

The Encounter of Two Philosophers with ‘the Crisis of Modernity’: Karl Popper and Hans Blumenberg

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ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of modernity, and in response to its myriad aspects and potentials, which are constantly unfolding, countless reactions have kept emerging in almost all quarters of the globe. A large variety of anti-modern reactions, the common core of which is perhaps the idea that modernity, in one way or another, is illegitimate, stand out among these responses. According to some of these anti-modern responses, modernity has usurped the characteristics and features of religion, which has been the soul as well as the main shaping force of the pre-modern era and has reproduced it in a corrupted form. Two German-speaking philosophers, Karl Popper and Hans Blumenberg, are among the intellectuals who have defended modernity against the onslaught of anti-modern tendencies. In this paper, I briefly, though critically, compare and contrast the approaches as well as some of the arguments of these two thinkers in defence of modernity.

Keywords:

Modernity, Pre-modern era,
Crisis of legitimacy, Religion,
Secularism, Critical rationalism

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I. What Is This Thing Called Modernity

The phenomenon which many writers identify as ‘modernity’ is a complex and perplexing entity whose ‘whatness’ and main attributes are hotly contested. For example, while Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish philosopher and historian of ideas, has declared that “[W]e have no idea what modernity is” (Kolakowski 1986, p. 9, quoted in Elvin 1986, 209), a French sociologist, Alain Touraine, has suggested that modernity signifies “the ever-increasing divorce between the world of nature ... and the world of the subject” (Touraine 1995, 57, quoted in Desserud 1995, 785), whereas for a British historian, Mark Elvin, modernity is a complex that “contains at least the following three components: (1) Power over other human beings, whether states, groups or individuals, according to the level of the system under consideration, (2) Practical power in terms of the capacity for economic production, (3) Intellectual power over nature in the form of the capacity for prediction and – more generally – of an accurate and compactly expressed understanding” (Elvin, 1986, 210).

For my part, I regard modernity as an emergent social phenomenon which contains indefinitely many possibilities of various sorts. Historically, it emerged in Europe around the mid-sixteenth century. I regard the publication of Copernicus’ *De Revolutionibus* ([1543]) as an arbitrary birth date for modernity.¹

The modern age, which emerged from the pre-modern one, witnessed the explosion and release of vast amounts of energy in various artistic, scientific, social, spiritual, and intellectual fields. These energies, in turn, paved the way for the appearance of a plethora of diverse forms of life and accelerated the pace of social change. The rapid tempo of change and development helped to create a fluid situation in which in Marx’s words “All that was solid melted into air” (Marx and Engels, [1848]1967, 83).

Amongst the main features which distinguished modern time and modernity from the old world, the notion of ‘man’s coming of age’ which Immanuel Kant has succinctly and brilliantly described in his ‘What is Enlightenment?’ is worth-mentioning. Enlightenment, according to Kant “is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without guidance from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance from another. ‘**Sapere aude!** Have courage to use your own reason!’- that is the motto of Enlightenment.” (Kant, 1784).

Prominent features of modernity are also captured in a number of aphorisms and catch phrases. For example, the title of one of Nietzsche’s book, *Human, All Too Human* (Nietzsche, [1878]1994),

¹ Paya 2018, 6. It is, of course, not possible to suggest the exact date/place of emergence of historical phenomena. With regard to modernity, while there seems to be a broad consensus about its general, though not specific, place of emergence, there is extensive disagreement concerning its date of appearance. For example, while the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* suggests that “a modern era arrived at the end of colonial invasion and global expansion, which date to the 18th and early 19th centuries” (2023), Lynn Hunt, Professor of Modern European History, has noted that “In 1694 the Dictionary of the Académie française defined *moderne* as ‘new, recent, what is from the latest times. It is opposed to ancient.’” (Hunt 2008, 48). Paul Hazard, a French historian of ideas, has identified the period in which people began to use the term ‘modern’ as 1680-1715 (Hunt, *ibid.*).

or Gramsci's "The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned" (Gramsci, 1994, 300, quoted in Davies, 2021) are two cases in point.

II. The Crisis of Modernity

What is called the crisis of modernity, according to some writers, is the clash between the emerging natural and social patterns and orders and the patterns and orders which had already emerged and consolidated their hold on the outlook of people. The emergence of new patterns undermines the existence of the old ones, which, in the language of Peter Berger, constitute part of the entrenched institutional background of the social and cultural environments in which the free agents operate (Berger 2014). Referring to the writings of the German social theorist Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976), Berger writes: "Human beings, compared with other mammals, have a relatively meager repertoire of instincts telling them what to do. ... To make up for the meagerness of human instincts, institutions were developed. That is, they erect an area of stability where the individual can act almost automatically and without much reflection, and at the same time, they make possible another area in which the individual is free to make choices. Gehlen called these two areas, respectively, the background and the foreground of human social life. The background is strongly institutionalised, the foreground is de-institutionalised; the background is the realm of fate, the foreground that of choices." (Berger, 2014, 6). It is the burden of making their choices on their own that, in the views of many modern writers, has brought about the crisis of modernity for the moderns.

Other writers have used the phrase 'The Crisis of Modernity' to refer to a range of different theses and factors, some of which may have partial overlaps. For example, Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth-century Swiss historian, believed that "the rise of the nation-state, the impact of rapid industrialisation on traditional values and institutions, and the growth of mass movements led by demagogues would alienate individuals from their creative center" and thus lead to the crisis of modernity (O'Brien, 2000, 30). Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevski, each in their own way, suggested that the Western man turning away from God is the root cause of the crisis of modernity.¹ Edmund Husserl maintained that the crisis of modernity was the result of a 'crisis of European sciences' (Husserl, 1970). Martin Heidegger's writings influenced the views of many German writers concerning the crisis of modernity. Thus, for example, as Daniel Herskowitz has noted: "Cassirer, Strauss, and Buber mobilised Judaism or Jewishness as they understood it as a primal spiritual and moral antidote to the dangers of modern secularism and to the comprehensive crisis of modernity that Heidegger's philosophy represented in their eyes." (Herskowitz, 2021, 12). Leo Strauss, the German-American political philosopher, was of the view that: "The crisis of modernity reveals itself in the fact, or consists in the fact, that modern western man no longer knows what he

