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Book Talk:
Apocalypse without God: Apocalyptic Thought, Ideal Politics, and the Limits of Utopian Hope,
by Ben Jones
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This book presents a welcome contribution to the literature on what is now often termed secular millenarianism or secular millennialism. These concepts have often been misunderstood. They stem from the understanding that, in the Christian West, a lengthy tradition of portending the end of the current earthly order through divine intervention, the return of Jesus Christ and vanquishing of the devil, the beast of Revelations, and evil in general, was gradually secularised in the early modern period, and most notably during the later Enlightenment. In Britain, Dissenting Protestant writers like Richard Price and Joseph Priestley anticipated a profound moral renewal might occur with the events surrounding the French Revolution (Fruchtman, 1983). To some, the secular millenarian tradition reached its peak with the writings of the most influential utopian ever, Karl Marx, and with the prophetic assumptions of an entirely new and superior moral, social, economic, and political world which would follow the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism (Claeys, 2018, pp. 108-9). Here, the overthrow of private property was often assumed to general the same moral renewal which Christ's intervention implied in apocalyptic Christian doctrine. Elsewhere, there emerged a secular literary tradition, part of the origins of the modern dystopian tradition, which associated the end times, and sometimes the extermination of humanity, with disease (Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, 1826), or social and political collapse of the type we today associate with "civilisational collapse" (as cited in Claeys, 2017, pp. 293, 312-3; Richard Jeffries's *After London* is a classic Victorian example). Traditional Christian apocalyptic visions did not entirely disappear; in Britain we recall Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott (Hopkins, 1982). But they gradually gave way to more secular endings of the human story. The theory of secular millenarianism gains in importance insofar as it comes to represent a key strand in modern utopian writing, intimately intertwined with modern theories of progress and revolution. And in the past decade, the idea of a secular apocalypse has taken on a new and vastly more frightening form, in the shape of catastrophic environmental breakdown (Claeys, 2022).

Where does Ben Jones's book sit in this debate? To Jones, Christian apocalyptic thought is the prototype for much thinking about epochal crises in human history. Its appeal lies in its ability to theorise a relationship between crisis and utopia, that is, between severe challenges to human order and an ideal order which might follow the collapse of evil, sinful regimes. This ideal order is here conceived in terms of "utopian hope," echoing the Blochian strand in contemporary utopian studies, which places a premium on themes and thinkers who elicit such hope, and denigrates those who fail to do so. Jones offers three case studies to demonstrate the emergence and consistency of modern secular apocalyptic theory: the juxtaposition of Machiavelli and Savonarola; that of Hobbes and some the millenarians of the English Revolution; and the relationship between the most famous early modern millenarian, Thomas Müntzer, and the second most famous later modern millenarian (in some accounts), Friedrich Engels. He then explores the implications of these instances for contemporary "ideal theory" (drawn from philosophy and political theory) and for "utopian hope" (derived from utopian studies). The most controversial of associations between early and later modern apocalyptic theory, the linkage of Müntzer, et al. to Marxism, is acknowledged to be such: Engels in particular recognised certain affinities between the two, but no overt intellectual debt exists which reduces Marxism to any earlier form of millenarianism. To Jones, "Engels finds in Christian apocalyptic thought insights relevant to modern socialism" (p. 140). But these are broadly historical rather than theoretical. The class struggle assumed the language of religion in an age when faith dominated. When it ceased to do so, the link was broken.

In this brief introduction to some of Jones's leading themes, I will concentrate on the latter deductions from the historical examples he skilfully explores. His approach is chiefly through "ideal theory," as posited by political theorists, which conceptually encompasses both apocalyptic theory and utopian thought, since both posit ideal states of affairs. John Rawls, not usually enlisted into the canon of utopian writers, is here presented as offering an account of "realistic utopianism," a term assumed to have been coined by Rawls, which it is assumed is generally about as close as modern political theory gets to utopianism (Bregman, 2018). Jones handles this account critically, however, while acknowledging that the goal of ideal theory generally is "to advance justice.” Here, by contrast, "Utopian hope sets its sights on a far loftier goal: a future that *ultimately* proves hospitable to justice and the ideal society" (p. 147).

