Introduction

THE PARABLE OF HILLSIDE

With little warning, the rustic kingdom of Hillside found itself under attack from its powerful neighbor to the north, Acadia. The Acadians started raiding Hillside, stealing its resources, inflicting casualties, and filling the kingdom with fear. Acadia had not conquered Hillside yet, but many worried it was only a matter of time.

Meanwhile, a prophet named John roamed the streets of Hillside, preaching that the end was near. Acadia's attack, he claimed, was a sign that God would soon intervene to wipe away corruption and establish his perfect kingdom. In the past, John had attracted large crowds with his message of hope in the midst of crisis. But his prophecies had failed too many times. By now, most of his followers had abandoned him.

Three wise men in Hillside – Nicholas, Thomas, and Frederick – closely studied John's preaching. They rejected the idea that God was about to intervene but still found power in John's message. Drawing on it, each developed his own vision for saving Hillside.

Nicholas spoke first to the people. Like John, he emphasized the opportunity presented by the current crisis, which had the potential to renew Hillside. Having gone years without a crisis to test it, Hillside had grown weak and vulnerable. Now was the time to commit to building its military strength. If serious about this commitment, Hillside could fend off attacks, expand, and become more glorious than ever. This plan appealed to many, but others pressed for more details. If the people sacrificed their time, resources, and lives as Nicholas called for, could he assure them that Hillside would face no more crises and achieve lasting peace? Unfortunately, Nicholas could make no such promise. He knew that, even after conquering Acadia, Hillside would face more tests. The people found this message discouraging and rejected his plan.

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Thomas went next. He scolded the people for exaggerating their troubles. Yes, the raids had hurt the kingdom, but the real danger was allowing the crisis to foster internal strife. Already, some were questioning the authority of Hillside's king and suggesting rebellion. Thomas stressed that they must obey the king and respect his authority. He went so far as to flip John's prophecy on its head, saying that the kingdom of God *already* existed in Hillside under the king's rule. The people of Hillside found this message preposterous. The Acadians were maiming, killing, and stealing from them on a regular basis – how could *this* be God's kingdom?

Frederick took a different tack. Hillside's current crisis *was* the king's fault, he said. For too long, the ruling class had oppressed the people, weakening the kingdom. The latest crisis had made the king so weak that revolution against him could succeed. Following John's example, Frederick portrayed the current crisis as one of historic importance: if the people seized this opportunity and threw off their chains, they could defeat their enemies and create in Hillside a lasting utopia. This is the future that prophets like John *actually* had in mind when they spoke of God's perfect kingdom. Frederick's hopeful vision – and a path for getting there – was what Hillside longed for! The people rebelled, overthrew the king, and defeated Acadia.

Despite the revolution, utopia sadly never came to Hillside. There is still hunger, suffering, and occasional violence. Reportedly, prophets and revolutionaries continue to visit Hillside, always managing to find some eager for their message.

THE MORAL

The parable introduces three of the main protagonists in the pages to come: Niccolò Machiavelli (Nicholas), Thomas Hobbes (Thomas), and Friedrich Engels (Frederick). None of these thinkers stand out as likely suspects to embrace apocalyptic thought. Engels, one of Marxism's founders, was an atheist.[1] The religious beliefs of Machiavelli and Hobbes – the respective authors of the classic texts *The Prince* and *Leviathan* – are a matter of dispute. Without question, they criticized aspects of Christianity, and for that reason some suspect them of atheism.[2] What is clear for all three is that they had no illusions that divine intervention would solve the woes afflicting political and

[1] For more on Engels's religious views, see Roland Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marxism and Theology IV* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 233–306.

[2] For the dispute over Machiavelli's religious views, see Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Clifford Orwin, "Machiavelli's Unchristian Charity," *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 (1978): 1217–28; Sebastian de Grazia,

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social life. Their theories are secular in the following sense: they make prescriptions for political institutions without the hope that God will assist in perfecting them. That view stands in contrast to apocalyptic hopes throughout history that divine forces soon will intervene to wipe away earthly corruption and establish a lasting utopia – the kingdom of God. Given the apparent chasm between that idea and these thinkers' perspectives, it would be reasonable to expect Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Engels to dismiss apocalyptic hopes as nonsense.

