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Motivation from Joseph Ratzinger's Eschatological Realism for Protecting Humanity's Future

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(Received 8 April 2024; revised 20 June 2024; accepted 24 June 2024)

Abstract

This article outlines one way in which Joseph Ratzinger's eschatology could contribute to reducing the risk humanity now creates to its own survival. Studies of 'Existential Risk' warn that hazards arising from Artificial Intelligence, Nuclear Weapons, Climate Change, and Engineered Pathogens require mitigation to safeguard the future of the human race from a calamitous end. Preventative measures, however, entail sacrifice, and there is no shortage of resistance to regulation of behaviours and technological development. Ethics of empathy, utility, and duties reach breaking point when stretched to overcome the temporal and moral gap between present agency and future well-being.

This article proposes that Ratzinger's theology of history and commitment to eschatological realism offers an intertwined double benefit: his warning about the danger of conflating hope in God's Kingdom with hope in a future world humanity could perfect for itself opens up the uniquely rich ground of a trans-historical hope in Jesus Christ, in which an impactful relationship of love for humanity's future can put down roots today.

Keywords: eschatology; existential risk; faith and technology; future ethics; Ratzinger

1. Introduction

Any attempt to pair a deeply utilitarian school of philosophy with the eschatology of Joseph Ratzinger may seem misguided, but the instrument which diagnoses an infirmity can be different from the lens which reveals a cure. The first part of this article, then, makes no theological claims but introduces a problem that theology might help to solve: the uphill struggle faced by those promoting greater efforts to protect humanity from causing itself great harm. Irresolute response to threats from climate change, nuclear war, and artificial intelligence has shown that broadcasting the need for mitigation does not guarantee behavioural change to that end.

After summarising why fostering concern for safeguarding future generations can prove challenging for the most influential schools of morality in today's secular world, I suggest that developing Christian love for humanity's future could equip the Church

to better play its part in reducing the risk humanity now creates to its own survival. Characterised by a dynamic theology of history and traditional eschatology, early writings from Joseph Ratzinger help both to moderate hopes based on a utopian future world humanity could perfect for itself, and to explain why transcendent hope in Jesus Christ can bring to light the true meaning future generations, and their well-being, have for us today.

2. Longtermism's struggle to motivate existential risk mitigation

2.1 Anthropogenic existential risk

As the 16th day of July 1945 came to a close, the sun set over a changed world. For the first time, humanity had detonated an atomic bomb, and after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki later that year, society struggled to come to terms with the forces unleashed. Amidst the storm of devastation and the uproar of anti-nuclear movements, however, there were those who perceived whispers that a greater threshold of despair had been crossed. One such thinker, Bertrand Russell, stood in the House of Lords to describe a new spectre darkening humanity's door:

We do not want to look at this thing simply from the point of view of the next few years; we want to look at it from the point of view of the future of mankind. The question is a simple one: Is it possible for a scientific society to continue to exist, or must such a society inevitably bring itself to destruction?¹

Jonathan Schell, a prominent disarmament activist, developed this theme in a series of articles for *The New Yorker* in 1982, turning to the book of Genesis to describe the milestone that had been passed: As Adam and Eve opened the door to individual death by eating of the forbidden fruit, now humanity has 'eaten more deeply of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and has brought itself face to face with a second death, the death of mankind'.² Russell and Schell both recognised that the development of nuclear weapons marked the dawn of a new age, humanity had become its greatest risk to itself. Only God could create humanity *ex nihilo* but humanity had obtained its own definitive power, the '*potestas annihilationis*, the *reductio ad nihili*'.³

Nuclear weapons soon became but one example of an Anthropogenic Existential Risk (AXR). Other self-caused threats to humanity's future potential now include engineered pandemics, human-caused climate change, and unaligned artificial intelligence. A recent study from the Forecasting Research Institute estimates these threaten a 20% chance of catastrophe and a 6% chance of human extinction by 2100,⁴ and as technological advancement continues unabated, it is reasonable to assume new AXRs will be discovered, some of which could be more hazardous.⁵ Whilst initiatives

¹Bertrand Russell, 'The International Situation', in *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, vol. 138, The House of Lords, debated on November 27th 1945, column 89.

²Jonathan Schell, *Fate of the Earth* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1988), p. 115.

³Ulrich H. J. Körtner, *The End of the World: A Theological Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), p. 181.

⁴Ezra Karger et al., 'Forecasting Existential Risks', *Forecasting Research Institute*, Working Paper, 1 (2023), p. 3.