There are some problems with this account. Jones takes "utopia" to mean the "perfect society… a place free from injustice where everyone always acts justly" (p. 148). This view, once common, may yet prevail in political theory, but it does not in utopian studies. Taking Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) as a prototype, we see that literary utopias often portray "best possible" societies which include crime, divorce, imperialism and many other features that are far from perfect. In my view the "perfect" society, indeed, is an ideal drawn from theology, not from the utopian tradition; it is a subset of the idea of bringing an imaginary "heaven" down to earth, rather than an extension of the ideal commonwealth tradition, or of utopian republicanism (Claeys, 2022, pp. 28-9). But Jones also concedes that ideal theory fails to identify the most just society possible, which leaves us with the problem that there may be no such place at all. Or there may be such a plethora of possible ideal societies (as utopian theory suggests) that adjudicating between them may be problematic. And the idea that there could only be one just society of course invokes many of the more conventional critiques of utopianism from Popper onwards: that they promote intolerance in the name of the one true worldview. If we concede that utopia is not the "perfect" but the best possible society given the particular constraints of time and place, this objection is less threatening to utopian theory. Here, a key source for Jones is Gerald Gaus, who dismisses as "sheer delusion" all "predictions and descriptions of distant ideal worlds" (2016, pp. 152-3), and even asserts that "The ideal of the realistic utopia of the well-ordered society tyrannizes over our thinking, preventing us from discovering more just social conditions" (p. xix), an assumption I wholly reject.

But how distant is "distant," and when is all future planning at threat as a result of having been condemned as "delusion"? To take the most pressing modern problem, can we prevent climate breakdown by projecting current destructive trends and then imagining a world in which they have stopped or been moderated? Clearly we can, and must. But, "Defending ideal theory also calls for accurate predictions about science and technology" (p. 156), a condition which may undermine any attempts to act at present, and which implies, Jones acknowledges, that defences of ideal theory must necessarily fail (p. 158).

What then happens to "utopian hope" in the face of this failure? Does it evaporate, or align itself (as so often) with a revival of religious faith (p. 165)? Jones notes, "Some will see little point in hanging on to ideal theory and reach a conclusion similar to [Bertrand] Russell's regarding religious belief. Beyond just claiming that arguments for religious belief lack plausible grounds, Russell treats such beliefs as nonsense - like believing a tiny teapot is orbiting the sun" (p. 166). I agree, so this is not a satisfactory outcome. But there is a third alternative: alignment instead with the most plausible and compelling climate science, and the imperative of human survival in a rapidly degrading world.

Can we then entertain the possibility that utopian theory may venture where ideal theory fails to tread? "Hope" in the abstract is merely a subset of religious faith, thus offering only hopium, a satisfying but ultimately destructive delusion. Hope based on scientific analysis is the opposite, and moreover indicates a plan for our survival. Forms of hope rooted in the apocalyptic tradition carry their own dangers, particularly that of violence, Jones warns us. But the apocalypse we face has been and is forged by human agents, chiefly the fossil-fuel corporations. Their great wealth shapes much public opinion respecting this issue, and our fate. Against them, a worldwide movement of nonviolent protest has arisen which refuses to resign humanity to this fate. Jones insists that utopian appeals to violence do not assist the attainment of their ultimate end. The possibility of nonviolent resistance needs to be entertained more carefully. Its success in hastening racial and imperial freedom is undoubted. Whether the failure of such a strategy, in the face of the extermination of humanity, would justify violent overthrow of the existing system of fossil fuel consumption, is a quandary increasingly coming to the fore.

Any possibility of "utopian hope" now rests on our capacity to envision a future which might realistically be constructed out of existing materials. There *are* such visions, but while they must necessarily be motivated by fear of the apocalypse, faith can play no role in their construction. We want no messiahs, no popes of hope, to reassure us, though elements of the utopian tradition itself can do so. We want climate scientists, and climate social scientists, and activists, and journalists, to ramp up and keep up the pressure for as long as it takes. We have very few years left to accomplish the turn towards sustainability. Fail now, and we lose the earth.

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Author's Reply by Ben Jones

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I am grateful to Professor Claeys for his careful and thoughtful response to *Apocalypse without God*. Informed by his expansive knowledge of utopian thought, he offers a nuanced account of the book's contributions to ongoing debates related to this literature. In particular, I have a keen interest in the connections that Claeys makes between the book's themes and the climate crisis. An earlier version of the book manuscript had a chapter on apocalyptic thought in the environmental movement, but it ended up not being part of the final version due to space constraints and suggestions raised during the review process. So I welcome the opportunity to discuss here, albeit briefly, some of the book's implications for responding to the climate crisis.

