

Towards Esoteric Futures beyond the Apocalypse

Mystery and the Sacred in Climate Collapse and Technological Accelerationism

Gijs van Leeuwen*

*Corresponding author. Radboud University, Faculty of Management Sciences
gijs.vanleeuwen@ru.nl

ABSTRACT

This essay problematizes monolithic futures characterized by an apocalyptic outlook and a scientific worldview, which constrain the scope of future possibilities. It does so by positioning the framework of esoteric futures, which serves to show these monolithic tendencies as well as alternative pathways. This framework is based upon an alternative reading of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which complexifies the common utopian interpretation which revolves around a privileging of 'light' over 'darkness'. Instead of focusing on Plato's ideal – and potentially monolithic – state, this essay builds on the metaphors of the Cave to imagine the administration of the imperfect – and non-monolithic – state. It does so through two core concepts: mystery and the sacred. The framework is applied to two sets of prevalent present-day futures, climate collapse and technological accelerationism, to interpret monolithic tendencies and alternative pathways in both.

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READERS GUIDE

Whilst published in the field of futures studies, this essay does not fit neatly into a single disciplinary category. It blends insights from futures studies, anthropology, philosophy and other fields, but does not – in its structure, style, and commitment to epistemic norms – adhere to any single one. As such, it is best characterized by the emerging turn towards postdisciplinarity (Pernecky, 2019). Postdisciplinarity embraces a lack of definite rules, norms or structures, but rather fosters openness, and emphasizes natural curiosity and learning as a foundation for academic scholarship. As such, postdisciplinary research is able to be more imaginative and creative, drawing from diverse sources and knowledge domains, whilst actively questioning and experimenting with the boundaries which define these knowledge domains. Under the umbrella of postdisciplinarity, the specific approach mobilized in this essay may be characterized as a speculative approach. In this speculative exercise, I discuss the rich metaphorical language of the Cave through the lens of darkness, rather than light. This should not be seen as a philosophical argument about the original views of Plato, but rather, as an exploration into the kind of meanings that can be unfolded, if we read the text through a different lens. The framework of esoteric futures, which is the outcome of this essay, should not be considered as a final answer but as an invitation for further inquiry and curiosity. In line with postdisciplinary sensibilities, this essay considers itself as an active intervention as well as an epistemological artefact. As such, it might as well be considered a call to action – even if only implicitly – as much as it is a knowledge contribution.

KEY TAKE-AWAY

Responding to futures of climate collapse and technological acceleration, requires us to adopt a postapocalyptic stance, and recognize that catastrophic change is happening in the present. Science-informed strategies to avoid climate collapse fail to appeal to the sense of mystery required to motivate social change. And futures of technological accelerationism harness mystery effectively, but sacralize technological capitalism as an anti-human force. Alternatively, potential non-monolithic pathways include stewarding new forms of the sacred, which prioritize the natural world and human agency.

INTRODUCTION

A series of mounting global crises, and the associated fear for impending catastrophe, increasingly give rise to the notion that there is no future, or that the future must take a necessary form. Climate change presents significant stresses for both ecosystems and human societies, leading to apocalyptic imaginaries in the public domain (Swyngedouw, 2010). Furthermore, the socioeconomic system of capitalism has superseded all notions of alternative cultural imaginaries and future possibilities, resulting in what has been called a slow cancellation of the future (Fisher, 2013). This crisis of futures is entangled with a global modernity which is characterized by an instrumental, mechanistic rationality (Escobar, 2018; Weber, 2013) which apprehends the future through calculative and probabilistic means (Appadurai, 2013) and is violently anthropocentric (Haraway, 2020). Overall, present-day crises are amounting to a future imagination that has become increasingly homogeneous – in its contents and the exclusion of alternatives (Escobar, 2018; Fisher, 2013; Ghosh, 2017). This essay engages with this homogeneity of the future, which it characterizes as *monolithic*. To problematize monolithic futures, and open up imagination towards alternatives, this essay positions the framework of esoteric futures.

The nature of monolithic futures can be elaborated in several ways. First of all, monolithic futures are *apocalyptic*, in the sense that they anticipate a coming end-of-the-world, and aim to negate this end-of-the-world by perpetuating a status quo order (Swyngedouw, 2010). As such, monolithic futures aim to impose and reify a particular state of being, which overrides and resists any processes of becoming which threaten to transform it. Opposed to this aspect of monolithic futures, the potential of a post-apocalyptic stance – which recognizes the end-of-the-world as relative (Danowski & Castro, 2017), and takes processes of becoming as primary (Connolly, 2010) – may be explored. Furthermore, the orders that monolithic futures impose are of a particular kind: they are orders that prioritize a *scientific* worldview, and function through instrumentalist rationality. Numerous thinkers have elaborated and problematized this worldview. Horkheimer & Adorno argue out that Enlightenment rationality is rooted in the instrumentalization of nature, and is blind to its own dark, mythological side (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Jacques Ellul describes a totalizing regime of technicity and efficiency which is intrinsic to the functioning of modern societies (Ellul, 2021). And, Iain McGilchrist describes how today's world is dominated by left-brain thinking, which serves to manipulate the external world through abstract logic, over right-brain thinking which sees the interconnectedness of 'the Whole' (McGilchrist, 2019). Overall, the scientific mind has a tendency to disregard diverse forms of religious and spiritual life – which it pejoratively categorizes as 'superstition' – and prioritize cognition over embodied and affective interaction with the environment (Ingold, 2011; Massumi, 1995). Still, whether as a search for 'deep meaning' (Stacey, 2024) or a 'shared act of attention' (Appiah, 2025), the category of religion remains very much relevant today.

