms, ideal theory aims to present a goal within the realm of possibility, even if a vast gulf stands between its goal and the imperfect present. If, as is commonly assumed, ought implies can, ideal theory must present a goal that is feasible so as to preserve its role as a normative guide to action. By setting forth the most just society feasible, ideal theory serves as a navigational guide: it provides a normative end goal to guide efforts toward greater justice.

When thinking about ideal theory’s navigational role, some mistakenly assume a sharp divide between ideal and non-ideal theory. Ingrid Robeyns (2008) takes this view—specifically, that ideal theory tells us what the end goal is and non-ideal theory tells us how to get there or at least closer to it. For Robeyns, it makes little sense to object to ideal theory on the grounds that it

fails to provide guidance on moving closer to a far off ideal. Such an objection fails, argues Robeyns, because it is not the ideal theorist's responsibility to map a path from the present to the ideal. That task falls instead to non-ideal theory (Robeyns, 2008: 345-46).

Yet this neat distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory ultimately proves problematic because it obscures an important point: ideal theorists also must engage in *non-ideal* theory when defending an ideal. A common metaphor for ideal theory—identifying the tallest mountain (Gaus, 2016; Sen, 2006; Simmons, 2010)—helps explain why. If we think of the most perfect, most just society possible as the world's tallest mountain and lower peaks as less just societies, an ideal theorist primarily errs in one of two ways: (1) by identifying as the tallest mountain a peak that, though perhaps the tallest in a region, is not the tallest in the world (say Denali); or (2) by identifying as the tallest mountain a peak that, though taller than Mount Everest, is nowhere to be found on earth (say a mythical peak 50,000 feet above sea level). Accusing ideal theory of one of these errors is to raise what, respectively, can be called the *utopian* and *feasibility objections* (for a similar point, see Jensen, 2009):

- (1) *Utopian objection*: criticizing ideal theory for being overly pessimistic and embracing an end goal that is *insufficiently ideal*.
- (2) *Feasibility objection*: criticizing ideal theory for being overly optimistic and embracing an end goal that is *too ideal*.

To give a compelling defense of ideal theory, then, one must overcome both these objections. And doing so requires engaging in non-ideal theory. If a critic argues for an ideal superior to that outlined by the ideal theorist, the theorist can ask the critic to explain a possible path to this superior ideal—i.e., to engage in non-ideal theory—and then challenge this account of non-ideal theory. Conversely, if a critic doubts the feasibility of an ideal theorist's vision, the theorist can defend it by engaging in non-ideal theory to show a potential path to this ideal.

So when doubts arise about the path to an ideal, the ideal theorist cannot simply respond: “Not my problem! Ask someone doing non-ideal theory.” This response leaves ideal theory without an actual defense, and gives others little reason to believe it. To avoid this pitfall, a compelling account of ideal theory also engages in non-ideal theory. The ideal theorist need not do all the work of non-ideal theory and specify every step from the present to the ideal. But the ideal theorist at least should work to allay skeptics’ doubts by sketching potential, general paths to a particular ideal.⁵

Since considering paths to the ideal takes on such importance in ideal theory, apocalyptic thought—with its emphasis on crisis as the vehicle to utopia—proves relevant to such theorizing. Robeyns’s characterization of ideal theory, which limits it to describing an ideal endpoint, would render many elements of apocalyptic thought irrelevant to it. But a closer look at ideal theory reveals the importance of outlining both the ideal endpoint and the path to it. While some understandings of ideal theory ignore this second matter, CAT places a strong focus on the path to the ideal. In the case of CAT, crisis opens the path to a seemingly impossible ideal.

5. The Catch-22 of Ideal Theory

To review, the ideal theorist has to guard against formulating a vision of society deemed either insufficiently ideal (the utopian objection) or too ideal (the feasibility objection). When one of these objections is valid, responding to it in isolation is straightforward. One can temper the goals of a vision that is too ideal and infeasible. And when a vision is insufficiently ideal, one can revise it to make it more utopian and appealing. But ideal theorists face a dilemma: *both* the utopian and feasibility objections loom over their projects as potential criticisms, and attempts to avoid one objection render them more vulnerable to the other.

