

# Eclipse of God, Eclipse of Man

Rémi Brague

The expression, the ‘eclipse of God’, refers to the title of a work by the Austrian-born Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965). It metaphorically expresses what otherwise may be called the ‘disenchantment of the world’, according to Max Weber, or the ‘death of God’, as heralded in the early 1880s by Friedrich Nietzsche.

The announcement of the ‘death of God’ is, however, a cry of anxiety rather than of triumph. And its consequences are signalled in a parallel expression regarding the ‘death of man’. This latter expression has been in circulation since Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (appearing in English as *The Order of Things*) published in 1966. But the expression already existed in the late 19th century.

In 1897, in a book dealing with the death of the son of Louis XVI, the French poet Léon Bloy wrote that as soon as the ‘model’ of a concept disappears, so too does its ‘replica’. One generation closer to us, the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev expressed the internal dialectic of what he already called *humanism*. If there is no God, then there is no man either.

In 1926, André Malraux—a great expert in the use of empty words—wrote a series of fictional letters between a Chinese man and a Westerner called *La Tentation de l’Occident*, in which he made his Chinese character say, ‘God is dead’—Nietzsche’s words—‘but the man you thought could replace him is dead, too.’

Little attention had been paid to these various warnings when Michel Foucault, in his grand, inimitable style, announced the ‘death of man’ at the end of *The Order of Things*. He later provided an explanation about this death, reducing it to a kind of ‘theoretical death’: What disappears is a model, a notion, rather than real people. This leads me to question Foucault’s intentions. While he instils the idea of the ‘death of man’ with terror, he eventually brings it back to a pretty harmless concept.

Perhaps we should address such questions in a more serious way and consider the death of man as something much more concrete. In this way, we might broaden the issue instead of seeing it simply as the end of an ideal on which the human sciences once relied—and which now they tend to destroy. In other words, might the ‘death of God’ lead to the actual death, the extermination, of the human species? Does the eclipse of man necessarily accompany the eclipse of God? My answer is: unfortunately, yes.

## The failure of atheism?

I would like to make the shocking assertion that atheism has failed. To show you how daring it is to say this, let me start with an objection to such a statement: Polls increasingly—perhaps even exponentially—show

that people say they have no religion. Fewer and fewer people say they are believers.

At the same time, however, the media continually bombard us with stories about the so-called ‘return of religion’, especially in its most radical, dramatic, and violent expressions. Islam and Hinduism are particularly subject to this treatment, and there are even anti-Muslim and anti-Christian pogroms in India. This return of religion can also be seen as more benign, especially when seen among the Jews: At the moment, the ultra-orthodox have the wind in their sails in terms of growth, which is a huge demographic problem for Israel. While secularized Jews typically have two children, the ultra-orthodox have ten. The same can be seen among Evangelical groups within the generally compassionate, community-oriented Protestant denominations.

None of these facts impress atheists. They have a ready-made answer: These are, they say, merely secondary struggles for survival—desperate reactions of exasperated people who know they have no real chance of success in opposing scientific and technical progress, a process that is inevitably accompanied by secularization. An increasingly secularized Europe (which has fewer and fewer church-goers and believers)



Portrait of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789), an 18th-century advocate of atheism.

is the *avant-garde*. The rest of the world will eventually follow its example. If I were an atheist I would simply remain patient.

Another reason to think that atheism is well on its way to victory is the increasingly aggressive way in which it is expressed. I recently read a passage by Edmund Burke writing about the French Revolution that amused me. He said that in the past, atheists used to be quite reserved, would not reveal themselves, and would even keep their convictions to themselves. But now (speaking about the 18th century), Burke said atheists had become active plotters, boisterous and seditious. I wonder what Burke would think about today's atheists.

This is just one of many aspects regarding atheism; but it is not even the most important one. From a philosopher's point of view, the number of people advocating for a particular opinion is not in itself an argument in support of that opinion. If we ask how many people think the Earth revolves around the sun or vice versa, I am not sure the Copernican view will be in the majority—and yet Copernicus is still right.