Hence, this essay opposes monolithic futures as static, rational orders which suppress alternative ways of being and becoming characterized by transrational and embodied qualities. This is done by discussing one of the most influential texts in Western intellectual history, namely Plato's Allegory of the Cave. This choice for this text, which revolves around a dichotomy between light and darkness, was informed by the theme of this special issue: *Reframing darkness*. In the Cave, light is symbolically associated with the good, the intellect, and being, whereas the dark is associated with evil, becoming and superstition. Furthermore, the Republic – the greater text within which the Cave is situated – has been interpreted through a utopian lens, and has been argued to expound a monolithic and totalitarian view of society. In contrast to this common reading, this essay surfaces an alternative interpretation informed by the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Based on this alternative

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reading, the essay explores oft-overlooked elements of the Cave in more detail, in particular those pertaining to darkness. Through this exploration, the essay positions the framework of esoteric futures. Rather than the eternal forms of justice and the good, esoteric futures focuses on the distribution of power, and how this distribution depends on a recognition of *mystery* and the *sacred*. To operationalize the framework of esoteric futures, two sets of common present-day futures are discussed: climate collapse and technological accelerationism. Using the esoteric futures framework, the essay highlights monolithic tendencies, as well as non-monolithic pathways, which are implicit in these futures.

BEYOND UTOPIA IN PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

The Allegory of the Cave, which can be found in book seven of Plato's Republic (Plato, 2000), revolves around a dichotomy of light and darkness, and is written in Plato's characteristic dialogic form. Socrates the philosopher converses with Glaucon, a young aristocrat in Athens, about how the *kallipolis*, or the perfect state, should be ruled, and what the role of philosophers should be. A common interpretation of Plato's views is that the perfect state should be ruled by the philosopher-king, who through his intellectual familiarity with the Platonic forms of Justice and the Good, is best able to enact justice (Hall, 1980; Reeve, 2006). This section will discuss this interpretation and others, and adopt a reading that holds that the Cave highlights important complexities about the reconciliation of philosophy and politics. It does so by elaborating on the diverse metaphors which are mobilized in the Cave, which informs the conception of esoteric futures in the next section. Note that in the remainder of this essay, the Cave with upper case refers to the allegory as a whole, whilst the cave with lower case refers to the physical domain within the allegory.

In the exposition of the allegory, Socrates describes a group of people which are chained to the wall of a dark cave, which has a passageway up to the surface. These prisoners have been in this position since childhood and are unable to turn around and perceive their surroundings. All they can see are shadows dancing upon the wall – of people, of animals, enacting diverse scenes – which they take to be all of reality. Behind the prisoners, several people – referred to as the puppeteers – move figurines in front of a fire to cast the shadows on the wall. Socrates discusses that, if one of the prisoners were to be liberated from their chains, this is hardly a smooth and voluntary process: 'when any of them is liberated and compelled to suddenly [...] look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains, the glare will distress him' (Plato, 2000, p. 178). If the prisoner continues to be 'reluctantly dragged' into the sunlight at the surface, he will at first be unable to see anything at all, but after some readjustment he can ascertain the most real existence of the Platonic forms, of the good, of justice and of mathematics, which is represented by the sunlight. The prisoner's journey represents 'the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world', where 'the idea of the good appears [...] the universal author of all things beautiful and right' (Plato, 2000, p. 179).

Figure 1. Visualization of Plato's Allegory of the Cave.



Image generated using Gemini, Nano Banana 2. Prompt used: "Make an image of Plato's Cave. The cave has two floors. On the lower floor, prisoners are chained sitting against the cave wall, looking at the opposite cave wall and the shadows dancing upon it. On the floor above, behind the prisoners, puppeteers are dancing figurines in front of a fire. Thereby they cast the shadows on the opposite wall. Behind the puppeteers, a passageway up to the surface can be seen. Bright sunlight shines at the surface."

The meaning of the ascent is elaborated by the following passage: 'just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being' (Plato, 2000, p. 180). This quote is significant in several aspects. Firstly, the bright upper world of the Platonic forms represents the *being* of eternal truths, whereas the dark cave represents the *becoming* of the material world. Secondly, the 'whole soul' (*psyche*) must be turned, which for Plato consists of three parts: the upper faculty of reason, the middle faculty of spirit and the lower faculty of appetite (Reeve, 2006). While the faculty of reason is in charge of this process, it is not a narrow, detached rationalism: if the entire soul is not turned, the intellect is akin to 'the narrow intelligence flashing from the keen eye of a clever rogue [...] he is the reverse of blind, but his keen eye-sight is forced into the service of evil' (Plato, 2000, p. 181). Hence, Plato's higher intellect is not a narrow rationality which operates through quantification and analysis, but encompasses all the faculties and qualities of the soul.

