

FUTURES TAMED

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with three human challenges – mortality, transience and change – and explores how they have been approached through the ages. Each of them poses different problems for our relationship to the future but shares with the others the difficulty of knowing what comes next and by implication how to act, how to go on, how to prepare and how to plan. The paper identifies sacred and profane practices associated with responses to those existential threats and considers their underlying assumptions. It makes historical comparisons in order to better understand contemporary dilemmas that arise with the immense capacity to create futures, which is not matched by an equal ability to know outcomes and thus falls far short of appropriate care for long-term consequences of today's actions. The paper demonstrates that competence in futurity had been achieved to a high degree by traditional societies and shows that freedom and progress, so prized by modernity, are accompanied by an inevitable rise in uncertainty and loss of control. The contemporary task of responding to the challenges created by our actions, it argues, is that more difficult when potential futures are no longer backed up by prophecies, providence and instructions on the one hand and by social networks of promise and obligation on the other. Having divested the future of content and rooted human freedom in nothingness we find that taming the future has become an altogether different social affair. As sole authors and owners of the future we also carry the sole responsibility for the outcomes of our future creating actions. It is here that we encounter the major paradox of the pursuit of progress and the assumption that freedom issues from an open future: we are inescapably responsible for that which we cannot know.

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Introduction

To understand our relationship to the future requires that we delve back into pre-history and the beginnings of cultural existence since it is here that our earliest responses to what lies beyond experience have been formed. It is here that first attempts to tame the future have been recorded in myth and ritual, in sacred and profane practices. This paper identifies some of these practices, considers their underlying assumptions and makes comparisons in order to better understand contemporary dilemmas that arise with the immense capacity to create futures, which is not matched by an equal ability to know outcomes and thus falls far short of appropriate care for its long-term consequences

As embodied beings humans are bounded by the cycles of life and death, growth and decay. In the wider scheme of nature and the cosmos, their individual lives are but a brief flicker of existence. They are of this earth, but through their reflective knowledge are also set apart from nature and other creatures and their earthbound existence. Above all, it is the knowledge of mortality and our having a relationship to finitude that has enhanced our cultural distancing from the basis of existence. ‘The idea of death, the fear of it’, writes Ernest Becker(1973: ix) ‘haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity’. As humans we not just live and die but we encounter death, reflect on it, ask questions about it. How death is understood, imagined, and explained has implications for who (and what) we think we are, how we explain existence, and what we consider good, right and appropriate actions in relation to that inevitability and other future unknowns. It influences further how we conceive of mortality with reference to what might come before birth and after death. The inescapability of death has produced a yearning for immortality. Confronted with finitude some cultures have posited an afterlife in another realm of existence, others believe in reincarnation, others still expect life to be bounded by nothingness or followed by re-absorption into the great pool of life from whence they came. The all too fleeting existence on earth brings with it a second yearning for eternity. This longing too is variably translated into beliefs and knowledge practices that impact on the way the future is conceived, related to and constructed. Finally, the inevitability of change, be it of a cyclical or cumulative kind, has fostered an array of cultural practices in response to the problem of uncertainty and indeterminacy. Change, which makes the future unknowable, is not only due to the will of god(s) and the creativity of nature but, importantly as I explain below, is also fundamentally rooted in human action.

In all three challenges – mortality, transience and change – the path to transcendence has been one of knowledge. Knowledge, however, has not been a straight-forward blessing, as it has moved humans beyond their earthbound niche, bringing them often dangerously close to the realms of their god(s). Our ancient myths are replete with stories about this dual role of knowledge: Prometheus having to endure the wrath of the gods for stealing fire to give to humans or Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge, which resulted in their expulsion from paradise, are just two prominent examples. From ancient mythology we learn that knowledge has changed the position of humans vis-à-vis

their god(s) and nature¹. The accompanying practices, in turn, are of central concern to us here as they help us understand the way the future has been tamed and pressed into human service. Before we can begin this exploration, however, it seems helpful to recount one myth about the quest for everlasting life. It is the epic of Gilgamesh, which tells the story of a historical figure, a Sumerian King, who ruled Uruk circa 2600 BC.² It is a tale of adventure, friendship, loss and death, of a quest for immortality and the precarious relationship with gods that enables us to connect human concerns across more than 4000 years of cultural history.