Nevertheless, dramatic successes have indeed been achieved by atheists. Two examples should suffice to give an idea of the victory of atheism. One is from the theoretical field of knowledge; the other from the practical field of action.

### A scientific victory

At the theoretical level, the modern science of nature—i.e. physics written in mathematical language—provides us with a useful description of reality without having to rely on the existence of a creator or a divine 'watchmaker' in charge of 'machining' the world (an 18th century metaphor). A useful anecdote involves the circumstances of the now famous meeting between astronomer Pierre-Simon, Marquis de Laplace, and Napoleon. The astronomer had just released his *Exposition du système du monde (System of the World)*, published in 1796, which he offered to the Emperor. Napoleon asked, 'Where is God in all this?' And Laplace offered his well-known reply, 'Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis.'

As a matter of fact, regardless of their personal faith (or lack thereof), the work of physicists, biologists, and chemists no longer needs God as a 'stop-gap' (an expression I've borrowed from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*) to explain the inexplicable. Asserting that God probably wanted things to be so, when one cannot explain why things are so, now simply looks like an intellectual failure. We just don't need religion anymore to explain how the world works.

Personally, looking to religion in order to explain physical phenomena does not make much sense to me. A scientific vision of the world proves to be much more efficient. Furthermore, one may ask whether any religion ever truly claimed to explain how things work. Take, for example, societies which have long been

considered 'primitive'. If we observe how such people see the world, we realize they don't pay any attention to how it works and they pay even less attention to who created it. This is clearly revealed in British ethnologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965).

Even religions that are not primitive at all—quotations from the Buddha, for instance—say that cosmological issues are unimportant and irrelevant. The Talmud itself warns not to look for what has existed before, after, besides, or below. The text does not make explicit what it is referring to, but it obviously deals with the origin, foundation, goal, and aim of the world. We should remember that physicists, regardless of their personal beliefs, do not need God as a hypothesis for their research. And this is where we find the first victory of atheism: in the theoretical field.

### A political victory

Atheism's theoretical victory is accompanied by a practical victory that also occurs within modernity—in the modern political arena. Politics itself shows how human societies may organize themselves, relying on themselves without any sub-human principle of legitimacy. This idea was proposed—probably for the first time—in 1682 by the French philosopher Pierre Bayle, who moved to Holland to escape persecution. At that time, he had written *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of the Comet*, in which he used the comments of people regarding a comet that had just appeared to devise an argument that eventually made him famous. Not only did Bayle say that atheism was no more harmful to a government than superstition, but he also said that a purely atheistic community would be *more* docile and easier to govern—in a word, better—than a community of enthusiastic believers (or what Voltaire and others have called 'fanatics').

Modern societies have turned this assertion into a concrete reality. Each one, in its own way, has made a strict separation between politics and religion. The United States has its 'separation clause', while the French-speaking countries have their renowned *laïcité* (a word whose meaning no one really knows but which everyone uses to deter any mix between politics and religion).

People only have to be reasonable enough to understand that their interest consists solely of living reasonably with each other. My interest—insofar as I can avoid being slaughtered or robbed—is to avoid slaughtering or robbing others. Starting from this, societies can be built. They may not be the most exciting societies; but they will be functional.

Allow me to say that not all religions seek to regulate societies with a detailed code of conduct. The Christian religion, among others, has this characteristic: It does not impose rules on behaviour except those that can be discovered by natural reason. In the second book of the trilogy I wrote on *The Law of God*, I quote French historian Fustel de Coulanges, who said the



Marie Auguste François Xavier Comte (1798-1857) in a portrait by J. Leonard located in the Musée Auguste Comte in Paris. Image courtesy of Jean-Pierre Dalbéra under CC BY 2.0.

Christian religion is the only one that did not bring its own legal system. Indeed, the Decalogue—what the Christians preserved from the Torah—consists of what I call a mere ‘survival kit’ for humanity. Otherwise, a society allowing murders, robberies, adultery, and other prohibited things would not long survive.