Yet their writings reveal a different attitude. Their engagement with apocalyptic figures and texts reveals a sincere interest in apocalyptic thought and appreciation of its power. Machiavelli grapples with how to assess a central figure of Florentine politics from the 1490s, the Dominican Friar Girolamo Savonarola, whose apocalyptic preaching helped usher in a brief revival of republican rule. Though at times critical of Savonarola, Machiavelli recognizes the power of his apocalyptic preaching in helping establish new political orders. Hobbes takes a harsher view of the apocalyptic prophets and sects that flourished during the English Civil War of the mid-1600s, yet responds by

Machiavelli in Hell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Vickie Sullivan, "Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli's Treatment of Religion in the *Discourses*," *Polity* 26, no. 2 (1993): 259–80; and Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). For the dispute over Hobbes's religious views, see Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); Willis Glover, "God and Thomas Hobbes," *Church History* 29, no. 3 (1960): 275–97; J. G. A. Pocock, "Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 148–201; Edwin Curley, " 'I Durst Not Write so Boldly,' or How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise," in *Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. Daniela Bostrenghi (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1992), 497–593; A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of* Leviathan: *Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Richard Tuck, "The 'Christian Atheism' of Thomas Hobbes," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 111–30; Paul Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in* Leviathan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996); Devin Stauffer, " 'Of Religion' in Hobbes's *Leviathan*," *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 3 (2010): 868–79; Agostino Lupoli, "Hobbes and Religion without Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, ed. Al Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 453–80; Sarah Mortimer, "Christianity and Civil Religion in Hobbes's *Leviathan*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, ed. Al Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 501–19; Steven Smith, *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 67–87; Arash Abizadeh, "Hobbes's Agnostic Theology before *Leviathan*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 47, no. 5 (2017): 714–37; and Arash Abizadeh, "Hobbes's Conventionalist Theology, the Trinity, and God as an Artificial Person by Fiction," *Historical Journal* 60, no. 4 (2017): 915–41.

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co-opting apocalyptic ideals to advance an alternative vision. In *Leviathan*, he calls earthly commonwealths a manifestation of the kingdom of God, essentially telling his readers to stop looking for God's kingdom – it is already in front of them and can be theirs if they just obey the civil sovereign. Engels exhibits an enduring fascination with apocalyptic thought, evident from his writings on the book of Revelation and the apocalyptic figure Thomas Müntzer, a leader of the German Peasants' War in the 1520s. Rather than entirely reject the Christian concept of the kingdom of God, he transforms it into a Marxist ideal.

Each develops a distinct strategy for responding to apocalyptic hopes, which is closely tied to how they approach theorizing about the ideal state. Machiavelli longs for a perpetual republic, which Savonarola's apocalyptic message promises. But despite recognizing the appeal of this ideal, Machiavelli ultimately rejects it, unable to accept the idea that any republic could survive the vicissitudes of politics and endure forever. Hobbes adopts a different strategy when confronted with the idealism of apocalyptic beliefs. He dramatically tempers this idealism by equating God's perfect kingdom with imperfect commonwealths that command the worship of false gods, kill the innocent, and engage in other evils. Engels goes further than Hobbes and embraces the apocalyptic tradition's utopian hopes. Though he envisions a secular ideal different from that envisioned by Christian apocalyptic thought, he shares with this tradition the belief that utopia will come after a period of crisis and upheaval. Appreciation of apocalyptic thought's political power leads Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Engels to three different strategies for handling its idealism: rejecting it, tempering it, and embracing it.

These thinkers' engagement with apocalyptic thought offers insights into this book's central question: Why do secular thinkers find in Christianity's apocalyptic doctrines appealing tools to interpret politics? By exploring apocalyptic thought's appeal even to those skeptical of its underlying theology, we can better understand its persistent influence in politics. More broadly, this analysis sheds light on strategies for overcoming the challenge of how to reconcile deeply held hopes for a more perfect political future with a world seemingly hostile to it.

THE PUZZLE OF SECULAR APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

On its face, why secular thinkers would find apocalyptic thought appealing is somewhat puzzling. Such thought enjoys a less-than-stellar reputation among both believers and nonbelievers. Many Christians find apocalyptic beliefs – predictions of coming plagues and judgment, the resurrection of the dead, an

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Antichrist who will persecute the righteous, and a millennial kingdom on earth – to be the most bizarre elements of their faith. This discomfort with their faith's apocalyptic heritage has led many Christians to downplay it, from urging allegorical interpretations of apocalyptic texts to skipping over them in church services.

The perceived link between apocalyptic thought and violence exacerbates these concerns. In both the past and present, there have been violent manifestations of apocalyptic thought. During the Crusades, Christians used apocalyptic texts like the book of Revelation to justify a brutal holy war aimed at taking Jerusalem.[3] Today, apocalyptic themes and rhetoric from Christian sources appear in the ideologies of right-wing militia movements in the United States and have influenced domestic terrorists like Timothy McVeigh.[4] The violent potential of apocalyptic beliefs also was on display with the rise of the Islamic State or ISIS. Through selectively drawing on Islamic sources, ISIS embraced apocalyptic beliefs that provided the logic for its shocking and violent tactics.[5] For some, these groups embody everything wrong with apocalyptic thought – bizarre and violent beliefs.

