The Paradox of Secular Apocalyptic Thought

Christianity's apocalyptic doctrines strike many – believers and nonbelievers alike – as its most bizarre elements. Despite apocalyptic doctrines' presence in the Christian canon, there is a tendency to minimize their importance, which stretches all the way back to the early church. In the fifth century, the Church Father Augustine urged an allegorical interpretation of Revelation and criticized predictions of Christ's imminent return to establish a millennial kingdom.[1] Today, many churches rarely include passages from Revelation in their services, evident from the book's scant presence in the lectionary.[2] As Glenn Tinder puts it, the Bible's apocalyptic themes are among the "most outworn vestments of religious faith."[3]

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?

This chapter aims to unpack that puzzle. A helpful approach for understanding apocalyptic thought's appeal in politics is the lens of ideal theory – commonly understood as theorizing about the best, most just society, rather than just a marginal improvement over the present.[4] When ideal theory aspires to have navigational value and be a moral guide to action, it faces a daunting

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[1] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), esp. XX.7, XX.9, XXII.30.
[2] Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 32.
[3] Glenn Tinder, "Eschatology and Politics," *Review of Politics* 27, no. 3 (1965): 311.
[4] There are other understandings of ideal theory, which Chapter 6 discusses.

task: outlining a goal that is both utopian and feasible. To be worth striving for, the ideal must be utopian and possess sufficient moral appeal to justify the transition costs needed to achieve it. Yet at the same time, the ideal must be feasible – otherwise, there is little reason to dedicate limited resources chasing after something outside the realm of possibility. 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 reasons to strive for it and its normative force. Within the apocalyptic tradition, a particular strand of it – what I call *cataclysmic apocalyptic thought* – proposes a way out of this dilemma. And that feature of apocalyptic thought contributes to its appeal in politics.

Specifically, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought identifies crisis as the path to the ideal society. It embraces a utopian goal and declares it feasible by pointing to crisis as the vehicle to wipe away corruption and bring the seemingly impossible within reach. This perspective has a prominent place in Christian texts like the book of Revelation, which envisions plagues and upheaval that precede the arrival of God's perfect kingdom. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought takes secular form with the belief that natural or human forces, not divine ones, will direct crisis toward utopia. That way of interpreting the world gives a particular crisis meaning and creates a sense of urgency to take advantage of the historic opportunity at hand. Some secular thinkers find this view especially attractive. For them, apocalyptic thought offers resources to navigate persistent challenges in ideal theory, show how utopia is possible, and make the case for urgent action in pursuit of a utopian vision for politics.

CATACLYSMIC APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT
IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Apocalyptic thought can take secular forms, but its roots go back to the Jewish and Christian traditions. For scholars of ancient religious texts, apocalypse refers to a genre of literature in which the author shares 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.[5] Apocalyptic literature emerged in the Jewish tradition following the Babylonian exile,[6] functioning as resistance literature

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[5] John Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.
[6] See John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of*

during a period of persecution.[7] 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 apocalyptic writings, crisis plays a central role. Crisis has 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,* which 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 God[8]

A helpful illustration of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought 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.[9] 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

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    Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975).

[7] See Richard Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); and Anathea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

[8] This list overlaps with some of the elements of apocalyptic rhetoric outlined in Frank Borchardt, *Doomsday Speculation as a Strategy of Persuasion: A Study of Apocalypticism as Rhetoric* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990). I, however, omit Borchardt's idea of a golden age that is restored. Hope of a restored golden age is sometimes present in apocalyptic worldviews. Yet Borchardt misses the important point that apocalyptic thought often envisions a truly novel ideal, superior to anything that ever existed before.