The story begins with Gilgamesh as a young god prince in the prime of his youth, a warrior of great stature who feels himself invincible and thus treats others (especially women) in a thoughtless manner so that the gods had to intervene and create a rival who was to fight Gilgamesh, absorb some of his energy and temper his spirit. The two rivals became great friends and had legendary adventures together slaying dragons and monsters. In the process they upset numerous gods who punished Gilgamesh by inflicting a fatal illness on his friend. Both men had prophetic dreams that foretold their respective fates. The death of his friend confronted Gilgamesh with his own mortality. Grief and fear of death pervaded his innermost being. In this state of mind he set out to confront death and seek everlasting life. Thus he embarked on an arduous journey that entailed many trials and tribulations from which Gilgamesh returned with a plant that held the promise of immortality. However, during a moment of carelessness while he left the plant unguarded, a serpent devoured the magic plant and shortly afterwards shed its skin. Thus the serpent rather than Gilgamesh obtained the power of regeneration.

It was then that Gilgamesh saw his hopes vanish, like so many phantoms in the mist. It was then that he knew he had wearied himself to no purpose, that all his efforts had been in vain, that through his own carelessness he had given away his peerless boon, his pearl without equal. It was then that he knew, with a bitterness that almost broke his heart, that the gift of his heart's desire, so nearly within his grasp, had been lost to the serpent forever – the Serpent of Regeneration who has taken to herself alone, for now and for all time, man's place in the Paradise Garden of Eternity. (Ferguson 2000: 83)

Thus ends the story of Gilgamesh.

Mythology is filled with stories about such encounters with death and the ensuing efforts to gain immortality or to breach the boundaries between this and another life, between earthly existence and the realm of the netherworld, between the sphere of mortals and the world of gods. John Dunne (1979) understands the epic of Gilgamesh as a story about the tempering of the human spirit and it is this tempering, so our argument, that lays the foundations for seeking what lies beyond death and the boundaries of human experience. To temper, suggests Dunne (1979: 12 – 13), can mean both softening and hardening. To temper steel, for example, can mean the softening of cast iron or hardened steel through re-heating at a lower temperature. Alternatively, it can mean to harden steel by heating it

¹ For myths of life, death, knowledge and the beyond see Adam 2004 chapter 1, Ferguson 2000 and Littleton ed. 2002.

² For the full story see Littleton, ed. 2002: 116-133 and Ferguson 2000: 76-83; for comments on the myth see Dunne 1965 and 1973, Eliade 1989/1949, Reaney 1991.

and cooling it in oil. Similarly, the knowledge that all humans are mortal can soften or harden the human spirit. It can soften it by taking away its arrogance and its ignorance of human finitude; it can harden it by taking away its hope. The stages of life, Dunne suggests, are the stages of this tempering. During the first stage of youth the spirit is untempered. Then comes the tempering, the encounter with death. That is like the steel being heated in the fire; it leads to the quest of everlasting life. The final tempering, the hardening, comes with the failure of the quest. This can lead to a number of response positions: to loss of hope, to acceptance and learning to live this life to the full or to a new quest for the realm beyond death. These and associated options are the subject matter of this paper. They form the backcloth against which contemporary approaches are developed and openings for change are explored in later working papers arising from further research on the futures project.

Stabilizing Change and Countering Uncertainty

Change, ephemerality and mortality each pose different problems for our relationship to the future. Despite their differences, however, all three make it difficult to know what comes next and by implication how to act, how to go on, how to prepare and how to plan. The first dilemma I want to discuss in this paper relates to cycles of change. Every repeating cycle, no matter how similar in its return, contains within it the seeds of change. Even the most repetitive action entails asymmetry and direction both within it and in relation to its environment. No natural cycle, we can safely say, is ever the same in its repetition. On the basis of ensuing differences we can distinguish between before and after. In an earlier work I pointed out that even in the physical world the likelihood of even 'one cubic centimetre of air to return in exactly the same composition is calculated as ten to the power of ten trillion years; a mathematical expression for 'as good as never' (Adam 1990: 168). There is no sameness in nature. For there to be life there has to be difference, be this in the form of change, transience and/or mortality. To put it differently, without processes that produce change life ceases. The opaqueness of the future therefore has an ineradicable foundation in the principle of life.

Of Living Cycles and Ritual Circles

Many processes in nature are cyclical, repeating in overall similarity which provides all living creatures with a measure of predictability. This predictability is both encoded in their genes – animals know when to move to their mating grounds, for example - and set up as a predisposition to learn which allows for responses to and anticipations of context-specific differences. The longest of these cycles are found in the cosmos and associated with the movement of planets. On earth we are embedded in annual and seasonal cycles, moon and tide cycles and the circadian cycles of day and night. As living beings we are tied into the cycles of life and death, with the length of creatures' life cycles primarily tied to their metabolism. Our bodies in turn are pervaded by cycles of differing lengths which are rhythmically organised and attuned to the cycles of their environments. Since no repeating process is exactly the same in its nested, compositional repetition, change of an unpredictable nature is endemic to every system. Consequently, unexpected 'surprises' have to be understood not as the exception but the norm. Cycles therefore produce

overall, temporally extended discernible patterns but cannot provide certainty about individual expression³.

