IMMANENCE, TRANSCENDENCE AND ESSENCE

The Dialectics of Progress

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Dr Peter Critchley


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Peter Critchley is a philosopher, writer and tutor with a first degree in the field of the Social Sciences (History, Economics, Politics and Sociology) and a PhD in the field of Philosophy, Ethics and Politics. Peter works in the tradition of Rational Freedom, a tradition which sees freedom as a common endeavour in which the freedom of each individual is conceived to be co-existent with the freedom of all. In elaborating this concept, Peter has written extensively on a number of the key thinkers in this ‘rational’ tradition (Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Dante, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Habermas). Peter is currently engaged in an ambitious interdisciplinary research project entitled Being and Place. The central theme of this research concerns the connection of place and identity through the creation of forms of life which enable human and planetary flourishing in unison. Peter tutors across the humanities and social sciences, from A level to postgraduate research. Peter particularly welcomes interest from those not engaged in formal education, but who wish to pursue a course of studies out of intellectual curiosity. Peter is committed to bringing philosophy back to its Socratic roots in ethos, in the way of life of people. In this conception, philosophy as self-knowledge is something that human beings do as a condition of living the examined life. As we think, so shall we live. Living up to this philosophical commitment, Peter offers tutoring services both to those in and out of formal education.

The subject range that Peter offers in his tutoring activities, as well as contact details, can be seen at http://petercritchley-e-akademeia.yolasite.com
The range of Peter’s research activity can be seen at

http://mmu.academia.edu/PeterCritchley

Peter sees his e-akademeia project as part of a global grassroots learning experience and encourages students and learners to get in touch, whatever their learning need and level.
Immanence, Transcendence and Essence

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR ESSENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY

Since Nietzsche announced the death of God, there has been a tendency to think that we are living in a godless universe. This is mistaken. Instead of a thoroughgoing secularisation, these theological and, indeed, teleological assumptions have come to be detached from their true objects and, instead, have come to be attached to secular powers, which in turn have become new idols determining the fate of human beings.

That Nietzsche announced the death of God is well known. Much less well known is that he demanded a thorough revaluation of all values, involving the shedding of all the theological assumptions which underpinned the belief in God. I argue that this revaluation of values has not happened. Instead of the end of religion, we live under the sign of a secular myth of progress. Detached from their true moral object, theological assumptions have come to be attached to new gods, the new idols of capitalist modernity – the state, bureaucracy, capital, money, commodities. These idols are the social powers of human beings in alien form. In the place of the salvation promised by the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in place of the reason and freedom promised by the Enlightenment, there is a secular religion of ‘progress’ in which salvation is conditional upon the propitiation of new gods of monetary and state power. The old theological and teleological assumptions have come to be attached to industry, science, technology to create a secular religion which promises salvation through progress. This progress is not measured in terms of human or spiritual growth, but in terms of economic growth, state power, military expansion, space exploration …..

We now have planetary engineers like Stewart Brand asserting that, through their technology, men have become as gods. Whereas God was conceived to be in the world but not of it, these new ‘men as gods’ are of the world but not in it. They are busy creating a surrogate world, a Heaven on Earth, a Heaven created above, beyond and against the Earth. Every natural resource will be used up in order to create a heaven out of and outside of the Earth. The foundations of life on Earth will be destroyed in the process.
Whereas the Judaeo-Christian tradition is founded upon the moral autonomy of human beings from indifferent natural cycles and biological imperatives, the secular religion of progress attempts to achieve transcendence in terms of technical autonomy, an endless expansion of technical and economic power that is of the world but not in it. On a planet of finite resources, this endless journey into the infinite can only end in ecological destruction and catastrophe. Detached from our biological matrix, we may exist for a while in the outer landscape of ‘the machine’; but we will die in the inner landscape.

Planetary engineering is threatening to abstract human power so much from Nature that Nature ceases to exist. This will achieve a complete transcendence, but only at the cost of detaching human beings from the ground of their being. This means not so much the end of God as the end of Nature. And the end of human nature. As biologist Jonathan Kingdon warns, we have become ‘orphans of our own technology’. ‘Drawn further and further out of our biological matrix we have become more and more dependent on an all-embracing but loveless technology to see us through.’ We have become totally reliant on our morally neutral and neutered technology in seeking to ward off starvation, disease and the rigours of climate. This has encouraged us to think and to act as though natural limits have been abolished. They have not. Human beings can produce and consume and expand to the extent that they have been only through an almost complete detachment from their local environmental and biological underpinnings. We have become so ensconced in the technosphere that we think that the biosphere no longer exists. This is an illusion, fuelled by a subsidy from a nonrenewing capital reserve. Instead of living off Nature’s interest, we have been dissipating the capital. As Kingdon comments: ‘This cuckoo syndrome is a luxury that can only be temporary.’ When finite resources are exhausted, the repercussions will be swift and harsh, hitting with all the impact of the old amoral natural necessity. And technology will be little help. Technology is us, it is we who have to change.
We cannot make a scapegoat of the technological revolution that has pampered us yet passed by the emaciated victims we see on television. It is an extension of what we are. If we are greedy and selfish technology will be a faithful mirror. Left to its own dynamics technological and industrial innovation trashes products, places and people. Technology is at once social shredder, racial churn and political furnace. It is for the children of technology to humanise their parent or, like Saturn, it will consume them. Self-made Man and his society will be undone. If the twenty-first century sets out to build a new sense of family it has powerful tools to help in the task. If it doesn't, its antithesis - increasing conflicts between haves and have-nots - is inevitable.

Kingdon 1993: 316/7

For Kingdon, the solution lies in 'a return of much fuller and more demanding responsibilities to the men and women who choose to have children', finding 'the ways and means of giving a greater value to fewer offspring.' Kingdon is correct to argue that 'this cannot be a mere technical fix but will involve a social and spiritual revolution.' But I think such a transformation entails something richer and much more profound than a concern with population. Giving 'greater value' entails a qualitative transformation in the human condition. This is nothing less than human self-realisation and the attainment of the truly human society, humanisation as a naturalisation.

I propose to argue that immanence and transcendence are the twin poles around which the most important issues and arguments of the contemporary world are organised. Maybe it has always been thus, since the founding of civilisation. Few lives, since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, have escaped the echo of the warning and lamentation in Ecclesiastes: "Man is born to trouble as the spark flyeth upwards."
We have been bent on flying upwards ever since, as if denying, by escape, our roots in a fallen originary nature. My view is that set at extremes, immanence and transcendence lead to a precarious, restless, unhappy and unsustainable way of life. As against the extremes of absorption into a world of amoral natural necessity on the one hand and flight from suppression of nature on the other, I wish to argue for a genuine balancing of immanence and transcendence in terms of the process by which the inherent potentiality of a natural essence is realised and thus becomes actual.

The problem with an alienated system of production is that the realisation of an essence which is frustrated in reality comes to be projected upwards into a false transcendence, to achieve an unreal or illusory universality rather than a concrete reality. With the inversion of means and ends, things come to be invested not only with existential significance but also with divine significance, coming to be projected upwards into the historical process operating according to a purpose which is beyond and above real individuals. This is not teleology, but a substitute; it is the false necessity of false gods.

I wish to set this problem within a philosophical frame.

Philosophy does its best work in the gap between what Is and what Ought to be — between the world we see around us, the immediate world presented to the senses, and the world of the true, the good and the beautiful revealed by the mind. The awareness of this gap characterises the philosophical system; attempts to close this gap brings philosophy to its fullest expression. The unity of the true, the good and the beautiful constitutes the "Ought-to-be" of philosophy.

Without the gap between what “is” and what “ought to be”, philosophy ceases to exist. Marx understood this to mean that the realisation of philosophy is also the abolition of philosophy; the world becomes philosophical as philosophy becomes worldly. (Heller 1984).
Philosophy apprehends and arranges what “is” from the viewpoint of what ought to be. The reality or unreality of being is assessed in accordance with the philosophical ‘ought to be’ - the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful. The attainment of this unity requires a correct method of investigation, and, in consequence, a well-structured and well-presented theory. As Marx argues, the ‘faulty architectonics’ of a theory is ‘not accidental, rather it is the result of . . . and . . . expresses the scientific deficiencies of the method of investigation itself.’ (Marx TSV vol. II, 1968: 166/167). I shall later set Marx within the essentialist tradition of Aristotle. His reference to architectonics savours a great deal of Plato, who argued that to discover the true nature of political and social justice it is necessary to ‘first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less’ (Plato, Republic, trans. Paul Shorey, in Hamilton and Cairns, eds., Collected Dialogues, 368e-369a). Plato’s approach was a strong influence upon philosopher Immanuel Kant, who tended to state his argument in architectonic terms: ‘there is yet another consideration which is more philosophical and architectonic in character; namely to grasp the idea of the whole correctly and thence to view all parts in their mutual relations’ (Preface to the Critique of Practical Reason).

The architectonic is a crucial concept and it is clear that it influenced Marx. The reference to architectonics indicates that Marx believed that a true theory is compelled by the very force of its ‘deep insight’ to develop an elegant conceptual structure. That ‘deep insight’ is what Plato called ‘the eye of the mind’. Marx, therefore, is working in the tradition of Pythagoras and Plato in affirming the harmony between truth, goodness and beauty in a rational universe.

That rational universe is philosophy’s ‘ought to be’. The big question is, could this ‘ought’ ever be realised to form the ‘is’? Philosophy is therefore a critical mode of thinking which seeks to penetrate beyond the fetish systems of the world as it is and expose the true, the good and the beautiful behind the veil of illusion. The defetishisation of the world is the criticism of what “is” from the viewpoint of what “ought to be”.

In later chapters I shall develop the arguments of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Marx at length. I work out of the essentialist tradition of philosophy which is concerned with the ethical development of human nature. Dating from Plato and Aristotle, essentialism is ‘rational' tradition of philosophical anthropology and is characterised by a normative
concern with the most appropriate regimen or mode of life for human beings as social, rational and moral beings. The essentialist tradition therefore exhibits a qualitative interest in the history of humankind. The self-realisation and affirmation of essential subjective qualities therefore emerges as the means by which to evaluate the differential modes of conduct of life (Hennis 1988:107ff; 1983). The essentialist philosophical anthropology therefore leads in the direction of a mode of life which corresponds to and enhances the human ontology rather than contradicts and inhibits it. Such a mode of life realises the telos of human nature. The philosophers in this tradition defined what “ought-to-be” as "essence", the true reality which contrasts with the "phenomenal" nature or "appearance" of what merely exists. In an essentialist metaphysics, essence and appearance refer to different cognitive abilities. In collapsing the distinction, empiricism leaves on the surface level of existence, trapped within a world of appearances, unable to apprehend the true reality that lies underneath. Nevertheless, the distinction between "essential" and the "inessential" are always present in any attempt to apprehend reality in some form. As Marx argued, without the distinction between appearance and reality, there can be no science.

In philosophy, the ‘ought to be’ is true reality, not just the real but the most real: the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful. The end of philosophy is therefore ens perfectissimum — ens realissimum. The “ought to be” is not an illusion, a fantasy, a dream which exists only in our subjective wishes, but the very opposite. This comes out clearly in the Symposium, where Plato writes of seeing with the mind’s eye ‘the true beauty—the divine beauty,’ ‘pure and clear and unalloyed,’ ‘the true beauty simple and divine’. “Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.” (Plato Symposium in Plochmann 1973: 294/5).

Philosophy deals with realities, not illusions and fantasies. Philosophy affirms the capacity of the human mind to discard subjective wishes and come to connect with the bedrock rationality of the universe. That connection takes us beyond the surface reality of appearances and discrete events and accidents.

Pursuing the "ought to be" in order to accessing "the true" or "the most real reality" implies a certain "topographical location". In metaphysics there are "heights" and "depths", levels of cognition which we ascend as we seek to access the 'most real'.
Clearly, such a view has implications with respect to politics and the landscape itself, implying the erection of ideal institutions and hierarchies in order to guide people but which, in truth, become relations of domination based on epistemologies of rule.

It is in light of this danger that Ernesto Laclau writes:

The dictatorship of the proletariat bases its legitimacy on the same privileged access to knowledge as the Platonic philosopher king, with the difference that in the latter the unity between monarchical power and knowledge was fortuitous, while in the case of the dictatorship of the proletariat there is a millennialist-naturalist theory of history explaining why the latter incarnation of the universal has an objective and necessary character.

Laclau 1990:77

This is caricature in that it cuts out the crucial aspects of an essentialist philosophy. Laclau writes as if the telos in essentialist philosophy is written into history independently of human moral choice, will, and action. Such a notion makes no sense whatsoever of the central thesis of essentialism – that human beings are essentially something and something essentially in terms of their social, rational and moral character. It is precisely the possession of that essence that precludes the imposition of the theoretico-elitist model that Laclau mistakenly presents as Plato’s view. Ultimately, the topographical location of true reality lies in humanity itself—in human freedom as the factum of reason. There is no privileged access to true reality in this conception at all; that access is available to all on account of the essential rationality of humanity. For Marx, this implies the truly realised society of realised human beings.

In passing, we should note that Laclau’s denial of naturalist essences leads him to a view in which identities are constructed, a far more totalitarian notion than anything proposed in the essentialist tradition. According to essentialist metaphysics, there is a true reality. This is the bedrock rational universe which guards against any external agency manipulating reality and the people in it according to subjective whim.
and fancy. Laclau’s constructivism asserts existence over essence and invites external manipulation and management. Where essentialism holds that all as rational beings are capable of accessing the rational universe, Laclau’s strategy denies the existence of such a universe, reality is made-up, with power and knowledge going to those who make it up. Frankly, it’s mere pseudo-philosophy that retreats before the big questions of the true, the good and the beautiful and instead remains in the safety of the shallow end of the pool.

We have to be clear here, and avoid misinterpretation. Jacob Bronowski lost many members of his family in Auschwitz. He writes: ‘We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people.’ (Bronowski 2011: 284/5).

We now have planetary engineers writing of humanity as ‘the god species’ and of human beings becoming as gods (Mark Lynas 2011, Stewart Brand 2009). Bronowski makes short work of that old delusion. ‘When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods.’ (Bronowski 2011: 284/285). The key phrase there is ‘with no test in reality’. Bronowski is not abandoning the question for knowledge, far from it. He is just concerned to ground it in reality. We have to close the distance between the rational order and the human act. ‘We have to touch people’. In a TV interview with Michael Parkinson, promoting his series The Ascent of Man, Bronowski states that despite all he has suffered, he ‘never had any uncertainty about the meaning of the word good, the meaning of the word true, the meaning of the word beautiful.’ Despite the world of accidental events, the ultimate reality exists. That is the world we are charged with accessing, that is the ultimate test of our knowledge.

For Kant humankind is the universal, for Feuerbach human-ness is the singular — the concrete, individual sensuous being, for Marx it is the species being differentiated and realised throughout the historical process. Rather than proposing a theoretico-elitist model based upon privileged access to knowledge and power, the essentialist tradition seeks the democratisation of power, politics and philosophy.

11
It was from an essentialist position that Antonio Gramsci argued against the view that philosophy is the specific intellectual activity of specialists and professionals. Pointing to the rational capacity as universal in the human species, Gramsci argues that ‘all men are "philosophers"’. Since this is the case, Gramsci argued that ‘It is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers. It must first be shown that all men are "philosophers"’. (Gramsci 1971 *Prison Notebooks* ch 7).

Gramsci describes language, common and good sense and popular religion as a kind of ‘spontaneous’ philosophy that most individuals engage in. Human beings are rational and moral beings and so engage in such ‘spontaneous’ philosophy every day. As an intellectual discipline concerning the framing of arguments and definition of terms, philosophy goes much further than this. Nevertheless, rather than remain in academic abstraction as the province of the professional philosophers, philosophy, in the essentialist tradition, must be drawn back into the everyday habitus of human beings. In pointing to the common moral reason that each and all possess by virtue of their humanity, Kant is able to go beyond Plato’s conception of the philosopher-ruler. In true Socratic fashion, there is no pretence at attempting to teach moral reason to individuals from outside their own reason, in the role of a philosopher. Any change in behaviour derives from the common moral reason which is innate to all human beings, not from some abstracted rationality which the philosopher imparts to human beings from the outside. The role of the philosopher is not to rule the people, but to goad the people into using their reason. In this way, Kant democratises Plato’s philosopher-ruler with the idea that philosophy should rule come to rule. Kant, the epitome of the professional philosopher, thus undercuts claims to the superiority of theoretical reason, showing human beings how little they need with respect to theory if they just rely on their common moral reason. (KGS XXIV, pp. 212,330.) Kant’s Socratic spur to human self-knowledge is also a legislating of the difference between wisdom about ends which arises from common moral reason, and theoretical knowledge or science. (KGS XVIII, Reflection 4902).
In fine, the essentialist tradition therefore affirms what Kant called the common moral reason innate to human beings, not some abstracted rationality given to human beings by professional, academic philosophers. (see Peter Critchley The Socratism of Immanuel Kant, Praxisphilosophie.de, 2012).

It is the essentialist assumption of a common moral reason on the part of each and all that the hope of realising the “ought to be” and thereby making the world philosophical rests. It is in the assumption of a rational capacity on the part of all human beings as members of the species *homo sapiens* that allows us to democratise Plato’s ‘Philosopher-Ruler’ so that philosophy should rule through all men and women becoming philosophers. In becoming philosophers, human beings make the world philosophical.

It was in this vein that Gramsci defined the fundamental question of politics:

‘Is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary?’ (Gramsci 1971:144).

Such a notion recalls Aristotle’s definition of the citizen as one who rules and is ruled in turn.

The realisation of the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful constitutes the unity of what “ought to be” and what “is” as the ‘most real’, the *ens realissimum*. Every philosophical system worthy of the name throughout history has been predicated on this assumption. Against the world of the shadows, the world of Becoming, Plato opposed the world of ideas, the world of Being; Aristotle opposed pure form to matter; for Spinoza, the substance is the most real, with every individual existence being merely an extension of it; against the empirical world of the ‘will of all’, as the will of selfish individuals, Rousseau opposed the ‘general will’ as the true human will; Kant contrasted *homo phenomenon*, a world of empirical necessity, with *homo noumenon*, a world of moral goodness; Hegel
opposes reason as the consciousness of freedom to an unconscious humanity; Marx opposes truly human society of realised human beings to alienated humanity; in History and Class Consciousness, Lukacs distinguished empirical consciousness with imputed consciousness.

All of these examples contrast an empirical world of appearances and discrete, accidental events and subjective wishes with the essential reality we must access if we are to be free. The "ought to be" is therefore the rational capacity of human beings coming to confront a given, immediate existence with an appreciation of what is most real. There is a gap between "is" and "ought to be" and it is in this gap that philosophy works. Not only is what "is" criticised by what "ought to be", it is constituted by it, only to be dissolved by it. That is, what "is" becomes inessential when what "ought to be" reveals what is essential. Shakespeare's Hamlet expresses this creative role of reason in realising the truly real: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." (Hamlet act II, scene 2).

Whilst philosophy works in the gap between the "is" and the "ought to be", philosophy and reality do not stand in external relationship to each other; each requires the other to exist. Philosophy articulates ultimate reality by way of reason. Ultimate reality is true reality, the most real. But at the level of philosophy, something is true to the extent that every thinking person can recognise it to be true according to the use of their own innate reason. Kant's motto of the enlightenment encapsulates this view - "Sapere aude", meaning 'Have the courage to use your own reason! Dare to be rational! Dare to be wise! Dare to be a philosopher (Kant Political Writings Reiss ed 1996:54).

Philosophy's function is, with the, help of rational thought, to induce human beings to use their reason so as to recognise what "ought to be" — that true, good and beautiful which philosophy already knows as the ultimate reality. This is to expose the inessentiality of what merely "is" in light of essence. Marsilio Ficino writes of 'the ascent of the mind from the lower regions to the highest, and from darkness to light.' (Marsilio Ficino 1433-1499 Letters). This ascent is the core of the philosophical approach to reality. The idea of a ladder leader from earth to the heavens used to be familiar. It can be found all over the medieval world, in Jewish and Christian thought, also in Averroes and Avicenna. It means no more than the use of reason gives us access to higher truths, truths beyond the senses and
beyond the empirical world of accident and necessity. We no longer live in philosophical times. Here we reap the whirlwind of Derrida and post-modernism. We live on the surface and mistake appearance for the one and only reality. To think of a truth that is somewhere beyond the veil of illusion is to be guilty of ‘totalitarianism’ in some form or other.

Plato’s philosopher-ruler is forever wheeled out here by people who have clearly never bothered to read or understand the Republic let alone Plato’s other works. The Republic was not a political blueprint, despite critics constantly arguing as though it was; it was an elaboration of philosophical principles. Rather than do the difficult thing and actually engage in philosophical argument, Plato is condemned by the simplest of reasoning by association. Plato argued for a philosopher-ruler, such an idea is undemocratic, therefore Plato and the thinking he inspired is totalitarian. Caricature that might be, but it’s what passes for thinking in these superficial times. We are losing the ability to think deeply.

The looming ecological catastrophe is taking us beyond our specialisms, beyond even the realm of cognition. We need to recover teleology. We need to reject the bogus forms that teleology has assumed in coming to be attached to alien powers and system imperatives; we need to reclaim those purposes which are central to the realisation of natural essences. This requires a philosophical anthropology in which reason is equipped with a moral component. We are being pulled into a destiny not of our own election, that bears no relation to our essential being. Reclaiming our future requires that we have the courage to look deeply into human nature with a view to bringing about that society which corresponds with the human essence. And that means having the epistemic guts to shake off intellectual slumbers and do some hard thinking on deep issues, regardless of which favoured nostrums are upset. For far too long the world of words has wallowed in mental torpor and timidity. The mere mention of a reason that is more than personal wish, selfish desire or subjective opinion is condemned as elitist and totalitarian and anti-democratic. A time of social and ecological crisis is the time for intellectual realignment. The big ideas are out there. They have always been out there. It’s just that, clinging to surface level appearances, people have stopped thinking big. Time and again before the ascent into the light of essence, people retreat. So I make no apologies for recovering the thought of Plato and Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Marx. My purpose is to recover the
richness in essentialist thinking that the modern mechanistic world has discarded. This recovery of a genuine metaphysics is crucial if, at long last, we are to address the ecological crisis with the moral and philosophical depth it requires.

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2 THE DIALECTICS OF PROGRESS

To continue to believe in progress seems to be an act of blind faith today. To economic depression we can add a psychological depression, a loss of hope in the future and in ourselves. The further we go into the twenty first century, the more pessimistic people seem to be becoming. Pollyanna-ish predictions of a restoration of economic growth are not persuasive. Magazines like *The Economist* point to the facts that living standards are higher for more people the world over. They are right. The question is why we refuse to believe it. The price of progress has been a great insecurity that constantly unsettles human *being* and denies a moral sense of place and identity. All the economic growth in the world is incapable of filling the hollowness at the heart of the human condition in a disenchanted, rationalised, commodified world.

And at all times, the looming ecological catastrophe casts a giant shadow. The shadow of death hangs over us all. Those of a more theological persuasion would refer to the mark of Cain, here. But is seems much more than this. The sin of brother murdering brother has been magnified by our technology. Rosa Luxemburg gave us the choice ‘socialism or barbarism’. If we fail to use our powers constructively, we will use them destructively. Means of production come to be turned into means of destruction. Instead of socialism, a social production for social need, we have the military-industrial complex, a protective apparatus perpetuating capital’s objective, ‘unsocial’ socialisation. The capital system does not automatically maximize human happiness and economic efficiency, as a belief in Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ maintains. Rather, it socializes the world in an unsocial way. In making the distinction between capital’s unsocial socialisation and a genuine socialisation, Michael Harrington argues that ‘socialism … is the hope for human freedom and justice under the unprecedented conditions of life that humanity will face in the twenty-first century.’ (Harrington 1993 ch 1).

That’s a variation of the socialism or barbarism thesis, and it can only be defended on the basis of an essentialist metaphysics. I shall develop the essentialist position at length later in the book. For the moment, I shall introduce the terms of the debate, highlighting essentialist categories and
modes of reasoning.) Socialism is the creative realisation of the inherent potentiality of the capitalist social organism. Through creative human agency, the unsocial, objective socialisation of the capital system is thus to be actualised as a social socialisation.

But there are people who think that such an argument is not politics but faith. It evinces an unwarranted belief in ‘progress’. I shall come to John Grey and ‘the delusions of progress’ later. Again, I shall argue that an essentialist metaphysics allows us to separate necessary and realisable lines of future development – a progress grounded in realities – from projections that are no more than fantasies. Lacking an awareness of necessary lines based on natural essences, we become prisoners of the narrow horizon of surface level appearances. On this level, it is easy to be overimpressed and overwhelmed by discrete facts.

The facts are indeed gloomy. The frustration of socialist expectations turned the twentieth century into a charnel house.

The Charnel House 1945 Picasso

Well over one hundred million human beings were killed in the twentieth century, whether directly by being shot, bombed, starved, or gassed during war, or indirectly by the famine and disease that follow in the trail of organised war. And was is an organised
killing. Figures like this are not achieved by accident, they are a matter of conscious purpose, deliberate decision, planning and preparation. A world that has been brainwashed into repeating that socialism is an impossible utopia that is beyond technical, financial and institutional reach accepts unthinkingly a $1.7 trillion global arms budget and killing on a mass scale. The modern world is characterized by technology, war, military power and death. The near total silence about possibilities for socialism is as deafening as the endless talk about war. We are in the world of human sacrifice, the price that human beings have to pay for their veneration of the new idols of state, capital, money and technology.

In 1906, in *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, Edward Westermarck wrote optimistically:

"We find that various peoples who at a certain period have been addicted to the practice of human sacrifice, have afterwards at a more advanced stage of civilization voluntarily given it up. . . . With the growth of enlightenment men would lose faith in this childish method of substitution, and consequently find it not only useless but objectionable; and any sentimental disinclination to the practice would by itself, in the course of time, lead to the belief that the deity no longer cares for it, or is averse to it."

Westermarck p. 468

Anthropologists thus saw human sacrifice as a sinister but passing vice which would come to be discarded in the name of progress. We can now see the fallacy of this view. With ‘progress’, human sacrifice has taken another form, a more indirect bribe offered to the new gods. What is different is the loss of the direct psychological link between priest and sacrificial victim, the meaning that sacrifice once conveyed. In the past, human sacrifice was a staging post on the road toward renewal in life. Modern sacrifice is wholly without such meaning.

In *Human Sacrifice In History and Today* (1981), Nigel Davies argues that today, ‘people can still be mentally programmed to kill themselves en masse.’ And kill each other. Davies looks at the numbers of deaths and argues that the mass killings of the modern world are a form of human sacrifice that has lost its purpose.
and is out of control. He is being provocative when he asks: ‘faced with the mass brutality of our century, real as well as simulated, one may ask whether, in its place, man might not do better to revert to the ritualized killings of the past.’ He writes of sacrificial victims in the past dying with dignity for the common good. The sacrifice was controlled. Modern sacrifice is excessive, a psychological excess as well as a physical excess. ‘If violence is endemic, sacrificial violence is at least a more restrained form… At the root of human sacrifice lay a belief in a hereafter that was not unlike life on earth. Even where victims were not slain with the precise end of serving their master in the next world, they never doubted the future blessings in store for them.’ Davies points out the hopeless character of modern mass killing as a form of sacrifice.

In almost all cultures but our own the living and the dead belonged to one single community, and death did not signify separation from a man's loved ones. Only in the world of today has death been demythologized. It has become a separate state, divorced from life, and we strive obsessively to save the dying from crossing this great divide. Once people share the belief that this life is the be-all and end-all of their existence, ritual sacrifice must abate, regardless of what other forms of killing take its place. In this respect, the modern ideologies differ absolutely from the old religions. However elusive their new promise of paradise, its gates are to be sought in this world, not the next. If modern dogmas also claim their victims, they die without hope and their end is not sacrificial.

Davies 1981: 289

The word ‘religion’ derives from the Latin religere, meaning to bind together. The rationalised, disenchanted world of capitalist modernity is said to be secularised, a world beyond such religion. Traditional society catered for both material and spiritual needs, seeing religious rituals as a vital uniting force in the community. Human sacrifice was an integral part of the human striving to live in harmony with the cosmos. That cosmic need is a permanent feature of the human condition. The problem is that the disenchantment of the world has enclosed human beings within the physical, temporal sphere. There is no meaning beyond this world. But that doesn’t mean that secularisation is irreligious. Instead, the cosmic striving has
come to be invested in things, the new gods of state, bureaucracy, capital, money, commodities, technology. These all come with imperatives of their own. These are the gods that human beings need to bribe or propitiate; and these gods demand an endless human sacrifice. With the death of God, a whole range of theological assumptions and religious impulses lose their moorings, and come to be attached to objective powers, ‘things’; systemic imperatives and objectives come to acquire the force of necessary belief; human beings come to obey ends which are external to them. The full extent of this overwhelming power can be measured in the tens of millions of human beings killed in the twentieth century. Instead of the realisation of the *telos* of human social nature, we have had the veneration of alien powers, modern idols demanding human sacrifice. When asked to describe the twentieth century, Rene Dumont (agronomist, ecologist) said: ‘I see it only as a century of massacres and wars.’ Well, neither wars nor massacres are modern inventions. What is distinctive about the modern world is the scale and intensity with which mass murder has been waged. When Picasso saw the Palaeolithic art in the caves at Lascaux he remarked ‘We have invented nothing. We have made no progress in culture, although we have invented organized war on a massive scale’.

There will be no progress until human beings start to live in cosmic harmony, and that means recovering a sense of cohesion in our modern disenchanted and fragmented society. It means recovering a genuine sense of *religere*, a binding together of human beings in society and of society with nature.
Picasso ranges the forces of death against the forces of life. I find it significant that Picasso ranges technologically sophisticated, tooled and armoured men in a flat landscape against peaceful women and children, set against a natural backdrop. It sets the dualism of nature and civilisation at extremes, certainly, but this has the merit of expressing the issue with a force and vigour that cannot be overlooked. In calling for balance in the use of our technology, we are presuming that balance is achievable. But what if our technological overdevelopment is driven by an urge to escape nature in the first place? What if the triumph of thanatos over eros is part of an ineliminable psychosexual conflict between feminine and masculine nature? If so, the human species is forever sailing precariously between the twin reefs of immanence and transcendence. I would compare the dilemma to the labours of Sisyphus, the human species has to strive ever onwards and upwards in order to avoid being crushed on the ground. The only problem is that there is no end point, nothing at journey’s end. The human species seems doomed to be forever going up and down, yet round and round within nature’s circularity. I get the impression that we are beginning to the attempt to escape from nature as futile, but rather than abandon the climb to nowhere, there is one last throw of technology against nature.

To those who die as a result of war and conflict, famine, disease and poverty, Doomsday comes every day in the modern world. Organised killing on a vast scale is a singular achievement of modernity.

‘Ten million people died in the First World War, with the indecisive battle of Verdun alone costing 700,000 casualties and the Somme a million. The Turks massacred nearly a million Armenians. In the early 1930s the building of socialism in the Soviet Union involved the death of perhaps 10 million peasants; as many as another 10 million died during the Purges, mostly in forced labour camps. The Second World War in Europe killed more than 40 million, including 6 million Jews, The Asian Second World War killed perhaps 20 million in the twenty years from the Japanese invasion of China through to the victory of the Chinese Revolution.’ (Based on Elliot, The Twentieth Century Book of the Dead, 1972).

The First World War marks a turning point in human history. We had seen mechanised wars in the nineteenth century, in Crimea and in the American Civil War. But the First World War was the war of machines without purpose. All sides
subscribed to the war as a noble and heroic cause, and many poets and artists in all countries – Brooke in England, Marc and the Expressionists, the Futurists in Italy – succumbed to the delusion. In no time, the war reduced to a purposeless machine grinding out mass death with relentless, uncontrollable regularity. For four years, six thousand soldiers a day were killed. In the aftermath we got the battle between Communism and Fascism/Nazism, in turn followed by the Cold War. Purposeless mass killing thus gained an ideological that added some kind of much needed meaning to an utterly meaningless machine war. The foundations of mass military attrition were laid in the First World War, with the ideological dimension that came later bringing a mass civilian attrition.

Achieving mass death on this scale is not accidental but requires political, institutional, psychological and technical preparation. Bertrand Russell was clear what was at stake, arguing that the era of Enlightenment and Progress came to an end in 1914. The First World War began the process of brutalization that would come to make mass murder thinkable and hence possible.

In 1914, Russell contemplated whether humankind was hopelessly addicted to violence and self-destruction. His considered view was that whether the world would become heaven or hell depended upon human choice. (Has Man a Future?) Those who seek to evade the question entertain the view that life may well carry on as now, some sub-paradisaical, but also sub-infernal. In this complacent view, humankind carries on disliking its existence under the shadow of nuclear holocaust, but coming to accept risks and diminish anxieties and thus reduce the dangers of catastrophe. That sounds like a permanent dis-ease to me, with all manner of psychological consequences. And catastrophe has now taken the form of an unavoidable ecological crisis. Whether or not a nuclear holocaust is avoidable, an eco-catastrophe as a result of the irresponsible use of human technology cannot be avoided. Russell’s point with respect to human choice remains valid. To fail to exercise choice is to make a choice by default, it is to choose the status quo and its death dealing beliefs and practices.

We are still living in the maelstrom unleashed by the First World War. Rather than being the war to end all wars, the 1914-18 set the model for the technical and
organizational commitment to mass killing that came in the century after. Organised mass murder presupposes a mindset of total warfare, a brutalised population which accepts the need to kill in order to ‘save’ itself. The preparation continues to this day, as the techniques of total war are brought to perfection. We seem permanently placed on the edge of oblivion. The many Doomsdays that people suffer along the way make the singly Doomsday all the more comprehensible.

The ‘scale of man-made death is the central moral as well as material fact of our time,’ Gil Elliot writes in *The Twentieth Century Book of the Dead* (1972: 6). The capital system is the world of the dead. Marx wrote of capital as ‘dead labour’, meaning the creative power of labour taking alien, objectified form. Sociologist Max Weber argued that the ‘iron cage’ of modernity will determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into it with irresistible force ‘until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.’ (Weber 1985: 181). Fossil fuels are ancient wastes with Mother Nature in her wisdom has sealed up beneath her skin. The capital system is fuelled by dead labour and dead matter. This is not progress as an organic growth, it is a necropolis.

The ancient cosmogony would cater for matter and spirit, life and death, this world and the next. A disenchanted world collapses all of this into a single flatland. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that we have created a veritable world of the dead that dwarfs the world of the living in size and significance. Frustrated expectations are diverted into the world of the dead. The meaning we once saw in life is now sought in death, the hopes for a better future, a better life, are made conditional upon sufficient sacrifice, in quantity and quality. The faith that it is possible for human beings to come to create and dwell in the peaceable land is more and more difficult to hold. A hundred years war waged against socialism had the result of channelling revolutionary hopes into a defensive, limited, distorted politics, the terrain coming to be dominated by world war, Fascism, Nazism, Communism, the Cold War. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this struggle, it was the rational hope for a better life that was deliberately and systematically subjected to assault. The continual defeat of hopes has the effect of sapping energy, undermining commitment and encouraging cynicism and despair. If the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, why have those intentions in the first place? Socialism or barbarism, Luxemburg argued. But what if Stalinism turned socialism into barbarism? What hopes can we have in the aftermath of the defeat of socialist hopes?
A great deal that has been humanly positive in the modern age seems inseparable from its own negative side. Progress seems to be accompanied by regress, achievements being offset by crises. In these circumstances it is relatively easy to become lost and confused in the thicket of accident. It is easy to succumb to pessimism. There are plenty of reasons for pessimism. But that reveals the limitations of atomism and empiricism, to become overimpressed by the world of accidental events and to fail to see the bigger picture. Marx’s essentialism involves an organic dialectics that can see alienation as a progressive force.

There is one great fact, characteristic of this our nineteenth century, a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman empire. In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving-and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. This antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand; this antagonism between the productive powers and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted. Some parties may wail over it; others may wish to get rid of modern arts, in order to get rid of modern conflicts. Or they may imagine that so signal a progress in industry wants to be completed by as signal a regress in politics. On our part, we do not mistake the shape of the shrewd spirit that continues to mark all these contradictions. We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by new-fangled men - and such are the working men. (Marx AB SE 1973).

In other words, it is fairly easy to spot the downside of progress. But to conclude from this that progress is a delusion not only betrays a superficial
metaphysics, it is to miss the potentialities for progress that are available. Marx is well aware of the extent to which, in an alienated system of production, human beings come to invest material things with an existential significance. As a result of such alienation, all our invention and progress end up stultifying human life into a material force. This condition is revocable. Marx took the high road beyond capitalist modernity, seeing alienation as a progress force, a condition that could be redeemed by the practical reappropriation of human power. Others are overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis and sound the retreat.

To ask about progress is a pertinent question given the extent to which it seems that modernity has come to the end of a historic phase of intense industrial expansion, and yet the problems that economic growth were supposed to have solved have become all the more pressing, war, famine, poverty. Even worse, we are now seeing the costs of such growth in the shape of the fundamental ecological limits which are increasingly encroaching on modern society. It has become imperative to redefine 'the good life', moving away from the emphasis upon quantity and possession towards a more qualitative experience. As the century is unfolding, the false hope that has been invested in the expectations of an ever-expanding economy is becoming manifest.

But none of this offers a reason for abandoning progress as a delusion. What is required is a disillusionment with respect to the dominant conceptions which see economic expansion, industrialisation, military might etc as itself the march of human progress. That is to mistake the objective preconditions for progress for the real thing, the means for the ends.

But pessimism with regards to progress has been around for a while. Spengler and Toynbee wrote about modernity in terms of the decline of civilisation. Whilst this could look like a reactionary rejection of progress, thinkers of more left wing persuasions have also expressed pessimism. There was a cultural pessimism at the core of much of the writing of the Frankfurt School, in notions of the 'administered
society’ (Adorno and Horkheimer) and the ‘one dimensional society’ (Marcuse). Back in the 1970s, Robert Heilbroner, a writer in the marxist tradition, wrote *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (1974). His view was that basic transformations in the modern world were creating a bleak prospect for the long term good.

Perhaps, in one sense, thinkers were at last starting to think deeply about human agency, at last taking morality seriously in terms of its centrality to human freedom and choice. The idea that progress is uni-linear always risked undermining morality, with human beings transferring responsibility for the good life from their own agency to economic expansion. A moral position affirms the radical indeterminacy of the future. We can explain past events with a view to understanding the present, but we are ourselves called upon to make the future. Only then can we ensure that progress ensues with a human face. So, a certain disillusionment with progress is a condition of investing the historical process with moral meaning.

Certainly, there have always been profound critics of the modern world, those who could see no basis for progress at all in those ‘dark satanic mills’. But what distinguishes the marxist tradition from the likes of Blake, Baudelaire, and Balzac, from Tolstoy, from the Symbolist poets and Spengler and Nietzsche, is the ability to identify the redemptive qualities of the capitalist system. Capital shows the scale of human power in alien form; the solution to the modern crisis is the reclamation of that power. More easily said than done, Max Weber argued. The modern institutional machinery possesses an inexorable force that is beyond the intentions and wills of human agents, Weber argued. Instead of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ sought by the socialists, we would get the ‘dictatorship of the officials’. History seems to have proven Weber right on this point. But, to repeat the point about the radical indeterminacy of the future, it remains within our moral power to prove otherwise. A pessimistic belief in an inevitable regress is just as much a delusion as a naïve optimism in an inevitable progress. It’s the same disempowering mentality, they are merely two sides of the same coin of determinism.

Since Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there has been increasing uncertainty and foreboding with respect to the future. In 1980, Robert
Nisbet wrote pessimistically with respect to the idea of progress: 'Disbelief, doubt, disillusionment and despair have taken over, or so it would seem from our literature, art, philosophy, theology, even our scholarship and science.' (Nisbet, 1980: 318)
For Nisbett, the modern world is 'almost barren of faith in progress'. (Nisbet 1980: 353)

It is significant that this doubt has not brought about a change in the prevailing social and characterological structures. Modern identities and psychologies remain organized around a belief in progress. This is generating a painful bifurcation in the modern psyche. Doubt is becoming pervasive, yet the dominant faith in progress remains unchallenged and unaltered. Modern society remains firmly committed to the old assumptions of progress through economic growth, technological innovation and scientific advance. For all of the evidence of regress, we are unable to shed this faith in progress through ‘things’. This conception of progress structures our identities and perceptions. To abandon them would cause an existential crisis. We lack a compelling alternative vision. The problem is that such distorted lenses render it well nigh impossible to entertain appropriate visions of the present.

Can we find a reason to sustain a belief in progress? Only by recognising that progress is not a given, it is not written into the historical process and it is not an inevitable consequence of human action. As A. O. Lovejoy argues, the hope invested in the idea of progress is based on 'a tendency inherent in nature or man to pass through a regular sequence of stages of development in the past, the present and the future, the latter stages being—with perhaps occasional retardations or regressions—superior to the earlier.'

Nisbet defines ‘superior’ in terms of an improvement in knowledge and in ‘man’s moral or spiritual condition on earth, his happiness, his freedom from torments of nature and society, and above all his serenity or tranquility.’ That’s progress as something more than an accumulation or expansion of material things. Yet, modern society is organised entirely around such material enlargement, the belief that industrialization and modernization as such automatically lead to a better life. The growth of the industrial system and the development of human powers are understood to be concomitant.
Ernst Bloch defines a qualitatively different kind of progress. 'Once man has comprehended himself and has established his own domain in real democracy, without depersonalization and alienation, something arises in the world which all men have glimpsed in childhood: a place and a state in which no one has yet been. And the name of this something is home or homeland.'

An argument like this is easily dismissed as utopian. The philosopher Immanuel Kant could defend such a view in terms of the moral freedom of human beings.

This perfect state may never, indeed, come into being; none the less this does not affect the rightfulness of the idea, which, in order to bring the legal organisation of mankind ever nearer to its greatest possible perfection, advances this maximum as an archetype. For what the highest degree may be at which mankind may have to come to a stand, and how great a gulf may still have to be left between the idea and its realisation, are questions which no one can, or ought to, answer. For the issue depends on freedom; and it is in the power of freedom to pass beyond any and every specified limit.

Kant CPuR 1965

Such a view affirms the radical indeterminacy of the future, highlighting the moral praxis of human beings in pursuit of an ideal as the object of their willing.

My argument is that a belief in progress goes beyond the accidental world of the surface and sees a deeper meaning and linkage in the apparently discrete events of the present. An essentialist position sees beyond events, both positive and negative, identifies lines of development and thereby reveals a path for action towards the realisation of future goals. As such, Marx’s essentialism absorbs the dialectics of progress contained in an earlier teleology expressing the human longing for the good life, and reveals this alternative to be a realistic tendency unfolding within the immanent potentialities of the present. In Marx’s hands, the age old human longings became an emancipatory project to be struggled for in this world, not
postponed to the next. I shall come later to assess John Gray’s view that such thinking represents a secular myth of progress taken over from religious eschatology. Such a view is plausible in general outline but breaks down under analysis.

But there is a plausibility in John Gray’s view. To question ‘progress’ is to express the crisis of the modern world and to highlight the increasing inability of the modern world to point the way to progress as the twenty first century unfolds. To doubt the existence of progress in theory presumes its absence in practice. Nevertheless, the increasingly pervasive scepticism with respect to progress has yet to transform the old identities. People are clinging on to the failing gods out of existential faith, and no more.

A dialectics of progress must be able to separate positive directions from negative directions, placing the discrete events of the present within an essentialist framework which comprehends them as a whole and is therefore capable of identifying alternative paths of development. A dialectics of progress, therefore, is capable of identifying necessary lines of development leading beyond the present, in the process exploring the meaning and capacity of creative human agency. And that includes taking morality seriously.

It isn’t surprising that philosophers and thinkers are asking whether there is reason to believe in progress anymore. This questioning of the central belief system of modernity implies that there is something awry within the modern project. Evidence for that view is not difficult to find. The progressive assumptions of capitalist modernity are crumbling. But a failure to make fine distinctions here can lead to perfectly possible and feasible forms of progress coming to be discarded with unwarranted assumptions. The question is how we can reconstruct progress on defensible philosophical and psychological foundations.

Progress is not, ultimately, a belief, it is a practice. Progress depends upon human agency, combing objective condition and subjective expectation: action firmly grounded in the real potentialities of essential organisms. The problem with the modern world is that it has lost the essential appreciation of immanent potentialities which was central to Marx’s understanding. Of course, progress detached from essence becomes delusional. For Marx, progress always depends on human agency within social relations. Whilst human beings may continually
project a field of images, dreams, desires, reality is a field of materialist immanence in which the essential conditions for realizing ideals are decisive.

The purpose of this book is to expose the death-dealing delusions of progress as a bogus teleology attached to alien powers. With disillusionment we can begin to construct an alternative progress founded upon an essentialist metaphysics. Confined to surface level appearance and events, we cannot help but find the likes of John Gray plausible as a witness of catastrophe. There does indeed seem to be little point to the attempt to return the world to its normal categories. My point is that the modern catastrophe is morally, politically, emotionally and intellectually too much to grasp within an atomist and empiricist metaphysics. Gray flounders without the essentialist categories, he can find no meaning in the world as he wrestles with it in his own little corner.

We should not allow ourselves to be derailed by a faulty metaphysics. Atomism and empiricism give a misleading impression of the whole from the perspective of a particular time and place. The world is always more than a series of discrete facts.

To question progress is most appropriate, however. Humanity is caught up in the ruins of a dominant conception of progress without knowing it; dominated by past hopes which have failed, yet unable to pull clear by taking an alternative path. Unable to make connections between events and facts, humanity is unable to identify a path leading beyond the failing present. Rather than retreat in the face of the destruction of hopes, it makes more sense to examine the ruins and try to understand why these events happened, make the necessary connections, penetrate to underlying structures, relations and dynamics so as to distinguish emancipatory lines from dead-ends, and thus be wiser about which paths to pursue and which to avoid. Those who fail to do this have no option but to turn back. But that’s a road that leads to nowhere.

To question progress means to avoid a cosmic pessimism in which an event is merely one more fact in a series of facts through which we make our way blindly, without meaning, without hope. It is to trace events to human agency. It is to see both good and bad as a human praxis, to see whatever happens in history as the more or less conscious, deliberate project of human individuals within various kinds of collectivities.
Unravelling the dialectics of progress means identifying the social structures, contexts and dynamics out of which human beings act. To ask what kinds of social relations, dynamics and contradictions produce death and destruction is also to ask what relationships and contexts are the conditions of the flourishing life. To point to evidence for the former in the shape of the events of the past hundred years or more is the easy task. To point to events in support of the contrary position – the rising living standards for larger numbers of the world’s population – is also inadequate. This is to remain within an atomistic metaphysics which lacks an essential grounding for progress. This is to be permanently perplexed by a condition that seems to be forever split between progress and catastrophe. Reality is more than a field of possibilities and the future is more than the projection of possibilities. To argue for reality as a field of materialist immanence is to argue that the good society is more than one possibility, on the same level as the bad society of death and destruction, but is the necessary society, necessary, that is, in the sense that this is what is required if an essence is to realise its inherent potentiality and flourish in actuality.

Without that essentialism, we remain trapped within that feeling that every positive possibility, every possibility for progress, seems to be accompanied by a contrary. The more we progress, the more we are brought closer to the abyss. I return here to Marx’s passage concerning the new-fangled productive forces requiring new fangled men and women to liberate their potentialities for the good. It is in precisely this essentialist sense that Rosa Luxemburg set out humanity’s future in terms of the alternate paths of socialism or barbarism. Socialism is the necessary society if we are to avoid regress, a technically sophisticated and efficiently organised regress, but a regress all the same. Marx, in the footsteps of Hegel, articulated progress in the most sophisticated and nuanced terms, one which recognised alienation and contradictory dynamics as a spring of advancement. This is to see the negative as a source of the attainment of the positive. It should be emphasised that for Marx, these necessary lines of development are not inevitable, but frustratable.

There has been a systematic war waged against socialism in defence of a capital system. All the effort that should have gone into the realisation of the social essence has gone into its frustration. It should come as no surprise then, when there has been a deliberate attempt to frustrate progressive forces, that progress should seem beyond our grasp. History shows social reality to be more petrified and more alienated than Marx
imagined. There is an inertia in institutions and in psychologies that Marx underestimated. Alienation is itself a praxis, and it draws everyone into an habitual cycle. But Marx’s point concerning revolutionary-critical praxis remains. Alienation is a revocable condition. What we are dealing with here is not a failure of essentialism but a failure to accent the subjective factor as the creative element in realizing necessary lines of development – developing political, moral, organisational and psychological capacities so as to bring about the good society.

The End of Progress

"But in contemplating history as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed, a question necessarily arises: To what principle, to what final purpose, have these monstrous sacrifices been offered?‘Hegel’s answer is Progress:

‘The events which make up this picture of gloomy emotion and thoughtful reflection are only the means for realizing the essential destiny, the absolute and final purpose, or, what amounts to the same thing, the true result of world history.’

The easiest thing to write here is that war and violence and organised murder has ended progress. But that would be to remain firmly within an atomistic conception that sees only a meaningless succession of events. There is nothing new about war and disorder. The axial religions were born in an era cruelty and violence, as any cursory reading of the Bible will show. However dramatic, however destructive, such events leave the fundamental *telos* of things unchanged, unfulfilled, certainly, but unaltered in themselves. War, crisis, disaster, the nuclear bomb, ecological destruction certainly put human beings in the moral spotlight. We are no longer allowed to have faith in a transcendent law that saves us independently of our own moral effort. That kind of teleology can no longer be sustained. ‘Progress’ in this form was a form of secular religion, a convenient faith for those who had abandoned God but not the theological assumptions which supported a belief in God.
When written in capital letters, ‘Progress’ denotes the operation of vast impersonal forces changing the world above and beyond human thoughts and actions. It makes no difference whether these forces are natural (biological necessity) or divine (Providence) or human (alienation) in origin, they represent a force which is independent of conscious human control and moral responsibility. This is a bad teleology, one that proceeds without regard to human moral freedom and choice and action. Such teleology drags humanity in its wake, with the promise that suffering is an involuntary sacrifice that will nevertheless be redeemed in the better world to come. To those sacrificed in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, there is no consolation in the supposed redemption that was achieved in the twentieth century, war and extermination is no reward for past sacrifices. And those living in the twenty first century are still being called upon to make sacrifices. The process never ends, it is endless, it lacks purpose, it is a false teleology. It is a false form of sacrifice.

This is ‘Progress’ as an anonymous force, something detached from natural essences and human agency and becoming a reification. This is ‘Progress’ hypostatised in being raised above realities. Essentialism grounds progress upon natural essences, society as a social organism, human beings as social beings. ‘History’, Marx wrote, does nothing. It is human beings who act. And ‘Progress’ is nothing if it is not the realisation of essential potentialities. To sacrifice human beings in the cause of some anonymous history is not progress in essentialist terms, it is the denial of progress. When he simplified, Marx occasionally gave the impression that alienation is a sacrifice inevitably leading to progress. Marx is actually working with the essential category of necessity, which is not an inevitability. Marx’s position is that alienation is a progressive force to the extent that it reveals human powers in an externalised form. These powers need to be, and can be, reclaimed and given fully human form. Alienation is a condition which is to be abolished (Aufhebung), that is, positively transcended (as a realisation of an essence). Rather than remain within the sphere of alienation, the positive human path must be taken by means of human choice and agency.

Events associated with war, violence, economic crisis, misapplication of technology, eco-catastrophe do not demand that we abandon progress as such, only that we identify and abandon the illusions which accompany a certain assertion of progress — illusions in which military expansion, state power, economic growth are made the single
and permanent tendency, projecting imperatives and necessities which are independent of actual human beings. An essentialist metaphysics is based upon categories such as law, necessity, lines of development, but these proceed on the basis of a purpose inherent to an essence. This essentialism is the condition of an end to illusion; it reinstates realities as against transcendental fantasies. We need to abandon projections out of and beyond natural essences and instead ground transcendence in those essences.

A defensible conception of progress is possible if it is grounded not in reified concepts and passive hopes, but in what Marx called ‘concrete reality’, creative human agency within specific social relations.

Marx, with his critical understanding of alienation, never fell for the delusions of progress. His various critiques were all designed to identify the reasons behind unreason.

Reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form. Hence the critic can take his cue from every existing form of theoretical and practical consciousness and from this ideal and final goal implicit in the actual forms of existing reality he can deduce a true reality. Now as far as real life is concerned, it is precisely the political state which contains the postulates of reason in all its modern forms, even where it has not been the conscious repository of socialist requirements. But it does not stop there. It consistently assumes that reason has been realized and just as consistently it becomes embroiled at every point in a conflict between its ideal vocation and its actually existing premises. (Marx EW Letters 1975: 208/9).

Reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form. Progress is a highly nuanced concept in Marx. Capital is an unsocial socialisation; Marx demands its realisation as a genuine socialisation. Modernity is an unreasonable rationalisation; Marx demands a genuine rationalisation. And this realisation is an act of political and moral agency. Marx’s argument is essentialist to the core. It is impossible to make sense of the above passage without an understanding of essentialist categories. Marx, the critic, is seeking to identify and bring to light the ideal and final goal implicit in the actual forms of existing reality; he is seeking to deduce a true reality immanent within an existing reality. Marx is seeking to expose the postulates of reason in all its modern forms, bring them to consciousness and inspire human agency in the cause of their realisation. In pointing to
a conflict between the ideal and actually existing premises, Marx is seeking to inform and inspire human agency to realise the ideal immanent within the real. The argument is essentialist to the core, identifying inherent potentialities and pointing to a line of development to be pursued beyond the present. Pursuing a goal implicit in the actual forms of existing reality is the essentialist argument in a nutshell. And Marx’s critical conception makes clear the extent that essentialism is not a passive evolution or biological determinism, but is based upon intellectual thought, moral values and political action.

What we see in the modern world is not rationality but its mockery. Much of progressive activity in the twentieth century has been delusional, murderous and mad. The intuitive good sense of people can see the madness associated with the organisation of war, arms production, nuclear power. They also see that intuition routinely ignored and overridden by the 'serious' discourse of officials and experts, people whose rational stances presume disaster as delivered by functionally minded intelligence. Such a conflict invites cynicism with respect to reason, showing the extent to which normal good sense has been drastically subverted, with fantastical constructions taking the place of the real world. In the process, human reality, and the people who live in it, comes to be systematically bent to fit a caricature of reason, a distortion that fits the distorted reality of the modern world.

Back in 1959, sociologist C Wright Mills argued that our major orientations ‘have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves’ (1970:184). He declared that 'we are now at the ending of an epoch, and we have got to work out our own answers'. (Wright Mills 1970:184). Ideas of freedom and reason, which were once inextricably connected in the Enlightenment tradition, have become ‘ambiguous’. We can no longer assume the automatic connection of reason and freedom. As Wright Mills observes, what characterises the new age is that ‘the ideas of freedom and of reason have become moot; that increased rationality may not be assumed to make for increased freedom’ (1970:185/6). Crucially, Wright Mills accents the ambiguous nature of reason. ‘The increasing rationalisation of society, the contradiction between such rationality and reason, the collapse of the assumed coincidence of reason and freedom - these developments lie back of the rise into view of the man who is ‘with’ rationality but without reason, who is increasingly rationalised and also increasingly uneasy’ (Wright Mills 1970:187).
Wright Mills is concerned with the anthropological consequences of this rationalisation. Individuals, alienated from their production and consumption, adapt themselves to a managed and manipulated world, subject themselves to a 'self-rationalisation' in which they come to systematically regulate their impulses and aspirations. 'There is then rationality without reason. Such rationality is not commensurate with freedom but the destroyer of it. It is no wonder that the ideal of individuality has become moot' (Wright Mills 1970:188/9).

But none of this is new at all. This dialectical relationship between reason and freedom is at the core of the organic dialectics of Hegel and Marx. At the root of the essentialist conception of progress is the sense of history as the contradictory realization of Reason and Freedom through human action and struggle. Marx saw a progressive unfolding from lower to higher forms of social life, history as a self-conscious undertaking leading to socialism as the realised society of realised individuals. This may be a secular hope, and it may even be a disguised religion, but it is not a delusion to the extent that progress remains tied to real purposes and real potentials. Once 'Progress' is hypostatised, detached from concrete reality, then it becomes a secular myth tied to a belief in some abstract 'Reason' at work in an anonymous history. Such a view is a caricature of Hegel and Marx.

The Drift Towards Catastrophe

Both policy and the system's drift point towards ecological catastrophe. There is a mindset of denial but also an institutional practice. It is no wonder that the governed follow the politicians and strategists into the fog. It is easier for people to dissociate themselves from this catastrophic reality, and thus suppress fears and anxieties about it, simply to meet the routine demands of everyday life. The fog of climate change denial is more than a denial of scientific facts. It is a fog of dissociation, abstraction and illusion which makes it possible to turn away from the actual terror that confronts us. Rather than respond to a threat once it has been identified, denial above, in governing institutions, encourages a psychic numbing below. In terms of instinct, fear alerts us to danger and causes us to take action and avoid harm. But when denial takes the form of rationalisation, we simply hide from real fears and put ourselves in increasing
danger. Indeed, psychic numbing is a maladaptive response that in time degenerates into sickness and madness. The systematic denial of danger encourages a condition of living within fantasies/illusions, so that more and more of the same thing will issue in a different result, that crisis can be resolved by the very things that have brought it about. We get a split between reality and representations/rationalisations of reality. We get a displacement of the concern with life and civilization to external forces like economic growth, war and conflict.

Human praxis ceases to be revolutionary and critical, understanding the world and ourselves as we transform our own reality. Instead, beyond the control and comprehension of human beings, human praxis becomes alienated and remakes the human world in its own petrified image. Max Weber wrote of ‘mechanised petrification’. (Weber 1985:181 182). And that is where we are today, unable to command the vast productive potential at our disposal. It is no surprise, then, in a condition of alien mediation and determination, that the conventional political realm is unable to question the main postulates of economic growth, despite all that we know about the deleterious impact upon the environment.

The system drives itself, with its own endless imperatives, and not surprisingly human thought and practice within its institutions becomes inertial. The system has obtained an independent of the human agents. The inertia we witness at the international climate conferences is merely the impotence of human moral choice and will in face of system needs and imperatives. Each power justifies its positions with respect to rational self-interest but, instead of a complementarity leading to a general reason, there is a self-cancellation so that the whole becomes irrational.

**Technology and Domination**

The question is what kind of social relations produces this irrationalism, and normalises it to such an extent that it becomes impossible to penetrate. Ecological catastrophe is the ultimate ‘unintended consequence’ of industrial civilization. Whereas Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ was said to produce the general good indirectly, instead we get a general bad in the form of unliveable conditions. How ironic that progress achieved through the mastery of nature is brought down by the reality of natural constraints.
Bahro refers to our 'misdirected civilization, which is aggressive in its innermost being, based on the principles of expansion and explosion.' Economic growth is about to explode the foundations of civilisation. This calls 'into question that traditional historical optimism for which the very essence of the human species points towards socialism, and not to barbarism, let alone a premature self-destruction.' It does, but that doesn’t mean it requires that optimism be abandoned, only that it is put on a firmer foundation than illusions and projections based on alienated power.

For Bahro 'it cannot be accidental that our civilization should generate a tendency towards the self-destruction of its subject as a defining trait of its most recent stage.' Bahro is thinking of exterminism with respect to nuclear power. It also applies to ecological catastrophe. Bahro sees this question of self-destruction as 'the quintessence of the whole complex of tools and machines operative on humanity and the planet.' Aggressive and destructive practices have characterised industrial capitalism from the first, exterminist practices which 'break up and destroy natural conditions, degrade energy potentials, suffocate the Earth's surface and isolate human beings from spontaneous energy cycles. The result is inevitably a distortion of both body and mind, whose consequences range from cancer to crime.'

Bahro's provocative sketch calls for a 'fundamental critique of human nature itself' and for 'a practical critique of the industrial system and its military spearhead.'

Here are the roots of the delusions of progress. And an understanding of human nature, and of nature as such, in essentialist terms forms the basis of this critique.

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The philosopher John Gray has written a number of books on the theme of the delusions of progress. I believe Gray is misguided, hence the title of this piece. I should start, however, with a few words of praise. In an age characterised by the worship of money and power, with a facile and hubristic view of the capacities of science and technology to bring about Heaven on Earth, John Gray has had the intellectual nerve and moral courage to break rank and expose something very mad and very ugly at the heart of the whole modern enterprise. Those who consider the human species to be unique, a god species, need to consider this point made by biologist E.O. Wilson. Should all the insects be wiped out overnight, life on Earth would seize up in six months; should the human species be wiped out overnight, the planet would be a paradise teeming with life. A strictly biological perspective certainly deflates human pretensions. It’s not that I agree with Gray that progress is a delusion. I certainly agree that the belief in and pursuit of progress can most definitely be delusional, and dangerously so. But human beings are inevitably anthropomorphic and cannot adopt a strictly biological perspective. That sense of human importance and dignity is natural to the species. My point is that we need to shed the delusions of the modern world and start to identify the conditions of a genuine progress, in terms of human flourishing in a form of common life, according to a conception of the common human good. There was a time when Gray entertained some such conception. Unfortunately, it has been buried within a relentless negativity that sees no meaning, no hope, no purpose to human life. That’s a dead end, whichever way we look at it.

In False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism (1998), Gray argues that free market globalization is an unstable Enlightenment project currently in the process of disintegration. But Gray’s target is not just the philosophical humanism deriving from the Enlightenment. Gray sees utopianism of all kinds as originating in religion. This is made clear in Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals (2003), and Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia (2007). For Gray, the whole notion of ‘progress’ derives from a religious millenarianism. He rejects human volition, and therefore morality, as an illusion. Progress is a mere human pretence that flatters the human self-image, the delusion that there is such a thing as the self.

The result is a ‘progress’ that is directly implicated in the assault on the planet. For Gray, though, this is not so much the destruction of the planet as the self-
destruction of the human species. Gray pulls no punches. For him, humanity is a ravenous species actively engaged in wiping out other forms of life. Gray writes that 'humans ... cannot destroy the Earth, but they can easily wreck the environment that sustains them.' (Gray 2003: 12).

That may be true. But that would amount to the denial of the human essence, not its realisation; that is, it would be a denial of a natural teleology, not its realisation. Such self-destruction issues not from a teleology of progress grounded in the human essence, but from its frustration. I shall deal with this point at length later. For now, I want to argue that some such notion of the natural human essence is entailed by an argument that Gray has advanced in the past.

Gray’s *Beyond the New Right Markets, Government and the Common Environment* (1993), contains a thoughtful article, ‘An Agenda for Green Conservatism’, which is concerned to challenge the easy identification of Green politics with a left wing politics. For Gray, concern for the integrity of the common environment, human as well as ecological, is most in harmony with the outlook of traditional conservatism. Gray cites the Burkean idea of the social contract, not as the liberal agreement among anonymous, ephemeral individuals, but as a compact between the generations of the living, the dead and those yet unborn. Ecologists are certainly concerned with the condition we leave the planet in for generations to come. Gray also cites scepticism about progress, and awareness of its ironies and illusions; resistance to untried novelty and large-scale social experiments. That would certainly apply to the permanent revolutionising of the conditions of life as a result of economic expansion.

Most important of all, however, Gray emphasises the idea that individual flourishing can occur only in the context of forms of common life. (Gray 1993: 125). That latter view is central to Aristotle and all thinking that can be classed as Aristotelian or essentialist. I make this point now because I shall be coming back to it when defining an essentialist metaphysics to found the idea of flourishing within the common life on the basis of natural essences. In my view, this essentialism offers a way out of the perils and pitfalls of progress as identified by Gray. Closer analysis reveals the real problem to be the atomistic and individualist mentality and modality deriving from the
modern scientific and industrial revolutions, not religious eschatology or essentialist teleology. The neo-liberalism and new right conservatism that Gray rejects as variants of Enlightenment humanism and religious utopianism are, in truth, examples of a false teleology and eschatology, not the real thing. It is interesting that, despite tracing the delusions of progress to religious notions of salvation, Gray still quotes the Catholic C.S. Lewis to good effect.

Man's conquest of nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. There neither is nor can be any simple increase of power on man's side. Each power won by man is a power over man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows in the triumphal car.

C.S. Lewis The Abolition of Man 1947

That view is central to Catholic social teaching and rests upon an essentialist metaphysics. The great achievement of St Thomas Aquinas was to have made Aristotle's concept of nature, designating birth, growth, decay, the basis of Christian cosmology. But Aristotelian essentialism is central to the thought of Karl Marx, too. Compare C.S. Lewis' argument above to what Marx writes: 'Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over men.'(Marx EW EPM 1975). It's the same point, and it derives from the same essentialist metaphysics.

