

A Response to Paul Mason

Paul Mason's feisty new book *Clear, Bright Future: a radical defence of the human being* (Allen Lane 2019), is a fitting follow up to his plea for a more socially just and sustainable global economy in the wake of the financial crash of 2008: *Post-Capitalism* (Allen Lane, 2015). In that earlier book, Mason (former TV economics editor and journalist) traced the effects of the shift in our understanding of the economy from being a servant of human trade and social relationships to becoming in its current neo-liberal guise the all-powerful master of global affairs, changing our understanding of ourselves, our behaviour, our values. His new book takes this further, and is, I think, so right and also sadly, at least from a Christian perspective, in some ways so wrong.

Mason is absolutely right to argue that we humans face a new problem: the long process of automation which is arguably replacing human decisions and human values. Coupled with unregulated free-market economics, the growth in the power of machines – particularly the thinking machines of artificial intelligence – is feeding a widespread 'anti-humanism' in which human values have no foundation, there is 'no logical basis to privilege humans over all machines' and in which we lose any rationale for universal human rights. Mason's 'radical defence of the human being' is right and welcome, as is his assertion of the importance of human values over 'machine values', of the value of human freedom, and of the universality of human rights. In contemporary politics, in social attitudes and in an all-encompassing technological mind-set, all of these values are in jeopardy.

The chaos of so much of the contemporary political world, not least the 'authoritarian populism' of many Western societies, is – Mason argues - symbolised by the Trump presidency in the USA. The loss of order and predictability in the world, the loss of restraint, kindness, mutual obligation, democracy, and independent thought, coupled with a culture without the concept of truth, is promoted by a leader 'who rises above logic and truth' and tells tired, despairing, resigned people that 'all their inner prejudices are right'. Trump managed to release 'untapped and unchallenged reserves of racism, cruelty and misogyny'. This is the end-point of the 'triumph of a reactionary theory of human nature in which inequality – of race, sex and economic status – is determined by our genes'; a theory which is deeply rooted in the economic models and practices of the past few decades which are now manifestly falling apart.

What Mason calls 'the neo-liberal self' – that is the human self that is assumed by neo-liberal economic models - is disappearing. In neo-liberal economic theory and practice, the individual person no longer matters. 'If you want a social-market economy, you must accept privatization, outsourcing and enforced competition, and turn a blind eye to the tax-dodging of large corporations.' You end up with 'a new social archetype: the rootless, self-centred individual, focussed not on the collective struggle or community activism but on the personal struggle for survival.' Collaborative social relationships are displaced by a belief in autonomous individualism. We turned ourselves into 'human capital', but the prosperity which prompted this change is now going or gone, and the core assumptions of the 'neo-liberal self' are undermined. Gone is altruism, gone is what Christians call 'neighbour love', gone is the quest for social justice; gone is responsible care for the environment. 'Economic man' (selfish individuals pursuing their own interests) has taken over and yet he was always bound to self-destruct.

Mason's understanding of 'the acute crisis of identity that millions of people are now living through' is rooted in the process whereby both geopolitics and economics fell apart at once. The big shake up of the financial crash, coupled with the emergence of the 'networked individual' who finds his or her identity in the new cultures of the information age has bred the emergence on line of a 'new form of techno-conservatism', a far right culture of protest, anti-feminist, anti-democratic, anti-truth, with a propensity to violence, strongly flavoured by Nietzsche's celebration of will-power: 'the strong over the weak, the purposeful liar over the moral and ethical person.' 'Now this three-fold crisis: strategic economic stagnation, global fragmentation and the rise of irrationalism – characterises and dominates the age we live in.' it is an ideology hostile to human rights, to universalism, to gender and racial equality; an ideology that worships power, 'sees democracy as a sham and wishes for a catastrophic reset of the entire global order.' Mason's passionate plea is for the recovery and defence of the concept of the human being – in all our variety of skin colour, face-shape, religion and culture – with universal rights, as the key to resisting the slide to further chaos.

One of the strongest challenges to recovering an authentic humanism is the challenge of thinking machines, and 'the new ideology of machine control known as post-humanism'.

Obviously machines have enormously enhanced human lives and human productivity. Yet the coming into reality of Alan Turing's prediction that machines will 'one day be able to think' has led to false assumptions about reality, and reopened debates about the relationship of mind to matter. There is a new 'digital idealism' with its own hidden theories of human nature which erode any concept of human freedom. As we will critically explore later, Mason has little time for religious theories, or for what he called their fatalism; he is not persuaded by those among the neuroscientists who deny the reality of free will. He is right to be searching for a way to 'reground' society on 'human values, not machine values' 'We cannot take the next step forward', Mason argues, 'without deciding who we are, and what values we want our machine intelligence to express.' He goes back to the 'virtue ethics' originating with Aristotle to find models for communities 'with the goal of living the good life': not 'naturally atomised individuals competing with each other', but pursuing virtue to achieve happiness and fulfilment for ourselves', and also to 'create organised societies that maximise free time, thought, leisure and the understanding of beauty.'