The first cultural achievement I want to discuss therefore relates to the taming of cyclically constituted difference and change. The ingenious way this has been achieved is through the cultural transformation of cycles into circles. Circles ensure that the repetition is marked not by difference and change but by sameness. Repetition of exact copies always takes you back to the same beginning. It closes the circle. Change is kept at bay. The circle of unchanging repetition is not encoded in genes but in rituals and traditions which guarantee that reality continues to be (re)created in this and no other way for ever more. Words and actions are handed down through generations, their unchanging form deemed sacred and untouchable. By this cultural method cycles of change are stabilised and for each of the ritualised circles the future becomes knowable. In this first crucial step, therefore, the inescapable unpredictability of life has been rendered predictable in its cultural form. The future has been tamed.

In his seminal *The Myth of Eternal Return* Mircea Eliade describes some of these processes and although the future does not feature explicitly in this work, we can clearly discern from it how the cultural production of circles of sameness impacts on the capacity to foresee and predict, enabling action in the secure knowledge that each ritual (re)creation of reality will be unchanging and continue to be so *ad infinitum*. Archaic societies, Eliade suggests, are indissolubly connected to and embedded in the cosmos whose history is told in mythical stories of the beginning. This reality needs to be recreated and regenerated periodically in accordance with the original model.

[Prototypes] are repeated because they were consecrated in the beginning (“in those days”, *in illo tempore, ab origine*) by gods, ancestors and heroes...

The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act. (Eliade 1989/1949: 4-5)

Myths are enacted in rituals through which the mythical period of the beginning is not just represented but ‘enpresented’, that is, actualised and made real in the present. Change, which accompanies the processes of life and profane action, is therefore suspended through ritual regeneration. As such, Eliade (1989/1949: 89), argues, ‘this eternal return reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming... The past is but a prefiguration of the future.’ We are reminded here of some lines in T.S. Elliot’s poem

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past. (Eliot, 1963 :189)

When change is tamed culturally through the ritual transformation of cycles into circles and by stringently adhering to the original model it is possible to expect a particular future with confidence and certainty. This extraordinary cultural achievement of archaic societies provided islands of stability and certainty in the vast sea of change which constitutes the base condition of all life. The cultural response to change cycles envelops these living processes with socially produced ritual order and structure. It ensures that the

³ For further theoretical work on the nature of rhythmicity and cyclical change, see Adam 1990, especially chapter three and the last part of chapter seven.

future is a sacred re-enactment of the past. As such it allows for extension into the future from the secure position of a people that know what is to come. Creating actions that circle back to the beginning, gathering up all of past, present and future along the way, is thus one of the key cultural means to provide maximum security and confidence in the face of what lies beyond experience.

The Pursuit of Permanence and Certainty in the Context of Human Action

Like living processes, human actions occur in a web of relations. They too set processes in motion, begin a networked chain reaction of doing and receiving, giving and taking that is ultimately boundless. Acutely aware of the complexity of human action Hannah Arendt notes,

...the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation. (Arendt 1998/1958: 190)

The indeterminacy of human action, we need to appreciate however, goes deeper and is even more far-reaching than the change processes of nature within which those actions are embedded. The difference is rooted in variably constituted freedoms related to space and time. Thus, for example, plants once germinated are usually tied to their place of growth and their life cycle is fairly tightly bounded in time. In contrast to plants, animals have freedom of movement across space and, through the capacity of learning and adaptation to context, their temporal freedom is expanded. In addition, human beings have mobility in both space and time. While their bodies are bounded by the same space and time limitations that govern the lives of animals (in parts even more so because they cannot fly unaided, their capacity to swim is inferior to all sea creatures and their ability to move cannot match the speed of big cats or horses, for example) their minds allow them to move with complete freedom into open-ended pasts and futures. These forays into time enable us to conceive of alternatives: transform cycles into circles, build islands of permanence in the sea of change, think and plan ahead, create substitutes for wings and flippers. Most importantly, the enhanced space-time freedom affords us the luxury to change our minds. We can change direction, take alternative routes, not follow rules, break with tradition and not do what is expected of us. The very freedom that marks us as humans, therefore, is also inescapably tied to the increased uncertainty and indeterminacy associated with human action. Culture arises with this awareness and the associated need to bound and delimit what is potentially boundless and limitless. Or, to put it differently, since the web of socially networked processes of reactions and actions that ensue can be neither known nor controlled, there is a need for cultural responses of a social, political, institutional and legal kind to the potential chaos. Before we can consider some cultural answers to the fundamental openness of social processes, however, it may be helpful to trace Arendt's tripartite construction of action as it provides important insights for the issues addressed in this paper.