The idea of flourishing within forms of the common life is central to the essentialist tradition. The ethic of the common good was central to the Christian middle ages. This ethic was eroded by the individualism of the modern capitalist age. This is worth emphasising, given Gray's tendency to conflate whole ideas and epochs. The delusions of liberalism and humanism stemming from the Enlightenment may well have their roots in religion, but as a distortion of those roots, hence the delusions of progress that Gray is so effective in denouncing.
Gray calls this a ‘secular liberal utopianism’ and a ‘species of rationalism’ which is based upon a faulty conception of human nature. Whilst human beings require a sphere of independent action, ‘their deepest need is a home, a network of common practices and inherited traditions that confers on them the blessing of a settled identity. Indeed, without the undergirding support of a framework of common culture, the freedom of the individual so cherished by liberalism is of little value, and will not long survive.’ (Gray 1993 ch 4).

I agree. But this entails a conception of human flourishing and well-being within a common life that is Aristotelian to the core, and which can be traced in Thomist, Hegelian and Marxist forms. As Gray acknowledges, human freedom is worthwhile and meaningful only when set within the frame of common cultural forms. That is precisely what the Catholic common good and the Hegelian Sittlichkeit, the system of the ethical life, are all about.

We can quote C.S. Lewis again here: ‘As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves.’

It is worth giving some thought to that view, because Gray is now arguing that the notion of human uniqueness and the self is a delusion and that meaning is made up. He is hell bent on reducing humanity to blind and indifferent nature. The point is, however, that so long as human beings are conscious beings, they are also social beings. As psychologist Anthony Storr argues, we need each other in order to be ourselves. Again, this is no more than a restatement of Aristotle’s essentialist view that human beings are social beings who need a public life in order to individuate themselves.

Gray is prone to advocate positions which are inconsistent and contradictory, or underdeveloped. He is most well-known for arguing the meaninglessness of existence. But that position is not consistent with his statement of a green conservatism based upon the common life. He writes: ‘We are a familial and historical species, for whom the past must have authority (that of memory) if we are to have
identity, and whose lives are in part self-created narratives, woven from the received text of the common life. Where change is incessant or pluralism too insistent, where the links between the generations are broken or the shared raiment of the common culture is in tatters, human beings will not flourish. They will wither, or else fall into anomic violence. In so far as neo-liberalism has been an ideology of radical change, whose debts are to liberal individualism rather than to traditional conservatism, it has tended to reinforce the disintegrative processes of modernist societies.’ (Gray 1993 ch 4).

I agree, for all the reasons contained in the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel and Marx. But these are not authorities that Gray can draw upon. Further, ‘authority’, ‘memory’, ‘identity’, ‘self-created narratives’, and ‘common culture’ all denote an existence that is meaningful, all accent the way that human beings create a world that is invested with meaning. Yet, drawing on the Gaia theory of James Lovelock, Gray’s critique of humanism and the Enlightenment, religion and utopianism is best known for its assertion of the meaningless of existence. (2003). Whether that view is right or wrong, it is entirely incompatible with the idea of flourishing within a common life which corresponds to the human ontology.

In what follows, I wish to set what Gray presents as a Green conservatism within an essentialist metaphysics that is able to identify the forms of the common life conducive to the co-existence of human and planetary well-being. And I want to unravel Gray’s critique of the delusions of progress so as to focus that critique on its proper targets, clearing the way for a genuine progress conceived in terms of the realisation and flourishing of essential potentials within the common life.

For Gray, the belief in meliorism at the core of humanism is inherently utopian since it ignores the fact that human beings are limited by their biological natures. Meliorism holds that it is possible to alter or improve the human condition in precisely the same manner that advances in science and technology have altered or improved living standards. (2003).

That may or may not be a valid criticism of meliorism. It certainly applies to plenty of the ideas about engineering the future. But the criticism does not apply to essentialism. An essence is something essentially and essentially something.
'Progress' here is not a question of altering or improving that essence, but of realising it, of turning potential into actual. Aristotelian flourishing is conceived entirely in these terms and so too, I argue, is Thomas Aquinas' common good and Marx's communism. Gray's criticism implies a natural law position of Aristotelian derivation.

But whereas the essentialist tradition accents potentiality and its realisation, the most salient feature of Gray's view is how limited and constrained life is by nature. Gray argues that history is not progressive, but cyclical. Human nature is an inherent obstacle to cumulative ethical or political progress.

Well, this all depends upon teleology and how it is conceived. Gray points to how easily progress is reversed in history, citing the US use of torture. There are many more examples of regress in the modern world. But Gray's reasoning here betrays his atomist and empiricist approach. Such instances are accidental in nature, and such accidents are indeed capable of frustrating necessary lines of development. But those lines remain necessary if an essence is to be realised and to flourish. Gray, surely, is arguing that torture is a bad thing. But he can only make that criticism if there is indeed meaning to existence, a meaning based upon a conception of what human beings are essentially.

Gray's loss of nerve here is due entirely to the absence of an essentialist understanding. He has had his fingers burned in politics and is now in retreat, abandoning the notion of human uniqueness as a religious conceit. Much more substantial is the view of John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

"The last clear definite function of man—muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need—this is man....For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments. This you may say of man—when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full
step back. This you may say and know it and know it. This you may know when the bombs plummet out of the black planes on the market place, when prisoners are stuck like pigs, when the crushed bodies drain filthily in the dust. You may know it in this way. If the step were not being taken, if the stumbling-forward ache were not alive, the bombs would not fall, the throats would not be cut. Fear the time when the bombs stop falling while the bombers live—for every bomb is proof that the spirit has not died. And fear the time when the strikes stop while the great owners live—for every little beaten strike is proof that the step is being taken. And this you can know—fear the time when Manself will not suffer and die for a concept, for this one quality is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe."

Fear the time when human beings abandon the sense of human uniqueness, not in the sense of arrogant superiority over nature and other animals, but in the sense of building the new Jerusalem as the new Eden.

Gray is big on pointing to the limits implied by our biological natures, but he has failed entirely to assimilate a biological understanding based upon essential natures and natural essences. An essence is not just a limit, it is a potential, and a potential with a necessary line of development if it is to become an actual. That line can be frustrated by accident, and Gray cites plenty of accidents which work to subvert the process of realisation, but the realisation of potential remains not merely possible, but necessary if completion and flourishing is to occur.

None of this argument concerning necessary lines of development implies a false teleology. The whole process is rooted in real natures. This point needs to be established, since Gray traces the belief in progress to what he describes as an erroneous Christian eschatology. Gray has certainly exposed something significant here, the extent to which the supposedly secular and liberal pursuit of progress is thoroughly religious, but his criticism doesn’t go far enough. His view is simply that since Christian eschatology is unwarranted, then the secular conception of progress is also invalid.
My view is that the problem is much deeper and much more complicated than that. I shall argue that a perfectly defensible teleology – in both Judaeo-Christian and Aristotelian forms – has come to be appropriated and distorted by a rationalisation and a secularisation that is no more than a cover for impersonal forces and alien powers which have acquired divine and existential significance.

The sociologist Max Weber characterised this rationalisation as 'the disenchantment of the world' (*Entzauberung der Welt*). The phrase is a conscious borrowing from the poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller, who wrote of *die Entgotterung der Nature*, the dis-godding of nature (Herman, 1981: 57). But whilst the gods have been detached from the natural essences, their purposes have not gone away. Thus Weber argued that ‘many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another’. (Weber 1970: 149).

The death of God implies the dissolution of the old overarching morality, resulting in a polytheism of values, morality as no more than irreducible subjective opinion. There is no such thing as moral truth in this disenchanted world, only value judgements, with no objective way of deciding between them. These values judgements are of equal merit, each is as equally right as the other, and as equally wrong. Power enters into this moral vacuum. The old theological and teleological conceptions haven’t gone away; instead they have attached themselves to new gods. Weber refers to ‘impersonal forces’. Marx refers to alien powers. Alienation describes a condition in which the creative social power of human beings comes to be invested in the state and capital, also money and commodities and bureaucracy and such like. Alienation is a condition which takes the human world out of the hands of individuals and beyond their common control and comprehension. The human creators become slaves of their creators.

Since this is the case, we stand in need of a disenchantment of the rationalised world, exposing the myth of progress as the bogus teleology at the hollow heart of secularisation. We need the practical reappropriation of alienated social power, we need to put means and ends back in their appropriate places.

I shall argue that the flourishing within forms of the common life that Gray makes an integral part of his Green conservatism requires the underpinning of an essentialist metaphysics, at the core of which is a proper understanding of teleology.
John Gray seems to be floundering on the twin reefs of immanence and transcendence. Rejecting transcendence as the delusion of progress—a progress which is busy transgressing planetary boundaries—Gray has retreated at speed to the other extreme of immanence, total absorption within nature’s eternal cycles.

Gray rejects the Judaeo-Christian idea of human beings as morally autonomous beings categorically different from other animals as erroneous. Fine. Darwin argued that the difference between human beings and other animals is one of degree and not one of kind. Except that when rats eat their young, we find the behaviour reprehensible but do not consider them to be morally responsible for their actions. Should human beings start to behave this way, we would hold them to be responsible, and to be immoral to boot. A strictly Darwinian view would undermine the entire basis of law. Would civilisation follow? It depends on how human beings want to live their lives. And that’s the point, human beings can and do have a view on how they shape their existence. That’s ethics and politics, it takes us beyond biology into the realm of culture, and it’s not a delusion, however much the various positions that human beings take may be manifestly absurd or wrong headed. Gray is good at listing the detailing human follies and crimes and stupidities, but even that recognition of human error implies a moral standard of the true, the good and the beautiful, determined in accordance with what Cicero and the Stoics called right reason. The essentialist tradition emphasises the fact that human beings are social and rational beings. Gray has cut himself off completely from that tradition and, not surprisingly, can make no sense of human life.

“Puts a weight on ya. Goin’ out lookin’ for somepin you know you ain’t gonna find.” (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*). It makes sense to start looking for the right things in the right places.

In *Straw Dogs* (2003), Gray rejects the idea that human beings are self-determining agents. But it is not just Christianity that Gray has in his sights. He exposes the fantasies of all those Darwinists who think that human beings can take charge of their own destiny so as to avoid ecological destruction. Gray seems to welcome this destruction, much in the same way that Lovelock sees Gaia as fitting the human species to itself. There are ways of avoiding destruction, but Gray is right to repudiate the follies of the Darwinists here. I call these characters planetary engineers. For Gray, for all of their talk of science, they are not naturalists, but
apostles of humanism. (2003). Which means they are not true Darwinians either. Indeed, when Gray points to natural cycles over against progress, he is much more true to Darwin, but that identifies another problem. For Marx, naturalism and humanism are not antithetical, but integral, and the fact that Gray should make such a distinction implies a missing element in his philosophy.

Marx calls his standpoint 'consistent naturalism or humanism' and sees it as integrating the truths of both idealism and materialism.

*Communism is the positive supersession of private property as human self-estrangement, and hence the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e. human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous periods of development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution.*

Marx EW EPM 1975: 348/9

That’s a passage which could have been designed to bring John Gray out in a rash. But Marx’s theses are defensible in terms of an essentialist metaphysics. Gray may well deny such essentialism, but this begs the question of what he means by the limits of biological natures. In essentialism, natures are not just constraints, they are potentialities.

In his latest book *The Silence of Animals*, Gray seems to have become a modern day Gulliver, abandoning the war-like, stupid and greedy human beings for the peace loving animals, leaving a doomed civilisation to go and live in the stables with the horses. It is difficult to look at contemporary business and politics and not want to pack up and go and join him. I am a supporter of The Aspinall Foundation and its
breeding programme at Port Lympne Wild Animal Park: ‘working together to protect endangered animals’. Issue 37 of Wildcry in Spring 2013 headlined ‘Rhinos are doing well’. And today I read that the Foundation is threatened by poachers in search of rhino horn.

In these circumstances, it is indeed tempting to write off the human species as congenitally delusional and seek the deeper wisdom of animals.

It’s the temptation of the Garden. It’s what Lewis Mumford called a utopia of escape. (Mumford 1962). It’s a retreat and an evasion and it brings problems of its own. There is no morality in nature, no distinctive identity apart from biological imperatives. The species interest prevails. Max Weber wrote that the institutions of capitalist modernity proceed ‘without regard for persons’. So too do nature’s cycles of birth, life, death and re-birth. It’s a picture of complete immanentism.

Gray’s immanentism view savours more than a little of Callicles in the Gorgias, whose amoral naturalism and immoral humanism is contradicted by Socrates’ argument that that one could be virtuous even in a totally immoral world and that one’s soul could never be harmed by the immoral acts of others. Another prejudice, Gray would no doubt assert.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb considers Gray to be "prophetic". (http://grantabooks.com/page/3012/False+Dawn/1302). He may well be. But there is more than a flavour of the self-fulfilling prophecy about Gray’s assertion of the meaninglessness of life. In which case, the optimistic belief in and pursuit of a feasibly better human life on account of essential potentiality is no more than a delusion than Gray’s pessimism and misanthropy, and one much more likely to bring about human happiness and well-being. It could misfire, but it’s our responsibility to ensure that it doesn’t. The taking of moral responsibility for action and ends is the human condition. I read Kant’s regulative ideal in precisely these terms, as an object of willing which inspires and orient's human behaviour and obligates us within life as a common project.
‘People need to believe that order can be glimpsed in the chaos of events.’ (John Gray, *Heresies*). That may be true. So what? Human beings are meaning seeking animals. Gray is big on the constraints of human nature and accuses utopians of ignoring that nature. Yet he ignores some of the most salient characteristic of human nature, what Victor Frankl called *Man’s Search for Meaning*, the sense of uniqueness, the belief in free will, the idea of moral responsibility.

Viktor Frankl was a neurologist and a Jew who spent three years in the Nazi concentration camps. Persecuted throughout history, the Jews had often been confronted with the choice to convert or die. During the Holocaust, they had no such choice. Is there anything left to a person once everything there was to lose is about to be taken away? Frankl drew the conclusion that there was one freedom that could never be taken away:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

Frankl 1986: 86

This is Socrates’ case for the moral dignity of human beings, that moral capacity that is above both mind and body as purely physical, bio-chemical things and processes. Even in the most adverse of circumstances, human beings retain freedom in the form of the decision of how to respond. John Gray, however, rejects Socrates and argues that human life is meaningless. Viktor Frankl knew better and taught meaning. The complete absence of hope creates a condition which Frankl called ‘futurelessness’, a deadening experience that denies life all meaning and all hope. Frankl recalls, ‘A prisoner marching in a long column to a new camp remarked that he felt as if he were walking in a funeral procession behind his own dead body.’ Human beings need meaning, a hope, a sense of direction towards something bigger and better, a feeling of being part of something greater than the individual ego and its
concerns. And that, I argue, is greater than simply fitting into an amoral, indifferent nature, conceived in terms of cycles and imperatives, leaving us with nothing more than species interest in reproduction. Human beings need to do more than survive, they need to thrive.

Frankl persuaded two of his fellow prisoners against suicide by convincing each that they still had work to do in life. Reduced to self-seeking automata, the lives of both prisoners were already over. Without hope survival is not possible. But as part of a greater whole, their lives still had unfulfilled purpose and potentiality. Frankl convinced both that something remained for them to do in life's bigger picture, work that could be done only by them and no one else. John Gray may dismiss the self as a delusion, but both prisoners survived. That is how human beings transcend biological necessity to come to lead the good life and flourish.

Frankl also survived and drew on his experiences to develop a new school of psychotherapy, logotherapy, from the Greek *logos*, meaning 'word' in the broadest sense, including the spiritual dimension of human life, that which endows life with a sense of purpose. That's transcendence in the best sense, offering an ideal to inspire hope. After the war Frankl wrote the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

*Homo sapiens* is the rational species that seeks meaning. The idea that the human being is the meaning-seeking animal is an integral part of an understanding of our biological nature. To preserve meaning, no matter how adverse the circumstances, human beings must be able to do three things.

1. Human beings must refuse to believe that they are victims of fate. Within limits, human beings are free, authors of their own lives.
2. Human beings must understand that there is more than one way of interpreting what happens to them. There is more than one way of telling the story of life.
3. Human beings must realise that meaning lies outside them as a call from somewhere else.

In the last resort, man should not ask, 'What is the meaning of my life?' but should realise that he himself is being questioned. Life is putting its problems to him, and it is up to him to respond to these questions by being responsible; he
can only answer to life by answering for his life. Life is a task. The religious man differs from the apparently irreligious man only by experiencing his existence not simply as a task, but as a mission. This means that he is also aware of the taskmaster, the source of his mission. For thousands of years that source has been called God. (Frankl 1986:13).

Ethics, as a system of moral thought, entails practical suggestions concerning how human beings ought to live and, as such, is founded on a view as to what human nature is.

This search for meaning is a constant of the human condition. The challenge is to ensure its embodiment in terms of a genuine teleology that concerns the realisation of the natural human essence.

Reading Gray, I get the impression not of the end of civilisation, but the end of a particular civilisation. We have to remember that John Gray was once a free marketeering economic liberal who subscribed to all the beliefs of progress he is now denouncing as delusions. The falsification of all those promises may well incline Gray to believe that progress as such has been exhausted of all its possibilities, but that is far from the case. Gray’s god may have failed, but many of us were never believers in the first place. Gray clearly bought the promises and now realises that he’s been had. The god that has failed Gray was not the true god at all. Yet Gray feels so badly let down as to have become a complete non-believer.

Gray’s position is a cul-de-sac, symptomatic of a certain reaction to capitalist crisis, utterly incapable of proposing a solution to it. Denied the world his particular belief in progress offered, Gray has become an out and out nihilist with a fine line in misanthropy. The danger is that, in embracing a Gaian outlook and in espousing the wisdom of animals, his bleak, anti-human position could rebound on the ecological vision.

In fact, Gray’s position is so relentlessly negative that it leaves no room even for nihilism. Certainly not nihilism in the sense that Nietzsche conceived it, redeeming the meaningless world by a revaluation of values. Gray offers nothing so optimistic. Instead, we must simply accept that progress, freedom, and selfhood are just
delusions, fancies and fantasies, morality a sickness, and justice a mere custom. Our natural condition is illusion. Just add suffering to this list and we are back to the professional miserabilist Arthur Schopenhauer. Frankly, it reads like an intellectual conceit and indulgence to me, an attempt to evade the difficult questions of ethics and politics by dismissing them as illusions. Gray sees no hope. Scientific knowledge cannot be used positively, technology cannot be consciously controlled, human beings are helpless and hopeless. There seems to be no way of avoiding a future global slave state.

Back in the sixties, Lewis Mumford wrote *The Myth of the Machine* (1962, 1967), the myth being the belief that the Megamachine is all powerful and unbeatable. Changing mentalities will change modalities. We can refuse the bribes offered by the megamachine, it is possible to reclaim personal responsibility against the bullying of the system. That’s what Socratic moral autonomy is all about. But I’m afraid Gray has given up the struggle.

In an important sense, Gray seems to be yearning for the Garden of Eden. The key argument of *Straw Dogs* is human existence would be a lot less bloody, violent and precarious if men and women really did behave like wild animals. It sounds like the ‘back to nature’ argument that Rousseau is always said to have made, but in truth didn’t. Rousseau argued for human beings exchanging individual freedom in the state of nature for a shared moral freedom in the civil state. Freedom as a collective endeavour under law was Rousseau’s message, which Kant developed further in terms of the universal moral law. Gray seems to be going in the opposite direction. For him, ethics are an animal affair rather than a legalistic affair. And here Gray is an optimist, seeing our fleshy, compassionate bodies as the true ground of morality as a human practice.

There is plenty to be said for Gray’s view. The origin of the word ethics, after all, is *ethos*, denoting a habit, a practice, a way of life. Gray is also right to want to deflate human self-importance. The belief in human uniqueness fosters a sense of superiority on the part of human beings with respect to other animals. In exceeding its natural reach in pursuit of progress, humanity risks bringing its life and exertions to nothing. The ancient Greeks called it *hubris*, and at the moment overweening human knowledge and power is undermining the foundations of life on Earth. But it’s human
uniqueness, in the sense of moral autonomy, that allows us to be able to rein in our technical powers and recognise our place within a greater whole.

Rather than re-instate the essentialist categories which alone allow us to recover purpose in the world and ground it in concrete reality, Gray abandons teleology as such, and with it, foundations, essences, the lot. Gray realises that post-modernism is a scarcely reasoned nihilism, but his position has plenty in common with it. Including inconsistency and incoherence. You cannot claim that human beings live in illusion and that morality is a fiction, and then proceed to make a series of criticisms which imply a notion of scientific and moral truth. Indeed, Gray’s approach reveals all the dangers of an unalloyed biology in politics. Gray stresses the affinities between human beings and other animals, denounces the idea of moral autonomy and uniqueness as an erroneous belief inherited from Christianity. Then he proceeds to condemn genocide and torture. That is not something other animals can do. Gray would respond that that is not something other animals would need to do. Organised war is a human accomplishment.

As psychologist Rollo May argues in *Power and Innocence*:

Man creates symbols and bases his culture upon them; the flag and patriotism are examples, as are status, religion, and language. The capacity to create and deal with symbols, actually a superb achievement, also accounts for the fact that we are the cruellest species on the planet. We kill not out of necessity but out of allegiance to such symbols as the flag and fatherland; we kill on principle.

May 1976: 157

Gray denies human uniqueness and praises of the wisdom of animals in his new book, *The Silence of Animals*. But he misses the double-sided nature of the human achievement. Human beings do indeed kill on principle, but they also do plenty more on principle than that. As May states, ‘our aggression occurs on a different level from that of animals, and not much can be learned from animals about this distinctively
human form of aggression.’ (May 1976: 157). That’s the point that Gray fails to assimilate, meaning that his whole critique is missing the very thing that is required to go beyond the delusions of progress – the human essence as a moral as well as a natural essence.

The capacity for murder is also a capacity for morality, and that indicates the uniqueness of the human animal. Gray is right to point out that it is humans who commit genocide, not animals. It is just that the point is that the moral and technical capacities of human beings can be used positively as well as negatively. The human record is not as bad or as bleak as Gray’s one-sided narrative implies.

I’m afraid that John Gray has missed the essential features of the human animal and has fallen for an unadulterated Gaian holism that sinks humanity back into a species essence absorbed within nature’s endless cycles. We should be careful to avoid the ecological message disappearing into nature’s immanence at the same time.

And this is where we can reinstate the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Human beings left the Garden of Eden with the capacity for knowledge and freedom. Whether we fall downwards or upwards is entirely our responsibility. That responsibility can be used positively and creatively, and should we do so, that would indeed amount to a genuine progress. But it can be used destructively. Gray seems to wallow in the negativity. That which one cannot have, one must destroy. I get the feeling that we are at the end of one civilisation, one which Gray believed in, but which he now realises was a fantasy world. So now he wants to see nothing but the end of the world. Or the end of the human species which has so badly let him down.

Gray writes of the limits of biological nature, but says nothing of natural essences whose potentials point to an alternative future. It is interesting that James Lovelock has referred to human beings as a virus. Lovelock thinks that Gaia is in the process of knocking the human species into shape, eliminating all those who are not fit for purpose. There are better ways of conceiving purpose, and this is in terms of an essentialist metaphysics deriving from Aristotle, which are present in St Thomas Aquinas and which take the most developed historical and social form in Hegel and Marx. That tradition offers a genuine teleology grounded in real human beings and
leading to a genuine progress. Compared to the ugly, misanthropic ecology of a Gaian politics, which in turn seems merely a cover for biological necessity, the essentialist tradition keeps us sane and sober on the high road leading to progress as the realisation of social nature of human beings. Gray is a former Thatcherite who once believed in free markets and all the promises made in their favour. We see now that the liberal world order is an illiberal disorder, an anarchy of the rich and the powerful at the expense of the world’s people. Rather than fight back, Gray has given up the ghost. The relentless negativity of his perspective has all the appearance of a reaction against the revelation that the freedom he once espoused is a delusion. He simply cannot see the light, and so wallows in the darkness of meaninglessness and hopelessness. That libertarian freedom Gray once espoused isn’t the only form of freedom. It is indeed a delusion. But that’s not the end of freedom at all.

It is difficult to know who or what John Gray’s precise targets are. The old Whig idea of history, in which a truly rational world emerged through the progress of reason and science and liberty, did not survive the First World War. His criticisms do not apply to Judaeo-Christian eschatology or Hegel and Marx properly understood and not distorted. So we are left with the bogus teleology of the capital system. Here, Gray is right. But that doesn’t justify the abandonment of teleology. Certainly, military expansion and war, environmental destruction, economic development, urbanisation etc employ all the tools of modernity, of reason, science and technology, to an unprecedented scale — only for its promises to explode. Events point to delusion and unreason. ‘Henceforth’, wrote Georges Sorel, "everything is given into disorder; nothing is necessary any longer; no predictions are possible.' (Sorel 1969: 210). The fact that Sorel’s book is titled The Illusions of Progress should tell us that we are wrestling with a central problem of modernity, the loss of meaning through the inversion of means and ends, object and subject.

I say that the conclusion is drawn from faulty empiricist and atomist premises and that an essentialist metaphysics sees a bigger picture and identifies other trends and tendencies.

Progress is not a force beyond human comprehension and control; on the contrary, a genuine progress is to be measured by the extent to which human beings attain a self-
conscious mastery of their powers. Crisis, war and destruction indicates the extent to which history remains, in E.P. Thompson’s words, an ‘unmastered practice’. But there is no such thing as ‘History’ in abstraction of human beings. Even alienation, in which history appears to be independent of human beings, is a praxis. History is the story of human beings who, as moral and political beings, choose, within specific social relations, to act this way or that. Within those social constraints, human beings think, choose, act.

In the chapters that follow I shall unravel the issues and principles adumbrated above. I shall look at the dilemmas and delusions of progress, I shall examine immanence and transcendence when set to extremes, and then I shall try to draw all the strands together by developing an essentialist metaphysics out of the works of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx. My argument is that it is possible to reject the illusions and delusions of progress, set reason on a rational footing that leads to freedom as human emancipation and self-determination, and that progress is defensible when set in essentialist terms.

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4 CAMILLE PAGLIA ON IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

Camille Paglia offers a provocative perspective on the relation between immanence and transcendence. Her view seems to agree with John Gray’s concerning the delusions of progress, with this crucial difference – for Paglia, progress might be an illusion, but it is also a necessary illusion if humanity is to avoid being absorbed back into the swamp of chthonian nature. Paglia, one appreciates, is not so ready to acquiesce in nature’s benevolence as, it seems, John Gray and the Gaians are. It’s just that she sees little but delusion whichever way we point.

Paglia describes both the Apollonian (rational, scientific) and Judeo-Christian traditions as transcendental in that they both seek to surmount or transcend nature. She describes Judaism as the most powerful of protests against nature. ‘The Old Testament asserts that a father god made nature and that differentiation into objects and gender was after the fact of his maleness. Judeo-Christianity, like Greek worship of the Olympian gods, is a sky-cult.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1).

For Paglia, this is an advanced stage in the history of religion, which everywhere began as earth-cult, venerating the fruitful nature of the Great Mother figures. Here is the world of the natural cycles that Gray opposes to progress. ‘Woman was an idol of belly-magic’, argues Paglia. ‘Men, bonding together, invented culture as a defense against female nature. Sky-cult was the most sophisticated step in this process, for its switch of the creative locus from earth to sky is a shift from belly-magic to head-magic.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1).

The transition from earth-cult to sky-cult moves woman into the nether realm of immanence and man who knows where in his pursuit of transcendence. It is called civilisation. However, from this perspective, it looks more like a surrogate world, giving the illusion of power and freedom, not the reality. ‘Man, repelled by his debt to a physical mother, created an alternate reality, a heterocosm to give him the illusion of freedom.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). Male civilisation is therefore the product of a defensive head-magic, of a transcendence driven by the need to escape the immanence of originary, chthonian nature. From this perspective, patriarchy is a male reaction to and resentment of woman’s power and its connection with chthonian nature. Denying the feminist argument that female archetypes are politically motivated falsehoods
created by men, Paglia goes much deeper into male-female relations. For Paglia, the historical repugnance of man to woman has a rational basis: ‘disgust is reason's proper response to the grossness of procreative nature. Reason and logic are thus the anxiety-inspired domain of Apollo, premiere god of sky-cult. The Apollonian is harsh and phobic, coldly cutting itself off from nature by its superhuman purity.’

Paglia identifies the male fear and resentment of female origins as lying behind the cold, clinical transcendence of masculine Apollonian purity. Apollo's great contrary is Dionysus, chthonian nature whose law is procreative femaleness and whose ‘prototype is the still pond of the womb.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). According to this line of reasoning, the greatest delusion of progress is the denial of the womb-tomb of nature. And that denial can proceed so far as to the destruction of nature but also self-destruction.

Paglia is not, however, valuing female immanence against male transcendence, quite the contrary. Eco-feminists like Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor (1992, 1987) condemn patriarchal technology for its destructiveness. Paglia, however, is clear that Western science and industry have freed women from the drudgery and danger that were the normal conditions of societies that lived close to nature. That is progress. Paglia readily admits that most of western culture is a distortion of reality. 'But reality should be distorted', she argues, that is, 'imaginatively amended.' It is an argument for transcendence as against absorption in the world of pure immanence, the world of the Great Goddess of nature.

The Buddhist acquiescence to nature is neither accurate about nature nor just to human potential. The Apollonian has taken us to the stars.

Paglia 2001 ch 1

Which begs the question of where the fanatical, superhuman and potentially fatal pursuit of transcendence not only comes from, but ends. We go to the stars in order to
deny our natural origins. The danger is that our abstracted technology comes to destroy those foundations of life.

It depends on how that flight to the stars is construed. For Paglia, this flight to the stars is a male flight from female nature. That, I will argue, rather forecloses the debate. There are other options. She argues that ‘mythology’s identification of woman with nature is correct.’ She acknowledges that most feminist readers will disagree, but insists that ‘the identification of woman with nature’ is ‘not myth but reality.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1).

It seems as though women are all powerful within Nature as female. Whilst women, made in the image of the Goddess, could reproduce themselves, men seemed to have no existence beyond their bodies. The envy spurred men to transcend female Nature, cheat death and thereby gain immortality. Male projection beyond Nature’s finitude lies behind thoughts of transcendence. Machine civilisation thus appears as an attempt to evade Nature’s circularity and man’s mortality.

But it’s a cheat, an illusion. The identification of Nature as female does not necessarily mean that women have autonomous power and freedom. Paglia is under no illusions here. There is a strain of eco-feminism which considers the world of the ancient Goddess to be benign (Sjoo and Mor 1987; Neumann 1972; Markale 1999; Gimbutas 1982). To Paglia, this would appear to be so much wishful thinking, a yearning for the blissful unity of life’s origins. In truth, women are enchained to biological necessity more than men. For Paglia, whether woman wishes it or not, ‘nature yokes her into the brute inflexible rhythm of procreative law.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). That is a rather blunt assertion that biology is destiny.

Seen from this perspective, the world of the Great Mother Goddess is the world of blind biological imperatives and natural necessity, a world entirely without free will and moral choice. Men have to ascend the levels to the spirit, have to avoid being encompassed in the world of the flesh, but the price of such transcendence is an unreality in which it is impossible to live.
This view leaves us trying to steer a course which avoids coming to grief on the twin reefs of the chthonian swamps of (female) immanence and the mad fantasies of (male) technological transcendence. More easily said than done, since the rejection of one extreme tends us to journey back in the direction of the other.

Put this way, human life is akin to the labours of Sisyphus.

The name Sisyphus means ‘too clever’ (Sisyphos). In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the son of Aeolus the wind-lord. He was a cattle-farmer on the Isthmus of Corinth. He was also a rogue, rivalling his neighbour Autolycus, son of Hermes, the god of tricksters. Sisyphus won his brother Salmoneus’ kingdom of Thessaly by treachery. Sisyphus raped Salmoneus’ daughter Tyro, and she was so ashamed that she killed her sons as soon as they were born. Sisyphus showed the Thessalians the bodies and said that they were the result of incest between Salmoneus and Tyro. The people banished Salmoneus and made Sisyphus king.

In Thessaly, Sisyphus revelled in cruelty. He executed enemies by pegging them on the ground and build stone-piles on top of them. It is the theme adumbrated above of the land being crucified and built upon, but also of human beings being crucified in nature, subordinated to natural necessity. Sisyphus went too far when he broke his word to Zeus that he would keep the whereabouts of the river-nymph Aegina from her
father, the river-god Asopus, in return for the spring called Pirene. Zeus sent Sisyphus to the Underworld. The judges of the dead gave Sisyphus a punishment appropriate to his trickery and his method of killing people with boulders. They placed a huge boulder just above him on a steep hillside. The only way he could prevent it rolling back and crushing him was to push it up the hill. Sisyphus was promised that if he could reach the top and push the boulder down to the other side his punishment would end. With all his effort, time after time, Sisyphus pushed the boulder to the summit, and each time, just one more push short of the downward slope, the boulder slipped out of his grasp and rolled all the way back down the hill. So Sisyphus was doomed to make immense, desperate efforts, only to be cheated, until the end of time.

The tale of Sisyphus serves to elaborate this dialectic of immanence and transcendence. Sisyphus crucified people on the earth and piled boulders upon them. He was condemned to push that boulder throughout all eternity, lest he himself be crushed underneath, falling back into the earth. He was forced to pursue the transcendent in order to escape being enclosed within the womb-tomb of the immanent world. His fate was to forever be caught within a transcendence that goes nowhere and an immanence that absorbs all into nothing.

It's the illusion that creates and sustains civilisation beyond Nature's swamp. The human race has to keep ascending in order to avoid being absorbed back into the primordial slime. But the ascent never actually goes anywhere. Progress is a necessary illusion by which we pretend that we have avoided the natural cycle of life and death. We have to convince ourselves that our technology will work this time, that with one more push we will be free. In the myth, the boulder falls all the way back to the bottom, so the ascent has to start again. But what if our ingenuity and skill is such that we have become capable of pushing the boulder off the mountain entirely? Into space? We have become so clever as to depart the realm of reality entirely. Isn't that a definition of madness?

Those who journeyed into the underworld and survived a period of initiation learned the truth that the Goddess of Nature is both womb and tomb, the beginning and the end for mortal man. We are talking here of initiation as a spiritual matriculation. ‘Etymologically, to matriculate means to enter the realm of womb and
mother.' (Paglia 2001 ch 11). For the Goddess herself there is no end, just an endless cycle of life and death, a change of being within an unchanging reality. To Goddess Nature, life, death and rebirth are continuous, inseparable parts of the whole, not discreet, discontinuous fragments.

Clovis Trouille’s painting *My Tomb* (c1947) portrays a gloomy view, certainly, but exposes the deep psychosexual dimension that many seek to evade.

*My Tomb* c1947 Clovis Trouille

There can be no genuine transcendence based on evasion, that merely becomes a flight motivated by fear.

Paglia sets the debate at extremes. Well, as Schopenhauer wrote, extremes magnify the truth. Paglia is well aware of the precariousness of the human condition. She argues that ‘that all cultural achievement is a projection, a swerve into Apollonian transcendence, and that men are anatomically destined to be projectors. But as with Oedipus, destiny may be a curse.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1).

Paglia sees men as doomed to return to originary nature.
Paglia asks what nature has given man to defend himself against woman? For Paglia, Apollonian rationality was invented by western man as ‘a refuge from the soggy emotionalism and bristling disorder of woman and nature.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). Paglia thus sets immanence and transcendence at polar opposites. That leaves us without much of a choice, only a futile attempt at escape.

Hence Paglia’s rejection of the Eastern acquiescence to nature as ‘neither accurate about nature nor just to human potential.’ Paglia claims that everything great in western culture has come from the quarrel with nature. Paglia refers to the frightful brutality of natural process, describing the heavy blind rolling and milling of matter as an ‘insult to mind’. Acquiesce in nature? ‘In loss of self we would find not love or God but primeval squalor.’

This revelation has historically fallen upon the western male, who is pulled by tidal rhythms back to the oceanic mother. It is to his resentment of this daemonic undertow that we owe the grand constructions of our culture. Apollonianism, cold and absolute, is the west’s sublime refusal. The Apollonian is a male line drawn against the dehumanizing magnitude of female nature.

Paglia 2001 ch 1

The upshot of Paglia’s reasoning is that nature is not some benign Goddess but a swamp of immanence waiting at society’s gates to absorb us back into the chthonian depths.
Organic nature reclaiming abstracted built place? Or nature adapting to fit the contours of human creation?

It’s a form of being in time, what Heidegger emphasised as *be-ing*. But it eschews any pretensions at any eternity beyond nature’s endless cycles. It’s a vision of pure immanence. But rather than a passive acceptance of our finitude with nature’s endless cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth, the picture suggests romanticism as a disillusioned idealism. Here one sees the truth of Paglia’s claim that without male projection, ‘woman would long ago have absorbed all of creation into herself. There would be no culture, no system, no pyramiding of one hierarchy upon another. Earth-cult must lose to sky-cult, if mind is ever to break free from matter.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). Women have no need of projection beyond the boundaries of the self. In other words, if mind does not transcend matter, then sky-cult loses to earth-cult and all is absorbed back into chthonian nature. ‘Woman and nature stand ever ready to reduce the male to boy and infant.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). This is an assertion of natural necessity so as to deny being not only in eternity, but also in time.

In the finale of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Nature returns with a vengeance as the mansion is swallowed up by the “black and lurid tarn”. This is the return of
the built order of man to the swampy, liquid nether world of female nature: ‘There was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters.’ This deep, dank tarn is the primeval swamp of female generation. Poe looks upon it with horror, describing its ‘pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish,... leaden-hued.’ It is a good description of the male terror of endless female nature.

Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher* oozes an ‘extensive decay.’ (*Great Short Works of Poe*, 217, 219, 238, also 192—93. 158—59, 161, 317, 329.) The extent to which Poe’s tales of terror are haunted by absent females has to be significant. In one tale after another the ghost of the absent lady of the house haunts the male imagination. In *Fall of the House of Usher*, the house itself sinks into Nature. The man-made environment, the buildings erected as proof of male potency, is swallowed whole. In Paglia’s terms, this denotes the extent to which civilisation, without transcendence, would come to be engulfed whole by chthonian Nature. ‘The cracked house of Usher, an Apollonian head fractured by madness, surrenders to the Dionysian, the murky womb-world of the primeval abyss.’ (*Paglia* 2001 ch 22). There is no escape, only return to origins, the source that cannot be denied, only repressed, diverted, denied, perverted into destructive, death-dealing fantasy.

In *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), Prince Prospero attempts to deny Nature by shutting it out of the city walls. Here, civilisation, the built world, is a defence against nature’s all-engulfing, overarching power. Of course, Nature closes in, surrounds and finally suffocates the life out of the city. The tale has affinities with Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, where a party of Florentine gentry think they can escape the Black Death plaguing the towns by fleeing to the countryside. Poe’s Red Death is different, though, in that it is the country and not the town which is pestilential, it is biological nature itself which is the plague, ‘the redness and the horror of blood.’ Camille Paglia draws out the full meaning: ‘The ebony clock of Poe’s seventh chamber is the ominous heartbeat of the maternal body. Since the Red Death is life itself, the clock is the passing bell that tolls for every man.’ (*Paglia* 2001 ch 22).

Poe is obsessed with closure, narcolepsy, the fear and reality of being buried alive. It’s the central theme running through *The Premature Burial, The Cask of
Amontillado, Maelstrom, The Pit. But readings of Poe which focus upon the alienation of built structures do not go far enough. Alienation refers to the way that man-made inventions gaining a life of their own independently of their human creators. The failure of the human creators to identify the built world as their own creation becomes oppressive in time and drains the life out of the human subjects. But Poe is referring to more than the way that the built environment gains an existential significance that ultimately sucks the life out of its inhabitants and builders. Paglia’s argument makes it clear that the tomb enclosing human beings is more than the built environment. ‘Action is the route of escape from nature, but all action circles back to origins, the womb-tomb of nature.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1).

Poe’s tales are not just about alienated built structures and the need for human creative subjects to reappropriate their power as their own. Poe’s motivation is deeper, darker, more pessimistic. Whatever environment we build, however much it expresses our power, however much we identify it as our own power, sooner or later the womb-tomb of Mother Nature closes in and swallows it all whole.

In this context, the madness of technological fantasies destroying the planet become comprehensible. What one cannot have one must destroy. Transcendence is therefore necessary to wake us from the nightmare of nature. The only problem is
that we are left dangling between dehumanisation within nature at the level of immanence and denaturalisation with technological civilisation at the level of transcendence.

Where, one asks, is the balance of the Yin and the Yang? The missing feminine is also the missing masculine, since if we lose access to the one, we skew the character of the other. Ann Belford Ulanov writes well here in *The Wisdom of the Psyche* (2000).

The down-going feminine way we neglect revenges itself by dragging us down into the dark abyss of matter because we neglect what matters. Symbols regress into symbolic equations and we are easily overtaken by a massing of energy in the unconscious that can at any time explode into neurosis, or into the demand for actual weapons with which we can kill others, or even the whole planet.

Ulanov 2000: 82/3

The relation between immanence and transcendence needs to be determined so that the masculine and the feminine complement each other and thereby complete their natures in unity rather than in antagonism. This would be to recognise that there is a process of growth within nature’s cycles of birth, life and death, an active way of being that is central to a healthy and flourishing life. The philosopher Spinoza expresses this idea well in his concept of *conatus*. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that 'Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours (*conatus*) to persevere in its being'. *A conatus* is a mode’s essence (or degree of power); all living things manifest this endeavour. The most fundamental desire of human beings is the endeavour (*conatus*) or power to persist in existence, to persevere in our being. Thus *conatus* is therefore the affirmation of essence in a mode’s existence.

Spinoza’s reasoning is essentialist, a position which I shall develop in greater depth later. The realisation of an essence is what Spinoza
understands as the endeavour of a thing, a human being, to persevere in its being, to be. Flourishing well is the solution. Shakespeare was right, ‘to be or not to be’ really is the question. Human beings will flourish well or they will not flourish at all. Striving is being in that the active endeavour to persevere in the world is an affective appreciation of reality which brings joy. As Spinoza argues, the wise and free person will avoid pain and aim necessarily ‘to act well and to rejoice’ (‘bene agere ac laetari’). To act well is to enjoy oneself fully, and to enjoy oneself fully is to act well: ‘there cannot be too much joy: it is always good: but melancholy is always bad’ (E Pt IV Prop XLII). Historian Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the modern world is suffering from ‘an epidemic of melancholy’ (Ehrenreich 2008 ch 7). Why? We no longer see health and happiness in terms of a personal, qualitative growth in tune with nature but in terms of the accumulation of material quantities within the machine we have built upon nature and confined ourselves within. Rather than appreciate our natural gifts, we turn and blame nature for its finality and indifference. That is precisely what we should be blaming the machine for.

In their work, feminist artists Emily Carr, Frida Kahlo, and Georgia O'Keeffe reveal how place, nationality, nature, and gender intertwine in art. There is a great book on Kahlo, Carr, and O'Keeffe called Places of their Own by Sharyn Rohlfsen (2000). These painters' inscriptions of self upon their native land became their ultimate subject and most radiant achievement, turning physical land into places of their own. It is to see the sacred at the heart of nature.
These are pictures of immanence, of being rooted in inescapable nature.
A vision of transcendence, of realizing a moral purpose out of nature. Destined to be absorbed back into organic nature? It depends on whether we can live under the aspect of eternity rather than time.

John Gray denies progress as a delusion by reference to nature’s cycles. Paglia points out the implications. She sets up the dialectic of immanence and transcendence in terms of the opposition between the female contentment in being and the male urge to become. Paglia warns us against the siren call of originary nature.

Nature's cycles are woman's cycles. Biologic femaleness is a sequence of circular returns, beginning and ending at the same point. Woman's centrality gives her a stability of identity. She does not have to become but only to be. Her centrality is a great obstacle to man, whose quest for identity she blocks. He must transform himself into an independent being, that is, a being free of her. If he does not, he will simply fall back into her. Reunion with the mother is a siren call haunting our imagination. Once there was bliss, and now there is struggle. Dim memories of life before the traumatic separation of birth may be the source of Arcadian fantasies of a lost golden age. The western idea of history as a propulsive movement into the future, a progressive or Providential design climaxing in the revelation of a Second Coming, is a male formulation. No woman, I submit,
could have coined such an idea, since it is a strategy of evasion of woman's own cyclic nature, in which man dreads being caught. Evolutionary or apocalyptic history is a male wish list with a happy ending, a phallic peak.

Paglia 2001 ch 1

In this context, science, industry, technology, organised religion, which all involve notions of progress and salvation, appear as male fantasies to escape or transcend the cycle of nature. Eschatology comes in both religious and secular form. There are no such female fantasies. Since woman is that cyclic nature, she has no need to go anywhere other than where she is. But that cycle does not denote an autonomous power or freedom. 'The Greek pattern of free will to hybris to tragedy is a male drama, since woman has never been deluded (until recently) by the mirage of free will. She knows there is no free will, since she is not free. She has no choice but acceptance.' (Paglia 2001 ch 1).

This position leaves us in a psychic purgatory suspended between the fantasy of transcendence and the longing for immanence, with no clear way out. We can neither go backwards nor forwards. Reading Paglia, one gets the impression that her awareness of the delusions of (male) transcendence are outweighed by her recoil from the horrors of (female) immanence. It's a very fair view, in that it upsets all sides equally. Read in this light, the belief in a God that is both immanent and transcendent, the God of St Thomas Aquinas, is the best we can ever hope to achieve. The big problems come with the death of God in a disenchaned rationalised world. The deification of finite human powers which results unleashes the transcendent fantasies of the male projectors, bending the finite world in pursuit of the infinite.

'The Apollonian has taken us to the stars', argues Paglia (2001 ch 1). And that is the crucial point. The transcendence entailed by the sky-cult of patriarchal religion, science, technology and industry has not only 'taken us to the stars', it has distanced us from our originary nature and life-sustaining roots. Transcendence has removed us from the ground of our being. Or, being more critical, transcendence based on the inversion of means and ends, has severed our connections to the natural foundations of life.
The death of God, however, has not meant the death of theological assumptions. On the contrary, the qualities formerly assigned to God have come to be invested in means and things, thus encouraging the idea that men have become as gods. It is the old fantasy of H.G. Wells. Whereas once, in the theological conception of Aquinas, God was both immanent and transcendent, now the new God of science, technology and industry is conceived as removed from the world, acting upon it as an external force.

Thus we have planetary engineers like Stewart Brand arguing that ‘We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it.’ (Stewart Brand, Whole Earth Discipline 2010). Brand proceeds to fill his book with large promises concerning nuclear power, biotechnology, genetically modified food, geoengineering… God may be dead but the old theological assumptions building up to salvation have not gone away; instead, they have come to be invested in the new gods of science, technology and industry and encouraged the wildest fantasies. Brand may think that he is proposing something new. In fact, he is merely the latest in the long line of male projectors. With the looming ecological catastrophe, we are surely reaching the end of the line.

In fine, whereas God is in the world (immanent) but not of it (transcendent), ‘men as gods’ are of the world but not in it. And this entails a transcendence that threatens not merely to take us to the stars but to dissolve and dispose of the nature we leave behind. That’s progress as a self-destruction. Paglia writes of ‘a swerve from the chthonian’, the shift from earth-cult to sky-cult as a displacement from one area of reality to another. Complete transcendence of nature, however, is a radical switch from reality to unreality. And that’s madness. Man escapes the claims of immanence only through self-destruction: quos deus vult perdere prius dementat (those whom a god wishes to destroy he first drives mad).

Stewart Brand writes of ‘men as gods’. Mark Lynas titles his book on planetary engineering The God Species. The response to these delusions was written a long time ago:
‘Tell them this: “These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens”.’ (Jeremiah 10:11).

And they may take the rest of us with them.

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I wish to examine some of the concepts by means of which people have sought to express their understanding of God. I should caution that finding the adequate words is a well-nigh impossible task. Our language is designed to deal with the particular things we encounter in everyday life. These things can be described literally. Such language will fall short when it comes to any entity, such as God, which is said to be eternal and in some way transcendent, outside of existence, beyond our language. So there will always be an inevitable paradox involved in the language by which we describe God.

God is ineffable. God is non-existent in that God is neither part of the universe nor outside of the universe. If God is infinite, He can neither be inside or outside of anything. So we either say nothing, since there is nothing our language can say, or we make an inevitably inadequate attempt to describe God through a literal language that cannot be inappropriate.

Johannes Scotus Eriugena wrote: ‘We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because he transcends Being.’

In transcending Being, God transcends existence and all the tools we have developed to explain and describe existence. We should compare this view to the Taoist conception of the way. The Tao Te Ching opens: ‘The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name.’

There is a need to be clear that much of what passes for a description of God is nonsense, the result of having no option but to rely on inappropriately literal language. God is indeed non-sensical, an entity beyond sense experience. An attempt to give a rational description and account of God gives atheists an easy target to hit, but the irony is that they are revealing nothing that isn’t already known and understood by theologians.

The view that God is unimaginable and therefore indescribable gained its strength from the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing. God is the cause of all reality,
the source of everything that has being. God alone is the creator of all that exists and requires no help, no building-blocks of pre-existent formless matter, no secondary principle, nothing. Before the universe was, there was nothing. The omnipotent God of monotheism created the universe out of nothing; "the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible" (Hebrews 11:3). God calls into existence things that did not previously exist, ‘gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were’ (Romans 4:17).

This doctrine of creation from nothing separates the Christian view from ancient pagan thought. It has no parallel in Greek philosophy. Aristotle, for instance, was an eternalist, for whom the world had always existed and would always exist. Against the idea of creation, the neo-Platonists argued that world had emanated from the One, like rays from the sun. As a result, the world is conceived as some kind of extension, or overflowing, of the very being of God. In this sense, the philosophy of emanation is connected to the panentheistic conception that sees the universe as part of God. Since, in the neo-Platonist view, God and the world are linked together, the possibility exists for one to ascend through the world that emanates from the One, to the One itself, whether through contemplation or spiritual purification. The metaphor of the ladder ascending upwards to God was familiar in the medieval world, picturing levels of cognition that we may climb up to God. Since this world flows out from the One and is therefore part of God, one may reasonably expect to gain knowledge of God in this world in the neo-Platonic conception.

The Christian doctrine of creation from nothing severs the links between God and the universe proposed by the ancient pagan philosophy of emanation. In the Christian conception, the universe is a reality that has been caused by God but is not a part of God, since it is not an extension of or overflowing from God’s being.

The universe has come into being from precisely nothing at all and is therefore separated from God. Since the essence of the universe is not the essence of God, reflection upon this world cannot give knowledge of the essence of God. Christians therefore understand that their being and God’s being are distinct and that knowledge of the universe of things that exist cannot yield knowledge of God. Further, since human knowledge is not only shaped and formed by the universe around us, but is also a constituent part of the universe itself, Christians understand that they know very little, if anything, about God. This recognition that human knowledge is confined to this world
and cannot go beyond the beginning of the universe to contemplate the essence of
God the creator stems from the Christian doctrine that God had created something
from nothing. As Basil the Great comments, it is because God is the creator of the
universe that God is unknown:

The superior remoteness of the Father is really inconceivable, in that thought
and intelligence are wholly impotent to go beyond the generation of the Lord;
and St John has admirably confined the conception within circumscribed
boundaries by two words, "In the beginning was the Word." For thought cannot
travel outside "was," nor imagination beyond "beginning." Let your thought travel
ever so far backward you cannot get beyond the "was," and however you may
strain and strive to see what is beyond the Son, you will find it impossible to get
further than the "beginning."

Basil the Great 1989:8-9

Human thought and intelligence cannot penetrate beyond things within the
universe and cannot imagine the unimaginable cause of the universe. It is impossible
to think of nothing. Try it. Whatever quality we imagine when we try to describe
nothing, a sound, a shape, a colour, it is always something, red, square, loud; and if it
is ‘something’, then it cannot be ‘nothing’.

Yet this is what one has to do when it comes to attempting to think of what there
was "before" the universe came into being. One has to think of nothing, a non-
existence that has no colour, no form, no shape, no time. Whatever one imagines,
however vague, would still be something rather than nothing, some quantity or quality,
or spatial extension, or duration, or feeling. Any it identified is always something.
However, when one thinks about whatever caused this universe, it is impossible to
identify any such it at all, since it would be something. All thought is thought of
something. Since thought is restricted to the universe, it follows that what lies behind the
universe is strictly unthinkable. Since God created the universe out of nothing, it follows
that God is unthinkable and imageless. Since God is not a part of the universe that
human beings comprehend, it follows that God is incomprehensible. In the Timaeus
(28e), Plato argued that it is difficult to conceive of God and impossible to define God. Gregory of Nazianzus surpassed Plato in his ignorance of God, teaching that it is impossible to define God and even more impossible to conceive of God. (Gregory of Nazianzus, "Second Theological Oration." 4, in Hardy (1954:138).

So we cannot imagine the unimaginable cause of the universe. Since God created the universe out of nothing, it follows that God is unthinkable and imageless. But that hasn't stopped human beings searching for God and seeking to define and describe God.

Why bother? Since the existence or non-existence of God cannot be proven one way or the other, those brought up in the school of logical positivism would dismiss the whole question as a non-question. Wittgenstein's conclusion at the end of the Tractatus is apposite: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.' The problem is that human beings obviously are bothered. The question doesn't go away. I think it is a question we ask not of some objective world or entity, but a question we ask of ourselves as part of what Plato called the examined life. And since it's all about perceptions, how we see ourselves and how we see our reality, I wish to proceed from the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant shows how we can speak about God, and why we should as a condition of our moral freedom.

The ambiguity or uncertainty of God is no reason for abandoning God or for rejecting religion, no more than the uncertainty of our knowledge of the universe is a reason for disbelieving the material world or despairing of ever having knowledge of it. Human beings are active parts of the world they see around them, creative agents who infuse the objective world with their own subjectivity. That also applies to God, conceived in terms of what Jonathan Sacks called The Great Partnership (2011). There is a role for us to play in the world. There is an old Hebrew joke which has Yahweh rebuking Abraham for some transgression or other. "What would you be without me", Yahweh scolds. "Without me", Abraham replies to Yahweh, "you wouldn't even be known." A human being is God's way of knowing about God. Life is a co-evolution. In asking questions of God, we are asking questions of ourselves, searching for some inner need or potential we
need to express in the world. Whatever else that is, it is not a non-question. And to be fair to Wittgenstein, he understood this very well:

To believe in God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.

Wittgenstein 1979: 74e.

That's the answer to those who would reduce life to physical events and causality, to biological imperatives and natural cycles. That physical universe exists, certainly. It's just that there is a human world which exists in some kind of relation to that world.

The uncertainty of God is of a piece with the uncertainty that holds at all levels of meaning, in that our experiencing of the world, religiously or naturalistically, depends upon our own relation and response to it. Whilst this approach to God and religion may seem evasive from a scientific view, the fact is that it is quite consistent with the approach taken to epistemology since Kant. Since Kant and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, epistemology asks not only ‘what do we know?’ but ‘what can we know?’ and ‘how do we know it?’ These questions and answers are related, since, for Kant, what we can know, and in what form we can know it, depends upon the scope and functioning of our own innate cognitive apparatus. (I give extensive treatment of these issues in Peter Critchley *Kant’s Natural Teleology and Moral Praxis* 2012).

For Kant, and for the tradition of critical realism he inspired, our awareness is not a simple and direct matter of the material environment imprinting itself as it is upon our consciousness. The notion of the environment being passively received by the senses in this way is untenable. For Kant, human beings possess a cognitive apparatus which in large part infuses the world with human purpose, will, design etc and thereby shapes the world presented to the senses. For Kant, the cognitive equipment and innate categories within the mind shape what we know and what we can know. This principle transcends sense perception and the material world
considered as a purely physical world. For Kant, the world is shaped by human agency, meaning that what, at the level of senses, appears to be a purely material world is actually a human world shot through with consciousness, meaning, purpose and morality.

Simply put, Kant demonstrates how the cognitive apparatus of human beings shapes the world presented to the senses. But he does more than this, showing how we can have both knowledge, as scientific reason, and faith, as moral reason. Kant thus resolves the question of the uncertainty or ambiguity of God and the universe by making a distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. Whilst we can know things in the world of phenomena, we cannot know things-in-themselves in the world of noumena, which is beyond human experience and therefore inaccessible to human reason. Kant’s philosophy is therefore a ‘transcendental idealism’, in that it holds that the noumenal world can be inferred from reason, but is itself another order of being, an intelligible world, a moral order. Human beings are therefore co-creators and co-legislators of the world of ‘noumena’ as a moral world, and partake of a real world as distinct from a merely ‘phenomenal’ world.

One does not need to understand Kant’s entire philosophy in all of its complexity in order to understand his basic thesis that far from being a passive receptor of the sensuous world, the human mind is continuously active in the perception of that world. Advances in cognitive psychology have since confirmed the fundamental truth of Kant’s philosophy, revealing the mind to be actively employing its own cognitive apparatus to be continuously involved in performing a complex, multi-levelled operation of selecting, grouping, extrapolating, excluding, projecting, relating and imposing its own interpretive categories. This process is going on at the unconscious level all the time, with the conscious level only apprehending the outcomes of the process.

The point is that scientific reason, limited only to the physical world of event and causality, the world passively presented to the senses, yields only a limited knowledge of the world and forms only a part of the human experience of the universe as a whole. Kant’s central insight is that the human mind imposes order and meaning upon the sense data it receives. This is true at all levels of awareness, not just the physical level studied by natural science, but the moral,
aesthetic and religious. These are all layers of meaning, areas which comprise the full human experience of the world and which feed human awareness in a holistic sense. The ethical and the aesthetic presuppose and are mediated through the physical, the religious can presuppose and be mediated through each or all of the others, something which does not hold in reverse. My principal focus will be on the religious aspect, but it is as well to note that the same epistemological structure runs through the many layers of awareness comprising human experience.

Set within this epistemological framework, the uncertainty or ambiguity of God ceases to be a problem. The existence or non-existence of God is a pseudo-problem which fails to acknowledge the involvement of the human mental apparatus in shaping the world presented to the senses.

The deeper theological implication is this, God must be *deus absconditus* – a hidden God - in order to make space for human freedom. That is, for human beings to exist as autonomous finite persons and morally free beings in God's presence, God must not be immediately and compulsorily evident to the senses, but must be hidden, yet capable of being found by those who are willing to live in the divine presence. Human beings must make the moral commitment to seek God if God is to be found. This view is entirely consistent with Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sack's view of God and human beings as existing in a partnership (Sacks 2011). If human beings exist in complete direct immediacy with God, as in a 'face to face' relationship, the relationship would be passive and automatic and human beings would not have moral autonomy and therefore could not achieve moral freedom. A hidden God is required for human autonomy, making it possible for human beings to make a free response to the Deity and thus exercise the moral autonomy that defines human freedom. Only thus do human beings become conscious moral agents of their own history, history as their own self-creation.

The same principle, in different forms, can be seen at work in various instances of a non-theistic awareness of the ultimate. Thus T.S. Eliot states in 'Burnt Norton', 'Humankind [in our ‘fallen' or pre-enlightened state] cannot bear very much reality'. The Buddhist *Bardo Thodol* claims that it is only at the moment of death that the soul confronts the clear light of reality. Only those who are able to embrace, or
be embraced by, the light come to be united with that which is ultimately Real (the transcendent). Those who are not ready for this, the greater number, have to return to the cycle of rebirths (immanence) until they are ready. In Hinduism, life is a samsaric cycle of suffering, broken only by moksha or liberation. In general, in both Buddhism and Hinduism, enlightenment, liberation, awakening only happen at the end of a long process of spiritual growth. There are no short-cuts, the process cannot be hastened by force (and certainly not by any hard technology and political and monetary power, our modern idols and crutches). The readiness for what is ultimately real has to come from within. That is our role in resolving ‘the problem’ of the uncertainty or ambiguity of God.

At this point, it is worthwhile briefly defining and discussing five core themes in the attempts to comprehend God:

• Theism: The idea that there is a creator God who may be encountered within the material world but is not limited to the material world is theism. Theism entails a balance of immanence and transcendence.
• Deism: The idea of God as an external designer who created the world from the outside, and is not immanent within it, is deism. It is worth pointing out that this is not the ‘God’ of traditional theism but the God of the scientists. Ironically, such natural theology is the most frequent target of those scientific materialists and atheists who are concerned to reject all supernatural ideas. Ironically, they are marshalling all the tools of rational critique to reject a God that is the product of reason in the first place.
• Pantheism: The identification of God with all that exists in the material world is pantheism. God is immanent but not transcendent. Pantheism means literally: everything = God.
• Panentheism: The argument that God is everywhere or within all things, but is not the same as everything, is panentheism. God is within everything but also beyond everything.
• Idolatry: The literal identification of God with any individual thing or concept is idolatry. Whilst people tend to understand idolatry as applying to a physical image, it can also apply to mental concepts or doctrines. There can be an idolatry of words. The extent to which people can go to Church and subscribe to words, beliefs, and ideas which they do not live up to in
their practical lives, indicates the extent to which God can be killed by being made an idol, not an idol of stone but of words, phrases, dogma and doctrine empty of substance.

In unpacking these ideas in order to form some kind of position on immanence and transcendence, I want to focus on pantheism and panentheism. I shall write little on Deism. It isn’t the traditional view of God and has become something of a straw man for atheist scientists and materialists. It is the God erected by the natural scientists which is now being pulled down by the natural scientists, whose self-congratulation betrays an almost complete ignorance of Deism’s origins. Theism is a much more substantial proposition.

Pantheism and deism introduce the two key concepts apropos of God - the immanent and the transcendent – in extreme forms.

Pantheism affirms God’s presence in the world and in human lives. Pantheism’s God is the God within, the immanent God. Deism affirms God’s status above and beyond the ephemeral and the transitory. God is immutable and infinite in being outside of change and decay. Deism’s God is the God without, the transcendent God, the object of awe and worship.

These aspects of God may be polar opposites, but it can be difficult to avoid going from one extreme to another. In rejecting pantheism, it can be difficult to avoid embracing Deism, and vice versa, since to resist the one is to tend to the other. What is required is a balancing act which avoids swings from one to the other. This is precisely what St Thomas Aquinas offers when he explains God’s immanence in terms of his transcendence.

In The Idea of the Holy, Rudolf Otto described these aspects as mysterium fascinans, the immanent God who draws human beings to Himself, and mysterium tremendens, the transcendent God who instils a sense of dread, before whom human beings are nothing.

Pantheism seems to be the conception most appropriate to an ecological and scientific view of the world. The word pantheism is derived from two Greek words:
pan, meaning 'all', and theos, meaning 'God'. God is all and all is God. Pantheism therefore affirms that God is everywhere and everything and that everything is God.

Poetry is infused with pantheistic thought. What Shelley wrote with respect to the death of Keats offers a clear and unambiguous statement of pantheism:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird.

The philosopher Spinoza expressed the point logically in the formula 'God or Nature' (Deus sive Natura), meaning that God and Nature are one and interchangeable.

When asked if he believed in God, Einstein replied: 'I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings'. That's a complete immanence, the absorption of the human species back into vegetable or animal nature, all physical eventuality and causality, with no morality beyond reproduction and survival. No war and conflict over principles, no symbols and delusions, true; but no Bach and Beethoven, no Michelangelo, no art, no music, no poetry, nothing but indifferent biological necessity. I’m not sure what remains of humanity in the absence of everything that makes us human.

That isn’t exactly what is entailed by pantheism, mind. That’s the scientific appropriation of pantheism as a complete naturalism. A pantheistic conception still sees God in Nature, and therefore sees Nature as more than just the nature of amoral physical causality. In their desire for union with the Divine, Western mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme sought God in Nature and come very close to pantheism, without actually stating it explicitly. Whilst they were outside the mainstream doctrines of their Christian faith, and were viewed with suspicion, even considered heretical, by contemporaries, set in the context of Eastern thought,
Eckhart and Boehme can be considered exemplars of those who seek the non-dualistic experience of total absorption in the Infinite. However, bearing in mind the caution issued with respect to the language of God at the beginning of this section, this condition is beyond the power of words to describe. Further, total absorption in the Infinite is a quite different notion to total immanence with respect to Nature.

Examples of pantheism are much more visible in Eastern philosophy, both with respect to the relationship between the human and the divine, and to the affinity between human beings and the natural world. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, there is a strong emphasis on God's presence in living things: in human beings, animals, birds, fish, insects, trees and plants of all kinds. God is in all things. If God is at the same time all things, then this is a pantheistic conception. If God is in all things but also more than this, then the conception is panentheistic.

Panentheism means, literally, everything is within God or all-in-God. According to pantheism, the universe is identified with God; according to panentheism, the universe is part of God. Stated thus, panentheism seems little different to theism. Here, the classic statement is by St Thomas Aquinas, who explains God's immanence in terms of his transcendence. According to this conception, God is immanent because he is so transcendent. This is the most successful solution to the problem of immanence and transcendence since it makes it impossible to focus too much on one aspect at the expense of the other.

In this respect, all orthodox Christians are panentheists. The God of theism is already seen as immanent within all things. It is the theological equivalent of the Biblical idea that 'In him we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17.28). Believing that the universe depends upon God for its initial creation and for its continued existence, the conception is a reminder of the need for both immanence and transcendence.