⁵For a description of the full range of known existential risks, see Nick Bostrom, 'Existential Risks: Analysing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards', *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 9 (2002), <<http://jetpress.org/volume9/risks.html>>.

have arisen to campaign against each threat individually, a burgeoning community of academics now seeks to respond generally to this development of the *potestas annihilationis*, establishing the philosophy of *Longtermism* and the field of Existential Risk Studies.⁶ Schell's work bears fruit in the thinkers he inspired: Carl Sagan and Derek Parfit, who in turn influenced, if not directly mentored, several of the contemporary philosophers this article will engage. Amongst these is Toby Ord, a researcher at Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute, who describes Schell's legacy as a 'new wave of thought' which realised that 'the loss of uncounted future generations may overshadow the immediate consequences of any given catastrophe'.⁷ The discovery of AXRs, then, goes hand in hand with another realisation; that humanity has a vast potential future.

Ord explains that planet Earth will remain habitable for roughly a billion years, which is not only time enough for trillions of human lives⁸ but also time to develop the technology required to leave.⁹ Another longtermist, Nick Beckstead, argues that if humanity makes the most of the billion years available here, it is not impossible for humanity to colonise the galaxy¹⁰ and so survive on a 'cosmological scale in which the present era will seem astonishingly close to the very start of the universe'.¹¹ The realisation of this vast, blank canvas of potential has captivated utilitarians seeking to maximise good and minimise suffering, such that MacAskill, another recent proponent of longtermism, argues that 'positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time ... taking seriously just how big the future could be and how high the stakes are in shaping it'.¹²

These two realisations, that humanity is its greatest risk to itself and that humanity's future could be much longer than people tend to consider, suggest that the coming centuries have a particular importance. Without action, the danger humanity creates for itself will continue to grow, and such increasing risk is unsustainable.¹³ We will either learn to mitigate existential risks or one of them will eventually play out, causing a permanent loss of humanity's potential. Ord, therefore, likens humanity to a young person with enough capacity to do themselves serious harm but lacking in maturity; 'we are rapidly coming into our full power and are impatient to flex our muscles, to try out every new capability the moment we acquire it'.¹⁴ As we are no longer constrained by our technology, we must be constrained by our good judgement, we must choose to survive.¹⁵ On this basis, Ord has named this moment of human history 'The Precipice', a period when humanity faces the task of walking a narrow way,

⁶See, for example, research from Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute *est.* 2005 or Cambridge's Centre for the Study of Existential Risk *est.* 2012.

⁷Toby Ord, *The Precipice* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 62.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹⁰Nick Beckstead, 'On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future' (New Brunswick, The State University of New Jersey, 2013), p. 57.

¹¹Ord, *The Precipice*, p. 223.

¹²William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future: A Million-Year View* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2022), p. 4.

¹³Ord, *The Precipice*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 191.

learning to manage its technological powers and avoid civilisational collapse or even extinction, and so pass on to a less perilous chapter of humanity's story.¹⁶

Longtermism may appear too hubristic in its future goals and overly pessimistic in its present distress; however, the lens of utilitarianism has brought a problem into focus that cannot be simply side-stepped. Humanity is now at risk of causing itself great harm and unquestioning reception of longtermism is not required for recognising the value of prudently avoiding the possibility of catastrophe. Could theology, even, play a part in reducing existential risk? One clue comes from Nick Bostrom, the director of the Future of Humanity Institute, who explains that there are benefits to thinking about Existential Risks generally: 'If we treat risks singly, and never as part of an overall threat profile, we may become unduly fixated on the one or two dangers that happen to have captured the public or expert imagination of the day'.¹⁷ Theology has engaged some AXRs specifically. The response to climate change is a well-developed example. However, a general response from faith to humanity's new power to destroy itself remains underdeveloped. There are new and thorny questions for theological anthropology, theology of divine providence, and eschatology, now that human agency has the power to cause the extinction of our species. This article, however, follows another path: Perhaps faith could address a more fundamental problem: how we justify the claim that we should be concerned at all about the well-being of potential future generations in the far distant future.

2.2 Difficulties in motivation from future ethics

The mitigation of Existential Risks requires sacrifices, and so the regulation of distribution, development, and use of hazardous technology meets resistance as states and individuals grapple with more immediate concerns: the wealthy have grown accustomed to burning fossil fuels and those in the developing world resist emission limits which slow economic growth; nuclear superpowers prove hesitant to disarm whilst others strive to earn a seat at the table by developing nuclear capability; all face the dilemma of delaying, by regulation, the possible benefits that could come with biomechanical and artificial intelligence breakthroughs. Dieter Birnbacher, a philosopher who writes explicitly about motivation for caring for the future, explains that future-oriented motivation is simply more demanding as moral judgements do not have recourse to the experience of present situations, and their application generates friction within ethical frameworks developed principally with contemporary relationships in mind.¹⁸

This motivational challenge comes into clearer view by thinking about types of motivation, which can follow a taxonomy used by Charles Batson in his critical assessment of the efficacy of contemporary morality.¹⁹ *Egoism*, motivation with the goal of increasing one's own welfare, resists application to future morality as there is little

¹⁶Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷Nick Bostrom, 'Introduction', in *Global Catastrophic Risks*, ed. by Nick Bostrom and Milan Cirkovic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2.