Arendt's analysis of human action is anchored in Greek antiquity, a cultural period that reaches back some two thousand years. According to Arendt (1998/1958), classical Greek society divided human action into three spheres, each associated with different aspects of social being and distinguished by social standing – labour as the work of the body, work as the activity associated with the hand and political debate primarily

identified with the mind. And, although this is not spelled out explicitly in Arendt's analysis, each action realm is marked by a specific relationship to the future:

At the lowest level of social esteem is the *labour* domain of reproduction. The primary focus of labour is the body and the satisfaction of its needs, that is, birthing and social nurture, care, nourishment, clothing and shelter. In Greek antiquity, this is the action world of women and slaves who labour in the temporal realm of ephemerality and transience. Nothing they do endures: the children they bear and nurture succumb to disease, grow old age and die. The food they produce is eaten. Clothes are outgrown and/or wear out. Shelters disintegrate. At the action level of labour, therefore, the only certainty is that nothing lasts. This form of action is immersed in the change processes of life.

The middle strata of human action, in contrast, produce permanence. This is the artisan's world of *work*. Here emphasis is placed on the hand and its capacity to produce objects that often outlast not just their creators but also the societies in which the artefacts were conceived and produced. The resulting permanence ensures continuity through which the future is rendered knowable. Work thus builds jetties of solidity and endurance on the shores of the sea of change. It redeems the transience associated with the action level of labour.

The third and highest level of human action is reserved for the activities of the mind: for thinking, talking, debating and moral concerns. It encompasses both the contemplative sphere of human life and the world of moral and political action where the rigidity that accompanies the production of permanence is opened up again and reactivated into processes. As such it is the action sphere of human freedom, the one furthest removed from bodily need. The freedom that ensues from action of the mind, however, comes at a price: it makes indeterminacy and ignorance of the future a fundamental aspect of human action. People operating at this level of action are therefore charged to find socio-cultural solutions to this inescapable by-product of human freedom. It is the realm of politics which engages with the past, present and future of the collectivity. According to Arendt, this realm, with its production of heightened unpredictability is not redeemable by yet another higher level of action but purely through the potentialities inherent in action. The potentialities she is referring to are *promise* in response to indeterminacy and *forgiveness* to counteract the irreversibility of actions and their unintended consequences. The idea of promise as a means to delimit temporal freedom is briefly discussed below. Forgiveness is addressed in later working papers.

Promise is fundamentally social in orientation and although it does not eliminate the uncertainty and unreliability that arises from the networked chains of social interaction associated with human freedom, promise can counteract these effects for specific purposes and in certain circumstances and contexts. To Arendt (1998/1958: 245) the power of promise lies in the capacity to 'dispose of the future as though it were the present'. By bringing the promised future into the present we are able to create reliability and predictability that would otherwise be out of reach.

...binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of certainty without which not even

continuity, let alone durability of any kind would be possible in the relationship between men. (Arendt 1998/1958: 237)

Arendt, of course is not alone in pointing to the stabilising effect of promise and contract. It constitutes a key component of social science analysis in both classical and contemporary anthropology and sociology as well as being addressed in futurist writing. Thus, for example, in the field of futures studies Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967) identified structural and contractual securities as scaffolds around the uncertainty of the future, the former being found in the most stable cycles of nature, the latter depending entirely on creation by socio-cultural means through, for example, tradition, rules, norms and laws. To the socially constructed securities of promise and contract we may also add the production of stability and continuity through moral and religious activity.

