

Conclusion

Encounters with apocalyptic thought often obscure the richness of this tradition. Many have a difficult time getting past the strange and bizarre impression that apocalyptic belief leaves them with. It is as if beliefs in the rapture, Armageddon, the Last Judgment, and the like spring from an alien mindset that outsiders cannot access. At the same time, the apocalypse has become mundane. Portrayals of global catastrophe – whether through nuclear war, climate change, asteroid impact, or deadly pandemic – have proliferated in popular culture. Apocalypse is understood simply as catastrophe, and this flattened conception now shows up everywhere.

These encounters leave us with an incomplete picture of apocalyptic thought, one that makes it difficult to grasp its nuances and persistent role in political life. To overcome that barrier, this study looks at apocalyptic thought from a different perspective – the perspective of thinkers with secular conceptions of politics. Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Engels all reject apocalyptic hopes that God will soon intervene to perfect society, so one might expect these theorists to dismiss apocalyptic thought. Yet they opt for a different approach. Recognizing the power of apocalyptic thought, they engage with it in their political writings.

By examining what draws these thinkers to apocalyptic thought, we gain insight into its enduring appeal and impact on political philosophy. Though apocalyptic thought's catastrophic imagery gets all the attention, its emphasis on utopian hope is just as central to it – if not more so. Because of its strategies for cultivating and preserving utopian hope, the apocalyptic tradition remains a resource for those interested in fostering such hope today.

THREE TAKEAWAYS

By taking a closer look at secular apocalyptic thought, this book arrives at three main conclusions. They concern how to study apocalyptic thought, the source

of its political appeal, and its lessons for political philosophy today. Let's briefly review each of these conclusions.

(1) *The study of secular apocalyptic thought would place itself on firmer ground by focusing on cases where secular thinkers explicitly reference religious apocalyptic texts, figures, or concepts.* This methodological recommendation comes in response to how loosely the term apocalypse is used, not just in popular culture, but also in academic research. Originally in the Jewish and Christian traditions, apocalypse referred to a divine revelation. So in the Bible, apocalyptic literature recounts a revelation, which in many cases explores the relation between crisis and utopia in God's plan for the end of time. Today apocalypse has taken the expansive meaning of referring to any catastrophe. Influenced by this trend, researchers often conclude that any discussion of catastrophe counts as evidence that it was influenced by religious apocalyptic thought. As a result, they see religious influences where the evidence for them is questionable, since catastrophic imagery and language also can come from nonreligious sources (e.g., accounts of war). An additional factor exacerbates this methodological problem: some use the label apocalyptic as a rhetorical weapon against ideologies and beliefs they find irrational and bizarre. To guard against drawing illusory connections in the history of ideas, I suggest more rigorous standards for identifying secular apocalyptic thought. Specifically, there should be evidence of secular thinkers explicitly referencing and drawing on religious apocalyptic thought.

(2) *Apocalyptic thought's political appeal partly lies in offering resources to navigate persistent challenges in ideal theory.* Ideal theory tackles the task of identifying the most just society, often with the aim of providing a goal to guide collective action. This aspiration to be a normative guide leaves ideal theory with a challenge: outlining a goal that is utopian *and* feasible. Its vision of the ideal society needs to be feasible, for it makes little sense to dedicate valuable resources to striving after a goal that isn't even attainable. Its goal also needs to be utopian so that it possesses sufficient moral appeal to justify the sacrifices needed to attain it. Unfortunately, a more utopian ideal tends to be less feasible, and vice versa. What I call *cataclysmic apocalyptic thought* provides an apparent solution to this catch-22: it embraces a thoroughly utopian ideal, seemingly out of reach, and declares it feasible by pointing to a coming crisis as the path to attain it. According to this view, crisis promises to open up possibilities previously closed off and offers a rare opportunity to make the ideal a reality. Apocalyptic thought thus proves appealing for those who want to realize the ideal and not merely theorize about it.