Let's look at each horn of this dilemma. The first is the utopian objection, which demands an appealing moral goal worth striving for. Yet the more utopian the ideal, the more disconnected it becomes from the present and the less feasible it seems. That concern raises the second horn of the dilemma—the feasibility objection—which also is important to overcome, since an unattainable ideal cannot be realized and thus is not worth striving for. But settling on a modest, feasible ideal risks depriving it of normative force due to its insufficient moral appeal. That concern brings us back again to the utopian objection. So, together, the utopian and feasibility objections create a catch-22 for the ideal theorist: a more utopian ideal is a less feasible moral goal, which diminishes reasons to strive for it and its normative force, but a more modest and feasible ideal is a less appealing moral goal, which also diminishes the reasons to strive for it and its normative force. Regardless of whether one moves in a more or less ideal direction, one risks diminishing ideal theory's normative force (see Figure 1).

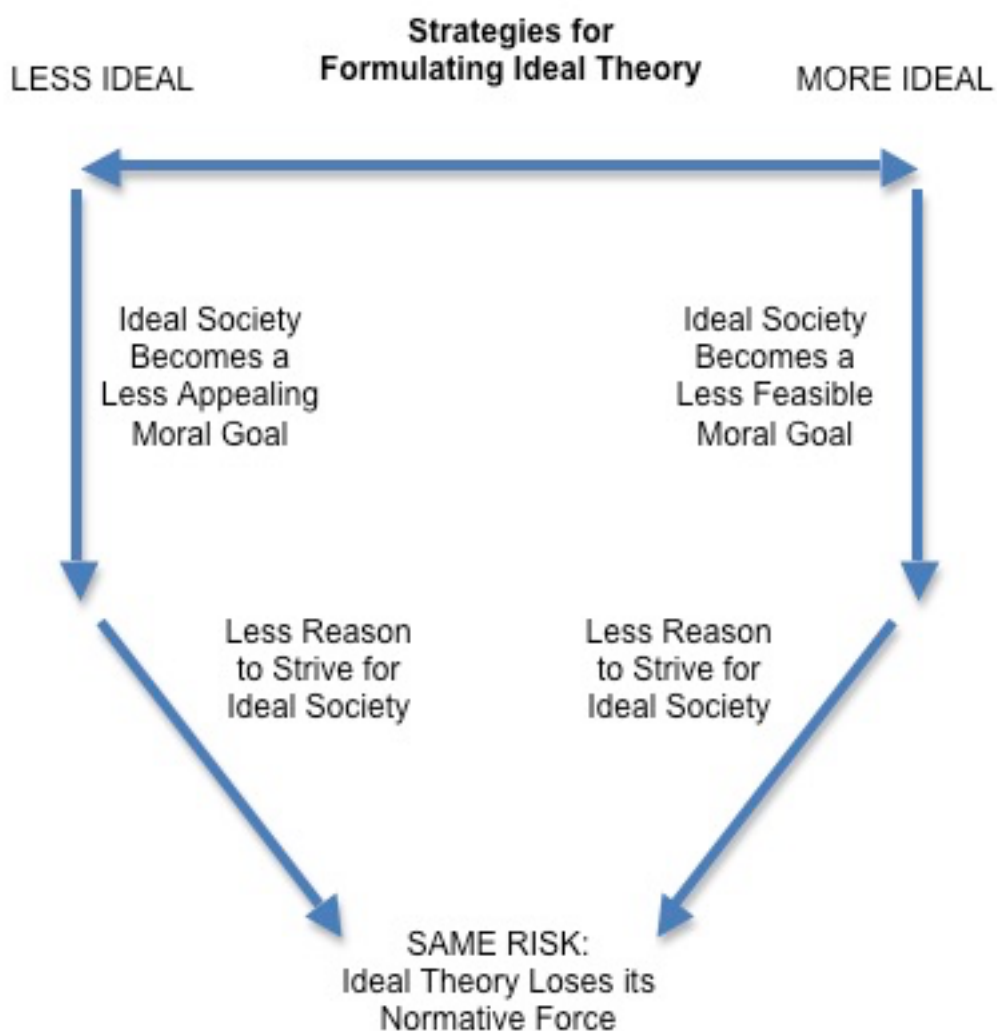
Some may contend that this catch-22 represents an illusory rather than real dilemma for ideal theory. Indeed, one finds political philosophers dismissing some version of the feasibility or utopian objection against ideal theory. It is important, then, to address this skepticism and show that the catch-22 identified here does in fact present challenges for ideal theory.