My main focus in this piece is upon the Western concept of God. I am arguing against extremes of immanence and transcendence and arguing for a balance between the two, a balance achieved by a proper sense of divinity. It is, however, worth noting, in passing, that the Hindu tradition maintains a similar balance between immanence and transcendence, preventing either from going to extremes. A brief comment here is in order.
Prince Arjuna’s dharma requires him to fight, but he has no wish to do so for a number of reasons. Instead, Arjuna is keen to behave like a Brahmin, who should not pollute himself with the shedding of blood. His charioteer, Krishna, the Supreme Deity, rebukes him with the words that it is ‘better to do one’s own dharma badly than another’s dharma well’.

My question is where, in this doing one’s dharma, is moral choice and moral autonomy? The Latin word ‘mores’ has different social implications than ethics, with morals being the customs of a society in a given time and place. Does dharma vary in such a way?

In answering these questions we need to understand how eternity and liberation are connected.

Although the writings of its legendary founder, the Samkhya-karika, only belong to the third century CE, samkhya is often referred to as the oldest known philosophical system in the world, dating back the Indus Valley civilization which came to an end around 1700 BCE. In the Svetasvatara Upanishad it is described as:
Eternal among eternals, conscious among the conscious, the One among the many, he disposes over desires: he is the cause, he can be comprehended in theory (samkhya) as in spiritual exercise (yoga); knowing this God a man is from every fetter freed.

It is also described in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Krishna tells Arjuna:

This wisdom has been revealed to thee in theory (samkhya); listen now to how it should be practised (yoga): if by this wisdom thou art exercised, thou wilt put off the bondage inherent in all works.

Hindu philosophical teaching diagnoses the causes of suffering, and then prescribes a remedy which leads to its cessation. The Hindu philosopher is a doctor of the spirit. The attainment of spiritual liberation described as nirvana, or *moksha*. *Samkyha* means 'enumeration', probably for the detailed way it analyzes human personality. What is of most interest in this discussion of immanence and transcendence is the fact that *samkyha* is a dualistic system that postulates two ultimate or eternal realities, *purusha* (the soul or cosmic spirit) and *prakriti* (the body or matter). The cause of suffering is the result of the fact that *purusha* is not identical with *prakriti*, so that spirit and matter are ill-balanced. Whilst the *purusha* is essentially free, it is so entangled with matter that it appears to be in bondage to it, hence the sense of suffering. The awareness that human beings have of a state that *transcends* the realities of phenomenal experience, and the desire to attain that state, is evidence of the existence of *purusha*. The existence of prakriti is self-evident at the sensory level of phenomenal experience.

*Samkyha* divides prakriti into 24 parts, the most important of which are the three *gunas* or strands, which are responsible for the tendency to evolution or change, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. *Tamas* is darkness, the coarse quality which results in ignorance. *Rajas* is activity or passion. It leads to craving and desire. *Sattva* is potential consciousness, goodness, pleasure, pain, bewilderment. Whilst *Sattva* may be described as good in relation to *tamas* and *rajas*, it still binds the *purusha* to things like wisdom and joy, thus apparently depriving it of freedom. *Sattva*, *rajas* and
tamas therefore hold the purusha in bondage like a chain. Spiritual liberation is attained by freeing the purusha from the influence of the three gunas.

In terms of the balance of immanence and transcendence, we need to understand that the dualism of samkhya is not one of good and evil, or real and unreal, but of the unchangeable and the constantly changing. Samkhya is a non-theistic system and requires no external agency (God or God’s grace) to facilitate the process of liberation. Any assistance in this process comes from prakriti, which, although it causes bondage, also provides the experiences that lead to detachment and freedom in the end.

Hindu scriptures express the belief that God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-pervading. The Bhagavad-Gita sees a divine spark, aspects or attributes of divinity, in every possible aspect of the creation. In Chapter 10, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna that ‘the best of everything in the world is a part of me’. The creation, maintenance, and annihilation of the cosmos is entirely down to the Supreme Will. "I am the origin, the end, existence, and the maintainer (of all)" (Gita 10.32). "Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both its origin and dissolution" (Gita 10.8). "By my will it is manifested again and again and by my will it is annihilated at the end" (Gita 9.8).

In the eleventh chapter, Arjuna sees the entire world in Krishna, as the deity shows his cosmic form. In fine, Hinduism affirms that God and prakrti (nature) are interrelated. Liberation is seeing ourselves as part of the whole, doing none harm.

Seeing God in nature, and human beings in nature, has ecological implications. The Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth holds that a person may come back as an animal or a bird. Hindus are called to give other species not only respect, but reverence. This reverence finds expression in the doctrine of ahimsa, nonviolence (or non-harm or non-injury) against other species and human beings alike. Ahimsa is a part of keeping pure. One finds the principle stated in the Mahabharata (written between 300 BCE and 300 CE) asserts: “That mode of living which is founded upon total harmlessness towards all creatures or (in the case of necessity) upon a minimum of such harm, is the highest morality.”
The doctrine of *ahimsa* presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth (*punarjanma*). The belief that the soul continues to take birth in different life-forms, such as birds, fish, animals, and humans, lies behind the profound opposition in the Hindu religion (and in Buddhist and Jain religions) to the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds, and fish for human consumption. The abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is considered unjust and sacrilegious.

In Hinduism, God and *dharma* are inseparably linked and combined with *moksha* or liberation from the *samsaric* cycle of birth and rebirth. Since *dharma* and *moksha* are social, not individual concepts, there can be no division between religion and politics. Gandhi linked this ethical principle of reverence for life to the political principle of non-violent resistance. In the *Gita Krishna*, God is a friend (*bandhu*) who comes to Arjuna in his time of distress. It is in this sense that, as Gandhi said, 'Truth is God'. But this is not truth as an impersonal absolute, or as a substitute for God, but as a clarification of what God meant by the term. This is what Gandhi meant by the word *satyagraha*, truth force. 'Its root meaning is holding onto truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force.' And that is the resolution of Arjuna’s dilemma.

In Hinduism, Brahman is sometimes understood as an impersonal term for God, denoting something akin to ‘absolute reality’. However, there are two concepts of Brahman: Nirguna Brahman, denoting the eternal, self-existent reality of God, and Saguna Brahman, denoting the personal aspect of God, seen in his relationship with his creation. I want now to link this to the two concepts of God in the Hebrew Bible, *Elohim* (the God of physical Creation) and *Hashem* (the God of personal Love, human relationships). There isn’t, in other words, just the one simple ‘God’ but two complementary concepts.

That balance unites the worlds of fact and value, the physical and moral universe, so as to create an active role for moral freedom and choice, for personal relationships which are at some autonomy from physical necessity. That’s a view which favours panentheism over pantheism. Pantheism seems to be the more
scientifically defensible proposition, and is precisely the way that Einstein reads Spinoza’s God. However, pantheism is problematical for a couple of reasons.

The problem with pantheism is that if God is identified solely and completely with Nature, then sooner or later He will cease to be. The immanent God is a finite God, who, with all life on this planet, will one day be either frozen or burned into non-existence. There is no meaning beyond finite nature.

Maybe we could see panentheism as combining the central affirmations of pantheism, deism and theism to create a more sympathetic conception of God. Like pantheism, panentheism affirms that God exists throughout the whole of Nature. Panentheism offers a way of saving God from this fate suffered by all finite things by affirming, along deistic lines, His omnipresence throughout the universe and beyond. In other words, God is not limited by what He has created. This adds the element of transcendence in order to give meaning and direction to immanent nature. Once we add to this the interventionist theology of theism, conceiving God in terms of the partnership ethics adumbrated by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in The Great Partnership (2011), we have established the foundations of the most comprehensive relationship possible between God, the universe, human beings and all other forms of life.

In denying the distinction between the divine and the non-divine, God and Nature, pantheism seems to invite atheism. If God is immanent in Nature and no more, then all we are left with is the God of Creation, Elohim, a purely material universe of physical fact, event and causality. And this is, indeed, Einstein’s God, the God of the scientists. There is little distance at all from the proposition that God is Nature and Nature is God to the view that there is no God other than Nature. Spinoza was accused of atheism for his formula Deus sive Natura. Strictly speaking, Spinoza was a monist, in that he argued that God is the only thing that really exists at all, with everything else as a quality of that single divine substance. Which goes to show that the pantheist conception is capable of sustaining a belief in God, to the extent that we can see Nature as sacred, an enchanted world. It is possible to adhere to a pantheism which remains the right side of the line that passes over into atheism and the view that Nature is just physical fact and causality and no more. The problems come with what Weber called the disenchantment of the world, the driving of sacred purpose out of Nature as a result of increasing technological mastery.
At this point, Nature becomes no more than amoral and indifferent physical causes and effects, and it is human technical powers and products that come to be invested with divinity.

If ultimate reality is identified with the material world, then it seems inevitable that science should replace religion. Strictly speaking, if we follow Darwin’s view that there is only a difference in degree and not a difference in kind between human beings and other animals, and if we recognise that the human species is but one species of many within Nature’s web, then the notion of human uniqueness has to be abandoned as an unwarranted theological assumption. Richard Dawkins writes of deflating human self-importance. And it is easy to envisage how seeing ‘man’s place in the universe’ (T.H. Huxley) could entail a scaling back of human hubris and fantasy and pomposity to bring life back within our natural grasp. This is what John Gray has in mind in the series of books he has issued on the many delusions attendant upon a belief in progress.

One should bear in mind, though, Pope Benedict XVI’s view that it is only one short step from abandoning God to abandoning the human subject as such.

One should also recall philosopher Immanuel Kant’s argument concerning God, the immortal soul and freedom. Kant argued that whilst knowledge of the existence of our own freedom, as well as God and the immortal soul cannot be theoretically demonstrated, these ideas are necessary presuppositions of moral conduct — objects of moral belief or faith rather than knowledge. For Kant, the practical "ideas" of ‘freedom’, ‘God’, and ‘immortality’ are the necessary supports of morality, the conditions that are required for the objectivity of moral experience. Unlike the categories of the understanding, the ideas of ‘God’, ‘freedom’ and ‘immortality’ are neither abstracted or derived from experience nor applicable within it. For Kant, the ideas of pure reason have a legitimate use, and yield a "canon", but in the field of morality, not science (A 795—831 /B 823—59). Scientific knowledge of the existence of God, of immortality and of the immaterial soul is impossible; these are incapable of rational theoretical demonstration. For both rationalists and empiricists, this is the end of the matter. Not so, Kant argues, and this is the important point to grasp. Knowledge of human freedom is also incapable of
scientific demonstration, but this does not imply the end of freedom as a value. On the contrary, human beings think and act as though human freedom is real, an integral part of Being, implying the existence of an underlying moral truth which is beyond rational scientific demonstration but which, in its practical effect, is no less real for that. Kant’s solution is to argue that whilst God, immortality and freedom cannot be theoretically proven, they do not need to be. They exist in the realm of morality, not science; they are objects of moral belief or faith rather than knowledge, necessary presuppositions of moral conduct. Hence the meaning of Kant’s statement that he found it necessary "to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (CPuR B xx).

The ‘death of God’, therefore, through subjecting the realm of morality to scientific principles, is also the death of human freedom, of morality as such (I argue these points in much greater detail in Peter Critchley Kant’s Natural Teleology and Moral Praxis 2012).

The death of God thus becomes the death of humanity, of human autonomy, morality, dignity. This is a dangerous step to take in conditions of economic and ecological crisis, when resources are scarce and could well get even more scarce. More than ever, we are going to need morality and a moral position that embraces each and all and even extends the moral circle so as to encompass all animal and plant life.

Moral values are necessary suppositions of a human life that is worth living. So when John Gray writes of the delusions of morality, the self and human uniqueness, we should be clear that we are in Nietzsche’s world following the death of God, a world which for Nietzsche was beyond good and evil. Think about it. Without the overarching moral framework attendant upon the belief in God, there is nothing that is absolutely good any more. And if nothing can be absolutely good, then nothing can be absolutely evil any more. That may sound liberating, and Nietzsche was all in favour of the joyful science. But Nietzsche also knew that living as gods was an onerous responsibility that human beings may fall far short of, with potentially appalling consequences.

It seems impossible to maintain a sense of human uniqueness without a conception of God. Fine, those committed to a complete naturalism of existence
may say, let us discard human uniqueness. But I wonder how many are truly prepared to accept the human species taking its place alongside other animal and plant species, in terms of being dissolved back into natural necessity rather than raising all life up into the realm of moral freedom. The moral circle should be expanded, not dissolved. A total absorption into nature would appear to be a genuinely ecological conception, considered purely from the viewpoint of science. The only problem is that this doesn't appear to be how human beings see themselves. Maybe that sense of human arrogance is the problem, and maybe there is no way of resolving human arrogance other than by developing a moral ecology, that is, an ecological conception in which human beings cease waging technological war with nature and abandon ambitions of conquest and mastery, but assume moral responsibility within Creation.

But the fact that the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who argued endlessly against religion, refused to consider the 'external world' an object for religious devotion, yet continued to believe that human beings were the highest beings, and continued to be absorbed in the problems of the human world, indicates the extent to which it is easy to repudiate God whilst holding onto God's theological underpinnings. It could be argued that Russell himself experienced something akin to 'cosmic emotion' with respect to mathematics and philosophy. In *The Problems of Philosophy* Russell argues that philosophy is to be studied 'above all because, through the greatness of the universe which philosophy contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good'. (Russell (H.U.L. 1912), p. 250; Guthrie 2000 ch 4).

This union with the universe is precisely what mystics like Eckhart and Boehme were attempting to achieve when they sought God in Nature. I find it impossible to distinguish Russell's mysticism with respect to mathematics and philosophy from what R. C. Zaehner called 'nature mysticism'. I think such views, involve, whether explicitly or implicitly, the idea of immanence containing a divine presence which is more than a merely physical world considered as a system of interrelated things. How else is one to make sense of Russell's lifelong, passionate commitment to the political causes of peace, freedom, industrial
democracy and social justice despite his recognition that the world is finite, meaningless, indifferent to human beings and human ends?

In *A Free Man's Worship* Russell faces a reality indifferent to humanity square in the face.

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labour of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

Those truths provide a scaffolding only for the gallows, they are not firm foundations whatsoever. The soul cannot live within the confines of such a world, only suffocate and die. Russell's statement here reveals the greatest problem with the immanentist conception, its identification of God, and the infinite spirit and immortal soul of human beings, with the finite world.

And once one recognises this, then the conception of God/Nature tends to recover a sense of transcendence. It is simply impossible to make sense of Russell’s life as a philosopher, mathematician and political and social activist without seeing an element of transcendence at work. And this entails the theological sense of human uniqueness, here, expressed in the form of simplicity and humility.

Despite accusations of atheism, despite the words of Einstein’s recommendation, I do not think that Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* affirms a God
which is literally identical with the physical world studied by natural science, though many may follow Einstein and argue that is. In *Spinoza and the Rule of Reason* (2007), I argue that Spinoza shows how it is possible to realise the ‘higher’ ideals of morality without having to de-nature human beings. Spinoza’s ethics are realised by realising nature. The greater the adequacy of ideas, the greater the power and independence of human beings in relation to the world.

The point I want to establish here is that if God is identified in a literal sense with the world of physical fact, even and causality – *Elohim* – then science will take the place of religion, with any number of implications. *Hashem*, the God of personal relationships, sustaining morality and the moral law, will go, along with meaning, the sense of human uniqueness, the dignity of the human subject, the view that human beings are capable of giving moral ends to themselves. Instead of moral choice and agency, there will be description and explanation relating to physical cause and effect. And there will be complete immanence in the sense of being enchained to amoral and indifferent biological necessity. The species interest will be in control of its individual members.

Nietzsche wrote of the death of God. We have killed him, he wrote, with reference to the way that scientific advance has revealed the world to be meaningless. As my above reference to Kant showed, the advance of science is not fatal to God and morality at all. Kant separates morality and science, faith and knowledge and so retains moral values as necessary suppositions of human freedom. But in the modern world, science is encroaching upon the realm of moral values, even though science, dealing with the world of fact, must remain silent in the world of value.

Many are inclined to see ‘the death of God’ as such as a liberation, but they overlook the profound implications entailed by this development. For Nietzsche, the death of God means that we have entered a world beyond good and evil, a world beyond morality. Kant referred to moral values, God and freedom, as the necessary presuppositions of moral conduct.
For Nietzsche, the death of God also entails the repudiation of these necessary presuppositions. Nietzsche’s response to the death of God involved references to idols, falsities, and illusions. Nietzsche saw clearly that whilst many would find it easy to abandon the idea of God as the perfect being, they would continue to believe that behind the changing world of appearances, a higher or more perfect world of stable values would continue to exist, a reality against which the transitory present could be judged. Nietzsche’s view was that the death of God called for the revaluation of all values. The discarding of all theological assumptions gave human beings the onerous moral responsibility of becoming gods. ‘Man ought not to know more of a thing than he can creatively live up to,’ Nietzsche cautioned.

My argument is that what Kant called the necessary suppositions of moral conduct do not go away, they are displaced, investing things with moral significance. My further point is that whilst the death of God is easily enough accomplished, there remains the problem of the continued existence of a whole set of theological assumptions, assumptions upon which society and its moral codes have been founded. To the extent that these are not discarded in the revaluation of all values, then they remain and function as some kind of hidden god. These theological assumptions would have to go somewhere. ‘Things’ come to be deified. Nietzsche clearly saw the dangers of the new idols of state, war and bureaucracy coming to be invested with divine significance. The state and its cult of power has become the new religion, the state is the ‘new idol’, as Nietzsche put it (Stauth and Turner 1988:54 56/7 210 216 216/7).

With the dissolution of morality through the encroachment of science, we come to be reduced to Nature as an amoral mechanism devoid of purpose and meaning. Nietzsche wrote of a world of power beyond good and evil, but John Gray rejection of progress in favour of natural cycles amounts to a reversion to a world before good and evil. That may well be implied in Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, or it may be Gray’s reading of Gaia. But it is a world without morality, and it is the great merit of Nietzsche to have spelled out the implications of such a world with extreme force, clarity and vigour.

The death of God, which for Nietzsche meant the death of the Christian God, implied the death of the Christian morality which had given meaning and order to civilisation for millennia. ‘When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives
oneself of the right to Christian morality. Christian morality is a command: its origin is transcendental ... it possesses truth only if God is truth - it stands or falls with the belief in God.' That implies the end of kindness, compassion, forgiveness and everything else involved in loving our neighbours as ourselves.

One could, with Nietzsche, see this optimistically, as a world of power being expressed 'joyfully', that is, creatively and positively. Some such notion can be found in Spinoza's sense of joy (even though Nietzsche seems not to have appreciated Spinoza). And that would seem to be how John Gray sees humanity once it rediscovers its places within natural cycles. The Aristotelian sense of flourishing, which I shall defend later, becomes a kind of healthy functioning within the whole natural organism.

I think Nietzsche can entertain such a vision, Spinoza too. I'm not sure that that's available to Gray with his sinking of humanity back into natural cycles. Those cycles are morally blind and indifferent. Power here is firmly part of a species interest and natural necessity. Later, I shall argue for necessity in the essentialist terms of potentials and their realisation. And I also emphasise the creative role that morality has to play in an essentialist metaphysics.

For now, I want to follow up the implications of the death of God without the necessary revaluation of values. That is, failure to attain the 'joyful' universe of creative powers pursued by Nietzsche leaves us morally adrift in a world of alien powers and/or biological imperatives. This is not a world of freedom and joy, but of social and natural necessity. And here, the loss of morality is felt.

To his credit, Nietzsche was clear, in a way that his acolytes have not been, that once the belief in objective morality is abandoned, the categorical imperative of justice goes too. Without a divine Judge, we can have no reason to expect justice. No God means that there is no transcendental 'Thou shalt not'. We are no longer entitled to talk of what is just and unjust, since these terms no longer have meaning. If there is no justice, neither can there be injustice. There can be no injustice in harm, oppression,
exploitation, destruction, since life naturally works that way, that is, Nature harms, oppresses, exploits, and destroys as part of its natural cycles.

In rejecting the extreme of transcendence, John Gray is firmly embracing the polar extreme of immanence. In taking his stand on nature’s circularity, Gray wants to expose progress as a delusion. Fine. But it is the plainest delusion to believe that, under pressure of some perceived necessity or imperative written into nature and biology, that we can abandon belief in God and leave nothing unchanged. There remains Kant’s argument concerning the necessary presuppositions of moral conduct – which Gray also abandons, regardless of the consequences for social life – and there remains the theological assumptions which accompanied the belief in God. Gray is at least aware that it is the plainest insanity to think that our technological powers can substitute for real gods. What he fails to appreciate is that there are other ways of constructing and pursuing progress than this particular form.

For Nietzsche, we are in a world ‘beyond good and evil’, beyond morality, beyond justice. Nietzsche was aware of the encroachment of Darwinism in politics, and he rejected the reduction of humanity to biologism. His joyful science seems to imply a humanity beyond not only morality but also beyond nature’s limits and constraints. It is the purest transcendence, a world beyond the natural and social nature of human beings.

I am more interested in what the world ‘beyond good and evil’, which Nietzsche made the corollary of scientific nihilism, implies for the social world in which we mere mortals, men and women as human beings and not gods, have to live in. John Gray writes of the meaningless of existence. This is the scientific view. Kant was clear that God and freedom cannot be scientific proven, but nevertheless remain the necessary presuppositions of moral conduct. Gray takes the scientific view in which all talk of moralities and divinities is merely so much meaningless talk. Without God, there is no objective morality, only value judgements, mere subjective opinions, all equally true and by the same token all equally false. Moral nihilism seems an inevitable corollary of scientific nihilism, if we allow science to encroach upon the world of value, if we dissolve the world of moral value into the world of physical fact.
Nietzsche’s anti-moralism is not cheap. The atheistic materialists who so readily embrace a world without God have missed what to Nietzsche was the essential point – that the abandonment of Christian ethics through a scientific materialism creates the space for a viciously Darwinian denouement. For Nietzsche, the world beyond good and evil is a world of power. Nietzsche wanted that power to be expressed creatively as a condition of human health.

That may sound ‘joyous’, but we should relate this world of power to Nietzsche’s rejection of Christianity as a ‘slave morality’ which preserves the weak and constrains the strong. In this world without morality, the strong must eliminate the weak, might must prevail over right, the rich must prey on the poor. The principle of caring for the weak and the needy is condemned as contrary to nature and stands in the way of the full working of the logic of power. The Christian ideal of the universal love of humanity means, in practice, ‘the preference for the suffering, underprivileged, degenerate: it has in fact lowered and weakened the strength, the responsibility, the lofty duty to sacrifice men’. It must therefore be discarded.

Nietzsche writes some chilling words in *The Will to Power*.

The biblical prohibition ‘thou shalt not kill’ is a piece of naivety compared with the seriousness of the prohibition of life to decadents: ‘thou shalt not procreate’. Life itself recognizes no solidarity, no ‘equal rights’, between the healthy and the degenerate parts of an organism: one must excise the latter - or the whole will perish. - Sympathy for decadents, equal rights for the ill-constituted - that would be the profoundest immorality, that would be antinature itself as morality!

We need to bear these words in mind when one reads John Gray denouncing progress as a myth, asserting that nature’s eternal cycles are all that exist. Whatever condition Nietzsche describes in the passage above, it does not denote progress of any kind. It has all the indifference and cruelty of nature unleavened by human morality.
Civilisation requires deep thought, commitment and confidence, an ongoing moral and practical effort at creating and sustaining meaning and purpose and order. Without that, we collapse back into the total immanence of natural necessity, and the result is seldom pleasant. There is no Eden to retreat back to, we are charged with the responsibility of creating the new Eden. Whilst Gray may consider such a view a myth inherited from Judaeo-Christian religion, it is also a view consistent with Kant’s reference to practical ideas of morality as the necessary presuppositions of moral conduct in social life.

Nietzsche was clear that the death of God charged human beings with the responsibility to live as gods. The question is whether or not human beings are capable of creatively living up to their powers, and this entails much more than wielding technological powers over against nature. To live as gods means to live up to the objective morality once underwritten by God. To the extent that the physical powers of human beings have come to be infused with the theological assumptions once invested in God, then progress is indeed a delusion, and a dangerous and destructive one at that. But this does not justify some amoral embrace of natural cycles. This is merely to exchange one external necessity for another, an alienated society for an indifferent nature.

If the death of God is simply interpreted as the end of good and evil, the end of morality, then the assertion of power will bring only an illusory freedom that proceeds only within the firm constraints of blind natural imperatives. That’s what natural cycles are all about, a species interest in control of its individual members. Max Weber wrote that the institutions of capitalist modernity proceed ‘without regard for persons’. So too do natural cycles. In such an amoral condition, human beings will become brutal, ruthless, mean and hard; they will deny the moral law within and harden their hearts; they will be endlessly engaged in seeking to impose their will on others; they will eliminate the weak, the poor, the disabled, all those deemed subhuman. And technical power will magnify the violence that objective morality has restrained for so long. For, make no mistake, if we dissolve our moral values and deny our moral capacity, we shall not disinvent our technical know-how. If Gray thinks otherwise, he is plainly deluded. The solutions to the dilemmas of progress in the modern world lie not in
denying human power, dissolving it back into nature and its cycles, but in assuming moral and conscious collective responsibility for it.

Human existence in all its variety, ingenuity and creativity is tied in with technology as it always has been. Technology is what defines our time and place today and every day, back into the most distant beginnings of humanity. There may never have been a time when technology, however humble, was not widely used but, as it gets more and more comprehensive in its effects, it is certain that we must make it subservient to the biological health of this planet. We are rooted in the earth and it is to the earth that we shall return no matter how sophisticated the shields and mirrors that blind us to that ultimate destiny.

Kingdon 1993: 332/3

We must make human power compatible with planetary boundaries, seeing human flourishing and planetary flourishing as two aspects of the same thing.

We have had plenty of reasons since Nietzsche to doubt that human beings could come to live up to the responsibility of being gods. A progress measured in these terms is indeed a delusion. What has happened is that, with the death of God, the theological assumptions underpinning the belief in God have not gone away. Instead, detached from God as a positive figure giving moral meaning to life and supplying ends within an overarching conception of a moral order, these theological assumptions have become the underpinnings of a secular religion of 'progress'. Moral ends have been displaced by means invested with divine significance. The forces of science, technology and industry have become the new idols of a dis-godded, disenchanted, rationalised world. And this has upset the whole ratio between immanence and transcendence. As a result, human civilisation is being stretched beyond its limits, transgressing planetary boundaries and inviting complete collapse back within natural confines.

My argument is that in a disenchanted and rationalised world which has been robbed of divine significance and moral meaning, we are swinging wildly between the extremes of immanence and transcendence and that we need to
regain the sense of nature that is an immanence that is in balance with and is complemented and completed by transcendence. I think that this balance is achieved by an essentialist metaphysics, whether this is theistic, as in the work of St Thomas Aquinas, or naturalistic, as in the tradition of Aristotle.

What we have at the moment is the immanence of a material world entirely lacking in moral meaning, the physical universe studied by natural science, and the transcendence of a machine world pursuing infinity within a world of finite resources. The position is unsustainable.

So, my argument is that Nietzsche’s 'death of God' thesis leaves us with two alternatives.

Either, we go the whole hog and completely abandon the theological assumptions which sustain the belief in God and which entails an abandonment of an overarching moral framework. This would be the revaluation of all values demanded by Nietzsche. As a complete moral autonomy from nature, or a complete absorption into natural necessity, the position is untenable. Nietzsche rejected Darwinian biological necessity but went mad trying to live up to his nihilism. As finite beings, human beings cannot be purely self-creating beings; only gods can be that.

Or, we recognise the inextinguishable yearning of the human spirit to a transcendent reality. In which case, we have to resolve the inversion of means and ends which characterises the modern world, and seek a re-enchantment which once more places human ends over technical, instrumental means. What we have at the moment is a halfway house that, predictably, is misfiring. The world of means has been invested with divine significance. The theological assumptions going spare given the absence of God in the dis-godded world have come to be attached to ‘things’ and are supporting a secular myth of progress as salvation. We are caught between the immanence of a material world that is all physical causality and no more, and the complete transcendence of that world via our technical powers. Predictably, as with the swing from pantheism to Deism and
back again, the inability to connect immanence and transcendence is sending the world to extremes. No wonder that H.G. Wells went from writing *Men as Gods* in 1922s to *Mind at the End of its Tether* in 1945. Simple identifications of science, technology and industry with progress could not survive depression, mass unemployment, fascism, Stalinism, world war and the atom bomb.

So we are left searching for God. This in itself is not a problem. We are supposed to search for God. It’s part of living the examined life. If God was immediately present face-to-face, we would never play our role in the partnership, would never exercise our moral freedom to bring about the divine in the world.

And therein lies the problem with immanentism. The immanent God is the finite God. The human yearning for transcendence stems from that need for meaning by contact with the infinite. Remove God from the picture, and the vertical projection beyond the immanent world comes to be horizontalised within the material world. Failing to exercise our moral capacity to search for and find God, we come to deify and venerate our technical powers. The result is the pursuit of infinity within a finite world. The result of seeing ourselves, through our technical powers, as gods, and of coming to use these powers to live as gods is the dissipation of the earthly ground of our being.

What we need is a conception of an ultimate reality that transcends the world as it is conceived by physical science. This can be done by recognition of the capacity of human beings as moral beings to supply ends to themselves. This can also be linked to an understanding of natural essences. Through a genuine recognition of manifestations of potentiality and actuality, human beings gain an awareness of the ultimate ground of all finite existence, a reality which transcends immediate experience and which human beings are morally free to choose or reject. This philosophy is firmly grounded in the human experience in transcending the sphere of physical nature, the immanent world studied by natural science, to tend towards an ultimate reality which is shaped by human moral ends.

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6 PLATO, ART AND ETERNITY

According to the philosophy of Spinoza, this would be to see the world ‘under the aspect of eternity’ (*sub specie aeternitatis*) and not just ‘under the aspect of time’ (*sub specie durationis*). Spinoza sees the intellectual recognition of facts, impassively, without the intrusion of subjective fears and hopes. To attain objectivity in face of rationally ascertained truth is to achieve eternal life through the intellectual love of God/Nature: ‘he who understands himself and his emotions loves God, and the more so the more he understands himself and his emotions’ (E 5, 15). Arising necessarily from the pursuit of knowledge, this delineates an intellectual love of God/Nature (*amor intellectualis Dei*) through activity of mind. Such a mind rejoices constantly in the object of its contemplation.

We are in that eternal realm that connects all the transcendental idealists - Plato, Plotinus, Dante, Berkeley, Blake, Kant. Plato asks: ‘how can he who has magnificence of mind and is the spectator of all time and all existence, think much of human life?’ But being a spectator of the objective world is not simply contemplative or passive, but entails the idea of participating in a higher realm. This becomes clear in Plato’s conception of art and the role of the artist in relating us to eternity and Being.

In Plato’s hierarchy of values, the desire for the human body ranks lowest on the scale. The body is of time; there is nothing permanent to it, it soon passes and decays. Highest on Plato’s scale of values is the desire to produce ‘eternity’, the ideals of truth, goodness and beauty. Accordingly, Plato expresses a love for eternity which is a higher form of love than the ‘human’ desire for the body, which is merely transient. Plato’s *extraordinary* love is transcendent in being beyond sense experience, and relates us to eternal life and to Being itself. This love transcends the life of the here and now, the transitory affairs of human beings absorbed in the reproduction of everyday life. Plato’s conception is an ode to art and to the artist. So much so that Max Schoen writes this paean to art:

An Art work cannot be anything but wholesome in its influence. ... It raises the self to a realm of experience cleansed of the dross and dirt, the strife and
struggle, the back-biting and back-sliding, which often ... are the substance of day-to-day existence.... No one can leave... a great performance of a great play or symphony without feeling that he has been in touch with perfection; that for a moment which was also an eternity, God was truly in His Heaven. This is good at its highest because it is life at its best.

Schoen 1944: 20

In truth, that overstates Plato’s view. Plato does not justify all art, art as such, in these terms. This is art its highest when life is at its best and the true, the good and the beautiful are attained in unity. The idea that ‘art with a clear and independent ethical purpose is preferable to the concept of “art for art’s sake”’ and a ‘pure’ aestheticism … which negates any involvement with ethics’ (Margherita Muller Under what stars to plough the earth? The aesthetics and ethics of three Scottish gardens 2012) has a clear Platonic resonance (and also Aristotelian, in the reference to ‘purpose’, telos, of which I shall write more later). Independence in the Platonic sense would refer to the way that art takes us beyond transitory temporal concerns and relates us to eternal life and Being itself. Thus, artists realize, not merely their personal dream, but also the ideal plan for humanity designed from eternity by God. The thinking is clearly teleological, in that there is a purpose at work. (Republic. 395c ff., Laws 903b ff. 817b f).

The question, then, is whether, upon entering the realm of eternity, time and space cease to exist. To understand Plato’s point concerning art, we need to understand how Plato’s community is organised according to eternal principles and purposes.

In creating objective works of art, the artist believes that s/he is fulfilling his or her function as an artist, producing a painting, a poem, a statue, a piece of music. The artist detaches his/her personality from such works, going on to create other works, also similarly detachable. So detached, Plato points out, the creative vitality seems to leave the artist, or the work, left to itself. (Ion 535d f. Protagoras. 347b f , Phaedrus 275d f, Theaetetus 165e f, 171c f, Sophistes 243a f.) But such an artist has no further conception of his/her function beyond creation. The artist is completing a technical job to order, marketing a product precisely the same way as a carpenter, weaver, or potter does.
This is not Plato’s artist at all. Plato’s artist is a creative being and does not produce detachable objects to be exposed for sale, handed around, maybe criticized unfairly and rejected. For Plato, the artists’ creativity is an integral part of the community life. In contributing to that life, the artist demonstrates an active citizenship and produces art which is never detachable. The community is a living and growing thing, developing as part of a plan designed from eternity in accordance with the principles of the true, the good and the beautiful. The artist participates in that life and that growth, interpenetrating with others and with the community as a whole, in the process coming to unfold eternal principles. The artist thus copies, produces, and identifies with the spirit of citizenship in his/her full personality. The Platonic artist is never detached from community life, and that life is never detached from the artist. It lives in his life and in the life of his fellows. (Republic 395 ff; The Laws 664e ff., 817b f).

The artist is therefore the creative individual who gives birth to eternal forms, to truth, beauty, and goodness. Plato has been accused of being anti-woman in this respect, creating a transcendent male realm of creation to replace the natural female realm in which women give birth to life. (In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy A Cavarero 1995 Polity). Such a reading misses Plato’s central point spectacularly (and contradicts the familiar feminist anti-essentialist piety that ‘biology is not destiny’). Plato is affirming an ethical position that is beyond biological nature and which raises both men and women to the eternal realm which is highest on the scale of values.

There is no denying that transcendence has often functioned as a male fantasy in denial of live-giving female nature, and that is certainly how it is functioning today with the massive military and technological armament of a machine world increasingly detached from Nature. But Plato’s transcendentalism is of an altogether different kind. Platonic love is both sexless and timeless, it is beyond biology and history and mechanical materialism and reveals the higher, rational humanity in all of us, male and female. Further, Plato’s transcendental idealism (as expressed in the Phaedo and Georgias) is balanced and buttressed by the ‘mixed life’ of The Laws, combining idealism with realism and humanism. The finite with the infinite.

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7 THE FINITE IN PURSUIT OF THE INFINITE

Margherita Muller *Hope*

As I ebb’d with the ocean of life (Walt Whitman)

Dawn and dusk. As the end of night is the beginning of day. “‘Tis always morning somewhere in the world.” (R.H. Horne).

The sun descends to calm the turbulent seas, as if seeking the perfect unity of immanence and transcendence. The seas remain turbulent, though. The human race has ever looked upwards to the sun, and at some point the sky god overthrew the ancient earth goddess, human beings projecting their power over, above and even against nature. It’s time to stop deifying the means by which we transcend our earthly existence and come back down to Earth to seek peace and tranquillity through the reconciliation of transcendence and immanence in the ground of our being. The blissful reunion of sky and sea/land when day is done and life has run its course. There can be no more than that, and there doesn’t need to be. That cycle is complete and self-contained. But, if the seas remain turbulent, can we do this? Are we seeking reconciliation with nature’s endless cycles? Or escape from them? Where does power reside?
So, what are we looking at here? Drawing down the sun; All things flow away; The destiny of all things; The origin and end of all things; as it began, so shall it end.

Not underground but in the growths of the upper air
And they feel the sun and rain,
And the energy again
That made them what they were!

(Thomas Hardy – Transformations)

Are we geocentric beings or heliocentric beings? Can we live under the aspect of eternity? Or are we destined to see the defeat of all our hopes as beings absorbed in time?

The price of participation in the sublime is as much storm and stress as any mortal can withstand. Nature is indifferent, so is said. As Kenneth Clark pointed out, no great artist has ever observed these violent, hostile moods of nature as closely as Turner; and Turner was without hope. (Clark 1969: 309). 'Hope, hope, fallacious hope,' Turner wrote, 'where is thy market now?'

Well, not in nature it seems. Modern science, it seems, declares in favour of hopelessness and meaninglessness.

Francis Crick writes (his emphasis), 'Chance is the only true source of novelty'. (Crick 1982: 58.) In similar terms, Nobel-prize winning biologist Jacques Monod uncompromisingly puts human beings in their insignificant place within nature:

The ancient covenant is in pieces; man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by
chance. Neither his destiny nor his duty have been written down. The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for him to choose.

Monod 1972: 167

Chance deprives us of even a fate or a destiny which, however unalterable, would entail some meaning, some standard by which to make sense of our lives as we live them.

This may (or may not) be scientifically accurate, but it isn’t remotely humanly accurate.

This condition of meaninglessness and hopelessness is what Rebecca Goldstein calls ‘the sad sight of human life untouched by transcendence. (Goldstein 2010: 308.) Without a sense of the transcendent, there is nothing but indifferent physical fact. We need a sense of the sun radiating joy to give hope in a world that could quickly engulf the spirit within its physical confines.

The poet Wallace Stevens writes of the ‘The Plain Sense of Things’

It is as if

We had come to an end of the imagination,

Inanimate in an inert savoir.

Stevens 1997: 428

As the great and scandalously overlooked philosopher Giambattista Vico argued in the New Science:
If people lose their religion, nothing remains to keep them living in a society. They have no shield for their defence, no basis for their decisions, no foundation for their stability, and no form by which they exist in the world.

Vico 1999: 490

It's no wonder that light has forever been considered the way to truth. The sun is the source of our power and energy, it radiates joy and gives hope.

The heliocentric, or 'sun-centred' theory of the cosmos, which posits that the Earth circles around the sun, is considered to be the watershed moment when science and religion parted company. But it all depends on how one understands science and religion. For Marsilio Ficino, the sun is the embodiment of God. Indeed, it is worth recalling that the Hermetic tradition located the seat of the anima mundi in the sun. Described as the Visible god' and a 'second god', the sun relays God's creative and sustaining power. (Asclepius p. 85).

It is in light of this that we should consider this remarkable statement from Copernicus: ‘Accordingly [considering the sun's central position], it is not foolish that it has been called the lamp of the universe, or its mind, or its ruler. [It is] Trismegistus' visible God'. Copernicus' understanding of the sun's physical place in the solar system is transcendental: Trismegistus' visible God' is the sun as the universe's 'mind' or the seat of the power that rules all creation.

Copernicus' debt to Hermeticism is demonstrated by the fact that his three revolutionary ideas - the Earth's motion in space, its rotation on its own axis and the orbiting of the Earth and other planets around the sun – all appeared in the Hermetica.

As Frances Yates argues:

One can say, either that the intense emphasis on the sun in this new worldview was the emotional driving force which induced Copernicus to undertake his
mathematical calculations on the hypothesis that the sun is indeed at the centre of
the planetary system; or that he wished to make his discovery acceptable by
presenting it within the framework of this new attitude. Perhaps both explanations
would be true, or some of each.

At any rate, Copernicus’ discovery came out with the blessing of Hermes
Trismegistus upon its head, with a quotation from that famous work in which
Hermes describes the sun-worship of the Egyptians in their magical religion.

Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, pp. 154-5

Writers in the Hermetic tradition took the Earth’s journey around the sun for
granted. Copernicus’ reference to Hermes Trismegistus in explaining his conception
of the heliocentric system is significant.

One gets the impression that Copernicus is saying: the truth of the matter was
already there, but went unseen because we judged things from an earthly
perspective. But Hermes, at the beginning of science, he saw it.

Churton 2002: 59

The truth of the matter was already there, it has been there all along – there is
nothing new under the sun. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible makes precisely
this point. Because we judge things from a transitory, earthly perspective we cannot
find meaning and hope in what we have, only diminish what we have by a false and
futile comparison with what we can never have. Instead of accepting the truth and
appreciating the now-ness of life, we grasp at an eternity we cannot have, and so fall
back disillusioned and in despair.

We are geocentric beings, not heliocentric beings, meaning that we are
constantly tempted into seeking infinity by finite means. It cannot be done; it’s a
delusion. But rather than abandon delusion to pursue a possible happiness in the
here and now, we despair. If we cannot find eternity in the temporal, we turn and
abandon it, calling life as a whole meaningless and hopeless.
The author of Ecclesiastes is a man who has everything - palaces, vineyards, gardens, parks, pools, servants. He finds that all the wealth and success in the world mean nothing:

2“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

3What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?

4Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains for ever.

5The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. 6The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

7All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

8All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

9What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

10Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.

11There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11)

And on it goes. Pleasure, wisdom, folly, toil, riches, advancement, everything is meaningless. The key word of Ecclesiastes – used thirty-eight times - is hevel. This is usually translated as 'vain', 'pointless' or 'meaningless'. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, however, points out that the word means 'a breath'. 'As in many other ancient languages, the Hebrew words for soul or life are all forms of respiration. Nefesh, 'life', comes from the verb meaning 'to breathe deeply'. Neshamah, 'soul', means 'to inhale'. Ruach, 'spirit', also means 'wind'. Hevel is a part of this family of words. It means specifically 'a shallow breath'. (Sacks 2011: 189).
The point of Ecclesiastes, then, is not that life is meaningless and human beings without hope, quite the contrary. The point is that seeking meaning in wealth and possessions, even in books and wisdom, is futile, since life is just a fleeting breath. And because life is a fleeting breath, it is precious and should be appreciated when we have it. Ecclesiastes does not encourage despair in the meaninglessness of life at all but calls upon us to contemplate the vulnerability of life and thus come to appreciate the life we are privileged to have while we have it.

Sacks writes of hevel in a way that recalls Shakespeare’s King Lear as he holds dead Cordelia in his arms and says, ‘Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life / And thou no breath at all?’ Life is breath and breath is life. ‘Hevel, a shallow breath, is all that separates the living from the dead. We live, we die, and it is as if we had never been. We build, and others occupy. We accumulate possessions, but others enjoy them. The good we do is soon forgotten. The wisdom we acquire is useless, for it merely brings us back to a recognition of our mortality. To seek happiness in objects that endure is a kind of self-deception: they last, we do not.’ (Sacks 2011: 189).

Ecclesiastes declares ‘a common destiny for all’. ‘All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.’ ‘The same destiny overtakes all.’ (Ecc 9: 2-3). ‘Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over animal. Everything is but a fleeting breath. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.’ (Ecclesiastes).

Life is but a fleeting breath – appreciate it while you have it. The argument savours a great deal of Spinoza, who writes ‘A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation not on death but on life’ (Ethics Pt IV Prop LXXII Dem). Through the serene contemplation of God or Nature as a whole, the individual achieves a blessedness in existence, bound in community with others of like mind, by ‘the love which acknowledges as its cause freedom of mind’ (E 4, Appendix).
As Ecclesiastes makes the point, ‘Anyone who is among the living has hope — even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.’ (Ecc 9: 4-6).

In other words, live life and enjoy life while you have it, rather than lament the fact that one day you will not.

7Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favours what you do... 8Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun. 10Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. (Ecc 9: 7-10).

The most remarkable thing about the book of Ecclesiastes is that it justifies life in its living in there here and now, not in terms of an afterlife. The stark fact of mortality is faced rather than evaded and there is no moralisation of fate. The important thing is to act, even though ‘you do not know the path of the wind’: ‘Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.’ (Ecc 11: 1).

Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle,

for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. (Ecc 11: 6).

Once we recognise that only God is eternal and that we have only a brief span of time in which to live, we are able to seek and find human happiness in the now-ness of time. Ecclesiastes refuses to let despair have the final word:
A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecc 2: 24-26).

The challenge is to live in the eternal now. ‘then man goes to his eternal home’ (Ecc 12: 5).

What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him. (Ecc 3: 9-14).

‘The sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.’ (Ecc 5: 12).

‘Remember Your Creator While Young’ means remember to live life whilst you have it, and know that it does not last forever. ‘Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ”I find no pleasure in them”— before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark.’ (Ecc 12: 1-2).

We return to the living of life in the light of the sun.

Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many.

Everything to come is meaningless.
Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see.. (Ecc 11: 7-9).

Ecclesiastes enjoins us to find meaning in the life we have been given, not to despair in the meaninglessness of a godless universe. Whatever the uncertainties concerning the future, the world to come, the afterlife, we can have no doubt that, in the present now-ness of things, we are alive, and since we are blessed with life, we ought to live it. I live, therefore I am. The author of Ecclesiastes is a man of great material riches and learning, but he finds meaning in the simple things of life, love and work, eating and drinking, friendship, doing good. He knows that ‘there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.’ (Ecc 3: 1). To acknowledge the eternity of God and accept the limits of the human life span diverts us from futile activities that waste our time and make us none the happier. Rather than set off in pursuit of an illusory permanence we should focus us upon a possible happiness, the one that is within our natural grasp. This is to achieve a genuine transcendence, to be touched by the divine within one’s life.

But there is another kind of transcendence, the attempt to storm the heavens and create an eternity and an immortality by limited, temporal means. This is indeed futile, meaningless, but it is precisely what the doctrine of industrial and technological progress rests upon.

The price of transcendence of our Earthly dwelling is now being exacted. We have been burning up the Earth for some time now. Through our industrial activity and the burning of ancient wastes that Mother Earth, in her wisdom, has kept buried beneath her skin, we have inflicted a sun of our own making on the planet. "Vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderit". “Invoked or not invoked, God will be present.” (Carl Gustav Jung). But global heating is human-made, not God inflicted. The crisis in the climate crisis is a call to the human species to invoke its own moral and rational powers and divert them from destructive to constructive ends. Through the burning of fossil fuels, we have achieved a power that transgresses planetary boundaries. In religion, transcendence is a spiritual endeavour that seeks the eternal beyond the temporal and transitory. In
industry, transcendence is instrumental, an inflation of technical and mechanical means to cheat mortality and manufacture immortality. This is not a genuine transcendence, but an idolatrous power that transgresses planetary boundaries. And it achieves not a genuine progress, a progress defined in terms of the realisation of a natural purpose, but a vain attempt to storm the heavens. The transcendent ideal has been brought down to Earth and brought within the reach of human technical power. In claiming the power of gods, we are in the grip of a delusional progress, the finite in pursuit of the infinite.

“Every action of our lives touches a chord that vibrates in Eternity” (Edwin Hubbel Chapin). Maybe, but the quality and beneficence of those actions depends upon what, precisely, we understand by Eternity. Are we talking about a claim to immortality through megalomaniacal deeds and triumphs? Shelley dealt with the ruination of all such claims in Ozymandias. Immortality through buildings and machines is a delusion.

Eternity, understood within the sense experience of biology, is nature’s endless cycles, and the best any species can do is flourish within those cycles. To flourish is to achieve health and well-being as a natural essence, and that’s more than enough. But what distinguishes the human species, naturally, is the ability to live by moral reason and to create a world of meaning out of physical immediacy. The danger is that that capacity leads us to unbalance the ratio between nature and culture, and that does indeed lead to the delusions of transcendence.

"Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present." (Ludwig Wittgenstein).

This savours a little of what theologian Paul Tillich described as ‘the eternal now’. We live in the present in light of eternity. That is transcendence in the purest sense, beyond sense experience, and hence beyond empirical evidence and reason.
Which begs the question of life, life after death and eternity. The problems come when we attempt to force the finite realm to infinity. There are turbulent times ahead on planet Earth as a consequence of immanence and transcendence parting company. We have horizontalised the vertical. Where once infinity pointed upwards to the transcendental sphere, we have brought it down to Earth and stretched it across a planet of finite resources. We have been so seduced by the promise of unlimited material power and progress by means of our technics that we have become detached from the natural cycles which nurture and sustain life. We thus come to seek immortality in the mortal realm, eternity in the temporal realm, infinity in the finite realm. The endless expansion of material power is not a genuine transcendence at all, but is a neurotic attempt to escape reality and evade finality. And it involves an assault upon nature, our own nature within as well as nature without.

Through its technological capacity, the human species has spread itself horizontally to cover the planet with evidence of ‘progress’. The worship of material ‘progress’ commits us to the extension of the infinite across the horizontal ocean and land. As a consequence of horizontalising the vertical, we have come to locate and pursue the infinite within the finite world. The problem is that infinity can go only so far within a planet of limited resources. We therefore come to transgress planetary boundaries. It is nature’s cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth that is truly eternal, not the instruments and products of progress. The pursuit of immortality through machines transgresses planetary limits and upsets the ecological balance of life on earth. It is a delusive, destructive attempt to escape nature’s eternal cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. According to particle physics, the atoms of matter that comprise our mortal bodies are more or less indestructible. All matter, our own included, is redistributed throughout the universe by Mother Nature to some useful purpose of her own for eternity. We need to remember that we are part of a great whole. For Darwin, evolution is a descent with modification from a common source, meaning that we are related to all things and that all living things are our brothers and sisters.
Transcendence and immanence, the sun and the sea/land, the vertical and the horizontal. We need to achieve a relational and holistic perspective that releases us from the constraints of a worldview in which 'up' and 'down', 'top' and 'bottom' are seen as antithetical. Enlightenment doesn't just come from above, the land is not covered with darkness. The distinction between ‘up’ and ‘down’ loses its meaning.

With the pursuit of material progress, we think we are achieving Heaven on Earth. But it’s an illusion. A worldview in which Heaven is sought ‘up there’ beyond the skies and Hell is seen as ‘down here’ on the benighted land is unsustainable. I would put the point this way. With the split between transcendence and immanence, we see Heaven as something up there beyond the clouds. And we think that we can reach Heaven by means of our skill and ingenuity and intellect. These are the means of material progress. It’s a secular myth, a false religion. We are neither reaching Heaven nor building Heaven. Imagine using our technics to build a tower that allows us to reach into the skies, and beyond. All the resources of the planet are utilised in the process, all the iron, the copper, all the minerals, all the energy, everything. The whole of the planet’s surface is covered in concrete in order to build a strong enough foundation for the tower to be able to reach the moon. All the materials of the planet are used to build the tower. And what do we find when we ascend the tower all the way to the top? I can’t see God up here, astronaut Yuri Gagarin is reputed to have said when reporting back from outer space. Try looking down. All the life we need is around us here on Earth. Yet we have used up and wasted all our natural resources in order to achieve divinity and immortality. It is the finite in pursuit of the infinite, and it is to waste the gift of life in an attempt to cheat death. I don’t believe that Gagarin made this remark. I suspect it was the politicians, serving their own idols, who put the words into the astronauts’ mouth. All of the natural resources making for Heaven on Earth are being used to achieve the false eternity and immortality of material progress. This secular myth of progress
delivers not the salvation promised, only endless human sacrifice to the new idols of state, capital, money, commodities, bureaucracy.

As a transcendent ideal, God is a vision of something better, something beyond biological imperatives and natural necessities, something that gives us hope and inspires our moral effort and willing and gives us a shared ethic, a universal. We need a moral conception that enables us to see beyond the world of factual matter. Without the moral intelligence that the transcendent offers, we either fall back into purposeless, meaningless matter or seek to escape it by an endless material progress pursued by mechanical and instrumental means. We are trapped between a blind finitude and a bad infinity.

Psychologically, we are still coming to terms with the discovery that the world is round rather than flat. Until the sixteenth century, the great civilisations and empires of the world were flat regimes in that they existed within a cosmology which conceived the Earth as flat. The land was a great island, surrounded horizontally by the oceans and linked vertically to infinity by the sky above. All the kingdoms and empires were bounded flatlands having to look upwards to the skies or outwards to the sea for a sense of infinity. The transcendent was located in the vertical pointing upwards.
All the maps of the world before the discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries exhibit that flat concept of the land, with human civilization centred around the Mediterranean Sea, a name which means ‘Sea in the Middle of the Earth’. Rome was known as *caput mundi*, the ‘capital of the world’. That notion implies a political hierarchy. Dante uses the phrase to refer to Rome as the world capital in *De Monarchia*. (De Monarchia (II, ix, 17). In Italian/Latin ‘capo’ means ‘head’, and therefore implies something ‘higher’ or ‘on top’. Rome may be the city built on seven hills, but my argument concerns a psychological height, rather than a physical height. That perception stems from the perception of the Mediterranean as being the middle of the Earth, the idea that Earth is a flatland with a centre, an end, a height.

It’s the psychological aspect, the way we see the world and see ourselves accordingly, that matters more than the physical aspects. The world we perceive in hierarchical fashion is not the world revealed by the new physics of the twentieth century; it’s not even the world revealed by the geographical discoveries of the sixteenth century and after. Our mindscapes are still adjusted to a way of seeing the world that no longer fits the way we know the world as landscape is. But that returns to the notion of ‘topographical location’ which I introduced at the beginning of this book. Our minds have to ascend the levels of cognition so as to access true reality. We have to ascend philosophically if we are to find our true place within the world. Instead, we seem hell-bent on a technological ascent in order to escape natural boundaries, considered as constraints upon freedom. They are not constraints, they are our moorings, keeping us sane and sustaining life.

The Earth is not flat and there is no division between the immanent and the transcendent. There is no horizontal on planet Earth, and since there is no horizontal, there is no longer any need for the old conception of the vertical. There is no need to project the transcendent upwards. There is no ‘up’ and no ‘down’, no ‘top’ and no ‘bottom’. The world neither rises nor comes down.

Yet just as we come to realise that the world and its potentialities are within our grasp, we have become prisoners of a techno-urban industrial mechanism that
continuously removes the world from our hands and extends it horizontally to infinity. The problem is that secular modernity has repudiated theology at the superstructural level but has absorbed theological assumptions within its substructure. We therefore get a secular myth of progress in which salvation is achieved through the endless accumulation of material quantity. Whereas once we looked upwards for spiritual meaning, with industrial and technological progress we have secularised the end of salvation and relocated its satisfaction within the material world. In horizontalising the infinite, we have conceived the end of salvation as an endless, infinite industrial and technical progress on a planet of finite resources. This secular myth of progress delivers not the human happiness and freedom promised but a spiritual and physical dissolution. And the reason for this is because it is focused upon delivering quantities rather than satisfying the qualities of being and place. Materialism is a false philosophy, its notions of a purely secular progress having all the character of a surrogate religion.

We now have a Pope in Rome, Pope Francis, who, upon his election, said this to the crowds in St Peter’s Square: It seems my brother cardinals went almost to the end of the world (to choose a Pope).

When a cardinal, Pope Francis declared: ‘The unjust distribution of goods persists, creating a situation of social sin that cries out to Heaven and limits the possibilities of a fuller life for so many of our brothers’.

Social and environmental justice go hand in hand.

We need to recover a proper sense of ends or it really will be the end of the world. Kaput also means ‘gone, dead, finished’. By horizontalising the vertical and pursuing the infinite in a world of finite resources, kaput mundi may well come to mean the end of the human world as in ‘gone, dead, finished’.

I owe these meanings of caput mundi and capo to literary linguist Margherita Muller. Her MLitt thesis contains a theme which is highly pertinent to this discussion:
Under what stars to plough the earth? The aesthetics and ethics of three Scottish gardens (2012), (available at http://independent.academia.edu).

I shall return later to the question 'under what stars to plough the earth?' It's the key question.

It's perceptions that count.

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8 THE VISIONARY MATERIALISM OF WILLIAM BLAKE

Beyond Urizen

(All textual references, unless otherwise indicated, are to *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes 1958).

And all the Arts of Life they changd into the Arts of Death in Albion.

The hour-glass contemnd because its simple workmanship
Was like the workmanship of the plowman, & the water-wheel,
That raises water into cisterns: broken & burnd with fire:
Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the shepherd.
And in their stead, intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel:
To perplex youth in their outgoings, & to bind to labours in Albion
Of day & night the myriads of eternity that they may grind
And polish brass & iron hour after hour laborious task!
Kept ignorant of its use, that they might spend the days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery, to obtain a scanty pittance of bread:
In ignorance to view a small portion & think that All.

—William Blake, *Jerusalem*

Against the dominant paradigm of mechanistic materialism, there were a number of writers and artists who expressed a different attitude to nature. One could mention here figures from the world of art such as Caspar David Friedrich, Goya and Samuel Palmer. The Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge are another two. I would offer William Blake (1757-1827) as a visionary materialist in a category of his own.

There are good reasons for including a piece on the visionary poet and artist William Blake in this collection of essays and articles concerning our need to rethink immanence and transcendence in light of the looming ecological catastrophe. Blake wrote at the height of the first industrial revolution in the early
nineteenth century and saw more clearly than anyone the moral and intellectual implications of the new world that was in the process of emerging. I conceive Blake's visionary materialism in terms of the moral necessity of imagining alternatives to the mechanical system that installed itself on top of the common ground of our Being. Blake's concern was not to return to some pre-capitalist idyll, but to realise the eternal ideal. In this, Blake exposed the emerging industrial capitalism as a false universal, a partial 'All', a totalitarian 'only', a singular vision. The "intricate wheels" of the dark Satanic mills against which Blake fulminated savour so clearly of industrial capitalism, binding workers to the labours of ever-repeated cycles of time and work discipline, that it is easy to read Blake simply as a critic of economic exploitation and dehumanisation. In truth, this forms one part of Blake's critique, with industrialism being a consequence of a larger mechanical materialism that comes to shape whole mentalities and modalities. Blake is concerned to expose the whole, apparently irresistible, totality that works to suppress alternate possibilities within itself. In his day, 'mad Blake' was considered a crank and an oddity, even a lunatic. Yet Blake had shown that to conform to the "necessities" and "realities" imposed by the mechanical system entails nothing less than madness. Blake struggled against this mechanical system that he struggled, not in pursuit of another system, but to put an end to all systems. "Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems" This emancipation is the unchaining of human potential from the realm of necessity, bringing about the creative fulfilment of all human creative energies and desires.

With this unchaining, human beings would for the first time – but "once again," in Blake's terminology, - to see the myriads of an eternity and an infinity. These possibilities are currently closed off to us by the single vision of a mechanical system that reduces everything to finite, uniform and measurable quantities. The easiest thing to write here is that Blake is a critic of industrial capitalism and the commodification and exploitation of the world. He may well be, but his vision is much larger than that, taking in the whole mechanical universe.
We live in a world which conceives Nature to be a machine. Industrial capitalism is one part of that universe. “The hours of folly are measur’d by the clock: but of wisdom, no clock can measure,” Blake writes (the Proverbs of Hell in *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell*). We measure the hours of the working-day within the machine, whereas Blake wants us to imagine the presently unimaginable. Changing mentalities brings about changing modalities, meaning that to get out of the mechanistic universe we need vision.

Blake’s visionary materialism contains the imperative to transcend the narrow confinements of a mechanical reality conceived according to the single vision. Blake sought to unleash the human energy against the structures and rules of the machine system of his day. That system remains in place. It is our world. Blake calls the ideologues of the mechanical order the Angels of the rationalizing system, meaning all those who would present the rules and regulations, principles and laws, objectives and imperatives, necessities and restraints of the system as natural, inducing us to conform in spirit as much as in body. Those people exist today also. Blake’s visionary materialism is timely in giving us the capacity to see through and break through these constraints.

It is with some trepidation that I enter the world of William Blake. Blake has all the brilliance, insight, contradiction and obscurity of the self-taught genius. He has
the esoteric quality of the true visionary. I get the impression that just one slight error in reading Blake can leave you heading for one almighty fall. I doubt that Blake would sympathise. He knew that the truly great works did not present their meanings immediately, on the surface, to be casually perused and picked up. So it is easy to see why so many could be misled by surface level investigation. Blake was determined not to have his message identified with surface appearances. Blake is not the most quotable of poets; even apparently simple words have a peculiar flavour in Blake. And Blake knew exactly what he was doing. Blake wholly concurred with Thomas Taylor’s view that the Ancients concealed the Divine Mysteries behind symbols. “What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider’d what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Esop, Homer, Plato” (To Trusler, 23 Aug 1799). Now that could leave Blake struggling for an audience. Personally, I’ve always strove to be understood, to invite individuals out of the idiocy of private concerns (the Greek idiots refers to those who are interested only in private affairs). I address people as polites, thinking, rational, social beings. But Blake knew what he was doing. He saw his great task as “to open the immortal Eyes of Man inwards, into the Worlds of Thought” (J 5:18). Blake was trying to get human beings to see with their mind’s eye, penetrate the world of the senses and see the ultimate reality. And such work is not for the idiots.

We all have that inner vision. Blake is challenging us to use it. It follows that Blake is not altogether impenetrable. He is addressing us at the level of an innate mental capacity, something we all have. Further, for all of his alleged mysticism, Blake is not an obscurantist. And he repays the effort. Blake’s message is timely. But then again, given Blake’s belief in an eternal realm, it is bound to be.

I shall start with a concise definition of Urizen.

Urizen is the southern Zoa, who symbolizes Reason. But he is much more than what we commonly understand by “reason”: he is the limiter of Energy, the lawmaker, and the avenging conscience. He is a plowman, a builder, and driver of the sun-chariot. His art is architecture, his sense is Sight, his metal is Gold, his element is Air. His Emanation is Ahania (pleasure); his Contrary, in the north, is Urthona (the Imagination). His name has been translated as “Your Reason,” a
derivation quite characteristic of Blake, who continually used semi-conscious puns; but Kathleen Raine and others prefer to derive it from the Greek ... "to limit", which is the root of the English "horizon."

Man, the image of God, is fourfold; God therefore must also be fourfold. As the Trinity is reflected in the other three Zoas (Tharmas, the Father; Luvah, the Son; and Urthona, the Holy Ghost), Urizen must be ... that aspect of deity which, when fallen, becomes Satan (FZ v: 217). All things, even the Devil, are of the divine substance.

(Foster Damon 1979)

To give some idea of the complexity of the idea of Urizen, the entry in Foster Damon’s Dictionary contains more than five thousand words.

When I write of Blake’s vision as going ‘beyond Urizen’, I shall take this to mean Urizen in both senses of ‘your reason’ and ‘horizon’. Blake’s vision goes beyond the way that alienated rationality narrows the horizon of the Human Imagination.

As Theodore Roszak comments in Where the Wasteland Ends (1972), Urizen is Blake’s most compelling image, from the Greek to limit, bound, restrict; also "Your Reason." ‘Urizen is single vision: functional logicality, that which divides up, limits, draws lines—the dominant Zoa of scientized culture, the Zoa that rules modern society. His sign is "the Starry Wheels": law, logic, inexorable order: the world-machine.’ Urizen expresses Blake’s horror of the mechanistic universe revealed by the natural scientists, which Blake describes as a "soul-shudd'ring vacuum" fashioned conceptually by a demon intelligence:

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific, Self-enclos'd, all-repelling: what Demon Hath form'd this abominable void, This soul-shudd'ring vacuum? Some said "It is Urizen."

But Urizen is "Your Reason." We need to reclaim this alienated rationality via the Human Imagination.
The contrary of Urizen is Urthona, “earth owner”, the creative Imagination of the Individual. Urthona’s element is Earth (FZ i: 18). Urthona is a blacksmith (FZ i: 519; J 95:17), constantly occupied with creating forms. He makes the “spades & coulters" of peace (FZ i: 520) and "the golden armour of science for intellectual War" (FZ ix. 853). His forge is in the deep dens or caves of the subconscious (MHH 26; FZ v: 189; vii b: 133; ix: 840). His Sense is the Ear (J 12: 6o; FZ i: 17); his Art is Poetry, which, in its degeneration, becomes Religion (Mil 27:60). Urthona is "keeper of the gates of heaven" (FZ iv.42; 78a:8i).

The discussion which follows is organised around this dialectic of struggle and divergence between Urizen and Urthona, reason and imagination. Jesus is the universal Imagination.