¹ Nietzsche, in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) discussed the implications of the death of God in a dramatic way, and Dostoevski, in his *Brothers Karamazov* (1879/1912/2015), made the following point in the course of a discussion between some of the characters of the book: "But what will become of men then? I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?'" (p. 833).

wants—that he no longer believes that he can know what is good and bad, what is right and wrong." (Strauss, 1975, 81, quoted in McAllister, 1995, 133-4). And the Czech writer, Karel Kosik, has discussed the crisis of modernity in the context of what he calls "a system of universal manipulateness":

In a system of universal manipulateness man loses the ability and the need to differentiate; that is, both the ability and the need to discern truth from untruth and good from evil. The system of manipulateness is a system of indifference and apathy, where truth mixes with falsehood and good with evil. Apathy elevated to a governing and constitutional category of reality signifies the identification of truth with untruth, good with evil, the lofty with the base, and, accordingly, universal leveling with universal disparagement. ... False consciousness in a system of generalised manipulation is not, therefore, founded on untruth and lies (which are different from truth), but rather on the blending, the merging—the inseparable mixture—of truth and untruth, of good and evil. ... The system of universal manipulation is founded on the technical arrangement of reality. Technical reason organises reality as an object to be subdued, sized up, disposed of, surpassed. In order that man (and along with man, things, nature, ideas, sensitivity) might become an integral part of the system of universal manipulability, first of all a fundamental epic change must be carried out. This is a change in which being is reduced to existing, the world to *res extensa*, nature to the object of exploitation or to an aggregate of physical-mathematical formulas. It is the transformation of man into a subject bound by a corresponding object to which being, the world, and nature have been reduced. Truth is reduced to exactitude of usefulness, etc., dialectics to a mere method or aggregate of rules, and, finally, to an entirely technical entity (Herskowitz, 2021, 12. Herskowitz attributes this claim to Karl Löwith).

This crisis is also related to a number of other important issues, such as the Enlightenment, Gnosticism, and secularism. The Enlightenment, for some of the main figures in the Frankfurt School, was one of the main factors behind all the evils of modernity. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presented a scalding critique of the Enlightenment as they understood and interpreted it. For them, the Enlightenment gave rise to two hallmarks of modernity: 'progress' and 'oppression' (Oram, 2022, 120). 'Progress' was best manifested in the advancement of a type of science, which according to the members of the Frankfurt School, was positivistic in its outlook and whose essence was nothing but technology and 'oppression' in the form of totalitarian ideologies such as fascism:

In a period of political division into immense blocs driven by an objective tendency to collide, horror has been prolonged. The conflicts in the third world and the renewed growth of totalitarianism are not mere historical interludes any

more than, according to the *Dialectic [of Enlightenment]*, fascism was at that time. Critical thought, which does not call a halt before progress itself, requires us to take up the cause of the remnants of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend. ... Our prognosis regarding the associated lapse from Enlightenment into positivism, into the myth of that which is the case, and finally of the identity of intelligence and hostility to mind, has been overwhelmingly confirmed. Our concept of history does not believe itself elevated above history, but it does not merely chase after information in the positivist manner. As a critique of philosophy it does not seek to abandon philosophy itself (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2022, xi-xii).

As for Gnosticism, some writers maintained that the modern age was “possessed by an immanentised form of Gnosticism which, at its core, was deicidal and sought ultimately to place man on God’s throne.” (Kroll, 2010, 20)¹ Similarly, for many writers, secularism, even if it can fulfil its promise of facilitating humanity’s march towards material enrichment of individuals, is incapable of satisfying their spiritual needs. In the words of a commentator: “A possible implication of this intertwining of liberal secularism and Christianity, especially insofar as the former attempts to replace the latter, is that if liberal secularism cannot deliver what it promises—the good life in the form of infinite material and economic security—the modern Western social order is left with a crisis of legitimacy and meaning that demands a considered response.” (Rossouw, 2014, 77). In the same vein, Del Noce has argued that both secularism and secularisation lead to harmful consequences for humanity: “Regarding [sic.] the much emphasised the distinction between secularisation and secularism, I think we have to say that secularisation inevitably yields to secularism in the two forms that this latter can assume ...: the first is voluntarism and absolute subjectivism, the second technological physicalism-scientism. The two forms of secularisation yield, respectively, to the first and second form of secularism.” (Del Noce, 2014, 281).

The list of remarks made by various modern observers about what is called ‘the crisis of modernity’ can be further developed almost at will. There are many books in which phrases like “The Crisis of Modernity” or “The Crisis of the Modern World,” or other phrases to the same effect, constitute their full titles or part of it (Del Noce, 2014, Dura, 2014, Hinde, 2000, Meyer, 1989, Guénon, 1927). Writers from various faith backgrounds, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc., have discussed this crisis in their books or papers (Meyer, 1989, Strauss, 1997, Ali, 2023). Authors representing ancient civilisations in India, China, Persia, Latin America and elsewhere have also discussed the crisis of modernity in the context of their culture and tradition (Bhattacharya, 2017; Andrews & Kuiyi, 1988; Shayegan, 1977a, 1977b; Quijano, 1989).

While the phenomenon of ‘the crisis of modernity’ had been noted by many observers, it seems, at least in the context of Germanic Europe, it entered into a new phase as a result of a long debate

¹ Kroll attributes this thesis to, among others, Eric Voegelin 1952.

which lasted almost three decades from the late 1940s until about the early 1980s, mostly, though not exclusively, between three German intellectuals, namely Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg (Kroll, 2010, vi). While Löwith and Schmitt, in their own ways, were arguing against modernity and blaming it for the crisis of modern times, Blumenberg was trying to defend the legitimacy of the secular age.¹

The main argument of both Löwith and Schmitt was that modernity is not legitimate because it has borrowed all its key concepts from Christianity while emptying them of their religious meanings. Löwith, in his *Meaning in History* (1949), argued that the modern idea of progress has its roots in the doctrines introduced in the Bible and “on the messianic view of history as a redemptive process. If Western modernity has been obsessed with the idea of progress through political and scientific means, it is only because it stands in essential continuity with the biblical idea of history as a journey towards divine fulfillment.” (Svenungsson, 2014, 69) One of the examples used by Löwith to argue for his case was Marx’s philosophy of history. Löwith claimed that:

The fundamental premise of the *Communist Manifesto* is not the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat as two opposite facts; for what makes them antagonistic is that the one class is the children of darkness and the other the children of light. Likewise, the final crisis of the bourgeois capitalist world which Marx prophesies in terms of a scientific prediction is a last judgment, though pronounced by the inexorable law of the historical process. Neither the concepts of bourgeoisie and proletariat, nor the general view of history as an ever intensified struggle between two hostile camps, nor, least of all, the anticipation of its dramatic climax, can be verified “in a purely empirical way.” It is only in Marx’s “ideological” consciousness that all history is a history of class struggles, while the real driving force behind this conception is a transparent messianism which has its unconscious root in Marx’s own being, even in his race. He was a Jew of Old Testament stature, though an emancipated Jew of the nineteenth century who felt strongly antireligious and even anti-Semitic. It is the old Jewish messianism and prophetism—unaltered by two thousand years of economic history from handicraft to large-scale industry—and Jewish insistence on absolute righteousness which explains the idealistic basis of Marx’s materialism. Though perverted into secular prognostication, the *Communist Manifesto* still retains the basic features of a messianic faith: “the assurance of things to be hoped for (Löwith, 1949, 44.).

Carl Schmitt was even more radical than Löwith in his enmity with the modern world. He was a dedicated critic of modern science (which he usually identified with modern technology) and a

¹ In recent years a number of scholarly books, papers and PhD theses have appeared in which the above topics is discussed. See, for example, Wallace 1981, Kroll 2010, Gibbs 2019, Gordon 2019, Griffioen 2019, Ebrahimi 2023, Azarfaam 2023.

staunch detractor of the Enlightenment. He maintained that “‘man is evil’ and should therefore be denied the right to make his own history.” (Kroll, 2010, 8). Like many other German critics of modernity, he was of the view that all that is regarded as modern is, in fact, a secularised copy of Christian ideas. Thus, for example, with regard to the modern theory of the state, he maintained that:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts not only because of their historical development - in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent god became the omnipotent lawgiver - but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries (Schmitt, 1985/2005, 36).

III. Hans Blumenberg’s Defence of Modernity

III.a. Blumenberg’s debate with Löwith

Blumenberg’s defence of modernity and the legitimacy of the secular age took the form of a long, on-and-off, dialogue (mostly in writing) with Löwith and Schmitt. His first serious encounter with Löwith was at the Seventh German Congress of Philosophy in Münster in 1962. The main theme of the conference was “Philosophy and the question of progress”.¹

At that conference, Löwith presented a paper entitled “Progress: a fatality” (Hogg, 1968, also see Chorell, 2021). It was mostly a passionate criticism of the ill effects of scientific and technological advances. He reiterated, among other things, a point he had already made in his *Meaning in History*, i.e., the so-called ‘secularisation thesis’: the modern secular age had borrowed its main categories and concepts from Christianity while emptying them of their eschatological and soteriological aspects.² He then went on to condemn the modern idea of progress, which in his view, was the result of a change which began with the advent of Christianity: while man and nature were at the same level in antiquity, with the introduction of Christianity, man’s cosmological position was

¹ The papers presented at the conference were collected and published in a volume edited by Helmut Kuhn and Franz Wiedmann. The volume entitled *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, Munich: Anton Pustet 1964. A number of famous German philosophers and sociologists, such as Jürgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, Hermann Lübbe, and had taken part in this conference. An English translation of Löwith’s paper was published in an anthology edited by Helen Hogg (1968). Kroll has translated the title of Löwith’s paper as “the calamity of progress”.

² A fellow traveller, namely Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1912-2007), a German physicist and philosopher, and a devout Christian, had defined this thesis in the following way in a talk entitled “What is Secularisation?": “... the modern world was the result of a secularisation of Christianity. That means that the modern world in certain respects is, and in certain respects is not, a Christian world. Contrary to the beliefs of many Christians and all secularists, I tend to the view that the modern world owes its uncanny success to a great extent to its Christian background. ... To repeat it in traditional Christian language: the gods of nature have been vanquished by the God whom Christians call Our Father; therefore man, ..., has received power over nature. ... [Man] is free, and his freedom includes the freedom to act against the will of ... the God of love. He can now subject the world to himself, and secularism does precisely this.” (1964, 178).

elevated to the centre of the universe. In the penultimate paragraph of his paper, Löwith warned that: “As long as we do not fundamentally revise our whole relations to the world and time, but still assume – as the biblical tradition and the Christian founders of modern science do – that the world is made or created for the purpose of man, and human knowledge for the sake of power, it is hard to envisage any possible solution of the dilemma which progress has become for us.” (Löwith, 1964/1968, 94).

Löwith also reiterated a point he had already made in his *Meaning in History*, namely that the philosophy of history of Christianity, i.e. the dominant philosophy of history in the Middle Ages, was fundamentally different from the modern philosophy of history (Chorell, 2021). According to Löwith, while modern history was progressive and open-ended,

What really begins with the appearance of Jesus Christ is not a new epoch of secular history, called ‘Christian,’ but the beginning of an end. The Christian times are Christian only in so far as they are the last time. And, since the Kingdom of God is not to be realised in a continuous process of historical developments [sic.], the eschatological history of salvation also cannot impart a new and progressive meaning to the history of the world, which is fulfilled by having reached its term (Löwith, 1949, 197).

According to the former, the symbolism of the appearance of Jesus on earth was indicative of the profound idea that there was no separation between the temporal and the eternal. At the end of history, the kingdom of heaven will be fully restored. In contrast, in the modern secular philosophies of history, such as the one which had been suggested by Marx, there was no place for the eternal; the end was wholly secular and man-made. However, it was modelled on the Christian idea of salvation (Löwith, 1949).