Mason argues strongly against those who believe that we are already becoming 'post-human' – something better than *Homo Sapiens* - androids that can out-think us humans, and to which we might eventually surrender control, convenient though that idea is to corporations or governments who want to subordinate human behaviour to algorithmic control and to override any concept of human rights. It is politically convenient also for those who think the 'elite's' economic freedom is incompatible with democracy. Mason concludes:

We need, in direct opposition to post-humanism, a radical defence of the human being. We need to defend the idea of a reality knowable by science, albeit a science under critical observation itself. We must impose on artificial intelligence, robotics and projects to enhance human beings biologically an ethical system that privileges all human beings and is developed from their universal features. (188).

I want to defend human beings against algorithms that predict and dictate our shopping choices, our voting patterns and our sexual preferences; against repressive governments who would use algorithmic control to convert us into submissive, semi-automatons that their ideology demands; against kleptocrats and billionaires who

would combine, as they did in the election that produced Trump, to leverage the massive power of algorithmic control, deregulation and business secrecy to rig the electoral system. (189).

I want to defend the idea that every one of us – the transgender activist in London, the female factory worker in Guangdong, the Kanak teenage fighting for independence on New Caledonia – has a universal quality from which inalienable rights derive. (190).

There are hopeful signs, Mason argues, that even in the face of censorship, elite-controlled information bubbles, and the flood of fake news, groups of mass protest in defence of human freedom and their ‘right to live a fully rounded human life’, and built on human values, are making their mark. There are too many others, however, who want to take these freedoms away. We need, says Mason, an economic model to replace neo-liberalism, a new multilateral order that stabilises globalisation and an enforceable global treaty that defends personal freedom. He concludes the book by reflecting on some policy proposals such as a universal basic income, resisting radicalism, preventing fascist psychology from becoming mass psychology, refusing machine control and establishing mandatory strict ethical safety codes which place all artificial intelligence under ‘meaningful, observable and irreversible human control’, to enable individual people to retain control over data. This will require local steps of radical protest. Above all it requires a rediscovery of what we think it means to be human.

So far, so right and so good, and mostly persuasive.

But then Mason proposes a model of radical humanism based on the ‘biologically universalist theory of human nature’ he finds in the early writings of Karl Marx. Now it is true, as Mason, in line with others such as Erich Fromm have pointed out, that some of the writings of the younger Marx are a far cry from the ‘Marxisms’ which later politicians, starting with Engels, have created. And much of the early Marx brings together the materialism and the idealism of Enlightenment thinking into what Mason calls Marx’s ‘core idea’: that ‘humanity as a species is biologically capable of setting itself free through technological innovation, self-transformation and work.’ This is the light guiding Mason towards his defence of humanity in the face of the encroaching ‘technological fascism’ which we have described. Humanity, capable of consciousness, creativity, imagination, language, altruism, has the power, he says, to stand against inequality, estrangement ‘and all forms of fetishism – whether religion, money, obsession or consumerism.’ Marx had a ‘teleological’ view of human nature; process and progress towards liberation.

There is much about Marx and Marxism which Mason rightly rejects, but he seems to hold onto a purposeful, persistent utopianism which he thinks is needed to confront today’s issues such as: women’s oppression, climate change, how to understand complexity, how to abolish scarcity and how to impose human control over thinking machines via a global ethical network. Against those who want to convince us that truth and morality do not matter, that we are all partly automata under the control of algorithms, Mason boldly affirms ‘Marx’s theory of human nature is the only one that allows us to confront these attacks and defeat them philosophically.’ He comes to this view because ‘almost every other theory of human nature falls apart.’ Religions, he strangely believes, need logically to retard technological progress because of their belief in the ‘soul’; and liberal individualists, he says, seem to

have no basis on which to claim human supremacy over machines which can develop ‘personalities’ and emotions. Marx alone has the answer.

But will his tech-utopia really deliver the goods? While I celebrate Mason’s determination, I think his view of human nature is far too optimistic, and will lead – as Marx has so often done – to disappointment and disillusionment. What is Mason’s answer to a very different diagnosis, this time from Thomas Metzinger:

Conceived of as an intellectual challenge for humankind, the increasing threat arising from self-induced global warming clearly seems to exceed the present cognitive and emotional abilities of our species. This is the first truly global crisis, experienced by all human beings at the same time and in a single media space, and as we watch it unfold, it will also gradually change our image of ourselves, the conception human kind has of itself as a whole. I predict that during the next decades, we will increasingly experience ourselves as failing beings. (Metzinger, T. (2017) ‘Spirituality and Intellectual Honesty’. Lecture. Quoted in Jonathan Rowson *Bildung in the 21st Century*, Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, 2019.)