It is interesting that Urthona is rendered as ‘Earth owner’. There has been an attempt to claim Blake for the ecological movement and its attempts to secure some kind of Green Peace on Earth. The anarchist Peter Marshall argues that Blake ‘is an ecological poet par excellence, a vibrating source of earth wisdom. He not only challenged the mechanistic and rational premises of Western civilization but posed an alternative vision which looks back to the millenarian sects of the Middle Ages and anticipates the modern green movement.’ (Marshall 1992 ch 20). That’s fine as far as it goes. But it all depends on what we mean by ecology, Earth wisdom and the modern green movement. Blake’s view is quite distinct from any simple veneration of nature. Blake was well known for his antipathy to the countryside. He was a city man through and through. But the issue is much bigger than lifestyle. Blake’s life, his work and above all his vision together resonate with their connection with ultimate reality. But this ultimate reality is not quite the same thing that a deep ecologist like Arne Naess would recognise as the Earth. Blake's ultimate reality is not physical nature, whether that is the nature of the deep ecologist or the natural scientist. For Blake, the physical materialism of modern science merely yields the appearance of a vegetable nature, not true reality. Green movement? It depends who and what is meant. I doubt that Blake would be enamoured of wind farms. To him, they would be power stations in beauty spots, more Satanic Mills evidencing the power of Urizen, technical reason alienated from the one and true reality.
Marshall uses this phrase ‘Earth wisdom’ quite a lot. He refers to the ‘ecosophy or earth wisdom’ of the Americans John Muir and Aldo Leopold and the German Albert Schweitzer. He writes this of Leopold: ‘he concluded that the earth was alive, a living being, which deserved respect. To transcend his earlier anthropocentric position was for him, as the title of a 1944 essay put it, Thinking like a Mountain’. (Marshall 1992: 25)

Blake also felt that the earth was alive, a living organism. This was part of his repudiation of mechanical materialism and scientific rationalism. But any ‘Earth wisdom’ in Blake did not entail transcending an anthropocentric position in order to think like a mountain. Indeed, Blake so thoroughly rejected an immanentist position with respect to nature that he went to the other extreme of transcendence. The world and everything in it is eternal in the Human Imagination. To Blake, vegetable nature was precisely the unreal world of appearance that the methods of mechanistic science revealed, not the true reality. To access that ultimate reality required a deeper vision, an inner eye.

Marshall writes of the deep ecology of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, whose 'ecosophy', which seeks to deepen our understanding of ourselves and our place in nature, derives from the Greek sophia, 'wisdom', and eco, 'earth'. Ecosophy, Marshall writes, ‘concerns itself with “earth wisdom”’.

Marshall is insufficiently alive to what distinguishes Blake from these other views expressing an ‘Earth wisdom’. This comes out clearly when Marshall expresses his inability to understand how AN Whitehead could reconcile his Platonic philosophy of ideal forms with his organic philosophy of process and desire. Marshall cannot see ‘how the world of eternal objects or forms is organized and how it is connected to this world’ in Whitehead’s conception. (My own view is similar to Whitehead’s in being an attempt to combine a transcendent idealism in the tradition of Plato and Kant with an essentialism in the tradition of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx. Arguably, the finest statement of such a position is given by St Thomas Aquinas, if one can accept the existence of a supernatural God. Despite Aquinas’ best efforts, it can’t be proven one way or the other. It’s a matter of faith).
Marshall’s view of Whitehead remains favourable. ‘Nevertheless, with all the complex and subtle understanding of modern physics, logic and mathematics, he elaborated a philosophy which is profoundly in tune with ancient “earth wisdom” and can inspire the best in modern green thinking.’ (Marshall 1992: 26).

Again, as with Blake, that rather general conclusion with respect to Earth wisdom and green thought and action rather fudges the fine philosophical points and distinctions. And, with respect to a figure such as Blake, that generalisation cannot but distort the complexities of the man’s thought. In another book, Marshall writes of Blake as a ‘visionary anarchist’. (Marshall 2008). He may well be. In *Blake A Man Without a Mask*, Jacob Bronowski writes that energy is ‘the core of Blake’s religious thought’. Bronowski writes of ‘evil and energy exploding society for its good. This anarchism remains masterful in Blake’s prophetic books.’ (Bronowski 1944: 65).

It rather depends on what one means by an anarchist. If Blake is an anarchist, then so too is Jesus Christ. The spiritual revolution is at the core of Blake’s philosophy. I would argue that Blake is a visionary materialist who, with a belief in innate ideas, is able to penetrate the vegetable world of the senses and access a true reality, an eternal realm of Human Imagination. And this gives Blake a true conception of reality beyond the mechanistic materialism which focused on the senses and the unreality of physical event and causality. That is a transcendental perspective. If Blake rejected mechanical materialism, he also rejected the idea that vegetable nature was a true picture of reality. His ‘Earth wisdom’ was to this extent Platonic or Neoplatonic. And it also distinguishes Blake from an ecosophy or deep ecology that equates Nature as such with God. Blake presents a visionary materialism so radical that it escapes the finiteness of immanence by embracing the infinity of complete mental transcendence. It is a strange kind of ecology that leaves the finite world of the senses behind in order to enter the realm of the eternal mind. Unravelling this riddle is the subject of this paper.

Arguing for a reality that lies somewhere between the extremes of immanence and transcendence begs the question of what we mean by reality? Reality is one those terms that make us yearn for a fresh vocabulary, since the word conveys so many different meanings. Those various meanings are less important here than the fact that Blake was in no doubt what reality meant. For Blake, reality is the universal soul of man. That is the one and true reality. Everything else is the "emanation" of
that universal soul. Blake conceived reality as eternal form; temporal appearance is unreality.

This view brought Blake into collision with modern science. Blake demonized the unholy trinity of Francis Bacon, John Locke and Isaac Newton, whose thinking jointly reduced ‘that which is Soul & Life into a Mill or Machine’:

I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe
And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Woof rages dire,
Wash’d by the Water-wheels of Newton: black the cloth
In heavy wreathes folds over every Nation: cruel Works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other, not as those in Eden, which,
Wheel within Wheel, in freedom revolve in harmony & peace.

Advancing a philosophy which reads Nature as mechanistic and the mind as passive, the unholy trinity of Bacon, Locke and Newton had replaced the soul with the five material senses, which were mere windows through which Nature impressed itself upon the senses. Locke viewed the mind as a *tabula rasa*, blank at birth, then inscribed by the outer world. In contrast, Blake believed in the reality of innate ideas. (And, as with Chomsky’s innate conception of linguistic capacity, Kant’s innate conceptual apparatus, the idea of an innate moral grammar, this could certainly be integrated within an essentialist position, the idea that there are natural essences rather than blank sheets for culture to write upon).

Blake’s visionary materialism represents an inversion of the common sense view of the world. Blake’s belief in innate ideas locates him in the Platonic tradition. These innate ideas transcend the world of immediacy and give access to the ultimate reality beyond the senses. When the man or woman of common sense refer to the "reality" of a thing, they mean its material substance.
However, for Blake, that material substance is precisely what denotes the unreality or shadow of a thing. So Blake would condemn a position of complete immanence not on account of it being realistic, but on account of it not being realistic enough, or realistic at all. The corporeal form, the very physical fact which is the stuff of single vision science, is, for Blake, mere vegetative nature. What mechanistic science presents as a true representation of material reality is, for Blake, the partial or sensory impressions that appearance makes on eyes that are mere glasses of reflection rather than being dynamic organs of sight. Whatever appears on those glasses of reflection is not true reality but mere unreality. Thus Blake emphasised the inner vision, what Plato in *The Symposium* calls the eye of the mind. True perception has sight of the eternal form. Blake thus argues that the doors of perception be opened. To Aldous Huxley, cleansing the ‘doors of perception’ entailed experimentation with drugs. Blake had no need of such artificial intoxication. The Imagination was enough. To Blake, artificial stimulants would have been stupefaction. Human beings have sufficient innate powers, which Blake sought to waken from their slumbers.

For Blake, the way to access the true reality beyond the senses was to liberate the sensuous imagination and allow it to reveal forms inherent and embryonic within the existing order of things. These forms are immanent within this order, yes, but also burgeoning, emergent, pointing beyond the shell of the prevailing world of the senses. If this is an immanence, then it is an immanence that is always pointing beyond itself, rather drawing things back into itself. Blake’s vision is expansive, an unfolding of worlds within worlds. For Blake, the imagination is both the progenitor and midwife of such forms, bringing about a world that vision has in some way created. One could therefore argue that Blake has a transcendent vision of the future, a future which is based on the transformation of a reality which is conceived as a field of materialist immanence. The future held in the mind’s eye is realised by freeing the sensuous imagination to play upon reality as a field of potentialities:

... the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy, whereas it now appears finite & corrupt.

This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment. But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do
by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern. (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p. 187).

The ‘infinite which was hid’ is a crucial phrase. Blake is writing of the ultimate reality which the methods of modern mechanistic science cannot access. This idea of unveiling reality crops up in quantum physics, as in the work of Heisenberg. For Blake, this infinity hidden in the finite world ultimately points beyond sensuous reality to the eternal realm.

The question is whether, as a result, Blake abandons the immanence of nature for a complete transcendence that exists nowhere except in the eternal realm of mind. If this is Earth wisdom, then it is Earth wisdom that involves much more than respecting and following the patterns of Nature as immediately given to the senses. Blake is arguing for much more than merely fitting ourselves passively to the contours of Nature or simply reading off lessons from Nature. Rousseau is commonly understood to have argued ‘back to nature’, conceiving nature to be benign and good. The Marquis de Sade agreed that we should go ‘back to nature’, except that Sade knew that part of nature which is cruel and violent and morally indifferent. One sees here that any notion of ‘Earth wisdom’ entails a moral view which is in some way independent of sensuous nature. The natural law is not the laws of physical nature but nature as seen through the eyes of reason, through Plato’s eye of the mind.

Blake is arguing for no such thing as de Sade’s back to nature. His Earth wisdom is quite distinct from that of naturalist scientists, philosophers and ecologists. By proposing that the doors of perception be cleansed, Blake is advocating a praxis that is reflective, indeed, that is self-reflective in Plato’s sense; and he is arguing for an imaginative transformation of reality.
And it is a mutual transformation. Blake’s criticism of mechanistic science and technological rationalism does not entail a rejection of science and technology. Blake offers himself as an example here, referring to his craft as printer and engraver, a craft in which Blake made a number of practical and technical advances beyond his contemporaries. Blake made no superficial distinction between theory and practice. Blake is far from being a mad visionary and impotent dreamer. On the contrary, Blake stated explicitly that theory and practice go together.

Good thoughts are little better than good dreams.
Thought is act. Christ's acts were nothing to Caesar's if this is not so.

Blake Annotations to ‘Bacon’s Essays’. Written about 1798

Blake's conception of praxis is capable of generalisation to cover the whole socially organized sphere of work and life, including the making of language and poetry, as well as science and technology. Indeed, since ‘Thought is Act’, there could be no separation between mind and body, intellect and will, for Blake.

For Blake, revolutionary transformation towards the free society began in the here and now. There was no need to adopt a passive posture waiting for the cataclysmic upheaval at some vague point in the distant future. The conception of the unity of theory and practice implies that everyone has a role to play in changing society by acting so as to change their own lives. And that change as self-change always begins in the present. And it involves the individual in taking stands against error wherever it may reside in existing social institutions:

All Life consists of these Two, Throwing off Error & Knaves from our company continually & Recieving Truth or Wise Men into our Company continually.
He who is out of the Church & opposes it is no less an Agent of Religion than he who is in it; to be an Error & to be Cast out is a part of God's design.

No man can Embrace True Art till he has Explor'd & cast out False Art (such is the Nature of Mortal Things), or he will be himself Cast out by those who have Already Embraced True Art.

Thus My Picture is a History of Art & Science, the Foundation of Society, Which is Humanity itself. What are all the Gifts of the Spirit but Mental Gifts? Whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth, a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual.


This is to place some exacting demands upon the individual. Human beings are social beings. Only the very strongest can resist the social pressures to conform, even to accept error. But Blake is clear in his rejection of hypocrisy, even and maybe even especially that hypocrisy born of a concern for the social peace and social position. For Blake, the hypocrite is a wrongdoer who knows his wrong, and this makes him the silent witness to the knowledge of right. Blake condemns the hypocrite from the perspective of one who is aware of the responsibility of moral responsibility and who is happy in having chosen right over error. That is a choice which everyone can make in their everyday life and which, for Blake, everyone must make.

For Blake, the personal is political and vice versa. Individual rebellion in the everyday life world forms an integral part of the necessarily collective enterprise of working towards the fundamental transformation of society. Blake was a rebel as a person but was also a revolutionary with respect to his vision of society. Bronowski writes of Blake as someone who had ‘a harsh understanding of the world in which he was forced to live: in which he knew himself to be a rebel, and in which he felt himself a prisoner.’ (Bronowski 1944 ch 2).

Blake felt himself to be an outsider, a man living in internal exile, in prison. Blake saw himself as living in a State of "Empire or Tax" (OSAB 777) in which
visionaries such as himself were considered madmen. Blake wanted to escape that prison and he knew that this was not just a question of personal rebellion but of social revolution. Blake knew that the madness was in the mechanistic rationality of the world being erected around him. 'May God keep us,' Blake exclaimed, 'From Single vision & Newton's sleep!'

In this mythology, Blake associates Newton with the authoritarian tyrant Urizen, 'your reason', which narrows the 'horizon' to imagination and cuts us off from true reality, from the infinite. Urizen is the Zoa of physical power, the physical power that rules the flatland, the world conceived in terms of mechanical materialism. Urizen is the builder of the "dark Satanic mills," the architect of vast geometric structures and imperial cities, the master of the "Mundane Shell."

Blake connects the mechanistic conception of the material world and mechanical models of the mind with the mechanisation that characterised the Industrial Revolution and which brought with it new oppressions. Urizen is the genius of the machines: "the Loom of Locke . . . the Waterwheels of Newton . . . cruel Works of many Wheels, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic . . ."

Urizen is 'your reason', human reason taking alien form, bringing vast technical and physical power but delivering not liberation but oppression and tyranny. Urizen-Satan's alienated reason extends mechanical, instrumental rationality over the whole world, mind and matter: "To Mortals thy Mills seem everything."

As Materialism is completed under Newton and Locke, humankind becomes more and more spiritually debased. In America and Europe, revolution breaks out; The Song of Los ("Asia") ends with the general resurrection.
But the revolution that Blake demands is not merely political. Blake is concerned with more than an external liberty within the machine world. He demands inner spiritual liberty.

It is worth spending some time on the question of Blake's politics, given the extent to which both the left and right, both socialists and conservatives, have laid some claim to Blake's memory and message.

Blake’s political radicalism is a well-documented fact. Many ‘patriots’, whose worship of war and the imperial state is in direct contradistinction to Blake’s views, cite Blake’s authority and celebrate ‘England’ as though the New Jerusalem has already been built. As though Blake’s concern is with England alone. Blake’s support for social, racial and sexual equality is anathema to such people. In Blake Prophet Against Empire, David Erdman (1977) shows just how expansive Blake’s vision is.

There is an attempt to evade Blake’s radical politics by erecting a socialist straw man. As though pointing out, contrary to Labour Party sentiment, that Blake was not a socialist somehow diminishes his clear support for radical
social and political causes. There is an awful lot of anachronism going on here, with Blake being pulled left and right between political traditions with which he would have had little sympathy. It should be clear that to say that Blake is not a Labourite socialist does not mean he is a Tory. Indeed, those who sing the hymn Jerusalem and get all misty eyed about the sacrifice of those who have fallen in the many wars between the imperial states have even less right to claim the name of Blake. Blake loathed all such wars.

Blake distinguishes between mental wars fought in Eternity and physical wars fought on Earth.

In Eternity, war is "intellectual" (Zix:854). "As the breath of the Almighty, such are the words of man to man in the great Wars of Eternity, in fury of Poetic Inspiration, to build the Universe stupendous, Mental forms Creating" (Mil 30:18). Wars such as these are fundamentally humane: "Our wars are wars of life, & wounds of love with intellectual spears & long winged arrows of thought" (738:14).

War on earth is a dreadful debasement of this instinct, "War & Hunting, the Two Fountains of the River of Life, are become Fountains of bitter Death & of corroding Hell, till Brotherhood is chang'd into a Curse" (Mil 35:2; 743:31). "For the Soldier who fights for Truth calls the enemy his brother: they fight & contend for life & not for eternal death; but here the Soldier strikes, & a dead corse falls at his feet" (7 43:41).

War on earth is "energy Enslav'd" (FZ ix: 152). It is "the fever of the human soul" (738:9).

Yet Jerusalem is sung on state occasions, ostensibly in commemoration of all those who have fallen in earthly wars between imperial states. This is a complete travesty of Blake’s views.

Those reactionaries in politics and religion – staunch defenders of Church and State – who condemn the idea of Blake the socialist, simply don’t understand just how radical Blake’s position is. I am not aware of any marxist who has argued that Blake is a Marxist before Marx, and I would be surprised if there is one. Marx thought capitalism and industrialism had redeeming qualities, Blake thought they had none. To Marx, alienation is a progressive force that was capable of redemption. To Blake,
alienated reason was the work of Urizen-Satan. This makes Blake a much more uncompromising figure given that the forces of materialism and instrumental rationalism have now gone global. It doesn’t make Blake right against Marx. It just makes him a figure who can never be seduced by or bought off with the material progress offered by the machine world.

The fact remains that Blake was a political and social radical, even if he was much more than even this. Blake’s radical sentiments are well known. He was a French sympathiser charged with sedition. One book remains of the poem in support of the French Revolution, which Blake began in 1789.

Blake called himself a ‘Liberty Boy’, although he was canny enough to keep his mouth closed in public. Nevertheless, Blake had some interesting friends who certainly kept him in touch with revolutionary politics. Johnson. The radical Unitarian William Frend. Through William Sharp, Blake would have known of the activities of the Society for Constitutional Reform, which promoted Paine’s Rights of Man. Then there was Hayley, with whom Blake shared radical opinions as regards the tyrannical government of England.

Blake’s support for social, racial and sexual equality is well-documented. Blake opposed slavery and supported the rights of man and woman, he opposed all hierarchies in Church and State – in other words, he espoused radical political views which exposed him to great personal danger at a time of political repression.

So imagine how it feels to read Blake being enlisted in the cause of Church and State, the very Satanic forces which his message opposed, against who he waged his ceaseless mental fight.

Blake sympathised with the political reformers in their struggle against the oppression of the poor, the subordination of women and the institution of slavery. Blake’s sympathy with these causes was as genuine as the reformers. Blake differed from the reformers in that he believed that an
exclusive concern with the trappings of external liberty would reinforce the tyranny of reason which is destructive of inner spiritual liberty. Blake was not content to be a political revolutionary but developed a subversive metaphysical doctrine which was concerned to realise that inner spiritual liberty. Blake’s mysticism was not, however, an obscurantism.

To argue that external liberty forms only one part of Blake’s vision does not imply that it is a disposable part. The implication that Blake’s political sympathies are insignificant when set within Blake’s metaphysical vision is an obvious non sequitur.

I would distinguish between Blake and Marx in these terms: Blake believed in renewal whereas Marx believed in change. Blake believed in an ultimate reality that was eternal, whereas Marx believed in the realisation of immanent lines of development through the historical process. Blake could be described as a conservative revolutionary for whom capitalism and communism represent two sides of the same materialist coin. Ultimately, Blake believed in (spiritual) renewal rather than (political) change.

Blake’s vision drew upon sources older than the Enlightenment and deeper than reason. The benevolent rationalists and perfectionists of the late eighteenth century ended their days disillusioned beings, disappointed by a human nature which, they felt, had proved resistant to reason and had let down the cause of enlightenment. Blake, as EP Thompson argues, was immune to such disenchantment.

His vision had been not into the rational government of man but into the liberation of an unrealised potential, an alternative nature, within man: a nature masked by circumstance, repressed by the Moral Law, concealed by Mystery and self-defeated by the other nature of ‘self-love’. It was the intensity of this vision, which derived from sources far older than the Enlightenment, which made it impossible for Blake to fall into the courses of apostasy.
Rather than succumb to despair, Blake chose to hand 'The Everlasting Gospel' on to the initiates. Thompson concludes that there is 'obscurity' and even 'oddity' in Blake:

But there is never the least sign of submission to 'Satan's Kingdom'. Never, on any page of Blake, is there the least complicity with the kingdom of the Beast.

Thompson 1993:229

Blake believed that there is a supersensible realm beyond the transitory divisions of time and place. However, that does not mean that Blake's support for radical political causes is unimportant, ephemeral. Such a view would make a mockery of the stances that Blake took throughout his life. As the old radicals who had not died lost their way, one by one, Blake remained a radical to the end. And Blake's position is cogent. There was no debilitating division between matter and spirit in Blake. External liberty in the political and material world and inner spiritual liberty go hand in hand in Blake. By guaranteeing equal external freedom for each individual, political justice fosters a climate which is favourable to moral autonomy and which is preparatory for the final end of Creation, the moral community in which external commands are internalised as the product of moral motives rather than by prospects of private gain and power. Ultimately, internal discipline replaces external discipline.

The validity of these innate and inalienable rights, which are the necessary property of humankind, is confirmed and enhanced by the principle that human beings may have lawful relations, even with higher beings. For the individual may consider himself/herself to be the citizen of a transcendental world, in which the same principles would apply.

Blake was a staunch, lifelong supporter of social, sexual and racial equality and his hatred of hierarchies in religion, politics and society comes out clearly in his writings. It's just that there is a need to avoid conflating the external trappings of liberty with the internal experience. With Blake, there is an ascent to complete inner
spiritual liberty through, not against, the material world. Blake’s political and social radicalism and his spiritual concern with the ‘Tree of Life’ are not only compatible, they are integral.

Blake’s fourfold vision cannot be reduced to the external liberty promised by the single vision of scientific, political and economic rationalism and materialism. But it is an error to set the one against the other. With Blake there are levels of freedom and consciousness which build upon each other to completion. It also needs to be pointed out that the danger of mistaking the trappings of external liberty for complete inner liberty applies to all who settle for the merely political expression of Blake’s vision, and to all who reduce the spiritual dimension to the material terrain. External liberation is preparatory for inner spiritual liberation, not a substitute for it.

The point applies most incisively to those who would reduce Blake’s patriotism to political-institutional expression. That is, it applies to those political conservatives who, in seeking to claim Blake from the socialists, enlist him to the cause of Church and State, war and empire. At least the socialist cause, for all of its supposed political materialism, is consistent with the conditions of external liberty. The same cannot be said for that conservatism which serves the material power of Urizen-Satan, the idols of Church and State.

The point is that, for Blake, there is a deeper truth beyond political and national divisions. Words are a blunt instrument. Art, understood in the expansive sense that Blake used the word, as a mode of life, is much more effective in accessing ultimate reality.

So what lies behind the conservative appropriation of Blake’s message and the concomitant denial of Blake’s political and social radicalism? The appropriation lies in the fact that Blake believes in an ultimate reality, an eternal realm of ideal forms which are outside of time and space, and it is this that taps into idealised visions of a country, it is this that supports a certain view of patriotism. Blake was a patriot, something very distinct from being a nationalist. How many of those who see Jerusalem as a celebration of England see the distinction can be questioned,
especially given the extent to which the hymn is sung on state occasions and in memorial services. But the fact remains that, above and beyond the external trappings of liberty, Blake’s “England” encapsulates a culture, a spirit of a place, a moral disposition, an ethos as a way of life. And it is eternal, hence my view that Blake believed in renewal rather than change. The Jerusalem to be built already exists in the ideal realm of the ultimate reality.

Blake’s “England” is a protest against a world that is quantified, measured, and reduced. And this protest is a protest against technocrats without a soul, rationalists without a spirit and materialists without a body. Blake is protesting against the materialism and instrumentalism of the machine world. For him, art accesses a truth that is beyond the instrumentalism of mechanical reason.

The social philosopher Max Weber describes rationalisation as ‘the disenchantment of the world’. characterises this shift as a ‘dis-godding’ of Nature - die Entgotterung der Nature - a dedivinization in which Nature becomes simply matter, available for technological appropriation, to be exploited according to human desires and projects. Blake believed Nature to be alive. Mechanistic science disagrees. Blake criticised this science as the ‘Tree of Death’. Blake saw how mechanisation in thought and action would engulf the whole world.

Blake was an inveterate opponent of rationalisation, mechanisation and industrialisation – forces which have now gone global. These are the forces which are abstracting places from persons, stripping the world of moral meaning, and despoiling the green and pleasant lands of people all over the world.

Blake’s “England” encapsulates a culture, a moral sense of place, a spirit, an ethos, a mode of life, elusive qualities that can be neither objectified nor quantified, only grasped by vision and imagination. Blake’s Jerusalem is a protest against a world that is measured, reduced and commercialised. Marx believed that the capitalist economy and the forces of industry and technology showed the extent and potentiality of human power in alien form. Alienation denoted the potential for progress. Blake felt such Urizen to be Satanic to the core. We are discovering that
the death of God has not led to the death of divinity. Instead, in the cause of progress, we have come to deify our powers as they have taken alien form. And the result has been the fevered employment of our technical installations of physical power to unleash Hell on Earth. Progress? At what point does a dehumanised humanity come to identify and reclaim its alienated power and use it creatively? Blake was never persuaded; he identified the mills as the work of Satan from the start.

Blake rejects the dualism of mind and matter, of spirit and body which is the accompaniment of mechanical materialism. Instead, he calls for a revolution led by the imagination:

The Negation is the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man: This is a false Body, an Incrustation over my Immortal Spirit, a Selfhood which must be put off and annihilated alway. To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by self-examination, To bathe in the waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human, I come in Self-annihilation and the grandeur of Inspiration; To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour, To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration, To cast off Bacon, Locke, and Newton from Albion's covering, To take off his filthy garments and clothe him with Imagination; To cast aside from Poetry all that is not Inspiration, To cast off the idiot Questioner, who is always questioning, But never capable of answering; who sits with a sly grin Silent plotting when to question, like a thief in a cave; Who published Doubt and calls it Knowledge; whose Science is Despair, Whose pretence to knowledge is Envy, whose whole Science is To destroy the wisdom of ages, to gratify ravenous Envy That rages round him like a Wolf, day and night, without rest He smiles with condescension; he talks of Benevolence and Virtue, And those who act with Benevolence and Virtue they murder time on time.

These are the destroyers of Jerusalem! these are the murderers Of Jesus! who deny the Faith and mock at Eternal Life, Who pretend to Poetry that they may destroy Imagination By imitation of Nature's Images drawn from Remembrance. (Harris 1969 ch 8). (533) (f.42, 1.34.)
This passage encapsulates the message that William Blake sought to deliver. In the Preface he calls upon the poets, painters, sculptors and architects to throw off the domination of styles drawn from the past and find and express their own inspiration. 'We do not want either Greek or Roman models if we are just and true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever, in Jesus our Lord.'

Blake is a Platonist. He believes in innate ideas, the unchanging realm of ideal forms and in an ultimate reality, he believes in the kind of vision that Plato in The Symposium called 'the eye of the mind'.

Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists Really and Unchangeably.

Imagination is the human essence for Blake. In a manner that anticipates Kant, Blake argued for the active connection between the perceiving mind and the perceived world. 'Some See Nature all Ridicule & Deformity ... & Some Scarce see Nature at all. But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, So he Sees.' (Blake, Complete Writings, p793). Or as a man sees, so he is.

As the expression of the Imagination, Los is the creator of all that we see. "All Things Exist in the Human Imagination" (J 69:25). This line forms the fundamental grounding of Blake's whole philosophy. For all of the references to Blake's mysticism, his philosophy of vision and imagination was not suspended in some ethereal realm, as those struggling to deal with its complexities might be inclined to believe. Amid the myriad deviations, incoherencies, and exaggerations, this principle that "All Things Exist in the Human Imagination" is the bedrock, the beginning and the end-point of Blake's philosophy. This principle holds that the conceptions of the mind are the realities of realities, give access to the ultimate reality, that the eternal world and the Human Imagination are, in some elemental sense, one and the same. Blake saw his task along the lines of the transcendent symbolism of Hermeticism.

I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes Of man inwards into the Worlds of thought, into Eternity Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.

*Jerusalem*

This passage, and many others like it, make it clear that, for Blake, the true exercise of the imagination involved an actual and comprehensive rejection of the world as it is revealed to us by our senses, and the replacement of images passively received by other images perceived by the active and unaided mind.

It should come as no surprise to discover that Bishop George Berkeley, who authored the phrase ‘to be is to be perceived’, made it onto the list of Blake’s favourite philosophers. Berkeley argued the radical thesis that all that exists are minds and the ideas in them. With his bold and fearless imagination, Blake the poet and artist appropriated the metaphysician’s philosophical conception of Idealism and transformed it into a grand, poetic Cosmos.

All of which makes Blake a very radical figure in these disenchanted, ‘dis-godded’ times.

But beware. There is a danger lurking in Blake’s spiritual revolution. ‘What are all the Gifts of the Spirit but Mental Gifts?’, Blake asks. All the gifts of the spirit are mental gifts. There is a danger here of complete transcendence of the material world in order to enter the eternal world of the imagination as the true reality, the reality of all realities. Thus Los gives "a body to Falshood that it may be cast off for ever" (*J* 12:13). Only thus can an error be limited, recognized, and annihilated. But is it falsehood alone that is cast off, or the body as such? The most fundamental of Blake’s instincts was the instinct of the mystic. Premised upon the search and the discovery of the infinite in all things, Blake’s vision is prone to end with repudiation of the finite, for the reason that the infinite is not contained in it.

"O Satan, my youngest born, art thou not Prince of the Starry Hosts.

“And of the Wheels of Heaven, to turn the Mills day & night?"
"Art thou not Newton's Pantocrator, weaving the Woof of Locke?
"To Mortals thy Mills seem every thing, & the Harrow of Shaddai
"A Scheme of Human conduct invisible & incomprehensible.
"Get to thy Labours at the Mills & leave me to my wrath."

Satan was going to reply, but Los roll'd his loud thunders.

"Anger me not! thou canst not drive the Harrow in pity's paths :
"Thy work is Eternal Death with Mills & Ovens & Cauldrons.
"Trouble me no more ; thou canst not have Eternal Life."

So Los spoke. Satan trembling obey'd, weeping along the way.
Mark well my words! they are of your eternal Salvation.
(Milton).

This is Blake speaking in the guise of Los. Los directly inspires Blake himself (Mil 22:4; 36:21). The figure of Los ties up all the central themes of Blake's message. Los resembles Jesus in being both the creator and the great champion of Man (J 96:22). Jesus constantly supports him. Blake declared to Crabb Robinson that Jesus is the only God. 'And so am I and so are you'. As the poet, Los is "the Prophet of Eternity" (Mil 7:38). "His vigorous voice was prophecy" (FZ i: 239). "He is the Spirit of Prophecy, the ever apparent Elias" (Mil 24:71). It is Los who reveals the basic truths. Los creates the line of poet-prophets who destroy the kings (J 73:40). Los is the spiritual revolutionist, whose son Ore is outward revolution. External and inner spiritual liberty go together. Los creates Golgonooza, the city of art (FZ v.76, etc.); he creates Jerusalem, the idea of liberty (FZ viii: 190); he creates Erin, the belief that all living things, especially the body and its impulses, are holy (J 11:8).

Blake proceeded to call for a building of a new Jerusalem, even 'Among these dark Satanic Mills'. Blake was not merely referring to the new cotton factories that had sprung up over England. Blake's 'Mills of Satan' referred to the intellectual and moral darkness that had engulfed the world, of which industrialisation was but one expression.
Blake’s new Jerusalem was not just a world of social justice and equality but a world of spiritual freedom which embodied the triumph of the imagination:

'I will not cease from mental fight, Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, 
Till we have built Jerusalem In England's green and pleasant land.'

*Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804-20) portrays the building of the new land presided over by the arts and the imagination (Harris 1969 ch 8).

*Jerusalem* represents the culmination of Blake’s lifelong attempt to state his vision. In the new land, the oppressive shell of Church and State is cast off as humanity comes to realise its divine potential and live in peace and love:

In Great Eternity every particular Form gives forth or Emanates Its own peculiar Light, & the Form is the Divine Vision And the Light is his Garment. This is Jerusalem in every Man, A Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness, Male & Female.

As a result, the moral law, imposed as a curse, ceases to be valid. There is no more division between the sexes as the Eternal Man bearing the stamp of the Divine Image walks the land. (*Daughters of Albion.*) So Los declares:

Sexes must vanish & cease

To be when Albion arises from his dread repose . . .

Jerusalem, Blake exists, is within each and every person. ‘And Jerusalem is called Liberty among the Children of Albion.’ (OSAB 684). To Crabb Robinson, Blake had declared that Jesus is the only God, 'And so am I and so are you'. God could be identified with Jesus only if spiritual error had been cast out. That would seem to
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imply that, for Blake, human beings, with spiritual liberation and true fulfilment, are to become gods. I shall return to this aspect of Blake's thought later.

With all the old radicals of his day either dead or giving up the struggle, Blake increasingly felt alone. In 1827, he wrote to a friend, "since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another, Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree" (878). But Blake for one never gave up. That same year, in his annotations to Thornton's *New Translation of the Lord's Prayer*, Blake offered his own liturgy. For all of the complexity of his imaginative world and for all of his isolation from the social world, Blake never descended into mysticism as an obscurantism. He continued to argue for social justice and freedom here on earth. Blake prayed for an end to capitalist exploitation (Price), for an end to repressive morality (Satan), and for an end to political authority (Caesar). Praying to Jesus, not God, he declares:

*Give us This Eternal Day our own right Bread by taking away Money or debtor Tax & value or Price, as we have all Things Common among us. Every thing has as much right to Eternal Life as God, who is the Servant of Man. His Judgment shall be Forgiveness that he may be consum'd in his own Shame. Leave us not in Parsimony, Satan's Kingdom; liberate us from the Natural man & [words illegible] Kingdom.*

*For thine is the Kingdom & the Power & the Glory & not Caesar's or Satan's Amen. (788)*

One sees here the fundamental accuracy of Jacob Bronowski's view that Blake 'was and he remained robust, matter-of-fact, and a rebel. He is as downright a rebel in the later religious writings as in his earlier Radical ones.'

Blake's form of Christianity was heretical, for it identified Christ the Son with all spiritual goodness and made God the Father, a symbol of terror and tyranny. And this, the Manichaean heresy, is not merely a technical nicety among sects: it is a crux in Blake's mind. God to Blake personified absolute authority, and Christ personified the human character; and
Blake was on the side of man against authority, at the end of his life when he called the authority Church and God, as much as at the beginning when he called it State and King.

Bronowski, Introduction 1958

This can all be read in the unfinished drafts of *The Everlasting Gospel* and in Blake’s response to Dr Thornton's version of the Lord's Prayer. For Blake, all virtue is human virtue:

The Worship of God is honouring his gifts
In other men & loving the greatest men best, each according To his Genius which is the Holy Ghost in Man; there is no other God than that God who is the intellectual fountain of Humanity.

Here we see the fundamental unity between the early Blake the Radical and the late Blake the heretic, they are one and the same man from first to last.

Blake castigates the kind of science which only sees nature as a machine as the 'Tree of Death'.

Blake recorded his credo concisely round his engraving of the Laocoon:

If Morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Saviour.
A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian.
Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed.
For every Pleasure Money Is Useless.
Without Unceasing Practise nothing can be done. Practise is Art. If you leave off you are Lost.

Where any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on, but War only, by pretences to the two impossibilities, Chastity and Abstinence, Gods of the Heathen.

The Old and New Testaments are the great code of Art.

Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death.

The whole business of man is the Arts and All things in common.

No secrecy is Art.

"Art is the Tree of Life. Science is the Tree of Death" (Laoc, K 777). Whilst such science may kill us, art is our salvation. However, Blake was referring to "Art" in the most expansive sense, the whole mode of life, the life of the imagination. And Blake identifies art in this sense with Jesus. "Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists. The Whole Business of Man Is The Arts" (Laoc, K 777). The aesthetic approach should shape all acts, even the least. Each Zoa, Blake argues, has its Art (Mil 27:55). "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian" (Laoc, 776). Anyone who does not develop one of these aspects is failing to live in accordance with the divine plan. "Prayer is the Study of Art. Praise is the Practise of Art. Fasting &c., all relate to Art" (Laoc, K 776).

Blake overcomes the inversion of means and ends that characterises commercial society. "Christianity is Art & not Money. Money is its Curse" (Laoc, K 777). The obsession with money and money-making blocks the aesthetic mode of life that Blake identified as the true end of human existence. "Where any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on" (Laoc, K 776). "Works of Art can only be produc'd in Perfection where the Man is either in Affluence or is Above the Care of it. ... Tho' Art is Above Either, the Argument is better for Affluence than Poverty" (LJ,K612).

Art is essentially the precise telling of truth. "Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed" (Laoc, K 776; cf. J 36: 49).
These sentences taken together reveal that Blake identifies the artistic spirit as a resolution of the problems of life, going beyond the divisions and conflicts of the material world – the injustices and iniquities associated with wealth and poverty – to attain the level of the pure mind.

Blake affirms the Tree of Life over against the Tree of Death. In castigating science as the Tree of Death, Blake is thinking specifically of mechanistic science and its negative effect in reducing the natural world to a blind and dead materialism. In this instance, Blake denounces science as the Tree of Death. However, in a condition of purity, art and science may be classed together as spiritual activities. As a spiritual activity, Blake calls science Christianity. It’s all part of the life of imagination. As Blake argues, if we recognize that ‘Nature is Imagination itself, its study can become a ’sweet Science’.

In his holistic approach to nature, Blake comes close to the positions of contemporary ecologists and the emphasis upon the interdependence and interconnection of all things, unity in diversity and organic growth. More than this, Blake offers a perspective on the re-enchantment of the world. If we can go beyond our five senses and cleanse the doors of perception, then we will see that ‘every thing that lives is Holy’. (Blake, *Complete Writings*, pp.777, 379,149,160).

Human beings are an integral part of Nature, not separate from it. Blake repudiates the dualism of subject and object. Nature is not some objective datum external to human beings. However, the single vision of mechanistic science has reduced Nature to dead matter, making it available to the utilitarian and exploitative interests of a humanity that, in turn, comes to conceive itself a subject apart from Nature. The result is that human beings stray from the beneficial course of nature. “The Bible says that God formed Nature perfect,” Blake wrote, "but that Man perverted the order of Nature, since which time the Elements are fill'd with the Prince of Evil" (OSAB 388). In its fallen condition, humanity comes to introduce a rapacious self-interest and wanton cruelty into an originally pure and benevolent natural order.
Blake abhors war and violence in human society but he goes further than this and condemns the callous treatment of other species at the hands of human beings. Human liberation, the liberation of art and the imagination, applies also to the animals.

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.
A dove house fill'd with doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.
A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
A Horse misus'd upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human blood.
Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.
A Skylark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.
The Game Cock clip'd & arm'd for fight
Does the Rising Sun affright.
Every Wolf's & Lion's howl
Raises from Hell a Human Soul.
The wild deer, wand'ring here & there,
Keeps the Human Soul from Care.
The Lamb misus'd breeds Public strife
And yet forgives the Butcher's Knife.

(431)

Further along Nature's interconnected and seamless web of life, Blake sees the spiritual and aesthetic qualities of plants and objects. Blake's poems allow clods of
mud and pebbles to speak and flowers to feel. Blake's ecological sensibility here stands in complete contrast to those who lack the vision to see any horizon beyond this fallen world of callous cash payment, those who can see only with the eyes of the miser, for whom "a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun, & a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way" (793).

Blake's ideas resonate within the contemporary ecological perspective which holds that nature is more than a stock of resources but forms an ecosystem which nurtures life and nourishes the spirit. Above all, though, it is Blake's holism which impresses. Blake is celebrating not just life, but the life of imagination. To the Zoas of Reason and Energy, Blake adds the Zoa of Prophesy, which is "the true man." And when Prophesy achieves masculine-feminine wholeness, the quality of perception alters, "Creating Space, Creating Time, according to the wonders Divine of Human Imagination . . ."

Blake takes us beyond the conception of nature as an ecosystem and nothing more. Instead, Blake's life of imagination denotes a new reality where it is the meanings of things which predominate. We are beyond a concern with price and monetary value but instead see the transcendent correspondences which shine through nature. Like the alchemists, Blake is in search of spiritual gold. The inverted world which has placed mere means in the place of ends is turned inside out by visionary power to reveal a bright new green and gold world of symbolic presences.

Mental Things are alone Real; what is call'd Corporeal, Nobody knows of its Dwelling Place: it is in Fallacy, & its Existence an Imposture. . . . I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. "What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro’ it & not with it.
The figure of Los, which is surely Blake, is "the magician of perception" (Kathleen Raine).

As above, so below.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm, of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. (431)

Blake transcends what is immediately presented to the passive senses and opens the 'doors of perception', emphasising the power of vision and the imagination to see through and break through the domination of the alienating abstractions of tyrannic power so as to realise the creative attributes of humankind.

We continue to live in Urizen-Satan’s world, with the rivalries and wars of imperial cities and states threatening to consume the whole world in a universal conflagration. Alienated reason, detached from the soul and blinded to vision and imagination, deliberately and clinically plans the annihilation of humanity and the destruction of the earth. The agents of instrumentalisation are still at work, doing their worst in the name of ‘progress’. From the military to the market, the machine continues to dominate human beings who are divided from each other, from nature, from their true selves. Mechanisation is a denaturalisation and a dehumanisation. The humanisation of our technics is also naturalisation of human beings.

It is Blake’s awareness of this knowledge and power on the part of alienated reason that fires his anger and indignation, and gives both him and us the strength to fight the mental war ‘with intellectual spears, & long wing’d arrows of thought’, in pursuit of a vision of man as he is to be, a vision of man as a fulfilled being.
Against the alienated authority of Church and State, the Satanic Mills of the machine world, Blake presents a vision of the free community of fully realised individuals who act spontaneously and creatively in accordance with their true natures, free individuals who are artists, even kings and priests in their own right. Blake told Crabb Robinson that Jesus is the only God, ‘And so am I and so are you’. The idea that men are gods is an ancient dream and delusion. In recent times H.G. Wells in the 1920s to the current crop of planetary engineers have asserted ‘We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it.’ (Brand 2010). The problem with the scientists and engineers is that they make the obvious mistake of investing divinity in ‘things’, in the machines. It is the strength of William Blake’s position that he saw through this delusion all along, identifying Urizen’s technical and physical power as Satanic. Blake never made such crass errors as our planetary engineers intoxicated with scientific knowledge and technical power. Blake saw such science as the ‘Tree of Death’.

"Art", in the most expansive sense, as the whole mode of life, is the ‘Tree of Life’. And this is the life of the imagination. And Blake identifies art in this sense with Jesus. "Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists. ‘We do not want either Greek or Roman models if we are just and true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever, in Jesus our Lord.’

The question remains, in becoming artists in this sense do we become as gods? For Blake, God could become identified with Jesus once spiritual error had been cast out. And casting out spiritual error is precisely what Blake has in mind. And once this condition of purity has been attained, art and science may be reunited as spiritual activities. It’s all part of living in the artistic mode of imagination. Once we recognize that ‘Nature is Imagination itself’, the “its study can become a ‘sweet Science’”.

Isolated in his own day, his memory appropriated war-mongers and imperialists, his message distorted by posterity, Blake’s sun of spiritual gold is beginning to rise in the approach of the age of ecology. That promise is increasingly felt as the innate yearning to access ultimate reality grows stronger through its denial by the mechanistic forces of Urizen-Satan.

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9 THE PARTICIPATORY UNIVERSE

There is a failure to appreciate the extent to which the various problems we face are interrelated. There is also a failure to recognize the extent to which so-called ‘solutions’, based on an outmoded technocratic, techno-fixing approach, will have a deleterious impact on future generations.

Our mentalities and modalities are still in the flatlands. William Blake opposed his ‘fourfold vision’ against the ‘single vision’ of mechanistic science.

Blake’s visionary materialism integrates the psychological and the physical. This integral perspective focuses upon the whole person in terms of the Four Zoas: body (Tharmas), reason (Urizen), emotion (Luvah), and spirit (Urthona). None can exist, creatively and healthily, without the others. Love, for instance, involves physical, intellectual and emotional states, but in true sexuality the spiritual perfects the physical. Blake’s “fourfold vision” describes a full visionary awareness which integrates energy, reason, emotion and spirit.

Now I a fourfold vision see, And a fourfold vision is given to me; 'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight And threefold in soft Beaulah's night And twofold Always. May God us keep From Single vision & Newton's sleep!

The reference to Beaulah comes from Bunyan’s Pilgrims Progress, describing the country in which the pilgrims can see the city they are searching for.

Single Vision is the state we suffer when the soul sleeps and appearances form themselves on the mind’s eye like images on a photographic plate. This is the first level of consciousness, a flatland of mechanical materialism where mechanistic reason holds sway in darkness, which Blake describes as Heaven. The second level of consciousness is the realm of energy, which Blake calls Hell. The threefold vision is the third level of consciousness which unites the first two through The Marriage of Heaven and Hell to achieve a state of light. The fourfold vision is the
inspired state of full light which integrates all the levels of consciousness. "Four-fold vision" is "naked beauty displayed", every living thing as it is in its itself, in its full flourishing, together.

It is worth pointing out that the god whom Blake destroys in his prophetic books, Urizen, is the Bible Jehovah. He is a god of reason, a god of the material world reduces to physical fact and cause and effect, not a personal god moved to evil by will but a god moved to evil by compulsion. Urizen is the god of the scientists and the philosophers, the god of those who remove soul and moral meaning from the world and reduce reality to the single vision of physical fact and causality.

Blake, in the character of Los, is "the magician of perception" (Kathleen Raine). Despite the best efforts of Blake, the single vision has worked its way deep into the marrow of modern civilisation. This is how mentalities shape modalities, how the figure of Urizen brings out the Satanic Mills.

But all is not lost. Far from it. Science is now moving in Blake’s direction, leaving the flatland of single vision behind and revealing such things as the designer universe, life as a cosmic imperative, the directionality of evolution, the participatory universe. The old mechanistic science is being eclipsed. In the work of theoretical physicist John Wheeler, we are beyond the old dualisms of subject/object and knower/known have entered the ‘participatory universe’ in which everything is the observer and everything is the observed. What counts in this universe is not the objectivity of reality but its intelligibility and potentiality. These are terms which owe more to the essentialist metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas, of which much more will be said later.

But Werner Heisenberg clearly invokes the Aristotelian concept of potentia when he writes: “In experiments about atomic events we have to do with things that are facts, with phenomena that are just as real as any phenomena in daily life. But the atoms or elementary particles are not as real; they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than of things or facts.”

As Polkinghorne comments: ‘An electron therefore does not all the time possess a definite position or a definite momentum, but rather it possesses the
potentiality for exhibiting one or other of these if a measurement turns the potentiality into an actuality.’ (Polkinghorne 2002). Heisenberg may be struggling to express this view when writing that this makes an electron ‘not as real’ as a table or a chair. Not so. It’s about potentiality becoming actuality, different stages and kinds of reality as it unfolds in a way appropriate to inherent nature. The idea is thoroughly Aristotelian. ‘What each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature’ (Aristotle). Each stage from potentiality to actuality is real, it’s just that we only know the nature of a thing when it is fully developed. As Polkinghorne comments, to know things as they are, we must know them as they actually are, on their own terms.

Despite the comment ‘not as real’, Heisenberg’s thinking is perfectly consistent with this Aristotelian conception. Heisenberg refers to ‘the veiled reality that is the essence of the nature of electrons’ and describes the ‘rather wraithlike wavefunction’ as ‘an appropriate vehicle to be the carrier of the veiled potentiality of quantum reality.’

Potentiality and intelligibility are crucial to this quantum reality. There is no objective reality, no material flatland that is merely physical fact and causality. Quantum physics shows that we cannot determine in advance whether electrons should be particles or waves. This is the observer’s choice, deciding which side of the black hole the photons would pass, even though it happened many millions of years ago.

As Wheeler explains:

Since we make our decision whether to measure the interference of the two paths or to determine which path was followed a billion or so years after the photon started its journey, we must conclude that our very act of measurement not only revealed the nature of the photon’s history on its way to us, but in some sense determined that history. The past history of the universe has no more validity than is assigned by the measurements we make - now!
The implications of Wheeler’s arguments are profound and entail the complete transformation of the way that human beings perceive the universe, relate to it and place themselves within it. This way of reasoning totally transforms the understanding of time and space. If anything, we seem to have our feet planted in mid-air. It is the intelligibility of reality that matters, and that accents the mind rather than matter. The general idea that observers influence what they observe barely scratches the surface of the revolutionary implications of this reasoning. John Wheeler emphasises the active role of the mind in the universe in proposing that we should think not merely in terms of observers but of participants. Human beings are actively involved in producing the world we see around us as we come to seek knowledge of it. For Wheeler, the difference between observation and participation might be ‘the most important clue we have to the genesis of the universe’:

The phenomena called into being by these decisions reach backward in time in their consequences ... back even to the earliest days of the universe .... Useful as it is under everyday circumstances to say that the world exists 'out there' independent of us, that view can no longer be upheld. There is a strange sense in which this is a 'participatory universe'.

Wheeler in Wheeler and Zurek 1983: 194

Wheeler takes this idea to its logical conclusion in arguing that 'we are participators in bringing into being not only the near and here but the far away and long ago.'

At this point, we reach a thoroughly transformed conception of time and space. We reach a cosmic perspective in which see ourselves as parts of a greater whole. Plato asked: ‘how can he who has magnificence of mind and is the spectator of all time and all existence, think much of human life?’ The idea that
one is a participant embracing all time and all existence, and not merely a spectator, would seem to buttress a cosmic optimism. It is easy to think a great deal of human life, of life as such, when one is a part of everything one sees.

The question then is what becomes of place? As Paul Davies and John Gribbin comment: ‘the quantum nature of reality involves non-local effects that could in principle reach right across the Universe and stretch back across time.’ (Davies and Gribbin 1991: 208).

Such a perspective alters the whole notion of time and space. The old notions of ‘up’ and ‘down’, ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ have lost their meanings and bearings, however much we still live as best we can in accordance with them. The ‘top and bottom’ and ‘up and down’ of what? The flatland of the objective world has dissolved.

For David Fideler, science is moving ever more in a Neoplatonic direction (it should be pointed out here that a Neoplatonic influence has been detected in Blake, who most certainly did believe in innate ideas):

Over the last century the mechanistic view of the universe has started to completely break down. Because the implications of quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and the realization that we inhabit an evolutionary, self-organizing universe are starting to work themselves out, it is no exaggeration to say that we are truly living in the midst of a new Cosmological Revolution that will ultimately overthrow the Scientific Revolution of the Renaissance. And if the mechanistic world view left us stranded in Flatland - a two dimensional world of dead, atomistic matter in motion - the emerging Cosmological picture is far more complex, multidimensional, and resonant with the traditional Neoplatonic metaphor of the living universe.

Fideler in Harris (ed.), vol. I, p. 104
Such views make it clear that the living, participatory universe is much more than a metaphor and instead denotes the quantum reality. Yet, in terms of its mentalities and modalities, humankind remains stranded in the 'Flatland' of a material world reduced to physical causality and mechanical rationality, caught between an all-encompassing immanence that absorbs the soul and puts the mind to sleep and a transcendence that ultimately severs all connections with reality and goes mad. We are cut off from the radiance of Blake’s fourfold vision and all the immense rewards it bestows. This, however, is not humanity’s end, merely its beginning. We can - and must – move up the levels of consciousness and leave the flat landscape of mechanical materialism behind.

Fideler emphasises the holistic nature of existence. He notes how particles of light from a common source 'continue to act in concert with one another' no matter how far apart they are. Fideler comments on the implications of this phenomenon, known as 'quantum nonlocality':

The tantalizing implication of quantum nonlocality is that the entire universe, which is thought to have blazed forth from the first light of the big bang, is at its deepest level a seamless holistic system in which every 'particle' is in 'communication' with every other 'particle', even though separated by millions of light years. In this sense, experimental science seems to be on the verge of validating the perception of all mystics - Plotinus included - that there is an underlying unity to the cosmos which transcends the boundaries of space and time.

Fideler in Harris (ed.), vol. I, 2002: 106

The breakdown of the paradigm of mechanistic materialism requires a new type of science, and Fideler proposes a fusion of the philosophy of Plotinus and John Wheeler's concept of the participatory universe. I would also refer to Plato’s innate ideas, Aristotle and potentiality, Aquinas and intelligibility, Kant and the way that the innate cognitive apparatus of the human mind shapes the world presented to
the senses. I have referred to the fourfold vision of William Blake. Capra draws the connections between the new physics and Eastern religions. The world is in flux. The upshot of this is that:

... the focus of life will become more multidimensional, contemplative, and celebratory as we as individuals come to see ourselves as living embodiments of the-universe-in-search-of-its-own-Being, and as active participants in the ongoing creation of the world.

Fideler in Harris (ed.), vol. I, 2002: 117

In *The Tao of Physics*, Fritjof Capra refers to ‘the emergence of a new vision of reality that will require a fundamental change in our thoughts, perceptions and values.’ The systems view of life which Capra develops in that work represents a new way of thinking about life, involving a new language, new perceptions, and new concepts. This new vision explores the implications of the new scientific understanding of life at all levels of living systems—organisms, social systems, and ecosystems. This new vision integrates psychological and physical aspects of reality so as to transform not only science, religion and philosophy – the three perennials concerning how human beings relate to the world and to each other - but the fundamental aspects of the everyday lifeworld - business, politics, social living and interaction, health care, education, and culture. We are dealing with nothing less than a new perception of reality leading to the emergence of a new conception of life.

Capra writes of the ‘crisis of perception’ in the modern world. He is thinking primarily of the environmental concerns that have become of paramount importance. ‘We are faced with a whole series of global problems that are harming the biosphere and human life in alarming ways that may soon become irreversible.’ Scientists have been documenting the extent and significance of the ecological crisis for a long time now. The evidence is overwhelming. The point is, however, is that the crisis in the climate system is not just a scientific question but needs to be set in the bigger context of how we perceive reality. Without a fundamental change in perceptions, we will keep resorting to outdated modes of thought, action and organisation. This will merely intensify the crisis. (Capra 1982).
As Capra argues: ‘There are solutions to the major problems of our time, some of them even simple. But they require a radical shift in our perceptions, our thinking, our values. And, indeed, we are now at the beginning of such a fundamental change of worldview in science and society, a change of paradigms as radical as the Copernican revolution. But this realization has not yet dawned on most of our political leaders. The recognition that a profound change of perception and thinking is needed if we are to survive has not yet reached most of our corporate leaders, either, or the administrators and professors of our large universities.’

From the perspective of living systems, the only genuine solutions are those that are "sustainable." The concept of sustainability is central to the ecology movement. Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute gives a clear and concise definition of sustainability: "A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations." (Brown 1981). The great challenge of our time is to create sustainable communities, 'social and cultural environments in which we can satisfy our needs and aspirations without diminishing the chances of future generations.' (Capra 1996: ch 1).

Capra argues that the major problems of our time — the threat of nuclear war, the devastation of our natural environment, poverty, hunger — are all 'different facets of one single crisis, which is essentially a crisis of perception.'

It derives from the fact that most of us—and especially our large social institutions—subscribe to the concepts and values of an outdated worldview, to a paradigm that is inadequate for dealing with the problems of our overpopulated, globally interconnected world. At the same time, researchers at the leading edge of science, various social movements, and numerous alternative networks are developing a new vision of reality that will form the basis of our future technologies, economic systems, and social institutions.

Capra 1982 Afterword
What we are seeing is the emergence not only of a new scientific paradigm but a new social paradigm. Capra refers to "a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself." (Capra 1986: 3).

The paradigm that has dominated for the past few centuries consists of a number of key ideas and values which have come to be embodied within political and social structures and practices. The universe is conceived as a mechanical system made up of elementary building blocks. The mechanical perception of nature has in turn shaped the perception of human life and society. The human body, the state, the economy, society itself all come to be conceived as a machine. In the process, the distinctive human values of creativity, spontaneity and autonomy come to be subordinated to mechanical regularity. Human purpose comes to be replaced by technical function. It’s the world of the natural scientist, a flatland of mechanical materialism, a world reduced to physical causality, a world without human value and meaning. In 1748, the natural scientist Julian La Mettrie wrote the book *L’Homme machine*, ‘Man the Machine’. La Mettrie describes all mental attributes as mere properties and functions of matter, the human will being mechanically determined by the body’s response to pleasure and pain as a result of its internal constitution or external environment.

This paradigm of mechanical materialism dominated for hundreds of years. If, as La Mettrie argues, man is a machine’, then it follows that politics in the ancient sense of creative self-realisation comes to be displaced by engineering.

In the organic world-view of the ancient past, all life forms — animal, vegetable, mineral— exude innate purpose and therefore radiate meaning as intelligible beings. However, the machine image objectivizes all it apprehends by emphasizing its inertial otherness as distinct from inherent natural purpose, capacity and growth. The scientific ideal of reality becomes internalised to form a subjective reality. This ‘single vision’ can be found in any number of thinkers, in Holbach and his *Systeme de la nature*, in Helvetius. Newton turns the universe into a machine; Descartes turns animals into machines; Hobbes turns society into a machine; Locke turns
government into a machine; Smith turns the economy into a machine. Everywhere we look we see mechanism.

It should come as no surprise, then, that as science advances, scientists should reveal the human body to be a machine. We end up with Francis Crick declaring that ‘You’re nothing but a pack of neurons’. Crick, Watson, Dawkins, Harris, Pavlov, socio-biology, neuroscience ... in all of this human behaviour is presented as machine-like, society as atomistic, life as a gene competition, the economy as a market mechanism. Slowly but surely there is a congealing of spirit, a militarization of the natural world, a petrification of the soul. As the mechanistic surface hardens without, the organic world withers and dies within. The Neoplatonism of Ficino, which saw the world as alive, inspired Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli and such like, inspires. I see no inspiration at all in mechanical materialism.

Further, the hierarchical conception of the physical landscape is implicated in the hierarchical ordering of society. From the mechanical conception of the material world there follows the idea that life is a competitive struggle for survival; there follows the belief in progress as unlimited material expansion to be achieved through economic growth and technological advance; there follows the belief that a functioning society rests upon relations of domination and subordination, the rule of some over others, whether organised in terms of class, sex, race, nation. As Capra argues: ‘The old hierarchical way of seeing the world fits easily into a society that is stratified by notions of class and status.’

All of these assumptions are now in the process of being challenged and subverted by the emergence of a new paradigm of scientific and social thought.

The emerging paradigm is based upon a holistic and an ecological worldview, viewing the world as an integrated whole rather than an aggregation of unrelated, atomistic parts. As Capra points out, an ecological awareness recognizes ‘the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the embeddedness of individuals and societies in the cyclical processes of nature.’ (Capra 1982 Afterword).
Capra offers a way of steering a path beyond the twin reefs of immanence and transcendence. To recognise the embeddedness of individuals and societies in the cyclical processes of nature does not necessarily imply the subsumption of human life into the natural world. Such a view is more akin to the single vision which reduces life and all values and ideas to the material flatland. We can retain the sense of the transcendent by recovering a spiritual sense of the material world.

The ecological paradigm is supported by modern science, but it is rooted in a perception of reality that goes beyond the scientific framework to an awareness of the oneness of all life, the interdependence of its multiple manifestations, and its cycles of change and transformation. Ultimately, such deep ecological awareness is spiritual awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels connected to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence, and it is then not surprising that the new vision of reality is in harmony with the visions of spiritual traditions.

Capra 1982 Afterword

Thus, for Capra, the new worldview that is now emerging in all the sciences and in society is a holistic and ecological worldview that is grounded, ultimately, in spiritual awareness. It is for this reason that Capra, in *The Tao of Physics*, has no trouble in showing and in drawing out the connections between the new paradigm, as it emerges in physics and in the other sciences, and certain key ideas in spiritual traditions, particularly in the religions of the East.

Capra’s view of interdependence overcomes the dualism that sends human beings to the extremes of high and low, up and down, top and bottom. Just as there is no ‘top’ and ‘down’ in the physical world, so there is no ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ in the social world. The division between body and soul, flesh and spirit, matter and mind dissolves and with it so too do all the distinctions between human beings organised around artificial constructs and stratifications of class and status. As science shows
that we live in a participatory universe, in which everything is the observer and everything is the observed and we are a part of everything we see, so a society based upon participatory structures becomes possible. Beyond the dualism of subject and object, it is intelligibility that matters in the new participatory reality.

'The culture we create and sustain with our networks of communications includes not only our values, beliefs and rules of conduct, but also our very perception of reality. As cognitive scientists have explained, human beings exist in language. By continually, we co-ordinate our behaviour and together bring forth our world.'

Jesuit priest and palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin writes well here:

Every person, in the course of his life, must build—starting with the natural territory of his own self—a work, an opus, into which something enters from all the elements of the earth. He makes his own soul throughout all his earthly days; and at the same time he collaborates in another work, in another opus, which infinitely transcends, while at the same time it narrowly determines, the perspectives of his individual achievement: the completing of the world. For in presenting the Christian doctrine of salvation, it must not be forgotten that the world, taken as a whole, that is to say in so far as it consists in a hierarchy of souls—which appear only successively, develop only collectively and will be completed only in union—the world, too, undergoes a sort of vast 'ontogenesis' (a vast becoming what it is) in which the development of each soul, assisted by the perceptible realities on which it depends, is but a diminished harmonic. Beneath our efforts to put spiritual form into our own lives, the world slowly accumulates, starting with the whole of matter, that which will make of it the Heavenly Jerusalem or the New Earth.

Teilhard de Chardin 1978: 61/2
Plato divided the world between the realm of Becoming and the realm of Being. Later, I shall argue this ‘vast becoming what it is’ in terms of an essentialist metaphysics which sees reality as a field of materialist immanence in the process of becoming a complete form.

Long before the World Wide Web and the Internet, Teilhard proposed the idea of the noosphere, an intellectual film which surrounds the world and functions as some kind of Universal Mind in which we may all participate. The noosphere serves to integrate the technosphere, the world of means, and the biosphere, the nurturing, sustaining basis of life on earth, to form a complete humanised and naturalised whole. If this Universal Mind is a God we have created, then we become not so much gods as sparks of the divine.

American physicist Frank Tipler goes further: 'People talk of God as the creator of life. But maybe the purpose of life is to create God.' Tipler argues that the stated aim of physics to describe the Universe in its entirety is a search for a Supreme Being. 'If it is to succeed in this task, clearly it [physics] must also describe any Supreme Being living in the Universe. It therefore follows that theology must eventually be shown to be a branch of physics.' Fine, but that doesn’t make us gods, just part of the divine milieu, which is more than enough. Knowing our place in the universe doesn’t entail becoming masters of the universe, still less becoming that universe. We need to remember the words of Jacob Bronowski as he stood in the death camp of Auschwitz: ‘this is what happens when men aspire to the knowledge of gods’. We need to ground our visionary materialism in natural essences and remain on the level of real potentials and their realisation, resisting fantasies of being as gods.

But there is a transcendental aspect to this visionary materialism. And here we develop an Aristotelian essentialism in terms of Plato’s idealism. In a Platonic sense, the creative individual who gives birth to eternal forms, to truth, beauty, and goodness.
Twilight

“There are two equal and eternal ways of looking at this twilight world of ours; we may see it as the twilight of evening or the twilight of morning; we may think of anything, down to a fallen acorn, as a descendant or as an ancestor. There are times when we are almost crushed, not so much with the load of the evil as with the load of the goodness of humanity, when we feel that we are nothing but the inheritors of a humiliating splendour. But there are other times when everything seems primitive, when the ancient stars are only sparks blown from a boy’s bonfire, when the whole earth seems so young and experimental that even the white hair of the aged, in the fine biblical phrase, is like almond-trees that blossom, like the white hawthorn grown in May. That it is good for a man to realize that he is ‘the heir of all the ages’ is pretty commonly admitted; it is a less popular but equally important point that it is good for him sometimes to realize that he is not only an ancestor, but an ancestor of primal antiquity; it is good for him to wonder whether he is not a hero, and to experience ennobling doubts as to whether he is not a solar myth. (G.K. Chesterton A Defence of Nonsense)

Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the ‘wonders’ of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take
off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper. Everything has in fact another side to it like the moon, the patroness of nonsense…

This is the side of things which tends most truly to spiritual wonder. It is significant that in the greatest religious poem existent, the Book of Job, the argument which convinces the infidel is not (as has been represented by the merely rational religionism of the eighteenth century) a picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it. ‘Hast Thou sent the rain upon the desert where no man is?’ This simple sense of wonder at the shape of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense. Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook. The well-meaning person who, by merely studying the logical side of things, has decided that ‘faith is nonsense’, does not know how truly he speaks; later it may come back to him in the form that nonsense is faith. (Chesterton A Defence of Nonsense)

I think Chesterton is right with respect to a natural science that sees the physical universe as ‘dead matter’, mere physical imperatives of cause and effect. With the perception of the ultimate reality, we are beyond the world of senses. But the older conception of the Earth as a living organism is back. This is an animated world alive with purpose. Nonsense, shout the mechanistic materialists. But the world is alive all the same.

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10 UNDER WHAT STARS TO PLOUGH THE EARTH?

*Under what stars to plough the earth?*
Let’s first know the winds,
and the varying mood of the sky,
and note our native fields,
and the qualities of the place,
and what region grows and what it rejects.
(Virgil, *Georgics* Bk I lines 2; 52-54).