[9] Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 123.

it?" ask those who worship it (Revelation 13:4).[10] In this environment of
pervasive corruption, many become numb to it. Apocalyptic writing seeks to
awaken people from blind acceptance of the status quo, so it 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" (Revelation 17:5–6).
What should be revolting – killing the righteous – has become normal and
widely accepted. Though New Testament scholars question whether
Christian persecution was as widespread as Revelation implies, John certainly
perceives it as ubiquitous.[11] This conviction leads to a damning portrait of
Rome: its corruption has reached such a point that, for Christians, comprom-
ising with it is not an option.

(2) *Impending crisis.* Surrounded by corruption, believers hold on to the
hope that, though the ruling authorities appear dominant, 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 that such a crisis
will engulf Rome (referred to as Babylon): "With . . . violence Babylon the
great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more" (Revelation 18:21).
Rome's persecution of the righteous has put it on a path that will culminate in
its destruction. Importantly, the apocalyptic crisis awaiting Rome is distinct
from far more banal crises – wars, famines, plagues, and the like – that have
come before. For 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 the impending destruction of Rome, John hopes to instill
in his readers urgency to resist its earthly power. As John Collins explains,
"[A]pocalyptic language is *commissive* in character: it commits us to a view of
the world for the sake of the actions and attitudes that are entailed."[12]
Revelation's prediction of 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" (Revelation 17:14). It will be a moment of
justice, in which God "judge[s] the great whore who corrupted the earth with

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[10]   New Revised Standard Version. All subsequent biblical quotes come from this version.
[11]   Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 84.
[12]   Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 283.

her fornication, and . . . avenge[s] . . . the blood of his servants" (Revelation 19:2). All eventually will recognize God's authority. Even those engaged in idolatry will cry out 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?" (Revelation 6:16–17). For believers in the midst of the crisis, they are assured that it will result in the fulfillment of God's ultimate plan for history and creation. This hopeful view differs from what Jürgen Moltmann calls "exterminism," which anticipates mass extermination of life due to war, economic collapse, or environmental destruction.[13] 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 "[d]eath will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 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" (Revelation 11:15). This hope motivates believers to prepare themselves for the coming kingdom, which requires sacrifice as Revelation reminds its readers: "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 . . . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Sacrifice resulting in martyrdom and apparent defeat represents, from God's perspective, victory over sin and corruption.[14] Such knowledge consoles believers facing persecution, who see God's perfect kingdom as having transcendent value and thus worthy of sacrifice.

SECULAR APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

Even in religious form, notes J. G. A. Pocock, apocalyptic thought often operates as a "powerful instrument of secularization."[15] With this remark,

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[13] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 203.

[14] Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 66–108.

[15] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 46.

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 our eyes. By interpreting change in this way, apocalyptic thought confers significance and meaning to the forces causing upheaval, while also undermining the authority of institutions resistant to change.

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 is cause for concern. So too are 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 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 in the present. In Christian thought, Augustine in particular played an influential role in undermining the authority of those claiming to know the hidden eschatological meaning behind world events. Notably, his monumental work the *City of God* closes 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."[16]

The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* takes a similar strategy 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 in denying God and trusting entirely in political forces to bring about earthly perfection.[17] Beyond just 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

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[16] Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.30: 1091. See also R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 166–78; and J. Kevin Coyle, "Augustine and Apocalyptic: Thoughts on the Fall of Rome, the Book of Revelation, and the End of the World," *Florilegium* 9 (1987): 1–34.

[17] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), § 676.

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 rather than divine forces.

So when cataclysmic apocalyptic thought takes secular form, it consists of beliefs similar to those found in the Christian tradition – present corruption, impending crisis, a divine force guiding crisis, and lasting utopia – with certain modifications. In secular form, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought anticipates a crisis guided by human or natural forces that will wipe away corruption and bring about the ideal society, while denying any role for the divine. This view puts some constraints on its vision for utopia. In religious form, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought imagines a utopia free from various constraints found in the natural world, like mortality. Divine intervention throws off these constraints. By forgoing appeals to divine power to explain the transition to the ideal society, secular apocalyptic thought offers visions of utopia that are less supernatural. Still, such thought has lofty expectations for the ideal society. It envisions a transformative crisis that will eliminate the ills that have long plagued human society, such as strife, poverty, and violence. The resulting utopia will be stable, since any utopia that quickly collapses hardly counts as ideal. Both secular and religious varieties of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought foresee a lasting utopia in humanity's future.

APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT AS IDEAL THEORY

The apocalyptic worldview, both in Christian and secular forms, sets its sights on more than a mere improvement over the present. It puts forward a vision of the most perfect society. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought specifically emphasizes crisis as the vehicle for reaching the ideal society. Through this vision, the apocalyptic tradition theorizes about the ideal society and the path to it. We thus can understand apocalyptic thought as a form of ideal theory.

Some may object to this claim and dismiss any equation between apocalyptic thought and ideal theory as an anachronistic mistake. Indeed, political philosophers today rarely if ever connect the apocalyptic tradition with ideal theory. Part of the reason why is the ahistorical nature of the debate over ideal theory in contemporary political philosophy. It sometimes gives the impression that ideal theory suddenly emerged in 1971 with the publication of *A Theory of Justice*.[18] Here John Rawls argues that "the nature and aims of

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[18] See Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map." *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 655.

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 nonideal conditions.[19] Rawls's distinction between ideal and nonideal theory sparked a flurry of philosophical debate, but sometimes lost in this debate is Rawls's place within a broader tradition of theorizing about the ideal society.

Utopian thought has long been concerned with the nature of the ideal society and goes all the way back to Plato,[20] as Lea Ypi and Gerald Gaus note.[21] The work that coined the term utopia reminds us of that point. In *Utopia* published in 1516, Thomas More compares the ideal society that he describes to the one outlined in Plato's *Republic*, thus situating his work within a tradition of ideal theorizing that long preceded him.[22] The apocalyptic tradition shares this interest in theorizing about the ideal society, and at times has influenced utopian literature.[23] So ideal theory is not entirely distinct from utopian and apocalyptic thought, but it overlaps with these traditions in important ways.[24]

In *The 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.[25] "Utopian" and "ideal theory" are contested terms,[26] so it is important to be clear on their meanings here. One common

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

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

[21] 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.

[22] Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (New York, Penguin Books, 1965), 27, 33.

[23] Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia: A Study in Theory and Practice* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 140.

[24] Timothy Kenyon stresses the following distinction between utopian and apocalyptic thought: "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." See Kenyon, "Utopia in Reality: 'Ideal' Societies in Social and Political Theory," *History of Political Thought* 3, no. 1 (1982): 147. Kenyon's distinction is not as sharp as he supposes, however, since it does not apply to *secular* apocalyptic thought.

[25] Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, 3.

[26] See Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990); 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; Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory"; and Kwame Appiah, *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

understanding of ideal or utopian theory is an approach within political philosophy that aims to identify the *best, most just* society rather than merely a *better, more just* society.[27]

Sometimes utopian implies the impossible,[28] but that view is far from universal or even standard.[29] Here our focus is on utopian or ideal theory that sets forth a vision of the best, most just society with the potential of being realized at some future point – what I call *navigational ideal theory*. In many cases, ideal theory takes this form and aims to present a goal within the realm of possibility, even if a vast gulf stands between this goal and the imperfect present. Rawls captures this idea with his understanding of ideal theory as an attempt to offer a "realistic utopia" to strive for.[30] If, as is commonly assumed, ought implies can, ideal theory must present a goal that is feasible to preserve its role as a normative guide to action. By setting forth the most just society possible, 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 nonideal theory. Ingrid Robeyns takes this view – specifically, that ideal theory tells us what the end goal is and nonideal 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 us closer to a far-off ideal. Such an objection fails, argues Robeyns, because it is not the ideal theorist's task to map a path from the present to the ideal. That work instead falls to nonideal theory.[31]

This neat distinction between ideal and nonideal theory proves problematic because it obscures an important point: those interested in offering a persuasive account of navigational ideal theory must also engage in *non*ideal theory. A common metaphor for ideal theory – identifying the tallest

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[27] See Amartya Sen, "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?" *Journal of Philosophy* 103, no. 5 (2006): 215–38; Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*.