Skepticism toward the feasibility objection. This view stems from two related but distinct concerns: (1) feasibility assessments are often wrong, and (2) feasibility considerations are irrelevant to ideal theory. David Estlund explains the first concern:

The great achievements in the development of human social life have typically been preceded by incredulity about their very possibility, much less their likelihood. If theoretical inquiry had limited itself to what was plausibly thought to be achievable, the achievements might never have happened. For at least this reason, we ought not to lower our gaze in a practical and realistic spirit. (2014: 133)

Sometimes a theory deemed infeasible ends up being realized. Critics of the theory err because they fail to appreciate what is truly possible. For this reason, says Estlund, philosophers should not give up on a theory whenever feasibility concerns arise, since they may have better foresight than their critics (see also Erman and Möller, 2013: 36-40). This argument provides reasons for rejecting feasibility objections that are potentially inaccurate, but not necessarily all feasibility objections.

FIGURE 1: Catch-22 of Ideal Theory



A more fundamental critique of the catch-22 comes from a general rejection of feasibility considerations when engaging in ideal theory. G.A. Cohen takes this stronger view in his defense of “fact-insensitive” principles of justice, which take conditional form: “One ought to do *A* if it is possible to do *A*” (2003: 231). His approach opens the door for ideal theory to outline an ideal based partly or entirely on conditional principles that are impossible to carry out. Without feasibility constraints on ideal theory, the most perfect and just society could be a hopeless goal. That scenario leaves ideal theory without a feasible end goal to guide action.

Such varieties of ideal theory still count as moral, according to Estlund: “a theory can be normative in one sense by being evaluative, whether or not evaluation itself counsels action. ‘Society would be better like this’ might be true whether or not there is anything it makes sense to do in light of this fact” (2014: 121). Unconstrained by feasibility concerns, ideal theory is free to explore what true justice consists of, and such inquiry has value even if it fails to guide action (Estlund, 2011b).⁶

One can adopt Estlund’s approach and understand ideal theory as having a purely evaluative role, but it comes at a high cost. For this approach leaves ideal theory vulnerable to the charge that it is irrelevant to promoting justice. Amartya Sen (2006), for instance, sees little value for ideal theory in a world filled with injustice, because endless debates over perfect justice distract from the more pressing task of making incremental steps toward a more just world. Normally, defenders of ideal theory have a counterargument available to them in response to Sen’s criticism: because of the path-dependent nature of social change, an ideal end point is needed to guide efforts toward greater justice (Simmons, 2010). Without an ideal end point to guide action, incremental steps toward justice could lead to a *more* just society, yet further away from the *most* just society. To return to the mountain metaphor, someone in Anchorage, Alaska,

trying to climb the highest peak but unfamiliar with world geography may think that traveling a few hundred miles north to Denali will accomplish this goal. Climbing Denali takes one to a higher altitude yet away from the highest peak, which is on a different continent altogether. As this analogy suggests, we need an ideal to guide the pursuit of justice and avoid paths that delay or block greater advances later. This defense of ideal theory, however, loses its force when theorizing becomes disconnected from considerations of feasibility and takes on a purely evaluative role. Assuming that ought implies can, an infeasible ideal fails to provide a moral end goal to guide efforts toward greater justice. So when infeasible, ideal theory lacks the navigational value that the most powerful counterargument to Sen appeals to. Without navigational value, ideal theory could persist as an intellectual pursuit, but Sen would be right—it would be an intellectual pursuit irrelevant to advancing justice in the real world.

Apparently uncomfortable with this conclusion, those critical of the feasibility objection sometimes still try to preserve a navigational role for ideal theory. Estlund makes the case that, even when hopeless, ideal theory can force “us to think of how far the ideal is from reality, and what can be done to move us closer to the ideal and those causal relations” (2008: 269). On this view, even if we can never reach an ideal, it at least directs us in moving closer to it. Though on its face a reasonable defense of hopeless ideal theory, it runs into a problem: if we chase after an ideal that cannot be attained, there is no guarantee that coming as close as possible to it will result in the most just society.