¹⁸Dieter Birnbacher, 'What Motivates Us to Care for the (Distant) Future', in *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. by A. Grosserries and L. Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 276.

¹⁹See Table 1.1, Charles Daniel Batson, *What's Wrong With Morality?: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 30.

the future can do for us now. *Altruism*, motivation with the goal of increasing the welfare of others, generally depends on sympathy for motivation; however, it is hard to sympathise with a distant future people who might not even ever exist. *Collectivism*, motivation for increasing a group's welfare, loses force the more widely the circle of inclusion is drawn, and so solidarity with future generations is overpowered by concern for the needs of family, community, and nation today.

Principlism, defined as motivation with the goal of holding to some moral ideal, is undermined in future application as the question of justice between generations, at least according to Jonathan Rawls, tests popular moral approaches to the limits.²⁰ The calculus of utilitarian aggregative ethics is paralyzed by the near-infinite amount of potential good and bad the long-term future could hold.²¹ There are challenges in invoking the rights of future people, such as the basic question of how do those who do not yet exist have rights, and that, as Kant himself acknowledged, corresponding inter-generational duties appear unjust for only 'later generations will in fact have the good fortune to inhabit the building on which a whole series of their forefathers had worked without themselves being able to share in the happiness they were preparing'.²² Contractualists struggle to strike up defensible hypothetical agreements with future generations.²³

To paraphrase Émile Torres, who has written recently in criticism of longtermism, there is work to be done to explain why it is necessarily a moral tragedy if a vast amount of potential impersonal value is left unrealised.²⁴ More generally, moral relativism leaves us uncertain about what should be preserved, what should we be passing on, and if it is wrong to make assumptions about what will be valuable. Annette Baier, in a landmark paper outlining a basis for the rights of future persons, is unsure if moral theory can 'capture the right reasons for the right attitudes to past and future persons', admitting her own argument relies on commonly shared intuitions.²⁵ Such uncertainty undermines motivational power. If it is unclear that there is a moral obligation to pay the price asked by the future, it is only natural that the present resists paying it in full. If there is a chance that costly risk-mitigation constitutes, not a liberation of the future from a tyranny of the present, but a dictatorship of the future over the present,²⁶ I am less likely to opt for those sacrifices.

In summary, neither intangible personal benefit, nor the good of some distant beneficiary, nor the abstract good of future humanity conclusively motivate a voluntary diminishment of my experience when weighed against concrete needs closer to home. This outcome is only exacerbated by a worldview that has appealed to freedom as

²⁰John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 284.

²¹Ord admits that all resolutions to these problems, known as Population Ethics, have 'at least one moral implication that most people find implausible'. Ord, *The Precipice*, p. 260.

²²Immanuel Kant, 'The Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. by Hans Siegbert Reiss, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 44.

²³See Birnbacher, 'What Motivates Us to Care for the (Distant) Future', p. 276.

²⁴Émile P. Torres, *Human Extinction: A History of the Science and Ethics of Annihilation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), p. 430.

²⁵Anette Baier, *Reflections On How We Live* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 11.

²⁶Torres, *Human Extinction: A History of the Science and Ethics of Annihilation*, 431; C.f. MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future*, p. 9.

autonomy to pursue goals, fostering a distaste for constraints and limitations imposed by past and future generations.²⁷ Birnbacher has called this the ‘motivational problem’; whilst reasons such as love, sympathy, or solidarity can be applied to future goods, these lack their full moral influence as they normally ‘depend on face-to-face relations with their objects’, whereas future people ‘come into view only as abstract recipients of goods and potential victims of harms’, so do not appear as ‘experientially accessible objects of attitudes such as love, friendship, reverence, or solidarity’.²⁸ Even in contemporaneous application, universalist ethics must wrestle against the stronger motivational force of close relationships of family and immediate community, by which all fail to act sufficiently to alleviate present suffering in distant parts of the world.²⁹ Greater still, then, is the effort required to bring forward impactful reasons of concern for future generations which can help promote existential risk mitigation. Secular morality has struggled to cross the chasm between future generations and present action, but the core of the Gospel’s social message is to love all of humanity as brothers and sisters in Christ. Why would future generations be excluded from this?

In *Living for the Future*, Rachel Muers draws out scriptural themes of community, responsibility, and maternity to develop a specifically Christian ethics of future generations.³⁰ Acknowledging that she builds on earlier work coordinated by Emmanuel Agius, founder of a Future Generations Programme, Muers not only develops a Christian response to the moral uncertainty described above but also opens the question of motivation, highlighting the importance of themes such as worship and community to broaden the field of ethical questioning. An analogy can be helpful here: Fundamental Theology grew out of a need to communicate not only what faith believes but why it believes. In a relativistic world, many are indifferent to the beliefs of the Christian faith, assuming dogmas make no real claim on nonbelievers’ own lived experience. Questions of Christian humanism, anthropology, credibility, relation to philosophy and science, and aesthetics, therefore, take on a new significance for the Church’s mission, helping better to reveal why the Christian faith is meaningful. The climate activist may well feel like a street corner preacher, frustrated that being louder does not translate to catching greater attention. If we under-respond to moral arguments for taking action to safeguard future generations, perhaps there is benefit in seeking as widely as possible for reasons why future generations matter to me and make a claim on my lived experience.