Indeed, the baggage associated with apocalyptic thought creates barriers to understanding it. One reaction is that only the crazy or deluded could sincerely embrace and act on apocalyptic belief. Many who study apocalyptic groups, however, caution against dismissing their members as irrational or brainwashed, pointing out that their actions are often rational when interpreted from the perspective of their belief system. So little is gained from dismissing members of apocalyptic groups as crazy. Instead, it is more productive to study their beliefs so that we can respond to them in constructive ways that minimize violence.[6]

[3] John Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 44–78; and Frances Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 38–50.

[4] Michael Barkun, "Religion, Militias and Oklahoma City: The Mind of Conspiratorialists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8, no. 1 (1996): 50–64; Michael Barkun, "Millennialism on the Radical Right in America," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 649–66; and Martin Durham, "Preparing for Armageddon: Citizen Militias, the Patriot Movement and the Oklahoma City Bombing," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8, no. 1 (1996): 65–79.

[5] William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); and Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/.

[6] Catherine Wessinger, "Introduction: The Interacting Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution, and Violence," in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 15, 39.

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These recommendations make sense, yet putting them into practice is a challenge. The idiosyncratic and often exotic nature of apocalyptic belief makes it difficult for outsiders to overcome the bizarre impression they initially have of it. After all, the gap between an apocalyptic belief system and that of an outsider can seem vast. Even if one sincerely *wants* to understand apocalyptic beliefs, they can appear disconnected from reality and anything familiar.

One benefit of studying secular apocalyptic thought is that it helps overcome this disconnect. Examining secular thinkers who take an interest in apocalyptic figures and texts allows us to see their appeal in a new light. This approach reveals thinkers who, while skeptical of apocalyptic belief, still find aspects of it appealing. In fact, some secular thinkers draw on apocalyptic thought and incorporate elements from it into their own political philosophy. Exploring why they make this move helps us better understand apocalyptic thought's appeal.

When we examine apocalyptic thought from the perspective of secular thinkers, it becomes harder to dismiss it as foreign and disconnected from the world we inhabit. Apocalyptic thought springs from persistent human hopes – notably, a longing for the ideal society and end to the evils that have plagued the world for too long. If we move past the assumption that apocalyptic thought's appeal is limited only to fringe groups, that shift in perspective forces us to recognize that the hopes bound up in it are not so radically different from ones long present in political thought.

WHAT IDEAL THEORY TEACHES US ABOUT APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

This study draws on a strand of political philosophy known as ideal theory, often understood as theorizing about what the best, most just society would look like. Ideal theory often gets a bad rap. The arcane debates characterizing it, over visions of society with seemingly little hope of being realized, give the impression that ideal theory lacks any connection to advancing justice in the real world.[7] Though ideal theory deserves its fair share of criticism, it is

[7] For more on the debates over ideal theory, see Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska, "Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals," *Political Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (2012): 48–62; Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, ed. David Estlund (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 373–88; Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654–64; Kwame Appiah, *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 112–72; and Michael Weber and Kevin Vallier, eds., *Political Utopias: Contemporary Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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important to appreciate the motivations behind it. The persistence of cruelty, suffering, and violence makes clear that the world is not what it should be. Moreover, many of these evils exist in complex interrelationships, where alleviating one could exacerbate others. Faced with that dilemma, ideal theory seeks to outline a vision of society whose institutions and foundational principles fit together in a cohesive whole that best advances justice. This vision offers a goal to aim for. Ideal theory is thus more than mere intellectual curiosity: it springs from legitimate concerns over how best to advance justice in a world where the answer is rarely straightforward.

On its face, ideal theory seems like an odd lens for studying apocalyptic thought. Today apocalypse is synonymous with catastrophe, bringing to mind wide-scale disaster and doom. Given how the term is often used, nothing about the apocalypse seems ideal. Apocalyptic thought's link to ideal theory becomes clearer, though, by looking at the Jewish and Christian traditions from which such thought emerged. Apocalyptic texts in these traditions anticipate crisis, but interpret it as a necessary step to realizing utopia. So apocalyptic thought is more than theorizing about crisis: *it is theorizing about the special relation between crisis and utopia*.

This claim requires some qualification. Apocalyptic thought is incredibly diverse, and generalizations inevitably fail to capture all its forms. Much of this study focuses on what I call *cataclysmic apocalyptic thought*. That particular strand of apocalyptic thought sees crisis as a key force to wipe away corruption and make way for a utopian society, in what will be a radical break from the past. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought does not represent all of the apocalyptic tradition but is certainly a significant part of it. Notably, the apocalyptic text of Revelation expresses the hope that divine intervention will bring about earthly upheaval and eliminate corrupt ruling powers. When these rulers meet their demise, the kingdom of God – a perfect kingdom to last forever – will rise in their place.