### Atheism & agnosticism

Despite the nuances I have brought to these ideas, we can credit atheism with the two victories I have described above. Granted, they are only two victories; but they are huge.

The atheism I am considering is not necessarily a fierce assertion of aggressive beliefs. It can also be a simple principle of method. Laplace never said: ‘I can’t bear God.’ To him, atheism is God between brackets. Whether there is something or nothing between the brackets is another issue. This is precisely what defines the word ‘agnosticism’ in its genuine meaning: I don’t know whether God exists; and I don’t know whether He does *not* exist. So then I have to suspend judgment.

The term ‘agnosticism’ was coined in 1869 by Thomas Huxley—the grandfather of novelist Aldous Huxley and zoologist Julian Huxley (who ended up heading UNESCO). Thomas devoted himself to advocating Darwin’s theories. Darwin himself was a peaceful man who avoided scandal, while Thomas Huxley was a fierce activist—whence his nickname, ‘Darwin’s bulldog’. Darwin lived during the Victorian

era—at a time when depicting oneself as an atheist was as unthinkable as shooting a perched bird or wearing the club tie of a college one was not an alumnus of. This is why this era bequeathed to us such terms as ‘agnosticism’, ‘secularism’, and ‘humanism’—terms that are still being used today. I was surprised when I learned that in French the word ‘humanism’ could name a party that was originally Christian, while in Victorian English it is a polite word for atheism. Words are docile: They can mean anything—as well as their opposites.

Agnosticism does not have to do only with religious issues (such as, for instance, the existence of God or the immortality of the soul). The same idea can be applied when it comes to our understanding of the physical universe (i.e. to science). This kind of agnosticism has been a basis for ‘positivism’, an attitude that aims at being satisfied with what science currently understands, regardless of more sophisticated issues such as ultimate causes or the meaning of the ‘stuff’ with which we are surrounded.

Auguste Comte was very specific when he explained that we had to give up research into ultimate causes. The causes of phenomena will always remain unknown. But that is no problem as long as we can use mathematics to rigorously describe the laws that govern such phenomena. Claude Bernard, a great physiologist, said exactly the same thing. In *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, Bernard has an amazing expression: ‘Man can do more than what he can know.’ In other words, we do not know—and we will virtually never know—why, for example, every point in the universe attracts every other point with a force that is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them (this is Newton’s law of universal gravitation). As long as we can do the adequate calculations so as to make sure a pulley works well, to make a parachute, or to avoid having things collapse on us—it all works out just fine: Our capacities surpass our knowledge.

### Is man’s existence legitimate?

I have tried to be a fair analyst of atheism by showing to what extent it is really agnosticism. In spite of what I have said, atheism contains a mortal defect, a deadly disease, which its ‘lite’ version—agnosticism—also contains. There exists one question about which atheism has nothing to say, one question it does not address, one question that makes it collapse. This fundamental question is: Assuming there is a being on Earth—let us call him *homo sapiens*—that is capable of understanding through science how the universe works; and further assuming that this being is capable of living peacefully with his neighbour, with no need for a transcendent truth; then would it be legitimate for such a being to exist and to keep on existing?

In other words, we can give a purely immanent description of the world with which we can master

and take advantage of things. We do not need to be told this; we just do it. We do not need to know the ultimate truth about the things that exist—and, what's more, we may live without any concept like 'truth'—as long as our description of the universe we live in works. Besides, we can immanently create rules to live peacefully within communities. All we need is to be smart enough to figure out that we only need to abstain from harming our neighbours so as not to be harmed ourselves.

Assuming that all of this is true and that we succeed in mastering nature (and science does help), then we will do it for the benefit of man. Assuming that we succeed in building peaceful national communities—and, even more, a peaceful international community—we will do it for the benefit of man. But is the existence of this knowledgeable, mighty, peaceful, and socially integrated man good? On this matter, the atheists have nothing to say. In fact, they cannot and do not say anything about it at all.