(3) *Ideal theory and apocalyptic thought both rest on faith and are best suited to be sources of utopian hope, not guides for collective action by a society.*

Apocalyptic thought sets forth an ideal and theorizes a path to it. Such thought thus has similarities to ideal theory that political philosophy often overlooks. Most notably, John Rawls sees the two as fundamentally distinct. In his view, ideal theory presents an ideal that individuals in a pluralistic society have reason to accept and collectively strive for, which religious belief cannot offer. That view runs into problems, though, because it fails to account for how future uncertainty undermines ideal theory's claims. Even if its proposed ideal seems morally appealing, there is no reason to be confident that it will retain its appeal under radically different future conditions that we cannot predict. Unable to provide plausible grounds for the ideal it proposes, ideal theory ultimately rests on faith. Despite this limitation, ideal theory can persist as a source of utopian hope, which gives meaning to imperfect efforts to advance justice by portraying them as steps toward the ideal. Such hope comes with risks, since it can motivate efforts to bring about utopia by any means possible – including violence. One strategy to reduce this risk, found in Jewish and Christian thought, embraces utopian hope while stressing human ignorance of the ideal and how to achieve it. Sensitive to our epistemic limitations, this strategy warns against believing that we can identify the ideal and a path to it. By pairing utopian hope with epistemic humility, religious traditions offer potential wisdom for ideal theory.

REVISITING THE PARABLE OF HILLSIDE

The parable of Hillside at the start of this study highlights how Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Engels respond to apocalyptic thought and its appeal, while also hinting at potential drawbacks in each of their approaches. Though Machiavelli recognizes the power of apocalyptic hope in politics, he resists the temptation to embrace it. An obstacle stands in his way of taking that leap: he simply cannot fathom a lasting utopia ever emerging due to the constant flux and inevitable decay that characterize politics. Hobbes opts for a different strategy, which focuses on tempering apocalyptic ideals. He makes the case that the Christian understanding of utopia – the kingdom of God – manifests itself on earth as the Leviathan state, despite its many imperfections in that form. Engels is the most unapologetic in his embrace of apocalyptic thought and utopian hope. He praises Thomas Müntzer's apocalyptic vision for politics while transforming his ideal of the kingdom of God into a secular goal to strive for.

None of these approaches prove well suited to sustain utopian hope. That is most obvious in the case of Machiavelli, who rejects such hope to begin with. Hobbes does hang on to a form of utopian hope, but one so anemic that it is

hard to imagine its having much appeal for those yearning for utopia. He co-opts the apocalyptic ideal of the kingdom of God and equates it with the deeply imperfect state outlined in *Leviathan*, all in an effort to warn against political projects that strive for perfection and cause continual upheaval. Instead of embracing the most ambitious forms of utopian hope, Hobbes wants his readers to set their sights lower. On its face, Engels's approach seems most conducive for preserving utopian hope. What attracts him to apocalyptic thought – its idea that crisis opens the way to utopia – proves appealing as a potential solution to challenges inherent in ideal theory. That solution, though, turns out to be illusory. Utopian hope that looks to realize its aims through crisis sets itself up for disappointment. No one can give plausible grounds that a particular crisis will actually deliver utopia. So though Engels embraces utopian hope, his understanding of it proves difficult to sustain in a world filled with uncertainty.

Each thinker's engagement with the apocalyptic tradition has its shortcomings, yet other approaches prove more promising for sustaining utopian hope. In particular, Jewish and Christian theologians struggling with the explosive potential of apocalyptic thought came to develop strategies that both limit its dangers and preserve utopian hope. The relevance of these strategies to current debates over ideal theory reminds us not to dismiss or ignore the apocalyptic tradition, despite its odd and bizarre features. Prominent figures throughout the history of political thought have taken a keen interest in the apocalyptic tradition. As is hopefully now clear, close study of this tradition, in all its richness, still has the potential today to offer novel perspectives and insights into challenges common to political life.