This apocalyptic perspective has proved influential throughout the history of political thought. The appeal of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought partly lies in offering resources to navigate a problem that has long plagued ideal theory: How can we get to the ideal society when it seems so hopelessly removed from the present? Ideal theory faces the competing demands of specifying a *feasible* ideal that we can actually achieve, but also a *utopian* ideal that remains appealing and worth sacrificing for. These competing demands create a catch-22: a more utopian ideal is less feasible, which diminishes our reasons to strive for it and its moral force, yet a more modest and feasible ideal lessens its appeal, which also diminishes our reasons to strive for it and its moral force. Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Engels all encounter this

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dilemma when considering hopes for utopia. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought offers a solution to ideal theory's catch-22: embrace a utopian ideal and declare it feasible by pointing to a coming crisis that will bring it about. Rather than abandon hope for utopia, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought proclaims that crisis will finally make this hope a reality. It thus fashions a narrative of political change to explain how the seemingly impossible becomes possible, which makes cataclysmic apocalyptic thought attractive to those who want to go beyond imagining the ideal and actually realize it.

Though Machiavelli and Hobbes recognize cataclysmic apocalyptic thought's appeal for politics, they stop short of embracing it. Engels goes further and embraces this perspective, providing an example of how cataclysmic apocalyptic thought takes secular form. In the hands of secular thinkers, apocalyptic thought becomes transformed by identifying human or natural forces – as opposed to divine ones – as the drivers behind crisis that will realize the ideal society. For Engels, economic forces will spark a crisis that leads to the collapse of capitalism and gives way to an ideal society grounded in Marxist principles. Both Christian and secular versions of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought take a hopeful view of crisis since only crisis can remove entrenched corruption in society and create a path to the ideal.

Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought remains thoroughly utopian even in conditions that seem hopeless. This worldview proves appealing to theorists who are acutely aware of the present's imperfection but refuse to let it shake their hopes for the ideal society. When understood from this perspective, secular apocalyptic thought becomes less puzzling. Its appeal comes from offering a rationale for holding on to utopian hope in the midst of corruption and crisis. Even in trying conditions, one can draw on such thought to instill hope and motivate action in pursuit of the ideal.

WHAT APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT TEACHES US ABOUT IDEAL THEORY

Beyond just using ideal theory as a tool to understand apocalyptic thought, this study asks what insights apocalyptic thought can provide into ideal theory.[8] It is a novel approach to ideal theory and one that stands in contrast to the ahistorical nature of most scholarship on the subject.

8 In how I approach the history of political thought for insights into contemporary political philosophy, I am deeply sympathetic to the recommendations in Adrian Blau, "How (Not) to Use the History of Political Thought for Contemporary Purposes," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 2 (2021): 359–72.

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John Rawls's 1971 work *A Theory of Justice* sparked much of the current interest in ideal theory. The book introduces that term to describe its approach of outlining principles of justice for ideal circumstances (ideal theory), which then are necessary to determine what justice demands under less-than-ideal circumstances (nonideal theory).[9] The bulk of scholarship on ideal theory focuses on how Rawls understands it and the debates he generated. By itself, this scholarship can give the impression that the ideal theory debate started with Rawls. But as some rightly point out, ideal theory has a long and rich history predating Rawls.[10] In the Western tradition, there are examples as early as Plato's *Republic* of political philosophers theorizing about what the ideal, most just society would look like.[11]

By examining that history, we gain new perspectives on current challenges for ideal theory. A common frustration is trying to imagine a path to an ideal that seems hopelessly far away. Apocalyptic thought offers a strategy to overcome that obstacle: interpret crisis as an opportunity to realize an ideal that previously seemed beyond reach, while encouraging dramatic action to seize the opportunity at hand. It is a strategy that, like most things in politics, comes with risks. Crises open up new opportunities, but almost always fall short of fulfilling utopian hopes. And when people try to force the end and realize apocalyptic expectations by any means necessary, their efforts often backfire and move society further from utopia.

That danger looms over ideal theory generally, not just apocalyptic thought. Given the world's immense complexity and human limitations, we cannot know the full consequences of implementing proposed principles of justice. That problem is especially acute for ideal theory since most people envision the ideal society as being markedly different than the present. The ideal theorist proposes principles of justice without being able to know what they would look like in a future world – one perhaps radically different than our own – which leaves them in no position to plausibly defend their theory. After all, for an ideal theory to be compelling, we need reason to believe that its principles would have normative force under the conditions in which they would be implemented.[12] Unfortunately, we lack that knowledge. If we still

[9] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

[10] Lea Ypi, "On the Confusion between Ideal and Non-ideal in Recent Debates on Global Justice," *Political Studies* 58, no. 3 (2010): 537–38; and Gerald Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal: Justice in a Diverse Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2–3.