In developing his defence of the legitimacy of the modern world, Blumenberg began by emphasising that he treated the ‘secularisation thesis’ not as a theological doctrine but “a historical category” (Blumenberg, 1983, 151; 2020, 38; Kroll, 2008, 135). He then used this position to develop an argument for the “reversal of the relation of debt” (Blumenberg, 1983, 151): the alleged debt of modernity to Christianity. Blumenberg argued that if Christians maintained that modernity had stolen the Church’s property, i.e. ideas introduced in Christian theology, then they had to make their position clear about the following three points: “a) the identifiability of the expropriated goods; b) the legitimacy of the primary property, c) the one-sidedness of its withdrawal.” (Blumenberg, 2020, 38, quoted in Kroll, 2010, 135-6). He then went on to argue that none of his proposed criteria can be met by the opponent of modernity: “There is nothing to substantiate the claim of a transposition of eschatology into the idea of progress.” (Blumenberg, 2020, 38) With regard to the first criterion, Blumenberg pointed out that eschatological doctrines and the idea of progress are *formally* and *genetically* different: the former deals with things which are transcendent and “answer to the question concerning the meaning and course of history as a whole”, the idea of progress, on the other hand, deals with events which are historically situated and “is originally a

structural formula for *theoretical* processes” (Blumenberg, 2020, 38). As for the second criterion, as some scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann, have argued, Christian eschatology is indebted to ancient cosmologies, such as the one introduced by the Stoics (Blumenberg, 2020, 39). And as for the third criterion, this is also not fulfilled since “eschatology has *historicized itself*.”¹

Another argument that Blumenberg marshalled against Löwith and other opponents of modernity was based on the notions of ‘self-assertions’ and ‘reoccupation of the space of problems left unanswered by pre-modern time’. He argued that since the fourteenth century, when Ockham and other nominalists revolted against Aristotelian realism and introduced the idea that God’s plan is beyond man’s comprehension (Blumenberg, 1983/1985, Part II, section 3, also 202, 392. Also see Gillespie, 2008), the moderns moved along a path initially inspired by Francis Bacon: to shape reality in ways to serve their purposes. This vision, in the hands of the likes of Galileo and his successors, led to the mathematization and mechanisation of nature.² It also led, through the project of the Enlightenment, to two further important developments which decisively set modern time apart from pre-modern time. These developments were firstly, ‘self-assertion’ and secondly, ‘reoccupation of answer positions that had become vacant’. Wallace, the translator of Blumenberg’s *The legitimacy* has explained the above two points thus:

The problem to which modern "self-assertion" (science, art, 'individualism,' etc.)" is a response was posed for us by the overriding emphasis in the late Middle Ages on the theme of divine omnipotence (Wallace, 1983/1985, xviii). When modern thinkers abandoned the Christian 'answers,' they still felt an obligation to answer the questions that went with them—to show that modern thought was equal to any challenge, as it were. It was this compulsion to "reoccupy" the "position" of the medieval Christian schema of creation and eschatology—rather than leave it empty, as a rationality that was aware of its own limits might have done—that led to the grandiose constructions of the 'philosophy of history' (Wallace, 1983/1985, xx).

Another important point that Blumenberg introduced in his discussion was that modern times did not emerge in a vacuum, and while it was not a distorted image of the pre-modern age, it was

¹ Blumenberg 2020, 40, also see Kroll 2010, 137. Blumenberg explains what he means by the above phrase in this way: “It is not that much-derided *autonomous thought* had seized, speculatively usurped, and violently remade the question concerning the end and goal of history; it is instead the inner consequence of the original eschatological idea itself and its ineluctable fate that forced its secularization. The excessive stress placed on the ethical demands in the acute situation of the imminent anticipation, the inevitable refutability of the apocalyptic prophecies, the necessary disappointment of a renunciation that would have triumphed only in the world’s undoing—these factors force answers to questions that had not previously posed themselves and to answer which theology could not attempt an infinite number of times. The elasticity in answering this question, of which theology had a sudden need, the studied indeterminacy and ambiguity of allegorical speculations, the distinct contrast with subtle dogmatic exactitude in other theological articles—all suggested the possibility that this might, after all, be a question not of revelation but rather of secular responsibility.” (2020, 40-1).

² Blumenberg 1983/1985, 1987. Diiksterhuis 1961 and Gorham et al. (eds.) 2016 have discussed mechanization and mathematization of nature at length. Of course, the main result of these developments in approaching nature was the production of far effective explanations which enabled man to exploit nature more successfully.

connected to that age via a set of problems, albeit problems which were no longer carrying any Christian identity badge. Moreover, what set it apart from the pre-modern age was the novelty of its solutions for these problems, problems with which the pre-moderns were grappling without success. Furthermore, modern times introduced many new problems of which the pre-moderns were completely unaware (Wallace, 1983/1985, xviii, Blumenberg, 1983/1985).

IIIb. Blumenberg's Debate with Schmitt

In his attack on modernity, Schmitt had borrowed some ideas from two other critics of the modern age, namely, Löwith and Voeglein. With the former, he concurred by emphasising that: "We know that the belief in progress of enlightenment and positivism was nothing but secularised Judaism and Christianity and drew its 'eschata' from there." (Schmitt, 1950/2009, quoted in Kroll, 2010, 179). With the latter he agreed that modernity was a modified form of Gnosticism, which Voegelin considered to be a manifestation of 'revolt against God,' (Faber, 1984, 23f, quoted in Kroll, 2010, 169). and a new philosophy of history whose aim was to give history a meaning and an end different from what religion suggested (Kroll, 2010, 169). Schmitt maintained that in the secular version of modernity, man tries to create an earthly utopia from which God is absent, "The new human being is aggressive in terms of the ongoing progress and continuous repositioning of himself. ... He snatched away heaven from God and spread out new realms." (Schmitt, 1970/2008, 130-1).

Being a lawyer and a political philosopher, Schmitt would view everything through the lens of legal issues. His arguments against modernity were no exception. Schmitt argued that for modernity to be legitimate, it ought to be legal, but it is not. Why? Because according to Schmitt "the rule of law [is] validated on nothing but sovereignty, that is, the coercive nature of the state" (Bragagnolo, 2011, 114). Schmitt was in favour of absolutism. He introduced, among other things, the notion of absolute potencies, to underscore God's unique position in the scheme of things (Kroll, 2010, 279). Modernity, however, was neither legal nor the notion of absolute had a place in it. It was not legal, because it was the project of creating a new world and a new order by man for man. About this project Schmitt had stated that:

I am repelled by a world made by man for man (Schmitt, 1991, 264, quoted in Kroll, 2010, 180).