[28] Robert Jubb, "Tragedies of Nonideal Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 11, no. 3 (2012): 231; and David Estlund, *Utopophobia: On the Limits (if any) of Political Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 11–12.

[29] Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 210–14; and Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, 2–3.

[30] John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11–12; and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4, 13. See also Ben Laurence, "Constructivism, Strict Compliance, and Realistic Utopianism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 97, no. 2 (2018): 433–53.

[31] Ingrid Robeyns, "Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice," *Social Theory and Practice* 34, no. 3 (2008): 345–46.

mountain[32] – helps explain why. If we think of the 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) identifying as the tallest mountain a peak that, though perhaps the tallest in a particular region, is not the tallest in the world (say Denali); or (2) identifying as the tallest mountain a peak that, though taller than Mount Everest, is nowhere 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*:[33]

(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 nonideal 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 – that is, engage in nonideal theory – and then challenge this account of nonideal theory. Conversely, if a critic doubts the feasibility of an ideal theorist's vision, the theorist can defend it by engaging in nonideal 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 nonideal 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 nonideal theory. The ideal theorist need not do all the work of nonideal 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.[34]

Since considering paths to the ideal takes on such importance in ideal theory, apocalyptic thought – with its emphasis on crisis as the vehicle to

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[32] See, e.g., Sen, "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?"; A. John Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2010): 5–36; and Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, 61–67.

[33] For a similar point, see Mark Jensen, "The Limits of Practical Possibility," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 168–84.

[34] An example of sketching general paths to an ideal, while recognizing numerous discoveries along the way that still need to be made, is Nick Bostrom's account of achieving super-intelligence – that is, artificial intelligence that outperforms human intelligence across all domains of interest. See Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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 this manner of theorizing. 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 the latter, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought gives considerable attention to the path to the ideal. According to this strand of apocalyptic thought, crisis opens the way to a seemingly impossible ideal.

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 that is worth striving for. Yet the more utopian the ideal, the more disconnected it becomes from the present and the less feasible it seems. This 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. This 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 2.1).

Some may contend that this catch-22 represents an illusory rather than real dilemma for ideal theory. Indeed, there are political philosophers who dismiss some version of either the feasibility or utopian objection against ideal theory. It is important, then, to address this skepticism and show that the catch-22 outlined here does in fact pose challenges for ideal theory.
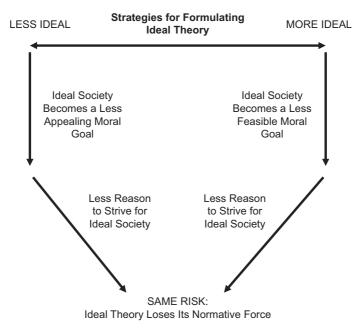
LESS IDEAL   **Strategies for Formulating**   MORE IDEAL
                         Ideal Theory

Ideal Society   Ideal Society
Becomes a Less   Becomes a Less
Appealing Moral   Feasible Moral
Goal   Goal

Less Reason   Less Reason
to Strive for   to Strive for
Ideal Society   Ideal Society

SAME RISK:
Ideal Theory Loses Its Normative Force

FIGURE 2.1 The catch-22 of 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.[35]

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 concerns about feasibility are raised since defenders of the theory may have better foresight than their critics.[36] This argument provides reasons to reject feasibility objections that are potentially inaccurate.

[35] David Estlund, "Utopophobia," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2014): 133.
[36] See also Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, "Three Failed Charges Against Ideal Theory," *Social Theory and Practice* 39, no. 1 (2013): 36–40.