3. Ratzinger’s eschatological realism and future ethics

The expression ‘eschatological realism’ might appear to be a bloated term for belief in orthodox Catholic teaching about death, eternal life, the expectation of Christ’s return, and the resurrection of the dead, which is far from unique to Joseph Ratzinger. However, the term has a dialectical dimension, characteristic of Ratzinger’s theology.

²⁷Samuel Scheffler, ‘Introduction’, in *On What Matters*, ed. by Derek Parfit, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 7.

²⁸Birnbacher, ‘What Motivates Us to Care for the (Distant) Future’, p. 282.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 277–78.

³⁰Rachel Muers, *Living for the Future: Theological Ethics for Coming Generations* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), p. 8; See also *Caring for Future Generations: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. by Emanuel Agius and Lionel Chircop (Westport: Praeger, 1998) *passim*.

He makes it plain: Catholic belief in the last things cannot coexist with hope in the perfectibility of history, the world, and humanity, because the definitive state of salvation is achieved ‘not through rational planning but through the indestructible love which triumphed in the risen Christ’.³¹ Perhaps counter-intuitively, it was Ratzinger’s commitment to the inter-dependence of faith and reason that motivated his efforts to shine the light of faith on the question of hope for the future. Ratzinger was mindful of the ‘highly dangerous pathologies’ found in religion which necessitate the ‘light of reason as an instrument of control, to purify and order religion again and again’.³² In a hypothetical world marked by pervasive religious fundamentalism, in which society mostly neglected the needs of the future on the basis of apocalyptic expectation, we can be confident Ratzinger would have promoted reason’s role for illuminating faith.³³ That is not the world we live in and so, as Aidan Nichols notes, Ratzinger often engaged the ‘anti-human’ possibilities that technology makes possible.³⁴ Ratzinger’s tasks, perceiving a particular danger of reason become too much of its own absolute in the realm of optimism,³⁵ were to moderate a rational, planned, sense of hope, ‘an active virtue’ which could bring forth a better world and a new humanity,³⁶ and to resist trends in theology which risked reducing eschatology to questions of praxis and interdisciplinary engagement.³⁷

Drafting a possible paragraph for *Gaudium et Spes*, Ratzinger expressed hopes that the Church enters into dialogue with all peoples but does so ‘bringing to the common questions that light she believes she is given by faith in Christ’.³⁸ This is why his own eschatological work seeks to bolster belief in the last things. It is not a dismissal of the *ad extra* task of allowing faith to speak to concrete problems but seeks to equip believers with authentic Christian hope with which the challenges of our time can be overcome.³⁹ Building on a relational anthropology, it is the social dimension of hope in God’s kingdom, dispelling worldly covetousness to enable a Christ-like generosity to be poor for the sake of those in need,⁴⁰ that Ratzinger’s eschatological realism can

³¹Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed., Dogmatic Theology (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p. 213.

³²Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularisation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 29

³³E.g. ‘Self-Criticism of the Political Effects of Christianity’, Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1988), pp. 212–15.

³⁴A Nichols, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London: Burns & Oates, 2007), p. 140.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁶Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. xviii.

³⁷‘It seemed important to me not to allow eschatology always to be transformed into political theology of whatever kind’. *Ibid.*, xix. See also ‘The State of the Question’, pp. 1–15.

³⁸Joseph Ratzinger, ‘Text 6 – Proposed Revision of 17 October 1965, for the Schema De Ecclesia in Mundo Huius Temporis, No. 9, Modifying and Expanding the Final Three Paragraphs of the Prior Text’, in *Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as Peritus Before and During Vatican Council II*, by Jared Wicks, vol. 89 (Gregorianum, 2008), pp. 292–93.

³⁹‘I hope to have restricted myself to basically to having identified a problem. I attempted to set forth the perduring significance of hope in God’s own action in history because this activity lends an inner context to what man accomplishes and transforms from within the transitory into something that endures’. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. xix.