A CLOSING PARABLE

Just as it began, this study ends with a parable. It comes from the Christian apocalyptic tradition, specifically Matthew 25:31–46. In the passage, Jesus explains the fate of the sheep (righteous) and the goats (unrighteous) at the end of time. The Son of Man returns, takes his place on the throne, and welcomes the sheep into his kingdom (see Figure C.1). He proceeds to explain why they have been blessed and chosen to enter his kingdom: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35–36). His explanation confuses the sheep. They cannot remember ever serving the king in these ways. With a simple response, the king dispels their confusion: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are



FIGURE C.1 Separation of the sheep and the goats
Byzantine mosaic from the early sixth century¹

members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).² Perhaps no other verse better sums up the gospel message.

The parable of the sheep and the goats has generated a wide range of interpretations. Here I’d like to offer an interpretation not with the goal of supplanting others, but to highlight the parable’s potential wisdom for ideal theory – specifically, its subtle reminder of the virtue found in epistemic humility. Consider the ignorance of the sheep. When the king thanks them, they are at a loss to explain how they served him. They have a woefully incomplete understanding of how their actions fit into the broader project of advancing God’s kingdom. Moreover, the actions for which they are praised highlight their limitations. They feed the hungry, which suggests that hunger is still a problem. They take in the stranger, which suggests that lack of shelter is still a problem. And they visit the prisoner, which suggests that crime and the need for prisons are still problems. In short, the sheep fail to fully solve many of the social ills they encounter. Unable to realize utopia through their own

¹ This image is in the public domain and available on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website at the following link: www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/466573.

² New Revised Standard Version.

efforts, they work for partial steps to alleviate suffering and remedy injustice. Despite the imperfect nature of their efforts, the parable makes clear that they still have reason to hold on to utopian hope.

For some ideal theorists, the sheep may seem like odd – even perverse – role models. Shouldn't we aim higher? Beyond just alleviating suffering, we must address the systemic injustices that cause it. That point is absolutely correct. But ideal theory often goes beyond identifying systemic injustices and proposing measures to fight them. It purports to outline a harmonious vision that eliminates injustice, and argues that this proposal should guide society. In reality, though, ideal theorists have no special knowledge of what the ideal society would look like. Too much about the future is unknown to make claims about utopia with confidence – or at least justified confidence. Realizing that fact is disappointing, to be sure. But it is far worse to presume that we have knowledge of the ideal and then attempt to bring it about by any means necessary. In a complex world, such hubris usually has unintended and regrettable consequences.

Given that danger, the sheep in their humility serve as an instructive model. With their questions to the king, they admit their epistemic limitations. As they stumble around in an uncertain world to advance justice, they cannot offer a detailed path to utopia and do not feign such knowledge. They are not, of course, completely ignorant of what actions are likely to be effective in advancing justice, at least in the short term. After all, they do have some success in feeding the hungry, providing shelter to the stranger, and comforting the imprisoned. So the lesson of the parable is not that good intentions are all that matter and questions of effectiveness are irrelevant. Research, experimentation, and planning all have an important role to play in helping ensure that good intentions are paired with – to the best of our knowledge – effective practices.

We can grant this point while still rejecting the loftier ambitions of ideal theory. For there is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, weaving together a unified theory that aspires to wholly eliminate injustice and, on the other, more piecemeal efforts to improve institutions and practices as we gain a deeper understanding of injustices and their causes. The latter approach holds greater promise in an uncertain world that frustrates the long-term predictions of ideal theory. Recognition of our epistemic limitations ultimately recommends a humble approach to advancing justice – one that involves trial and error, small experiments that can be expanded if they are fortunate enough to succeed.

Though that approach departs from many prominent understandings of ideal theory, it leaves one aspect of it in place: utopian hope. At the same time

that future uncertainty undermines the idea that we can identify utopia, it carves out space to believe in its possibility should we choose. Since so much about the future is uncertain, we are free to hope that it will be far better, no longer marred by the injustices of the present. Such hope, in short, can be as ambitious as our imagination allows.