Two main interpretations exist for the Cave: the epistemological or 'orthodox' reading, and the political reading (Hall, 1980). The epistemological reading holds that the main lesson of the Cave is the need for philosophical education. In this view, the shadows of the cave represent the illusions, opinions and superstitions held by most people, whereas the journey of ascent symbolizes the intellectual attainment of the philosopher. Taken as such, the Cave could be taken to advocate for the necessity of a particular kind of universalist – and hence, potentially monolithic – philosophical education. In contrast to the epistemological reading, various authors have argued that the primary meaning of the Cave is political (Abensour, 2007; Ferguson, 1922; Zamosc, 2017). Ferguson (1922), provides the original and most comprehensive version of this reading, and argues that the prisoners are not merely

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imprisoned by their own state of mind, but by the shadows of the social world. In his view, which I adopt here, the political reading encompasses – rather than displaces – the epistemological reading (Ferguson, 1922). The case for the political reading is supported by what happens next, as Socrates describes how the ascended prisoner – who has now become a philosopher – needs to ‘unwillingly descend to human affairs’ (Plato, 2000, p. 180). This descent is the key political move, as it symbolizes the turn from philosophical knowing to political action. The process of descent is accompanied by the same ‘bewilderment’ as the ascent, as the philosopher must become reacquainted with society (Plato, 2000, p. 180).

At this point, it is informative to consider the most common political interpretation of the Cave: the utopian reading. Socrates explains what should be the course of action of ‘us who are the founders of the State’ (Plato, 2000, p. 181). This action consists firstly in compelling the ascent for those who are suited, and secondly, to compel them yet again to ‘descend among the prisoners in the den, and partake of their labors and honors, whether they are worth having or not’ (Plato, 2000, p. 181). The need to ‘compel’ the newly initiated philosophers to rule is notable, as the unwillingness to rule is precisely what makes them suitable as rulers, according to Socrates. The repeated emphasis on the need to compel is part of the reason why the Cave, and the *kallipolis* it symbolizes, has been regarded as an inclination towards authoritarianism, where the enlightened caste of philosopher-king can bring about the perfect state of utopia (Schofield, 2006). In particular, Karl Popper mobilized a critique of Plato’s political philosophy, regarding it as a totalitarian utopia antithetical to democracy, universal values and self-determination (Popper & Gombrich, 2013). Under this utopian interpretation, Plato’s perfect state is itself the monolith which negates degeneration, pluralism and becoming, through an imposition and reification of being – as the ideal forms of the good and justice – embodied in the philosopher-king caste.

There are other possible interpretations besides the utopian reading, however. Of particular interest is the idea that the Cave does not unambiguously promote one political system or the other, but is actually a commentary on the complexities of reconciling philosophical and political life. The key interpreter of this view, is Leo Strauss, whose interpretation in *City and Man* (Strauss, 2007) has been characterized as Platonic Liberalism (S. Smith, 2000). In Strauss’ view, Plato’s *Republic* is not a utopian but an anti-utopian work, in the sense that it explores the limits of justice instead of advocating its totalitarian imposition. The key to this interpretation lies in the literary form of the *Republic*: Socrates’ description of the Cave allegory, and the perfect state, must be read in relation to his conversation partner Glaucon, and in the context of the greater drama of the *Republic*, which – according to Strauss – obfuscates Plato’s real views (Strauss, 2007).

Strauss’ view can be illustrated with the following passage, where he comments on how the philosopher-king can come to rule in Plato’s perfect state: ‘This coincidence of philosophy and political power is very difficult to achieve, very improbable, but not impossible. To bring about the needed change on the part of the city, of the non-philosophers or the multitude, the right kind of persuasion is necessary and sufficient’ (Strauss, 2007, p. 123). Strauss argues that the only way for the philosopher-kings to maintain political authority is to persuade the population to voluntarily recognize, and hence legitimize, their rule. However, since the philosopher-kings themselves actually do not desire to rule, and the population does not desire to follow them, only the option of compulsion is left, as is suggested by the language which Plato himself uses. But if both ruler and ruled must be compelled, then who is there to do the compelling? Because of such inconsistencies, and because of the dialogic drama of the *Republic*, Strauss argues that it is highly unlikely that Plato intended for the philosopher-king to be a realistic option (S. Smith, 2000). In his view, Plato shows the impossibility of reconciling politics and philosophy: to mix the two is to corrupt philosophy with mere opinion, and to risk the totalitarian rule by philosophers (S. Smith, 2000).

Not all agree with Strauss' interpretation - Hall critiques his account and argues that Plato was a sincere political reformer (Hall, 1977). What is interesting about Strauss' interpretation, however, is that it opens the door towards different ways of thinking about the relationship between philosophy and politics. As Strauss says, the perfect state is impossible: 'Even political life at its best is like life in a cave, so much so that the city can be identified with the cave' (Strauss, 2007, p. 125). Following this quote, we can read the Cave through a different lens: what is political life in the cave *actually* like, and how can it be non-monolithic?