Place, life, reproduction, regeneration. Virgil is an important character in that whilst he is the origin of the idea of Arcadia, his poems identify a creative role for human agency in realising the good life. Rather than just passively living off Nature, human beings are actively involved in realising nature’s purposes. *Georgics* means ‘On working the Earth’. Virgil’s words on farming and rural life take us a stage beyond immanence, but not beyond nature and natural cycles and life-support systems. ‘Under what stars to plough the earth?’ It’s a good question. It’s a question concerning how we relate transcendence and immanence. It’s a question of how we relate our technics to the Earth as our life support system.

Steinbeck describes the modern application of technology to nature as monstrous. He describes the tractors coming over into the fields. ‘That man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat … The driver could not control it …. He could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth… He loved the land no more than the bank loved the land. He could admire the tractor – its machined surfaces, its surge of power, the roar of its detonating cylinders; but it was not his tractor. Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades – not plowing but surgery … The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control.’ (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*).

We need a whole new approach to the land. We still stand in need of what the American naturalist and forester Aldo Leopold called a 'land ethic'. The land ethic
overcomes the damaging separation of human beings from the land, recognises the necessity for intellectual as well as emotional defences of the environmentalist position, and rejects the tendency to judge the value of the environment solely in economic terms.

Margherita Muller argues that ‘as societies ecological concerns rise proportionally to their destructive economic model, a demand for radical gardening is also ever growing and represents … an alternative ethic’ (Under what stars to plough the earth? The aesthetics and ethics of three Scottish gardens 2012).

But beware the eco-engineering approach of Stewart Brand. Chapter 8 of his Whole Earth Discipline is titled ‘It’s all gardening’. In truth, there is precious little gardening in what Brand proposes. The chapter should be re-titled ‘It’s all engineering’, as Brand waxes lyrical about market solutions allied to technology. ‘To protect a wilderness permanently … it has to be treated not just as a garden, but as a commercial garden. The wildland must pay its way or perish.’ (Brand 2009: ch 8). And he means it. Organic nature must ‘pay its way’, or perish.

I get the distinct impression that the planetary engineers take the same merciless, mercenary approach to people. The engineering view betrays arrogance towards and ignorance of Nature, the greatest engineer of all. In The Little Book of Garden Heroes (2004), Allan Shepherd writes: “The phrase ‘garden heroes’ seems to suggest that those plants and animals that benefit us are somehow consciously helping us out. Of course, this isn’t true… It is a curiosity of nature that they happen to do the jobs we need doing and do them extremely well.” To which the planetary engineers working for business would ask, ‘do they pay?’ Pathetic. This quotation encapsulates the organic alternative to an imploding, decreative commercial civilisation. The book Garden Heroes is a product of the Centre for Alternative Technology community in Machynlleth, Mid Wales. The book celebrates the ‘little’ heroes of the world, plants and animals that act as composters, pollinators and predators, identifying ‘top trumps’ species such as the ladybird and comfrey. Designing a garden around the true heroes of the plant and animal world enables a low-intensity gardening and vegetable growing that is more productive, more satisfying, more in tune with nature within and without, more enriching in soil and soul.

Margherita Muller goes on to note the overwhelming recognition in town planning strategies that access to gardens creates happiness and favour well-
being. These are sound concepts which are firmly grounded in an Aristotelian essentialist metaphysics. I shall return to essentialism later. At the moment, I am more interested in this question of how we guide our interchange with nature by. It’s a question not merely the plough and the plowing, but of the stars. By what morality do we guide the use of our tools? The balancing of immanence and transcendence requires the integration of our moral and technical capacities. To achieve harmony, we need to put the world of fact and the world of value together.

We are back to Blake here, and his conception of a Satanic reason. “O Satan, my youngest born, art thou not Prince of the Starry Hosts.” This is Urizen, the limiter of Energy, the lawmaker, and the avenging conscience. For Blake, Urizen is single vision, the functional logicality which divides up, limits, draws lines. Urizen is a plowman, a builder, and driver of the sun-chariot. His sign is "the Starry Wheels" and he is the dominant Zoa of a scientized culture characterised by law, logic, inexorable order: 'the world-machine.'

Urizen is the plowman (FZ ii:119; J 95. 16). In the Last Judgment, after the Son of Man, the Human Truth, is revealed, Urizen drives the Plow of Ages over the entire universe in preparation for the New Age (FZ ix: 311). Urizen then sows the human seed (FZ ix:321), returning to his true vocation (FZ ix: 344-53). Urizen and his sons reap the human crop and store it in the barns (FZ ix:579). On the Fourth Day, he flails out the chaff, threshing the Nations and the Stars (FZ ix:650), for Urthona’s use in making the Bread of Life (FZ ix:86). Urthona, "earth owner", (FZ i: 18), "keeper of the gates of heaven" (FZ iv.42; J 82:81), takes over from Urizen.

In Jerusalem, it is Albion who operates the Plow. In Milton, it is Los rather than Urizen who operates "the Plow ... to pass over the Nations" (6:13; 7:5; 8:20) in preparation for the New Age. The historical logic is the same, with the poem ending with the preparation for "the Great Harvest & Vintage" (Mil 43:1).
Blake is seeking the well-balanced man in Eternity, Imagination and Reason as cooperating contraries. Los is "the Prophet of Eternity," who reveals the basic truths (J 44:30; Mil 22:4; 36:21), the expression of the Imagination, the creator of all that we see (J 69:25), and creates the line of poet-prophets who destroy the kings (J 73:40).

Blake's idea is the unifying of the universe, which had been divided by the Elohim in the six days of creation, the separation of the sexes, the separation of good from evil, of body and soul in the sentence of death, and man from man in the confusion of tongues at Babel, ending in the dreadful and irreconcilable dichotomy of Heaven and Hell. Blake reunited man and God, who are inseparable; man and man in the Brotherhood which is the Divine Family; man and nature, which is his projection; man and woman, who together constitute the Individual; soul and body; good and evil; life and death. The basic, ultimate reality is the union of God and man in the mystical ecstasy. (Foster Damon 1979: 418).

We are drawing down the stars. We are in the Neoplatonic tradition.

In his translations and commentaries, Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino revived interest in Plato and Plotinus and, with the Corpus Hermeticum, was an integral part in the formulation of an alternative to Aristotelian Scholasticism. Ficino was also concerned with the practical impact of philosophy, something which involved him in astral magic, seeking to draw the influence of the planets and stars into our life by conscious means - through use of images, music, scents, types of food and drink, and such like. But Ficino's purposes are psychological rather than astrological. As he writes in The Book of Life: 'The important thing is to hold on correctly to whatever spirit, whatever force, or whatever powerful thing it is that these planets signify.' In other words, Ficino has grasped the extent to which we are involved in creating the world around us. In integrating disparate psychological, philosophical, moral and spiritual strands into a unified and coherent system, Ficino created nothing less than a living Platonism for an organic view of the world.

To Giordano Bruno, however, contemplation of the stars that govern our lives leads to a complete rejection of geocentrism and anthropocentrism.
If in the eyes of God there is but one starry globe, if the sun and moon and all creation are made for the good of the earth and for the welfare of man, humanity may be exalted, but is not the Godhead debased?... the earth is but a planet, the rank she holds among the stars is but by usurpation; it is time to dethrone her'

Bruno, *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*

This passage makes clear the extent to which Bruno did much more than embrace the *heliocentric* view that the Earth orbits the Sun. Bruno not only argued against *geocentrism* (the idea that the Earth is the centre of the universe), but dethroned the human species from the centre of the universe.

Bruno's view is not as bleak as it may seem. He argued for a form of *hylozoism*, the idea that all physical matter is imbued with life. The world is alive and human beings are an aspect of that living universe. For Bruno, to see ourselves and our place within a living whole is a liberation; for the first time we would come to appreciate the true wonder of creation. Everything in the universe is alive – not just the animals and the plants, but the stars and planets possessed a form of conscious life. A divine spirit pervades the universe, unifying all things into one being. Bruno calls upon us to abandon the belief in our privileged position as an illusion. But far from being the diminution of the human species, this would be a 'promotion', in that human beings would come to share in the totality of everything - every blade of grass, every planet and supernova: 'Dwellers in a star, are we not comprehended within the celestial plains, and established within the very precincts of heaven?'

It's an inspiring vision. And Bruno's conception of the world as alive is certainly valuable, distinguishing him from the mechanistic materialists who dominated for centuries after. Bruno's day may yet come. But his vision begs the same old questions. The human species has not been an unconscious part of Nature's seamless web since being cast out of Eden. By nature, human beings are endowed with reason and morality; by nature human beings strive to develop and grow out of
immediate confines. Human beings are guided by their own stars; they are active in bringing about the world around them.

And by nature, human beings are geocentric beings. Bruno’s view is that of the scientist, in that it seeks a factual truth in abstraction from the human psyche and human morality. Most people are not scientists. For most people, the sun rises and the sun sets. The practical human vision is earth-bound, geocentric in flat contradiction of the heliocentric view.

The crucial question remains: how we can put the scientific view and the moral view together, how can we unite the world of fact and the world of value. This was the philosopher Kant’s great achievement.

“Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe ... the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” (Kant CPR 1949:258).

The problem is that we can no longer see the starry heavens above on account of the light pollution emitted by our techno-urban industrial system, the very system of monetary values that has also blinded us to the moral law that nature has planted within. And, as Camille Paglia, argues, ‘the Apollonian has taken us to the stars.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). It has also abstracted us so far from nature, our own nature within as well as nature without, that the species is self-destructing. Surely, with Ficino, we should be drawing down the stars, achieving some kind of psychic balance with the Earth.

How do we identify the end that realises the telos at the heart of all living organisms? How do we relate the qualities of place to the qualities of being? What is the role of creative human agency in realising nature’s immanent purpose? How do we play our part realising our purposes within the whole without succumbing to the delusion that, through our powers, we have become as gods in forming the whole totality of things?

How do we balance immanence and transcendence?
Steinbeck shows how Being and Place are integral to each other when he exposes the limitations of a possessive individualism.

“Sure, cried the tenant men, but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That's what makes it ours - being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.” (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*).

*Starry Night* 1889 Vincent Van Gogh

It’s time to see the world by the light of nature.
When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never again walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12).

With the claims made for industrialisation and in the pursuit of endless economic growth, we see the extent to which secularisation is itself based upon a myth of progress, a teleology in which history is forever moving in the direction of some end. This material progress has nothing to do with salvation but is a secular myth. Marx wrote that under capitalist modernity all that is holy is profaned. Max Weber pointed to rationalisation as a disenchantment which stripped the world of meaning and purpose. For Friedrich Schiller, this was a ‘dis-godding’ of nature, *die Entgotterung der Nature*, a ‘dedivinization’ (Herman, 1981: 57).

As a result, we lose the old transcendental ideal of salvation but also the ancient idea of nature as alive and filled with purpose. We have lost *telos* and, as teleological beings searching for meaning, we are coming to terms with this loss. It should come as no surprise that in this meaningless universe, human beings should come to invest ‘things’ not just with an existential significance but
also a moral meaning. The idea that secularisation is atheistic is untenable. Instead, the old religious concern with salvation has been secularised. Where once salvation was something achieved in Heaven, now it is located on Earth. Where once the concern was with the immortal soul, now the concern is with material goods pandering to the physical self. Modernity worships new gods in the form of industry, technology, the state, capital, money, commodities. It's an idolatry. The problem with such gross materialism is not that it is materialistic, but that it isn't materialistic enough; the problem is not that it is irreligious but that it is all too religious. Materialism is a new religion, a disguised religion. The whole notion of secular progress is thoroughly infused with a hidden theology.

The apostles of secular progress are forever promising us ‘the end of history’. Francis Fukuyama in the 1990s was merely resurrecting an old claim that can be dated back to Francis Bacon or Robert Boyle’s ‘empire of man’, to Hegel and to Marx.

Nietzsche is often quoted as the prophet of the new atheistic age. Nietzsche announced the death of God as a result of scientific advance, the stripping away of the world of objective morality and meaning through the encroachment of knowledge into areas formerly the province of traditional morality. But Nietzsche’s perspective is nuanced rather than simple. Nietzsche would accuse the militant atheists of the contemporary world of missing precisely what is at issue in the debate over atheism. He is less easily satisfied than the likes of Grayling, Dawkins and Harris, who peddle a rather crude version of eighteenth century materialism that has nothing in common with Nietzsche’s argument. Nietzsche was clear that with the death of God, human beings are being called upon to fill the gap and assume moral responsibility. He seemed to doubt whether human beings were up to the challenge, that they were even aware of the challenge before them. To repudiate God is a simple enough thing to do. The problem with many atheists is not that they are radical in repudiating God, but that they are not radical enough. In so far as they are apostles of modern progress through science and technology, there is a hidden God at work in their arguments. This was Nietzsche’s point when he announced the death of God. It is so much easier to renounce theology than it is to escape its influence. Plenty that is presented under the rubric of atheism leaves a whole set of theological
assumptions firmly in place. The problem is worse than this, however. A genuine religion is a way of addressing and resolving some perennial issues in the human condition. Religion is a kind of psychic therapy which allows human beings to confront, express and control certain deep seated needs and fears and hopes that are buried in the human psyche. The danger is that with a disguised religion, that these assumptions are buried and go unrecognised and thus unchallenged and uncontrolled. The problem with a half-baked religion is that these psychic impulses go underground and can reappear in untamed, unrestrained perilous forms. Where we once thought that God was dead, we now get lots of deities ascending from their graves, doing battle in all manner of impersonal forms.

'Many old gods arise from their graves, disenchanted and in the form of impersonal forces; they strive to gain power over our lives and resume again their eternal struggle with one another'.

Weber 1991: 147/8

'Which of the warring gods should we serve?', Weber asks in Science as a Vocation. As though we have a choice in a world which proceeds, in Weber's apposite phrase, 'without regard for persons'. Weber realises our predicament. In place of God as an overarching morality, there is an irreducible subjectivism of value orders, with no way of deciding between them: 'over these gods and their struggles it is fate, and certainly not any 'science' that holds sway'. (Weber 1:246-47 quoted by McCarthy Introduction to Habermas 1991:xix/xx).

In this context, the idea of progress through industrialisation, economic growth, the advance of scientific knowledge and the technological mastery of nature appears as a secular myth which is shaped by the Judaeo-Christian presumption about the direction of history. One could also throw the Aristotelian notion of telos, purpose, in here to make the point that the idea of a beginning, a middle and an end is not necessarily a myth nor intrinsically a bad thing. All living organisms have essences and potentialities which are to be realised and exercised as integral to their flourishing.
The case against the secular myth of progress is that it supplants this organic sense of purpose with impersonal targets, drives and objectives. In this utilitarian world, human beings come to serve ends which are external to them, not the purposes which are intrinsic to their being. As function replaces purpose, progress fails to deliver the salvation promised. Instead of Heaven on Earth, our technical instruments deliver Hell.

These huge institutions of the modern world are fundamentally flawed in the way they go about things. As they get bigger and as more and more political power and technological hardware get concentrated within these oligarchic structures, the more their directors and executives threaten to become new sorcerer's apprentices for the twenty-first century.

Kingdon 1993: 330/1

The control and use of this power takes different forms within society's many institutions, from the state and the armed forces to industry and trade. Kingdon sees the dangers of technology falling into the wrong hands. He proposes an 'Earth Council' setting guidelines and putting limits upon the innumerable and often dangerous side effects of technology. 'Access to technology, techniques and processes needs to be kept open to all, yet responsibly controlled in the interests of the world's life processes of which we are a mere part.' (Kingdon 1993: 330/1).

I think the problem goes much deeper than the control and the use of technology and pertains to the extent to which technical powers in the service of the mastery of the Earth have been invested with a divine significance. This deification is both a dehumanisation and a denaturalisation. To overcome this condition, we need to recover a genuine sense of purpose, one rooted in real essences and their realisation.

A teleological conception sees the idea of progress as inherent in the unfolding of the historical process. History possesses an overarching meaning and morality, giving us some sense that all our thoughts and actions are part of some grand scheme building up to some great conclusion. The arrow of time is forever pointing in the direction of a better future, with human action conceived as being in fulfilment of
history's promise. One can see this in the Whig interpretation of history, the idea that history is the inexorable march of reason and liberty, culminating in liberal democracy. One can find the same mode of reasoning in Hegel. So when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Francis Fukuyama could be found declaring the end of history. Of course, history hadn't ended. To be fair to Fukuyama, and to Hegel before him, the point is that freedom and reason are the culmination of history, their realisation being the full and complete realisation of human potentialities. This is a view which gives history and human life meaning. Such a claim is independent of the particular forms of their incarnation in time and place. And that, surely, is the case for teleological thinking, the idea that living organisms possess an essential purpose that ought to be expressed and incarnated in the world rather than repressed.

My argument is not against teleology as such but against that form of teleology which abstracts from natural essences and in the place of genuine purposes imposes inexorable and impersonal imperatives. Instead of ends entailing fulfilment, we are given objectives, instead of purposes, we are given functions. As a result, salvation, which hitherto concerned the human soul or psyche, becomes no more than the endless accumulation of material quantity and physical knowledge.

My target is the secular myth of progress, a disenchantment and dis-godding that is shaped by buried and unacknowledged theological assumptions and which results in modern forces and powers taking idolatrous form. In other worlds, God is not dead at all, but has taken other, not necessarily benign, forms.

The ultimate measure of the awesome power, and the fundamental violence, of unfettered abstraction is to be found in the millions upon millions of nameless corpses which this most vicious of centuries has left as its memorial, human sacrifices to one or another of Weber's renascent modern gods. War itself is not new, modernity's contribution is to have waged it, with characteristic efficiency, under the sign of various totalizing abstractions which name and claim the lives of all.

Sayer 1987: 154/5
From this perspective, the endless progress sought by capitalist modernity is anything but a gross or atheistic materialism, it is something much more startling – it is a secularised theology. Modern progress via the new idols of industry and technology is not just a secular myth, it is a form of eschatology. Once, history was considered the expression of God's purpose for humanity, leading from the fall to the salvation of the human race. History has a final end. In this view, history is seen as working towards a final end. One can trace the idea of teleology to Aristotle. The secular myth, though, reads more like an inverted and gutted version of Christian theology, denoting a rationalisation in which means have become so enlarged as to displace ends. But this is not an abolition of teleology, only a bad teleology in which means have been exalted to the status of ends. That is an inversion of Christian theology and is a complete misreading of the way that *telos* operates in the work of Aristotle. In exposing the misfiring modern conception of ‘progress’ as a disguised theology, one should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Teleological conceptions which work well in Aristotle, in the Judaeo-Christian eschatology and in Hegel and Marx become something else entirely when pressed into the service of the new gods of money and power. One sees this clearly in the modern world. Instead of the promised Heaven on Earth, we get the endless expansion of a socially unjust and environmentally damaging economy, we get military expansion and total war, we get the enlargement of state power and the bureaucratisation of the world. Such ‘progress’ may not amount to an end of history, but it may certainly put an end to human history.

We should be clear that the problem here is not the idea of purpose as such, but the inversion of means and ends which replaces purpose with function. Marx is pertinent here, describing this condition of alienation in terms of the inversion of subject and object, human creators becoming appendages of their creations, as ‘things’ come to be invested with existential significance. Marx is clear on this question:

History does *nothing*, it does *not* possess immense riches, it does *not* fight battles. It is *men*, real, living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not 'history' which uses men as a means of achieving - as if it were an individual person - *its* own ends. History is *nothing* but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends.
Marx, *The Holy Family* (1845), MECW, 4, p.93.

Marx did not, therefore, see history as evidence for the hand of God guiding us inexorably towards some inevitable end. But he did possess a teleological view (he explicitly renounces the supra-natural conception when praising Darwin). As Scott Meikle convincingly argued in *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (1985), the idea of essences containing potentialities and immanent lines of development is central to Marx. But Marx cannot be convicted of the bad teleology of hidden designs and purposes that proceed independently of human agency. Marx explicitly repudiates the idea that history is about the inexorable unfolding of God’s purpose. Marx did not see history as evidence for the hand of God guiding us inexorably towards some inevitable end and criticised the way that Hegel employed the figure of Reason in this manner, (a criticism which is unfair to Hegel, who clearly emphasises the role of human agency in the progress of reason to consciousness of freedom.) It is human purpose that matters, and this is where we reinstake Aristotle’s conception of essences and potentialities which need to be actualised and exercised for fulfilment. This realisation is necessary for a flourishing life, but is not inevitable. It depends upon human agency for its realisation. Necessary lines of development can be frustrated. To which I will just add that, as Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes clear, in the Jewish conception, history is a co-evolution between human beings and God. The emphasis remains firmly on human agency. The real error here is not the idea of salvation based upon teleology as such but the secularisation of this idea to create a false religion of progress based on the veneration of industrial and technical powers as the new deities. The error is the idea of salvation based upon technological and industrial powers regardless of ends supplied by human moral agency.

Differentiating between and evaluating these competing versions of teleology requires an ability to take philosophy and theology seriously. If philosophy is a difficult terrain for modern pragmatic, results-driven, money obsessed men and women to explore, the challenge to think theologically seems to be utterly beyond them. In claiming divine power through our technology, we have fallen far short of the knowledge and wisdom of God. Stripping the world down to physical fact and causality has greatly diminished the human mental and moral equipment. This has
left us psychologically exposed and vulnerable. The same life forces that have shaped human beings throughout history are still at work in the human psyche. The problem is, in the aftermath of rationalisation as disenchanted/dis-godding, modern man and woman possess an impoverished religious/theological apparatus which leaves us powerless when confronted by these underlying processes. We cannot control the forces we have unleashed upon the world. This is an integral part of the paradox that the increasing rationalisation of the world, far from issuing in progress, is accompanied by increasingly irrational behaviour. That is the only way to explain the $1.7 trillion global arms budget, a figure so large that it would take six times recorded history to count at the rate of a dollar per second.

We need to recognise the extent to which our secular idea of progress is infused with a hidden teleological assumption which derives from theology. The political philosopher Leo Strauss argued that "what presents itself as the 'secularisation' of theological concepts will have to be understood, in the last analysis, as an adaptation of traditional theology to the intellectual climate produced by modern philosophy or science both natural and political." (Strauss *Natural Right*, ch 6).

This radical change is not primarily a change within theology, but a change in modern philosophy and science. And I would argue further that the change goes deeper than that and is rooted in the inversion of means and ends within capitalist modernity, the extent to which instrumental means have become so enlarged as to replace ends.

By citing Nietzsche, my point is not to demand that secularisation be the thoroughgoing process he demanded, extinguishing not merely God but all the theological assumptions attendant upon the belief in God. Instead, I would argue that we should recognise certain ineliminable aspects of the human condition, particularly the search for meaning, and address those psychic realities with greater honesty and courage. This would amount not to the abolition of teleological assumptions but to the reintroduction of *telos* in a form which is appropriate to the end of human flourishing in our day. And this implies an ability on our part to understand and give thought to such ideas, something we are poorly equipped to do in an increasingly irreligious age. The death of God and the denigration is our loss if we fail to live up to the moral and creative imperative that comes with it – to become
as gods. I would argue that such divinity is beyond human beings. As Kant reasoned, out of nothing so crooked can something entirely straight be made.

‘Man ought not to know more of a thing than he can creatively live up to’, argued Nietzsche. That’s the challenge that comes with the death of God, can human beings creatively live up to the knowledge and power that is now in their hands? In rejecting God whilst retaining a whole range of theological assumptions, human beings have come to venerate their power as a new idolatry. Human beings have come to think and act as gods, with predictably disastrous results. Such power becomes a destructive and dangerous force rather than the creative, joyful force Nietzsche affirmed. If human beings do not use power creatively according to ends they have set themselves, ‘power’ would impose its own external, impersonal ends destructively. Against the assertiveness of the militant atheists of the contemporary age, Nietzsche, who knew what was at stake, considered the death of God to be a tragedy. The death of God has charged human beings with the responsibility to live as gods. Nietzsche suspected from the first that human beings might well not be up to meeting the challenge. In this, Nietzsche’s pessimism has proven all too true. Nietzsche thought the issue took us beyond good and evil. The problem is that the secular myth of progress has neither sought nor achieved the transvaluation of all values. On the contrary, the old values have gone underground as a set of theological assumptions which invest material powers with divine significance. On a superficial level, we are beyond God, but at a deeper level, we have deified our technical powers and material things. The new gods are the impersonal forces which govern the lives of all within modernity and which demand – and receive - daily human sacrifice.

We badly need to recover a sense of purpose and start to give ends to ourselves as moral beings. The notion of telos is central to the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle’s teleological assumptions are embedded in a philosophical anthropology which sees human beings as social beings (zoon politikons) requiring a public life (politikon bion) in order to realise and exercise their potentialities and thereby flourish. Aristotle argued that the purpose of life is not just to live but to live well. And his holistic approach involves an examination of the social conditions for human flourishing. Clark summarises Aristotle's view in these terms: 'Man's being lies in community, in the unity of man with man' (Clark 1975:107/8). In the modern world,
one sees this perspective in the work of communitarian philosophers such as Sandel, Raz, Finnis, and Galston.

Jurgen Habermas also offers a variant of this thesis. For Habermas, freedom, even personal freedom, is conceivable only in 'internal connection with a network of interpersonal relationships', in the context of the communicative structures of a community, so that 'the freedom of some is not achieved at the cost of the freedom of others'. Identifying the 'potential for Social-Darwinist menace' inherent in individualist conceptions of freedom, Habermas argues that there is a need to 'analyse the conditions of collective freedom'. 'The individual cannot be free unless all are free, and all cannot be free unless all are free in community. It is this last proposition which one misses in the empiricist and individualist traditions' (Habermas 1992:146).

We should be clear that the repudiation of purpose and meaning could come at a very big price. There is a case for arguing that deflating the sense of human self-importance, encouraging human beings to see themselves as parts of nature's interconnected web of life, has the potential for a species more at peace with itself and with its world. Some such notion would seem to be what Nietzsche was presenting as the joyful or gay science. This would be to abandon the idea that we are going to some better, improved future via science, technology and industry as a delusion. Economic growth, technological expansion, urbanisation, military power and conquest etc are all evidence of a rationalistic fallacy and false mythology at work, not progress. But I would still distinguish this secularisation of purpose and salvation from the Aristotelian conception of flourishing and all those traditions which are based upon it, whether we refer to Christianity, Hegel or Marx. Any progress within this conception is a natural process of growth, development and flourishing. The growth, realisation and exercise of potentiality is healthy for a living organism. Such a notion does not denote a myth of progress at all but, instead, defines the vital functioning and flourishing of all living things. And this is where I would distinguish this Aristotelian view from Nietzsche’s criticisms. Nietzsche, I would suggest, was not sufficiently alive to the potential for Social Darwinist menace in individualist conceptions of freedom. He failed to recognise the force of Aristotle’s argument that human beings are essentially social beings, that human beings are not just individuals but are individuals who require each other in order to be themselves. As Aristotle argued in the Politics, "He who is unable to live in society, or
who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”
The way that our deification of technical power has unmoored us from our moral and social foundations points to a danger. If we cannot become as gods, then it seems that we must become as beasts.

It is surely of some significance that Nietzsche, with his elitist conception of freedom and morality, referring to the mass of humanity as the ‘bungled and the botched’, was unable to live in society and consequently went mad. Nietzsche personifies a whole modern civilisation that has lost its moral compass and has loosened its social cement.

There is a case for saying that an immanentist perspective which sees nothing but the circularity of nature deflates the human ego, dissolves the idea of a unique self as a delusion, and exposes the free will as a myth. If human beings can finally abandon their mad enterprises to conquer the planet and build the ‘empire of man’, accept that we are going nowhere on this planet, and simply learn to live out our natural span in peace with each other and the environment, then that would indeed be a happy outcome. But I would still argue that this would be a form of progress which represents the realisation of a telos, human beings finally learning how to live well. As Gandhi put it, we can fly like a bird in the skies and swim like a fish in the seas, but we have yet to learn to walk on the Earth like a human being. I say that living the human life amounts to the realisation of the telos of the human being. That is the only progress we can achieve on Earth. That is how I would interpret Plato’s statement that ‘virtue is its own reward’.

If immanence means the rejection of the purpose and end associated with the transcendent ideal, I see not the joy that Nietzsche forecast but egoism and madness. Repudiating the individualist approach to freedom and morality, the teleological conception deriving from Aristotle holds that freedom represents a certain quality of life for all the individuals composing a community. Freedom, if it is to be anything more than a delusion associated with free will and the egoistic self, can only be conceived as a fundamental component in a communal modus vivendi which is committed to the flourishing of all. This implies a conception of the good life, which in turn requires a teleological underpinning.
And this implies a transcendent ideal. In realising a human purpose, human beings have no alternative but to hold in the eye of the mind (Plato, *Symposium*) some design for life which pertains to human character, conduct and interaction in the community, and proceeding to pursue a plan of action as tends to bring about that design. And this implies a conception of the good life for human beings, a teleology which identifies a form of communal life that enhances rather than inhibits human flourishing.

And that means recovering and reclaiming theological assumptions from their appropriation and misrepresentation by secularised modernity. We need a re-enchantment, not in the sense of investing modern idols with theological significance, but in the sense of reordering the arrangement of means and ends. We need to recover the ‘end of the world’ in the sense of fitting our lives to an overall pattern or design for life which corresponds to the human ontology and its flourishing. The problem with the secular myth of progress is that it exalts the instrumental means to the status of ends and as a result contradicts the human ontology. That’s the kind of progress we can do without. That’s the kind of progress which is a delusion. Instead of human ends relating to flourishing, we have the pursuit of objectives associated with economic growth, the endless racking up of material quantities, the infinite pursuit of capital accumulation on a planet of finite resources. That kind of progress will indeed bring about the ‘end of the world’, interpreted as ‘dead, finished, gone’. We need to pursuing a genuine end, one related to genuine teleological assumptions concerning the human ontology.

We have lost this ability to identify a genuine teleology concerning purpose from a bogus teleology concerned with instrumental rationality and function. The danger is that in repudiating the latter we fail to recover the former. We need to recover the genuine sense of ends as a condition of our flourishing. We need to re-enchant a culture that currently stresses egoism within society and independence from nature, a view which sees human individuals as being in the world but not of it, charged with the task of bending reality to egoistic will. That is not a genuine teleology in that it realises an end which is external to the human ontology. Instead of the realisation of human potentiality, it is the contribution an individual makes to the expansion of the GNP that counts. That is progress as a secular myth. That delusion does not mean that progress in terms of the end of salvation is also a myth. A genuine sense of
purpose and ends implies a more holistic approach to life, submerging the ego in relations to others and to nature.

Modern man’s success in separating himself from others and from nature represents a massive anthropological failure, a triumph in the name of material progress which has led to growing dis-ease and unhappiness. Free will and the ego are false constructs which delude human beings into accepting the diremption that characterises the modern condition as normal and inevitable. We misread transcendence as separateness from others and from nature. In truth, human beings are part of the world, not apart from it. Transcendence and immanence are united when we come to recognise that we are joined to all organic and inorganic things by a unifying and universal spirit. Any self that we have is a cosmic self. We see ourselves as parts of a greater whole. Teilhard de Chardin wrote well of the Cosmic Christ.

Ultimately, the separateness of egoism estranges us from our own natures. In describing the condition of alienation, Marx writes of ‘the self-estrangement of man from himself and from nature.’ (Marx EW OJQ 1975). This is ‘human self-estrangement.’ (Marx EW OJQ 1975). Marx makes it clear that the problem is not progress as such and not purpose as such, but the particular forms these take within alienative and exploitative social relations:

Money is the universal and self-constituted value of all things. It has therefore deprived the entire world - both the world of man and of nature - of its specific value. Money is the estranged essence of man's work and existence; this alien essence dominates him and he worships it.

Marx EW OJQ 1975

The problem is the inversion of subject and object, ends and means, and the resulting loss of human purpose and human ends. This denotes a condition of alienation:
So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, of capital.

Marx EW EPM 1975: 324/5

Marx identified the new god of the secularised theology of the modern world all along – capital. ‘Accumulate, accumulate, that is Moses and all the prophets!’ Marx wrote. Where once Moses was the lawgiver dispensing ethics pertaining to human ends, now the imperatives of capital accumulation give the orders. And that’s the point, the accumulative dynamic of capital is *endless*, it is never a completed purpose, just accumulation for the sake of accumulation. Capital must expand its values or collapse. The process can never end, only expand endlessly. Capital accumulation is the endless pursuit of mere means to infinity on a planet of finite resources. The only end here is the exhaustion of nature’s life support systems. Again, that is the end of the world, certainly of the ecological conditions supporting civilised human life.

Rather than unmask the theological assumptions of the secular myth of progress, Marx put the accent on unmasking self-estrangement in its secular forms, a much more radical enterprise and one which presupposes human purpose, ends and fulfilment. Marx presents his own form of the end of history argument in precisely these terms:

It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.

Marx Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction  EW 1975: 245
And that is the task that remains before us if we are to achieve the social conditions which correspond to the human ontology and enable human — and planetary — flourishing. The qualities of Being and Place interpenetrate, meaning that the end we set ourselves is concerned with the realisation of essential purposes.

In fine, I would relate transcendence and immanence in this way. The transcendent ideal sets ends which are concerned with the realisation of human purpose, indeed of the telos of all living organisms. The ends are those which human beings, as moral and teleological beings, set themselves in pursuit of the fulfilled and flourishing life. Conceiving reality as a field of materialist immanence, the transcendent ideal is a vision of the immanent society which exists as a current potentiality to be actualised. I would come back here to Virgil and his idea of ‘working the earth’, gaining knowledge of natural processes not so as to be able to exploit them in pursuit of ends abstracted from nature, but to learn our connections to nature so as to be able to define ends which enable a creative self-realisation of our telos. This is to see place as the ground of our being, a field of materialist immanence that contains potentialities for the flourishing society, an immanent ideal which we are able to conceive morally by our sense of the transcendent. In the material realm, this transcendent ideal becomes, in the words of Kant, the ‘real object of our willing’ (Kant CPrR 1956:121f). In other words, the transcendent is an end that human beings as moral agents set themselves and which, as purposive, creative agents, they set about realising as part of the moral duty to realise the good life.

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11 BEYOND HEROIC MATERIALISM

The Echoing Green by William Blake

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
“Such, such were the joys
When we all, girls & boys,
In our youth time were seen
On the Echoing Green.”
Till the little ones, weary,
No more can be merry;
The sun does descend,
And our sports have on end.
Round the laps of their mothers
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest,
And sports no more seen
On the darkening Green.

In *Civilisation*, Kenneth Clark said this of New York: ‘it's godless, it's brutal, it's violent — but one can't laugh it off, because in the energy, strength of will and mental grasp that have gone to make New York, materialism has transcended itself.’ ‘New York was built to the glory of mammon - money, gain, the new god of the nineteenth century.’ But it is not a celestial city. ‘Come closer and it's not so good. Lots of squalor, and, in the luxury, something parasitical. One sees why heroic materialism is still linked with an uneasy conscience.’ Clark goes on to write of ‘the heroic self-confidence of men for whom nothing was impossible, the men who forced the first railways over England.’ The men who imposed industrialisation upon nature. Clark exposes the hollowness at the heart of the city of mammon and concludes on a troubled note: ‘The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left us with no alternative to heroic materialism, and that isn't enough. One may be optimistic, but one can't exactly be joyful at the prospect before us.’ (Clark 1969: 347).
And that is where we remain today, still in search of that alternative to heroic materialism.

I believe the phrase comes from Berthold Brecht. The people who need no heroes are indeed truly blessed, in that they at peace with the ‘garden heroes’ on and in the land. It all depends upon what we meaning by heroism. In ancient mythology, the hero sets an example, inducing us to draw out the heroic capacities we all have within. The hero stands intermediate between men and gods. Strange that the hero-cult was apparently unknown to the Mycenaeans, a civilisation often considered to be matriarchal, living peacefully within the contours of the land.

Even more interesting is the fact that Hero was a woman, priestess of Aphrodite at Sestus on one side of the Hellespont. Her mythological lover, Leander lived on the other side at Abydos. Leander saw Hero at a festival, fell in love with her, and used to swim the Hellespont at night to see her. He was drowned when a storm put out the light by which Hero guided him, and Hero leapt from her seaside tower onto his corpse.
Musaeus’s poem (5th/6th cent. AD) accentuates the motifs of light and darkness in this myth to good effect, with Hero’s lamp equated with the life of her lover in a myriad ways. (Virgil, Georgics 258-63; Ovid, Heroines 18-19, see also Marlowe’s Hero and Leander). Light and dark, sun and sea, the transcendent and the immanent – is perfect peace and union possible?

Where Leander would swim the Hellespont, Greek heroes would take to their boats. Where now we have the infinity of space, in the flat worlds of the past, it was the sea that represented infinity. Where now we have rockets going upwards into space, in the past heroism was proven in the infinity of the sea. The sea was the testing ground of heroism. So we had the heroes setting out in their boats in an attempt to master the seas. And I mean ‘master’ in the sense of men pitting their technical wits and tools against the oceanic as the unconquerable female. Or is it men differentiating themselves from their origins in order to return as independent beings for reunion at a higher level?

Attempts at mastery are doomed to fail, no matter how big the ships become, no matter whether they go round the world or leave it entirely. The Earth is never conquered. If unity without differentiation is an unconscious world of complete immanence, then differentiation without unity is a madness...
of rootless transcendence. Yet, somehow, these adventures are always read as triumphs for the heroic spirit.

The Odyssey may be read in terms of a separation from the land, a journey, a triumph over alien nature, the return as conquering hero. This could be the way we differentiate ourselves from our natural origins, achieve a moral autonomy and distinctive identity as human beings, and return to live a self-conscious existence in relation to circumstances.

Maybe. But that’s not how they read. The price paid and the independence asserted precludes any genuine reunion. Odysseus, king of Ithaca, is the son of Sisyphus (a name meaning ‘too clever’). When Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy as a hero, he hanged a dozen slave-girls in his household on one rope. He suspected them of ‘misbehaviour’ during his long ten year absence. The hanging involved no morality. Like the nature to be heroically mastered, the girls were property, his property, the disposal of which was a matter of expediency and utility, not of right and wrong. In other words, the heroism of Odysseus did not involve an ethical relationship to nature, only possession, expediency and utility. We still lack that planetary ethic. Instead, like Odysseus' slave-girls, the land, the sea, the sky and all the animals and plants which fill the earth are just property of merely utilitarian significance.

Read from this perspective, the Odyssey is a tale of the deliberate rupturing of our ancient, originary ties with nature and celebrates the triumph of technics over nature. To equate this triumph with ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation’ is a lie, a masculine fantasy that takes heroism away from the tale of Hero and Leander. The people who have no need of heroes have achieved their peace with the land and see no reason to engage in its mastery.

The Odyssey exposes the fearful void that weighs on the heart and soul of the heroic ideal. In the Odyssey, death is a black transcendence. Not even the heroes can make sense of it. Death is ineffable and inconceivable. (Vernant 1996: 58-60). Visiting the underworld, Odysseus is horrified by the obscene spectacle of the swarming crowds of the dead, stripped of all humanity. However, Odysseus begs Achilles not to grieve: “No man has ever been more blest than you in days past, or
will be in days to come. For before you died, we Achaeans honoured you like a god, and now in this place, you lord it among the dead." But to Achilles, the words are hollow; he knows the truth. "Don't gloss over death to me in order to console me. I would rather be above ground still and labouring for some poor peasant man than be the lord over the lifeless dead." (Odyssey 11:500, in Shewring 1980). Here is a clear answer to Virgil’s question: Under what stars to plough the Earth? Achilles’ words thoroughly subvert the aristocratic ethos of the warrior as hero.

Is that void at the heart of nature or at the heart of ‘heroic’ man divorced from nature, at war with nature, with others, with himself?

The Werner Herzog film ‘Heart of Glass’ ends with the inhabitants on some barren rock looking out to the sea for an escape from their confinement. Nature’s immanence is a confinement, it can suffocate and swallow up – there is a human yearning to push out beyond such confines and develop an independent personality. Such is heroism. Herzog’s Heart of Glass seems to offer no hope either way. Whether we stay or go, there is nothing but the blind indifference of nature. The camera pans to the sky above and focuses on the birds circling round in the air. To those tied to the land, birds are symbols of freedom, as under the feudal system during the Middle Ages. Those bound by the immanence of the land yearn for the transcendence symbolised by birds. The camera looks upwards and outwards. Then the narrator ends the film: "Then the men set out, pathetic and senseless. In a boat that is far too small. It may have seemed like a sign of hope that the birds followed them out into the vastness of the sea."

And there the film ends, with the sea and sky swallowing them all up. There is no infinity in the horizontal plane, and more fool those who horizontalize the vertical in a finite world. It’s an escape, an illusion, an attempt to deny finitude and mortality rather than come to terms with them. We are already on a tiny little boat within the vastness of nature. Earth is a fragile planet. But, rather than see nature as bleak and hostile, something to escape or conquer by our technologies, we need to appreciate the potentialities for flourishing contained within nature, nature without and nature within.

“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Covering both the natural and
spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description.... If there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism.” (Albert Einstein).

That sounds reasonable in the age of science. But what, then, becomes of morality? When asked if he believed in God, Einstein replied that he believed in the God of Spinoza, a God/Nature that is concerned with the harmony of all that exists in complete indifference to human thought and action. That’s Elohim, the God of Creation, as against the personal God, Hashem. The problem is that the personal God is the God of human relationships, the God of love, of morality, of human meaning. It’s hard to see how we can transcend the personal God and retain a sense of human dignity. Human beings need to find the moral law within themselves and share it in relation to others – it is this that gives reality to Hashem as the personal God and delivers moral meaning to the world of natural processes. There is a need for transcendence in this sense. The human spirit needs to see and experience meaning in the harmonious unfolding of natural processes within the web of life. We can re-write Einstein’s credo. Elohim and Hashem go together to join the material and the spiritual, fact and value, and thus generate a religious sense from the experience and understanding of all things natural as a meaningful unity.

Free your body and soul
Unfold your powerful wings
Climb up the highest mountains
Kick your feet up in the air
You may now live forever
Or return to this earth
Unless you feel good where you are!

(John Laird McCaffery)
'Progress' has come to be measured by the extent to which our heroes have transcended all ties with the land and sought infinity through their machines and rockets and space ships. That's the promise by which we are socialised, and to question its veracity is to provoke an existential crisis. But material progress is illusory, since there is no escaping nature's circularity. "All flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust." (Job 34:15). It's all dust to dust. But what we do in between is our choice. That's the moral autonomy we have from nature and its blind imperatives. The question is whether it is better to accumulate material quantity in pursuit of progress or to realise and exercise the natural potentialities we are born with? The former leads nowhere, since the world of things is ephemeral and transitory and comes to an end; the latter is to make the most of the gift of life while we have it.

Science tells us that the sun doesn't rise and doesn't set. The earth goes round the sun, not vice versa. Yet we see the sun going round our earth and not vice versa. We are geocentric beings, not heliocentric beings. Our feet stand on the ground, even if our heads are in the clouds. We need to see the sun paying his homage to oceanic nature, the blue planet, Gaia. We need to find a peace on nature's terms, going beyond heroes and the pursuit of 'progress' to achieve a genuine unity of immanence and transcendence. At this point, we see the sky god abandoning attempts at transcendence and instead achieving reconciliation with permanent nature, achieving a genuine eternal life that recognises the circularity of nature.
But that's the problem: a self-contained world soon becomes a prison of the spirit. The human being years to move, get out, explore, and then, maybe, return a differentiated, self-conscious being. Circularity, for all its merits, is the enemy of independent movement. It is a nature worship that diminishes human moral stature. And that is what transcendence feeds - spiritual hunger. Civilisation is the record of human beings reaching for something beyond their grasp. That's the paradox of the human condition, always seeking home, never at home, until day is done and the sun goes down. Human beings must escape the finite world of naked materialism and instead go to face and find themselves in the infinite. To be human is to undertake a long, often tempestuous voyage ahead, with no way of saying where it will end, because it is never over until it is over.

I have used the sun and the sea as metaphors for journey's beginning and journey's end, because human life is all about movement, escape, deed and return. We may return in triumph or in failure, but we return nonetheless.

Once more upon the waters! yet once more! And the waves bound beneath me as a steed That knows his rider. Welcome to their roar! Swift be their guidance, wheresoe'er it lead!

'Wheresoe'er it lead!' We go where it leads, otherwise we fall back into Nature's swamp. Does Nature's circularity point to the fallacy of human ambition and the futility of human machinations? Nature and her endless cycles and rhythms are eternal, human actions temporal. We are the finite sparks in pursuit of the infinite. William Blake stated the point with typical vigour: 'The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man!'

'Too great for the eye of man!' It bears repetition in an age when men yet again are thinking of themselves as gods and once more pursuing the fantasy of immortality by mechanical means. But Nature, what Einstein calls the God of Spinoza, is indifferent to human affairs, and the journey into the infinite soon becomes tiring. So we return and accept our finitude. Or we carry on to self-destruction, either as a person or as a civilisation. Eternity is too great for unaided human capacities. But we can live under the species of eternity without having to
capture, control or defeat it by technical means. Fulfilment requires recognition of natural limits. Fulfilment requires our recognition of our dependence on nature and upon others. The rich person knows sufficiency, the poor person never does – stupidity is the finite in endless pursuit of the infinite.

But such stupidity is deeply rooted in a part of the human psyche that resents originary nature and seeks to dominate and destroy it.

I shall come later to discuss George Monbiot’s lazy denigration of Plato and Marx as totalitarian thinkers in *The Guardian*. The anger was fully justified. At a time when we need to develop a rational thinking capacity that secures the long term common good over against short term individualist thinking, Monbiot caricatures the arguments of two of the thinkers who did most to take us in that direction.

It isn’t just the philosophical shallowness of Monbiot’s reasoning that grates, but the evidence of an underlying political naivety, a naivety which has ever characterised liberal reformism and incrementalism. Monbiot writes in outraged tones as to how Marx could dismiss lumpen elements as ‘social scum’ and ‘bribed tools of reaction’. Monbiot has evidently never heard of the King and Country mobs, and clearly has no class awareness of who the supporters and enemies of dictatorial regimes from Bonapartism to Fascism/Nazism have been. That is not just historically ignorant, it is politically dangerous. It is a typical liberal blindspot. I would refer here to the German Freikorps, the murderers of Karl Leibnecht and Rosa Luxemburg. These are the lumpen elements that Marx was rightly wary of, and history has proven Marx right here. But I want to look at this question at a deeper level than this clash between revolutionary and reactionary politics. I want to look at domination in terms of a reaction not just against political enemies, but against life and nature.

Klaus Theweleit has written an extensively researched, detailed and disturbing study of the attitudes toward women and sexuality among German soldiers between the world wars. (Klaus Theweleit, (1987 [1977]) *Male Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Klaus Theweleit (1989 [1978]) *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies*:}
Psychoanalyzing the White Terror. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.)

Theweleit’s The study exposes the dark side to the domination of nature and merits comment.

Theweleit’s main focus is upon the German Freikorps. This was an army unit formed at the end of the First World War with the express purpose of fighting ‘Bolsheviks’, socialists and trade unionists along Germany’s eastern border. However, despite the ending of the official mandate, many continued to fight as a vigilante force, in time joining the SA and SS, some becoming commandants in the concentration camps.

Theweleit describes this group as a dissociated, contingent body forming itself into a warrior body with the express intention of dominating others. Theweleit thus details the construction of the dominating body as warrior: ‘The soldier male is forced to turn the periphery of his body into a cage for the beast within. In so doing, he deprives it of its function as a surface for social contact. His contact surface becomes an insulated shield, and he loses the capacity to perceive the social corpus within which his insulated body moves. ... A man [so] structured craves war, because only war allows him to achieve identity with his alien, “primitive,” “bestial” interior, while at the same time avoiding being devoured by it’ (1989: 22). In the process, domination becomes medium and outcome of the warrior body: ‘What seems to hold the masculine-soldierly body together is his compulsion to oppress the body of another (or bodies, or the body in his own body). His relation to the bodies he subordinates is one of violence and, in extreme cases, of murder’ (1989: 87).

Theweleit’s key thesis is that ultimately, the male soldier’s hatred is not just directed against this group or that group, but against life itself, as productive and contingent. Subordination, violence and murder is directed against life as such. ‘The monumentality of fascism would seem to be a safety mechanism against the bewildering multiplicity of the living. The more lifeless, regimented, and monumental reality appears to be, the more secure the men feel. The danger is being alive itself.’
Theweleit (1987: 218). And those who make the best soldiers are those who most fear being alive.

Theweleit is concerned to identify what lies behind the lack which motivates domination. He rejects classical psychoanalytic explanations for a social explanation, influenced by Deleuze and Guattari (1983). Theweleit explains the distinction between the two perspectives thus: 'And so, the story doesn't go; because he couldn't take possession of the mother, he subjugated the Earth to himself (Freud). It goes: because he wasn't allowed to use the Earth and produce, he went back to his mother. In this scheme of things, "incestuous desire" is not primary desire at all, but a form that Desire assumes because of the repression to which it is subject in society' (Theweleit 1987: 213). Through domination, society institutes within the body the disturbing psychic forces indicated above. Theweleit re-reads the biblical story of Adam and Eve as 'a failed revolution [told] from the victor's standpoint. For attempting to put into practice their slogan "Our bodies belong to us," the rebels were sentenced to a life of forced labor in the sweat of their brows. "Your bodies belong to your ruler!" was the response.' The 'prerequisite . . . for ideological assault' is to install a condition of lack in bodies. "Installing dark territories, sources of terror and anxiety, in and on people's own bodies and the bodies of those they desired" creates the 'fear and uncertainty, of people's feeling that there were many places within themselves that no one could enter - neither they themselves, nor anyone else. Those were the territories occupied by the gods, the police, laws, Medusas, and other monsters' (1987: 414, 415).

There are monsters aplenty in the world of the megamachine. Each and all are being appropriated in mind, body and soul, enlisted in a cause designed to dominate and, ultimately, destroy life on Earth. The last word may well belong to one of the Freikorps members who, writing his own epigram and epitaph, could have been writing for all of us: 'Only now do we recognize how little at home we are within ourselves' (quoted by Theweleit 1987: 243).
Bluebell Avenue

Bluebell, any plant of the genus *Endymion*.

One of the most enduring of all the plants.

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12 DANTE: THE WAY OF TRUTH AND LIFE

[I have written more extensively on Dante in Peter Critchley, 2013 Dante – The Living Hope; and Peter Critchley, 2013 Dante’s Enamoured Mind. I refer those who want a more in depth view of Dante to those works. I believe that Dante offers the finest, most sublime, most existentially satisfying resolution of the dualism between immanence and transcendence. I establish my case in detail in the above works. Here, I can do no more than give a taster.]

Philosophy... is the ascent of the mind from the lower regions to the highest, and from darkness to light. Its origin is an impulse of the divine mind; its middle steps are the faculties and the disciplines which are described; and its end is the possession of the highest good. Finally, its fruit is the right government of men. (Marsilio Ficino 1433-1499 Letters)

I start with a quote from Marsilio Ficino for a reason. Later on I shall develop as essentialist metaphysics based on the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle is an obvious starting point in defending teleological thinking on the basis of the existence of natural essences possessing inherent potentialities and purposes. But there is another tradition in this quest for realisation, one which highlights the transcendental ideal. This is the tradition of Plato. After centuries of domination of Aristotelian Scholasticism, there was a Platonic revival, in which Ficino played a central part. as the first translator of Plato’s complete works into Latin.

In truth, Platonism had been dominant in Christian civilisation until the early thirteenth century. The medieval world considered appearances to be symbols of the ideal order, the one and true reality. From the time of St Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle became the dominant influence.

Dante was as interested in humanity and Earth as any Aristotelian naturalist, but his philosophic power, moral depth and grasp of abstract ideas gave him a transcendent sense of heavenly light. I wish to pursue the metaphor of light with respect to Dante. ‘The way of truth and life’ is a quote from Dante’s Divine Comedy, a poem whose central theme is the ascent into the light.
The Aristotelian world is the world of earthly realities, a world of unfolding purposes within the material plane. Dante can also see an unfolding of purposes, but in such a way as to ascend the levels from the lower to the higher being.

The great achievement of Dante is to have modelled an ideal unity, relating the parts together and structuring life according to ascending levels of purpose so as to form a greater whole. If, as seems to be the case, human beings are meaning seeking, symbol making creatures, then Dante is the master. The argument of *The Divine Comedy* is beautifully structured, almost mathematical, possessing a relatedness that draws the inner person out of the ego and into the outer world. I like that idea of ascending purposes, each of us finding a place that allows us to contribute to the greater whole, a symbiosis of the parts that creates synergy. It is a view that appealed to R.H. Tawney. I find it significant that Tawney concluded *The Acquisitive Society* with an exposition of Dante’s practical philosophy.

The famous lines in which Piccarda explains to Dante the order of Paradise are a description of a complex and multiform society which is united by overmastering devotion to a common end. By that end all stations are assigned and all activities are valued. The parts derive their quality from their place in the system, and are so permeated by the unity which they express that they themselves are glad to be forgotten, as the ribs of an arch carry the eye from the floor from which they spring to the vault in which they meet and interlace.

Tawney 1982 ch 11

That’s the democracy of place, purpose and person that I argue in favour of over against the democracy of subjective opinion and self-interest. The attainment of Being comes through the realisation of purpose.

Such a combination of unity and diversity is possible only to a society which subordinates its activities to the principle of purpose. For what that principle offers is not merely a standard for determining the relations of different classes and groups of producers, but a scale of moral values. (Tawney 1982 ch 11).
The economic problem is, in origin, a moral problem arising from the inversion of means and ends. Tawney proceeds to argue that economic activity should be assigned to its proper place as the servant, and not the master, of society. The problem of modern civilization is not merely the maldistribution of wealth, but that economics has come to hold a position of exclusive predominance among human life, a position which ‘no single interest, and least of all the provision of the material means of existence, is fit to occupy.’

From first to last, this is Dante, for whom the greatest sin of all is avarice, since from this sin all the others follow. We have built a social system organised around avarice and the results are plain to see. ‘Like a hypochondriac who is so absorbed in the processes of his own digestion that he goes to his grave before he has begun to live, industrialized communities neglect the very objects for which it is worth while to acquire riches in their feverish preoccupation with the means by which riches can be acquired.’ (Tawney 1982 ch 11).

Tawney concludes by arguing that this obsession by economic issues is as local and transitory as it is repulsive and disturbing.

To future generations it will appear as pitiable as the obsession of the seventeenth century by religious quarrels appears to-day; indeed, it is less rational, since the object with which it is concerned is less important. And it is a poison which inflames every wound and turns every trivial scratch into a malignant ulcer. Society will not solve the particular problems of industry which afflict it until that poison is expelled, and it has learned to see industry itself in the right perspective. If it is to do that, it must rearrange its scale of values. It must regard economic interests as one element in life, not as the whole of life. It must persuade its members to renounce the opportunity of gains which accrue without any corresponding service, because the struggle for them keeps the whole community in a fever. It must so organize its industry that the instrumental character of economic activity is emphasized by its subordination to the social purpose for which it is carried on.
The end of *The Divine Comedy* is *Commedia*, felicity, giving us a happy ending. It’s a happiness achieved by our coming to subordinate our egoistic selves to moral and social purpose.

I rate Dante highly. Dante makes the idea of philosophy as ascent not only comprehensible but sublime. As George Steiner writes: Dante ‘organizes, makes irreducibly vital, the reciprocities of religious, metaphysical and aesthetic codes in respect of being and of generation. Dante’s apprehension of theology is schooled and profound. No faith is more innervated by thought. He engages with philosophical issues at the highest level of general perception and technicality (Dante was a logician of the intuitive). There is - banality - no greater poet, none in whom the summa of knowledge, of imagining, of formal construction is made to reveal itself in language more commensurate to its purpose.’ (Steiner 2001 ch 2). Dante is a towering figure in the history of philosophic theology. And he’s a political philosopher of the first rank. Here, Dante’s principal concern was to establish the foundations of unity and peace between the fractious city-states of northern Italy. But his attempt to discern the common good in a context of particularism is of much wider significance in time and space. Ultimately, Dante’s end was universal peace in a world state. In his new book, Al Gore argues for a universal planetary ethic in order to deal with social and environmental issues. I agree. But here, the world is catching up with Dante’s attempts in *De Monarchia* to form the fragmentation and atomisation of the existing political world into a consistent and united whole. *De Monarchia* was written in 1310-13, that is, exactly eight hundred years ago. Ask yourself this question, how many of today’s thinkers will be so lauded in the thirtieth century?

With Shakespeare, as with Montaigne, scepticism is liberating. And maybe the point to grasp is that the human condition is to keep asking questions rather than resolving them. But, ultimately, I prefer those thinkers who embark on the ascent because they think that there really is something ‘up there’, wherever that ultimate reality is located. If you believe that there is such a thing as scientific truth and moral truth, then you have to have a conception of the true, the good and the beautiful as something that inheres in an ultimate reality, a reality which is intelligible if we ascend
the levels of cognition from lower regions of empirical necessity to the higher ground. Dante gives us that sense of the ultimate reality and sets us on our way, out of the darkness and into the light.

"Unask'd of you, yet freely I confess,
This is a human body which ye see.
That the sun's light is broken on the ground,
Marvel not: but believe, that not without
Virtue deriv'd from Heaven, we to climb
Over this wall aspire."

Under what stars to plough the Earth? asks Virgil. Dante makes Virgil his guide through purgatory. It's a tale of going from darkness to light, going from the forests at the beginning of the poem to the threshold of Paradise. At this threshold, Virgil, the epitome of human knowledge, leaves, as if it is here that we meet the limits of human knowledge. After that, we are in the deeper realms of moral value and faith.

Dante's *Inferno* portrays a terrible world, a world of hatred, greed, cruelty and suffering. But Dante's vision reached beyond the sins of humanity to the goodness in nature - to flowers, animals and birds. From the middle of the *Purgatorio*, Dante achieves moments of disembodied bliss which are transcendent. We move from the lower regions to the higher regions, from darkness to light. For Dante, light is the symbol of the spiritual life, and *The Divine Comedy* contain beautiful, poetic descriptions of the transcendent effects of light.

Numberless lights, the which in kind and size
May be remark'd of different aspects;
If rare or dense of that were cause alone,
One single virtue then would be in all,
Alike distributed, or more, or less.

Different virtues needs must be the fruits

Of formal principles, and these, save one,

Will by thy reasoning be destroy'd. Beside,

If rarity were of that dusk the cause,

Which thou inquirest, either in some part

That planet must throughout be void, nor fed

With its own matter; or, as bodies share

Their fat and leanness, in like manner this

Must in its volume change the leaves. The first,

If it were true, had through the sun's eclipse

Been manifested, by transparency

Of light, as through aught rare beside effus'd.

But this is not. Therefore remains to see

The other cause: and if the other fall,

Erroneous so must prove what seem'd to thee.

If not from side to side this rarity

Pass through, there needs must be a limit, whence

Its contrary no further lets it pass.

And hence the beam, that from without proceeds,

Must be pour'd back, as colour comes, through glass

Reflected, which behind it lead conceals.

Now wilt thou say, that there of murkier hue

Than in the other part the ray is shown,

By being thence refracted farther back.

From this perplexity will free thee soon
Experience, if thereof thou trial make.


The Supreme Good; light, ministering aid,

The better disclose his glory: whence

The vision needs increasing, much increase

The fervour, which it kindles; and that too

The ray, that comes from it.

Dante writes of the light of dawn, light on the sea, the light on leaves in spring. These poetic descriptions are the part of Dante which resonate most with people. They are, however, metaphors, an attempt to make a vision of divine order and heavenly beauty comprehensible to our earth-bound senses.

He, whose transcendent wisdom passes all,

The heavens creating, gave them ruling powers

To guide them, so that each part shines to each,

Their light in equal distribution pour'd.

By similar appointment he ordain'd

Over the world's bright images to rule.

Superintendence of a guiding hand

Dante’s vision is transcendent in the purest sense. That is, the transcendental as something outside of sense experience: ‘The light, outshining far our earthly beam.’ There comes a point when words fail us and we can only proceed by way of
analogy. Here, we part company with empiricists, existentialists and pragmatists. They don’t know what they are missing.

Into the heav’n, that is unbodied light,
Light intellectual replete with love,
Love of true happiness replete with joy,
Joy, that transcends all sweetness of delight.
Here shalt thou look on either mighty host
Of Paradise; and one in that array,
Which in the final judgment thou shalt see."

Dante takes us as far as words and images can take us. After that, the journey is our own.

In his latest book, The Silence of Animals, philosopher John Gray returns to his dominant theme of ‘progress’ as a delusion. He makes many good points, but his argument is premised on the meaningless of existence, something which he says is liberatory. Giordano Bruno also argued for the dethronement of human beings from the centre of Creation. This conception is liberatory, Bruno argues, to the extent that we saw the whole universe as alive, and saw ourselves as an aspect of that living whole.

Such views are worth contemplating, particularly given all the signs of senility and self-destruction that a self-important modern civilisation is showing. A $1.7 trillion global arms budget at a time of ecological crisis is hardly evidence of the progress of reason. I have a lot of sympathy with Bruno’s position. But I’m not sure that it is true to human nature. Accepting a humble place within the confines of natural cycles is not enough to sustain a human society, since it is a perspective that exists solely within the confines of the present. Such a view implies a small static existence that never looks outside or beyond its own narrow parameters. We know from historical experience that such societies are inert and become petrified. The human spirit yearns to break the confines of such narrow vision, it requires change and
development beyond endless, repetitive cycles; it requires ideas and inspiration that transcend immediacy and develop human potentialities in a richer, more expansive way as levels of cognition are ascended.

Whenever we have had societies that lacked a transcendental sense of hope, a sense of meaning, a sense of the future as something worth striving towards, they have tended to be bleak, bounded and oppressive. They soon close in on themselves. They confine the human soul and the human spirit. We need the sense of hope for the future that the transcendent gives. And that's what Dante delivers, the ‘light transcendent’. That is the best that humanity can achieve.

It’s an anthropomorphic view, admittedly. One can easily imagine the Earth as a Paradise teeming with life without the human species. Bruno’s view exposes our notions of progress as a convulsive self-importance. It could be that the human species is congenitally incapable of appreciating the gift of life on Earth. In which case we are dealing with a problem that lacks resolution, so we have to believe in progress. It may be a myth but, like God, it’s a necessary myth to stop us going mad. I’m sympathetic to the view. That’s the reason I spent a chapter on John Gray. His argument is worth consideration. But here we are. And since we are here, it is better to try to make the best of anthropomorphism rather than pretend that if we ignore it, it will go away. It’s possible to look at the empirical evidence – the war, the violence, the greed, the stupidity – and walk away, abandoning the human species as a botched job. My arguments are an attempt to present the human species at its best, to show the best that human beings can be.

It’s interesting that Boccaccio, who always wrote in praise of sensual delights, of love and women, started to feel religious scruples later in life. In the 19th-century Francesco De Sanctis described the Decameron as a “Human Comedy”, a successor to Dante’s Divine Comedy. So I’m holding onto the Aristotelian distinction between human beings as they are and human beings as they could be. Aristotle distinguishes between existence and life. The purpose of human life is not just to live, but to live well. And to live well we need a sense of the transcendent, of hope grounded in the human spirit.
And that's why I like Dante. Despite a profound awareness of the depth of human sin and suffering, Dante answers the question as to whether happiness is possible in the affirmative. It's about finding your place in the wider scheme of things. And to do that we have to believe that we are part of a greater whole. We have to believe that the world and our lives have meaning. And at that point, we come out of the chains of the ego and subordinate the self to a greater moral and social purpose. We see ourselves in others.

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13 BIOLOGY AND NATURAL SELF-ORGANISATION

Instead of the totally self-contained world implied by immanence, and instead of the supernatural God implied by transcendence (and I include the false gods of science, industry and technology in this category, given the way that they transgress finite natural limits), the biological conception of self-organisation in nature shows a way of connecting immanence and transcendence in a fashion that realises essential natures.

If one follows the line of reasoning which conceives the relation between God and human beings to be a partnership ethics (Sacks 2011), then evolution is a co-evolution. God is not merely Nature as physical cause and effect, but Nature conceived as a field of materialist immanence, involving human moral agency, always pointing in some necessary way beyond the present. If this indicates the presence of God, then it is God not as an intelligent designer outside of creation but as an immanent potentiality forever transcending the immediately given reality.
To the old dualism of nature and nurture (reason, culture, morality), then, I would add self-organisation, indicating a materialist immanence which exists as a field of potentialities in the process of becoming actualities. Such a view combines immanence and transcendence within time and space, not beyond it. This is not the Theistic conception. It is a naturalist conception which does not require a supra-natural dimension. Infinity ceases to be out there in the spiritual realm but instead becomes a part of evolution. Eternity once more becomes something like the ancient Goddess, an eternal force in control of the natural cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth. But it is a natural cycle that transcends natural necessity in that it includes the moral capacity for human beings to read nature with the eyes of reason and thus come to supply natural moral ends to themselves.