To illustrate this point, consider the following example. Some believe that future advances in artificial intelligence will lead to an ideal society that remedies a host of injustices common today. On this view, ideal theory must set forth principles of justice to govern the development, distribution, and use of artificial intelligence. Now suppose this understanding of

ideal theory is wrong, and artificial intelligence cannot bring about the ideal society hoped for. Perhaps human capacities cannot effectively control artificial intelligence, which if developed would exercise tyrannical power over humanity. Or, more prosaically, perhaps humans lack the capacity to develop artificial intelligence to the point where it becomes truly effective in remedying various injustices (see Bostrom, 2014). Either way, investing in and pursuing artificial intelligence would hinder efforts to advance justice. Instead of leading to the most just and perfect possible, pursuing this unattainable ideal takes society down a path that wastes valuable resources and perhaps even fosters tyranny.

Sometimes the path in pursuit of an unattainable ideal does correspond with the path to the most just society possible, but that cannot be assumed, as the above example illustrates. Showing the navigational value of an unattainable ideal requires identifying the most just ideal possible, and explaining how the paths to these ideals correspond. Ultimately, then, one cannot escape feasibility concerns when formulating navigational ideal theory. The feasibility objection presents a real challenge to ideal theory. To overcome it, ideal theory must advance an ideal that is attainable and a suitable guide to action, rather than a mythical goal liable to sidetrack efforts toward justice.

Skepticism toward the utopian objection. The utopian objection raises the concern that ideal theory puts forward a goal with insufficient moral appeal, and as such is not worth striving for. Some respond that whether people find an ideal appealing and strive for it says nothing about its truth. For example, Laura Valentini (2009) points out that individuals do not always follow moral principles, yet that is a regrettable reality rather than an indictment of the principles themselves. If no moral theory has perfect success in motivating individuals to act rightly, why

should we single out ideal theory for criticism? On this view, ideal theory's success in motivating action is irrelevant to evaluating its truth.

Valentini is correct that even true moral principles do not always motivate action. But the utopian objection, or at least the strongest form of it, does not stem from concerns that akrasia (i.e., weakness of will) prevents individuals from pursuing ideal theory's goals. It instead levels a more serious charge against ideal theory: regardless of whether ideal theory actually motivates, there are compelling moral reasons why it *should not* motivate individuals to pursue its goals. According to the utopian objection, the insufficient moral appeal of ideal theory should prevent it from serving as a normative guide to action.

Importantly, the utopian objection presents challenges both for inaccurate and accurate accounts of ideal theory. Obviously, when ideal theory is overly pessimistic and specifies an ideal well short of the most perfect and just society possible, the utopian objection tells the ideal theorist to aim higher. But even when ideal theory identifies the most perfect and just society possible, the utopian objection can raise compelling reasons not to pursue it. On its face, this position seems odd. If ideal theory puts forward an ideal embodying the most perfect and just society possible, wouldn't we have strong normative reasons to pursue it? Not necessarily. It could be the case that the ideal, while representing the most just end goal possible, lacks sufficient moral appeal to justify the transition costs to realize it.

Juha Räikkä emphasizes this concern when discussing "the moral costs of the changeover," which are an inevitable part of transitioning to the ideal society (1998: 33). If the ideal is distinct from the present in significant ways, achieving it likely will require dramatic societal changes, along with the sacrifices and disruption that come with such changes. And

when the transition costs are steep, there can be compelling moral reasons to balk at pursuing the ideal society.

Take, for instance, an ideal theory X, which gives an accurate account of the most just and perfect society possible. In a state of nature without obstacles from the past to hinder the pursuit of X's ideal, individuals have good reason to strive for it. Yet, under actual conditions, advancing toward X's ideal involves higher costs because of the need to alter existing institutions. In fact, at this point in history, X's ideal only can be realized through a bloody conflict that wipes out society's dominant class. The substantial moral costs involved in achieving X's ideal prove too great to justify the transition, even if it would end various injustices (e.g., an entrenched wage gap between different groups). In sum, X's ideal has moral appeal, but not enough to justify the transition costs needed to realize it.

If, as in this case, the utopian objection succeeds, ideal theory finds itself in the same position it does when the feasibility objection succeeds: it lacks navigational value and relevance to promoting justice. Without sufficient moral appeal to justify the transition costs needed to realize its goal, ideal theory fails to specify an ideal worth striving for. So, despite some philosophers' skepticism, the utopian and feasibility objections do present a real challenge for ideal theory. One must escape the catch-22 posed by these objections to ensure ideal theory's normative value in guiding action. CAT's appeal in politics, as the next section discusses, partly lies in offering resources that seem to overcome this catch-22.