IMAGINING THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE IMPERFECT STATE

In addressing this question, I for now leave Strauss' conclusion - that philosophy and politics are irreconcilable - behind, but follow up on his view that Plato's views 'awaken us to the mystery' and 'assist us in articulating that mystery' (Strauss, 2007, p. 62). Can we proceed to explore other relationships between philosophy - i.e., the search for truth - and politics, which are not monolithic but also not incoherent? To do so, this section will tend in more speculative directions by building on several metaphors in the Cave - especially the 'darker' elements, which Plato himself does not elaborate in detail. As opposed to the light of intellectual truth, these darker elements make up the fabricated, artificial state of the cave, and hence represent the common situation of human societies.

Opposed to Plato's *kallipolis*, the cave represents the imperfect state, the stability of which is maintained through the shadow-casting apparatus, composed of the fire, the figurines and the prisoners' chains. The imperfect state is administered by the puppeteers, who likely represent poets and sophists shaping public opinion in Plato's Athens (Ferguson, 1922). These poets and sophists represent power for power's sake: mind control which is not grounded in truth. The shadows they produce represent the diverse opinions, stories and imaginations that circulate in the city, and which educate - or indoctrinate - its population from childhood. Hence, the shadow-play represents the social, cultural, political dynamics of society, where the puppeteers and prisoners represent, respectively, the producers and consumers of cultural artefacts. Now we might ask: what if it is accepted that this imperfect state is simply a reality to be faced rather than transcended? Rather than imagine the perfect state, which is inevitably monolithic, the question is how the imperfect state should be administered. The imperfect state is the inverse of the perfect state: it is not being superimposed upon becoming, but being subjected to becoming. The imperfect state is a human effort to create local stability and temporary order in the face of *entropic becoming*: the natural process of change, transformation and degeneration which all societies face.

We can imagine several pathways for the philosopher to participate in the administration of the imperfect state, after completing the disorienting process of descent. First of all, the philosopher might get involved in the shadow-play to cast shadows of their own, which - informed by their experience of the perfect forms - would provide a better representation of reality. To do so, the philosopher can collaborate with the puppeteers, i.e. negotiate with status quo powers to gain influence. Alternatively, they may engage in a power struggle for control over the fire - i.e., attempt to seize the means of cultural production - or start a fire of their own, to cast shadows which are more compelling. Plato describes this as being 'compelled to fight in courts of law, or in other places, about the images or the shadows of images of justice' (Plato, 2000, p. 180). In today's world, the 'fight about the shadows of the images of justice' may represent the increasingly fragmented media landscape of information warfare, where a multitude of voices - more and less truthful - are competing for territory and influence. The philosopher may have to get involved in this information

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warfare, lest the prisoners are compelled by illusory images. Importantly, all of this remains invisible to the prisoners: they are subject to the forms which are cast toward them, unaware of the people who cast these shadows, or of the extent to which these shadows are rooted in truthfulness.

The radical power asymmetry between prisoners and puppeteers is an affront to the idea of equality, making it likely that the philosopher will explore a second avenue for administering the imperfect state: the liberation of the prisoners. Therefore, we should investigate the nature of the prisoners' chains, and the way in which they may be fastened or released. As Hall describes, the epistemological reading considers the prisoners to be trapped by their own state of mind, whereas the political reading considers them to be enslaved through political corruption (Hall, 1980). In line with his views, and those of Ferguson, I consider the prisoners' chains to represent a combination of both: 'the chains, the steep and hard way up, and the struggle, all typify the resistance of formed psychical dispositions and of the institution that has moulded them' (Ferguson, 1922, p. 25). It is through these 'psychical dispositions' that a limited set of specific cultural artefacts is taken to be the whole of reality. Since liberation from these dispositions is, as Plato describes, rather shocking, we can safely assume that there are two types of prisoners. On the one hand, there are those who wish to be liberated and initiated into greater truths; on the other hand, there are those who would rather remain chained to their known comforts. Importantly, the imperfect state will have to account for both. For the would-be ascenders, the philosopher may endeavor to craft systems of guidance, education and initiation which – importantly – facilitate the 'turning of the whole soul', not just the rational part. For those who remain below, the philosopher may endeavor to craft shadows that promote constructive behaviors so that the cave remains livable.

A final important point concerns the nature of the light: the differences and similarities between the sun and the fire. As the light source where shadows are produced, the fire is not a mere source of illusory truth, but a central component of the machinery which stabilizes the fabricated reality of society. In contrast, the sun projects the light of the perfect forms and eternal truth. Hence, both may be taken as sources of *meaning*: the sun is the source of *revealed* meaning, whereas the fire is the source of *manufactured* meaning. For the philosopher to contribute to better administration than the puppeteers are capable of, this administration should – presumably – be informed by the light of the sun, i.e. grounded in truth. Besides this important difference, the fire and sun are importantly similar in another way: both are accessed only by a small elite. The sunlight is accessed by an intellectual elite, whereas the fire is accessed by a political elite. The prisoners don't know who these elites are, and may not even know of their existence.

To synthesize, this reading of the cave does not highlight the question of the perfect state, but the imperfect state. A struggle for power, and the competition between a multitude of shadows grounded in illusion, half-truth and truth, is inherent in the imperfect state. It consists of different types of prisoners want to either be freed or remain chained, and must account for both groups. In the imperfect state, philosophers can participate but have not power or legitimacy to lay down a totalitarian system – and nor does anyone else. The imperfect state is subject to entropic becoming – the natural process of degeneration – and harnesses the machinery of political power to maintain stability. With the image of the imperfect state spelled out, the question becomes: what are the conceptual leverage points around which this image revolves? And how may these be mobilized to inform futures which are not monolithic? This will be the subject of the rest of this essay.