Man plans his world history, / what horrible poems they will be! / Ultimately, they will be but rumors, / which I breed as myths. / But God leads man's plan ad absurdum / for ultimately, man's plan is nothing but merely stupid. / Only you are as stupid as that! So all that's missing is that one there, / Deus sive natura, / Deus Spinozisticus sive Spinozistica Natura. // The more man does according to plan, / the more his plan is prone to collapse. / And God's plan, which then appears, / leads ad absurdum friend and foe (Schmitt, 1991, 275f, quoted in Kroll, 2010, 182).

Schmitt presented his arguments against modernity in terms of a model of political theology. For him the secularisation theorem was a specific application of this model (Kroll, 2010, 265). To further develop his argument against modernity, Schmitt introduced a theological notion, *Katechon* [= *katechon*, 'restrainer']. Its theological role was "to hold back the Antichrist until the coming of the Last Judgment." (Kroll, 2010, 20). But its theoretical role for Schmitt in his political theology was "to act as a 'bridge' between eschatology and historical thought:

The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the eschatological paralysis of all human events and the tremendous historical power [*Geschichtsmächtigkeit*] of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings (Schmitt, 2006, 60, quoted in Hell, 2009, 287).

In his defence of modernity against Schmitt's arguments, Blumenberg developed a number of interconnected theses. For example, he argued that Schmitt's legalistic approach focuses on normative issues and totally ignores the significance of the historical aspects of the issues under consideration (Kroll, 2010, 263). Blumenberg also was not in favour of Schmitt's theological approach. For example, he did not pay much attention to the notion of *Katechon* which was central to Schmitt's approach to the issue of modernity.¹ His strategy, therefore, was to deal with the issue of the legitimacy of the modern world as a historical development and neither as a theological doctrine nor a purely legal issue (Kroll, 2010, 169). For example, whereas Schmitt had claimed that the friend/enemy or believer/non-believer relation in Christianity was transferred "onto the conflicts between the national states," Blumenberg argued far from "adoption' of theological attributes by the secular state," an important cause for the emergence of absolutist states has been the hostility and rivalry between the Europeans who subscribed to various Christian 'denominations' (Wallace, 1985, xxiv).

Blumenberg also rejected Schmitt's understanding of the 'secularisation theory' (Wallace, 1985, xxiv). By making use of a distinction between 'the content' and 'the function' of ideas/doctrines, Blumenberg argued that the idea of progress was modern (content-wise) and although it is influenced by Christianity (function-wise), it could not be identified with any Christian doctrine (Wallace, 1985, xxvi).

He, however, agreed with Schmitt that there was a marked contrast between "the modern doctrine of the state" (where Schmitt had in mind concepts like sovereignty, *raison d'etat*, 'will,' 'decision,' 'friend and enemy') and modern rationalism that tried to comprehend politics in terms of such concepts as contract, consent, liberty, law, and rights. The latter concepts were all consistent with "self-assertion" and the fundamental individualism that it implies, whereas the former, those used to explicate the notion of the state itself, all suggested the possibility, with which we were so familiar in modern history, of the state overriding the interests of individuals (Wallace, 1985, xxiv).

¹ In his (*Glossarium* 1947, 63), Schmitt wrote: "To me the *katechon* represents the only possibility of understanding history as a Christian and finding it meaningful" (quoted in Hell 287). Also see Kroll 2010.

IV. Popper’s Defence of Modernity

While Blumenberg had directly tackled the notion of the legitimacy of the modern world, Popper’s defence of modernity was indirect and in terms of his elaboration of some closely connected critical aspects which set modern times apart from pre-modern times. One of these was the phenomenon of the Enlightenment, to which Popper attached a great deal of importance. The other was the notion of progress, the third one was the vexing issue of the historicism and the existence of patterns and meaning in history, the fourth was modern science, the fifth, his defence of liberalism, and the sixth his fierce opposition to dogmatism and absolutism in politics and epistemology.

Popper was an ardent advocate of the Enlightenment project and its ideals. It seems for him one thinker who would be a true representative of the Enlightenment was Immanuel Kant, from whom he had learnt a lot. In a short article on Kant in *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper, quoting Kant’s famous statement in presenting the core message of the Enlightenment, namely, “Sapere aude! Dare to use your own intelligence! This is the battle-cry of the Enlightenment.” had noted that: “Kant believed in the Enlightenment. He was its last great defender. ... One might well say that the dominant theme of his whole life was the struggle for spiritual freedom.” (Popper, 1963/2002, 239). In talking about Kant and his attitude towards the project of the Enlightenment, it seems, Popper was also alluding to his own relationship with the project of the Enlightenment. As Douglas Williams has noted: “Popper himself, like Kant, tells us that philosophy, understood as the ‘legislation of human reason,’ has ‘two objects, nature and freedom.’ And like Kant, Popper contends that these ‘two objects’ must ultimately be represented in one unified philosophy, for, in both contexts, it is man’s reason, the knowing mind that determines their perspective natures and the conditions of their possibility.” (Williams, 1989, 47).

Prior to the publication of *Conjectures and Refutations*, in an important letter to Isaiah Berlin, on the occasion of receiving a copy of the text of Berlin’s inaugural lecture at Oxford University in 1958, Popper had presented a passionate defence of what he thought to be a correct interpretation of the Enlightenment.¹ Although, in his letter, Popper had stated that he had “a long list” of criticisms of Berlin’s paper, he only touched upon two of them. The first one was a critique of Berlin’s interpretation of the concept of ‘rationalism’, as a central theme of the Enlightenment project and the other an alternative interpretation of Berlin’s concept of ‘positive liberty’ in which, contrary to Berlin’s understanding of this concept, it could be nicely connected to the Enlightenment’s motto, *a la Kant*.²

In place of Berlin’s conception of rationalism, which Popper had found wanting, he suggested his own critical rationalist model of rationality. Popper then moved to his second point, which not

¹ The letter is published in Popper 2008, 199-201.