### A question atheism cannot address

Through its own fault—through a process philosophers like to call an 'internal dialectic'—the victory of atheism is turning into the failure of atheism. This will make some of us think of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. But this dialectic does not merely play out as

a theoretical matter; it unfolds at the level of concrete historical events as well.

What, indeed, was the original project of modern atheism? Allowing for and supporting the emancipation of man. The guardianship that weighed on man until then had to be rejected by him. He had to elect his own laws and become fully 'autonomous' (in the Greek sense of the term).

This could not occur earlier since, prior to this emancipatory project, man had to follow exterior principles. On the one hand, these principles could be represented as the 'order of things' or the 'cosmos'; this order was to be imitated by man, who had to rule himself according to nature's principles of harmony. On the other hand, these exterior principles could consist of obeying commandments allegedly originating in a divinity. This example can be found in Ancient Greece, in Athens, as well as in our culture's other flagship city, Jerusalem—since the Holy Bible features the idea of commandments imposed on man by God.

Modernity refuses to consider either the cosmos (nature) or the divine as sources of authority. All references to anything exterior, anything 'other', anything superior, have been banned or declared absurd. To quote a play on words used by Karl Marx in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, being 'radical' means reaching the root. And the root of man would be ... man himself. The image is baroque enough, but



Photograph taken in April 1964 at the *Max Weber-Soziologentag*. Horkheimer is front left, Adorno front right, and Jürgen Habermas is in the background, right, running his hand through his hair. Image courtesy of Jjshapiro under CC BY-SA 3.0.

it expresses well what it means. To describe such an ideal, the 19th century—especially in the period when Marx wrote—coined the word ‘humanism’. Humanism, according to Marx, refers to man depending on nothing other than himself. The problem is: If there is no superior entity, then how can man assert his own value? How can he claim his own dignity? How can he find a ground based in reason for the rights he derives?

Nowadays one can hardly avoid tripping over a human ‘right’; but what is such a right based on? Who can say? Man is really amazing? If man makes this claim, then we must remember Chesterton, who said that believing in oneself is a sign of insanity. Indeed, the insane have a stubborn faith in themselves (just think of politicians). The 20th century’s dictators also had a limitless faith in themselves. This is why they could do so much harm.

By this I mean: Man cannot make a value judgment of himself (otherwise he would be judge and jury). Marx said you cannot judge someone based on what he thinks of himself. So my question remains: Who will decide if man deserves any rights, dignity, and value at all? Who can decide if humanism is *good*?

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, Fichte radicalized Kant’s philosophy and proposed this curious thesis: God is not someone or something we need to believe in, because the divine belongs to the moral law that is already a conscious part of ourselves. We know it and we cannot hide it from our own mind. From there we can conclude that there is no need for a *faith* in God. God, in a way, is ‘obvious’.

Yet there is someone we need to believe in: man. This means we need to believe man is capable of obeying the moral law that he intimately bears within himself—although we know man is not on a par with this moral law. But how can we believe in man amid the foolishness one calls ‘history’? Have a close look at history and you will find no reason for boasting about being a human being.

Fichte is somehow right. But who can have faith in man? Who can have this faith? If the reply is: ‘man himself’, then allow me to laugh. Only God can have faith in man.

### Why believe in man?

Everything I’ve mentioned may seem merely academic. Why do we need to believe in man to defend the value of man? Well, this is increasingly needed for perfectly concrete and familiar reasons. In the past several decades, two new developments have prompted us into considering again the question of the legitimacy of the human.

To be or not to be? This has become an actual—rather than a virtual—issue, because technology now allows us to put an end to humanity. Think of our progress in weapons: The atom bomb one thinks of first may seem very rudimentary compared to the promises of chemistry, nanotechnologies, and so forth. The erasing of life on Earth because of environmental

poisoning is often evoked, too. (I am no specialist about it, but I read newspapers as everyone else does.) A third factor: Chemical contraception allows us to decide quite conveniently whether the next generation should be given life or not.

I am not saying that the extinction of humanity is probable; I am saying it is possible. And the possible has a tendency to exist, as Leibniz said.