TOWARDS ESOTERIC FUTURES: MYSTERY AND THE SACRED

This section positions the framework of *esoteric futures*, which serves to analyze the potential of futures to be non-monolithic. It is concerned with the role of the esoteric, which means 'hidden' or 'secret', in the propagation of monolithic power and its resistance. As this framework builds on Strauss' reading of Plato, it is informative to mention that Strauss describes his reading of Plato as an esoteric reading, arguing that philosophers often had to 'hide' their real views in-between the lines to avoid political persecution (Strauss, 1988). Hence, this hiddenness is a feature which avoids capture by monolithic power, but may also support it by hiding its operations.

The starting point for this framework is the imperfect state – the natural condition of society – which has been described above. While the perfect state is considered monolithic by definition, the imperfect state is not non-monolithic by definition. The esoteric futures framework serves to interpret pathways for the imperfect state to be both *non-monolithic*, in that it allows for the co-emergence of distinct power centers, and *legitimate*, in the sense that it has a known relationship to truth. This section proceeds to describe the two key concepts of esoteric futures, namely *mystery* and *the sacred*, and interprets how these follow from the Cave allegory.

While the epistemological reading of the Cave prioritizes education into universal truths, the political reading emphasizes the importance of various forms and degrees of unknowing. The prisoners are unaware of anything beyond their narrow reality, the philosopher's ascent and descent are characterized by a disorienting state of half-shadow, and both prisoners and puppeteers are ignorant of the upper world. As a whole, the imperfect state is subject to the fundamental uncertainties of its own futures: it is subject to an existential unknown which motivates the puppeteers' practice of upholding the machinery of power. To further emphasize and unpack this unknowingness, the esoteric futures framework makes use of the concept of *mystery*. Mystery denotes states of half-knowing, which are not characterized by their relationship to factual truth, but by their emotive character and capacity to inspire agency. As such, mystery is not unlike mythology (Stacey, 2024). States of mystery can be simultaneously fascinating, anxiety-inducing and puzzling, and invite active exploration.

The esoteric futures framework distinguishes three forms of mystery. The first of these is *existential mystery*, which pertains to the fundamental uncertainty associated with an apprehension of the future. Rather than the *kallipolis*, the perfect state where becoming is subjected to being, the imperfect state is characterized by the subjection of being to entropic becoming. In other words: the imperfect state is subject to degeneration, and is vulnerable to collapse, disaster and corruption. This condition is characterized by existential mystery, which especially motivates the actions of the puppeteers: the status quo powers, which attempt to uphold stability of the state through mechanisms of control, which aim to reduce uncertainty. These mechanisms are akin to ways in which contemporary society tends towards prediction, quantification and colonization of futures (Adam, 2008; Appadurai, 2013). Importantly, these mechanisms enjoy their legitimacy precisely because of the existence of existential mystery.

Because of their narrow purview of reality, the prisoners are spared existential mystery – instead, they enjoy *popular mystery*. Popular mystery relates to the concept of the noble lie, which Plato introduces in the Republic: 'How then may we devise one of those needful falsehoods of which we lately spoke – just one royal lie which may deceive the rules, if that be possible, and at any rate the rest of the city?' (Plato, 2000, p. 86). The noble lie is foundational to Strauss' argument – he considers the noble lie to 'make the citizens forget

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the truth about their education or the true character of their becoming citizens' and to justify the 'fundamental inequality' between the different social classes as divinely mandated (Strauss, 2007, p. 102). Overall, popular mystery is what keeps the prisoners chained, or what makes them want to be chained. In contemporary terms, it may consist in the commonly shared narratives which are propagated through religion or mass media and entertainment. The distinctive characteristic of these narratives is not their factuality, but their role in upholding social order.

Finally, the ascending and descending philosophers face *initiatory mystery*. This form of mystery may be understood to emerge in states of liminality (Andrews & Roberts, 2012; Thomassen, 2009), as it characterizes the disorienting in-between states where the philosopher is transitioning into new realities of either ontological or political significance. In the Republic, Socrates is clear that the rulers of the state must devise ways of 'compelling' people to undertake these transformations, so that they can be initiated into greater knowing and action. Hence, initiatory mystery – like the others – must be actively designed and institutionalized. Initiatory mystery is characterized by a sense of anticipation, as the experience of being pulled forward in time, which comes with fear and anxiety (Bryant & Knight, 2019). Initiatory mystery must serve the turning of the whole soul, and hence, is not merely akin to the transfer of knowledge and information.