⁴⁰See ‘The Social and Cosmic Dimension of Hope’, Joseph Ratzinger, ‘On Hope’, in *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, vol. 2, ed. by David Schindler and Nicholas Healy (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 28–41, First published in English in *Communio* 35.2 (2008).

offer. As will be seen, the intertwining of faith, hope, and love alone can bridge the gap between present motivation and future goods.⁴¹

3.1 Responding to Utopia without faith

In a *Communio* article which exemplifies that eschatological project, Ratzinger explains that utopia is not a future reality. The essence of utopian thinking is not in setting radical goals for the future that might be achieved by the dynamism of history and humanity's efforts, but in critique of present systems and institutions.⁴² Utopia in this strict sense refers to the criticism of the politics of the day, which are assumingly failing to optimise civil society, according to a set of norms of justice. In this case, the utopian element in longtermism is not the long and blissful possible futures that have captivated imaginations, but the assessment that today's systems are failing to bring those about. Longtermists hope to correct those systems, using the goal of a galaxy teeming with trillions of blissfully happy human beings to advocate policies which lead down that path, and condemn those that do not. Consistent with his writings against Comte, Ratzinger warns us that little *ethos* is left to a utopian critique which relies on our possible achievements for hope.⁴³

Ratzinger argues this point most explicitly in a radio address from 1969,⁴⁴ outlining the implications of Comte's view that 'slaves of God' have no role to play in shaping what is to come.⁴⁵ Would it not seem that only those clinging to an outdated world-view, unable to grasp how great the universe, the world, and history really are, could believe that one person, Jesus of Nazareth, could be the centre of all human destiny, someone who will only fade ever more into the past?⁴⁶ Because this perception spread alongside the expansion of empirical methods from natural sciences to philosophy, Ratzinger's response is epistemological, claiming that after that expansion, neither the natural sciences nor philosophy 'seek truth but only inquire about the correctness of the methods applied'.⁴⁷ Ratzinger's warning is that humanity becomes imprisoned by the compulsion to correctly apply empirical methods which do not allow a movement from beyond oneself to 'the heart of things'.⁴⁸ The uncertainty, then, with which a secular mind perceives the distant future does not result from an absence

⁴¹Peter John McGregor has recently shown how a perichoresis of the theological virtues is central to Ratzinger's theology. Peter John McGregor, 'The Theological Virtues', in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Ratzinger*, ed. by Uwe Michael Lang and Daniel Cardó (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 297.

⁴²First published as 'Eschatologie und Utopie' in *Communio* 6.2 (1977), 97–112. Joseph Ratzinger, 'Eschatology and Utopia', in *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, vol. 1, ed. by David Schindler (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 10–26.

⁴³Euclides Eslava, 'Auguste Comte: Science, Reason, and Religion', in *Joseph Ratzinger in Dialogue with Philosophical Traditions: From Plato to Vattimo*, ed. by Tracey Rowland, Rudy Albino de Assunção, and Alejandro Sada (New York: T&T Clark, 2024), pp. 126–27.

⁴⁴Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), p. 22 ff.

⁴⁵As cited in Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), p. 172, fn101.

⁴⁶Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, pp. 20–21.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁸Ratzinger, 27; C.f. Ratzinger, *Glaube Und Zukunft*, 29, 'auf den Grund der Dinge vorzudringen' originally translated as 'to press on to the foundation of things'.

of reliable data but is the fruit of a philosophical approach unable to offer a hope sufficient for the human heart.⁴⁹ 'Man has been made so that he cannot live without a future',⁵⁰ and faith is required to reach truths that are 'deeper and more concerned with man's essential humanity than are the truths of natural science, exact and important as the latter may be'.⁵¹ The 'cry that rises up from mankind for a future' cannot be answered by positivism, nor by an anonymous sense of collectivism,⁵² but only by an offer of a personal hope, an encounter with God because 'humanity is commensurable, not with the presently expedient, but with the eternal, that which opens up a new horizon'.⁵³

The pattern just seen in anthropology is applied by Ratzinger to history itself. The fundamental significance of eschatological realism is revealing the impossibility of perfecting this world through and in history. Technological developments which put the destruction of the human race within the power of ever smaller groups of people, or even individuals, have truly banished any sense of the inevitability of human progress, so what alternative is left for answering history's own cries for meaning, if it cannot contain that meaning within itself?⁵⁴ Based on Plato's principle that the 'individual and the community can continue to exist only if there is an overarching just order of being from which they can derive their standards and before which they stand responsible',⁵⁵ Ratzinger believes that utopia has a role to play, but the crux of history cannot be some possible future state but must be something divine, God himself, who entered history in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵⁶ Here a door opens to the political and ethical implications of Ratzinger's Christocentric theology of history, where Christ is both the end but also the centre,⁵⁷ and the guiding star who imbues history with dynamism, no matter how vast the future ahead may or may not be.

3.2 *The motivational potential of trans-historical hope*

Addressing the Christian Academy in Prague,⁵⁸ Ratzinger explains that the offer of a better world in the future as a concrete goal to work towards is attractive to the modern mind as it prioritises what can be planned and made, rejecting the seemingly superstitious myth of future hope from faith. However, reflecting the challenges described above, he insists that this promise will always be empty because this future world, 'for the sake of which the present is being used up', is never actually experienced, 'always

⁴⁹Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, p. 49.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 16.