[11] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari and trans. Tom Griffith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 471c–73b.

[12] For this point, I draw on Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 18–22; and Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, 23.

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push forward with adopting these principles on a wide scale, we risk unforeseen consequences that could exacerbate the very injustices we seek to remedy.[13]

Though cataclysmic apocalyptic thought often heightens this danger, other resources in the apocalyptic tradition help address it. This tradition may seem like an odd place to turn, given its links to violence by those determined to realize utopia by force. It is this explosive potential in apocalyptic thought that spurred theologians and others to interpret it in ways that neutralize its dangers. Jewish and Christian thought both developed strategies to preserve apocalyptic thought's utopian hope, while emphasizing human ignorance of utopia and how to bring it about. That knowledge rests with God alone.

What results is a somewhat counterintuitive idea – utopian hope that largely rejects claims to knowledge about utopia. This humble approach has certain advantages: it recognizes the epistemic limitations inherent in ideal theorizing and guards against political visions that ignore them. It also understands belief in the ideal as resting on faith in contrast to the dominant view in political philosophy, which treats ideal theory as something that its defenders can give plausible grounds for. If ideal theory rests on faith, it is a mistake to think that anyone must embrace ideal theory and the utopian hope it offers in light of certain evidence. People still are welcome to embrace this hope, but its basis in faith counsels humility about any claims regarding what the ideal society would look like.

This study departs from previous ones by focusing on apocalyptic thought's insights for ideal theory. The most significant recent work on the relationship between apocalyptic and political thought is Alison McQueen's *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. It specifically analyzes how political realism engages with apocalyptic thought and responds to fears about the end of the world.[14]

The focus of McQueen's study, political realism, often stands in opposition to ideal theory.[15] Though definitions vary, political realism generally refers to a tradition of thought that understands the political sphere as having distinctive challenges and evaluative standards, and therefore criticizes attempts to simply apply moral philosophy to political life. Political realists also see

[13] For an insightful discussion of this danger, see Burke Hendrix, "Where Should We Expect Social Change in Non-ideal Theory?" *Political Theory* 41, no. 1 (2013): 116–43.

[14] Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[15] It is important to note that political realism's opposition to ideal theory, though common, is not inherent to it. See Matt Sleat, "Realism, Liberalism and Non-ideal Theory or, Are There Two Ways to Do Realistic Political Theory?" *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016): 27–41.

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conflict and disagreement as inescapable parts of politics. According to the realist account, politics is about managing conflict, not eliminating it.[16] So political realists are often critical of ideal theory and its harmonious vision for politics. Indeed, some of the most trenchant criticisms of ideal theory come from those writing in the tradition of political realism.[17]

This difference between McQueen's approach and mine – the former focusing on political realism, the latter on ideal theory – stems in part from which aspect of apocalyptic thought we emphasize. McQueen recognizes that the apocalyptic tradition includes both visions of catastrophe and utopia,[18] but puts more attention on its catastrophic elements. This approach makes sense for a study on political realism, which has little interest in pursuing utopia and instead is concerned with how to keep disaster at bay.[19]

It is important, though, not to lose sight of the utopian hope present in apocalyptic thought, which is easy to do when apocalypse so often brings to mind doomsday. This study puts the focus on the other side of the apocalyptic coin, so to speak, by examining its utopian hope and relevance to ideal theory. With regard to McQueen's approach and mine, one is not right and the other wrong. Rather, both approaches complement each other and provide a fuller picture of apocalyptic thought's relevance to political theory.[20]

APOCALYPSE, EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

One feature of apocalyptic thought that stands out, which this book grapples with, is its apparent ubiquity. Talk of the apocalypse seems to be wherever one turns.[21] There is no shortage of apocalyptic preachers who use select biblical passages as a lens for interpreting current events and predicting the rapture,

[16] William Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010): 385–411.

[17] See, e.g., Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[18] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 12.

[19] See, e.g., Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21–38.

[20] McQueen and I also differ in our methodological approaches, which *do* come into conflict. Chapter 1 explains and defends my approach to studying secular apocalyptic thought.

[21] See Nicholas Guyatt, *Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans Are Looking Forward to the End of the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007); and Richard Kyle, *Apocalyptic Fever: End-Time Prophecies in Modern America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

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tribulation, and fulfillment of other end-time prophecies.[22] Despite their failed track record, many continue with their predictions. And it is not just televangelists who warn of apocalypse. Scholars and reporters concerned about nuclear war, climate change, deadly pandemics, and other threats often describe them in apocalyptic terms.