This moral essentialism would be compatible with 'Darwinism'. Indeed, the real issue separating evolutionists and proponents of Intelligent Design, even Creationists, is whether life has evolved over a very extended time-frame through purely self-organising natural processes. (Fuller 2008 conc). Evolutionists say it has, ID theorists point to evidence of design, conscious purpose, hence God as an Intelligent Designer.

Vague talk about nature’s wonder and divine consolation may be inspiring and may be reassuring, and may well be what is required in most instances in life. There is a strong case for arguing that religion is an ethos, a way of life, something that human beings do rather than think and say. But as meaningful disciplines, science and theology require more than a vague and broad consistency. Intelligent Design theorists need to show how the intelligent designer implicit in Creation is the Abrahamic God. And they also need to accentuate the idea of moral autonomy alongside the immanent processes of nature. Without this, Intelligent Design is empty of content and becomes little more than evolution in another form. And evolution has no need of God. A true theology requires specificity with respect to the intelligent designer. That is, theology is a ‘science of God’ or it is not theology at all.

Which begs the question of the value of theology. Theology plays a cognitive role in theorising the nature and power of God. It is a rational
discipline that shapes our view of reality. But bear in mind the remarks I made earlier concerning the extent to which God is unknowable and indescribable. And bear in mind the Taoist view that the Tao is unnameable. Here is Karen Armstrong writing about ancient religions:

The ultimate reality was not a personalised god, therefore, but a transcendent mystery that could never be plumbed. The Chinese called it the Dao, the fundamental 'Way' of the cosmos. Because it comprised the whole of reality, the Dao had no qualities, no form; it could be experienced but never seen; it was not a god; it pre-dated Heaven and Earth, and was beyond divinity. You could not say anything about the Dao, because it transcended ordinary categories: it was more ancient than antiquity and yet it was not old; because it went far beyond any form of 'existence' known to humans, it was neither being nor non-being. It contained all the myriad patterns, forms and potential that made the world the way it was and guided the endless flux of change and becoming that we see all around us. It existed at a point where all the distinctions that characterise our normal modes of thought became irrelevant.

Armstrong 2009 ch 1

Such a view would put a big question mark against the whole notion of theology. Theology is nothing if it is not a 'science of God'. But if God is unknowable, indescribable and unnameable, then such an entity is beyond the methods of science. In her History of God, Karen Armstrong states explicitly that she is not offering 'a history of the ineffable reality of God itself, which is beyond time and change, but a history of the way men and women have perceived him from Abraham to the present day.' The reason we cannot have a history of God is the very same reason why we cannot have a science of God – God is an ineffable reality beyond time and space.

So what can we have? Theology is a rational, cognitive discipline that tries to render the incomprehensible comprehensible, making some sense of the ultimate reality that human beings feel themselves a part of. It isn’t science,
strictly speaking, in that such a study must necessarily go beyond physical matter. We can have religion as an *ethos*, a practice, something that people do. And we can have metaphysics, dealing with a transcendental realm beyond immediate sense experience. And we can have a history of how we have been co-authors in the understanding of God.

The yearning of the human spirit for a transcendent reality derives from a need for meaning through contact with the infinite. Theology, for all of its necessary shortcomings, has played a significant role in that quest for meaning. And it's an ongoing quest. One would have thought that the first principles concerning God would be fixed throughout all eternity. They may well be. But if they are, human beings work at the limits of their own knowledge and must forever engage in the attempt to describe the ineffable. And this is the way of science. Our knowledge of the external world is *our knowledge*, and not the external world as such. God as the ultimate reality will always be greater than our theology.

So moral essentialism would also be compatible with theology, in that theology, as the ‘science of God’, means that what theology writes of God is what our science tells us at any particular time. That science changes with the times. If God has a history in relation to human actors, as a partnership ethics holds, then this is a history which is bound up with human experience.

The human idea of God has a history, since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time. The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement ‘I believe in God’ has no objective meaning, as such, but like any other statement it only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is not one unchanging idea contained in the word ‘God’ but the word contains a whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive.

*Armstrong 2009: ch 1*
If God and human beings are involved in a partnership, it follows that the idea of God possesses a flexibility and even a history. This implies that any particular conception of God has meaning and relevance according to time and place, and is modified as human beings come to express their yearning for the transcendent differently throughout history.

The result may well represent a new theology. But a new theology implies a new God only in the fundamentalist sense that people today experience God in exactly the same way as Abraham, Moses and all the prophets did all those years ago. That view is anti-historical and can make no sense of the idea of human moral agency in partnership with God.

In fine, as Karen Armstrong argues, 'there is no objective view of 'God': each generation has to create the image of God that works for them.' Armstrong adds, pointedly, that 'the same is true of atheism.' The atheists are engaged in the search for God and moral meaning and freedom, just as much as the theists are.

The controversy between biology and theology revolves around the claim that the evidence of intelligent design in the universe implies the existence of an intelligent designer. The existence of a watch implies the existence of a watchmaker. This is Paley's natural theology, the Deist view of a God that creates the universe and then stands apart from it. This is the God that Dawkins has targeted his most telling criticisms against. But it is not the God that most Christians have accepted throughout history. It is the scientists' God, the God which was defined in the aftermath of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, and as such is somewhat easy for scientists to criticise.

Nature is not a machine, and God is not a mechanic. The question is begged, then: what if Nature is an organism instead of a machine? I shall answer this question by reference to the principle of self-organisation in biology.

The watchmaker argument is appropriate to an age of mechanistic science, an age which reduced Nature to 'dead matter'. An older biology, rooted in Aristotle, saw Nature as alive, as a living organism, and this view goes against both the idea of God as the watchmaker and of Nature as the watch. Instead, in the Aristotelian
conception, Nature is a field of essences and purposes unfolding according to their own potentialities. Once we conceive matter organically, rather than mechanically, we are able to see nature’s ability to organise *itself from within*. Organisation, in other words, is self-organisation, and this does not require an external organiser in the sense of an intelligent designer. Rather than a watch, a better analogy would be a whirlpool or a tornado, a structure that comes into being and organises from within, without the need for conscious intervention. Self-organisation is an immanentist view that conceives matter organically as a field of unfolding potentiality, that is, as a reality that is always in the process of realising itself beyond an immediate and given state. Here, transcendence lies in immanent potentiality becoming actual.

The idea of self-organisation seems counter-intuitive. The existence of organisation seems clearly to imply the existence of an organiser. The world evinces evidence of design, so we think that the idea of a designer is plausible. But if the world is self-organising, if that design is internal and evolving, then we, who are ourselves on the inside of the living organism, would not experience such behaviour directly and explicitly. In our everyday lives, we have to plan, design, prepare, order and work hard in order to produce organisation in our world. We see the results of our efforts, and understand our roles as organisers. We are much less inclined to see that we are made from and surrounded by matter that is highly organised, and it must have attained this level of organisation in some way. The easiest thing to do is to draw the analogy with ourselves and claim that the organisation we see is evidence of an organisation-maker.

The idea of organisation as implying an organisation-maker is well known to philosophers and theologians. Its plausibility stems from its comprehensibility. The existence of organisation indicates the existence of an organiser. However, at a deeper level than simple intuition, the idea merely begs the same questions: who or what organised the organiser? Who or what is the organiser? Where is the organiser? The idea of the organisation-maker hasn’t answered the key questions concerning organisation at all but remains a deduction from the existence of organisation. The organisation-maker is an assumption. This may be fine at the level of faith. One may or may not believe it. But if we want to pursue this question further than intuition and guesswork, which are prone to mislead, then, surely, we need an approach that is able to understand nature, not merely postulate it. One can be content with the view that the existence of organisation implies the existence of an organiser. It’s just there is just no compelling, cogent reason to accept that proposition.
So we come to the alternative proposition that organisation is a living organism which has organised itself. In this perspective, there is no organisator in the sense of a conscious organisation maker who intervenes from the outside.

The great merit of the 'self-organisation' hypothesis is that it goes beyond postulating nature to understanding it. Whereas the notion of the organisation-maker fails to answer the key questions, the self-organisation hypothesis is capable of resolving the issue by explaining how and why organic matter self-organises. There is nothing inherently self-contradictory in the idea that organic matter engages in self-organised behaviour which is without conscious design, organisation and intervention. The fact that science is still unsure as to how self-organisation operates does not alter the fact that we know that organic life is self-organising. This raises some deep theological questions concerning how much we, as parts of the whole, not the whole itself, need to know in order to play our own role in the self-organising universe. Perhaps the self-organising universe is special in being like that; that is, if God is the whole living matter, then we are parts of that whole aiding the self-organisation of the whole, not gods who are the whole. In which case, not only do we not know, we will never know, we are incapable of knowing. In which case we re-state the ineffable nature of God/Nature.

It's the concept of the universal soul that John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* put in the mouth of Tom Joad, when speaking of the radical preacher Casy:

“Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an’ he foun’ he didn’t have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain’t no good, ’cause his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ‘less it was with the rest, an’ was whole.”

Well, Tom concludes, maybe it's like Casy says. "A fellow ain’t got a soul of his own, just little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, then..."

Then, we put all those little pieces together to form one big whole that's more than the sum of its parts – that's the only transcendence we can achieve, and it's more than enough. It’s still a soul.
The self-organising ability of life is clear. There is solid evidence that matter can spontaneously self-organise. As Rupert Sheldrake argues, ‘although the self-organisation of living organisms as a whole is more complex than that of ribosomes or viruses, and produces a far greater internal heterogeneity, there is sufficient similarity to suggest that here again is a difference of degree.’ Sheldrake believes that the evidence concerning the generation of life supports the organismic theory over the mechanistic theory of life (Sheldrake 1981 ch 2). There is a creative role for human reason, morality and culture in this view, and it is natural rather than supernatural. Immanence and transcendence join together as a mutual growth and completion.

We need to go beyond the theory of evolution through variation under natural selection to consider the properties of dynamic self-organisation of developmental systems. And this requires a new approach to evolution, ‘one that sets out to explore not the variation and selection of intergenerationally transmitted attributes, but the self-organising dynamics and form-generating potentials of relational fields.’ (Ingold in Rose ed 2000: 242/3).

Steven Rose views cells as marvellously complex versions of string quartets or jazz groups, ‘whose harmonies arise in a self-organised way through mutual interactions.’ This is why the answer to the chicken and egg question in the origin of life is not that life began with DNA and RNA, but that it must have begun with primitive cells which provided the environment within which nucleic acids could be synthesised and serve as copying templates. (Rose in Rose ed. 2000).

So maybe this is the answer to the dilemma of freedom and determinism, the resolution of the riddle that freedom is the appreciation of necessity. One finds that view in a range of philosophies, in Spinoza, Hegel and Marx, and in a lot of Eastern religions. The Existentialists sought to resolve the dilemma with the view: ‘We are condemned to be free.’ In truth, human beings need to overcome egoism and see themselves as parts of a greater reality. Overcoming egoism is shedding the self through a greater union. It is to participate in a greater whole. Is this what Bruno meant when conceiving human beings taking their place within a living universe as a liberation? It depends on whether that dissolution of egoism is an absorption into unthinking matter or a transcendence that takes us into an ultimate ideal realm.
The Catholic tradition is based upon what is called the natural moral law. In this tradition, the natural law is not the law of nature considered in the sense of physical science, but nature as seen through the eyes of moral reason. In this tradition, reason is a natural endowment which human beings can and ought to use in order to realise moral freedom as a rational natural end. There is a long line of development in pre-modern civilisation which connects Aristotle to Aquinas through notions of human flourishing, the good life and the common good. The rise of capitalist modernity fractured this picture of an overarching moral order, atomised nature and society, and gave us the paradox of individual freedom as a collective unfreedom.

I want to look here at the philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant as attempts to recover the sense of a universal order of which individuals are a part. (Hegel would be another philosopher who sought universality and commonality to resolve the diremptive conditions of the modern world).

Rousseau wrote of individuals being ‘forced to be free’, the law as a moral and educative purpose that puts egoistic individuals in touch with their true, general interest. This is not to abolish freedom so much as to repudiate free will and the notion of an independent self as egoistic delusions. But it begs the question of how autonomous is moral autonomy. The idea of moral choice independent of natural necessity and biological imperatives does not necessarily imply a moral agency which is apart from nature as such. The philosopher Immanuel Kant writes of the ‘common moral reason’ and the moral law which is implanted within each and all. The realisation of the realm of ends, for Kant, is part of the realisation of the rational end of nature. In other words, nature guides human inclinations over time to the rational end of the ‘just civil constitution’, which is the final condition for the self-development of the natural faculties of human beings (Kant UH 1996:45). And such a just civil constitution would be based upon law in the sense affirmed by Rousseau, as the embodiment of the general interest of human beings, the interest that individuals should serve in order to realise a greater, richer freedom.

The point I want to establish is that, in the title of Roger Trigg’s book, *Morality Matters* (2005). Morality is not just a method of social repression, restraint and control, but provides meaning and coherence to individual existence. Moral values
provide a significance and direction to human lives beyond that which is provided by the ego. As social beings, human beings seek reasons which are more or other than mere epiphenomena of individual wants, impulse and desires. Morality provides standards which enable us to evaluate which of our inclinations to cultivate and which of our goals to pursue. Morality also yields the satisfaction that comes with living together as one ought with others in a shared culture of a common life, something which brings a richer and more fulfilling freedom than that of merely doing what one wants as an individuals. And my point is that this moral freedom is a freedom not over and above and against nature, but is an integral part of rational nature. To simply absorb humanity back into natural cycles or a living universe merely begs the same old questions. At some point, the human species will eat of the forbidden fruit, seek and gain knowledge and exit unthinking, unconscious nature.

Here, I would cite Kant’s argument that the moral good which human beings ought to pursue and realise in the realm of ends is immanent in rational nature itself. It exists as a potentiality which is to be realised and as a moral capacity which is to be used.

If then there is to be a supreme practical principle and—so far as the human will is concerned—a categorical imperative, it must be such that from the idea of something which is necessarily an end for every one because it is an end in itself it forms an objective principle of the will and consequently can serve as a practical law. The ground of this principle is: Rational nature exists as an end in itself.

Kant GMM 1991:90

I want to establish the point that such ‘rational natural’ freedom can emerge from within self-organising living organisms. Here, the self-organising system is considered to contain a realm of moral autonomy, creative human agency, art, culture, intelligence, individual expression, all those things which biologist Steven Rose calls ‘lifelines’ (Rose 1997). Rose’s rigorous and systematic shredding of biological
determinism and genetic reductionism in all their forms shows how, from what he describes as his 'strongly materialist perspective', we can recover a sense of human moral agency whilst recognising that human action and self-realisation proceeds within natural constraints and limits.

The question is whether this is an immanentist perspective? It is certainly a materialist perspective, in that it does not rely on or support any supernatural entity or entities. My point is that it is possible to have a sense of the transcendental within material reality with respect to

a) the Platonic and Kantian transcendental conception of a moral ideal which we may identify and pursue as the 'real object of our willing' (Kant 1956:121f);
b) the Aristotelian conception of an essence as possessing potentials in the process of becoming actual.

And this viewpoint is entirely compatible with the conception of biology based on notions of lifelines and self-organisation.

In this conception, reality is understood to be in the process of becoming, moving from an unrealised to a realised state, something which makes future reality something other than it is in the present. If this is a materialist immanence, then it is an immanence that is expansive in always moving beyond itself rather than closing in on itself. To the Aristotelian distinction between reality-as-it-is and reality-as-it-could-be – an essence as potential in the process of becoming actual – I would add the Kantian conception of human moral agency – the ability of human beings to supply ends to define an ideal which exists the real object of our willing, motivating and inspiring human beings to bring about a morally desirable future society. Neither view relies on supernatural agency or intervention. The conception is materialist. But it is a materialism which contains a transcendent element, in precisely the sense in which Steve Jones retains a sense of the transcendent in his 'strongly materialist perspective'.

Jones claims that his perspective on biology 'transcends genetic reductionism by placing the organism, rather than the gene, at the centre of life - this is the perspective that I call homeodynamic.' Jones refers to those traditions in biology
'which have refused to be swept along by the ultra-Darwinist tide into accepting that living processes can be reduced to mere assemblages of molecules driven by the selfish urges of the genes to make copies of themselves.'

These traditions argue instead the need for a more holistic, integrative biology, one which understands and enjoys complexity and recognizes the need for epistemological diversity in our explorations of the nature and meaning of life. Their voices can still be heard above the ultra-Darwinist din.

Rose 1997 Preface

I want to follow up Jones’ emphasis on the organism as a whole. I want to return to the idea of self-organisation in nature. I want to argue for this self-organisation in the essentialist terms of potentiality in the process of becoming actuality. This places the accent on human society as well as on nature as a living organism, both of which we are a part. We are an active part of both society and nature, as creative, conscious, moral beings. We create a social world out of the natural world. But this world is an organism and not a machine. Only in conditions of alienation does the world we create take on megamechanical characteristics. The alienated world as a machine world is not organic: it has functions instead of purposes; it has objectives instead of ends; and it has cogs instead of persons.

In *Lifelines*, biologist Steven Rose writes that the metabolic web has an advantage over one made of mere fabric. ‘Unlike living systems, human artefacts such as fabric cannot compensate for the loss of any individual thread. The cellular web, however, has a degree of flexibility which permits it to reorganize itself in response to injury or damage. Self-organization and self-repair are its essential autopoietic properties.’ (Rose 1997: 164).

To see society as a living organism instead of a machine is to conceive social metabolic order of flourishing beings. I want to argue that the idea of self-organisation
drawn from biology can be conceived in terms of an essentialist metaphysics, seeing development and flourishing in terms of the realisation of potentiality.

It is possible to see self-organisation as implying a self-regulating organising that thrives according to its internal connection and complexity.

It is like this with the metabolic web within every cell: once it reaches a sufficient degree of complexity, it becomes strong, stable and capable of resisting change; the stability no longer resides in the individual components, the enzymes, their substrates and products, but in the web itself. The more interconnections, the greater the stability and the less the dependence on any one individual component.

Rose 1997: 164

Stuart Kauffman describes the properties of stability and self-organization as 'order for free'. They can certainly be presented as implying a social metabolic order that is free in the sense of the flourishing of the parts. Kauffman's book has the suggestive title Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe* (1995). Metabolic organization is not merely the sum of the parts, it forms a greater whole. In organisation theory that is called synergy. It is also transcendence. The knowledge of, indeed the flourishing of, the parts, has to be set within the functioning of the entire ensemble.

In terms of an essentialist metaphysics, this entire ensemble is dynamic, comprising potentiality in the process of becoming actuality. Jones writes that stability and self-organization explain why the equilibrium achieved by the cell is indeed a dynamic and not a static one. 'The essence of the stability of the whole is that the individual components are in constant flux. Freeze them in reductionist immobility, and, like a skater on thin ice who needs to keep moving to avoid falling through, the cellular edifice would collapse into those individual components that we
biochemists have for so long lovingly studied in dissected and impoverished isolation.’ (Jones 1997: 167).

Jones concludes:

Lifelines, then, are not embedded in genes: their existence implies homeodynamics. Their four dimensions are autopoietically constructed through the interplay of physical forces, the intrinsic chemistry of lipids and proteins, the self-organizing and stabilizing properties of complex metabolic webs, and the specificity of genes which permit the plasticity of ontogeny. The organism is both the weaver and the pattern it weaves, the choreographer and the dance that is danced.

Jones 1997: 171

Jones considers this to be the fundamental message of the biology he develops in Lifelines. Set within an essentialist metaphysics, homeodynamics provides the foundation and framework for an organismic perspective which sees the realisation and flourishing of the parts in terms of the realisation and flourishing of the whole.

To see society as a living organism instead of a machine is to conceive a social metabolic order of flourishing beings. I want to argue that the idea of self-organisation drawn from biology can be conceived in terms of an essentialist metaphysics, seeing development and flourishing in terms of the realisation of potentiality.

In fine, the approach I am seeking to develop repudiates an immanentism defined narrowly in the sense of biological and ecological determinism, sees evolution in the sense of the continuous realisation of potentialities, affirms the active role of human moral agency in establishing transcendental ends in a field of materialist immanence, and therefore argues that human beings create a personal history within the constraints of biology, ecology, society and everything else, including what theology reveals about the nature of God.
Since Darwin and the domination of Darwinism, essentialism, organicism, teleology have come to be edited out of biology, replaced by reductionism and atomism that can explain the parts but passes in silence on whole organisms as living entities. Darwin has been portrayed as an empiricist, carefully amassing his accidental facts, paying no attention to overall meaning. And, of course, Marx praised Darwin for putting the final nail in the coffin of teleology. Was Marx thinking of eschatology and the idea of history as the product of Providential design? James Lovelock presents Darwin as a simple empiricist for whom theory was merely a secondary consideration: “Charles Darwin did not travel the Earth to prove a theory. He was a supreme observer and naturalist: the theory was developed later, some of it after he had died.” (Lovelock 2009 ch 2). This is an old-fashioned view, reflecting the domination of atomist metaphysics. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould has done good work to correct this view (Gould 1980: 11, 19-26).

In the work of maverick biologists such as Rupert Sheldrake, essentialist and organicism is returning. In biology as in history and the social sciences, the stock of atomism is falling rapidly as its inflated promises are increasingly revealed to be false.

Marx’s conception of historical development is teleological, and, contrary to the conventional wisdom, that is its strength, not its weakness. For any adequate account of nature, society, history, the human being, any organism has to be. Even biologists, intimidated by the dominant mechanical materialism, have had to smuggle teleology back in in the form of teleonomy.

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14 TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM AND NATURALISM

Metaphysics properly means *omne, quod trans physicam est* (everything that is beyond physics). An essentialist metaphysics combines both immanence and transcendence, both Plato’s realism of the Ideal forms and Aristotle’s unfolding of natural essences. In a Platonic sense, the *oppositum* of physics is concerned with truths that are founded on *principia a priori*, or supersensible principles. Immanuel Kant developed this supersensible Idea in terms of right and duty. In Kant’s transcendental idealism it is understood that while, *in concreto*, we can attach these truths to the corresponding objects in experience, we nevertheless develop such truths purely *in abstracto*, and thereby vault up into the boundless, so far as the limits of reason permit (Kant 2001: 251).

The great achievement of Kant’s philosophy is to have reconciled the claims of both empiricism and rationalism. Kant, I argue, offers the most intellectually sophisticated and philosophically cogent attempt to mediate between sensible and supersensible realms.

In the constructive theory of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1965) demonstrates that all knowledge requires both input from the senses and organization by concepts. Kant does not oppose the mental apparatus to empirical nature in any simple sense. Kant is not an idealist in the sense of arguing for the non-reality of the real world apart from mind. Kant argues that both sensory inputs and organizing concepts have pure forms that are capable of being known *a priori*, and which are therefore universally and necessarily valid. The pure forms of ordinary sensory inputs - empirical intuition - are the structures of space and time studied by mathematics; the pure forms of ordinary empirical concepts are the pure concepts of the understanding - the categories – and these are what makes it possible to apply the various aspects and forms of judgment studied by logic to objects of experience. Mathematics contains synthetic *a priori* judgments that are universally and necessarily true of all appearances; these must be derived from the construction of mathematical objects in pure intuition rather than from the analysis of concepts. The categories yield synthetic *a priori* principles when applied
to experience with its necessarily spatio-temporal structure - the principles of the conservation of substance and of the universality of causation for instance.

Kant’s crucial argument is that the various features of experience, including space, time, causality and substance, are not in themselves features of the external world, but are things which the human mind imposes on experience in order to make sense of the external world. With this argument, Kant transformed epistemology and metaphysics, giving us a whole new way of looking at the world.

To take one example, when we see a sequence of events, one following another, we say that time is passing. We find this easy to understand, since we can easily grasp the sequence of things. Things get more difficult, however, when we ask where this time is. Time is not something that exists ‘out there’ which we are able to see. Rather, time is part of our mental apparatus. This, for Kant, is an example of the ways in which the mind organizes its experiences.

For Kant, the physics of Newton and the modern natural sciences in general are necessarily true on account of the categories. To argue that the truths of physics are *a priori* truths, Kant means that physics does not merely describe experience and that Newton's laws cannot be derived from the content of our perception. The same reasoning applies to geometry and arithmetic. For Kant, the human mind constructs the categories of space and time, cause and substance, in such a way as to shape experience. The world of experience presented to the senses is shaped by the way that forms, or categories, are imposed upon them. Our knowledge of physical objects is the result of being shaped by the way we impose forms, or categories, upon them. This does not mean that the phenomenal world is merely a mental construction ‘made up’ by each individual human subject, a pure subjectivism to which philosophical idealism is prone. Phenomenal forms — the categories of time and space, causality and substance — are the constructs of the perceiving human mind, certainly, but they are a collective creation common to all human beings, not a subjective creation. The world in which we live is common to all human beings, not individual subjects alone in isolation, but all perceiving subjects together. Whilst objects can exist independently of the perceiving subjects, the idea of an appearance presupposes that there is something beyond the appearance, even
though we cannot know anything of those things ‘in themselves’. Since we cannot see independently of the subjective conditions of experience, we cannot know anything of things ‘in themselves’, other than that they are not the same as their appearances.

Human beings, then, do not see the world as it is, but as it appears. Certain aspects of reality are internal rather than external in that they are present in the innate cognitive or conceptual apparatus of the human mind rather than existing in the world outside. A chair appears to be a particular shape or colour on account of the particular constitution of the human visual apparatus. The visual apparatus of a different species, one that could, for instance, process a wider range of light waves (infrared, ultraviolet), would show this chair differently.

And what applies to the visual apparatus applies to the cognitive equipment of the human mind in general as it apprehends other aspects of reality. For Kant, the ‘categories’ of experience, such as space and time, cause and effect, are a part of the conceptual apparatus which is innate to human beings and which determine how human beings experience the world. In other words, the phenomenal world that human beings experience is a human world constituted by the innate categories. Without these categories, the world of sense experience would be an inchoate jumble. It would make no sense. The human mind therefore makes sense of sense experience, that is, imposes a meaningful order upon the external world, thereby giving an objective, natural datum a human shape.

Kant’s philosophy contains a wealth of reality making implications with respect to affirming the creative, constitutive power of human agency. Kant, however, is careful to emphasise limits and check any flight into subjective fantasy. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he argues that ‘It is precisely in knowing its limits that philosophy exists.’ This knowledge of limits is important. The emancipatory potential of reason can be realised only through a knowledge of what reason cannot do. Kant, therefore, sought to describe exactly what can be said by reason and what cannot.
The innate categories impose order on chaos but also impose limits on experience. These limits determine what human beings can know. Human beings can seek causal explanations regarding everyday experience - who put that table there? what made that noise? These are the simplest questions to answer, and form the stuff of empiricism. However, Kant is aware that there are questions to which causal explanations cannot be given - human free will, the origin of the universe, and so on. Answers to such questions can often result in antinomy, that is, equally rational and plausible possibilities which are nevertheless mutually exclusive. A large part of the freedom and determinism debate in philosophy has this character. In the history of philosophy, we can find equally rational and plausible arguments on either side of this debate. One argument may claim that human beings possess freedom and that every human act is the product of free moral choice; another argument may claim that human beings are unfree and that every human act has a determined cause. Similarly, it is possible to present equally rational and plausible arguments that the universe at one time didn't exist and was created out of nothing or that it has always existed and always will exist (Aristotle's eternalism). Such arguments appear equally plausible, or equally implausible.

For Kant, these antinomies indicate that there are limits to reason, and make clear the extent to which human beings can never fully understand certain things.

For Kant, all scientific and moral judgements are imposed by the mind on the world outside. Human beings are only able to apprehend the things of the world through the use of our conceptual apparatus and the imposition of the innate categories upon the world. Kant is not denying that things exist independently of the mind. Kant's point is that these things in themselves cannot be known since they are beyond mind. Kant therefore distinguishes between the world of phenomena, the apparent world, and the world of noumena, the unknown and unknowable world of the thing in itself. Kant's philosophy is therefore a transcendental idealism. This means that whilst human beings can only ever experience their own perceptions through categories of experience (idealism), there is a reality that exists beyond (transcends) these categories. Whilst the noumenal world can be inferred from reason, it is in itself another order of being.
In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique*, Kant informs us that the *Critique* is an essential preparation for a proper grounding of morality (Bxxv). In a section entitled ‘The Canon of Pure Reason’, contained in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, Kant resolves the problem of metaphysics by demonstrating that Critical philosophy is able to bring harmony to reason and thus validate the moral order through its vindication of the metaphysics of experience and criticism of transcendent metaphysics.

Kant presents the concepts of hope and faith as the central theme of the doctrine of the postulates. He states that the doctrine of postulates is concerned with the question, "What may I hope for?" (C1, A 805/B 833). Kant seeks to ground hope in faith, but faith of a certain kind. On first impression, Kant’s view that he found it necessary ‘to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith’ (C1, B xxx) sets hope and faith in opposition. In truth, they are complementary and constitute a single matter. The faith Kant refers to is a special type of knowledge, common (in principle) to all human beings as rational beings. Hope is *grounded* hope and is the affective response that faith arouses in each individual. Faith and hope are therefore two interrelated aspects of the same awareness. The relation is one-way, from faith to hope, faith being prior to hope both logically and temporally (Yovel 1980 ch 2).

The critical theory of Kant’s *Critique* holds that we can use the pure concepts of the understanding to conceive of objects that lie beyond the limits of our sensible intuition through our power of inferential reason. We can, for instance, imagine a spatio-temporal universe that has a kind of completeness that our indefinitely extendable actual intuitions can never have. And we can imagine objects that cannot be represented in sensory experience at all, such as God or an immaterial soul. Kant is clear that, contrary to traditional metaphysics, these conceptions do not amount to knowledge. But Kant goes much further than exposing past errors. Kant’s positive argument is that these powers have a proper use, so long as we understand them correctly (G, 4:395). Working in the tradition of Plato (see CPuR, A312-20/B369-77), Kant argues that the ideas of pure reason have a legitimate use, or yield a "canon" (A 795—831 /B 823—59), *but in morality rather than science*. Kant denies the possibility of knowledge of the existence of God, of immortality and of the immaterial soul as a result of theoretical reason. Such notions are incapable of rational theoretical demonstration. For empiricists, this would seem to be the end
of the matter. Not so, says Kant. For knowledge of human freedom is also incapable of theoretical demonstration. A strict adherence to theoretical reason would also entail the end of freedom as a value. Yet human beings continue to think and act as though human freedom is real. Such freedom, and such belief in freedom, is an integral part of human Being. So, Kant reasons, whilst God, immortality and freedom cannot be theoretically proven, they do not require such proof. They are not objects of knowledge. They are objects of moral belief or faith, what Kant calls necessary presuppositions of moral conduct. Theoretic reason has nothing relevant to say in the realm of faith and belief. Hence Kant's statement that he found it necessary "to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (B xx). Faith can neither be supported nor destroyed by means of knowledge.

Kant therefore exposed the inadequacy of the rational proofs for the existence of God. Ultimately, Kant took the unknown and unknowable noumenal world to be evidence for the existence of God - because it is unknown and unknowable. One is tempted to refer here to the Tao as the unnameable. This begs the question of just what comprises 'the One' and whether or not human beings are a part of it and what role we play. If the human mind plays no active role in the noumenal world of things in themselves, then in what way does human agency relate to divinity?

Reason does more than interpret experience. What Kant offers, in addition to speculative reason, is 'practical reason', with its own a priori principles. These principles are normative and bring human beings, with their 'common moral reason', into the moral world.

The concept of freedom, insofar as its reality is proved by an apodictic law of practical reason, is the keystone of the whole architecture of the system of pure reason and even of speculative reason. All other concepts (those of God and immortality) which, as mere ideas, are unsupported by anything in speculative reason, now attach themselves to the concept of freedom and gain with it and through it, stability and objective reality.

*Critique of Practical Reason.*
‘Practical reason’ is central to Kant’s architectonic. The world of ‘practical reason’ or morality is radically different from the phenomenal world. Human beings are co-creators and co-legislators of this moral world, the world of ‘noumena’, and partake of a real world as distinct from a merely ‘phenomenal’ world. The moral law is crucial to this world.

The categorical imperative is at the very core of Kant’s ethical system. The categorical imperative requires us to act only on "maxims" or principles of action that can be ‘universalized’ in the sense that they can be accepted and acted on by all who would be affected by individual actions. Further, principles must be universalizable since every person, ourselves as well as all others, must always be treated as ends and never merely as means. This is the Formula of the End in Itself: ‘Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.’ The principle of universalizability affirms that this ethic of ends applies to each and all equally.

The Formula of Universal Law holds: ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’. Human beings are therefore enjoined to act in such a way that they bring about the universal interest of each and all. This achieves a greater freedom than purely individualistic actions. Thus The Formula of Autonomy holds: ‘So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim.’

If everyone respected the principle of universalizability and acted on the categorical imperative in accordance with the principle, the result would be a "realm of ends," a "whole of all ends in systematic connection (a whole both of rational beings as ends in themselves and of the ends of his own that each may set himself") (4:433). The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends therefore enjoins individuals to: ‘So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.’ In the realm of ends, each person is intrinsically valuable and is treated as such, not as a mere means to the ends of others. This is a realm in which the
particular ends set by each person are promoted by all persons to the extent that this can consistently be done.

The categorical imperative has three components. The first concerns its form, the second its content, the third linking these together:

(1) Act as if you were legislating for everyone.

(2) Act so as to treat human beings always as ends and never merely as a means.

(3) Act as if you were a member of a realm of ends.

Formulation (3) connects (1) and (2) together.

Kant’s fundamental idea is that individuals should act as a community of persons, each and all making moral decisions together. This implies that each member treats all other members as moral beings, allows freedom of decision to all, and recognizes that each should and can decide as though legislating for all.

The ethics of the categorical imperative has political implications insofar as the realm of ends can be understood as a politically organised society. Certainly, Kantian ethics is a democratic ethics in affirming that every person is competent to make universally legislative decisions. (Raphael 1981:57).

I would argue that this step from morality to politics needs to be taken in order to realise the principles of Kant’s practical philosophy.

It is important to keep both aspects of Kant’s transcendental idealism in mind so as to ensure that the question of knowing ‘why’ is set alongside the question of knowing ‘how’. Detached from moral purpose, reason as ‘know how’ can degenerate into a technics which turns the emancipatory possibilities of reason into a repressive
reality. This shows the danger of failing to bridge the gap between reason and nature. Since culture is constituted in the sphere of reason apart from the empirical world, reason is transcendentally constituted and legislates to the empirical world from the outside (Rundell 1987:14). The realisation of Kant’s ideal of a noumenal community therefore depends upon the synthesis of morality and politics.

Kant therefore argues for rightful (external) freedom in politics and the rule of law as preparatory for the final end of creation, the moral community in which the command of law is internalised as the product of moral motives rather than of self-interest and coercion, gain and power. Internal discipline replaces external discipline. Rightful freedom in politics fosters a climate favourable to moral autonomy.

*Rightful (i.e. external) freedom* cannot, as is usually thought, be defined as a warrant to do whatever one wishes unless it means doing injustice to others. For what is meant by a *warrant*? It means a possibility of acting in a certain way so long as this action does not do any injustice to others. Thus the definition would run as follows: freedom is the possibility of acting in ways which do no injustice to others. That is, we do no injustice to others (no matter what we may actually do) if we do no injustice to others. Thus the definition is an empty tautology. In fact, my external and rightful *freedom* should be defined as a warrant to obey no external laws except those to which I have been able to give my own consent. Similarly, external and rightful *equality* within a state is that relationship among the citizens whereby no-one can put anyone else under a legal obligation without submitting simultaneously to a law which requires that he can himself be put under the same kind of obligation by the other person. (And we do not need to define the principle of *legal* dependence, since it is always implied in the concept of a political constitution.) The validity of these innate and inalienable rights, the necessary property of mankind, is confirmed and enhanced by the principle that man may have lawful relations even with higher beings (if he believes in the latter). For he may consider himself as a citizen of a transcendental world, to which the same principles apply. And as regards my freedom, I am not under any obligation even to divine laws (which I can recognise by reason alone), except in so far as I have been able to give my own consent to them; for I can form a
conception of the divine will only in terms of the law of freedom of my own reason.

Kant PP 1996:99

The principal aim of Kant's political philosophy is to establish 'the way to peace', converting chaos, difference and diversity into order, identity and unity (Saner 1973:34). This political peace is freely and spontaneously affirmed by human agents as morally autonomous beings to create a community of ends. In this community, individual agents do not leave each other free to pursue private ends but come actively to promote each other's ends (Van Der Linden 1985:188).

Kant's political philosophy identifies the goal of human history as the empirical political fulfilment of the idea of 'rational freedom', a freedom which is universal and applies to each and all as rational beings (Cassirer 1981:407). Kant affirms that the 'sovereignty of the good principle is attainable, as far as men can work toward it, only through the establishment and spread of a society in accordance with and for the sake of the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is rationally to impress these laws in all their scope upon the entire human race' (Kant R 1949:404). Kant's reasoning is teleological and identifies a social and historical goal on account of the rational moral nature of human beings. It follows from this that 'the species of rational beings is objectively, through the idea of reason, destined for a social goal, namely, the promotion of the highest good as a social good' (Kant R 1949:407).

The continued and full development of human capacities requires a social order with the greatest possible freedom. Kant identifies this social order as the perfectly just constitution in which the mutual antagonism gives way to a mutual intercourse that is consistent with freedom and justice.

Kant therefore conceives the moral laws, a priori laws based on the Ideas of pure reason (A806/B834), in a political framework. The function of moral law is to harmonize the freedom of each individual with the freedom of all other individuals. Kant offers the Idea of a
republican constitution, which allows 'the greatest possible human freedom in accordance with laws by which the freedom of each is made to be consistent with that of all others' (A316/B373).

These laws are initially proposed as maxims, the subjective rules of behaviour. But when these subjective rules are in accord with the Ideas of pure reason, they can be accepted by all as the objective laws of a community. Kant's conception of morality, therefore, entails a realm of ends which reconciles the life of each individual with that of the community of all individuals. Such a civic constitution establishes a commonwealth.

Kant identifies this constitution, embodying rational freedom as a universal law, as the end of rational nature. Hence The Formula of the Law of Nature: ‘Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.’ And this gives a new version of the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends: ‘All maxims as proceeding from our own making of laws ought to harmonise with a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature.’

This shows the danger of failing to bridge the gap between reason and nature. Since culture is constituted in the sphere of reason apart from the empirical world, reason is transcendentally constituted and legislates to the empirical world from the outside (Rundell 1987:14). The realisation of Kant's ideal of a noumenal community therefore depends upon the synthesis of morality and politics.

In other words, Kant has a way of bridging the gap between reason and nature. For Kant, reason is transcendentally constituted and legislates to the empirical world from the outside. Culture is therefore constituted in the sphere of reason independently of the empirical world. But Kant is thinking here of natural inclination, desire and impulse, that is, those things which chain individuals to the world of natural necessity. This is not Nature as a whole. The ‘common moral reason’ of human beings is a natural endowment which human beings can use to achieve a moral freedom independent of the world of empirical immediacy and necessity. Kant identifies the realisation reason as the natural end of human beings.
If then there is to be a supreme practical principle and—so far as the human will is concerned—a categorical imperative, it must be such that from the idea of something which is necessarily an end for every one because it is an *end in itself* it forms an *objective principle* of the will and consequently can serve as a practical law. The ground of this principle is: *Rational nature exists as an end in itself.*

Kant GMM 1991:90

Rational nature as an end in itself is nature with a moral component, nature that is more than inclination, impulse and desire. Thus, Kant identifies the ultimate purpose of Nature as leading humanity from the state of egoistic rivalry at the level of empirical immediacy – an individualist freedom which inhibits the freedom of each and all – to the state of universal harmony – a rational moral freedom which enhances the freedom of each and all. A civil society established by the force of reason will eventually spread and rule the whole world. And this, for Kant, is the realisation of the final purpose of creation (C3 435).

I want to finish here by tying up these arguments in terms of innate moral and intellectual reason as a rational natural endowment. That is, I want to identify rational freedom as an end of nature, something human beings realise in coming to fulfil their nature as rational, moral and social beings. And I want to establish Kant’s transcendental idealism as a transcendental naturalism. Kant is commonly thought of separating reason over and against nature. My point is that Kant’s moral reason is a natural endowment which human beings use in order to transcend the necessity of empirical inclinations, impulses and desires and thereby achieve a genuine moral freedom, a freedom that applies to each and all.

I come now to Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, showing how reflective judgement mediates between the worlds of phenomena and noumena. Kant’s *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) is much less well read than the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Which is a shame, since in this work
Kant does some good work on beauty and purpose, clarifying and tidying up a good number of complicated issues arising from the earlier critiques.

In his aesthetic philosophy, Kant bridges the gap by way of a two-way transition: an upward transition from phenomena to noumena, which concerns the recognition of moral law; and the downward transition from noumena to phenomena, which concerns the realization of moral law.

In considering how judgement makes these two transitions, we need to recognise that Kant has two aesthetic theories, aesthetic formalism and aesthetic Platonism.

With respect to aesthetic formalism, reflective judgements are made by the subjective feeling that the free interplay of imagination and understanding provoke. Since this free interplay involves no supersensible world, there is no need for mediation.

In Kant’s aesthetic Platonism, mediation is required since the ultimate foundation of all aesthetic judgements is the Idea of Beauty, and this belongs to the noumenal world. The Idea of Beauty is transcendent and abstract and is not therefore readily applicable to the phenomenal world. This leaves a gap between phenomena and noumena. Bridging this gap requires aesthetic Ideas constructed by imagination and understanding in order to articulate the transcendent Idea of Beauty in terms of sensible imagery. This is what artistic genius and its inspiration does. In Platonic terms, this represents the descent of Ideas from the Ideal realm to the natural world. In Kantian terms, this represents a mediatory transition made by both human beings and nature to bring phenomena and noumena together. In other words, natural beauty is the expression of aesthetic Ideas immanent in both human beings and nature.

I wish to argue this two-way mediation in teleological judgements as a end of rational nature. In doing so, my intention is to argue for an essentialist metaphysics based upon Plato’s Idealism and which proceeds within Kant’s transcendental idealism.

For Kant, natural purpose is a supersensible Idea that cannot be found in the blind mechanism of nature (C3 377). There is therefore need for a two-way mediation. Human beings make the upward transition for recognizing the Idea in
the Ideal realm and the downward transition for realizing the Idea in the natural world.

The point to emphasise is that this mediation bringing natural purpose to bear is made by both human beings and natural teleology. On the highest level, there may be only one Idea of natural purpose. As Plato argues, there is only one Idea of Life (Timaeus (39e)). However, every species has its own Idea of natural purpose and is governed in accordance with it. On this level, the multiplicity of teleological Ideas corresponds to the multiplicity of aesthetic Ideas. However, the various particular Ideas of natural purpose are generated by the articulation and specification of the one transcendent Idea of Life. In naming the objects of natural beauty, Kant refers to living beings such as flowers, birds, and crustaceans, thus implying that the power of life includes the power of beauty. In this way, Nature conjoins the Ideas of Life and the Ideas of Beauty and brings them from the supersensible to the sensible world. This descent of Ideas is engineered by the technique of Nature. For Kant, this is Nature working like an artist (C3 390).

Kant explains Nature’s two-way mediation between phenomena and noumena thus: Nature creates living beings in the phenomenal world by bringing down the supersensible Ideas, and one species amongst those living beings has the intelligence to apprehend the noumenal world. The moral and aesthetic life of human beings is therefore a link in the creative cycle of natural teleology, which Kant conceives as the Providence of Mother Nature in his Idea of a Universal History.

For Kant, Newton was the master of natural world (the starry skies above) and Rousseau was the master of the moral world (the moral law within). But neither could bridge the vast chasm between phenomena and noumena. There remained a division between fact and value, between scientific knowledge and morality. This, for Kant, is the key problem in human affairs. Kant locates the solution to this problem in Nature, in rational nature as purpose and end. Nature is the original matrix for realizing the supersensible Ideas in the sensible world; the moral and political development of humanity is shaped under the auspices of Nature’s eternal providence. Kant’s earlier acceptance of the mechanistic conception of nature had prevented him from grasping this cosmic truth, hence Kant’s separation of reason over against (empirical) nature. But Kant came to appreciate that there was more
to nature than the necessity of immediate impulses, desires and inclinations.
Nature has a rational end. In coming to acknowledge Nature as the living force,
Kant resolves his ultimate philosophical problem and bridges the chasm
between the starry skies above and the moral law within, between the world of
phenomena and the world of noumena.

Kant’s resolution of the split between fact and value, science and morality,
savours a great deal of the conception of the natural world which Plato presents in
the *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge, the spirit of the natural world (the World-Soul),
creates all things in accordance with the eternal Ideas.

Moral and political philosophy began with Socrates and the stand he took
against the overweening claims to knowledge on the part of natural philosophers.
The natural philosophers Thales, Anaximander etc were scientists concerned with
physical fact; they studied nature without regard to human beings. For Socrates,
the most important question in philosophy concerns how human beings ought to
live. As Cicero put it: 'Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the
heavens and compel it to ask questions about life and morality.'

Plato continued Socrates’ concern with the examined life, identifying the
philosophical quest with the fight against the amoral forces of nature and the fight
against the immoral forces of human beings. For Socrates, amorality in nature and
immorality in society were linked. In the *Gorgias*, Callicles is the avowed champion
of both amoral naturalism and immoral humanism. Socrates confronts Callicles
with the argument that that one could be virtuous even in a totally immoral world
and that one’s soul could never be harmed by the immoral acts of others. As Plato
put it: virtue is its own reward. In the *Phaedo* and in the *Symposium*, Plato finds a
safe haven for the virtuous soul in the intelligible world of Ideas. In this world, the
soul was safe from the immorality of the phenomenal world. The problem is that the
safe haven of the intelligible world cannot provide a living community for moral
individuals. Appreciating the difficulty of realising a just society in an amoral and
irrational world, Plato laid out his conception of a rational and orderly universe in
the *Timaeus*. This conception forms the cosmological foundation for the ideal state
of the *Republic* and for the city of Magnesia proposed in the *Laws*. In these
works, Plato set out the principles of the political community as a moral community which provides for the moral life of individuals.

Kant is working entirely in this tradition of Plato. Kant develops Plato's idea of the perfect city in terms of the free civil constitution:

A constitution allowing the greatest possible human freedom in accordance with laws which ensure that the freedom of each can co-exist with the freedom of all others.

Kant 1965 B.373-374

This is a concise statement of the principle of rational freedom in the political realm, embodying the idea that the freedom of each individual is conditional upon and compatible with the freedom of all individuals.

Kant thus continues Plato's quest for a suitable natural order for the realization of eternal ideals. In his Ideological conception of natural order, Kant reaffirms the Platonic conception of the rational order of Nature, the idea of Nature as the Mother of all creation. Whilst Kant's conception of the categorical imperative and the noumenal realm derive from the Christian religion, the conception of Mother Nature taps into ancient nature religion with a view to looking forward to the attempts to locate the place of human beings within Nature. The idea inspired the supernatural naturalism of Romantic philosophers and poets. Certainly, the conception was a key figure in Goethe's *Faust*, where Nature manifests her inexhaustible creative power as the Earth Spirit, the Eternal Mothers, and the Eternal Feminine. (see Peter Critchley *The Eternal Womanly* 2013). Read in conjunction with the conception of immanent Ideas, this natural teleology is one of Kant's most enduring achievements and offers a perspective of rational nature that is likely to become ever more pertinent as ecological crisis gives human beings the task of making their peace with Nature.
The descent of transcendent Ideas from the Platonic Ideal realm to the natural world fundamentally alters Kant's original conception of Nature. In the first Critique, in Religion and in the Groundwork, Kant had conceived Nature as a chaotic world of subjective impressions and natural inclinations, a world so unruly that Kant claimed that it was the ultimate source of all radical evil in human nature (Kant R 1960: 19). This is a world of egoism and desire and impulse, a chaotic world that could obtain rational order only through the a priori natural laws that human understanding comes to impose on empirical impressions. For Kant, the world of natural inclinations and impulses could only be controlled through the imposition of moral laws.

In the Groundwork, Kant turned morality and Nature against each other. The categorical imperative is conceived as a stern command for the triumph of morality over the forces of natural inclination. (Kant GMM 1991: 394). The natural world is at best coldly indifferent and at worst cruelly hostile to the world of supersensible moral ideals. Material forces are governed by mechanical laws and are therefore blind and indifferent to moral values. In constituting human nature, they produce natural inclinations that have the perpetual propensity to flout moral laws. The natural world thus works to prevent human beings realizing their transcendent aspirations. The fact that human beings have such aspirations makes the human species a misfit pitted against nature. Kant contemplated this troubled condition of humanity in the natural world in terms of the gap between the sensible and the supersensible worlds. This was a gap between fact and value that Kant sought to close.

Since the possibility of morality depends upon abstraction from the empirical world, the noumenal realm beyond the phenomenal world 'is certainly only an ideal'. Individuals enter this noumenal realm only to the extent to which they abstract from their empirical situation. The categorical imperative can enjoin that individuals act as though they are legislating members of a 'kingdom of ends' only 'if we abstract from the personal differences between rational beings, and also from all the content of their private ends' (Kant GMM 1991:95).

Kant's morality of self-denial, instituting the obedience of the 'lower', i.e. empirical, to the 'higher', i.e. rational self, is based upon the categorical distinction between reason and nature. The workings of the Categorical Imperative enables individuals to discover 'right' and 'wrong' independently of their inclinations, impulses
and desires. It follows that to realise their higher nature, individuals must learn to identify happiness with the subordination of their lower nature to the moral law.

Kant’s point is that freedom will only be achieved through the realisation of the human capacity for autonomy and independence as given by rational and moral will. The capacity of the market economy to manacle individuals to necessity in their empirical existence by manipulating their ‘sensuous desires’ is one of the most striking features of the modern world. It is this shackling of human beings by their own natural inclinations that Kant’s morality seeks to overcome.

The descent of transcendent Ideas from the Platonic Ideal realm to the natural world enable Kant to mediate between sensible and supersensible realms and thus develop a much more expansive conception of Nature. Nature is more than a realm of empirical necessity but contains a rational teleology leading to moral freedom. The descent of transcendent Ideas from the Platonic world of Being releases Nature from the shackles of humanly imposed moral and natural laws. Nature is now able to operate with the power of its own immanent Ideas. This opens up a conception of Mother Nature as the Eternal Feminine who has the inexhaustible power to procreate and sustain her countless children. Kant further argues that human beings, as Nature’s children, are equipped with natural endowments that enable them to transcend their natural condition and create their cultural world as a world of moral freedom. The attainment of this world is the realisation of Nature’s immanent Ideas. Kant's transcendental idealism thus culminates in a transcendent naturalism.

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15 ESSENTIALISM AND ATOMISM

The secular myth of progress may have the appearance of Christian salvation, but it has none of the reality. In exposing the teleological assumptions behind the delusions of progress, one is not attacking teleology as such, but the form of teleology employed in the modern world. To bracket Plato's Ideal Forms, Kant's transcendental idealism, Aristotle's realisation of potentials, the Christian belief in salvation, the secular promises of economic growth and technological innovation, the operation of Hegel's Reason in history, and Marx's 'truly human society' together when writing of the delusions of progress clearly won't do. That's far too big a target, fails to differentiate between various purposes and goals, reveals absolutely nothing and therefore fails to identify the real cause of delusion. The problem lies with the specific form of teleology at work. We need to ask, precisely, which gods are failing? Why is progress backfiring so spectacularly? Asking deeper questions such demands a definition of teleology. Teleology is often conceived as a theory that concerns the fulfilment of a purpose in the world. The world is seen as the artefact of a Deity, with purpose unfolding in a specific way through the operation of a higher Intelligence. This is certainly how critics of the teleological assumptions at work in secular notions of progress see teleology. This is not the conception of teleology within an essentialist metaphysics.

We should, however, bear in mind what Freud said: 'The idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system.' (Freud and Strachey 2005: 76.) Freud also thought that religion was an illusion. Freud did not escape the mechanicism of his day. He could not appreciate purpose as a materialist essence. I propose teleology as an integral part of an essentialist metaphysics. It is based upon the view that there are natural essences, things that are essentially something and something essentially, essences that have purposes with necessary lines of development. As Moses Maimonides writes: "In the realm of Nature there is nothing purposeless, trivial, or unnecessary." (Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed).

I wish to show how immanence and transcendence relate in an essentialist metaphysics. An important point to establish is that essentialism is not a determinism; change is central to essentialist metaphysics. A nature is not preserved through history, it is developed through successive forms. This makes
all existing reality a field of immanent potential in the process of becoming actual. This is a field of materialist immanence in the process of transcending itself, realising its potential as actual.

In being elevated into the universal, a species transcends its former state.

This view is also firmly grounded upon Aristotle’s conception that ‘what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature’ (Aristotle). For a thing to be fully developed, completed, in accordance with its nature, is a necessary development. A thing is an organism which has a telos, a purpose, which is to be fully developed in order to realise its nature.

Hegel and Marx developed this Aristotelian essentialism in terms of a unity of the ‘is’ and the ‘ought-to-be’. That is, the ‘is’ of existing material reality is conceived to be the ‘ought-to-be’ in the process of becoming. Existing reality is therefore a field of immanent potential in the process of transcending itself in becoming a fully developed actual.

In The Moral Landscape (2011), Sam Harris, as part of his project of promoting atheistic humanism, challenges philosopher David Hume’s distinction between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought-to-be’. Harris argues that there is such a thing as moral truth and that this can be derived from a knowledge of biological nature. The possibility of this project is defended by Daniel Dennett:

If "ought" cannot be derived from "is," just what can it be derived from?.. . ethics must be somehow based on an appreciation of human nature—on a sense of what a human being is or might be, and on what a human being might want to have or want to be. If that is naturalism, then naturalism is no fallacy (Dennett, p. 468).

My point is that the entire essentialist tradition in philosophy has always argued this case, and has ever been concerned to develop the practical, political implications in terms of what Aristotle called a politikon bion, a public life of flourishing human
beings. Essentialism, however, is not a naturalism and is quite distinct from the reduction of moral values to biological facts. Dennett is selling his philosophical birthright for a mess of scientistic pottage, reducing the ‘ought-to-be’ to the ‘is’ instead of, as with essentialism, seeking to realise the ‘ought-to-be’ out of the ‘is’. The biological approach is the denial of morality as integral to the human ontology; the essentialist approach is the realisation of this morality.

Within an essentialist framework, teleology is a theory about how the real nature or essence of an entity is to be identified and how its development from potential to actual form is to be explained. A whole entity can be anything from the smallest thing to the social organism. Telos may be defined as the form, state or condition towards which an entity develops as it realises its nature. This line of development is necessary, in that this is what is required if a thing is to complete itself, attain its final form. But this development is not inevitable, it can be frustrated by external accident. All that a teleological argument states is that the telos is the final form an entity achieves through its process of development.

Set within the frame of an essentialist metaphysics, it soon becomes apparent that the problem with progress is not teleology as such, or even teleology at all, but a false necessity which has taken the form of a surrogate teleology within specific social relations. With the inversion of subject and object through the alienated form of social labour under capitalist relations of production, ‘things’ have come to acquire existential significance. Human subjects have become mere puppets of the vast impersonal forces which they themselves have initiated in their actions, and which they themselves sustain in their practices. In Manuscript Found in Accra, Paulo Coelho writes: “The great wisdom of life is that we can be masters of the things that try to enslave us.” That could have been Marx’s response to Weber’s claim that we are destined to remain confined within the ‘iron cage’ of rationalised modernity. The things that try to enslave us are our own alienated powers; they have no will of their own, only imperatives which, in failing to recognise our subjectivity in the world we have created, we blindly obey. How do we become masters of these alien powers? “By taking responsibility,” says Coelho. “Today people aren’t encouraged to take responsibility. It’s easy to obey because you can blame a wrong decision on the person who told you to do this or that. From the moment you accept that you’re the

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master of your own destiny you have to accept responsibility for every single action of yours."

Coelho is on the right lines, but assuming moral responsibility is a collective project, and not just an individual one. Our alien powers are supra-individual powers, powers which escape the comprehension and control of individuals.

John Steinbeck expresses the idea well in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

"We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man."

"Yes, but the bank is only made of men."

"No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it."

"The bank - the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size."

This points to alienation as a supra-individual force which require collective mechanisms of control. Society is a social organism, and mastery in the sense of moral responsibility is only possible in the context of social control of associated individuals. (Meszaros, *The Necessity of Social Control in Beyond Capital* 1995).

Since Aristotle, history has swung continuously between atomism and essentialism, with forms of essentialism being dominant throughout the middle ages, and atomism becoming dominant in the context of the mechanistic materialism of the scientific and industrial revolutions. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Descartes are exemplary figures here. Essentialism returned with Hegel and the idealism that followed in his wake, including later Oxford idealists like TH Green, McTaggart, Bradley, as well as Santayana. Marx is also part of this development.
The atomist view, going back to Democritus and Epicurus, holds that reality is composed of discrete entities and events, with no overall significance. Against this, Aristotle’s view is that an account of the persisting natures of things, species and genera is possible only by acknowledging a category of form or essence. In the essentialist view, it is impossible to explain what a thing is in terms of its constituent matter (atoms), since the entity retains its nature and identity even as its constituent matter changes over time. A thing changes but stays the same in terms of its essence. It completes itself. The development is necessary.

Essentialists argue that there are organic wholes with real natures and hence laws, forms and necessities. Essentialists may also be called organicists. Atomists deny the existence of essences, or, at least, essences which are knowable. Atomists may also be called empiricists (but not always, for example, Descartes). Rather than discern a meaning and purpose in the movement of history, atomists see only discrete events and accidental relations at the level of appearances. There is no meaning in history, no pattern, no progress. This would appear to be the dominant intellectual and philosophical view of the modern world. History is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.

That view is superficial. Apart from anything else, it can make no sense of why, throughout history, human beings have so readily believed that they and their societies are on the road to somewhere. One could, with John Gray, simply refer to the delusion of progress. But if progress is a delusion, it has always been a powerful one. And a necessary one. It clearly resonates with something deep in the natures of human beings. Human beings are meaning seeking creatures who invest their lives with a sense of worth and significance. To simply dismiss this as a delusion will do nothing to stop human beings seeking meaning. That yearning is a permanent feature of the human condition and has to form part of any viable worldview.

Those who are sceptical of any and all meaning in history are soon lost in the thickets of accident. To them applies what Marx wrote of Gustav Hugo: ‘He is a sceptic as regards the necessary essence of things, so as to be a courtier as regards their accidental appearance.’ (Marx MECW I 1975 204).
It was for this reason that Jurgen Habermas characterised the poststructuralists as 'young conservatives'. If you deny a vision of a meaningful alternative then, whether by default or design, you end up as a supporter of the status quo. And the status quo at the moment is the secular religion of 'progress' based on a false eschatology of endless expansion of physical power. It is a nihilism. I don't see how John Gray, on his own premises, can escape the world he condemns as deluded. And the same applies to all those who see meaninglessness in the modern world and conclude that there is no such thing as purpose. They are atomists and empiricists, whose vision is confined to surface level events, and who are incapable of penetrating to the underlying structures.

It is in light of this that I would like to spend some time challenging the criticisms that the ecologist George Monbiot has made of Plato and Marx.

Read this from George Monbiot.

A century and more ago the idea was communism. Even in the form in which Marx and Engels presented it, its problems are evident: the simplistic binary system into which they tried to force society; their brutal dismissal of anyone who did not fit this dialectic ("social scum", "bribed tool[s] of reactionary intrigue"); their reinvention of Plato’s guardian-philosophers, who would "represent and take care of the future" of the proletariat; the unprecedented power over human life they granted to the state; the millenarian myth of a final resolution to the struggle for power. But their promise of another world electrified people who had, until then, believed that there was no alternative.

George Monbiot  
Communism, welfare state – what’s the next big idea? The Guardian 2 April 2013
This is so wrong on every count that it merits extensive discussion. It’s not the specific charges that are important – they are easily countered – it’s the mode of reasoning that is revealing.

I read all of this kind of ‘criticism’ back in the 1990s, the rejection of the ‘privileging’ of the proletariat and the embrace of identity politics, the endless assertion that ‘there is no necessary relation’ between class position and political views. I’m afraid that was the liberal left in the process of mental, moral and political implosion and, sure enough, the inevitable has happened. The likes of Monbiot are up a creek without a paddle. Monbiot is desperately asking what the next big idea is. Given the way that he caricatures Plato and Marx here, it is evident that Monbiot lacks the philosophical depth to deal with big ideas, old or new. And that philosophical deficiency is worthy of comment. It is a deficiency of atomist and empirical thinking which sees only a world of surface level accidents and discrete events. This is a world incapable of the joined up, holistic thinking we need in an era of global economic and ecological crisis. That is my case for a rational and organic essentialism, drawing upon both Plato and Kant, and which I shall develop throughout this book. Such a philosophy avoids the loose, overly-hasty reliance upon sensory experience, as though discrete events and accidental facts provides us with sufficient verification.

But I’ll give Monbiot a brief response. Brutal dismissal of anyone who didn’t fit the dialectic? There is no doubting that Marx was intellectually intolerant. But was he wrong against Stirner’s individualism, Bakunin’s political violence? Was Proudhon’s small scale production likely to bring about the transformation of social relations? Marx was trying to reveal immanent potentialities, not entertain limitless social alternatives. In politics, at the International, Marx worked with all sections of the organised working class, even right wing trade union leaders, precisely because it was the movement of the class that was important. He also rejected the political indifferentism and abstentionism advocated by the anarchists. Marx urged working class involvement in politics, including parliamentary politics. Where on earth did Marx argue forcing society into a simple binary system? Marx’s writings on French politics make it crystal clear that he understood that there were a number of classes and gradations within classes. Monbiot refers to ‘dialectic’, by which he seems to mean some external reason at work in history, according which everything must be
fitted. What is missing here, of course, is the whole supporting infrastructure. Marx wrote three volumes of *Capital* to reveal these innermost potentialities and purposes at work, so that human beings would gain self-understanding and work with realities rather than illusions. That was why Marx revealed – or thought he had revealed – what lay behind the value form, the money form, the commodity form. Rather than wade through such close reasoning, it is of course easy to write ‘dialectic’ and imply some extraneous reason at work in an anonymous history.

Marx also argued against using force to bring about the new society, that is precisely what his analysis of social forms and stages of history is about. That’s why Marx took pains to ground the historical process in what he called ‘concrete reality’. That human beings in business and politics find it easy to detach themselves from that essential reality and project fantasies in political programmes is not Marx’s fault. Marx’s philosophy is full of organic metaphors. He speaks of the new society embryonic in and emerging out of the womb of the old. Thus the working class ‘have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant’ (Marx CWF FI 1974: 214). Of course, it is teleological and essentialist, but that’s the kind of reasoning that Monbiot condemns as millenarian.

As for "social scum" and "bribed tool[s] of reactionary intrigue", is Monbiot denying that such lumpen elements did line up behind tyrants and dictators? Is he denying that the lumpenproletariat turned up in the massed ranks of the Fascist squadre, the Freikorps? The empirical evidence is that the organised working class resisted the Fascist and Nazi temptation, and Marx’s argument here will show why. Those who lack social identity within the class structure very easily fall in behind a strong ruler in support of an authoritarian politics. What matters to Marx is the structural capacity to act and social futurity, and that is what Marx identified in the working class as the value creating class. To postmodernists this amounted to ‘privileging’ the proletariat. They proceeded to ditch the working class for a myriad of social groups and identities, with the result that they lack a social agency to back any vision that they may have. Which is no doubt why George Monbiot is now asking for the new big idea. Whatever ‘big idea’ Monbiot ever has, on these premises he would lack social relevance.

As for Marx reinventing Plato’s guardian-philosophers, this is just plain rot. Marx’s position is distinguished by the way he subverted the Weitling-Buonarroti view that the
masses are too 'corrupt', too determined by circumstances, to emancipate themselves. That is precisely what revolutionary-critical praxis and the principle of the self-emancipation of the proletariat is about. Self-transformation and social transformation are one and the same process. Marx is not to be held responsible for the fact that the socialism that came after failed to act on the principle. In the Circular Letter Marx condemns those who call for the leadership of 'educated and property' bourgeois on account of the working class being incapable of liberating itself by its own efforts. Marx couldn't be clearer.

One has, therefore, to insist upon Marx's conception that the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself.

We cannot, therefore, cooperate with people who openly state that the, workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves and must first be freed from above by philanthropic bourgeois and petty bourgeois.

Marx and Engels to Bebel, Liebknecht and Bracke and others, 17 September 1879 in FI 1974.

Marx thus criticised those concerned with engineering revolution in abstraction from a revolutionary process as 'alchemists of revolution'. It was in this mind that Marx referred to revolutionaries as 'alchemists' and critics who criticised him for confining himself 'merely to the critical analysis of the actual facts, instead of writing recipes .. for the kitchens of the future' (Capital I 99).