6. The Political Appeal (and Risks) of Apocalyptic Thought

Faced with the catch-22 posed by the feasibility and utopian objections, ideal theorists could give up on trying to formulate an ideal with navigational value. Ideal theory would merely have an

evaluative role: specifying the best society in theory and giving up on any aspirations to formulate a feasible end goal to guide action. Some, like Estlund and Cohen, seem content limiting ideal theory to this role. Others, though, find this concession deeply unsatisfying—one suited for the ivory tower but not actual politics, which demands a more robust normative role for ideal theory. On this view, one consults ideal theory not only to know what the ideal society is, but also for guidance on how to achieve it. As Gaus puts it, ideal theory is both about “what we should think” and “what we should do. They are not ultimately separable, for to think about justice is to think about where we should *move*, and how to engage in the *quest*” (2016: 61). Especially for those who understand their theorizing as helping to bring about the ideal society, guiding action is an essential function of ideal theory.

But crafting ideal theory with navigational value requires overcoming the catch-22 and crafting a goal that is utopian and feasible. For someone like Engels faced with this challenge, the apocalyptic tradition—and CAT particularly—offers an appealing approach. CAT refuses to be stymied by either horn of the catch-22 of ideal theory, and embraces an ideal that is thoroughly utopian while offering a narrative to explain its feasibility. CAT brings seemingly irreconcilable goals together in a single ideal.

First, despite the criticisms leveled against apocalyptic thought, few complain about it being insufficiently utopian. Apocalyptic narratives envision perfection at the end of history, such as the New Jerusalem described in Revelation. The vision of what is to come—a world finally free from strife, want, and suffering—stands in stark contrast to today. Without apology, the apocalyptic tradition sets forth a utopian vision as the destiny for God’s elect. Since it outlines an ideal embodying perfection, apocalyptic thought proves less vulnerable to the charge that its vision lacks appeal.

Second, CAT provides an explanation for how such a utopian ideal could be feasible. Outlining a far-off ideal without any connection to the present naturally prompts the feasibility objection—how does one ever get there from here? CAT takes this concern seriously and attempts to address it: a coming crisis will open a path connecting the present to utopia. Without such disruption, the apocalyptic ideal would indeed be an impossible and foolish thing to strive for. But CAT predicts a coming crisis, unlike any before, which will wipe away corruption and bring about the ideal envisioned.

CAT's appeal makes further sense when considering the power of crisis generally in interpreting political events. Crisis often provides compelling grounds for indicting the status quo and developing an alternative vision to pursue. Both the political right and left recognize the opportunity presented by crisis. "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change," writes Milton Friedman. "When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around" (2002: xiv). President Barack Obama's first Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, makes a similar point: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.... This [economic] crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before" (Seib, 2008). This idea is far from new, and appears in political tracts from the Age of Revolution to the present (Paine, [1776] 1987: 116; Sharp, 2010: 35). Across different eras, crisis has had the power to direct people's attention to societal failures, helping overcome apathy and instill a sense of urgency to address them.

Likewise, CAT portrays crisis as a potentially transformative moment in politics. Just on the other side of crisis, argues CAT, lies the perfect society that surpasses all others. Within CAT's framework, crisis wipes away long-entrenched obstacles that stood in the way of utopia, and creates urgency to act and take advantage of the unique opportunity at hand.

The power of CAT to reframe crisis as an opportunity for transformative change rather than a source of paralyzing fear makes it an appealing approach for interpreting politics, but also a risky one. Instilling a particular crisis with historic importance can create in the short term a sense of urgency to seize the opportunity to radically improve society. This hopeful mindset, though, quickly can turn into disillusionment when crisis fails to produce redemptive change. That danger has long plagued apocalyptic thought. As Stephen O’Leary observes, “the recurring fallacy of apocalyptic eschatology seems to rest in a human tendency to identify the particular with the ultimate” (1994: 218). CAT pins its hopes for renewal on a particular moment in history. If dramatic action in response to crisis never brings the desired change, discouragement often sets in—the sacrifices were in vain. Sustaining a commitment to CAT thus proves immensely challenging. One finds this challenge in Christianity, when expectations of the imminent arrival of God’s kingdom go unfulfilled. It also is found in secular ideologies like Marxism, which struggles to explain how the inevitable crisis and collapse of capitalism has yet to occur and usher in the communist ideal.