⁵²Ibid., p. 52.

⁵³Ibid., 53; The English translation omits the significant clause: 'das, was ihn ausweitet über den Augenblick hinaus', literally 'that which expands him out beyond the moment' C.f. Ratzinger, *Glaube Und Zukunft*, p. 57.

⁵⁴Ratzinger, 'Eschatology and Utopia', p. 20.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁷See 'The Pre-Bonaventurian Development of the Medieval Theology of History' in Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure* (Providence: Cluny Media, 2020), pp. 90–109.

⁵⁸The speech was later published as Joseph Ratzinger, 'Daß Gott Alles in Allem Sei, Vom Christlichen Glauben an Das Ewige Leben', *Klerusblatt*, 72 (1992), 203–7; published in English as 'My Joy Is to Be in Thy Presence: On the Christian Belief in Eternal Life', in Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), pp. 130–48.

only there for some future generations, as yet unknown'. The hubris which supplants eschatology with a human-made utopia ends only in a state Ratzinger likens to that of the Greek god Tantalus, the fruits of the future's better world lying always just out of reach of those living at any given moment, which has consequences both for hope and for motivational resourcing.

Ratzinger's contrasting insistence on a distinction between hope for the future and hope for eternity offers a path forward for '[present] and eternity are not, like present and future, located side by side and separated; rather they are interwoven'.⁵⁹ Crucially for the motivational question, eternity can enter into the present in a way the future cannot: eternal life can 'become effective in the midst of time', as 'God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven"', and so 'truth springs up, justice arises, love comes to be':

The Kingdom of God is much closer than the Tantalus-fruit of utopia because it is not a chronological future, does not come chronologically later, but refers at all times to the wholly other, which for that very reason is able to embed itself within time, so as simply to take it up within itself and make of it pure presence. Eternal life, which takes its beginning in communion with God here and now, seizes this here and now and takes it up within the great expanse of true reality, which is no longer fragmented by the stream of time. There, the mutual impermeability of I and thou can no longer exist, as this is closely associated with the fragmentation of time. In fact anyone who sets his will within the will of God deposits it right there, where all good will has its place; and thus our will blends with the will of all others.⁶⁰

Echoing a point from his *Eschatology*, Ratzinger is explaining how the Kingdom of God is not a future structure of governance but a reference to God's dominion, His power spread throughout the world, meaning that Jesus' promise that the Kingdom is close assures believers that God reigns here and now, as well as in the age to come: Christ, in whom the future is present, mediates the power of the Holy Spirit as God reigns on earth.⁶¹ Ratzinger offers Abraham, the father of a great many generations, as the biblical example *par excellence* of surrendering what is planned for the sake of a future in and with God.⁶² Having placed his hope in God's hands, Abraham's present was imbued by God's promises, the temporal was conformed to eternity.⁶³ In this way, and in contrast to the prison of positivist method, a new and limitless horizon opens up towards the eternal⁶⁴ and sharing Abraham's faith 'sets us moving and introduces concern for the future', teaching 'the responsibility of hope'.⁶⁵

Most significantly here, Ratzinger turns to Augustine in affirming that when humanity allows the present to be determined by hope in God's kingdom, humankind then shares in dominion over the created world, a consequence of being made in

⁵⁹Ratzinger, 'My Joy Is to Be in Thy Presence', p. 141.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pp.141–43.

⁶¹Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, pp. 34–35.

⁶²Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, p. 40.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 47.

God's image. By orientation towards a transcendent horizon, humanity's dominion consists in 'bringing things into man's glorification of God'⁶⁶ and as Christ's incarnation irrevocably transforms human nature, all human 'action, thought, willing and loving have become the instrument of the *Logos*'.⁶⁷ Once action, thought, will, and love are given life by taking on Christ's likeness, we become bound together through him. Christ, 'God being here with us', 'the opening of time into eternity', makes it possible to live life shared with God, and so through Christ 'each single person's relationship with God has been blended together in [Christ's] one relationship with God, so that turning one's gaze toward God is no longer a matter of turning one's gaze away from others and from the world'.⁶⁸ Ratzinger even goes so far as to say that this relationship continues in the time between biological death and the last day, as history continues after the death of an individual. The interdependence of each human being means that any individual remains morally bound, even after death, to the welfare of others they left behind: how could it be that someone reaches their ultimate end and peace if there are still those that suffer on their account?⁶⁹ In the Body of Christ, all human beings are one organism, with a shared destiny, and so each individual takes their final place having been judged in terms of the whole, when 'the total organism is complete'.⁷⁰ This is why eschatology does not foster indifference to the problems of this world but binds the believer to the needs of others as Christ, God's entry into time, brings the present 'under the measure of the eternal'.⁷¹

