

# Interpretation

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By what right does humanity exist? This is the striking question motivating Rémi Brague in his latest offering, *The Legitimacy of the Human*. Drawing on theology, philosophy, and history, Brague deals with human existence as a question of politics and ethics. He works through this question chiefly by articulating the origins and ideas connected to “humanism” and setting those ideas against what he calls “antihumanism” (4).

Brague divides humanism into classical humanism and modern humanism. Classical humanism includes ancient philosophy and the great monotheistic religions. Whatever the deep differences that exist between ancient philosophy and monotheistic religion, Brague points out a decisive similarity: the notion that there is something higher or greater than human beings themselves, whether that something be nature or a providential God (16). Classical humanism thus identifies human greatness by contrasting it with something greater yet, divine greatness. Modern humanism includes a wide-ranging set of thinkers from the early Renaissance to late modernity, such as Francis Bacon and Karl Marx. What binds this diverse set of thinkers together is an assumption that human excellence is due to human activity, work, and an effort to improve the human condition by the conquest of nature, all without reference to God. The implicit atheism of this humanism is made explicit especially in the words of Karl Marx: *non serviam*. Marx believed that human greatness lay in its capacity to serve as its own providence (16–22).

The origin of humanity's existential question as a political question is far too complicated to do justice to in this review, so I will offer just a taste of Brague's argument. Brague claims that the basis of modern civilization is modern science and its child, modern technology (118–19). Modern science, as a mode of knowing, peers past the appearances of things, avoiding the most obvious characteristics of the natural world for the sake of grasping efficient causes, the causes that most of all make modern technology possible. The modern emphasis on efficient causes corresponds to a de-emphasis of final causes, or the goods at which things are aimed (28–29). But human action is made intelligible through knowledge of the good, and so modern science is necessarily unhelpful in shedding light on human action as human action. As such, the basis of modern civilization—modern science—is unable to tell modern civilization what to do. The problem is exacerbated by modern university education focusing excessively on science and engineering at the expense of the classics and humanities.

Given this deformity of modern education, Brague thinks it reasonable that radical ideas form in modern civilization: the idea that modern technology will shortly render human beings unnecessary, since modern technology can perform the tasks of modern civilization much better than human beings themselves; or the idea that nuclear annihilation is a consummation devoutly to be wished, since human beings are a dangerously voracious species on the planet and cursed with self-consciousness; or that since we are but clever apes, we have no more right to exist than fleas (33–35).

To deal with these disturbing notions adequately, Brague shows, we must reconsider the beginning of humanity. The beginning of humanity can be reduced to two possibilities: chance or intelligence. These two possibilities determine how we conceive of the “legitimacy” or “filiation” of man: Is man, like a legitimate child, meant to be? Or is he the product of random acts that happened to produce life? If he simply happens to exist, and is a threat to the world or could be superseded by a superior being of his own creation, by what moral claim can humanity say it ought to exist (52)? In fact, considering the self-inflicted meaningless suffering and malevolence of humanity, would it not, as Ulrich Hostmann famously argued, be more rational to use nuclear weapons as a means of collective suicide and end the pain and immorality of humanity?

Brague develops this question over the next few chapters by investigating the concept of antihumanism and the modern project. He begins this task by turning to Islamic philosophy, an epistle from the “Sincere Brethren” which

raises the question, By what right do human beings use animals for the benefit of humanity? According to Brague, the meaning of the Islamic Platonists is that human superiority is justified only if human beings attain true happiness. That is, human completion and excellence is the reason for human superiority (70–71). In other words, medieval Islamic philosophy understood that the dignity of humanity and its place in the world were contingent on the good that oriented human life. For Brague’s purposes, it does not matter whether one means a beatific vision or philosophic contemplation. In either case, there is appeal to an intelligent purpose that militates against the idea that humanity is an accident.

Brague then turns to a very different case, that of the Russian poet Alexander Blok. Blok believed that the Great War and the Bolshevik Revolution presaged a “crisis of humanism” and that the future would bring a return of humanity to its “elemental” condition, or a condition of “culture” without “civilization” (76, 78–79). Humanism, as far as Blok was concerned, was the same as modern civilization, and modern civilization was the same as amoral individualism. With its destruction, a new sort of figure would come into being, the “artist” who would shape humanity into something new and indeed superior to mere humanity. Although Blok is not as impressive a thinker as those who influenced him, especially Nietzsche, he remains important for Brague because he represents a recurring possibility for human beings in the face of catastrophes like the Great War or Bolshevism: a rejection of preserving humanity in favor of working for an unknown future that promises to overcome the suffering of human life.