Monbiot writes of 'the unprecedented power over human life they [Marx and Engels] granted to the state.' At which point I ask, has Monbiot even read Marx, or merely read what an anti-Marxist has written of Marx. 'Unprecedented power' if you please. From first to last, Marx criticises the state power as a parasitic growth upon society. In The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte Marx draws attention to the fact that it is the liberal bourgeoisie who are statist to the core.
the material interest of the French bourgeoisie is most intimately imbricated precisely with the maintenance of that extensive and highly ramified state machine. It is that machine which provides its surplus population with jobs, and makes up through state salaries for what it cannot pocket in the form of profits, interest, rent and fees. Its political interest equally compelled it daily to increase the repression, and therefore to increase the resources and the personnel of the state power; it had simultaneously to wage an incessant war against public opinion and mistrustfully mutilate and cripple society's independent organs of movement where it did not succeed in entirely amputating them.

Marx SE *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 1977:187

And this parasitic state power has grown ever since. Of course it has. The state and capital are in symbiotic relation. They rose together and they will fall together.

In *The Civil War in France*, Marx calls for 'the destruction of the state power' as 'a parasitic excrescence.' 'While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping preeminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society.' (Marx CWF FI 1974:210/1).

Criticising Bolshevism, George Lichtheim describes the use of the state power to 'build socialism' as 'the most un-Marxian notion ever excogitated by professed Marxists' (Lichtheim 1961:370). 'The fact remains that Marx stood out among the early German socialists just because he did not share the traditional idealist veneration of the state' (Lichtheim 1970:94). Marx thus rejects the Gotha Programme of the German SPD for its commitment to the 'free state'. It forms no part of Marx's communism to make the state free: 'freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed on society into one thoroughly subordinate to it' (Marx CGP FI 1974:354).

Of course, what Monbiot could cite in his defence is Marx's *tactical* use of political power in conditions of social revolution. If Monbiot thinks that those with a vested interest in an existing order are going to see reason and walk away without a word of protest, then he is a political naïf. He himself has seen how organised and how
vociferous the fossil fuel lobby is with respect to climate change denial. In the book *Political Materialism*, Robert Meister shows how Marx broke with left wing radicals who lacked political realism and whose radicalism was merely an endless rehearsal of the defeats to come. It’s a politics of permanent protest. At some point, you have to embody your alternative, and that requires political organisation.

It took me about ten minutes to eviscerate Monbiot’s charges. The important point, however, is not the defence of Marx. What I find most significant is that Monbiot has misunderstood Marx so profoundly that we have to question the philosophical foundations behind this misreading. The looming ecological catastrophe demands that we all up our philosophical game, cease dealing in clichéd thinking and start demonstrating intellectual and moral courage. We need real philosophical and moral depth in order to deal with the crisis of civilisation we are facing. A rehash of totalitarian pieties betrays an appalling philosophical deficiency on Monbiot’s part that is bound to impair his reasoning in other areas. It is pointless calling for new ideas if that is what we make of the old ideas. Monbiot dismisses Plato with a one line reference to the ‘guardian-philosophers’. What he fails to appreciate is Plato’s point concerning the organisation of human affairs in terms of a distribution of competences and expertise for the good of the whole. Monbiot should understand the nature of the problem that Plato is addressing here, how to secure the long term common good out of particular interests and opinions. It should ring a bell. How to get governments constrained by short term electoral cycles to act on the evidence for human made global heating and secure the long term good. Rather than deal with the question of how we relate knowledge and opinion, general and particular, long term and short term, Monbiot delivers a knee-jerk liberalism that presumes Plato is a totalitarian. If that is the best that a leading environmental thinker can make of Plato and Marx, then we are in trouble. After all, in arguing for action to tackle climate change, in arguing for a general interest to prevail over myriad particular interests, ecologists like Monbiot have been accused of being eco-fascists.

We need not so much new ideas as the ability to think deeply about serious issues. Establishing philosophical foundations is precisely what this book is about.
The case I develop in this book reveals such criticism to be lacking in philosophical depth. It’s no wonder that George Monbiot is casting around for the next big idea if that is how he deals with Plato and Marx, a few quotes taken out of context, without the supporting edifice of definition and argumentation, to prove a totalitarian implication. My deeper point is that this crude rehash of Popper betrays all the shallowness of the empiricist and atomist method. I shall discuss this point at length in later chapters when developing an essentialist metaphysics against atomism and empiricism.

Monbiot writes of ‘the millenarian myth of a final resolution to the struggle for power’ and ‘promise of another world’. And this, for me, is the key to Monbiot’s deficiencies. For it betrays the total inability to understand a teleological and essentialist mode of thought as anything but mythological and delusional, possessing inherent totalitarian implications. This view is currently being expressed by John Gray, whom I shall discuss at length in a later chapter. The argument boils down to whether we can see purpose at work in history. The essentialist sees history as the progressive realisation of immanent purposes through inherent potentialities becoming actualities. Marx’s argument is organised around the essentialist categories of law, form, substance, necessary lines of development. And his analysis of various social forms was an attempt to ground this essentialism in realities, not mythologies. It is this analysis of what Marx called ‘concrete reality’ that gave his vision of an ‘another world’ a reality as against utopian though. Marx’s notion of socialist revolution has been compared to Judaeo-Christian eschatology many times before. In truth, the comparison reveals more about an author’s inability to understand the philosophical and theological points in anything other than very broad brush strokes. In simple terms, this teleological tradition believes that there is meaning in history, that history has a direction and that the end point concerns the realisation of the potentials of something essentially and essentially something. The atomist and empiricist tradition has been in the ascendant for so long now, that there is a complete incomprehension when it comes to essentialist modes of thought. Rather than engage with the arguments, there is a simple straight reading of totalitarianism. Those brought up to see no meaning in history beyond discrete and accidental events can make no sense of those philosophical and theological traditions that make necessary connections within the whole. To them, history is meaningless, aimless and endless. Those who identify purpose at work and seek realisation are guilty of millenarianism.
Beyond the philosophical line connecting Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Hegel, Marx, the criticism also takes in the major religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for whom history has a purpose and leads to an end point. It is that end point that invests actions with moral meaning, raises hope, inspires effort, and obligates individuals in pursuit of an end. It is worth emphasising this point because Monbiot, as an environmentalist, certainly believes in changing the existing world in order to achieve ‘another world’ in the shape of the ecological society. Monbiot is surely aware of the extent to which environmentalists have been accused of being ‘eco-fascists’ and ‘eco-zealots’ practising a ‘new religion of climate alarmism’. That’s the same accusation of millenarianism that Monbiot levels at Marx, with about as much substance - little.

The charges of millenarianism betray the inability to see meaning in history, and that is derives from the absence of essence and purpose. That’s fine for those bent on digging up the planet in order to make money. It makes perfect commercial sense to reduce Nature to a dis-godded machine devoid of intrinsic purpose, to be used whichever way money and power deems meaningful. But Monbiot is attempting to promote the environmentalist message against such commercial exploitation. My argument is that without an essentialist foundation, there is no environmentalist message as such, just another value position. And in such a meaningless world devoid of purpose, it is money and power that counts, as Monbiot has surely, by now, found out. His writing details the machinations of business in the world of politics and public policy. All the scientific evidence on climate change in the world hasn’t budged the world of business and politics. The only defence that environmentalism has is the bedrock reality of Nature, and that requires an essentialist mode of thought. All that Monbiot has is empiricism and atomism that makes nonsense of the idea of purpose and no sense of history. History becomes meaningless, aimless and endless. And that’s precisely what money and power want, a blank sheet upon which they can write their dreams and fantasies of expropriation and exploitation.

So my point here is that beneath Monbiot’s specific against Plato and Marx lies a mode of reasoning that is typical of an atomist and empiricist methodology, a mode which we need to discard. What Monbiot argues against Plato and Marx would apply to all those who would seek to oppose the “ought to be” against what “is”,

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another future world that is feasibly better than the present, since such distinction necessarily implies that some – an elite! – see a reality that others – the mass! – don’t. To penetrate to the underlying, essential reality beneath the surface is to set up a division between appearance and reality. It is to argue that those on the surface are living in Plato’s cave, chained to illusion. To those of nervous liberal sensibilities, this implies that some can see through the illusion and hence can claim privileged access to knowledge and, no doubt, power. So the distinction is rejected and we remain enclosed within the cave of shadows.

The point is worth labouring given that Monbiot is an environmental campaigner who has frequently crossed swords with climate change deniers. The distinction between appearance and reality is intrinsic to science. Without it, as Marx argued, there could be no science. Empirical observation at the level of the senses tells us that the world is flat. Science tells us that the world is round. Science is counter-intuitive. To argue this is not to justify a scientific dictatorship in which an elite of knowledgeable experts govern the deluded, ignorant masses. Yet this crude caricature is the only sense that Monbiot can make of Plato and Marx for their distinction between appearance and reality.

The point is worth pursuing. The way that Monbiot criticises collapses the distinction between knowledge and opinion, a distinction which he, as an environmentalist who promotes the idea of human made climate change, is well aware of. It is climate change deniers who remove that distinction, in an attempt to reduce science to politics.

The serious point is that the failure to ground the ecological standpoint on natural essences leaves us adrift of reality. And it leaves us ill-equipped intellectually, morally and politically to challenge those in business and politics who are asserting their right to distort reality whichever way they like. Take climate change denier Brendan O’Neill who condemns ‘the ugly elitism and end-of-days mania of the environmentalist movement’. (Brendan O’Neill, ‘Stupid, feckless, greedy: that’s you, that is’, Spiked, 16 March 2009.) It is the likes of Monbiot, as someone who argues for action to deal with climate change, who is on the receiving end of these charges of elitism and ‘end-of-days mania’. Monbiot would defend himself by pointing to the climate science. And the criticism will come back that Monbiot is an elitist claiming privileged access to knowledge. These charges directed against
environmentalists like Monbiot are the charges that Monbiot directs against Plato and Marx. And it's philosophically loose.

The point is that human reason is capable of penetrating beyond the illusion of the empirical world presented to the senses and give us access to true reality. Without that capacity, we are condemned to remain enchained to empirical immediacy and necessity.

Monbiot’s rehash of hoary old claims of totalitarianism betrays the lack of a viable philosophical standpoint. But it reveals more. It reveals a lack of intellectual courage. ‘Have the courage to use your own reason!’ wrote Kant. We need the courage to depart from the immediate and the given in the world of appearance and embark on the journey to what is most real. This was a familiar idea in past civilisations, but the brave soldiers of the modern empiricism seem to lack the appetite to make a move. The future is no more than the present enlarged and they see no direction, no necessary relations or lines of development beyond the accident of discrete events. They lack hope, they lack courage, they are beaten, and the evidence of their defeat is all around us.

We have been here before. Back in the 1980s, postmodernism and poststructuralism was all the rage, marxism, the working class and class politics were out. The likes of Monbiot had their way, and we are now where we are, in the brave new world of call centres, casual, short-term contracts and climate crisis. Realising that they are up a creek without a paddle, they issue the call for new ideas. Well, as Aristotle wrote, there is nothing new, only a lot of things we’ve forgotten. It’s time to remember.

I can do no better than to quote Norman Geras, who saw off this nonsense when it first reared its head in the 1970s and 1980s. In Discourses of Extremity, Geras concludes the final chapter entitled Ex-Marxism without Substance with these pertinent words:

But socialist thought presently also confronts, on the other hand, a singularly hostile political and intellectual environment. It is pressed in from all directions by
those ready to write it off, deride it, belittle both its hopes and its achievements as illusion or dross.

So besieged, socialist thought - in all its currents and varieties - has an even heavier responsibility than it should generally own to anyway, to conduct its discussions in a spirit of sobriety and just proportion and with a sense of the complex paths that truth and error alike persist in tracing across all straightforward maps of the historical intellect. Argument by caricature and simplification; by easy reduction and intellectual short-cut; by light-minded use of such hackneyed vulgarizations as have already been answered many times over (and as will be seen today for vulgarizations not only by Marxists but by a substantial number of fair-minded, non-Marxist students of Marxism) - this is a dual dereliction. It obstructs fruitful socialist debate. And it reinforces the currently difficult external environment of that debate. It is no fit style for the kind of socialist pluralism we need. In any case, enough is now more than enough.

Geras 1990: 165

Scepticism with respect to essences sapped the life out of socialism. Today we face a civilisation-threatening crisis in the climate system. To confront that problem we are going to need thinking of real perception, philosophical depth, intellectual courage and moral weight. If what Monbiot writes is typical of environmentalists, then we are indeed writing the Requiem for a Species (Clive Hamilton 2010).

I shall argue against such pessimism. It is precisely because of the reality of essences that a future creative self-realisation, beyond the vagaries and accidents of sensory experience, is always possible. Indeed, in the essentialist terms I shall develop, this development is necessary. Not in the sense of being inevitable, since lines of development are frustratable. It depends upon human agency, the way in which, or whether at all, human beings act. The development is necessary if human beings – and other organisms – are to become what they essentially are, that is, what they have the potential to be.

I shall argue that we can pursue the “ought to be” without disappearing into the fantasy world of subjective wishes and delusions. Anglophone philosophy since
David Hume has insisted that one cannot derive an ‘ought to be’ from an ‘is’. And this distinction became a philosophical convention. Finally, Daniel Dennett has had the nerve to ask that if one cannot derive an “ought to be” from an “is”, from what can we derive it from? It seems we must have to make it up, and thus enter the world of delusion. Not so. The essentialist tradition going back to Aristotle has always deduced the “ought to be” from the “is”. And that is to conceive the “is” as composed of natural essences. Thus Hegel and Marx are able to locate the ideal within the real, conceiving the future as an immanent society in the process of becoming actual.

Those who allege elitism, privileged access to knowledge and totalitarianism are simply wrong, badly wrong. The reverse is true. It is because of the possession of innate capacities and natural essences that human beings are protected from total manipulation and management on the part of external agencies.

It is only because of this connection at the level of essence that it is possible for philosophy to lead every thinking person from the world of the “is” to what “ought to be.” We need the courage to hold our nerve and not retreat before this ascent. No-one and nothing else can take that journey for us. That’s why Kant called upon us to have the courage to use our reason. To retreat from the ascent is to fall back into the world of empirical inclination, impulse and desire. To ascend to the “ought to be” of the moral law, Kant needed the fact of conscience as something that existed within the realm of the “is”.

And that implies innateness and essentialism, human beings as something essentially and as essentially something, something more substantial than cultural – even worse, political – creations. This essentialist conception has been lost in modern times. Take Richard Evans’ review of Eric Hobsbawm’s Fractured Times. (The International Man by Richard J Evans, Review Saturday Guardian 23.03.13). In two large introductory columns Evans argues the case for Hobsbawm as the ‘most celebrated historian of the 20th century, not just in Britain but all over the world.’ His major works remain in print, he has honorary degrees and awards and prizes from all over the world. ‘There are many reasons why Hobsbawm managed to achieve such worldwide eminence and popularity’, claims Evans. ‘Clearly Hobsbawm owed much of this to his lifelong adherence to Marxism, which in his hands was a subtle and flexible tool for organising and interpreting historical material.’ It was from Marxism that Hobsbawm learned to see the connections between the discrete events of
history and set them in a wider context. ‘His ability to see the big picture and devise a framing concept to sort out the diverse and unruly detail of history was breathtaking,’ writes Evans. He is right. Except, in the very next passage, Evans sounds the retreat. ‘Marxism did, it is true, lend much of his work a teleological flavour that is no longer to our taste in the post-Marxist world.’ So what if teleology is no longer in fashion? That inability to engage in teleological thinking is precisely the reason why, with a wealth of information and knowledge before us, our thinkers and intellectuals can only write of meaninglessness and delusion. They remain on the surface level of discrete events and therefore cannot find any interlinking purpose, any direction, any overall meaning. They are sceptics of the structures who have become the sycophants of the surface.

The same copy of The Guardian carried an interview with Noam Chomsky (A Life of Protest, The Saturday Interview, Aida Edemariam, The Guardian 23 March 2013). Chomsky is worth discussing at length, since his work in linguistics proceeds from a very distinct philosophical viewpoint, the rationalist tradition that I am defending in this book. This rationalism is today considered controversial, but it possesses a long and distinguished heritage and, in Chomsky, possesses one of its greatest exponents.

Chomsky’s breakthrough as a linguist came with the argument that, contrary to the prevailing idea that children learned language by copying and by reinforcement (i.e. behaviourism), basic grammatical arrangements are already present at birth. Published in 1957, Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures defined linguistics for the rest of the century. Chomsky’s concern is with language learning and the 'syntactic structures' that underlie different languages. But his views have wider moral and political implications which show the strength of essentialism and innateness. Chomsky’s social and political commentaries, in which he criticises totalitarian power and politics, are informed by the same rationalist philosophical assumptions.

Chomsky’s work in linguistics is predicated on a rationalist theory of mind. The empiricist tradition emanating from Locke holds that the mind is a blank
slate, a 'tabula rasa', at birth. Against this, Chomsky argues that the mind is constrained in its operations by certain innate structures. For Chomsky, all languages share, at a fundamental level, a universal structure, or grammar. Rather than being something that is learnt through teaching and experience, as in the empiricist tradition, this universal grammar is 'hardwired' in our brains.

The idea of a universal grammar may be explained thus. Although there are some 5,000 known varieties of human language, they are all constrained by certain parameters above and beyond their many surface differences. These principles are innate, and unique, to the human mind. The grammatical rules are hardwired in the mind and do not need to be learned. The early exposure to language merely acts as a trigger and the child develops a linguistic competence at an accelerated rate.

For Chomsky, this hardwiring is an aspect of our human nature. And this applies to our other cognitive faculties.

The argument that there is such a thing as an innate linguistic structure, and by extension an innate moral grammar, is an essentialist argument. Chomsky’s argument revolutionised linguistics, but had fundamental implications for our notions of the human mind and human nature.

Chomsky’s view has political implications. Those brought up on the idea that we choose our existence over against our essence are inclined to see these ideas of innateness as implying a biological or natural determinism.

Atomists and empiricists can only see necessity in the form of determinism in such arguments. They embrace the illusion that human life and culture can proceed apart from foundations and can therefore be 'made-up' in some way. It is the old existentialist conceit and supports a superficially libertarian rhetoric, the idea that one can choose one’s identity. But it’s an illusion, and a potentially inhuman one at that. Such a view confines human beings to the surface level of
appearance and accident, frustrating inherent potentialities for a better, richer life. It also permits external agencies, the state, business, the military, to intervene and shape a pliable human nature this way or that to fit

Human beings end up serving ends which are external to them – economic growth, military conquest, state power etc. There are now developments in biotechnology which are encouraging scientists with a commercial interest claiming that we can engineer the future. They mean that they intend to engineer human beings. Such a notion is entirely comprehensible if we deny the idea of human essences and innate structures.

And here we see the damage that an atomist and empiricist metaphysics has done. Anti-foundationalist libertarians and feminists have been potty trained to see structures and essences as determinist constraints on freedom, so they choose the arbitrary freedom of surface level events. And thus walk straight into the new behaviourism that is emerging with human and planetary engineering. Constructing identities whilst being chained to empirical desire and impulse is an illusory freedom. It’s the easiest to understand and the easiest to attain for a reason – it’s already under our noses as the world of appearance.

Edemariam has no idea how to deal with the bedrock of Chomsky’s argument that there are such things as innate structures. She writes that the idea of an innate capacity ‘has interesting, even troubling ramifications for his politics. If we are born with innate structures of linguistic and by extension moral thought, isn’t this a kind of determinism that denies political agency? What is the point of arguing for any change at all?’

As though the existence of innate structures yields a passive determinism that denies change and agency. The argument completely misses the fact that an innate moral grammar, for instance, remains a moral position, implying the capacity to identify and choose between right and wrong, good and bad, and to assume responsibility and act. In fine, there is nothing passive or inevitable about the possession of a nature or
an innate capacity. The nature has to be realised, the capacity has to be used.

Many have become so accustomed to Popper's ignorant liberal assault on Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx as totalitarian 'enemies of the open society', that they no longer see the philosophical issues at stake. An essentialist metaphysics is all about change, but change that proceeds in a necessary way according to the realisation of inherent potentialities. That is precisely what flourishing is all about. That is precisely why Marx argued for a social order that enhanced the human ontology rather than inhibited it, that is why Marx demanded a social order that corresponded to creative human nature rather than contradicted it, that is why Marx repudiated the autonomy-impairing and denying structures of the capital system as a dehumanisation and a determinism. And Marx did so in the name of a revolutionary-critical praxis that placed the accent on creative human agency. Here we see the high price we are now paying for the excesses of post-modernism and post-structuralism, the inflation of discourse and the replacement of class struggle with identity politics. The left no longer has a moral and intellectual language and so cannot see beyond the slogans of the surface. Chomsky makes short work of Edemariam's objections.

"The most libertarian positions accept the same view." he answers. "That there are instincts, basic conditions of human nature that lead to a preferred social order. In fact, if you're in favour of any policy - reform, revolution, stability, regression, whatever - if you're at least minimally moral, it's because you think it's somehow good for people. And good for people means conforming to their fundamental nature. So whoever you are, whatever your position is, you're making some tacit assumptions about fundamental human nature... The question is: what do we strive for in developing a social order that is conducive to fundamental human needs? Are human beings born to be servants to masters, or are they born to be free, creative individuals who work with others to inquire, create, develop their own lives? I mean, if humans were totally unstructured creatures, they would be ... a tool which can properly be shaped by outside forces. That's why if you look at the history of what's called radical behaviourism, [where] you can be completely shaped by outside forces - when [the advocates of this] spell out what they think society ought to be, it's totalitarian."
The charge of determinism or totalitarianism can be thrown back against the existentialists. This idea that we may choose our existence over against our essence may sound liberatory, certainly if it is the individual agent doing the choosing. But that’s the point, in a world of supra-individual forces, the individual is always set within a context of collective powers and beliefs and norms. If existence prevails over essence, then there is nothing to stop an external agency, a state, a political movement, an organisation of any kind, mobilising to manipulate and manage an individual according to purposes which are external to them. This external manipulation is entirely possible if the individual human being is merely the blank sheet of Lockean empiricism, or the unconstrained free agent of existentialism. For Chomsky, it is the fact that we possess a nature that prevents us from being subjugated by external forces and directed by anything other than our own purposes. Our innate, essential nature is our best protection against tyranny and totalitarianism. The range of possible political structures that we can tolerate is limited. Those who still cling to the idea of freedom as some unconstrained choice may reject this view as narrow. But if the view rules out some of the more fanciful utopias of the human mind, it also checks oppressive political systems, such as Orwell’s 1984 or Huxley’s Brave New World. In constraining us to realities, the rationalist view has the merit of focusing on the realisation of our natures, as against the libertarian and repressive fantasies that lead us astray. The point is that external agencies, whatever their political colours, cannot completely mould our minds, however much they may try. In an era of all manner of biological determinisms, from behaviourism to neuro-Darwinism, the concept of innate rationalism needs to be recovered as our best defence against tyranny. Our thoughts are not, as behavioural psychologists had argued, conditioned responses to repeated stimuli. Now we have neuroscientists arguing that they have ‘explained’ the processes of the human mind. So what? The philosopher John Searle’s question to neuro-determinists and reductionists remains unanswered: ‘How is it possible for physical, objective, quantitatively describable neuron firings to cause qualitative, private, subjective experiences?’ (Searle 1995.)

Innateness comes with uniqueness, and that is what gives human beings autonomy in thought, morality and politics. And here we appreciate the political
implications of Chomsky’s linguistics. The concept of being a ‘free agent’ is as hardwired into our nature as the constraints that act on our forms of speech. Those who would denounce this belief as a delusion are working against innate human nature, seeking to diminish or destroy the very capacity that protects us against external manipulation.

Chomsky’s linguistic theory can therefore be developed in the social, political and moral landscape. The nature of language reveals the nature of the human mind, not simply in the sense that language is a uniquely human activity, but because language ‘is the vehicle of thought’ and therefore uniquely placed to illuminate the essence of the human mind. By ‘mind’, Chomsky means the cognitive principles and processes that underlie human behaviour.

Chomsky’s ‘innatist’ theory is part of a tradition which goes back to Plato’s innate ideas and embraces such key figures of philosophy as Leibniz, Descartes, and Kant. According to this philosophy, the human mind is endowed with innate ideas or categories that shape who and what we are, what we can know. With the dominance of mechanical materialism and atomist and empiricist methods, this tradition has been neglected. Detached from realities grounded in innate ideas and essential natures, human beings have entered the realm of fantasy and fiction and, mistaking this madness for freedom, have shot for the stars. The tradition of organic, essentialist rationalism will pull us back to realities and focus us upon the realisation of real purposes. Essentialism is a constraint in the healthiest sense, ruling out fantasies and focusing us upon genuine potentialities. Essentialism points us the direction of an emancipated society which corresponds to the free and full realisation of our nature.

In complete contrast to the essentialist conception, an atomist metaphysics sees change only in terms of discrete ‘events’, which together have no overall meaning or direction. Change is just accidental change, leading nowhere particularly or essentially.

Since the scientific and industrial revolutions, atomist and empiricist thought has been in the ascendant, with essentialist categories coming to be misunderstood, distorted, caricatured, and rejected accordingly. The mandarins
of politics and culture have a vested interest in the world being complicated rather than simple, all discrete events with no connecting thread or meaning. With an atomist metaphysics, the world is broken up into discrete entities, made the possession of the bureaucrat. In the same manner that a pretentious savant will prefer to put ‘the truth’ in inverted commas and rendered unsayable and left unsaid. When it comes to the inflation of discourse, the grandiloquent language conceals the paucity of thought. And there is a political dimension to this bureaucratisation of knowledge under an atomist metaphysics. The denial of real essences in favour of a view which sees the world as the accidental occurrence of discrete events suits those who wish to see, manage and manipulate reality and human beings as they see fit. Terry Eagleton exposes the potential for manipulation that exists in the post-structuralist view that there is ‘no necessary relation’ between economic position and political and ideological positions. He comments wryly that the idea that there is ‘no logical connection whatsoever’ between class position and the political/ideological means that it is wholly coincidental that all capitalists are not also revolutionary socialists. (Eagleton 1991: 214). This denial of necessary relations leaves politics and ideology free to determine all that there is. The material world, it appears, does not exist until it is defined into existence; it is clay in the hands of the politicians and the intellectuals.

Eagleton thus exposes the determinism that is implicit in the anti-essentialist position. ‘If the working class has no interests derived from its socio-economic conditions, then there is nothing in this class to resist its being politically or ideologically ‘constructed’ in various ways. All that resists my own political construction of the class is someone else’s. The working class, or for that matter any other subordinate group, thus becomes clay in the hands of those wishing to coopt it into some political strategy, tugged this way and that between socialists and fascists.’ (Eagleton 1991: 214).

An essentialist position that can reveal what capital and labour are, can reveal the fundamental nature of social relations and forms, can show that workers’ interests necessarily entail socialism. But the argument that workers have no necessary interests, only those interests they are ‘constructed’ into, cannot explain why workers should bother to become socialists rather than, say, fascists. An essentialist
metaphysics sees necessary relations and lines of development leading workers to pursue the realisation of the inherent potentials of creative labour in a society of the associated producers. Without that conception of necessity – which is not a determinism, which entails creative human agency in actualising potentials – the working class will become socialists only when their existing identities have been transformed by the process of becoming socialist. But, Eagleton asks, how would they ever come to embark on this process? ‘For there is nothing in their conditions now which provides the slightest motivation for it. The future political selves they might attain have no relation whatsoever to their present socio-economic ones. There is merely a blank disjunction between them, as there is for those Humean philosophers for whom what I was at the age of twenty has no relation at all to what I shall be at the age of sixty.’ (Eagleton 1991: 215).

An essentialist metaphysics can provide the interest, explanation and motivation in that present conditions always contain an inherent potential which is to be realised. Eagleton asks why should someone become a socialist, feminist or anti-racist, if these political interests are in no sense a response to the way society is? Without an essentialist foundation, there is no reason at all. Eagleton reminds us that in Hindess and Hirst's view, society doesn't even exist until it has come to be politically constructed in a certain manner. 'Of course, once Hindess and Hirst begin to spell out why they themselves are socialists they will find themselves ineluctably referring to something very like 'the way society is'; but strictly speaking this notion is inadmissible to them.' (Eagleton 1991: 215). Quite, such a notion is available only to those who proceed from an essentialist understanding. Without those essentialist categories, politics becomes a manipulation rationalised by an impotent moralism, without any grounding in natural essences. Such a position suits all political and intellectual positions which are made up and sold over the heads of people. It is an open invitation to the theoretico-elitist model of power and politics. Society, and the individuals composing the demos, become anything the bureaucrats of knowledge and power choose. An essentialist metaphysics is the surest guard against totalitarianism since, if human beings are essentially something, and something essentially, then however much you engineer them in one way or another, social, political, bio-tech, you cannot alter what that something is unless you change it. The same point pertains to society as essentially something, and something essentially. The only real change that is possible is a matter of the realisation of real essences, inherent potentials in the process of becoming actual. Those
engaged in the politics of management and manipulation - and the same applies to those intellectuals engaged in the ‘construction’ of perspectives and persons – have a vested interest in denying essential natures. The absence of essential natures blurs the line that separates accidental changes at the level of appearances from fundamental changes at the level of a deeper reality, and makes it possible to remain within an existing system rather than see and pursue a line of development that moves beyond it.

Without essentialism, there is no possibility of developing a genuine teleological conception that is capable of understanding change in history. Essentialist metaphysics provide the categories required for identifying the nature of a system and for distinguishing necessary change from accidental change in a system. Without essentialist categories, history can only come to be understood as it appears, as the interplay of unrelated ‘factors’ and discrete events, signifying nothing. Without essentialist categories revealing necessary relations, we cannot see the wood for the trees. We end up lost within the thicket of accident, unable to see any meaning or direction or unity or interconnection. The bureaucrats of knowledge and power take control of a world that is as they say it is.

The essentialist idea that there is purpose and direction in the world now stands condemned as an illusion born of a mythical belief in ‘progress’, deriving from religious eschatology and naïve Enlightenment rationalism. In truth, John Gray is saying nothing new here. Since the last blast of Hegelianism in the shape of the likes of the Oxford Idealists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the likes of Croce in Italy, and Marxists like Gramsci and Lukacs, philosophical orthodoxy has been atomist and empiricist. The ‘progress’ which John Gray considers to be so spectacularly misfiring in the contemporary world is a product of this orthodoxy, not of teleological thinking at all. Organicism and essentialism have been systematically denigrated and destroyed, expunged from the political and moral and intellectual world. Karl Popper in The Open Society and its Enemies selected his targets well – Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx. The only figure missing was St Thomas Aquinas. These are the key figures in the essentialist tradition and, as such, are the main threats to any status quo content to reside in the realm of appearance. Essentialists are habitually accused of reasoning according to a 'biological analogy', meaning that the categories which are appropriate to natural forms come to be applied illicitly to human society and
history. This is plain wrong and merely reveals that the critics are simply ignorant of Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel and Marx. That direct biological analogy is precisely what they don't do. Essentialism is not a Social Darwinism or socio-biology, quite the contrary. Human agency, morality, culture etc – the subjective factor – possess a key creative role in realising potentials. That is why accusations of determinism also fail. The categories of essentialist philosophy such as law, form, matter, necessity entail an organic dialectics which pertain to both natural and historical processes of coming-to-be and passing-away within whole entities or systems, whether one refers to Nature, the physical universe or the social organism.

There is still a tendency to identify Karl Marx as an economist and to read *Capital* as a work of economics. Actually, *Capital*, like Marx’s other works on economics, was a critique of political economy. Marx was not offering a correct economics to replace an incorrect economics. Failure to understand that point will continue to mislead people. Marx was engaged in a project of human self-knowledge, bringing the Socratic tradition of the examined life to its highest stage of development. Those with dominant positions within the social system have a vested interested in denying the possibility of such knowledge, certainly in denying it to those whose alienated sovereignty and labour forms the basis of the social system and its reproduction. So they have struck hard at the basis of human self-knowledge – necessary relations and lines of development, essentialist categories and organic dialectics. The effectiveness of this assault can be judged by the extent to which atomism has taken the place of essentialism within Marxism itself, in the form of analytic and rational choice marxism (Elster 1985; Cohen 1978; Roemer 1986) We can also see the effectiveness of the atomist assault in the linguistic turn in philosophy and cultural studies, in the way that identity politics has encouraged a narcissism of differences to the neglect of universal themes.

In January 1997, Chomsky gave a talk at a conference in Washington DC entitled *The Common Good*. Chomsky based his talk on Aristotle's *Politics*, 'the foundation of most subsequent political theory.' Chomsky explains what the talk was about:

Aristotle took it for granted that a democracy should be fully participatory (with some notable exceptions, like women and slaves) and that it should aim for the
common good. In order to achieve that, it has to ensure relative equality, "moderate and sufficient property" and "lasting prosperity" for everyone.

In other words, Aristotle felt that if you have extremes of poor and rich, you can't talk seriously about democracy. Any true democracy has to be what we call today a welfare state—actually, an extreme form of one, far beyond anything envisioned in this century. (When I pointed this out at a press conference in Majorca, the headlines in the Spanish papers read something like, If Aristotle were alive today, he'd be denounced as a dangerous radical. That's probably true.)

Chomsky 2012: 209

That is true. Witness Karl Popper’s tendentious assault on Aristotle as one of the ‘totalitarian’ enemies of the ‘open’ society. (The charge is that Aristotle is not a liberal. So what? How ‘open’ is a society that cannot tolerate criticisms of the liberal position?) It’s not that Aristotle was a ‘dangerous radical’, it’s just that the people in charge of the business and politics of the world have gone to extremes. Aristotle was a man of moderation, proposing universalistic values which are firmly grounded in natural essences.

Eric Hobsbawm emphasised that universalistic values are crucial to the project of the Left. He asked what the turn to identity politics implied, given that the political project of the Left is genuinely inclusive in extending emancipation to all. Hobsbawm argued that the Left, given its universal agenda, cannot base itself on identity politics as such. ‘Now the wider agenda of the Left does, of course, mean it supports many identity groups .. and they, in turn look to the Left. .. What united them was the hunger for equality and social justice, and a programme believed capable of advancing both’ (Hobsbawm NLR 217 May/June 1996:43/4). Social justice and equality are universal themes, they incorporate identities but do not reduce to them. There is, in other words, such a thing as the common interest and this defines the Left in politics as something other than an identity politics. Hobsbawm thus fears the 'increasing tendency' ‘to see the Left essentially as a coalition of minority groups and interests’ (Hobsbawm NLR 217 May/June 1996:44). He points out the dangers. The 'danger of disintegrating into a pure alliance of minorities is unusually great on the Left because
the decline of the great universalising slogans of the Enlightenment, which were essentially slogans of the Left, leaves it without any obvious way of formulating a common interest across sectional boundaries. The only one of the so-called 'new social movements' which crosses all such boundaries is that of the ecologists. But, alas, its political appeal is limited and likely to remain so' (Hobsbawm NLR 217 May/June 1996:45).

In this respect, Gitlin asks a pertinent question: 'What is a Left if it is not, plausibly at least, the voice of the whole people? ... If there is no people, but only peoples, there is no Left' (Gitlin 1995:165).

Common interests, common dreams, universal themes – the common good. We can see now how right Hobsbawm was. Universal values are crucial to the project of the Left. A congeries of sectional interests and constructed identities is no basis for a common life based on universal values. So what, comes the reply of those content within the politics of difference. It means that a superficial liberty at the level of accident and appearance has been exchanged for a deeper, richer freedom that comes through the realisation of the social essence of human beings. The challenge is to realise universal values within a common good in such a way as to incorporate plural social identities. And my point is that without an essentialist metaphysics, there is no possibility of distinguishing appearance from reality, accidental change from necessary change. We remain content with a superficial made-up libertarianism through the assertion of identities. A genuine freedom requires that we move beyond constructed identities to the realisation of the inherent potentials within essential natures, most of all those contained in the nature of the whole social organism.

I would argue that the plausibility of the atomist view in the contemporary age is due not to some general 'delusion of progress', whether Christian or secular (with respect to the promises of industry, economic growth and technology) but to a bad and bogus teleology deriving from the alienation of social power, the inversion of subject and object, ends and means, and from the frustration of necessary lines of development. The solution to modernist delusions is not to abandon 'progress' and ideas of patterns and directions in history, but to recover a genuine essentialist metaphysics and to start doing progress right. Progress is more that economic growth, scientific advance and technological innovation. That is the false teleology that is inevitably misfiring in the modern world. That is not a case for abandoning teleology but for recovering the telos of historical development as the necessary realisation of
inherent potentials, necessary, that is, in the sense of an entity completing itself by turning potential into actual.

That is precisely what I propose to do in what follows.

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16 ESSENTIALISM, PURPOSE AND HUMAN AGENCY

As the creations of human agency come to be invested with existential significance, the human creators come to be divested of subjectivity. ‘Things’ come to acquire a living quality independent of human beings. Capital and the state, money, commodities etc are the new gods and come to develop an independent existence as powers in their own right. The teleology identified by the likes of John Gray as a delusion is in fact the external determinism imposed by these new idols. But this is not teleology at work here at all. *Telos*, purpose, is something proper to a natural essence and its realisation, and it is precisely this that has been replaced by imperatives and functions, particularly the accumulative logic of capital. Instead of the potentials of essences and their realisation, ‘things’ have acquired an existential significance and, in the process, replaced purposes with functions and imperatives.

With great irony, the rejection of ‘progress’ as the rejection of teleology returns us to the false essentialism in which capitalist social relations and forms – the very things which lie behind the secular myth of (industrial, technological) progress - come to be naturalised, rendered inevitable and permanent. Rather than see the end of the capital system, the end of history is asserted, and the future becomes no more than the present enlarged. With a genuine essentialist metaphysics, Marx can see a way out of the impasse of bourgeois delusions by identifying a proper end of history. Instead of naturalising historically specific capitalist relations, Marx explained the power of objectified labour to be the social power of labour in alienated form. In other words, behind any ‘delusions of progress’ lies not teleology but its denial. Rather than the realisation of the human essence through labour, there is the frustration of this essence through alienated labour. And behind this alienation lies specific social relations of production.

Marx’s general point comes out clearly in the way that he praises Hegel in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phanomenologie* … lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of object, as alienation and as transcendence
[supersession] of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the essence of labour and conceives objective man — true, because real man — as the result of his own labour. The real, active relation of man to himself as a species-being, or the realization of himself as a real species-being, i.e. as a human being, is only possible if he really employs all his species-powers -which again is only possible through the cooperation of mankind and as a result of history - and treats them as objects, which is at first only possible in the form of estrangement.

Marx EW EPM 1975: 386-387

The human essence has a history. That is, natural essence is not a passive, given state, fixed for all times, but is developed through social relations. The argument that essentialism entails a determinism is simply false.

This passage makes it clear that Marx is concerned with alienation as a denial of the essence of a thing, labour, and that any genuine ‘progress’ has to be conceived in terms of the ‘transcendence of this alienation’ and the realisation of this essence. That is precisely what is denied by capitalist relations of production and that is precisely why the promises of salvation contained in the secular mythology of progress misfire. That is the case not for abandoning teleology but for abandoning its fetishised form within capitalist social relations of production, in which social production is subordinated to the private appropriation and accumulation of surplus value, the alienated form of surplus labour.

The secular myth may have the appearance of Christian salvation, but it has none of the reality.

The delusions of progress are not accidental, but neither are they the result of teleology in its proper sense. Rather, they are determined by the alienated character of the social relations of production, whose reproduction is mediated through the indirect supply of social labour through the value form. That alien mediation frustrates the realisation of necessary lines of development and it is that frustration which lies behind the destructive fantasies and illusions at the heart of the secular myth of progress.

In fine, it is the domination of an atomist and empiricist metaphysics which has denied us the essentialist categories which alone can make sense of human social
development through history and which gives us a secular mythology in the absence of a genuine teleology. General references to some purpose at work in history is neither here nor there as either description or criticism. This is to take the fake teleology at work in an alienated world at face value.

The form of teleology that Marx, in line of descent from Aristotle, uses is not an occultism in which some hidden force acts causally upon events, nor is it a superstition in which change is the fulfilment of the design of Providence. Rather, it is a philosophical position solidly grounded in the fact that whole entities or organisms have essential natures and hence have potentials to be realised and lines of development to be furthered. Such teleology entails no supra-historical or supra-natural force since in fully coming-to-be, these entities or organisms are simply realising the potentials which are inherent in their natures. Immanence and transcendence are joined together in the existence of potentials and the realisation of potentials.

*Of course,* atomistic metaphysics cannot discern a pattern in history, and *of course,* the functions and imperatives of alienated powers cannot redeem their promises of progress. What we have here is something that is neither fish nor fowl, a secular mythology that has appropriated the form of teleology but, inverting means and ends, object and subject, has none of the essentialist content. That is why the secular myth cannot deliver the progress it promises, only extend the nihilistic cycle of means being accumulated for the sake of further means. As philosopher Ross Poole argues, the instrumental rationality of the capital system ‘is concerned with production for the sake of further production, consumption for the sake of further consumption, and above all, profit for the sake of further profit. In other words, it is concerned not with ends in themselves, but with ends insofar as they may be used to pursue further ends.’ (Poole 1991: ch 4). And that is a nihilism in that it is endless, it lacks moral ends. It is world in which means have come to be enlarged to take the place of ends. That is the dis-godded world of modernity analysed by Max Weber.

Atomism and empiricism gives us a bad teleology that is congenitally incapable of fulfilling its promises of freedom and happiness through economic growth, incapable of delivering salvation, precisely because it is divorced from the essential natures and potentials that alone give content to *telos.* The
solution to the bad teleology behind the delusions of progress is not the rejection of teleology as such but the rejection of an atomist metaphysics and the alienated social relations that are its accompaniment, and the development of an organic dialectics capable of grasping society as a living organism. (Fisk 1973).

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17 ARISTOTLE AND ESSENTIALISM

Essentialism is Aristotelian in origin: 'What each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature' (Aristotle). It follows that each thing is to be fully developed, completed, in accordance with its nature. This is a necessary development. A thing is an organism which has a telos, a purpose, which is to be fully developed in order to realise its nature. This telos forms the basis of a genuine teleology.

Aristotle's philosophy is infused by essentialist categories. This is what lies behind his view that 'poetry is a more philosophical and serious thing than history, as it speaks rather of the general history rather of the particular'. In the various histories of his day, Aristotle found nothing general, merely accounts of particular events that took place in certain times and places, with nothing to connect them together. All that there was was chance or accident, and for Aristotle this formed no basis for science. In Aristotle's view, 'what happens always or for the most part' happens, not fortuitously, but 'by nature'. (Physics 2. 198b33ff).

Things happen by virtue of some essential nature whose reality is manifested by the fact that certain kinds of thing tend to happen 'always or for the most part'. For Aristotle, then, science reveals essential forms, natures or 'causes', the very things he found to be lacking in the histories of his day. Whereas history dealt with particularity, science dealt with generality in the particular. For Aristotle, 'we have scientific knowledge when we know the cause' (Post. An. 71b30f) and 'the general is honoured because it reveals the cause.' (Post. An. 88a5) In other words, to have scientific knowledge we must look for the general and identify a line of necessity with a view to revealing the cause. Such an approach is possible only with a view of a whole organism in whose development according to its nature (ergon or telos) the necessity lies.

In the Politics, Aristotle sets out his essentialist methodology in the clearest terms: 'He who considers things in their first growth and origin, whether of a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them. (Politics 1.1252a24.)

Aristotle's approach can be compared to Plato who, when seeking to discern the truth of a thing, would first look to the general and then to the particular.
Thus, to discover the true nature of political and social justice, Plato argued that it is necessary to ‘first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less’ (Plato, Republic, trans. Paul Shorey, in Hamilton and Cairns, eds., Collected Dialogues, 368e-369a). In similar fashion, Immanuel Kant tended to state his argument in the architectonic form: 'there is yet another consideration which is more philosophical and architectonic in character; namely to grasp the idea of the whole correctly and thence to view all parts in their mutual relations' (Preface to the Critique of Practical Reason).

Such views can only be understood in the essentialist and organicist sense of relating the parts to the whole organism.

The categories of atomist and essentialist thought are completely incompatible, but without being aware of it, the critics of the delusions of progress are attempting to read teleology in terms of the atomism and empiricism which is all they understand. This is profoundly anti-essentialist. It is not surprising, then, that the result is a doom-mongering pessimism with no way of avoiding the end of the world. If John Gray has an alternative, I have yet to hear it, other than a letting go of the self and of striving in favour of some blissful immanence. I’m not sure that that is the correct reading of nature and I’m certain it makes no sense of human striving and yearning. A closer examination reveals that the problem is not teleology but its appropriation by an alienated system of production and its presentation of theological assumptions and teleological categories as a secular myth of progress. There is no purpose at work here, only systemic imperatives, there is no end point here, only the endless accumulative dynamic of capital, and there is no progress, only more of the same in greater quantities on a planet of finite resources. Whatever else the capital system is, it has nothing to do with the realisation of potentials, with the unfolding of natural essences and with the fulfilment of human social nature.

The problem is not teleology but mechanicism and atomism. This comes out clearly when comparing contractarian political thought to the ancient conception of politics as creative human self-realisation. Plato’s discussion with
Adeimantus in Book 2 of the Republic, concerning the ‘first principles of social organisation’ (Plato, Republic 369b-371e). makes it clear that the ancients considered co-operation among individuals as social beings to be the basis of the state, ensuring a more efficient and abundant supply of physical goods, ‘the provision of food ... shelter ... clothing of various kinds’. ‘Quantity and quality are therefore more easily produced when a man specializes appropriately on a single job for which he is naturally fitted, and neglects all others.’

That's certainly true.’

'We shall need more than four citizens, then, Adeimantus, to supply the needs we mentioned. For the farmer, it seems, will not make his own plough or hoe, or any of his other agricultural implements, if they are to be well made. The same is true of the builder and the many tools he needs, and of the weaver and shoemaker.' (Plato 1987:61/2).

And so on and so forth, as Plato proceeds to build the state out of the human need for cooperation. This is part of the realisation of the human essence.

Aristotle took the discussion beyond such humdrum and utilitarian justification to present the case for human association in terms of the good life. Aristotle therefore made the telos of human association central to his practical philosophy. For Aristotle, 'a state's purpose is not merely to provide a living but to make a life that is good'. The state provides something more than 'a military pact of protection against injustice' in a society concerned with the 'exchange of goods'. The state is not morally neutral but is directly concerned with 'the virtue and vice of the citizens'. Without the conception of the good 'the association is a mere military alliance .. and law .. a mere agreement', 'a mutual guarantor of justice' which is 'unable to make citizens good and just' (P Ill.ix 1981:196).

For Aristotle, the telos of human association (or the state) is to make citizens good and just. Human beings are zoon politikons, social beings, requiring a politikon bion or public life to realise their potentialities. The state is the larger community of the smaller communities, all formed with a view of the good in mind. Human association, from the lowest level upwards, is about the higher provision of 'the good life' in order to realise the potentialities inherent in the essence of man. (Politics 1252b29).
The great achievement of Hegel and Marx is to have located this unfolding of the *telos* of human association within the historical process as the realisation of inherent potentiality of human beings as social and rational beings. There is, in other words, a *telos* of human history, in that history is the unfolding of human purpose.
18 HEGEL AND THE **TELOS OF HISTORY**

As against the dominant categories of mechanicism and atomism, Hegel's dialectical philosophy is firmly based upon Aristotelian categories of essentialism and organismism. Hegel's great achievement is to have developed essentialist categories into dialectical form. Marx praised the advance that Hegel made here: 'It is a great step forward to have seen that the political state is an organism and that, therefore, its various powers are no longer to be seen as organic but as the product of living, rational divisions of functions.' (Marx EW CHDS 1975:67). The various aspects of the constitution, the various state powers are related organically and rationally to each other. This, Marx writes, is a tautology. It may be. But it is an essentialist conception in which the parts are understood in relation to each other and in relation to the whole. In other words, although Marx's point here is specific, his argument implies a general significance.

Hegel's philosophy is infused by essentialist Aristotelian categories from first to last, although he applies them to history and to society to a greater extent than did Aristotle. Indeed, there is a strong case for arguing that Marx's own Aristotelianism came more from his reading than from Aristotle.

Hegel advances a number of Aristotelian and essentialist theses.

1) Hegel affirmed that law and order rather than *chance* is the basis of phenomena. Hegel criticises Epicurus 'who ascribed all events to chance'. (Hegel 1953: 14). And whilst Anaxagoras thought the world to be lawlike, in Hegel's view 'he did not apply the universal to the concrete. (Hegel 1953: 13/4) Hegel praises Socrates for taking the first step of comprehending the union of the concrete and the universal'. (Hegel 1953: 15).

2) Hegel conceives the form of law in terms of the realisation of potentialities in a whole organism which possesses an essence in which those potentialities inhere. 'A principle, a law is something *implicit*, which ... is not completely real (actual) ... not yet in reality ... a possibility.' (Hegel 1953: 27).
3) The phenomena of history arise from a whole which possesses an essence which has an end or telos and undergoes transformation of form. The essence of history is 'that freedom of spirit (which) is the very essence of man's nature', (Hegel 1953: 24) and the telos of world history is 'the actualisation of this freedom' which Hegel identified as 'the final purpose of the world'. (Hegel 1953: 15). Hegel conceives history as 'the union of freedom and necessity. We consider the inner development of the Spirit ... as necessary, while we refer to freedom the interests contained in men's conscious volitions. (Hegel 1953: 31). Necessity is immanent in the line of development in which a nature attains fulfilment or completion by realising its potential. We may call that freedom or flourishing.

The realisation of essential potentialities within the whole organism brings about the union of the concrete and the universal, necessity and freedom. This is the resolution of the dialectic of immanence and transcendence. It is this that allows us to ground progress in realities rather than fantasies, natural purposes rather than technical powers.

World history passes through stages and each stage has its own 'principle' or law. A higher level of human consciousness of freedom is attained at each of these teleological stages. (Hegel 1953: 70). Hegel is frequently accused of having proposed a Reason operating behind the backs of individuals in history. Hegel certainly argues that individual actions can produce consequences they had not intended but which move history on further, which is a very different notion. In historian E.P. Thompson’s apposite phrase, that refers to history as an unmastered practice. That is the very thing that Hegel, and Marx after him, is trying to overcome. Hegel offers a way of achieving the mastery of historical practice. And this highlights the creative role of conscious human agency. For Hegel, for the potentiality of an essence to become actual, 'a second element must be added ... namely activity, actualisation', and this is human will, passion and interest. Hegel thus argues that 'the main efficient causation' behind the movement of history are 'the actions of men (which) spring from their needs, their passions, their interests ...'. (Hegel 1953: 26). Hegel therefore values creative human agency in the historical process. There is no purpose here which is detached from human beings and their actions, interests, wills, passions etc.
There is no distance at all from here to Marx's view that human beings are able to adapt society to themselves in order to realise inherent human potentials, rather than adapting to society (or to unmediated nature and its imperatives). This social self-mediation overcomes the split between transcendence in the sense of a Megamachine detached from Nature, and immanence in the sense of a purely physical Nature. Aristotle's *Politikon Bion*, Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, Marx's truly human society entail human beings as social, moral and rational beings consciously determining their ends over against the requirements and imperatives of some wider entity, whether this is Nature or a social metabolic order of alien control which frustrates the human essence, even though it is a human creation. The end of an essentialist metaphysics is a social order which corresponds to rather than contradicts the human ontology, and such an order is the truly human society achieved by the realisation of the social essence of human beings.

The necessary line of development entailed by essentialism is not direct and unmediated, but mediated by human praxis and therefore frustratable.

Hegel distinguishes between natural and historical change in terms of the different manner in which organic categories apply in human society and in organic nature. 'Change in nature, no matter how infinitely varied it is, shows only a constant cycle of repetition. In nature nothing new happens ... one and the same permanent character continuously reappears, and all change reverts to it.' (Hegel 1953: 68). Again, Hegel's teleological conception values creative human agency. Human will, thought, activity etc has a creative role in the realisation of immanent purposes. 'Only the changes in the realm of Spirit create the novel. This characteristic suggests to man a feature entirely different from that of nature - the desire towards *perfectibility*. This principle, which brings change itself under laws, has been badly received ... by states which desire as their true right to be static or at least stable. (Hegel 1953: 68). There is no distance at all from here to Marx's view that human beings are able to adapt society to themselves in order to realise inherent human potentials, rather than adapting to society (or nature) and to the requirements and imperatives of some wider entity, whether this is Nature or a social metabolic order which frustrates the human essence, even though it is a human creation. Marx is seeking a social order which corresponds to rather than contradicts the human ontology, and such an order is the truly human society achieved by the realisation of the social essence of human beings.
The historical development of human beings is a much more complex process than the development of organic natural entities. An essentialist metaphysics does not argue by way of biological analogy and is much more sophisticated than a socio-biology. An essentialist metaphysics recognises that whilst lines of development may be necessary for the realisation of potentials, they may be frustrated. The process of historical development is internally more complex than natural development, with the interplay of component forces capable of advancing, slowing or frustrating development in various ways. This reveals the dialectical aspect of the whole process. The line of necessity is not direct and unmediated, but mediated and frustratable. Once more, the creative role of human agency is emphasised by Hegel: 'The transition of its potentiality into actuality is mediated through consciousness and will.' (Hegel 1953: 69). The subjective factor is, therefore, the crucial difference between the natural and historical process of development. This point is worth emphasising given the tendency to write off teleology as a mode of thinking which sees purpose and direction operating independently of human agency. Not in Aristotle, not in Hegel, not in Marx. This accusation applies most of all to the false teleology of the capital system, whose imperatives are not purposes at all, only the determinist logic of alien powers. Here, vast processes of employment, investment and production operate independently of individuals, with the promise of salvation being made in terms of economic growth. But this is neither the Judaeo-Christian eschatology nor essentialist teleology, merely what the capitalist world offers in the absence of either - the secular myth of progress, theological and teleological assumptions detached from purposes and attached to functions and imperatives. It's a world of false gods and false idols, false fixities and determinisms, false promises. It's a world organised around capital's endless process of accumulation.

The criticism also applies to those who see development purely in terms of biological nature. Again, that does not apply to the essentialism in the tradition of Aristotle, only to those who would collapse humanity back into natural cycles and physical causality. Essentialism is not a socio-biology or Social Darwinism, it emphasises the creative moral agency and praxis of human beings.
Hegel shows how immanence and transcendence relate in an essentialist metaphysics. A nature is not *preserved* through history, it is *developed* through successive forms. 'If we consider the genus as the substantial in this transformation, then the death of the individual is a falling back of the genus into individuality. The preservation of the genus is then nothing but the monotonous repetition of the same kind of existence.' (Hegel 1953: 93).

With respect to historical development, the situation is much more complex:

a moral whole [by which Hegel means the state as an organism] as such, is limited. It must have above it a higher universality which makes it disunited in itself. The transition from one spiritual pattern to the next is just this, that the former moral whole, in itself a universal, through being thought (in terms of the higher universal), is abolished as a particular [that is, raised into the universal]. The latter universal, so to speak, the next higher genus of the preceding species, is potentially but not yet actually in the preceding one. This makes all existing reality unstable and disunited.

Hegel 1953: 38

This makes all existing reality a field of inherent potentiality in the process of becoming actuality. In being elevated into the universal, a species transcends its former state. The instability here is the contradiction between the 'is' and the 'ought-to-be', between what exists as potential and what it is in the process of becoming. The 'is' of existing reality is the 'ought-to-be' in the process of becoming, the potential in the process of becoming actual. The 'is' contains potential for the complete state which defines what a thing is. Hegel describes this potential as 'the opposite' of the actual, meaning that what exists contains both itself and its opposite (as potential). Hegel therefore proposes a dialectical process which unfolds through contradiction and the resolution of contradiction. Hegel does not propose some passive evolution which proceeds through a gradual unfolding of essences. Rather, the opposite, the potential, is the 'germ', 'impulse' or 'urge' within the existing world which generates change towards completion through the realisation of potential. 'Possibility points towards something which shall become real; more precisely, the Aristotelian *dynamis* is also *potentia*, force and power.' (Hegel 1953: 71). 'The
Imperfect, as involving its opposite, is a contradiction, which certainly exists, but which is continually annulled and solved.' (Hegel 1953: 59).

I shall shortly come to the way that Marx critically appropriated the organic dialectics developed by Hegel develops and employed them to expose the contradictory dynamics of the capital system. For the moment it is sufficient to note that the relation between Aristotle, Hegel and Marx in terms of an essentialist metaphysics is clear. The main difference lies in the understanding of the character and relation of natural and historical change. Further, there is a greater emphasis upon contradiction in Hegel and Marx, change as a dialectical process through history. What in Aristotle is the telos of human association becomes in Hegel and Marx the telos of the historical process, human beings acting to realise their social and rational natures. This is what Marx calls the ‘truly human society’.

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19 MARX’S ESSENTIALIST METAPHYSICS

I want now to examine the role of immanence and transcendence in Karl Marx. Marx is interesting in the way that his essentialism draws on the Aristotelian tradition of potential becoming actual and his dialectic is based on the Hegelian sense of locating the ideal within the realm of the real. I also want to return to the question of idolatry as adumbrated earlier. Marx’s critique of alienation makes him very interesting on this question. Alienation is a condition in which the human creators come to be dominated by their own creations – money, capital, commodities, the state, bureaucracy etc. Human beings come to be reduced to the status of determined things as things come to acquire an existential significance. The obvious solution is to put subject and object back in their right places. Marx sought to recover, both conceptually and practically, the constitutive role of human subjectivity from behind the alienated structures and relations which constrain human beings in an external and deterministic sense. Through this alienation, human powers come to confront the human subjects as external, objective 'things' with an independent life of their own.

In seeking 'the laws of motion of modern society', Marx employed conceptions of law, form and necessity which derive from an essentialist metaphysics of Aristotelian origin and which are and quite opposed to empiricist and atomist perspectives. Marx therefore endorsed the view of an early reviewer of volume one of Capital who wrote that he [Marx] sought 'the law of the phenomena ... of their development, i.e. of their transition from one form into another ... the necessity of successive determinate orders of social conditions' (Afterword to the Second German Edn., Cap. I).

Without an understanding of an essentialist metaphysics, it is well-nigh impossible to make sense of Marx’s arguments. This certainly applies with respect to what Marx meant by abolition, Aufhebung as overcoming, transcendence, preservation and realization at the same time. Essentialism provides the key to the
understanding of Marx’s meaning, how Marx can be both an immanentist and a transcendentalist at the same time.

In Marx’s Theory of Ideology, Bhikhu Parekh writes:

On the basis of the already developed and developing human needs and capacities, as well as the prevailing level of technological development, Marx formulates a vision of the historically immanent society, and uses it as a standard with which to criticise the prevailing social order.

Parekh 1982: 178

A ‘vision’ of the historically immanent society is an ideal which is located within the real lines of development of a prevailing social order but which points beyond that social order, that is, transcends it. By referring to these essential lines of development, Marx exposes the evils of the prevailing society, ‘and demonstrates that these can be eliminated in a differently structured society which is both possible and necessary.’ The key word is necessary. That concept of necessity derives from Marx’s essentialist metaphysics. This concept is more than a weak or vague possibilism or a strong inevitabilism but points to necessary lines of development in the process of the realisation of an essence.

Parekh’s words not only highlight Marx’s immanentism, but also his transcendentalism.

In other words he confronts the capitalist society with an image of its own possibilities. His criticisms of it are not abstract but historically grounded, not superficial but radical, not dogmatic but based on a realistic assessment of its potentialities, not sentimental and moralistic but based on the actual needs of men, and not external but based on what is historically both possible and necessary.
Parekh 1982: 178

Parekh is correct to argue that Marx sought the realisation of the historically maturing possibilities immanent within existing lines of development. But Parekh’s words need to be re-written in terms of an essentialist metaphysics. Marx is referring to something much more than possibilities. Communism is more than just one possibility amongst many others, it is the necessary society if existing lines of essential development are to be realised. Reference to potentialities in the process of becoming actualities makes sense of communism as the historically necessary, but not inevitable, society. Lines of development can be frustrated. There is a role for creative human agency, and hence for politics and morality, in the realisation of these immanent potentialities. And that is the role of formulating an ‘image’ or an ideal of the potential future society.

Marx’s emancipatory project is based on the realistic grasp of historically emerging potentialities yielded by categories of essence, form, law and necessity. I would argue that these categories lie at the heart of any serious theory, hence my attempt to link them to the rejection of determinism and reductionism in biology.

Resolving the issues of immanence and transcendence requires that these essentialist categories be placed on a firm foundation. Essentialism and the categories of essence, law, form and necessity are bound up inextricably with dialectics. These categories are central to Marx’s conception of the real nature of the historical process, showing how necessary lines of development will lead (unless frustrated) to the full realisation of human society and thereby to the full realisation of the social nature of humankind.

The dialectics of Aufhebung thus entail an expanding field of human capacity to understand and experience the world as infused with human subjectivity and conscious purpose, as against an alienated condition in which the world confronts human beings as
an objective and external datum. This process will issue ultimately in the truly human society.

Marx’s metaphysics of essentialism derive from Aristotle via Hegel. This gives Marx’s arguments a peculiar flavour. The dominant methodology since the scientific and industrial revolutions has been empiricism, atomism and reductionism, the breaking up of entities into dissociated discrete parts. Where Marx believes in essences and necessary lines of development, the dominant methodology sees single events and accidents.

I would argue that essentialist and organicist categories are crucial to the resolution of the problem of immanence and transcendence, and are the source of revealing the way to a happy and fulfilled life.

Marx offers a way of transcending the status quo by way of realising its potentials to the full. That is, Marx’s view is firmly founded on the ‘necessary essence of things’ and how their completion points beyond the existing order. Marx conceives societies as whole organisms and employs the categories of an essentialist metaphysics to examine and understand the changes they undergo - essence and form; form and matter (or content); necessary and accidental change; potential and its realisation; law; adequate form, finished form, etc.

This essentialist metaphysics is clear in the centrality Marx accorded to the value-form in *Capital*. Marx proceeds from ‘the elementary form of value’ through the money form, the commodity form, and so on, revealing the necessary developments of the value form as it comes to be universalised over society as a whole in its final form, capital. These developments are *necessary*, in that they realise potentials immanent within the value-form. They are not inevitable, since necessary lines of development can be frustrated by accident.

Marx's emancipatory project is based on the realistic grasp of historically emerging potentialities yielded by categories of essence, form, law and necessity. I would argue that these categories lie at the heart of any serious theory, hence my attempt to link them to the rejection of determinism and reductionism in favour of self-organisation and homeodynamics in biology.
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Resolving the issues of immanence and transcendence requires that these essentialist categories be placed on a firm foundation. Essentialism and the categories of essence, law, form and necessity are bound up inextricably with dialectics. These categories are central to Marx’s conception of the real nature of the historical process, showing how necessary lines of development will lead (unless frustrated) to the full realisation of human society and thereby to the full realisation of the social nature of humankind.

The organic dialectics of *Aufhebung* – abolition as a positive transcendence and realisation - thus entail an expanding field of human capacity to understand and experience the world as infused with human subjectivity and conscious purpose, as against an alienated condition in which the world confronts human beings as an objective and external datum. This process will issue ultimately in the truly human society.

It’s not just that teleology is central to Marx’s thought, as it was to Aristotle’s philosophy, it’s the form of teleology employed that is important. There is an implicit and bad teleology at work in the secular myth of progress that dominates the modern world. Marx’s teleology concerns the unfolding and flourishing of natural essences. The modern teleology of progress operates according to a supra-human, supra-natural – in Marx’s sense of alien – force – capital, technology, industry, what Nietzsche referred to as the ‘new idols’ of modernity.

The practical reappropriation of these alienated human powers and their reorganisation as social powers realises ‘human emancipation’. (Marx OJQ EW 1975: 234). Marx defines communism as the ‘regaining of self’ (*Selbstgewinnung*) and ‘the reintegration or return of man to himself, transcendence of human self-alienation’ (MEGA III 113/4 in Tucker 1964:151). Everything that Marx writes with respect to communism belongs to this essentialist conception of nature and human nature. Marx therefore saw the emergence of the generic human self in a new stage of history.
Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* is not so much a rejection of Hegel as an attempt to make his essentialist philosophical structure live up to its potential. Marx is concerned to check the tendency for Reason to become detached from real natures and thus determines to rest essentialist categories on the most fundamental ontological level of human social being. Time and again, Marx accuses Hegel of inverting the true relations between things, not of falsehood. Marx makes constant references to ‘real relationship’, ‘real mediation’, ‘real subjects’. His teleology is firmly grounded in the concrete reality of real individuals.