To illustrate my remarks, I point to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in an obscure footnote in *La profession de foi du vicairé Savoyard* of 1762 (*Declaration of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar*) recycles the comparison Bayle made famous: Between fanaticism and atheism, which is better? Rousseau notes that atheism causes no deaths but prevents the giving of life, while fanaticism provokes bloodbaths but pushes men into great enterprises. Since then, however, atheism has proven capable of ‘performances’ with which the crimes of religious fanaticism just cannot compare.

The 20th century gave birth to two explicitly atheist and anti-Christian regimes: One of them was anti-Christian because of its anti-Semitism; the other was anti-Semitic because of its anti-Christianity. Both were incredible performances. Compared to them, the Crusades and the Inquisition look like details—unfortunate details—of history. Still, Rousseau’s question must be addressed, but with different words: Assuming that atheism does not kill, is it capable of providing reasons for living—of saying *why* our existence is good?

The second element that prompts us into considering the question on concrete and familiar grounds comes from man’s uncertainty of his own legitimacy. We are no longer sure that our existence is good. This is not yet a mass phenomenon; but voices are starting to be heard that say maybe man is not the good guy in life’s ‘Hollywood drama’. Maybe man is the bad guy.

Here is an example: People of my generation remember that in the early 1980s there were talks across Europe about the Pershing missiles. The Soviets had medium-range missiles behind the Iron Curtain. The Americans had long-range missiles on their territory. This imbalance prompted the Americans to propose putting medium-range Pershing missiles in Europe. Tough discussions followed. Several renowned philosophers took positions, some of them advocating disarmament while others called for a balance of powers. Both had a common goal: maintaining peace. But one German philosopher produced a book in which he said: a nuclear war? Sure. Come on. Let’s do it—and get rid of human beings once and for all since they are a threat to all other species and, even more, to life on Earth.

Hence, the use of atomic weapons—i.e. total extermination—would be a way for nature to get rid of this predatory and invasive species, a species that remains unsatisfied with its ecological niche and that invades everything. If man were to disappear, everything—including nature—would be liberated.

How can one oppose this argument? Should we say that man should continue existing (regardless of the issue of his own legitimacy) because at least there is a survival instinct, nature has provided us with everything we need, and we can still have children (which can be quite pleasant)? I have heard such replies. As a philosopher, however, I feel bothered by such replies because this is abandoning reason while facing a problem regarding the only animal concerned with his reasons—with the causes of what he does. This is a paradox. And this paradox may be observed at another level: The science of nature (notably biology) consists of a tremendous triumph of reason. But at the same time, this science argues that reason is but a result of evolution—i.e. the result of blind, irrational forces. Thus, the rational would be a result of the irrational. This is troubling.

Under such circumstances, our only option consists of finding an external referent capable of asserting that the existence of man is good—an Archimedes' point granted by its own non-human nature that gives the right to say man must be saved anyway. What shall we call this external referent? I think 'God' is adequate.