² In a series of three informative articles published online in 2013, James Schmidt has discussed Popper’s reaction to Isaiah Berlin’s understanding of liberty and Enlightenment. In the above short discussion of Popper’s approach to the Enlightenment project I have partially relied on his paper. In his critical review of Berlin’s *Four Essays on Liberty*, Anthony Arblaster (1971) shows how Berlin, in the light of the comments of some of his critics, including Popper, had made some substantive changes, not with full acknowledgement, to his earlier views.

only contained a new interpretation of the notion of ‘positive liberty’ but also a succinct elaboration of his own model of rationality:

My second point is your picture of positive freedom. It is a marvelous elaboration of the idea of being one’s own master. But is there not a very different and very simple idea of positive freedom which *may* be complementary to negative freedom, and which does not need to clash with it? I mean, very simply, the idea to spend one’s own life as well as one can; experimenting, trying to realise in one’s own way, and with full respect to others (and their different valuations) what one values most? And may not the search for truth — *sapere aude* — be part of a positive idea of self-liberation? What have you against *sapere aude*? No doubt, the idea that anybody *is* wise, is dangerous and repugnant. But why should *sapere aude* be interpreted as authoritarian? It is, I feel, anti-authoritarian. When Socrates said, in the *Apology*, that the search for truth through critical discussion was a way of life (in fact, the best way of life he knew of) — was there anything objectionable in this? (Popper, 2008, 200-201)

Popper’s other serious effort in defence of modernity was his lengthy discussions concerning the historicists’ theses, which, although being presented as modern ideas, were, in actual fact, entirely anti-modern and against the spirit of the Enlightenment. In dealing with this important topic, Popper also discussed issues related to political absolutism and totalitarianism. In a series of articles entitled “The Poverty of Historicism,” in the journal *Economica* (Popper, 1944-1945)¹, Popper exposed the fatal flaw in all such philosophies of history and showed their role in providing a theoretical framework for totalitarian ideologies. Popper further developed his critique of totalitarianism and its roots in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper, 1945/1966).

Popper’s project in this book was more substantive: he tackled the origins of the epistemological roots of totalitarianism in the epistemological theories of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx and their models of rationality. He contrasted these models of rationality with his own model of critical rationalism. He argued that his model, which was inspired by Kant’s model of rationality, promulgated all the values and objectives of the project of the Enlightenment. In the last chapter of the book, Popper discussed the important issue of the presence or absence of any meaning in history. In a later publication, *The Myth of the Framework*, whose subtitle was: *In Defence of Science and Rationality* (Popper, 1994), in a chapter entitled “A Pluralist Approach to the Philosophy of History,” Popper, among other things, revisited some of the themes he had discussed in that chapter, in particular, the important problem of ‘meaning in history’ from a new angle:

It was the theory that there is a plot in history, whether theistic or anti-theistic, that I called by the name 'historicism'. ... I am, however, alive to the dangers of stagnation, including the danger of letting my own ideas stagnate. And I will

¹ These articles were later on, in 1957, published as a book.

therefore not say anything further here against historicism. On the contrary, I will ask here whether there is not, perhaps, a gram of truth in historicism, or more precisely in the historicist idea of a plot in history. In other words, I propose to take a fresh look, though only a very brief one, at my first question - Is there a plot to history (or at least to human history) — and even to answer it by saying that, by and large, the answer seems to be 'yes' (Though I wish to make it quite clear that I do not thereby weaken my criticism of historicism I still regard historicism as badly mistaken) (Popper, 1994, 131-2).

The 'meaning' that Popper conceded could be found in history was the growth of knowledge, or perhaps more precisely, the growth of scientific knowledge (in the extended sense of the term science, which includes all types of knowledge about reality): "[I]f we look back from our present vantage point, we can say, I think, ... that the growth of knowledge - and of scientific knowledge - forms something like a plot of history. [W]e can see the growth of our knowledge not only as the main plot of human history, but perhaps also of the evolution of life." (Popper, 1994, 132-3).

While Popper was not in favour of discussing the meaning of words, and the so-called 'meaning analysis,' or similar approaches popular among the philosophers of language (Popper, 1981/1985, 9n, 181), the issue of the meaning of life and a meaningful and responsible existence, which is guided by reason and lofty ethical ideals of the kind Immanuel Kant had introduced, including his maxim concerning treating others as ends in themselves and not means, was also one of the main aspects of his approach to modernity. Referring approvingly to Kant's famous saying concerning the starry heaven above and the moral law within, Popper noted: "The first annihilates the importance of a man, considered as a part of the physical universe. The second raises immeasurably his value as an intelligent and responsible being. I think that Kant is essentially right. ... Human beings are irreplaceable; and in being irreplaceable they are clearly very different from machines. They are capable of enjoying life, and they are capable of suffering, and of facing death consciously. They are selves; they are ends in themselves, as Kant said." (Popper, 1981/1985, 3).

Given the unity of his thought (Watkins, 1974), Popper skilfully connected his account of "rationality of science," "his commitment to political liberalism," "his anti-dogmatism," "anti-totalitarianism" in the shape of a coherent narrative (Shearmur, 1996, Ryan, 2012, Notturmo, 2000). For example, he argued, in powerful manner how justificationism in epistemology leads to dogmatism in one's knowledge-garnering quest and this attitude, in turn, paves the way for political dogmatism and intolerance (Popper, 1945/1966, Miller, 2006, Oram, 2022). In developing his unified model, Popper managed to revive and defend the main ideals of the Enlightenment. In the words of one critical rationalist: "...Popperian conception of science and reason, and the Enlightenment ideal of the rational society is one and the same as the ideal of the free, open society. At a stroke, a major objection to the Enlightenment Programme is overcome!" (Maxwell, 2006, 179. Also see Maxwell, 2017).

Popper and Blumenberg: Similarities and Differences

A detailed study of the works of Popper and Blumenberg reveals many similarities as well as a number of differences in their intellectual outlook towards the modern world and the project of the Enlightenment. In what follows, I shall briefly touch upon some of their more important commonalities and differences.