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 defense of "fact-insensitive" principles of justice, which take conditional form: "One ought to do A if it is possible to do A."[37] 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."[38] 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.[39]

One can adopt Estlund's approach and understand ideal theory as having a purely evaluative role, but it comes at a high cost. Most importantly, this approach leaves ideal theory vulnerable to the charge that it is irrelevant to promoting justice.

To illustrate this point, consider one of Amartya Sen's criticisms of ideal theory and how its defenders respond. Sen sees little value for ideal theory in a world filled with injustice, since endless debates over perfect justice distract from the more pressing task of making incremental steps toward a more just world.[40] Normally, defenders of ideal theory have a counterargument available to them in response to this criticism: because of the path-dependent nature of social change, an ideal end point is needed to guide efforts toward greater justice.[41] Without such an ideal to guide action, incremental steps toward justice could lead to a *more* just society, yet 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

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[37]   G. A. Cohen, "Facts and Principles," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2003): 231.
[38]   Estlund, "Utopophobia," 121.
[39]   Estlund, "What Good Is It? Unrealistic Political Theory and the Value of Intellectual Work," *Analyse & Kritik* 33, no. 2 (2011): 395–416.
[40]   Sen, "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?"; and *The Idea of Justice*.
[41]   Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory."

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 ought implies can, an infeasible ideal fails to provide a moral end goal to guide efforts toward greater justice. In this case, 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.

Uncomfortable with that conclusion, some still may try to salvage a navigational role for ideal theory that offers an unattainable ideal. Perhaps such an ideal can serve as a goal that we strive to get closer to, even if it will always be beyond our reach. But though reasonable on its face, this argument runs into a problem: there is no guarantee that moving closer to an unattainable ideal of justice will lead toward the most just society possible.

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. According to this view, ideal theory must set forth principles of justice to govern the development, distribution, and use of artificial intelligence. Now suppose the goal outlined by this ideal theory is impossible to achieve, both now and in the future. 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 injustice.[42] Either way, investing in and pursuing artificial intelligence would hinder efforts to advance justice. Instead of leading to the most just and perfect society possible, pursuing this unattainable ideal takes society down a path that wastes valuable resources and perhaps even fosters tyranny.

It could be the case that pursuing an unattainable ideal corresponds with the path to the most just society possible, but that cannot be assumed, as this example suggests. Demonstrating the navigational value of an unattainable ideal requires identifying the most just ideal possible and explaining how the paths to these two ideals correspond. So, ultimately, we cannot escape questions of feasibility when formulating navigational ideal theory. The feasibility objection presents a real challenge and, to overcome it, ideal theory must set

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42   See Bostrom, *Superintelligence*.

forth an ideal that is attainable and a suitable guide to action, not a mythical goal that risks sidetracking 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 whether it is true. For example, Laura Valentini points out that individuals do not always follow moral principles, but that is a regrettable fact of life rather than an indictment of the principles themselves.[43] If no moral theory has perfect success in motivating individuals to act rightly, why should we single out ideal theory for criticism? For Valentini, 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 weakness of will prevents the pursuit of 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. According to the utopian objection, the insufficient moral appeal of ideal theory should preclude it from serving as a normative guide to action.

Importantly, the utopian objection presents challenges for both 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 come with transitioning to the ideal society.[44] If the ideal is distinct from the present in significant ways, achieving it likely will require dramatic societal changes. Such changes impose considerable

[43] Laura Valentini, "On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2009): 340.

[44] Juha Räikkä, "The Feasibility Condition in Political Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998): 33.

sacrifices and disruptions on society. When the transition costs are steep enough, 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 hypothetical 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 and wealth gap between different groups). Other efforts short of wide-scale violence hold the promise of reducing injustice in society, and individuals may have compelling normative reasons to pursue those efforts. Yet that strategy always will fall short of achieving X's vision and will lead society down a different path. In sum, X's ideal has moral appeal, but not enough to justify the transition costs necessary 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 the skepticism voiced by some philosophers, the utopian and feasibility objections do present real challenges for ideal theory. It is necessary to escape the catch-22 posed by these objections to ensure ideal theory's normative value in guiding action. The appeal of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought for politics, as the next section discusses, partly lies in offering motivational resources that seem to overcome this catch-22.

APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT'S APPEAL FOR POLITICS

Faced with the catch-22 posed by the feasibility and utopian objections, ideal theorists could just give up on trying to formulate an ideal with navigational value. In that case, ideal theory would merely have an evaluative role: specifying the best society in theory and abandoning 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, a sphere that demands a more robust normative role for ideal theory.

According to 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*."[45] Especially for those who understand their theorizing as a contribution to bringing about the ideal society, it is essential for ideal theory to guide action.

But crafting ideal theory with navigational value requires overcoming the catch-22 and identifying a goal that is utopian and feasible. For those facing this challenge, the apocalyptic tradition – and cataclysmic apocalyptic thought in particular – offers a potentially appealing strategy. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought refuses to be stymied by either horn of the catch-22 of ideal theory: it embraces a thoroughly utopian ideal while offering a narrative to explain its feasibility. Such thought brings together in a single ideal seemingly irreconcilable goals.

Let's start with the goal of crafting a utopian ideal. Despite the criticisms leveled against apocalyptic thought, few complain about its being *insufficiently* utopian. Apocalyptic narratives envision perfection at the end of history, such as the new Jerusalem described in Revelation. The vision of what's 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.

Now let's turn to feasibility. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought provides an explanation for how its utopian ideal could be feasible. Outlining a far-off ideal without any connection to the present naturally prompts the feasibility objection – how does one get there from here? Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought takes this concern seriously and attempts to address it: a coming crisis will open a path that links the present to utopia. Without such disruption, the apocalyptic ideal would be an impossible and foolish thing to strive for. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought avoids this motivational dead end by predicting a coming crisis, unlike any before, that will wipe away corruption and bring about the ideal envisioned.

The appeal of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought 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 of politics to pursue. Both the political right and left

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[45]   Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, 61.

recognize the opportunities presented by crisis. "Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change," writes the conservative economist Milton Friedman. "When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around."[46] President Barack Obama's first chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, makes a similar point: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste . . . . [The 2008 economic] crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before."[47] This idea is far from new and, from the Age of Revolution to the present, appears in political tracts, such as *The Crisis* by Thomas Paine.[48] Of course, the idea stretches back even further, as apocalyptic texts and the events they inspired remind us. Across different eras, crisis has had the power to direct people's attention to societal failures and instill a sense of urgency to take political action.

Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought harnesses the potent idea that crisis represents a transformative moment. It argues that the perfect society to surpass all others awaits just on the other side of crisis. Within this framework of thought, crisis will wipe away obstacles that have long blocked the path to utopia. This knowledge creates urgency to take advantage of the unique opportunity at hand. The appeal of cataclysmic apocalyptic thought lies in reframing crisis so that it no longer is a source of paralyzing fear, but an opportunity for transformative change.

A STRATEGY NOT WITHOUT RISKS

Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought proves appealing for politics because of the promise it holds: overcoming the intractable catch-22 of ideal theory and motivating dramatic political action perhaps when it is most needed, in the midst of crisis. But political strategies that hold promise almost always come with risks, and that is true in this case. Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought as a lens for interpreting politics and stirring people to action can backfire in three ways: (1) lead to a quietist attitude toward politics; (2) prove unable to sustain hope and motivate action over time; and (3) exacerbate injustice by trying to force utopia under conditions of uncertainty.

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[46] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 40th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xiv.
[47] Gerald Seib, "In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama," *Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2008, www.wsj.com/articles/SB122721278056345271.
[48] Thomas Paine, *The Crisis*, in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner, 91–176, 181–210, 222–52, 325–33, 348–54 (New York: Library of America, 1995).