An interesting example where promise, expectation, interdependency and moral obligation interleave to create stability and security of relations in contexts of potential conflict is provided by Malinowski's (1920, 1922) classic study, conducted during the early years of the twentieth century among tribal inhabitants of the Melanesian Islands of Eastern New Guinea. The practice Malinowski has studied refers to an elaborate exchange of gifts that ties islanders, who might otherwise fight each other, into intricate relations of obligation, moral dependency, implicit promise and expectancy. The practice is known as the *Kula* and the gifts in question are not items of need, not even ornaments. Rather, they exist for the sole purpose of being given to trading partners who in turn are obliged to pass on the gift to others and return a gift of equivalence to the partner who has thus enriched him or her. Arm shells circulate in an anti-clockwise direction through the islands, necklaces in a clockwise direction. The islanders depend for their livelihoods on extensive trade of goods because their respective islands are differently endowed with soil fertility and raw materials. The trade in the non-essential valuables of arm shells and necklaces, we need to appreciate, is conducted parallel to the trade in goods. Presented as gifts rather than items of barter these valuables set in train relations of mutual obligation and responsibility that reach back to the beginning of time when mythical ancestors inaugurated the practice and prescribed its precise form forward into the distant future. Not only does this practice tie trading partners in the *Kula* ring into unending networks of reciprocity, as Malinowski (1920: 98) explains, it also places them 'under obligation to trade with each other, to offer protection, hospitality and assistance whenever needed.' Persons trading in the *Kula* ring, moreover, carry high status in their respective societies. Their status, however, is associated not with ownership and possession of the valuables but with the capacity for generosity - that is, with giving and the nature of the gift. Furthermore, Malinowski (1920: 100) notes that 'the *Kula* involves the elements of trust and of a sort of commercial honour, as the equivalence between gift and counter gift cannot be strictly enforced.' Items are only ever held in trust for a limited period during which the item, its journey and resting places, and the generosity of its trustees become part of the stories that bind disparate groups of island communities into large social networks of obligation. The peaceful relations of moral dependency that ensued from the *Kula* system facilitated trade rooted in the secure knowledge that the ties of obligation will safeguard livelihoods and prevent war as far into the distant future as these complex, open-ended chains of interdependency would reach.

What we can surmise so far about taming the future is that the cultural achievement of certainty, stability and permanence is extraordinarily reliable and affords foreknowledge into the distant future as long as the rules established for those purposes are meticulously adhered to. Thus, the ritual transformation of change cycles into circles works so long as no variations are admitted into the rituals. Promises only bind the future into the present, and thus allow knowledge of future presents, as long as they can be relied upon to be kept. Similarly, contracts offer future security only insofar and as long as they are honoured. Trust established on the basis of *Kula* gift exchange alongside the trade of goods is maintained only while, and as long as, everyone adhered to the rules set down by the mythical ancestors. We can further discern that the future in question is a living future, as discussed in Chris Groves' (2005) working paper. This living future is always already set in motion and requires ritual action to secure its materialisation. Moreover, the foreshadowed future awaiting actualisation is embedded in tradition, embodied in myth and ritual and bound to specified context. Accordingly, for traditional societies taming the realm beyond experience depends on connecting the ancient past to an equally distant future and binding it into a coherent unity of cosmos, spirit world and human action with its inescapable production of uncertainty and indeterminacy. The production of certainty here is conceived as a socio-cultural task. It needs to ensure that past futures are superimposed on future presents, or to put it differently, that future presents are matched to past futures. The taming of the future discussed so far has been variously achieved through the ritual circle, the production of permanence, promise and obligation, contract and law.

What underlies the concern to create a measure of certainty, security, stability and permanence is the uncertainty of all uncertainties, that is, death and the great unknown that surrounds it. If we lived forever, then not knowing what tomorrow holds in store, what happens next season and/or next year, or what will ensue from a particular interaction would hardly matter and certainly would not carry the same weight or importance. Mortality and finitude, therefore, need to be recognized as the ultimate root of all anxiety about the uncertain future.

Encounters with Death and Quests for Eternity

Reaney (1995: xxi) notes two primary features that are (as far as we know) unique to human beings: the 'fear of death' and a 'longing for immortality'.

This is what it means, at root level, to be human. It is a primary characteristic of the human mind that it yearns to outlive the perishable construction of flesh and bone and water that houses it. From this yearning for forever, this aching sense of passing time, springs most of humanity's greatest achievements, in art, music, literature and science. Paradoxically, it is the very awareness that life is fleeting on the wings of time that directs human activity towards the creation of artifacts that possess the durability their creators lack, images in carved stone and marble, words written in books, beauty woven from sound, ideas captured on film. (Reaney 1995: xxi)

In this part of the paper we are concerned with the threat of finitude and the quest for immortality and consider the desire to overcome this ontological insecurity together with some of the ways that have been devised to deal with it.

Throughout the ages people have looked to the cosmos and nature for solace, finding there evidence of the *eternal* that was lacking in their individual lives. Dying plants produce seeds that burst into new life, blossoming until their time has come to produce seed and return to the earth to nourish the next generation of seedlings. In ancient Egypt, for example, the cosmos was understood to take part in the eternal cycle of rebirth symbolised by both sun and moon and the seasonal return of Sirius on the night sky as marker of the impending floods that bestow fertility on the land. For centuries the planets' journeys across the sky have been the source of death myths and rituals. Paramount amongst these is the story about the nightly death and rebirth of the sun god Re of ancient Egypt who journeyed daily across the sky, re-entering the sky goddess Nut's womb at dusk to be reborn every morning at dawn. This imagined re-entering of the mother's womb played an important role in the way death was imagined and depicted. Many a coffin lid was decorated with the image of the sky goddess Nut and poems inviting the deceased to re-enter her womb to be re-born into the realm of the dead in which they will continue to lead a fulfilled life as long as their earthly existence was just and thus warranted entry into that illustrious realm where gods and former mortals were thought to intermingle (Assmann 2000: 27-36).