For Marx, individuals, the family and civil society are ‘real parts of the state, real spiritual manifestations of will’, the ‘state’s forms of existence’ and the ‘driving force’ of the state. However, Marx accuses, Hegel makes them the products of the real Idea: ‘it is not the course of their own life that joins them together to comprise the state, but the life of the Idea which has distinguished them from itself.’ (Marx CHDS EW 1975: 69). Whether or not Marx’s criticism of Hegel is correct is not the issue. (My view is that Marx has written hastily and has missed the extent to which he is in agreement with Hegel. It is interesting that Marx has been accused of the very things that he accuses Hegel of, of making some overarching Reason independent of real individuals.) More important is to establish the extent to which Marx shares Hegel’s essentialist metaphysics. Marx accuses Hegel of inverting true relations: ‘If Hegel had begun by positing real subjects as the basis of the state he would not have found it necessary to subjectivize the state in a mystical way.’ (Marx EW CHDS 1975: 78). Marx posits ‘real subjects’ as the basis of political and social reality so that he has no need to subjectivize human creations such as the state or capital ‘in a mystical way.’ (Marx EW CHDS 1975: 78). The solution to a false teleology is clear – put subject and object the right way round and posit real subjects as the basis of all social forms. For Marx, all human history is human social individuals and the forms that they engender.

Proceeding from the fundamental ontology of ‘real human existence’, Marx criticises the modern inversion which ‘does not proceed from the real person to the state, but from the state to the real person.’ This results in the subjective coming to be converted into the objective and the objective into the subjective with the inevitable result that an empirical person is uncritically enthroned as the real truth of the Idea.'
The implication is that a true account establishes the right relation between subject and object and thus proceeds from the real person to the state and all other social forms.

It is also worth noting how the inversion of subject and object through the alienation of social power to the state and capital results in a situation in which ‘an empirical person is uncritically enthroned as the real truth of the Idea’. Whilst Marx’s criticism here refers to a specific aspect in Hegel’s political philosophy, the point is capable of generalisation. As an alienated system of production, capitalism is characterised by the inversion of subject and object. Human beings are ‘thingified’, made appendages of objects as their creations come to acquire existential significance. In this condition, human ends come to be displaced by means whilst the extension of an instrumental rationality disenchant or removes purpose from the world. But we do not lose teleology or theology. Instead, someone or, more likely, something comes to be ‘uncritically enthroned’ as the real purpose of history. And that is precisely what I mean about the problem of capitalist modernity being not a genuine teleology at all but a substitute or fake teleology which rationalise the imperatives involved in the secular myth of progress.

The solution to this bogus teleology is to put subject and object in their true relation, with the human creators coming to take conscious moral and collective responsibility for their creations. For Marx, the social forms created by human praxis should be brought under the conscious common control of the associated individuals, as part of the process leading to the truly human society.

For this reason, Marx can retain the powerful philosophical essentialism developed by Hegel, employing it to examine the human social organism, the nature of both whole and parts, their relation and movement.

According to Marx, in Hegel ‘what should be a starting point becomes a mystical result and what should be a rational result becomes mystical starting point’. For Marx, the true starting point of social and historical analysis are real individuals as the concrete universal: ‘the real essence of the finite real, i.e. of what exists and is determined’ and ‘real existent things as the true subject of the infinite.’ (Marx EW CHDS 1975: 81). For Marx, real individuals are the ‘real state’. ‘The state is an abstraction. Only the people is a concrete reality.’ (Marx CHDS EW 1975: 86). Marx writes of the inversion of true reality which comes from ascribing ‘living qualities to the abstraction’ (Marx CHDS EW 1975: 86).
Marx endorses Hegel's organicism and repudiates mechanistic materialism for its neglect of the active side of human subjectivity (*Theses on Feuerbach*). Against Hegel, Marx seeks to develop a *materialist* organicism on the basis of the 'various powers' of a thing being determined and explained by their underlying essence. Those powers develop so as to express or manifest that essence, that is, the necessary line of development is located within an actually existing essence rather than, as with Hegel (in Marx’s view), being derived from the 'nature of the concept', or from 'the universal relationship of freedom and necessity'. (Marx EW CHDS 1975: 75 65).

Marx affirms that the concrete reality behind the state, the executive power, the monarch, the bureaucracy, etc., is the existence of people. The significant point, in Marx's view, is that: 'In democracy no moment acquires a meaning other than what is proper to it. Each is only a moment of the *demos* as a whole ... democracy is the essence of all political constitutions, *socialised man* as a particular constitution.' ‘In democracy, man does not exist for the sake of the law, but the law exists for the sake of man, it is *human existence*, whereas in other political systems man is a *legal existence*. This is the fundamental distinguishing feature of democracy.’ (Marx EW CHDS 1975: 87 89).

But this is democracy considered not as a radical political movement, but as the realisation of a social essence, a genuine universality. To understand this we need to understand the term *Aufhebung*, which Marx uses when writing of the abolition of alienation. *Aufhebung* means abolition as a positive transcendence, something which preserves and realises through the completion of an immanent potential. Marx's *Aufhebung* is a philosophical term with clear dialectical connotations when it comes to the relation between immanence and transcendence. In his various 1843 essays, Marx refers to the *Aufhebung des Staates*. Marx conceives the state to be caught between the ideal of universality, transcending the particularistic interests of civil society, and the reality of having to serve these interests themselves.

For Marx, the universality which human beings as social beings require is frustrated in atomistic civil society through the institution of private property; the result
is that this universality comes to be projected upwards to the alien state. Universality thus exists in the state as an ideal realm.

The perfected political state is by its nature the *species-life* of man in *opposition* to his material life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist *outside* the sphere of the state in *civil* society, but as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained its full degree of development man leads a double life, a life in heaven and a life on earth, not only in his mind, in his consciousness, but in *reality*. He lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in *civil society*, where he is active as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers. The relationship of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relationship of heaven to earth. The state stands in the same opposition to civil society and overcomes it in the same way as religion overcomes the restrictions of the profane world, i.e. it has to acknowledge it again, reinstate it and allow itself to be dominated by it. Man in his *immediate* reality, in civil society, is a profane being. Here, where he regards himself and is regarded by others as a real individual, he is an illusory phenomenon. In the state, on the other hand, where he is considered to be a *species-being*, he is the imaginary member of a fictitious sovereignty, he is divested of his real individual life and filled with an unreal universality.

Marx EW OJQ 1975:221

For Marx, universal suffrage is not just the realization of a radical democratic political vision but the *Aufhebung* of the state which realises a true universality. For Marx, the suffrage is the extension and the greatest possible *universalization* of the *vote*, i.e. of both *active* and *passive* suffrage. (Marx EW CHDS 1975: 191). And this democratisation as universalisation would amount to ‘the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the state and of civil society.’ The important point to grasp is that the *Aufhebung* of the state requires that the political structure comes to realise all of its potentialities. In other words, *Aufhebung* is abolition in the sense of being transcended, realised and preserved. The realisation of the ideal universality of the state is only possible through the abolition of the state. In becoming identical with its universal content, the form of the
state, always partial, ceases to be mere form, and universalisation becomes a
democratisation with respect to concrete reality.

_Aufhebung_ is a dialectical process of transcendence, a social _praxis_ which
creates a new reality, resolving an ideal universality into a true universality.

Only when civil society has achieved unrestricted active and passive suffrage
has it really raised itself to the point of abstraction from itself, to the political
existence which constitutes its true, universal, essential existence. But the
perfection of this abstraction is also its transcendence [ _Aufhebung_ = abolition].
By really establishing its political existence as its authentic existence, civil
society ensures that its civil existence, in so far as it is distinct from its political
existence, is inessential. And with the demise of the one, the other, its opposite
collapses also. Therefore, electoral reform in the abstract political state is the
equivalent to a demand for its dissolution and this in turn implies the dissolution
of civil society.

Marx CHDS EW 1975:191

Marx’s reasoning here follows Feuerbach, according to whom Christianity is self-
destroying in that its historical appearance abolished the need for religion. To
paraphrase Jesus Christ, the fulfilment of the law would amount to its abolition. This is
how _Aufhebung_ functions in Marx. Democracy as an active and universal suffrage
amounts to the abolition (_Aufhebung_) of the political constitution, i.e. the realisation
and transcendence of the state.

‘Democracy is both form and content. Monarchy is _supposed_ to be only a form, but it
falsifies the content.’ (Marx EW CHDS 1975).

In democracy the _constitution itself_ appears only as _one_ determining
characteristic of the people, and indeed as its self-determination. In monarchy
we have the people of the constitution, in democracy the constitution of the
people. Democracy is the solution to the riddle of every constitution. In it we find the constitution founded on its true ground: real human beings and the real people; not merely implicitly and in essence, but in existence and in reality. The constitution is thus posited as the people's own creation. The constitution is in appearance what it is in reality: the free creation of man.

Marx EW CHDS 1975: 88/9

So Marx is resolving power on its true ground of real individuals, affirming the political constitution as the ‘free creation of man’, ‘the people’s own creation’.

In democracy, man does not exist for the sake of the law, but the law exists for the sake of man, it is human existence, whereas in other political systems man is a legal existence. This is the fundamental distinguishing feature of democracy.’(Marx EW CHDS 1975:88/9).

‘For the sake of’ denotes purpose, telos, related to the realisation of essential potentiality. We can only understand Marx’s reasoning here if we grasp the Hegelian meaning of the term Aufhebung as abolition, transcendence and preservation simultaneously. Both the state and (atomistic) civil society are abolished and transcended in such a way that their contents are preserved at a higher level – a genuine universality. The Aufhebung of the state means that once its universal nature comes to be fulfilled, the state becomes superfluous as a separate organization embodying only an unreal universality. Thus, Marx's demand for universal suffrage is not based upon radical democratic traditions and politics but is a dialectical tool designed to bring about the simultaneous abolition of the state and civil society, bringing both of them to their apex and transcendence. The granting of universal suffrage will be its last act of the state as a state. For Marx, democracy is the realisation of the universal postulate of the state so as to abolish the institution of the state.

These remarks also apply to what Marx writes with respect to private property. In opposing the "rule of man" to the "rule of property", Marx is demanding that a
repoliticization overcomes a condition of depoliticization so that "universally human emancipation" entails (Marx OJQ EW 1975: 216).

*Political* emancipation from religion is not complete and consistent emancipation from religion, because political emancipation is not the complete and consistent form of *human* emancipation.

Marx EW OJQ 1975: 217/8

Complete and consistent human emancipation requires the extension of democratization as a universalisation to social relations, and not the projection of a universality denied in real civil society upwards and outwards to the abstract level of the state. The transcendence that Marx has in mind is the positive transcendence/abolition of the state and private property through the practical reappropriation of alienated human powers and potentialities. Only *Aufhebung* in the dialectical sense of abolition, transcendence and preservation at a higher, i.e. more universal, level will realise in a humanity no longer split between the general and the particular. With the humanisation of the world, both cognitively and practically, humanity comes to realise itself fully.

This dialectical conception of *Aufhebung* runs throughout Marx’s writing, so that communism is the positive transcendence of capitalism, entailing the realization of those potentialities which are immanent within but frustrated by the social relations of the capital system. It is in this sense that Marx refers to share capital and the joint stock principle as ‘the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-dissolving contradiction, which *prima facie* represent a mere phase of transition to a new form of production.’ (Marx C3 1981 ch 27 pp569/70)

*Aufhebung* is the abolition of an alienated form through the realisation of content. The unity of form and content amounts to the restoration of human powers to human control. The human creators regain conscious and common control of their free
creation. The truly human society is based upon the free creative self-realisation of human power.

The *telos* of history doesn’t belong to some supra-natural entity at work in the historical process, but to the purposes of real individuals. Concrete reality remained Marx’s starting point throughout the rest of his work. For Marx, human history is about real individuals and the forms they engender. The character of the *telos* of history as Marx employs it is apparent in what Marx writes of Hegel. Marx emphasises that ‘the importance of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* ... lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object [*Entgegenstandlichkeit*], as alienation and as supersession of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of *labour* and conceives objective man - true, because real man - as the result of his own labour. The real, active relation of man to himself as a species-being, or the realization of himself as a real species-being, i.e. as a human being, is only possible if he really employs all his species-powers - which again is only possible through the cooperation of mankind and as a result of history - and treats them as objects, which is at first only possible in the form of estrangement. (Marx EW EPM 1975: 386/7).

For human beings to realise their social natures in the truly human society, the supersession or positive transcendence of alienation is required. But – and this is the crucial point – real individuals and concrete reality form the basis of Marx’s essentialist metaphysics. ‘The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.’ (*The German Ideology* 1999: 42). Marx’s teleology is connected to the purpose immanent within human beings and their social praxis.

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical
organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, orohydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.

Marx GI 1999: 42

That passage merits being quoted at length because it cuts through the easy accusations that teleology as such entails some supra-natural or supra-individual force whose abstract purpose unfolds inexorably over the heads of human agents. That’s a caricature of teleology. And it’s not the issue with respect to the secular mythology at work within capitalist modernity. The forces operating independently of conscious, acting, choosing human beings are not God or Reason or any kind of telos properly understood, but the alien power of capital. With alienation, we enter the world of unintended consequences, false fixities and systemic imperatives and all manner of societal and biological determinisms. It is not purpose that is the problem but functional necessity and determinism in their many forms, but most of in the basic form of capital accumulation. ‘Globalisation’, ‘there is no alternative’, ‘economic growth’, ‘it’s the economy, stupid’, ‘investment’, ‘jobs’ etc. etc., these are only the terms by which the mouthpieces of capital employ as they proselytise for the flock. And on top of these are the various neurodeterminisms and genetic determinisms being proposed by natural scientists who see nature as a purely physical realm.

In the above passage from The German Ideology, Marx makes it clear that his organic dialectic proceeds from real premises – individuals in their real relations within an empirically verifiable process of development under definite conditions. It is mediation between associated individuals in society, nature and the social organism which counts, not some purpose detached from this mediation and identified with an entity apart from human praxis.
The reference to 'socialised man' in the Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State points to the idea of fundamental essence in human history as forming the basis of Marx's ontology. Marx develops this idea further with respect to the class of 'concrete labour'. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx writes of the concrete universal of human labour, which manifests itself through a series of social forms in history, organic social wholes defined according to the specific way in which social labour is supplied. Each social metabolic order has its own specific laws or realisable potentials which, in coming to be, move history on until, finally, the essence is realised to its fullest potential to bring about a realised society of realised human beings.

For Marx, the fundamental entities that compose society are essences manifested in different ways within specific social relations. On this essentialist basis, Marx identifies a line of historical development as a broad threefold demarcation of pre-capitalist formations - 'primitive communism', 'clan society', feudalism – capitalism and class division; then socialism or classless society on a high technological level (Kiernan 1983:61; Gould 1978:145). This also appears or as 'tribalism - slavery - feudalism - capitalism - communism' (Gandy 1979:5). Individuals become fully human and fully social beings through coming to realise human potentialities in the course of historical development. These schema pertain to three basic forms of social relations: community based upon personal dependence; individuality and external sociality resting upon personal independence based upon objective dependence; communal individuality based upon free social individuality (Gould 1978:4/5).

In the Grundrisse Marx outlined three stages of human development by reference to the social forms through which human productivity is developed. These are the three social metabolic orders in history.

Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on objective dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all round needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time.
Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third.

*Marx Grundrisse 1973:158*

The social relations appropriate to these three stages may be defined as community, replaced by individuality with external sociality, giving way to communal individuality (Gould 1978:4-5). Marx refers to the third stage in terms of ‘free individuality’. The guiding principle of development through these stages is toward the ‘universal development of individuals and the ‘subordination of communal, social productivity as social wealth’ (Marx 1973:158).

Stated in broad outline, Marx appears to be indulging in a bad teleology that induces scepticism these days, as though history is propelled forwards by some supra-human Providence or supra-individual Reason. That is precisely what Marx is seeking to avoid by references to social forms and metabolic orders within historically emerging social relations. It is impossible to make true sense of Marx’s argument without an understanding of his essentialist metaphysics. In light of this essentialism, Marx’s view may be stated thus. The historical development of human society is the development of the value-form, from its coming-to-be to its becoming a general and universal social metabolism to its passing-away and supersession. The history of human society is the history of forms of extraction of surplus labour, from relations of dependence or unfree labour to the indirect supply of social labour through the value-form (wage-labour) to the direct supply of social labour through the freely associated producers. The whole process concerns the realisation of the essence of human beings in society, which is, at the same time, the realisation of the social essence of human beings.

Understanding Marx’s essentialism is key to understanding how Marx resolves the issue between freedom and determinism. There has been a tendency to identify Marx with the very determinism he sought to overcome – the inexorable logic and
imperatives of alien powers. Against this, Marx human freedom in terms of human self-determination through the reappropriation of alienated social powers and their conscious control and exercise on the part of the freely associated producers (Neill 1973:12/3). Indeed, Marx is not merely accenting the social individual of Aristotle, the *zoon politikon* or social being, but the free individual: 'society for the individual under communism changes quite substantially. It is not the social individual that communism allows for the first time, but the transcendence of that individual' (Forbes 1990:xviii).

Marx is therefore doing more than asserting an undifferentiated species essence, the realisation of which brings about a homogeneous communal existence. Marx's essentialism distinguishes between individualism, which contradicts the social nature of human beings, and individuality, which corresponds to that social nature. Whereas pre-capitalist formations are characterised by a unity without differentiation, and capitalism is characterised by a differentiation without unity, communism produces a unity with differentiation. Marx highlights the extent to which a human's individualness is social and is connected to the development of the human essence in history. The human potential to be an individual is connected to the way that social labour is supplied through history. ‘This means that Marx transcends individualism by laying the foundation for an understanding of individuality. Individuality in Marx's thought relates to the extent to which the potential inherent in a person's human nature is realised in becoming a free creative individual in society. This is another way of suggesting that human individuals will ultimately be autonomous with regard, to the material base of society, because it will be in their control' (Forbes 1990:33).

Marx's view is firmly grounded in the view that society has an essence and that the accidents and necessities that comprise the stuff of history are more than discrete events but are to be properly understood only by reference to that essence. Capitalism, as a class society, is *in its essence* a social metabolic order for the extraction of surplus labour from one class by another, which it achieves through the indirect supply of social labour through the value form. Marx articulates his essentialist understanding of human development with perfect clarity in *Capital* III: 'The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers . . . reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure.
Marx defines human freedom in terms of the practical reappropriation of alienated human power and its recognition, reorganisation and exercise as social power.

All emancipation is reduction of the human world and of relationships to man himself.

Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a species-being in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognized and organized his forces propres as social forces so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of political force, only then will human emancipation be completed.

Marx EW OJQ 1975: 234

Human beings are to be in conscious control of their own creations and powers. Marx takes his stand on ‘the people’s own creation’ and ‘the free creation of man’. Human creation and power are at the heart of Marx’s demand for the truly human society.

This becomes interesting when Marx draws the analogy between religious and secular alienation. In one sense alienation is a form of idolatry. The domination of the human subjects by the objects which they themselves have created denotes a condition of alienation. The state, capital, commodities and money become the new idols which dominate human beings.

It follows from this that human beings only realise themselves as human to the extent that they objectify essential, generic powers. Alienation is a dehumanisation and a depersonalisation. The abolition of alienation is not just a rehumanisation and repersonalisation, it is a rehumanisation and repersonalisation at a higher level. How high a level? The complete fulfilment of the human species essence. Marx sees the process as ending in the truly human society of truly human beings.
But since for socialist man the whole of what is called world history is nothing more than the creation of man through human labour, and the development of nature for man, he therefore has palpable and incontrovertible proof of his self-mediated birth, of his process of emergence. Since the essentiality [Wesenhaftigkeit] of man and of nature, man as the existence of nature for man and nature as the existence of man for man, has become practically and sensuously perceptible, the question of an alien being, a being above nature and man - a question which implies an admission of the unreality of nature and of man - has become impossible in practice. Atheism, which is a denial of this unreality, no longer has any meaning, for atheism is a negation of God, through which negation it asserts the existence of man. But socialism as such no longer needs such mediation. Its starting-point is the theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as essential beings. It is the positive self-consciousness of man, no longer mediated through the abolition of religion, just as real life is positive reality no longer mediated through the abolition of private property, through communism. Communism is the act of positing as the negation of the negation, and is therefore a real phase, necessary for the next period of historical development, in the emancipation and recovery of mankind. Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism is not as such the goal of human development - the form of human society.


Note the terms, ‘essentiality’, ‘essential beings’, ‘necessary form’, ‘dynamic principle of the immediate future’. Marx’s argument is set within the framework of an essentialist metaphysics concerning potentiality in the process of becoming actuality, essences in the process of realisation and completion. Such essentialist metaphysics offers the basis for a genuine teleology, restoring meaning to the world. Purpose is connected to the realisation of the human essence, to human growth, not the endless expansion of things and accumulation of quantities. History has a goal, an end point.
Humankind could be developed to such a degree that it constituted a powerful enough historical force for the destruction of social organisations which restricted the full realization of human capacities and abilities.

Forbes 1990:236

This is a liberatory vision, certainly. The full realisation of human capacities and abilities implies a defetishised social order which has transcended the alienation of power. The key is the abolition of an alienated system of production. A condition of alienation entails an inability to comprehend the social forms engendered by human subjects as human products, mistaking them instead for entities with an independent existence of their own. What critics of the delusions of progress identify as teleology is actually the determinism of alienated social powers that have escaped human comprehension and control, and which in their independence come to impose their alien logic upon human subjects from the outside. The solution to this bad teleology is to understand these powers as forms possessing an underlying essence, which comprehensible and controllable by the human agents who are the originary power. And this requires a recovery of essentialist categories and teleological thinking in terms of real individuals, concrete reality, the relation of the part and the whole, notions of necessary and accidental change, the real natures of history's successive organic wholes and social metabolic orders, an understanding of their specific social forms, potential and the realisations of potential in the coming-to-be of the truly human society of truly human beings – true as defined in terms of an essence, and purpose as defined in terms of the realisation of that essence.

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20 THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE IMMANENT CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITAL

There are clear affinities between the organic dialectics which Hegel develops and Marx's concern with the contradictory dynamics of the capital system, what Marx called an 'immanent contradiction' with respect to various aspects of capitalist production (Marx 1976 ch 15 pp 531/3). Chapter 15 of *Capital III* is titled 'Development of the Law's Internal Contradictions'. The contradictory dynamics of the capital system are at the heart of Marx's critique of political economy. In unravelling these immanent contradictions, Marx thus showed how the capital system pointed beyond itself to a new social metabolic order of social control. Hence Marx's emphasis upon the critique of political economy. Marx was exposing the realities behind the value form, the commodity form, the money form etc.

Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product.

Marx CI 1976: 174

The approach that Marx takes and the categories he uses are essentialist to the core. The references to form and content presuppose the existence of a substance that is essentially something and something essentially. Marx is attempting to penetrate beyond surface level appearance to expose the true reality below. Without an essentialist metaphysics, we remain on the terrain of immediacy, suffering the effects of capital's contradictory dynamics, but unable to apprehend them cognitively and practically.
Marx did not offer a political economy of his own, he offered a critical approach designed to bring to consciousness the internal realities at work in the capital economy, showing how capital’s form transcended itself. Of course, this is not a passive or automatic evolution, hence Marx’s emphasis on the subjective factor in history. Capital creates its own grave digger in the form of the proletariat. (Marx MCP Rev1848 1973).

The sense of contradiction, of potential as an opposite which points beyond existing reality, is evident in the following passage from Marx.

But on the other hand, in its capitalist form it reproduces the old division of labour with its ossified particularities. We have seen how this absolute contradiction does away with all repose, all fixity and all security as far as the worker's life-situation is concerned; how it constantly threatens, by taking away the instruments of labour, to snatch from his hands the means of subsistence, and, by suppressing his specialized function, to make him superfluous. We have seen, too, how this contradiction bursts forth without restraint in the ceaseless human sacrifices required from the working class, in the reckless squandering of labour-powers, and in the devastating effects of social anarchy. This is the negative side. But if, at present, variation of labour imposes itself after the manner of an overpowering natural law, and with the blindly destructive action of a natural law that meets with obstacles everywhere, large-scale industry, through its very catastrophes, makes the recognition of variation of labour and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death. This possibility of varying labour must become a general law of social production, and the existing relations must be adapted to permit its realization in practice. That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labour required of him; the partially developed individual, who is merely the bearer of one specialized social function, must be replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn.
Also worth noting is the way that Marx identifies capital as a new god or idol demanding human sacrifice. Marx exposes capitalist development as a fake teleology which operates independently of human agency and purpose, impacting upon human society in the 'manner of an overpowering natural law'. Marx emphasises the extent to which the contradictory dynamics and systemic imperatives of capital have all 'the blindly destructive action of a natural law'. (Marx CI 1976 ch 15 619). To repeat, against critics of teleology, this is not a genuine teleology at all. The problem of capitalist modernity is that the disenchantment of which Weber and Schiller wrote has never been a thoroughgoing secularisation, and maybe never could have been. Whilst nature and labour, which Marx identified as the two sources of wealth, have been profaned or 'dis-godded', (Schiller’s term), divinity as such has not been extirpated and, as a necessary transcendental ideal, never could be. Instead, theological assumptions and teleological categories have been detached from their true objects and re-attached to the alien powers of the capital system. These are the powers which impact in 'overpowering' and 'blindly destructive' fashion, in the manner of a natural law. But it is a bogus teleology in being detached from natural purposes. We need to reinstate these purposes. Human beings are teleological beings who require and seek meaning in life. It is as well as to recognise that fact and abandon the project of dis-godding and instead seek the re-enchantment of the world, in the sense of recovering a genuine sense of purpose.

Marx’s purpose in bringing out the immanent contradictions within the capitalist mode of production is to reveal the potential for further development in the social forms created by human activity. Marx is worth quoting at length here, just to indicate the extent to which he is identifying the content that exists as an innate but repressed potential within capitalist forms. Marx’s essentialist approach is designed to
liberate potential and bring about the realised society of realised human beings.

To express this contradiction in the most general terms, it consists in the fact that the capitalist mode of production tends towards an absolute development of the productive forces irrespective of value and the surplus-value this contains, and even irrespective of the social relations within which capitalist production takes place; while on the other hand its purpose is to maintain the existing capital value and to valorize it to the utmost extent possible (i.e. an ever accelerated increase in this value). In its specific character it is directed towards using the existing capital value as a means for the greatest possible valorization of this value. The methods through which it attains this end involve a decline in the profit rate, the devaluation of the existing capital and the development of the productive forces of labour at the cost of the productive forces already produced.

The periodical devaluation of the existing capital, which is a means, immanent to the capitalist mode of production, for delaying the fall in the profit rate and accelerating the accumulation of capital value by the formation of new capital, disturbs the given conditions in which the circulation and reproduction process of capital takes place, and is therefore accompanied by sudden stoppages and crises in the production process.

The relative decline in the variable capital as against the constant, which goes hand in hand with the development of the productive forces, gives a spur to the growth of the working population, while it continuously creates an artificial surplus population as well. The accumulation of capital, from the point of view of value, is slowed down by the falling rate of profit, which then serves yet again to accelerate the accumulation of use-value, while this in turn accelerates the course of accumulation in terms of value.

Capitalist production constantly strives to overcome these immanent barriers, but it overcomes them only by means that set up the barriers afresh and on a more powerful scale.

The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as the starting and finishing point, as the motive and
The purpose of production; production is production only for capital, and not the reverse, i.e. the means of production are not simply means for a steadily expanding pattern of life for the society of the producers. The barriers within which the maintenance and valorization of the capital-value has necessarily to move - and this in turn depends on the dispossession and impoverishment of the great mass of the producers - therefore come constantly into contradiction with the methods of production that capital must apply to its purpose and which set its course towards an unlimited expansion of production, to production as an end in itself, to an unrestricted development of the social productive powers of labour. The means - the unrestricted development of the forces of social production - comes into persistent conflict with the restricted end, the valorization of the existing capital. If the capitalist mode of production is therefore a historical means for developing the material powers of production and for creating a corresponding world market, it is at the same time the constant contradiction between this historical task and the social relations of production corresponding to it.

Marx C3 1981 ch 15 pp 358/9

The most flagrant contradiction within the capital system is the distinction between social production and private appropriation. Capital is less a work of economics than a book of human self-knowledge and self-understanding. Or, given the highlighting of the social nature of the human essence, Capital is a book of ‘co-understanding’ seeking to aid human beings in the realisation of their true natures in the society of the associated producers.

They are conditioned by a low stage of development of the productive powers of labour and correspondingly limited relations between men within the process of creating and reproducing their material life, hence also limited relations between man and nature. These real limitations are reflected in the ancient worship of nature, and in other elements of tribal religions. The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature,
generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development.

Marx CI 1976: 173

Marx is clear that the form by which social labour is supplied is part of a necessary teleological process in which social labour as such is developed. Marx evaluates the alienation of labour under the capital system as a progressive force in that it represents a development which, through reappropriation, culminates in a form of society which achieves the full realisation of the potentials of the social nature of human beings. 'It is precisely in the fact that the division of labour and exchange are configurations of private property that we find the proof, both that human life needed private property for its realisation and that it now needs the abolition of private property.'

Marx therefore sees historical development as progressing in terms of the unfolding of the telos of the social nature of human beings and, indeed, the human nature of society. The teleology that Marx identifies within the historical process is the realisation of human social nature within the truly human society.

For Marx, the historical process is a teleological process whose premises are real individuals and their social natures of human beings and whose telos the realisation of humanity’s inherent potentials in their fullest and highest form. 'The entire movement of history is therefore the actual act of creation of this communism — the birth of its empirical existence — and, for its thinking consciousness, the comprehended and known movement of its becoming.' (KMEW, 1975: 348).

History is the truly human society of truly human beings in the process of becoming. The essence of historical development is the concrete universal of
human labour, and its different 'principles' are the specific social forms which mediate the supply of social labour at different stages. The end or *telos* of history is the realised society of realised individuals, an end which is necessary if human beings are to realise their inherent potentials fully, but which is also frustratable – if human agency fails to act in accordance with its purposes, if the defenders of civilisation block an ascending class and arrest historical development, then these necessary lines of development can indeed be frustrated, with all manner of damaging and destructive consequences. Crashing economies, bankrupted states, despoiled environments are all possible. Such an eventuality would deprive human beings of the fullest realisation of the potential of human society.

But atheism and communism are no flight, no abstraction, no loss of the objective world created by man or of his essential powers projected into objectivity, no impoverished regression to unnatural, primitive simplicity. They are rather the first real emergence, the realization become real for man, of his essence as something real.

Marx EW EPM 1975: 395/6

I find Marx’s association of atheism and communism here significant. I want later to come to the question of idolatry and the extent to which Marx believed that human beings could become as gods. I want also to examine the extent to which such a notion slides into a kind of teleological thinking that works independently of human purposes, thus violating the real premises I have developed above.

For the moment, I want to emphasise the extent to which the realisation of the truly human society and the realisation of the social essence of human beings is inextricably connected. For Marx, the individual and the social are two aspects of the same essence. Marx therefore is concerned to emphasise that the realisation of the social essence of human individuals and the realisation of the human essence of society are part of the same process.

Again, Marx is at pains to ground his essentialist categories in real human beings, ensuring that any *telos* remains on the ground of concrete reality and
doesn’t become detached in some supra-individual determinism as under the capital system.

It is above all necessary to avoid once more establishing ‘society’ as an abstraction over against the individual. The individual is the social being. His vital expression - even when it does not appear in the direct form of a communal expression, conceived in association with other men - is therefore an expression and confirmation of social life. Man's individual and species-life are not two distinct things, however much - and this is necessarily so - the mode of existence of individual life is a more particular or a more general mode of the species-life, or species-life a more particular or more general individual life.

Marx EW EPM 1975: 350/1

The full realisation of the potentiality of the social essence inherent in the human species is also the full realisation of the potentiality inherent in the essence of human society considered as a social organism. Individuality and sociality are both realised in being the two sides of the same human essence.

Marx’s 'species being' (Gattungswesen) refers to the real essence or nature of the human species, not an ideal human being divorced from biology and history. Marx’s argument proceeds from potentialities which inhere in human beings as species essence. These potentialities can only be realised historically within human society and the specific social forms which human beings develop in order to supply social labour. Man's process of 'realisation of himself as a real species being ... is only possible through the co-operation of mankind and as a result of history'. (KMEW, 386). The important point to establish here is that Marx binds the telos of history firmly to the real essence of human beings as a social species. (And as a rational species. It is worth underlining Marx’s similarity here with Aristotle and, intriguingly, with St Thomas Aquinas).

Marx’s reference to species essence is a core element in Marx’s essentialist metaphysics and is the foundation of his conception of history as a teleological process. The social nature of human society and the human nature
of society are two aspects of the same thing. The Aristotelian conception which Marx develops in his early writings reappears in his later writings. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that 'the human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politikon*, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society - a rare exception which may well occur when a civilized person in whom the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness - is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other.' (Marx *Gr* 1973: 85).

I rather like Marx's bad tempered comment that ‘there is no point in dwelling on this any longer’, calling the individualist argument ‘twaddle’. Marx, it seems, assumes that Aristotle's view is so obviously correct that hardly needs restating. Suffice to say that Marx’s argument is Aristotelian. ‘Man is the rational animal’ said Aristotle. Man is a *zoon politikon*, a social animal, said Aristotle. “He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god”. (Aristotle *Politics*). Marx said all these things. So too did St Thomas Aquinas.

To conclude, the realisation of the social essence of human beings and the human essence of society are integral to each other. There is no *telos* of history apart from real individuals and it is the detachment of historical development from these real premises that had led to all kinds of misunderstanding with regard to teleology and the operation of purpose within history.

The identity between individual and social essence is explicit in Thesis six in the *Theses on Feuerbach*: ‘the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.’ Marx accuses Feuerbach of failing to enter upon a criticism of this real essence, with the result that he is compelled ‘to abstract from the historical process’. I would argue that what is happening within capitalist modernity is that in an alienated system of production the historical process is being abstracted from real individuals, with the result that creative human agents are being made the objects of alien powers invested with existential significance. This seems to be news to those disillusioned with ‘progress’ and its delusions. But Marx has said this from the first. The only problem is that necessary lines of development are frustratable. We have just seen a hundred years war against socialism, with victory going to the defenders
of capitalist civilisation. The result is economic crisis and environmental disaster. No wonder contemporary critics of progress and teleology seem plausible. My point is that they have badly missed the real target and that progress to the truly human society remains not merely possible, but necessary.

Bibliography


21 ALIENATION, HUMANISATION AND IDOLATRY

I want to try to tie this debate concerning teleology and progress up by examining the essentialist argument of Marx for evidence not only of an abstraction of reason from the concrete reality of real individuals, but of idolatry. The delusions of progress are not resolved if, by reappropriating alienated powers, we come to venerate those powers as a form of idolatry. We move from one delusion to another. Marx argued that the human world is human-made and is therefore capable of being known, comprehended and controlled by human beings. I want to know if Marx also believed that men could become as gods as a result.

The argument here proceeds from Vico's *New Science* and the principle *verum ipsum factum*. This states that knowing the truth of something is conditional upon having made it. Vico's argument is that whereas Nature is made by God, and therefore knowable only by God, the human world is a human creation. Vico's central epistemological thesis is the identity of the true with what is made or done, that is, with that which owes its very being to having been made. This is the *verum-factum* concept. The human world is a human creation and is therefore capable of being known by human beings. The state and politics, trade and commerce, war and peace, etc are all the product of creative human agency; the world of nature is the province of God. Creating is an activity and that it thus logically requires a creator. Human agency is the creator, the human world is the creation. How do the human creators relate to their creation? Does the Creation in some way reflect a divine power and glory upon the human creators?

Marx writes of human beings becoming the sovereign of circumstances. He justifies the English rule in India in terms of progress from a condition characterised by nature worship and domination by external circumstances to a condition in which human beings are in conscious control of these circumstances.

We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external
circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never-changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow.

Marx AIC SE 1973: 307

Marx explicitly repudiates the ‘back to nature’ argument in any of its forms. He refers to the ‘brutalizing worship of nature’ as a ‘degradation’ in that ‘man’ is ‘the sovereign of nature’. Who says that man is the ‘sovereign of nature’? There is no scientific basis for this claim. Darwin argued that human beings differ from other animals only in degree, not in kind. The biologist EO Wilson emphasises the centrality of insects to life on Earth. If the insects were wiped out, life on Earth would end within a year; if the human species were wiped out, life on Earth would flourish. The argument that ‘man’ is the ‘sovereign of nature’ is a theological argument: it stems from the idea that God made man in his own image and it stems from the Judaeo-Christian view of human uniqueness and moral autonomy.

I want to return to a passage quoted earlier.

But atheism and communism are no flight, no abstraction, no loss of the objective world created by man or of his essential powers projected into objectivity, no impoverished regression to unnatural, primitive simplicity. They are rather the first real emergence, the realization become real for man, of his essence as something real.

Marx EW EPM 1975: 395/6

Once more, Marx rejects the ‘back to nature’ argument as an ‘impoverished regression to unnatural, primitive simplicity’. Human beings acting upon nature, transforming both nature and themselves, is natural for human beings. Camile Paglia
is restating Marx’s view here when she writes that ‘the Buddhist acquiescence to nature is neither accurate about nature nor just to human potential.’ (Paglia 2001: ch 1).

But Paglia’s next sentence makes this clear assertion of human progress most interesting: ‘The Apollonian has taken us to the stars.’ (Paglia 2001 ch 1). To the stars, to the heavens. How many ways are there to the stars? Do we ascend to the heavens? Or draw the heavens down to earth? Heaven on Earth? This would reveal that the progress that Marx is advocating, the transcendence of alienation so that man becomes the conscious sovereign of circumstances, itself a secular myth. Marx’s statement is more positive and more creative, certainly. Marx is demanding the projection and realisation of the essential powers of human beings so as to overcome domination by an alien and external objectivity, bringing about circumstances which are ‘humanly objective’, in Gramsci’s apposite phrase. Alienation implies a failure on the part of human agents to comprehend the social world as their own creation, and hence as amenable to human intervention, alteration and control.

My question is how far does Marx take this ‘sovereignty’ of man? For Vico, Nature is the realm of God, therefore unknowable and uncontrollable with respect to human agency. Marx draws no such line. Marx disparages human subjugation to ‘never-changing natural destiny’. Marx is surely correct in his assumption that there is no longer some ‘Nature’ apart from the human world, that the human interchange with and transformation their environment has brought Nature within the province of the human social world. There are countless books which make this point. (Morris ed 2003; Simmons 1996; Odum 1993; Chapman and Reiss 1999; Doyle and McEachern 2001; Barry 1999; Harris ed 2004).

So, Marx is correct to emphasise the importance of human transformatory activity. But when he disparages ‘natural destiny’ we need to question what, exactly, he is getting at. Notions of human beings being the ‘sovereign of circumstances’ being somehow able to evade or escape ‘natural destiny’ suggest much more than human beings are realising their essential powers creatively in the world that they create. It implies that that social world created by human beings somehow trumps the natural world. It implies that human beings in their social world have transcended Nature and the eternal cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth.
Marx, at points, strays over into teleology in the bad sense – as a telos unfolding over the heads and against the wills of individuals.

The question is not what goal is envisaged for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even by the proletariat as a whole. The question is what is the proletariat and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature. (Marx: The Holy Family).

That is the kind of argument that brings essentialism into disrepute. That argument does imply that the realisation of a natural essence is given and that a course of action is inevitable regardless of will, choice, morality etc. The passage needs to be re-phrased to take account of the delicate sensitivities of modern liberals, brought up to believe that identity is a matter of free choice and design. An essentialist metaphysics is teleological. Note Marx’s identification of a goal, something given by the nature of an essence. If the proletariat is to realise its nature, then it must take a course of action which corresponds to, rather than contradicts, is nature. By using the terms ‘forced historically’, Marx is stating the essentialist case too strongly. A necessary line of development is not an inevitability and, as he rightly argues, ‘history does nothing’. What Marx means is that if the working class is to realise its nature as the class of concrete labour, the value creating class, then it needs to institute the society of the freely associated producers. For Marx, there is a necessary relation between the working class as the producers of value and a socialist society in which social labour is supplied directly through the free association of the producers, rather than indirectly through the value form. Those who object to that essentialist argument, who deny such a necessary relation between class position and political ideology, who deny the nature of an essence, can have no objection to the proletariat being politically constructed for a slave society, a Fascist society, can have no necessary objection to the proletariat remaining within the exploitative relations of capitalist society.

Marx expresses himself too strongly in the above passage, minimising the importance of the subjective factor, the extent to which the proletariat has to develop
its organisational, political, moral capacities in the process of self-emancipation. That process of self-development is all part of the proletariat coming to realise its nature.

Marx is similarly over-emphatic in the Manifesto of the Communist Party. He writes: ‘What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.’ (Marx MCP Rev1848 1973). If the fall of the bourgeoisie and the triumph of the proletariat are inevitable, why bother writing the Manifesto, why urge ‘working men of all countries, unite’? Of course, one can appreciate the statement of inevitability as an attempt to inspire hope and boost confidence in the middle of a political battle. But it is still worth highlighting, just to be on our guard against a bad teleology that steals political and moral responsibility out of human hands and invests it in some external agency.

I want to come to more substantial cases, beyond manifesto speak, when Marx does seem to defend human action in more philosophical terms, terms which are all of a piece with the secular myth of progress through industry, science and technology. Marx admits that England is ‘causing a social revolution’ in India for the ‘vilest interests’. ‘But that is not the question’, he states. ‘The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.’ (Marx AIC SE 1973). Marx brushes past the actual actions and wills of human agents, the cases put for and against English intervention in India, and reverts to the bad old device of human actors being ‘the unconscious tool of history’. If human beings are ‘unconscious tools’ in this manner, then they cannot also be sovereigns of circumstances. There is none of the moral autonomy here that comes with assertions of human uniqueness in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. We are back to Hegel’s slaughterbench of history. ‘Then, whatever bitterness the spectacle of the crumbling of an ancient world may have for our personal feelings, we have the right, in point of history, to exclaim with Goethe: ‘Should this torture then torment us Since it brings us greater pleasure? Were not through the rule of Timur Souls devoured without measure?’ (Marx AIC SE 1973: 320).
To be fair to Marx, his defensible point is this, any hope for overcoming the moral and social failures of capitalist modernity does not lie in the past, neither in Nature worship nor in the ancient or medieval communities but in the present, in those necessary lines of development which point towards an alternative future in which human beings can objectify their powers without having to alienate them. Marx is looking to build new solidarities through a re-personalisation at a higher level of development, not defend or revert to older solidarities appropriate to social relations that no longer exist. The liberal criticism of Marx as offering a ‘thickly textured communitarianism’ (Femia 1993:170) is simply wrong. Marx, like Hegel before him, takes the high road of modernity, seeing alienation as a progressive force, objectifying human power in such a way that they can be reclaimed in future at a higher level. Marx was well aware of conservative critics of the capital system, whose rejection of modernity was absolute and who took refuge in those remnants of the past which continued to exist in the modern world. Such solidarities are beyond recall and presuppose a social identity that no longer exists. Marx has no sympathy with the crumbling of an older world. Against the nostalgic mode, Marx looked to redeem the potentials contained in the alienated social world, finally making progress live up to its name.

But questions remain. Take Schumpeter’s point that capitalism is a moral parasite, living off the moral capital created by past civilisations, but doing nothing to replace it? Take the evidence that it is those nations, such as Germany, who most held onto their feudal structures and practices, who have shown greater social resilience as well as long term economic success. In False Dawn The Delusions of Global Capitalism, (1999) John Gray accuses Marx of modelling capitalism on the particular British experience of the nineteenth century. Such a capitalism leaves us with no ties other than the nexus of callous cash payment.

In the two passages quoted above, Marx uses the term ‘destiny’ in two different ways. He justifies English intervention in India in terms of a social revolution which allows human beings to escape a ‘never-changing natural destiny’. Fine, human beings transform nature and in the process transform themselves, coming to express and manifest more and more of their essential powers in history. I have argued strongly that that telos is strongly grounded in real human being. Yet Marx does, at times, detach the historical process from human actors and thus abstract purpose
from human self-realisation. In this manner he asks: ‘The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?’ The idea of humankind fulfilling its destiny strongly suggests a supra-individual purpose at work. In the same way Marx writes of human actors being ‘the unconscious tool of history’.

Marx’s argument can be salvaged from such bad teleology. It needs to be, since stated thus, Marx is clearly an adherent of the secular myth of progress. Destiny implies a fate that is out of the hands of human agents. This could just simply be a case of an inappropriate word. Marx’s meaning is teleological in the good sense of human beings realising their essential powers, fulfilling their species essence within the historical process. Human beings as ‘the unconscious tool of history’ is more difficult. However, the view is consistent with the idea of alienation as a progressive force, with human beings objectifying their powers in such a way that, at first, they become alien forces determining social action with inexorable, external force. At this stage, human beings are indeed unconscious tools, in that they do not comprehend these alien powers as their own social powers in alien form, and in that human action is determined from the outside by the imperatives associated with these alien powers. The condition of alienation is characterised by human beings becoming instruments of their own powers.

The morally dubious aspect of Marx’s argument is his justification of this ‘unconscious’ instrumentalism in alienated social conditions as progressive, his dismissal of moral objections and protests. It begs the question at what point does this ‘unconscious’ progress over the heads of human actors cease and human beings finally assert moral ends over technical means? Because precisely these same justifications for progress are being made in the contemporary world, in favour of ‘globalisation’, industrial development in India and China, the BRIC nations and everywhere, in favour of drilling in the Arctic and on the ocean bed, in favour of GM food and biotechnology.

If, as Marx argues, ‘personal feelings’ don’t matter when set against ‘history’, we need to ask what does? I think Marx is wide open to the criticism that he has failed to take morality seriously and that his historicism makes his argument prone to end up with what Popper called a ‘moral futurism’.
Marx seems to historicise the Judaeo-Christian principle of moral autonomy from nature and its imperatives and cycles. And that entails a denial of the view that morality is autonomous from progress as defined in the realisation of essential human powers. The danger is, in alienated conditions, such a position could end up transferring moral responsibility to the a ‘history’ which proceeds in some degree of abstraction of human individuals. Alienation is a progressive force for Marx (and Hegel). The danger is that we can easily remain within a progress that treats human beings as the unconscious tools of history.

Kolakowski is certainly right to point out that such a position invites a moral wasteland. Kolakowski recovers the moral responsibility that lies at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition: ‘No one is relieved of either positive or negative responsibility on the grounds that his actions formed only a fraction of a given historical process... Thus we profess the doctrine of total responsibility of the individual for his deeds and of the amorality of the historical process... (Kolakowski 1969: 161/2).

For Kolakowski, the moral failure of Marxism in this respect that made its political failures not only understandable but inevitable. So there is a need to take morality seriously. ‘Morality matters’ (Trigg 2005). Marx’s morality is implicit in the progressive unfolding and full realisation of innate human potentials and powers. Marx denies any autonomy of morality from the telos of human self-realisation in history. The position is defensible, although it underestimates the extent to which human social praxis is also a moral praxis. Marx could present creative human self-realisation as a moral ideal grounded in the human species essence and its unfolding. Such an ideal could work in the Kantian sense as the object of our willing, motivating and inspiring human beings to act and obligating them in a common cause leading to the fuller expression of essential human powers.

But, even so, there remains the danger of mistaking essential human powers for the objectified products of those powers. In the simplest case, that would denote a condition of alienation. The problem runs deeper than that, though. Even with the
transcendence of alienation there is the danger that Marx, uniting human creators and human creation, is engaging in a form of idolatry. This is to define idolatry as the worship of the products of the human hand or, more generally, as the worship of human powers. It could immediately be objected that Marx is simply calling for the proper fulfillment of the human essence, human beings coming to recognize the social forces dominating the world as their own powers in alien form. Human fulfilment, the telos of the historical process, requires that the human creators assume conscious control of their human powers. Fine. But what are these human powers? Do they also pertain to the products of human power? Where is the line drawn?

Surprisingly, Marx makes very few references to Vico, despite the pertinence of Vico’s verum-factum principle to the issue of objectification, alienation and human self-knowledge and self-realisation. I am aware of only the one reference to Vico in Marx’s writings, and it is only a footnote. Nevertheless, it is a highly significant passage.

Darwin has aroused our interest in the history of natural technology, i.e. in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, as instruments of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organization, deserve equal attention? And would not such a history be easier to compile, since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in this respect, that we have made the former, but not the latter? Technology discloses man’s mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and by which also his social relations, and the mental conceptions that flow from them, are formed. Any history of religion even, that fails to take account of this material basis, is uncritical. It is, in practice, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, to infer from the actual relations of life at any period the corresponding ‘spiritualized’ forms of those relations. But the latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one. The inadequacy of the abstract materialism of natural science, which leaves out of consideration the historical process, is at once evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions of its spokesmen, whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own specialism. (*Capital I* (1867) VA I, p. 389, footnote 89).
Marx argues that the history of the productive organs of man, the material basis of social organisation, deserves equal attention with the history of natural technology, the formation of the organs of plants and animals, as ‘instruments of production for sustaining life.’ Marx cites Vico’s distinction between human history and natural history to the effect that human beings have made the former, but not the latter. The key argument in this passage is that ‘technology discloses man’s mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and by which also his social relations, and the mental conceptions that flow from them, are formed.’ Marx describes the failure to take this material basis into account as ‘uncritical.’ He is referring to religion. It is significant, however, that the passage starts with a quibble about Darwin’s exclusive concern with natural technology and ends with a criticism of ‘the inadequacy of the abstract materialism of natural science’, as evidenced by the ‘abstract and ideological conceptions of its spokesmen’ who leave the historical process out of their considerations.

The point to emphasise is Marx’s critique of abstracting tendencies in all their forms. Marx’s accent is upon human productive powers as they develop in history and form the material basis of all social organization. The emphasis is upon the process of production by which human beings mediate their relation with nature and produce the conditions which sustain human life. Any materialism which is detached from this process is an abstract materialism. Marx is thinking of natural science here, but he also condemns mechanical materialism in similar terms. And it makes the point that Marx combines both immanence and transcendence. The actual world is a field of immanent potentiality in the process of completing itself and becoming something else.

So Marx can be cleared of the charge that his self-knowledge through the connection of human creators and their social creation entails immanence as an enclosed world of human self-importance.

But the danger of idolatry remains. In associating ‘atheism and communism’ Marx is attempting to emphasise the positive expression of
essential human powers, human creators in conscious control of the world that they have created.

But atheism and communism are no flight, no abstraction, no loss of the objective world created by man or of his essential powers projected into objectivity, no impoverished regression to unnatural, primitive simplicity. They are rather the first real emergence, the realization become real for man, of his essence as something real.

Marx EW EPM 1975: 395/6

But one has to question why Marx doesn’t just simply refer to communism. Why atheism? Marx knows Vico’s distinction between human and natural history. Nature is God’s creation, argues Vico. In truth, Marx well knows that the human exchange with nature renders such a distinction obsolete. Hence his call for natural scientists to give up their abstract materialism and recognise that the material world is a human world.

The question is whether Marx goes further than human self-realisation and steps into the idolatrous realm of human self-veneration. Instead of fulfilled human beings realising their powers within a whole organism they see as a human creation, we enter the realm of ‘men as gods’ absorbing the greater substance into themselves.

In examining this question we need to start from Marx’s argument that religion is the ‘opium of the people’. Marx does not condemn religion as a delusion which is made up by the ruling class to dupe and stupefy the masses. That popular view is a crude caricature which actually inverts Marx’s real meaning. If religion is a drug then it is a drug that is self-administered.

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.
Religion is the ideal expression of a condition people yearn for but which is denied in real life. Religion is the cry of alienated individuals living within an atomistic market society. Within such conditions, these individuals can overcome the separation experienced in the real world only by projecting the unity and commonality desired upwards into the realm of fantasy. Fantastic religious ideas will only be dissipated when human commonality is achieved in real society and the alienation and atomism associated with the 'rule of property' has been overcome.

Marx is not therefore simply saying that religion is wrong or false, quite the contrary. Religion expresses a real human yearning and need in abstract, fantastical form. Marx is criticising not just illusion but most of all the social conditions which require illusion.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.

Real human happiness, then, requires social transformation so that human beings no longer have need of recourse to illusions in nourishing their heart and soul. But the implications go further than this. Such a social transformation implies the abolition of religion. This would be abolition in the sense of positive transcendence, so that religion ends to the extent that it realises its ideals. That, surely, is what every religion aims at? But, with Marx, this self-abolition of religion implies something more: it implies that human beings become the centres of their own Earthly Heaven.

The criticism of religion disillusiones man, so that he will think, act and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that
he will move around himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.

Marx EW CHPR:I 1975

‘Man' moving around himself as his own true sun is a clear statement of the 'men as gods' thesis. There is plenty wrong with this optimistic thesis, not least the abundant evidence from history that human beings are nowhere near as rational and free and humane as humanists believe. That, in itself, doesn’t change much, given that we are dealing with a teleological argument that ends when human beings have fully realised themselves as free and rational and truly human beings. But the idea of human beings revolving around their own sun is a clear statement of self-absorption, implying an egoism and narcissism that eats away at the soul. Human beings need to come out of their own egos and see themselves as part of a greater whole, see themselves in relation to others. Marx, of course, knows this and, throughout the main body of his work, develops this intersubjective and communitarian thesis at length. My concern is with a certain strain in Marx’s argument which could tip a legitimate interest in creative human self-realisation over into full blown idolatry and the bad teleology of a ‘history' abstracted from human purpose. My concern is with the dangers of moving from a legitimate concern with the fulfilment of human powers to a veneration of the products of those powers.

Marx is concerned with exposing the fetish systems of politics and production by revealing their basis in the material world of human power. He is concerned with truth as against both illusion and the alienated social conditions which generate and require illusion.

It is therefore the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.
Note the references to the ‘task of history’ and philosophy in ‘the service of history’. What ‘history’? Is this ‘history’ in abstraction from human purpose? Marx’s essentialist metaphysics is grounded in the essential natures of human beings and the essential nature of human society. But references to ‘history’ like these above are not so firmly grounded. To be fair, Marx does state that ‘to be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.’ But even this begs the question what is this ‘man’ that Marx is referring to. In these passages, Marx seems to be referring to an ideal human being outside of the historical unfolding of the human essence in specific social relations. And this uncoupling from socio-historical reality can easily slide into a more ethereal realm.

Clear proof of the radicalism of German theory and its practical energy is the fact that it takes as its point of departure a decisive and positive transcendence of religion. The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that for man the supreme being is man, and thus with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected and contemptible being - conditions that are best described in the exclamation of a Frenchman on the occasion of a proposed tax on dogs: Poor dogs! They want to treat you like human beings!

We return to the conception of positive transcendence, an abolition that preserves, raises up and realises as it puts an end to something. The abolition of religion amounts to the realisation of religious ideals. But what are those ideals? In a condition of alienation, Marx notes that human beings are treated like dogs. But his statement actually reads as dogs being treated like human beings. Marx wants more. The abolition of religion realises the doctrine that for man the supreme being is man. ‘Do you mean God?’, the young boy in the film Time Bandits asks. ‘We don’t know him that well’ comes the reply.
There is no doubt that Marx is on the ground of theology here. He refers to Germany's *revolutionary* past in the form of the *Reformation*, drawing an analogy between the *monk* and the *philosopher* in whose brain the revolution begins. (Marx EW CHPR:I 1975). Marx wants to complete the job of the Reformation.

Luther certainly conquered servitude based on *devotion*, but only by replacing it with servitude based on *conviction*. He destroyed faith in authority, but only by restoring the authority of faith. He transformed the priests into laymen, but only by transforming the laymen into priests. He freed mankind from external religiosity, but only by making religiosity the inner man. He freed the body from its chains, but only by putting the heart in chains.

Marx EW CHPR:I 1975

A thoroughgoing Reformation is a lofty ideal. It requires the complete abolition of religiosity. That he is asking for Heaven on Earth is clear enough. But he seems also to be asking that human beings become saints and philosophers. Are human beings so free and rational and humane? Is Marx implying that human beings could become gods, supreme beings? One recalls here Kant's statement that out of nothing so crooked can something entirely straight be made. Kant also referred to the irrational use of reason. An attempt to straighten something so crooked is prone to rebound spectacularly. So Marx is sailing into dangerous waters.

Marx is seeking to trace the products of the human hand and the human mind back to source – human praxis in the material world.

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the *world of man*, state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*. 
It soon becomes clear, however, that Marx isn't actually repudiating religion at all. Marx writes of 'irreligious criticism' but in truth his statement proceeds to list all the qualities of religion which Marx demands to be realised in the world.

Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

In fine, Marx's case is not against religion but against an irreligious world in which religious ideals can obtain only illusory form. Marx is demanding the true realisation of the human essence. Religious ideals are the fantastic realisation of the human essence in conditions which block that essence obtaining true reality.

Religion remains the ideal, unsecular consciousness of its members because it is the ideal form of the stage of human development which has been reached in this state.

The realisation of the religious ideal implies a further stage of human development in the sense of realising fully innate human potentials. The abolition of religion as a positive transcendence implies the replacement of an unsecular
consciousness by a secular consciousness. But this is tricky in the sense that Marx defines religion as the ‘fantastic realisation of the human essence’. This implies that giving the human essence a true reality is a material realisation of the religious ideal. And this would seem to imply that Marx is committed to the realisation of the theological assumptions underpinning the figure of God, even as he is prepared to abolish God as no more than the projection of the human essence in ideal form. It is easy enough to get rid of God; it is much more difficult to shed the theological assumptions which have been the necessary accompaniment of the belief in God throughout history. My point is that far from producing the secular conscious that Marx demands, his positive transcendence of religion implies communism not as atheism but as a disguised religion. And it is this which opens up the route from the fulfilment of the human essence to the worship of the products of human powers, from the realisation of human species being to ‘man’ as the ‘supreme being’, from the good teleology which culminates in the realised human society of realised human beings to the bad teleology of a ‘history’ abstracted from human purpose and in the service of the alien powers of industry, technology, capital, the state, bureaucracy etc. etc.

In fine, we need to be careful in reconstructing Marx’s essentialist metaphysics so as to avoid turning Marx’s positive transcendence of religion into the secular myth of progress, the false teleology which dominates the alienated world in the form of the false fixities of economic growth, capitalist accumulation, technological imperatives, state encroachment, state expansion, bureaucratisation, urbanisation ...

Marx is well aware of the sin of idolatry. He sets idolatry within the context of an alienated system of production.

Money is the jealous god of Israel before whom no other god may stand. Money debases all the gods of mankind and turns them into commodities. Money is the universal and self-constituted value of all things. It has therefore deprived the entire world - both the world of man and of nature - of its specific value. Money is the estranged essence of man’s work and existence; this alien essence dominates him and he worships it.

Marx EW OJQ 1975
And, long before John Gray and the exposure of the delusions of progress, Marx is very well aware of the extent to which ‘progress’ can become a secular myth undertaken through the agency of alien power. ‘The god of the Jews has been secularized and become the god of the world. Exchange is the true god of the Jew. His god is nothing more than illusory exchange.’ (Marx EW OJQ 1975).

Marx is criticising alienation but also idolatry. Does it then follow that the abolition of alienation is also an abolition of idolatry? That isn’t necessarily the case.

Alienation is the condition in which human creations come to dominate the human creators. Idolatry is the worship of the products of one’s own hands. It would therefore seem possible that the practical reappropriation of alienated human powers could still be a form of idolatry. It all depends upon whether human powers are being exercised in such a way as to enhance human flourishing and fulfilment or whether these powers are being venerated as power as such, that is, not in terms of their effects with respect to creative human self-realisation. Marx’s commitment to a truly human society would seem to clear him of the charge of idolatry, but things are not so simple. It all depends on how one reads Marx’s critique of religion. The question depends upon the extent to which what Marx proposes as the free and full development of individuals could also be construed as the claim that human beings could become as gods.

Marx does draw the direct analogy between what human beings invested in God as an alien power and capital and the state as alienated social powers. The practical restitution of human power therefore implies that human beings no longer project their divine power upwards to the ideal realm of God but instead become in some sense deities themselves.

Finally it follows that even when man proclaims himself an atheist through the mediation of the state, i.e., when he proclaims the state an atheist, he still remains under the constraints of religion because he acknowledges his atheism only deviously, through a medium. Religion is precisely that: the
devious acknowledgement of man, through an intermediary. The state is the intermediary between man and man's freedom. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man attributes all his divinity, all his religious constraints, so the state is the intermediary to which man transfers all his non-divinity, all his human unconstraint.

Marx EW OJQ 1975 219

Just as the working class invest their labour in capital, and the demos invest their sovereign power in the state, and thereby create alien powers which dominate them, so human beings invest their divinity in God, and so create the abstract Christ who dominates them. The implication of this is that Marx believes that human beings could indeed become as gods.

Marx is certainly aware of the dangers of following false gods.

Mill aptly sums up the whole essence of the matter in a single concept when he describes money as the medium of exchange. The nature of money is not, in the first instance, that property is externalized within it, but that the mediating function or movement, human, social activity, by means of which the products of man mutually complement each other, is estranged and becomes the property of a material thing external to man, viz. money. If a man himself alienates this mediating function he remains active only as a lost, dehumanized creature. The relation between things, human dealings with them, become the operations of a being beyond and above man.

Marx EW JM 1975: 261

Alienative social relations result in the estrangement of the products of human activity. As a result, the existential significance which properly belongs to human beings coming to be invested in a material thing external to human beings. Marx, here, refers to money. In time, with a more thorough critique of political economy, Marx would come to
identify capital as the principal ‘agent’ of a historical development that proceeds above the heads of the ‘lost, dehumanized’ human actors. The false teleology at work in the secular myth of progress therefore describes a condition of alienation. Capital and its imperatives reveal are ‘the operations of a being beyond and above man’.

Marx demands the social self-mediation of associated producers against the alien mediation of things. Alien mediation is a false religion with a false god.

Through this *alien mediator* man gazes at his will, his activity, his relation to others as at a power independent of them and of himself - instead of man himself being the mediator for man. His slavery thus reaches a climax. It is obvious that this *mediator* must become a *veritable God* since the mediator is the *real power* over that with which he mediates me. His cult becomes an end in itself. Separated from this mediator, objects lose their worth. Thus they have value only in so far as they *represent* him, whereas it appeared at first that he had value only to the extent to which *he* represented *them*. This reversal of the original relationship is necessary. Hence this *mediator* is the lost, estranged *essence* of private property, private property *alienated* and external to itself; it is the *alienated mediation* of human production with human production, the *alienated* species-activity of man. All the qualities proper to the generation of this activity are transferred to the mediator. Thus man separated from this mediator becomes poorer as man in proportion as the mediator becomes *richer*.

Christ originally represents (1) man before God, (2) God for man and (3) man for man.

In the same way *money* originally represents (1) private property for private property; (2) society for private property; (3) private property for society.

But Christ is God *alienated* and *man* alienated. God continues to have value only in so far as he represents Christ, man continues to have value only in so far as he represents Christ. Likewise with money.

Marx EW JM 1975
Marx draws a directly analogy between the alienation of social power and God. The more that human beings invest in an object, the less they are in themselves.

All these consequences are contained in this characteristic, that the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself. The worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object. The greater his activity, therefore, the fewer objects the worker possesses. What the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The externalization [*Entdusserung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.

Marx EW EPM 1975 325

Marx defines human emancipation and freedom in terms of the practical reappropriation of the power alienated to the state and capital and its reorganisation and exercise by associated individuals as their own social power. (Marx OJQ EW 1975). 'Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over men.'(Marx EW EPM 1975). But, if the above analogy between alien power and God applies, that is, if God is the human essence in ideal form, then it follows that the practical restitution of human power not only dissolves God but at the same time turns human beings into gods. In Marx's defence, if this is indeed what the abolition of alienation entails, then all human beings will become gods. But maybe Marx's meaning here is very different.

Marx's view can be compared to the view of the Catholic C.S. Lewis.
Man's conquest of nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. There neither is nor can be any simple increase of power on man's side. Each power won by man is a power over man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows in the triumphal car. (C.S. Lewis *The Abolition of Man* 1947).

Such a view is entirely consistent with Marx's conception of democratisation as a universalisation.

The sovereignty of man - but of man as an alien being distinct from actual man - is the fantasy, the dream, the postulate of Christianity, whereas in democracy it is a present and material reality, a secular maxim.

Marx EW OJQ 1975

That would be a thoroughgoing secularisation, not a secular religion of progress. Is it possible? It requires nothing less than universal human emancipation.

The question is: What is the relationship between complete political emancipation and religion? If in the land of complete political emancipation we find not only that religion exists but that it exists in a fresh and vigorous form, that proves that the existence of religion does not contradict the perfection of the state. But since the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, the source of this defect must be looked for in the nature of the state itself. We no longer see religion as the basis but simply as a phenomenon of secular narrowness. We therefore explain the religious restriction on the free citizens from the secular restriction they experience. We do not mean to say that they must do away with their religious restriction in order to transcend their secular limitations. We do not turn secular questions into theological questions. We turn theological questions
into secular questions. History has been resolved into superstition for long enough. We are now resolving superstition into history. The question of the *relationship of political emancipation to religion* becomes for us the question of the *relationship of political emancipation to human emancipation*.

Marx EW OJQ 1975

We are still engaged in the process of answering that question.

Under what stars to plough the earth?

Have we a better answer than the one given by Dante?