If mystery characterizes states of half-knowing, then how should we understand the sources of light, the sun and the fire, around which the imperfect state revolves, and which are guarded by elites? In the esoteric futures framework, these are designated as instances of *the sacred*. This will be elaborated by drawing from the religious scholar Mircea Eliade, and his view of the sacred. Eliade regards the sacred as a 'wholly different order' (Eliade, 1987, p. 10) that is 'saturated with being' (Eliade, 1987, p. 12) and that is central to the structure of pre-modern societies, as he regards the sacred to 'ontologically found the world' (Eliade, 1987, p. 21). As such, the sacred is the foundational reality which binds a society together: 'for the man of all pre-modern societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and [...] to *reality*' (Eliade, 1987, p. 12). Eliade's conception, which he has described as Platonic (Eliade, 2018, p. 34), encompasses both the sun – as ontological reality – and the fire – as the center of human society. There is an important difference between them, however, which may be inferred from a critique of Eliade's view: Jonathan Smith argues that Eliade's model is too simplistic, and is based on the views of priestly elites who have a vested interest in maintaining power (J. Smith, 1993, p. xii). Hence, Smith suggests that some instances of the sacred are not characterized by their relationship to ontological truth, but by their instrumental role in upholding power.

Based on this view, the esoteric futures framework distinguishes two forms of the sacred. Firstly, the *fabricated sacred* is represented by the fire and characterized by a relationship to power. The fabricated sacred is itself a societal construct, and is at the center of human affairs. Relative to the imperfect state, the fabricated sacred is an *interiority* where meaning is esoterically manufactured, and which is subject to natural degeneration and corruption. Secondly, the *revealed sacred* is represented by the sun and characterized by a relationship to ontological truth. The revealed sacred has a reality of its own, independent from human intervention or societal constructs. Relative to the imperfect state, the revealed sacred is an *exteriority*, an external domain whence meaning emanates. Both of these instances of the sacred are exclusive domains: to those who are not privy to the inner workings of the sacred, it is an absolute unknown, the source of mystery, and an anchoring point for human imagination. Hence, from the outside – i.e. for the prisoners in the cave – the difference between the fabricated and revealed sacred is not clear.

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Using these concepts, several key thoughts may be formulated about the potential of the administration of the imperfect state to be both non-monolithic and legitimate, as is the purpose of esoteric futures. The relationship between the revealed and fabricated sacred is crucial for the legitimacy of political power, if we assume that political power must be grounded in truth for it to be legitimate. Plato's *kallipolis* solves this problem by having only a single power center where the fabricated and revealed sacred overlap in the figure of the philosopher-king. This structure is monolithic – not only because there is only a single power center, but also because the relationship between power and truth may not be verified by anyone outside of this power center. Hence, in order for the imperfect state to be non-monolithic and legitimate, different power centers must be able to co-emerge, and their relationship to truth must be able to be independently verified, so that the various forms of mystery may be constructed based on truth, rather than mere illusion. The next section will explore in more detail how the concepts of the esoteric futures framework can serve this purpose, by applying it to two sets of prevalent present-day futures.

DISPLACING MONOLITHS IN CLIMATE COLLAPSE AND TECHNOLOGICAL ACCELERATIONISM

This section operationalizes the esoteric futures framework by applying it to two sets of futures which have monolithic tendencies. As described in the beginning of this article, the monolithic is characterized by apocalypticism – the anticipation of the end-of-the-world – and the imposition of a rational, scientific order to negate this end-of-the-world. The first set of futures concerns climate collapse, and the second concerns technological accelerationism, both of which anticipate drastic and imminent societal change and upheaval. This section uses the lens of esoteric futures to interpret the monolithic tendencies in both of these futures, as well as avenues for how legitimate, non-monolithic political power may be configured.

First, this section discusses futures of climate collapse, which are informed by expectations of rising temperatures, an increase in extreme weather events, collapse of biodiversity, and degradation of ecosystems. Climate change threatens to destabilize the order of modern, industrialized society, and has given rise to the staging of apocalyptic imaginaries (Methmann & Rothe, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2010), which mirror the stable order of the present with a likewise static image of collapse, of the negation of this stable order. Imaginaries of climate collapse, which suggest that society as it is either persists or collapses, can be regarded as forms of existential mystery which increasingly shape national and international governance. These apocalyptic imaginaries are especially informed by the insights of climate science, which models, quantifies and projects the impact and consequences of climate change through technical instruments and methods. Scientific truth is one of the highest ideals of modern societies, and only a small elite is – through institutionalized forms of practice – initiated to the inner workings of this form of knowledge creation. Through the lens of esoteric futures, the governmental institutions which must take measures against climate change may be characterized as the fabricated sacred, whereas the institutions of science may be characterized as the revealed sacred, where truth about the nature of reality is discovered. While – as will be discussed later – this qualification is itself deficient, it is informative to first see how it may serve our analysis.

In the futures of climate collapse, the relationship between science and state – between the revealed and fabricated sacred – tend towards the monolithic in several ways. The first of these is clear by highlighting the strategy of ecological modernization (Hajer, 1997), which is essentially an effort to uphold the present order through scientific and technological innovation, the individualization of climate damages, and the incentivization of clean energy technologies. In ecological modernization, the revealed sacred – scientific knowledge – does not merely serve to justify the existence of the fabricated sacred – the present societal order

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– but actually has become entangled with it. This is an important problem: in the order of ecological modernization, the revealed and fabricated sacred have come to overlap significantly, to the extent that they have become dependent on each other. Hence, the insights of the revealed sacred are, as it were, contaminated by the need of the fabricated sacred to persist, and maintain stability. Or, at the very least, we might say that this risk exists, and that this risk constitutes a monolithic tendency.