Media coverage of Donald Trump's presidency provided its fair share of examples. In the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, the online magazine *Slate* posted a "Trump Apocalypse Watch" to track the likelihood of the apocalypse – that is, a Trump victory. The morning after the election, *Slate* gave its final update: "4 Horsemen."[23] The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during Trump's presidency further encouraged the conclusion that America found itself in apocalyptic times.[24] "Welcome to the Trumpocalypse" declared *Rolling Stone* as the pandemic ravaged the United States over the Easter holiday in 2020.[25]

Such language – sometimes meant to be humorous, sometimes meant to emphasize the gravity of a threat, and sometimes both – frequently appears in news, movies, art, literature, and scholarship. Apocalyptic themes and concepts have migrated from religious contexts to largely secular ones, and now are applied to a much wider range of phenomena. This shift comes at a cost. When apocalypse becomes synonymous with any disaster, the concept loses much of the nuance and complexity it possessed in the religious traditions from which it emerged.

The evolution of the term's meaning in English illustrates this point. When it first entered English in the Middle Ages, "apocalypse" referred to the book of Revelation (i.e., the Apocalypse of John). The adjective "apocalyptic" came several centuries later and also referred to the book of Revelation and its contents. Near the end of the nineteenth century, apocalypse took the broader meaning of referring to wide-scale disaster or cataclysm (not just the events described in Revelation).[26] This is how many use the term today. It has a vague religious resonance, but this connection is often tenuous, as many using the term have limited familiarity with religious apocalyptic thought. So as

[22] See, e.g., Scott James, "From Oakland to the World, Words of Warning: Time's Up," *New York Times*, May 19, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/us/20bcjames.html.

[23] Ben Mathis-Lilley, "The Last Trump Apocalypse Watch," *Slate*, November 9, 2016, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/11/the-last-trump-apocalypse-watch.html.

[24] See Elizabeth Dias, "The Apocalypse as an 'Unveiling': What Religion Teaches Us about the End Times," *New York Times*, April 2, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-apocalypse-religion.html.

[25] Bob Moser, "Welcome to the Trumpocalypse," *Rolling Stone*, April 11, 2020, www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/trump-evangelicals-apocalypse-coronavirus-981995/.

[26] *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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apocalyptic language shows up in more contexts, it loses much of its richness, particularly the utopian hope initially bound up in it. Apocalypse is seemingly everywhere, yet stripped of aspects of its original meaning.

This development creates challenges for studying *secular* apocalyptic thought. If any prediction of disaster qualifies, such a broad understanding fails to ensure a meaningful connection between secular apocalyptic thought and the religious traditions it supposedly stems from. Calling texts or ideologies apocalyptic usually implies that they are indebted to religious traditions due to their preoccupation with disaster. But such fears can come from other sources, like the threat of war. An overly broad conception of apocalyptic thought makes it easy to read into secular works religious influences that are not there.

In the 1960s, two influential theorists – Judith Shklar and Hans Blumenberg – raised this concern. Shklar found many claims about purportedly secular apocalyptic thought to be baseless and insensitive to important distinctions between religious and secular thought.[27] Blumenberg shared these concerns, and raised the additional point that labeling secular thought apocalyptic often serves the goal of undermining its legitimacy. By characterizing modern ideologies as apocalyptic, critics suggest that these ideologies are not what they claim to be – paradigms of reason – and instead rely on bizarre beliefs.[28] Together, Shklar and Blumenberg cast doubt on the concept of secular apocalyptic thought and its value for studying the history of ideas.

Curiously, these objections have gone unnoticed by most scholars of secular apocalyptic thought, who largely have proceeded without grappling with them.[29] That oversight raises the risk of drawing spurious connections in the history of ideas. To minimize that risk and put claims about secular apocalyptic thought on firmer ground, this study offers a proposal to address Shklar's and Blumenberg's concerns. It argues that research on secular apocalyptic thought should focus on cases where religion's influence is clear because secular thinkers explicitly mention religious apocalyptic texts, figures, or

27 Judith Shklar, "The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia," *Daedalus* 94, no. 2 (1965): 367–81.

28 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

29 See, e.g., Michael Barkun, "Divided Apocalypse: Thinking about the End in Contemporary America," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 66, no. 3 (1983): 257–80; John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*; and McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. One notable exception that considers Blumenberg's objection when discussing secular apocalyptic thought is Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, trans. Stephen Ricks (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 36–49.

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concepts. This approach ensures a stronger link between what we label secular apocalyptic thought and religious apocalyptic traditions.