Each accepted pain, no matter how obscure, every silent suffering of evil, each act of inwardly overcoming oneself, every outreach of love, each renunciation, and every turning in silence to God - all of that now becomes effective as a whole: Nothing that is good goes for nothing. Against the power of evil, whose tentacles threaten to surround and lay hold of every part of our society, to choke it in their deadly embrace, this quiet cycle of true life appears as the liberating force by which the Kingdom of God, without any abolition of what is existing, is, as the Lord says, already in the midst of us.⁷²

It was said above that Ratzinger's approach to eschatology and politics strives to mirror the relationship of faith and reason. His Christological theology of history can therefore help steer a course between the extremes of a hope unilluminated by faith, or a hope blinded by a lack of reason, between the irrationality of expectations of God perfecting this world and the hopelessness of a meaningless history. Ratzinger's insistence on maintaining the distinction between the rationality of politics and the hope of faith explains his criticism of political theologies which attempt to blur it and only serve to

⁶⁶Joseph Ratzinger, 'Part I, Chapter I: The Dignity of the Human Person', in *Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World*, ed. by Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. V, Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II (New York: Burns & Oates, 1968), p. 122.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 160.

⁶⁸Ratzinger, 'My Joy Is to Be in Thy Presence', p. 144.

⁶⁹Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 187.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 190.

⁷¹Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, p. 55.

⁷²Ratzinger, 'My Joy Is to Be in Thy Presence', pp. 144–45.

lose the essence of both.⁷³ If Christianity is reduced to offering hopes of a self-perfected world in a crowded marketplace of earthly optimism, it would be no more capable of lifting the human spirit beyond the narrow horizon of humankind's own making, even if it is enriched by a Christological veneer.⁷⁴ Without distinction between the future and eternity, a Christian hope for a better future is unable to weave into, and transform, the present.

The general pattern of a Ratzingerian solution to the motivational problem can now be outlined: Whilst future goods, and hopes therein, always remain other, across a chasm of time which cannot be bridged, eternity breaks into the now, and so hopes for eternity, the horizon of life given by encounter with the person of Jesus Christ,⁷⁵ can shape the present in a way future hope cannot. As emotive as hopes for a better world can be, they lack the transcendence which can truly penetrate the present. The goal of a perfectly just, galaxy-colonising, human race blessed with lives rich with meaningful activity and free from suffering will be ever too-nebulous to make its mark. It will make very little difference to me if that never happens. Even the more pressing reality that those born today will experience life on a less hospitable planet does not directly impact me.⁷⁶ However, my Christian hope that God's Kingdom come, both now and in eternity, transforms the way I perceive the future, including future people, as God's eternity makes its claim on all of history, including the past, what is to come, and my now. The Christian lives eschatologically, taking shelter amidst the strife of human experience amongst all those who have been, are, and will be God's children and so 'the walls separating heaven and earth, and past, present and future, are now as glass'.⁷⁷ On these terms, the relational anthropology Ratzinger often expresses cannot exclude future generations. They too are embraced by a Christ-like, radical, self-giving love of those in need, even if they are unknown, and without expecting a grateful response in return:⁷⁸ 'One does not become a Christian for oneself at all; rather, one does so for the sake of the whole, for others, for everyone', and so a Christian is 'ready to engage in a particular service that God requires from us in history', having passed into 'a new form of existence of someone who lives for others'.⁷⁹

4. Conclusion

I have hoped to outline how Ratzinger's eschatological realism can offer a foundation for bridging the motivational gap between present agency and future needs. Ratzinger reminds us that hope in the closeness of God's Kingdom imbues the present with meaning and a driving force, directing it to the future, in a way that temporal expectations of the world's transformation cannot.⁸⁰ His conviction that eschatological realism leads

⁷³Ratzinger, 'Eschatology and Utopia', p. 16. This concern lies at the heart of Ratzinger's criticism of Liberation Theology.

⁷⁴See, for example, 'The Evolutionist Design of Teilhard de Chardin' *ibid.*, 23–25.

⁷⁵Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican City, 2005), para. 1.

⁷⁶Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report', ed. by Hoesung Lee and José Romero, 2023, p. 7.

⁷⁷Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 9.

⁷⁸Joseph Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 83.

⁷⁹Joseph Ratzinger, *What It Means to Be a Christian* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 55.

⁸⁰Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 11.

to relationality, as ‘human love shines with radiance of eternal mystery’,⁸¹ suggests that eschatology alone can bring together present and future, the individual and the community into a unity.⁸² The sense of belonging to the Body of Christ which spans the whole of humanity’s history, therefore, inexorably binds me with those that will follow in a relationship of love and responsibility, no matter how far into the future God wills them to be.