Another, perhaps more fundamental problem, pertains to the way in which the present order has – on its own terms – no place at all for mystery. There is an increasing sense that the performance of climate futures under the regime of ecological modernization fails to democratically bring about the necessary momentum for societal change (Hajer & Oomen, 2025). Since mystery, as defined above, is characterized by its emotive character and capacity to inspire action, and since ecological modernization fails to bring about collective action, there is a sense that it does not exude any kind of mystery. Importantly, other strategies to address climate change – such as the Degrowth movement – suffer from similar issues (Schwartzman, 2012; Van Den Bergh, 2011). Whilst those privy to the inner workings of climate science are convinced by its relationship to truth, this is insufficient for the public to vote for climate action. Climate science aims to communicate some of its key findings to the public, without translating this into a form of popular mystery, which can speak to the public. After all, without the knowledge of a climate scientist, the public is unable to understand the significance of singular facts. Science by itself is simply not compelling enough to convince the people to change their practices, perhaps because science itself endeavors to do away with mystery altogether. Given the lack of democratic change, apocalyptic climate imaginaries are becoming increasingly entangled with post-democratic imaginaries (Swyngedouw, 2010). In other words: climate imaginaries become increasingly monolithic, as they pertain to the complete overlap of science and state, of revealed and fabricated sacred.

Where, then, can we perceive pathways for addressing climate change which are legitimate and non-monolithic? First of all, various scholars show how postapocalyptic orientations, which hold climate catastrophe to be present, real and ongoing, motivate local climate action (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018). Whilst the apocalyptic climate imaginary concerns the relationship between scientific knowledge and institutions of governance, and locates change in the distant future, the postapocalyptic inspires local, embodied action in the present. The science-informed apocalyptic imaginary aims to ascend out of the cave, without descending back down – and even its mode of ascent does not serve the turning of the whole soul. In contrast, the postapocalyptic imaginary acknowledges the entropic becoming of climate change – which has been described as the ‘intrusion of Gaia’ (Goffey & Stengers, 2015) – and does not attempt to negate it by reimposing the perfect state. It appears that the postapocalyptic is characterized by a sense of mystery, as climate activism is increasingly associated with religious and spiritual practices of various forms, including myth, ritual (Joyce, 2020; Stacey, 2024) and asceticism (Bort & Kieser, 2023).

Furthermore, the postapocalyptic has a different conception of the revealed sacred. The apocalyptic imaginary considers the revealed sacred to consist in science, but since science is entangled with the instrumentalization of nature, it is questionable whether it is not entangled with the fabricated sacred. In contrast, the postapocalyptic recognizes the sacred to consist in the interconnectedness of life on earth, and in the intrinsic value of living beings and systems (Lovelock & Margulis, 1974; Naess, 2019). Beyond merely reducing our quantity of consumptions and emissions, this recognition prompts a transformation in our relationship to the world: it means to regard the natural world as a sacred exteriority (Kealiikanakaoleohaililani & Giardina, 2016). As such, nature is considered as the source of mystery, which has a life, dynamic and interiority of its own, which should be respected

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rather than analyzed, harvested and extracted. While this appears as a promising avenue, several questions remain: how may the sacrality of nature be stewarded locally, how may it inform the power structure of society, and how can it be represented in popular and initiatory mystery? The sacrality of nature is, too, exclusive, and to most people may remain a distant yet compelling mystery at best, or be completely invisible at worst.

Next to climate collapse, this essay considers futures of technological accelerationism, which pertain to the increasingly rapid advancement of technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and genetic modification, and the disruptive societal consequences they imply. Imaginaries of technological accelerationism are apocalyptic in various ways. The first of these is the singularity, a mythical event which would mark the absolute unpredictability and unknowability of the future, as technology would advance at such a rapid rate that humanity is unable to adjust (Bostrom, 2017; Chalmers, 2016; Kurzweil, 2014). Like climate collapse, the singularity entails a sudden and complete ending of the present societal order, but beyond mere collapse, it also anticipates a rapturous entry into a new techno-utopian order, brought forth by the monolith of technology to which everything else is subject. Related to the singularity is transhumanism, which holds that the future entails a transcendence of the human through technological augmentation and genetic engineering (More, 2013). In its aspiration to negate the defects of human nature through technology, transhumanism has parallels to ecological modernization. Finally, the accelerationist philosopher Nick Land holds an apocalypticism which consists in the acceleration of the future and time itself, to the point where there is no time left to make deliberate decisions, but rather 'events increasingly just happen' (Land, 2017b, p. 33). Land legitimizes his accelerationism by contrasting it from the monolith of the present order, designated as the 'Cathedral' of liberal-democratic media, academia and government (Land, 2012). Hence, the apocalypticism of technological accelerationism does not serve to reimpose the present order, but to replace it with a new one that is itself the cause of the end-of-the-world.