### Atheism's shaky ground

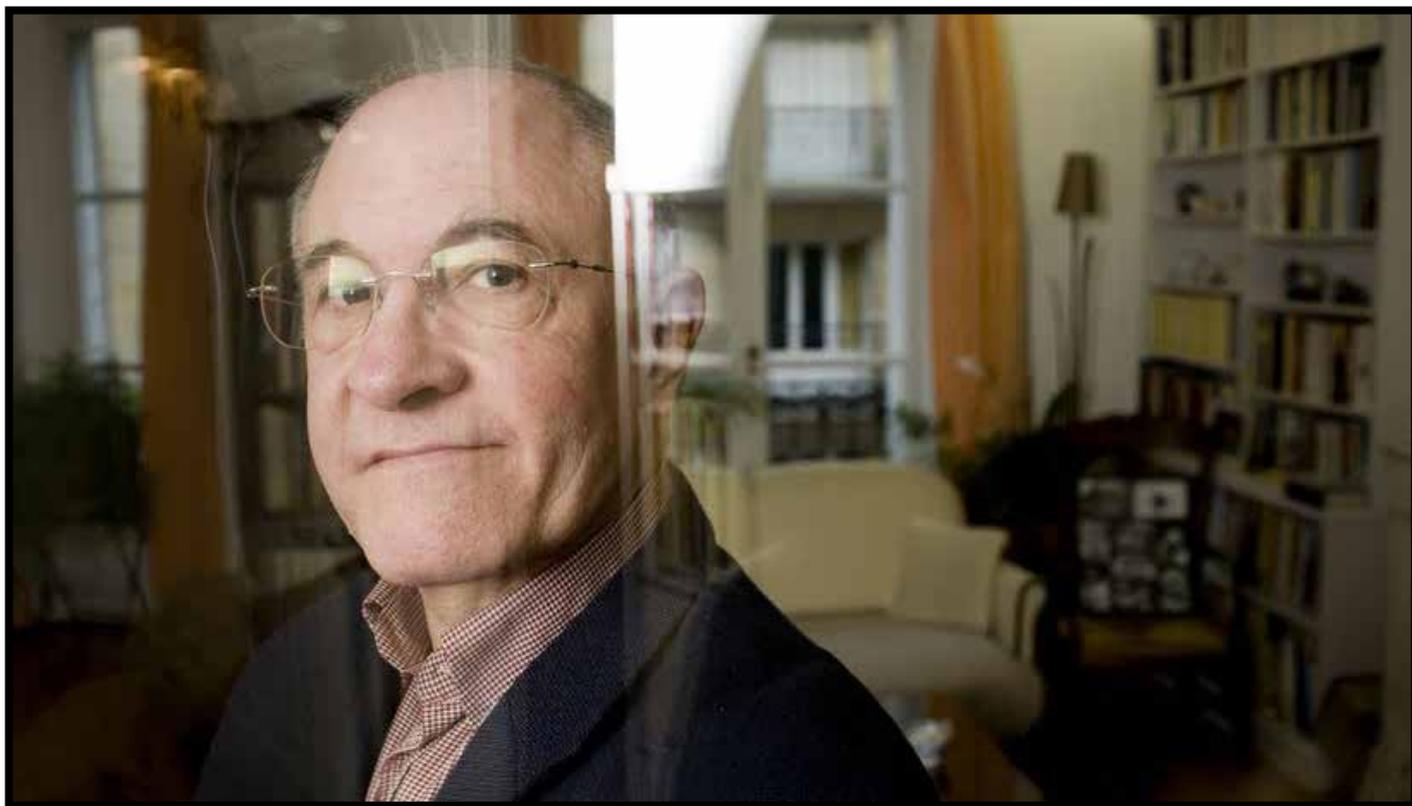
At the end of the Second World War, Fr. Henri de Lubac published a reflection titled, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. Instead of 'drama', I would call it a 'failure'. In it, Fr. de Lubac took stance on a dominant apologetical trend of the 18th and 19th centuries: the view that you cannot build a world deprived of God because religion

is a social need. This thesis was advocated, before the French Revolution, by people criticizing the radical Enlightenment and, after the Bourbon Restoration, by Bonald, Maistre, and others. To this, Lubac replied that we can indeed build a society deprived of God—but it will be an inhumane society. When one considers the time during which Lubac wrote his book, and the fact that he was active in the Resistance, one understands what Lubac was referring to.

Yet, in my opinion, Fr. de Lubac is still too optimistic. Without God, perhaps a society could still be built; but it could not endure for more than a century. It would be a society that logically would not have the right to procreate or give life to illegitimate beings without permission or justification. If born, such beings would probably be miserable, despite enjoying a lifetime of unflinching happiness, since they would—in any case—end their lives in a grave. So, therefore, an atheist father is a criminal.

An atheist humanism could eventually produce a society in which everyone would 'swim' in happiness. But it would be a secular society in the proper sense of the term—that is to say, that it reasonably could not last any longer than the life of a human individual. ■

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Rémi Brague (b. 1947) is author of numerous works in the Arabic, Jewish, and Christian thought of the Middle Ages. Image courtesy of Aletea.