This trust in the eternal cycles of life and the cosmos has been undermined by Judeo-Christian religions and finally shattered by modern science. In the former God created the earth and will bring it to an end on judgement day. In the latter the earth and the cosmos have a history which may have started with the big bang and may end in heat death or a black hole. In the Judeo-Christian belief systems only God is eternal while science has eliminated the concept of eternity altogether, leaving non-believers to confront nothingness in solitude⁴. In this sense science is as much out of step with the contemporary condition as the past-oriented traditional religions that find themselves deserted in favour of belief systems that look to the future and offer hope. That is to say, the scientific belief system, which posits a finite earth, understands the world on the basis of exclusively past-based causes and has no room for moral judgement, is ill-equipped not only to respond to the root anxiety of human existence but also to deal with the consequences of its future-creating actions that affect people yet to be born, as well as nature and the cosmos for millennia.

One effective traditional way to achieve immortality has been through leading a heroic life that is worth preserving in story and legend. A life marked by bravery, courage, fortitude and great wisdom will transcend the person's mortal life, effectively granting a social status of immortality. Thus, the lives of heroes are still remembered today in mythologies of the ancient world and in the lives and deeds of saints and martyrs in religious histories. In ancient Greece, for example, the heroic life was the exclusive preserve first of gods (male and female) and then of men. Heroism afforded men the status of demigod, granting them immortality rooted in moral action, Arendt's third action level. Women meanwhile laboured exclusively in the ephemeral sphere of reproduction. It was, interestingly, a religion headed by a trinity of males which was to

⁴ The sciences' approach to eternity is not addressed here as it forms an integral part of the discussion of Chris Groves' next working paper.

open up the field of heroics to women. That is to say, in the Christian history of martyrdom women emerged as equals to their male counterparts, proving no less capable than men of the immortality and everlasting fame bestowed to religious heroes. Like mythological heroes, saints stand mid-way between their God and the world of human activity, bridging mortality and immortality, sacred and earthly realms.

Most traditional societies, we need to appreciate, understand the golden age of perfection to be located in the past and social life since to have been marked by a decline of varying degrees of steepness. For them, therefore, the good and just life is one that resembles the past as closely as possible. For such societies heroism is one of the rare means by which the backward spell is broken for a brief period and individual immortality is sought with an eye to both ancestors and successors. Mircea Eliade (1989/1949: 39-48) shows on the basis of examples from across the world that this period of individually based, historical memory extends over no more than forty years and how subsequently heroic deeds become absorbed into the reservoir of mythical archetypes. Collective memory in the modern age, in contrast, seems to be focused less on heroic deeds and more on products: the great inventions of science and engineering, the conceptual innovations in philosophy and the creations in music, literature and poetry. This means that much of what outlives modern individuals is achieved at the middle level of Arendt's tripartite schema of action where permanence is created through the production of enduring objects, enabling individuals (both male and female) to stay permanently associated with their products: Austin's novels, Brunel's bridges, Curie's research into radioactivity, Kant's philosophy, Mozart and Beethoven's music, Shakespeare's sonnets, Newton's physics. This difference is important and will be considered therefore at a later point in a later paper.

First, however, we need to explore a very different collectively constituted way to secure continuity which is clustered around the idea that there is life after death. In order to cope with the threat of mortality and the finitude of individual existence cultures past and present have posited a range of variations on the transcendence of death: rebirth into the domain of gods and ancestors in ancient Egyptian societies, existence in the realm of the living dead in traditional African religions, re-absorption into the ancestral realm of dreaming in Australian Aboriginal cultures, re-incarnation through a series of life forms in Hindu religion and existence in an afterlife while awaiting final rebirth on judgement day in the Christian belief system, are just some of the prominent examples from across the world and history. Religions that promise life after death also tend to provide guidance about the path to that realm, about appropriate conduct during this life to ensure eligibility and about what to expect once the deceased arrive there. Some belief systems place great emphasis on the journey part of the process and since the passage from death to the afterlife is considered difficult, there has been a need to provide detailed instruction to smooth the path and alleviate anxiety about the unknown.