Technological accelerationism is characterized by strong monolithic tendencies, which consists in a significant overlap between the revealed and fabricated sacred. This is most clear in anticipations of superintelligent artificial intelligence, a figure in which power – the fabricated sacred – and access to truth – the revealed sacred – supposedly come together. Accelerationist philosopher Nick Bostrom anticipates how AI can recursively learn and improve itself to the point of sheer unintelligibility, and paints the picture of the 'paperclip maximizer': an all-powerful machine that has the narrow goal of creating paperclips, and therefore will turn all material on earth – including its inhabitants – into paperclips (Bostrom, 2017). This picture is eerily similar to Plato's figure of the keen-eyed rogue, whose powerful intellect does not serve the turning of the entire soul, and hence, acts in the service of evil. Furthermore, Land regards AI as the final manifestation – the destiny – of capitalism, which he regards as an unstoppable force which imposes itself upon human beings and institutions (Land, 2017a). Land elevates capitalism to the point of imbuing it with sacrality: capitalism becomes the sacred exteriority which has a life and dynamic of its own, but rather than a domain of being, it is the entropic becoming to which the imperfect state is subject. His views constitute an existential mystery about how capitalism shapes the future: 'what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources' (Land, 2012, p. 338). In this way, accelerationism considers the nexus of AI and capitalism as a force which is both all-intelligent and all-powerful, and hence, monolithic.

An important difference from climate collapse, is that technological accelerationism is deeply imbued with mystery. Numerous scholars point out that the anticipation of the singularity rests more on mythology than science (Cole-Turner, 2012; Geraci, 2010a; Modis, 2006), and importantly, that it enjoys significant popular appeal – it translates well to popular mystery

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(Geraci, 2010b). While technological accelerationism finds its origin in rational scientific progress, it appears to depart this enlightenment heritage. This is perhaps most visible in the philosophy of Land, who mobilizes a plethora of esoteric ideas and practices to position technological capitalism as a sacred exteriority – it is the mobilization of mystery to converse with the sacred, and to regard technological capitalism not as a logical system, but an esoteric force.

The mystery of technological accelerationism can be seen most clearly by consider how AI has become both the recipient and the producer of mystery. As already discussed, AI has been envisioned as an ultimate center of power which can legitimize itself through a claim to absolute truth. Due to its black-boxed nature, its fundamental intransparency, humans may not be initiated into its inner workings: there is no initiatory mystery possible, which can lead humans into the truth which AI can access. Therefore, AI is a sacred interiority, and thereby, a vessel upon which humans can project their imagination and speculation, and around which social imaginaries unfold. At the same time AI is itself capable of fabricating mysteries, as it can be regarded as a technological upgrade of the shadow-casting apparatus in the Cave: it is as if the puppeteers' fire is stoked to the maximum, so that they may flood the cave with the most compelling shadows. Whether or not such shadows, or popular mysteries, are anchored in truth is unknown, but their performative power would be significant. This performative power may be understood through Land's notion of hyperstition – the process by which fictions are made into realities (Brassett & O'Reilly, 2025). Hence, futures of technological accelerationism are not merely monolithic, but through their capacity to produce mystery, they can inform potentially effective systems of societal control – of keeping the prisoners chained, without providing pathways for initiation.

Are there any non-monolithic pathways to be discerned in the futures of technological accelerationism? Interestingly, unlike imaginations of the singularity, Land's accelerationism carries a postapocalyptic sensibility, in the sense that it holds apocalyptic change to be present and ongoing. Like the post-apocalypticism which inspires climate action, it endeavors to recognize the sacred in the external forces which bring about catastrophic change – one regards the natural world as sacred, the other capitalism. This opposition is articulated by a final noteworthy accelerationist thinker, namely Mark Fisher, who opposed Land's ideas by positioning accelerationism as a Marxist strategy against capitalism. In his essay 'Terminator vs. Avatar', Fisher argues that the opponents of capitalism should not aspire to a melancholic return to a pre-capitalist world of simplicity and rurality, but rather, harness the tools of accelerationism to fight capitalism (Fisher, 2019). This idea acknowledges the power of capitalism, but aims to relocate agency to human society. From the perspective of the esoteric futures framework, this effort would require the stewarding of new, local instances of the sacred, which empower this human agency, and can resist technological capitalism's demand for transparency (Han, 2022). What such forms of the sacred might look like, does not seem to be evident quite yet.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, this essay has opposed monolithic futures, which are characterized by an apocalyptic outlook and a scientific and rational worldview. It has done so by drawing from Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and using the reading of the political philosopher Leo Strauss to highlight elements of the allegory which are associated with darkness, rather than light. By elaborating on the metaphors of the Cave, the essay has positioned the framework of esoteric futures, which serves to interpret monolithic tendencies in present-day futures, and to imagine pathways for legitimate and non-monolithic power.

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Esoteric futures focuses on the entanglement between the distribution of the unknown and political power, and through the concepts of mystery and the sacred, characterizes this dynamic as a transrational phenomenon. It distinguishes monolithic apocalypticism from an actionable postapocalyptic orientation, in which drastic change is held in the present rather than extrapolated into a distant future, and which fosters a greater recognition of mystery and the sacred. The framework was applied to futures of climate collapse and technological accelerationism, to show their monolithic tendencies, as well as alternative pathways. Still, the potential of the esoteric futures framework was not exhausted by this analysis, and future work should continue to explore the relevance of concepts such as the unknown, power, mystery and the sacred for futuring. By highlighting such phenomena, which are distinct from the rationality and universality of enlightenment values, such efforts would further contribute to *reframing darkness* in futures studies.

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