They are both, as we have seen above, against absolute powers that stifle men's power. Both maintain that reduction of ills is preferable to the accretion of 'happiness'. Popper discusses this notion under a rubric which became popularised as 'negative utilitarianism', although it was not a description that he embraced¹: "I believe that there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure. Both the greatest happiness principle of the Utilitarians and Kant's principle 'Promote other people's happiness ...' seem to me (at least in their formulations) wrong on this point which, however, is not completely decidable by rational argument. ... In my opinion ... human suffering makes a direct moral appeal, namely, an appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway" (Popper, 1945/1966, Vol. 1, 284-5. Also see Shearmur, 2006, Magee, 1973, Gorton, 2023). Blumenberg has referred to this idea in the context of his discussion of the notion of progress: "Augustine's explanation of the bad in the world as the result of human wickedness; as a species-wide quantity, made it necessary for any subsequent notion of progress that would undertake to diminish the bad in the world also to establish man's ability to lessen his culpability by his own efforts. The idea of progress, as was to become evident much later on, requires a reversal of the causal relation between moral and physical evils; it is founded on the assumption that in a better world, it would be easier to be a better person." (Blumenberg, 1985, 53-4. Also see Kroll, 2010, 242).

Neither of the two philosophers has discussed the problem of evil at length and in detail. However, sporadic discussions of this issue can be found in the works of both.

Both philosophers are against essentialistic approaches in the social sciences and humanities (Popper, 1954/1966, Heidenreich, 2020, Svenungsson, 2014), positivism (Popper, 1959/2002, Popper, 1963/2002; Blumenberg, 1987)² and both endorse the emancipatory role of knowledge (Popper, 1963/2002, 175; Blumenberg, 1983/1985, 6).

While Blumenberg's attitude toward religion appears to be rather negative, as he takes Nietzsche's 'Death of God' seriously and talks about it as a metaphor (Rasmussen, 2009), and treats Christianity as a myth (Kroll, 2010), Popper has a much more reverent attitude towards religion (Paya, 2018, ch. 3, and Paya's paper in this issue).

¹ For the term and theory of 'negative utilitarianism' and its place in Popper's oeuvre see Shearmur 1996 ch. 4 and Kadlec (2008).

² Popper 1959/2002, Popper 1963/2002; Blumenberg 1987. While Popper's attack on positivism is more direct and explicit, Blumenberg's critical attitude towards positivism is more implicit. The following quotation is a case in point. Rephrasing, "Oh Nicholas Copernicus, be glad that you did not end up in our age, the era of the spirit's enslavement, of historicism, of empiricism, of positivism; if you were to come forward today with such a daring, such a heroic apriorism, you would have to atone for your idealistic chimaera, as a shocking anachronism, in-at least-a madhouse!" (1987, 83).

Both philosophers adopt a problem-oriented approach to epistemic and non-epistemic issues (Popper, 1999, Blumenberg, 1983/1985). Both maintain that the modern world has introduced many new problems unknown to the pre-moderns while it has provided solutions for the problems that the pre-moderns have not been able to solve (Popper, 1963/2002; Blumenberg, 1983/1985).

Popper, it seems, lays more emphasis on the importance of dialogue and dialogical approaches than Blumenberg. Popper had famously stated that: "I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth." (Popper, 1994, xii; Blumenberg). Blumenberg, on the other hand, though in favour of dialogical approaches, "is quite clearly insisting that the question of significance or meaning of the modern point of view, whether of knowledge, rationality, nature, or progress, can *only* be asked in a much more *limited* 'dialogic' context than is often assumed." (Pippin, 1997, 267, the second italics added).

While both philosophers held modern sciences in high esteem, Blumenberg maintained that science could not create meaning and tame reality, whereas, in his view, myth could. Blumenberg was keen on the study of myths. Some of his major works were about this subject matter (Blumenberg, 1988). The study of myths, *per se*, was not among Popper's areas of research. However, he maintained that myths of all types form part of our background knowledge and to acquire genuine knowledge about reality, "we start from myths - from traditional prejudices, beset with error - and from these we proceed by criticism by the critical elimination of errors" with the help of evidence, to correct our mistakes, our prejudices, our tentative theories. This process leads to the emergence of new problems, "And in order to solve these problems, we invent conjectures, that is, tentative theories, which we submit to critical discussion, directed towards the elimination of error."

Blumenberg ended up adopting a relativist position and a sophisticated approach (Wallace, 1987, xxxiii; Nicholls, 2016). For him truth was not an objective ideal towards which we should proceed in our knowledge pursuits, it was a matter of rhetoric and negotiation (Nicholls, 2016). Popper, on the other hand, was a staunch realist for whom truth, in an absolute and objective sense, was the central goal for all knowledge pursuits. Moreover, while he was a stalwart supporter of epistemic pluralism, he was fiercely against relativism (Popper, 1983, Miller, 2006).

While both philosophers were of the view that modernity did not emerge in a vacuum, it seems Popper laid a greater deal of emphasis on the role of tradition in helping the moderns to tackle their modern problems (Popper, 1963/2002, ch. 4; Blumenberg, 1983/1985).

With regard to the future of mankind, Blumenberg seems to be more gloomy in his outlook. As Martina Urban has explained

From the second half of the nineteenth century to the 1930s the idea of *Weltbild* became 'the vehicle of the philosophical problem par excellence...'. World images not only frame how we perceive and visualise sensate reality but also point to man's place in the order of being. It is for this reason that Hans Blumenberg described world images as the 'quintessence (Inbegriff) of reality

in which and through which man understands himself, orients his evaluations and his practical objectives, assesses his possibilities and necessities and imagines himself in his essential needs.’ In the modern period world images were also increasingly replaced by what Blumenberg casts as ‘world models’ sponsored by the natural sciences. But due to their pragmatic nature, world models remain indifferent toward meaning structures and normative horizons traditionally provided by *Weltbilder*. Assuming a cautious and somewhat pessimistic position, Blumenberg held that philosophy must resign itself to the collapse of world images and the meaning vacuum furthered by their historicisation and—in order to remain uncompromised by their potential abuse by interest-driven politics—acknowledge the impossibility of their renewal. What is left is the formulation of a concept of *Bildung* that immunises culture against ideological seduction and manipulation and resists the human need for world images (Urban, 2018, 171-2).