Two such books of instruction, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* have survived through the ages and provide insight into the beliefs and assumptions associated with those ancient texts. The former is a guide book for mourners on how to prepare the body so that it may be acceptable to the netherworld of ancestors and gods. Other ancient Egyptian texts, as I indicated in an earlier working paper (Adam 2005), describe the netherworld and offer tightly prescribed rituals of embalming that re-

enact the mythical journey of their god king Osiris⁵. The Tibetan book of instruction, in contrast, offers guidance for the deceased's soul and is read to the dead person in the presence of mourners, giving information about what to expect and how to behave in each of the phases between this life and the next. Both books assure grieving survivors of a life after death and that a just life during earthly existence is the first step to secure everlasting life. Followers of these two belief systems, therefore, were and are left in no doubt that there is continuity in another realm and are authoritatively informed about actions that need to be taken in order to get there safely. This means that despite their very different contents, both texts provide certainty about the ultimate uncertainty and both focus on action, on things that can and have to be done in order to bring the journey to a successful conclusion. It is this practical element regarding the deceased that makes these books of the dead so different from other religious texts on the subject.

All major religions today, we can safely say, provide not just assurance about a dwelling place for the dead but also hold out a promise for a future after death, a future that provides hope and solace for the hardships that have to be endured during earthly existence. Thus, John Mbiti (1985/1969: 99) reflects that it may well be the lack of a promised future in traditional African religions that is contributing to the large numbers of Africans converting to Christianity and Islam. As African society is increasingly coming to terms with the inescapable globalised western open future, a two-dimensional religion that is exclusively focused on the past and present, he therefore concludes, is no longer appropriate to the contemporary condition.

While the major religions all carry this element of hope and future orientation, not all offer immortality for believers. Despite its essentially eschatological outlook, for example, in the Judeo-Christian belief system does not offer immortality after death. Rather, immortality is a gift that the immortal God bestows on believers on the day of reckoning only⁶. Thus hope based on the promise of redemption is located in an unknown future present which acts as a catalyst to action. As Jürgen Moltmann argues,

Because hope stands in contradistinction to present reality, hope may not be a passive anticipation of future blessings, but must be a ferment in our thinking, summoned to the creative transformation of our reality. (Moltmann 1967: 33-4).

Promise, we need to remember, is never fully resolved in the present, it connects to the past and inevitably spills into the future.

When we consider more closely the nature of promise and its location with reference to past, present and future, surprising continuities emerge between, for example, the eschatological promises of Christianity and the relations of trust, obligation, hope and implicit promise that characterised the trading relations organised around the *Kula* ring studied by Malinowski. In both cases the past features strongly in what is to be expected. Both systems are grounded in patterns and decrees set out in the long distant mythical

⁵ For the Osiris myth see Ferguson 2000: 116-19 and Littleton ed. 2002 chapter one. For analyses of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and other associated texts, see Assmann 2001/1984 and Hornung 1999. The Tibetan Book of the Dead has been translated into English in 1957.

⁶ This point is persuasively argued by Hoekema 1994/1979 in his detailed analysis of the Bible and the future.

past. In the *Kula* it is the ancestors' actions and instructions that need to be followed whilst past relations governed by the *Kula* give-and-take are the basis for what can be legitimately anticipated. In the Christian belief system, God's creation of the earth, original sin and redemption through Christ's death on the cross are the long-term past that, together with the future promise of redemption on judgement day, constitutes the base for action in the present which, in turn, colours expectations about individual salvation. Here, providence, promise and hope are constitutive of and strengthened by the first redemption two thousand years ago. Thus, we can see how in both systems interdependencies are created that reach from the beginning to the end of time, while the promise of future rewards is taken on trust in the one system and on belief in the other. In both cases the future does not belong to people. Instead, ownership is externally located with ancestors and God respectively. From a temporal perspective, therefore, the great divide between the so-called past orientation of traditional societies and the eschatological perspective of Judeo-Christian belief systems is difficult to uphold. Thus, when we focus on the way promise and hope are anchored in past, present and future, continuities and similarities come to the fore and differences fade into insignificance.

The practices associated with taming the future considered so far are both familiar and strange. There is both a sense of continuity and discontinuity with current industrialised societies' future relations and practices. This difference and its implications will be explored in further working papers. Here I would merely like to begin the process of opening up the issues as this helps to reflect on what it means to tame the future and to consider in which social conditions the practice of taming the future comes to an end and something else begins. The belief in progress provides the perfect tool for that purpose.