Of perhaps even greater concern, crises sometimes motivate dramatic action that exacerbates rather than solves societal ills. Scholars on both the right and left note that crisis (real or perceived) often serves to justify troubling changes in state power (Hay, 1996; Higgs, 1987). Convinced that a crisis is at hand, people clamor for *something* to be done. This mindset can justify transition costs normally shunned, such as violence against those perceived as obstacles to an ideal. Steep transition costs hardly guarantee utopia, especially given the complexity of the social world and impossibility of predicting the full repercussions of political action. Efforts to bring the ideal into existence by brute force can unleash a host of ills without

bringing utopia any closer—a danger that looms over apocalyptic thought (Flannery, 2016) and ideal theory more broadly (Hendrix, 2013).

7. Conclusion

Despite its many risks and theological baggage, apocalyptic thought proves appealing to a number of serious political thinkers. For those like Engels interested in not just theorizing about the ideal state but in actually realizing it, they face the challenge of crafting an ideal worth striving for. Attempts to formulate such an ideal run into the catch-22 of ideal theory, and overcoming it requires outlining an ideal that is both utopian and feasible. Yet the immense tension between these goals leaves few if any options to realize them simultaneously. Instead of shrinking from this dilemma, CAT offers a purported solution: crisis will transform the world and finally make utopia possible. And that is perhaps why Engels—who, as a Marxist, has every reason to reject Christian apocalyptic doctrines as the opiate of the masses in especially bizarre form—nevertheless finds himself drawn to apocalyptic thought. The allure of the ideal state makes apocalyptic thought attractive even to secular thinkers, as such thought helps in imagining a path to this elusive goal.

Notes

¹ A term similar to CAT is “catastrophic millennialism” (Wessinger, 2011: 718). I opt against this term because it carries connotations of a millennial kingdom—an idea often absent from secular apocalyptic thought.

² This list overlaps with the elements of apocalyptic rhetoric outlined by Frank Borchardt (1990), but omits his idea of a golden age being restored. Hope of a restored golden age is present in some apocalyptic worldviews. Borchardt, though, misses the point that apocalyptic thought often envisions a truly novel ideal, superior to anything before.

³ Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor write: “Modern utopias have generally dispensed with the notion of divine intervention, and have urged men to rely entirely on their own efforts in striving for salvation; yet even so, elements of Christian millenarianism seem to have found their way into modern thought.... The idea of the Second Coming of

Christ actually re-emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century as a key ingredient of many utopian theories” (1982: 14). Timothy Kenyon, while recognizing similarities between utopian and apocalyptic thought, emphasizes the distinction between them: “From the millenarian point of view, this work [of establishing the ideal society] must be left to God, who will intervene either directly or through His agents, the Saints. From the utopian point of view, the ideal society can only be established by Man, working unaided” (1982: 147-48). Kenyon’s distinction is not as sharp as he supposes, however, since it does not apply to *secular* apocalyptic thought, which claims that human or natural forces will realize the ideal society.

⁴ Another feature often associated with ideal theory is full compliance. In Rawls’s formulation of ideal theory, “Everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions” ([1971] 1999: 8). This assumption appears in many subsequent formulations of ideal theory (e.g., Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012: 48; Nili, forthcoming; Stemplowska and Swift, 2012: 375; Valentini, 2012: 654). The conception of ideal theory advanced here, however, does not assume full compliance. In the most just society possible, there still may be some non-compliance because of freedom’s role within it. If that is true, assuming full compliance in ideal theory would make its ideal impossible and unsuitable as an end goal to strive for.

⁵ An example of sketching general paths to an ideal, while recognizing numerous discoveries along those paths that still need to be made, is Nick Bostrom’s (2014) account of achieving superintelligence.

⁶ Estlund (2008: 263-70; 2011a) distinguishes between utopian/impossible and hopeless normative theories. The former prescribe actions that are impossible for humans, whereas the latter prescribe actions that humans could do but are unlikely given human nature. Estlund’s distinction between impossible and hopeless theories collapses, though, if certain features of human psychology can never be changed on a broad scale.

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