What has thus far gone unsaid is that secular thinkers are themselves far from unaware of the motivational challenge. Samuel Scheffler, author of *Why Worry About Future Generations*, recognised the ‘evaluative infirmity’ in understanding the connections between generations and is one thinker amongst others who looks outside the realm of strict ‘principlism’ to find reasons to care about future generations.⁸³ Consider just three examples of reasons of concern which do not rely on some possible value in the future, but rather the *present* value of the possible future:⁸⁴ the possible cosmological preciousness of the human race as unique amongst the cosmos which could be tragically squandered;⁸⁵ appreciating how much those alive today have received from past generations which, as it is impossible to reciprocate to past humanity, generates an urge to reciprocate sacrifices made in the past by making sacrifices today to benefit the future;⁸⁶ or how so much of what is most meaningful in life is meaningful because of the assumption humanity has a long future ahead of it.⁸⁷ Reviewing these creative philosophical efforts in detail and placing them into the framework of Ratzinger’s eschatological realism would only enrich the repertoire of reasons why hope in Jesus Christ can motivate the present generation to protect those that follow. Ratzinger’s eschatologically determined anthropology brings to light the true meaning of humanity’s unique role in creation and the tragedy of its calamitous end. His eschatologically determined account of revelation brings into relief the meaning of the great efforts made to preserve and pass on the Tradition and the cultural treasures of the Church, a long future opening the possibility of deeper riches uncovered by organic development beyond today’s imagination. Ratzinger’s ecclesiology of an eschatologically orientated community could develop the theological value of the opportunity of a long future so that the Church’s long-term initiatives could bear fruit; evangelisation, ecumenism, and synodality to name a few. As a river needs a hill to flow, morality needs a trans-historical dynamism for future meaning to pour into the now.

Any attempts to draw out practical implications from what has been said must recall the specific motivational problem being addressed. St Paul lamented, ‘I do not

⁸¹See Robert Wozniak, ‘Eschatological Personalism: A Trinitarian and Relational Account’, in *What the Faithful Hope: Christian Eschatology Starting with the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI*, ed. by Bernardo Estrada, Pierluca Azzaro, and Ermenegildo Manicardi (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), p. 282.

⁸²Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 12.

⁸³Samuel Scheffler, *Why Worry About Future Generations?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 11, 19.

⁸⁴C.f. Krister Bykvist, *Value and Time*, ed. by Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 133.

⁸⁵Ord, *The Precipice*, p. 53.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸⁷Janna Thompson, ‘Identity and Obligation in a Transgenerational Polity’, in *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. by Axel Grosserries and Lukas Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 37.

do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do'.⁸⁸ It is one thing to acknowledge some moral standard that requires a sacrifice for the sake of future generations and another to experience motivation to act accordingly,⁸⁹ and this article has hoped to assist, not the former, but the latter. Tracey Rowland has expressed that Ratzinger worked to resist a 'Kantian rationalist tendency to reduce Christianity to the dimensions of an ethical framework',⁹⁰ and so it is fitting that Ratzinger's contribution to a moral debate expands reflections on the experience of the moral life rather than elaborating specific ethical reasoning. For Ratzinger, it seemed self-evident that technology's 'deeper intrusion' into the 'world in which future generations will live' requires 'correspondingly increased responsibility for the world entrusted to man and for the rights of others, especially those of coming generations'.⁹¹ There is no shortage of ethical arguments, for example, that Christianity entails a calling to stewardship, bolstering the judgement that taking prudent action to safeguard the environment is a moral good. The texts from Ratzinger here reviewed, however, help us see a meta-ethical reality, that a Christian can establish in themselves an identity as a member of the trans-generational Body of Christ, adopting an interior disposition in which future generations are more effectively experienced as objects of empathy, and charity, in a way unavailable to secular reasoning.

This can have two quite practical consequences that cannot be taken for granted: first, to increase the impact of ethical claims made by advocates for existential risk mitigation, potentially tipping the balance towards action; and, second, to ensure that future generations are not neglected by omission in moral deliberation. As persistent and urgent communication about the need to mitigate threats to future well-being has yet to elicit significant behavioural change, perhaps indifference is a greater obstacle than uncertainty for safeguarding humanity's future. To this end, Ratzinger shows how a Christian can form a unique relationship with future generations because faith in Jesus Christ gives eyes that can see Christ himself in all those in need, hands which are free for radical generosity as they work for the treasures of heaven not those of earth, and a heart that can love those who are yet to be, for it shares in the love of God which is not bound by the limits of the present. This is how Christian hope can disrupt the stagnation of indifference which characterises response to existential risks to date and which secular narratives have struggled to overcome.

⁸⁸Rom 7:19.

⁸⁹See Charles Daniel Batson, *What's Wrong With Morality?: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67.

⁹⁰Tracy Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 66.

⁹¹Joseph Ratzinger, 'Technological Security as a Problem of Social Ethics', in *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, vol. 2, ed. by David Schindler and Nicholas Healy (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 47, First published in English in *Communio* 5.3 (Fall 1982).