Revealing Providence, Pursuing Progress

In his classic work, *The Idea of Progress*, John Bury (1955/1932: 22) argues that providence and progress are incompatible. A true future orientation, he suggests, is only possible when the future is no longer pre-given as *future present* but arises as *present future* from actions in the present. In this study Bury shows that the modern drive to produce innovation and change requires a different past-present-future constellation from the one I have outlined above in the *Kula* exchange and Judeo-Christian providence. It is therefore worth our while to consider a summary of the features of and preconditions for progress so that we may be able to better understand its implications for contemporary socio-environmental relations.

According to Bury it was not until the sixteenth century that obstacles to the pursuit of progress began to be removed and a new attitude to the future began to be developed. The move to the new perspective involved the following transformations: The future rather than the past had to be conceived as the ideal state, a golden age not to be returned to but yet to be created. The theory of knowledge had to be one of steady improvement rather than decline. The purpose would be no longer to discover divine design and laws but instead to produce happiness through the control of nature. Providence and final causes were to be replaced as explanatory principles by reason and the past-based causality of the new physical sciences respectively. Another way to think of these changes is through a temporal perspective that maps the differences with reference to their past-present-

future relations. On the basis of this perspective we find that the belief in progress means the future cannot be pre-set or pre-given. Instead it has to be empty and open. As I argued in an earlier working paper (Adam 2005), the future needed to be emptied of all content. This means, not the future present but the present future is the base from which progress can be pursued. Similarly, ends are not predetermined by external sources (gods and ancestors) but established by humans for humans from and for the present. Cycles and circles need to be opened up and flattened out to form a line with one direction only, that is, from the past to the future. The idea of progress is thus congruent with the existentialist idea that human freedom is rooted in nothingness. As Jean-Paul Sartre (2003/1943: 462-463) insists in *Being and Nothingness*, 'freedom in its foundation coincides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man' and which 'forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be'. It entails further that one must not and cannot allow oneself to be determined by one's past 'to perform this or that particular act' (Sartre 2003/1943: 475)

This emptying out of the future, divesting it of all precedent and pre-set content, has its parallel development in the emptying of lived time and its transformation into clock time, the abstract quantity freed from contextual difference that is applicable anywhere and anytime⁷. It is further replicated in the sphere of economics where, as Chris Groves will show in a later working paper, use value is displaced by abstract exchange value. The underlying principle of the pervasive change is to replace contextuality and embeddedness with decontextualised disembedded relations in order to produce a world of pure potential that is subject to human design and where anything is possible. An unintended but inescapable consequence of this change is the rise of uncertainty and indeterminacy to previously unknown heights. When the future is actively emptied and opened, carefully honed strategies to render the natural and social world more predictable and manageable are forfeited, abandoned for the adventure of freedom. As sole authors and owners of the future, however, we also carry the sole responsibility for the outcomes of our future creating actions. It is here, therefore, that we encounter the major paradox of the pursuit of progress and the assumption that freedom issues from an open future: we are inescapably responsible for that which we cannot know.

Reflections

Competence in futurity by socio-cultural means had been achieved to a very high degree by traditional societies who managed to tame many of their unknowns. Change processes were stabilised through the construction of ritual circles. The fear of death was combated through ritual and religious practice. Permanence was established through heroism and the production of artefacts that survived their creators. Continuity was secured through chains of social interdependence and moral obligation and by locating present activities in the wider scheme of cosmos, spirit world and social relations. Today, traditions and moral codes, laws and social rules continue to be the base for what Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967: 45) called 'an offensive collectively waged on the future and designed to partly tame it.' What we need to establish in later research papers is whether or not these social means to structure, tame and secure the uncertainties and insecurities arising from an emptied future owned by humans and constituted in freedom are appropriate to the

⁷ For an analysis of this process and its social implications see Adam 2004, especially chapter six.

contemporary condition. And, if they are found wanting, we need to consider what our options might be and what openings for change might be available to close the gap between creating, knowing and minding our contemporary futures.

We can be assured that the need to know what is in store persists and that the need for practices to counterbalance pre-set futures therefore remains as urgent as ever. Efforts to gain insight into providence, into the will and whims of gods, the instructions of ancestors or the rules governing the netherworld may not be the most appropriate means to deal with contemporary futures in the making. There is a need in addition to or instead of these traditional practices to trace complexities and interdependencies of future creations that potentially reach to the end of time in the food chain, at the level of cells, or in the global climate. The task to tame futures remains but it has become that much more difficult when it is no longer backed up by providence and the promise of an afterlife, by prophecies and instructions, and by inviolable social networks of obligation. Today we seem to find ourselves in a situation worse than Gilgamesh, without hope or appropriate social tools to respond to the future-taming demands that arise from the contemporary condition. Having divested the future of content and rooted human freedom in nothingness we realize that taming the future has become an altogether different social affair, one that requires extensive collective effort and ingenuity.

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