Apocalypse without God advances three main arguments—one methodological, one interpretive, and one normative. It raises concerns with overly broad conceptions of apocalypse that equate it with any sort of catastrophe and are commonplace in academic scholarship. To put the study of secular apocalyptic thought on firmer ground, the book makes a methodological recommendation: there must be explicit references to religious apocalyptic texts, figures, or concepts in a secular thinker's work to claim that apocalyptic influences are present. Some secular thinkers do express explicit interest in and see value in apocalyptic thought, which on its face is puzzling. After all, apocalyptic doctrines are often viewed as the most bizarre elements of religious belief, so why do they have persistent appeal in politics for secular thinkers? The book offers an interpretive argument to explain why: apocalyptic thought's appeal partly lies in offering apparent resources to navigate challenges in ideal or utopian theory. Such theorizing frequently aims for goals in tension with one another—outlining an ideal that is both utopian and feasible. Apocalyptic thought, at least certain varieties, seeks to resolve that tension by embracing a thoroughly utopian ideal with considerable appeal while identifying crisis as the path to bring the seemingly impossible within reach. Lastly, the book suggests that the apocalyptic tradition offers normative insights for ideal or utopian theorizing in political philosophy today. To guard against the danger of trying to realize utopia through force, one strand of the apocalyptic tradition fosters epistemic humility. It holds on to utopian hope but stresses human ignorance of utopia and how to bring it about. The close of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Satan in Goray*—a fictional account of the apocalyptic figure Sabbatai Zevi—embodies that idea: "Let none attempt to force the Lord: To end our Pain within the world: The Messiah will come in God's own time: And free men of despair and crime" (1974, p. 160). Such epistemic humility, I argue, holds potential wisdom in a world marked by deep uncertainty.

It is my normative argument that draws much of Claeys's attention, especially in his discussion of the book's relevance to the current climate crisis. In my account, faith is an inescapable element of utopian hope. The world's immense complexity and human limitations preclude reliably accurate predictions of the range of future scientific, technological, economic, and political developments and the possibilities they bring. Given such uncertainty, we can have faith that utopia—the most perfect and just society possible—will one day come, but cannot offer plausible grounds that it will be achieved, nor that a particular vision of society represents the ideal to strive for over potential alternatives. Ideal theorizing, whether in religious or philosophical contexts, ultimately rests on hope for an ideal that goes beyond the available evidence to support it.

Though Claeys sees utopian hope's value in imagining alternative futures when confronting challenges like the climate crisis, he is more skeptical of faith's role. As we develop visions for a sustainable future, "faith can play no role in their construction," he argues in his response. "We want no messiahs, no popes of hope, to reassure us, though elements of the utopian tradition itself can do so. We want climate scientists, and climate social scientists, and activists, and journalists, to ramp up and keep up the pressure for as long as it takes." For Claeys, visions of utopia must be guided by "the most plausible and compelling climate science," not faith.

I share Claeys's view that efforts to address the climate crisis and pursue a more just and sustainable future than the one we face should be informed by the best science available. My emphasis on faith's role in utopian hope stems from the recognition that even the best science does not offer clear guidance in all cases. In his most recent book, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life after Consumerism*, Claeys offers a number of worthy recommendations for transitioning from consumerism to sustainability. Undoubtedly, though, others equally committed to climate justice and evidence-based strategies will disagree with him at points on which interventions and policies to prioritize. Such disagreement is to be expected. Despite all the valuable knowledge that climate-related science has produced, many questions remain unsettled on how best to mobilize social change, as well as which practices and technologies to invest in most heavily, given uncertainty over their future development.

Uncertainty is not an excuse for quietism, and *Apocalypse without God* makes no such argument. Rather, it recommends epistemic humility in our visions of utopia and pursuit of them. The end of Chapter 7 emphasizes this point: "Humility teaches us to coexist with other conceptions of utopian hope that we may not fully understand and to remain open to learning from them. That openness to revision, and refusal to accept any particular vision of utopia as the final word, is what a world of deep uncertainty ultimately demands of ideal theory and utopian hope" (p. 190).

Such guidance, in the context of the environmental as well as other social movements, cautions against inflexible visions of utopia that exclude potential allies. It is here that my normative conclusions appear most at odds with the ones that Claeys reaches. For instance, in *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*, Claeys is quick to reject a role for religious faith in pursuing the sustainable future that he envisions: "Religion … encourages 'faith' in general, meaning belief without empirical, verifiable evidence. This fosters scepticism about science" (p. 443). His claim seems unnecessarily divisive in the context of his overall project. Many religions have taken an active part in calling for and working for environmental justice in ways informed by both their faith and climate science. Pope Francis's encyclical on protecting the environment, *Laudato Si'*, is one of many notable examples. We need not share others' faith or vision of utopia for there to be opportunities to work with them toward common environmental goals. Visions of utopia that preclude such collaboration risk proving counterproductive when—as in the case of protecting the environment—large-scale collective action is needed.

In a world of unavoidable uncertainty, we all must make leaps of faith at certain points when pursuing justice. Histories of social movements bear out this point.

How to act and whether a specific action will advance justice is always less clear in the moment than with the benefit of hindsight (see, for instance, David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* on the debates over strategy in the civil rights movement). Recognizing the leaps of faith involved in pursuing justice helps guard against overconfidence, encourage critical assessment of one's vision of utopia, and make one receptive to insights offered by other perspectives on utopia and new evidence. Without such humility, utopian hope stands in danger of becoming the worst form faith can take—dogmatism.

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