Introduction

THE PARABLE OF HILLSIDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE MORAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE PUZZLE OF SECULAR APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT IDEAL THEORY TEACHES US ABOUT APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT TEACHES US ABOUT IDEAL THEORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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