The history of political thought offers various examples where secular thinkers directly engage with religious apocalyptic traditions. Engels, for instance, shows a deep interest in apocalyptic figures and texts, drawing parallels between the apocalyptic worldview of early Christians and the socialist movement of his day. In such cases, where secular thinkers explicitly discuss, praise, and appropriate elements from apocalyptic traditions, it is harder to dismiss the concept of secular apocalyptic thought as merely an invention of later interpreters. Given the undeniable links between some secular thinkers and religious apocalyptic beliefs, there is strong reason to preserve secular apocalyptic thought as a conceptual tool.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

For the sake of clarity, it is helpful here at the start to explain and distinguish some key terms that will be used throughout. The terms fall into two groups. The first are common in scholarship on apocalyptic thought – apocalypse, chiliasm, eschatology, millennialism, and millenarianism – but are not always used consistently. The second are traditions of thought – prophetic, utopian, and secular – that are distinct from apocalyptic thought but intersect with it.

Let's begin with apocalypse, which comes from the Greek and originally meant revelation or unveiling. For scholars of religion, apocalypse refers to an ancient genre of literature, in which a supernatural messenger provides revelation about a transcendent reality and salvation that awaits a chosen group at the end of time.[30] Perhaps the best-known example of this genre is the final book of the Christian canon, Revelation. Because of the catastrophic events described in Revelation, apocalypse eventually came to also mean catastrophe.

Apocalypses like the book of Revelation contribute to a branch of theology called eschatology. This term derives from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning "last things." Eschatology refers to the study of last things at the individual (death) or global level (end of the world).[31] Apocalyptic literature offers perspectives within eschatology, but not all eschatology is apocalyptic. Eschatology includes a variety of texts and meditations on last things that fall outside the apocalyptic tradition and genre.

[30] John Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

[31] Catherine Wessinger, "Millennial Glossary," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 719.

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The related terms of millennialism, millenarianism, and chiliasm – the latter derived from the Greek term for millennium – stem from a reference in Revelation 20:1–6. These verses speak of Satan's being bound for a thousand years, during which time those killed for their Christian faith "came to life and reigned with Christ" (Revelation 20:4).[32] In the Christian tradition, this passage has spawned hopes of a millennial kingdom on earth where Christ will rule. Millennialism in the field of religious studies has come to take on the broader meaning of referring to belief systems that anticipate the imminent salvation of the faithful, who will inhabit a utopian society on earth or in heaven. Used in this way, millennialism applies to religious groups beyond just Christians.[33]

This study generally opts for the term apocalyptic thought over millennialism. The primary reason is that the focus here is on the influence of Christian apocalyptic texts and their interpreters on political thinkers, less so on the influence of the specific doctrine of Christ's millennial kingdom. Political thinkers can draw on apocalyptic beliefs and find valuable elements within them without embracing belief in a millennial kingdom. Moreover, though millennialism's meaning has broadened, in many contexts it remains closely tied to debates over how to interpret the millennial kingdom discussed in Revelation.[34] The term apocalyptic thought avoids some of those implications and thus seems more apt.

Let's turn to the second group of terms, starting with prophetic thought. A prophet is someone who receives a message from God and then communicates it to a particular person or group. Prophecy occupies a central place in the Jewish and Christian traditions, with prophetic books comprising much of the Hebrew Bible. In the Old Testament, prophets often deliver messages that call for repentance and predict societal flourishing or destruction, depending on whether the audience heeds God's commands.[35] Though works of prophecy need not be apocalyptic – most prophetic books in the Old Testament are not – they can be. For example, the author of Revelation describes his words as prophecy inspired by the God of the prophets (Revelation 1:3, 22:6–7).[36] So prophetic and apocalyptic thought are not mutually exclusive, since authors of

[32] New Revised Standard Version.

[33] Wessinger, "Millennial Glossary," 720.

[34] For example, premillennialism claims that Christ will return before establishing his millennial kingdom, whereas postmillennialism claims that his return will follow this kingdom. See Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 12–13.

[35] Deborah Rooke, "Prophecy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. J. W. Rogerson and Judith Lieu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 385–96.

[36] Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," 269.

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apocalyptic texts often understand themselves as part of the prophetic tradition.