Popper, however, was an optimist. For him to be an optimist was a moral duty:

It is our duty to remain optimists. Perhaps I should explain this in a few words ... The future is open. It is not predetermined and thus cannot be predicted – except by accident. The possibilities that lie in the future are infinite. When I say ‘It is our duty to remain optimists’, this includes not only the openness of the future but also that which all of us contribute to it by everything we do. We are all responsible for what the future holds in store. This is our duty, not to prophesy evil, but, rather, to fight for a better world (Popper, 1994, xiii).

Concluding Remarks

More than five centuries after the emergence of a phenomenon which is now identified as ‘modernity,’ what had been dubbed by some writers and commentators ‘the crisis of modernity,’ still challenges many great minds all over the globe. The crisis in question has been formulated in various ways by different writers. One popular formulation which is being promoted by some influential scholars, is called ‘the secularisation hypothesis’. According to this formulation, the modern world is an illegitimate construct that has borrowed all its main identifying features from the old world and has no property that it can claim to belong to itself and not borrowed from the pre-modern world.

Two modern-day philosophers, namely Karl Popper and Hans Blumenberg, have tried to defend modernity against the charges of inauthenticity and illegitimacy. The present study revealed that there are many interesting similarities as well as differences in their perspectives and approaches. Although these two philosophers were contemporaneous and shared the same mother tongue (German), they have had no contact with each other. According to Dr. Rüdiger Zill, who has written a comprehensive intellectual biography of Blumenberg has only referred to Popper in one of his

publications, namely, *Theorie der Lebenswelt*.¹In this publication, Blumenberg refers to Popper’s *Objective Knowledge* (Blumenberg, 2010) and his discussion concerning “the complex of avoiding the immunisation of our theories against refutation.” (Blumenberg, 2010, 241).

A critical comparison of the philosophical approaches of these two philosophers makes it clear that while Blumenberg was more inclined to explore the issues related to the problem of ‘the crisis of modernity’ by means of some sort of linguistic approach consisting of an analysis of metaphors and myths, Popper was more interested in a critical analysis of substantive aspects of the phenomenon of modernity. Thus for example, Blumenberg used his analysis of the myth of Prometheus to argue against absolutism and in favour of pluralism by suggesting that the myth of Prometheus represents, in a metaphorical manner, a division of power between gods:

Only a god can in turn curtail a god. That is the punch line of the myth of Prometheus, which is expressed in the apophthegm. Löwith didn't see it, because he saw in the suffering of Prometheus the justified punishment for the technology which man rebelliously acquired; but the suffering Prometheus is not the last word of the myth, for Prometheus knows the secret of Zeus and his possible downfall. [...] The gods may be immortal, but their power is not imperishable. Man of course does not count among that which can stand against a god; Goethe had learned that by the example of Napoleon, who had been, and not only to him, but also in the iconography of the times, a Prometheus-like figure,²

By contrast, Popper tackled the political and epistemological aspects of absolutism and pluralism with respect to some actual political and philosophical developments. Regarding political absolutism and pluralism, he analysed the factors which gave rise to it in the context of the rule of the Prussian State and Hegel’s philosophy. Quoting Hegel, he wrote:

‘that which preserves, and continually produces, the State and its constitution, is the *Government* ... In the Government, regarded as an organic totality, the Sovereign Power or Principate is .. the all-sustaining, all-decreeing Will of the State, its highest Peak and all-pervasive Unity. In the perfect form of the State in which each and every element ... has reached its free existence, this will is that of *one actual decreeing Individual* (not merely of a majority in which the unity of the decreeing will has no actual existence); it is monarchy. The monarchical constitution is therefore the constitution of developed reason; and all other constitutions belong to lower grades of the development and the self-realisation of reason.’ And to be still more specific, Hegel explains in a parallel passage of his *Philosophy of Law*—the foregoing quotations are all taken from

¹ Private communication.

² Blumenberg correspondence with Schmitt, August 7, 1975, Briefwechsel, 133f, quoted in Kroll 2010, 272.

his *Encyclopedia*—that ‘ultimate decision ... *absolute* self-determination constitutes the power of the prince as such’, and that ‘the *absolutely decisive* element in the whole ... is a single individual, the monarch.’ (Popper, 1945/1966, Vol. II., 43-4).

Popper concluded his analysis of the ‘absolutist’ part of Hegel’s approach by stating, in a sarcastic manner, that: “Now we have it. How can anybody be so stupid as to demand a ‘constitution’ for a country that is blessed with an absolute monarchy, the highest possible grade of all constitutions anyway?” (Popper, 1945/1966 Vol. II., 43-4) Then turning to the epistemological aspect of the same issue, he wrote:

The idea of a philosophical absolutism is rightly repugnant to many people since it is, as a rule, combined with a dogmatic and authoritarian claim to possess the truth, or a criterion of truth. But there is another form of absolutism—a fallibilistic absolutism—which indeed rejects all this: it merely asserts that our mistakes, at least, are absolute mistakes, in the sense that if a theory deviates from the truth, it is simply false, even if the mistake made was less glaring than that in another theory. Thus the notions of truth, and of falling short of the truth, can represent absolute standards for the fallibilist. This kind of absolutism is completely free from any taint of authoritarianism. And it is a great help in serious critical discussions. Of course, it can be criticised in its turn, in accordance with the principle that *nothing is exempt from criticism*. But at least at the moment it seems to me unlikely that criticism of the (logical) theory of getting nearer to the truth will succeed (Popper, 1945/1966, Vol. I., 493).

Popper then discussed the importance of pluralism both for a political system and an epistemological endeavour in the context of what he called ‘an open society’: “An open society (that is, a society based on the idea of not merely tolerating dissenting opinions but respecting them) and a democracy (that is, a form of government devoted to the protection of an open society) could not flourish if science becomes the exclusive possession of a closed set of specialists.” (Popper, 1994, 110).

It seems Popper’s and Blumenberg’s defence of modernity, despite the differences in their style and emphasis, provide a set of complementary arguments, which to a large extent, does justice to the merits of the modern world.

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