The summary statement of anithumanism is best made by Michel Foucault. Brague emphasizes Foucault’s phrase “death of man,” and forcefully rearticulates Foucault’s argument that the death of God, or denial of anything transcending humanity itself, logically requires the annihilation, real or metaphorical, of humanity itself. As Brague interprets Foucault, limitation or definition is coextensive with humanism—classically stated, humans are neither beasts nor gods (103). Without divinity acting as a limit on humanity, Foucault argues, there is no rational limit to the search for power. Indeed, every attempt to limit the desire for power is a form of humanism.

Since Blok and Foucault are at once products and critics of modernity, Brague turns to the modern project itself by considering the work of Hans Blumenberg. Blumenberg argues that modernity is the victory of “humanism” over other ways of organizing the life of human beings. Furthermore, modernity is a singular stage in human history because it was consciously

chosen by great thinkers and statesmen (113). Moderns wish to be modern. Since moderns wish to be modern, moderns believe being modern is better than the alternative, which is what came before modernity. In the history of the West, this means medieval Europe, or Christendom. For modern men, then, medieval Europe or Christendom is undesirable. Why?

For Blumenberg, the Middle Ages, and thus necessarily the Catholic Church, was an attempt to refute “Gnosticism,” or the belief that nature is evil and that humanity is meant to be emancipated from the evils that nature visits upon it (115–17). Where Gnosticism posits independent sources of good and evil in the world, Christianity claims that God’s Providence rules, and hence that good is destined to rule over evil. For Blumenberg this position is not credible, since providence is originally developed in Stoic philosophy, and is consequently at odds with scripture itself. The failure of the Second Coming to take place anytime soon meant that the Catholic Church failed to deal with the existence of present evil adequately. Modernity sought to deal with the problem of evil in the world—war, disease, and poverty—through the frank application of human knowledge to the natural world. In doing so, it sought to replace a pious community emphasizing God’s providence with a technological providence by which human beings could confidently take God’s place (119).

Thus the modern project came from and in opposition to the Catholic Church. While modernity seeks to have humanity determine its own course and future, it comes out of a civilization that believed that human destiny was determined by a saving God. To that extent, modern civilization depends on Christianity, and we might say that modern civilization is the rebellious child of the Catholic Church. But while modern civilization produces incontrovertible goods such as health and wealth, its long-term effects are not so obviously good. And the thinking that came after modern civilization—the postmodernism of Blok, Foucault, Hostmann—tends to embrace the real or metaphorical annihilation of humanity. Hence modernity provides the means and the thought for human extinction, if not yet the will. For Brague, this is empirical proof that modernity has failed inasmuch as it can neither defend itself against nihilism or postmodernism, nor defend the goodness of being more generally. If modern civilization, and humanity more generally, is worth preserving, we must return to the decisive difference between the Middle Ages and the modern project, and recover a conviction in, and consciousness of, God’s providence (132–33).

The final two chapters are given over to an examination of Genesis, and the relation between the biblical God and humanity. Brague wonderfully draws out how the commandments of God to the Israelites are commandments that over time continue to concretize, make more real and more definite, human existence. Thus he moves from the commandment that being should be, that man should be (and that man is very good), that man should live in a way proper to his species (not as an animal), that he should be free from slavery, and that he should worship God in the Temple and rule in the land of Israel (159–64). The existence of humanity finds its legitimacy in God's affirmation that being is good, and that flourishing being is necessarily limited being, being most actual.

Brague delightfully argues that being is good because the God beyond Being, the Good that causes the world to Be, has made it so (167). Atheism, the supposition of the modern project, assumes that things are as they are, without any divine mandate, and thus is unable to say that humanity ought to exist. It is for this reason that Brague thinks some sort of return to belief in providence is necessary: for most people, some sort of justification for the goodness of human existence is necessary if they are not to engage in self-destruction. At this point, Brague's optimism is perhaps surprising. The Western world seems to be more unchurched, more hedonistic, and more nihilistic than ever before. Recent defenses of modern civilization (e.g., Steven Pinker's) are unreflectively atheistic, and simply ignore the existential questions that motivate Brague's book. One might have thought that the moral horror that was the twentieth century might inspire the return to belief in providence that Brague sees as necessary, but the opposite appears to be the case, at least in Western nations. The comfortable relief of man's estate is a very difficult idea to displace, and perhaps justifies existence for many. As human existence becomes less comfortable, so suicide comes to appear, horrifically, as a more and more reasonable option.

So Brague leaves us with another, sobering, possibility: that a belief in some sort of providential order is necessary for the continued avoidance of some sort of existential catastrophe, and since such belief is not obviously forthcoming, catastrophe of some sort or another is the fate of modern civilization. In this case, rather than hoping for a new Middle Ages, perhaps we can encourage a statesmanship that, at best, could reaffirm the goodness of both humanity and civilization, or at least could hold off catastrophe a little longer.

## GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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