Similarly, utopian thought is distinct from apocalyptic thought but overlaps with it in important ways. Utopia commonly is understood as referring to the best and most just society, which is the definition adopted here (at some points, utopia specifically will refer to the best and most just society *possible*).[37] Thomas More coined the term in 1516 with his book *Utopia*, and inspired a genre of literature – fictional accounts of ideal societies – that would flourish after its publication.[38] Yet the tradition of ideal theorizing long precedes More. Notably, he understands *Utopia* as continuing rather than inventing a tradition, evident in the book's claim that its account of the ideal society surpasses Plato's *Republic*.[39] Accounts of the ideal society also appear in ancient religious texts, including Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, which highlights the close links between apocalyptic and utopian thought.[40]

The last term requiring explanation is secular thought. One understanding avoided here is that such thought stands in contrast to modes of thought grounded in faith. According to this view, secular thought has its foundation in reason, science, and evidence, whereas beliefs relying on faith espouse a worldview colored by superstition and irrationality. Reliance on faith is a misleading criterion for distinguishing secular from religious thought, since all first principles are insusceptible to proof and require some level of faith. With regard to apocalyptic thought, what distinguishes secular and religious varieties of it is not the presence of faith, but rather its object. By placing its faith in God, religious apocalyptic thought looks toward divine intervention to realize utopia. Secular apocalyptic thought, on the other hand, places its faith in human forces, natural forces, or some combination of the two. It prioritizes earthly over heavenly ends, and emphasizes that it is up to human action – perhaps with help from nature – to advance history toward its intended end of the ideal society. In short, secular apocalyptic thought seeks to achieve the ideal without any room for divine intervention.

37 For more on the different ways utopia has been understood, see Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

38 See Susan Bruce, ed., *Three Early Modern Utopias* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gregory Claeys, ed., *Utopias of the British Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Frank Manuel and Fritzie Manuel, eds., *French Utopias: An Anthology of Ideal Societies* (New York: The Free Press, 1966).

39 Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 27, 33.

40 See Eric Gilchrest, *Revelation 21–22 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Utopianism* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

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WHAT'S TO COME

To summarize, this book makes three main arguments – one methodological, one interpretive, one normative.

(1) *Methodological argument*: 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.
(2) *Interpretive argument*: Apocalyptic thought's political appeal partly lies in offering resources to navigate persistent challenges in ideal theory.
(3) *Normative argument*: 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.

The book fleshes out these arguments over three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) closely analyzes the concept of secular apocalyptic thought, the challenges of studying it, and the paradox it poses. In popular culture and scholarship, apocalypse has taken on the expansive meaning of referring to any catastrophe. It is common to attribute religious influences to a text that may rely on nonreligious sources for its catastrophic language and imagery. Part I proposes a more rigorous approach. Specifically, the study of secular apocalyptic thought should restrict its focus to cases where it can offer evidence of secular thinkers explicitly referencing religious apocalyptic traditions. After outlining that methodological proposal, Part I turns to the question of why secular thinkers would find the Christian apocalyptic tradition appealing for politics, given its baggage and seemingly bizarre doctrines. The answer to this puzzle lies partly in apocalyptic thought's value to ideal theory. Apocalyptic thought, with its emphasis on crisis as the path to utopia, offers a vision for bringing the ideal society within reach.

Part II (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) puts into practice the methodological recommendation of Part I and presents three historical cases studies. These case studies feature thinkers with secular conceptions of politics who directly engage with Christian apocalyptic figures and texts. The first looks at how Machiavelli grapples with the appeal of Savonarola's apocalyptic message and its promise of an eternal republic, which helped foster a brief period of republican rule in Florence. Our attention then shifts to Hobbes, who confronts apocalyptic ideas during the English Civil War, as many looked for the arrival of Christ's kingdom in the midst of political strife. The final case study investigates Engels's interest in the book of Revelation and in the apocalyptic figure Müntzer as sources of insight into socialism's hopes and challenges.

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These historical case studies reveal three strategies for responding to apocalyptic thought's idealism – rejecting, tempering, and embracing it – and reflect contrasting attitudes toward utopian hope.

Part III (Chapters 6 and 7) asks what insights the study of secular apocalyptic thought offers for current debates over ideal theory. Here I argue that political philosophy needs to rethink ideal theory's role. For figures like Rawls, ideal theory outlines a realistic utopia that individuals have reasonable grounds to accept and pursue. This idea of giving a plausible defense of ideal theory runs into insurmountable challenges, for it requires predictions about society that we cannot have confidence in, given uncertainty about the future. Ideal theory, if we choose to hang on to it, ultimately rests on faith and shares more in common with apocalyptic thought than political philosophy tends to admit. Some may embrace ideal theory for the utopian hope it offers, which gives meaning to the difficult and always incomplete work of advancing justice by linking it to a loftier goal. But this hope comes with risks, since those yearning for utopia sometimes try to force it into existence without true knowledge of how to achieve it. It is in addressing this danger, and emphasizing that utopian hope must be paired with epistemic humility, that the apocalyptic tradition proves to be a surprising source of wisdom for ideal theory today.

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