To begin with the risk of quietism, this worry frequently comes up in the context of religious apocalyptic thought.[49] If it is foreordained that divine forces will wipe away corruption and establish a perfect society, what point is there for individuals to take action in pursuit of that goal? Given that divine plans are in motion, individual action seems insignificant and unable to impact the ultimate outcome. Secular apocalyptic thought faces similar concerns. If forces in history guarantee that society eventually will attain perfection, it can be tempting to conclude that one's own actions are ultimately meaningless. So apocalyptic thought can breed such confidence in the future that a quietist attitude toward politics results. But it is important not to overstate this worry. A far more common barrier to political action is *lack* of hope. As research from psychology finds, people are more likely to support and consider participating in collective action when they have hope that political change is possible.[50] Utopian hope, in particular, can motivate collective action by highlighting the gap between the present society and the ideal – and the need to bridge that gap.[51] Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought crafts a narrative that offers such hope, which highlights its potential to motivate political action.

It is sustaining hope that proves especially challenging. Instilling a particular crisis with historic importance creates, 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, "[T]he recurring fallacy of apocalyptic eschatology seems to rest in a human tendency to identify the particular with the ultimate."[52] Cataclysmic apocalyptic thought pins its hopes for renewal on a particular moment in history. If dramatic action in response to crisis never

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[49] See, e.g., Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1982* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), 93–104.

[50] See Smadar Cohen-Chen and Martijn Van Zomeren, "Yes We Can? Group Efficacy Beliefs Predict Collective Action, but only When Hope Is High," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 77 (2018): 50–59; Simon Bury, Michael Wenzel, and Lydia Woodyatt, "Against the Odds: Hope as an Antecedent of Support for Climate Change Action," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, no. 2 (2020): 289–310; and Katharine Greenaway et al., "Feeling Hopeful Inspires Support for Social Change," *Political Psychology* 37, no. 1 (2016): 89–107.

[51] See Julian Fernando et al., "Functions of Utopia: How Utopian Thinking Motivates Societal Engagement," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44, no. 5 (2018): 779–92; and Vivienne Badaan et al., "Imagining Better Societies: A Social Psychological Framework for the Study of Utopian Thinking and Collective Action," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14, no. 4 (2020): e12525.

[52] Stephen O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 218.

brings the desired change, discouragement often sets in – all the sacrifices people made were in vain. One finds this danger in Christianity when expectations for 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 collapse of capitalism has yet to occur and usher in the communist ideal.[53]

Of perhaps greater concern, crisis sometimes motivates 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 to state power.[54] When confronted with a crisis, people clamor for *something* to be done. This mindset can justify transition costs normally shunned, such as violence against those perceived as impeding the path to the ideal. Steep transition costs hardly guarantee utopia, especially given the world's complexity and the 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 and ideal theory more broadly.[55]

But despite these risks and its theological baggage, apocalyptic thought continues to prove appealing to a number of political theorists. For those interested in not just theorizing about the ideal society 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 seems to leave few if any options to realize them simultaneously. Instead of shrinking from this dilemma, cataclysmic apocalyptic thought proposes a solution: crisis will transform the world and finally make utopia possible. And that is perhaps why, as we'll see in Part II, some thinkers critical of Christianity still find themselves drawn to its apocalyptic doctrines. The allure of the ideal society makes apocalyptic thought attractive even to secular thinkers, for such thought helps in imagining a path to this elusive goal.

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[53] See Nomi Claire Lazar, *Out of Joint: Power, Crisis, and the Rhetoric of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 166–208.

[54] See Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Colin Hay, "Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent,'" *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1996): 253–77.

[55] See Burke Hendrix, "Where Should We Expect Social Change in Non-ideal Theory?" *Political Theory* 41, no. 1 (2013): 116–43; and Frances Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (New York: Routledge, 2016). This danger is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.