In contrast to Mason’s view of it, historic Christian faith has a celebratory view of the goodness of all God’s creation and of humanity made as God’s image. Yet the Christian understanding of human nature is a picture of ambiguity, because of the fragmented and broken state of God’s world. Human nature is fundamentally good, and yet is all too capable of the selfishness, stupidity and sin which leads to destructiveness, brokenness and social fragmentation, and therefore failure. This gives rise of Pascal’s apt description of us as a ‘ruin; a glorious ruin.’ Furthermore, the broader Christian perspective recognises a power for destructiveness which takes over human systems and ideologies as well as individual choices - what the New Testament scholar Walter Wink, referring to what St Paul centuries before spoke of as ‘principalities and powers’, calls ‘Domination Systems’. Christian faith does not rest in the sort of radical muscular optimism which Mason expressed; it is not a belief that everything will work out if we only work at it. Nor is it a recipe for despair and resignation. It is rather an optimism in the faithfulness of God, who made the world in love, and redeems it and heals it in love, and in love confronts all evil powers in whatever form they present themselves, in order that the whole creation shall become a celebration of love: the kingdom of God, which is creation healed.

So Christian people understand themselves as part of the whole of God’s created order, on their way to being redeemed through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the authentic human being. Inspired by the values of God’s kingdom: self-giving love and justice, grace and forgiveness, creativity, goodness and beauty, humanity finds its fulfilment within a corporate body living in dependence of God, and inter-dependently with each other and within the natural environment. It includes old and young, people of all skin-colour, economic status, gender and background. The Christian perspective inspired by God’s kingdom brings systemically together economy, ecology and equity in the values of *shalom*, which I take to mean health and well-being in all human relationships – within oneself, with others, with the wider communities of which we are part, with our natural environment on which we depend for life and the means of life, and with God.

And this is where I believe Mason’s Marxist perspectives let him down, and his over-swift dismissal of Christian perspectives is a disappointment. Mason seems unaware of the

interpretative and redemptive power of Christian faith and Christian theology, and the more realistic picture of human nature which it offers. Although he does acknowledge that there are historical examples of Christian people and groups making a stand against oppressive regimes and defending human freedom and other human values, his very narrow view of Christianity and religion in general leads him to place it all in the category of fatalistic superstition. In a surprising caricature he tells us that Christianity

‘teaches that all humans are born evil (because of the original sin of Adam and Eve) but that they can be made good by obeying a set of rules and following certain rituals (baptism, communion, confession, the last rites etc.). Once the body dies, the soul faces a binary outcome – heaven or hell for eternity – depending on the judgement of God.’

His justification for the last sentence is the paintings on the walls of churches like the Sistine Chapel.

When did Mason last read any contemporary Christian theology?

He tells us in a 2015 interview for *Third Way* magazine that his early exposure to oppressive priestly behaviour at his Catholic school and to their ‘talking rubbish’ left him with a determined atheism. That is understandable, and I suppose that is why in his discussion of pioneers of quantum mechanics, he accepts the odd view that their discoveries ‘invalidate cause and effect throughout all of reality; and that a reality beyond our senses, existing independently of our observations cannot exist’. He should read The Revd. Professor Sir John Polkinghorne, FRS, former President of Queen’s College, Cambridge *Quantum Physics and Theology: an unexpected kinship* SPCK 2007, and numerous other of his writings in the growing conversation between many contemporary scientists and Christian faith. Mason should also open his Bible, or perhaps read the magnificent Encyclical, prompted by Christian responses to climate change, from Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, ‘On Care for our Common Home’* (2015):

Human life is a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. (5).

[St Francis} shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. (10).

Today...we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*. (49).

Economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fails to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. (56).

‘God saw everything he had made, and behold it was very good’.(Gen.1.31). The Bible teaches that every man and woman is created out of love and made in God’s image and likeness... This shows the immense dignity of each person, “who is not just something but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession, and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons.” (65).

Those who are committed to defending human dignity can find in the Christian faith the deepest reasons for this commitment.. How wonderful is the certainty that each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles! (65).

Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered. (70).

The created things of the world are not free of ownership: ‘For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living’ (Wis.11.26). This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds, and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. (89).

Technology has remedied countless evils, which used to harm and limit human beings. How can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine, engineering and communication?...Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely....In whose hands does all this power lie?...Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience. (102 – 105).

The technocratic paradigm ... tends to dominate economic and political life. (109). We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral. (112).

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. (158).

That gives a flavour of a contemporary Catholicism which I reckon is much richer and more realistic, positive and hopeful than that of a certain 1960’s primary school. In brief summary, it is a perspective on the world as God’s creation and gift of God’s love, which celebrates the goodness of all that God has made, including humanity made as the image and likeness of God. This is the basis for affirming human dignity and value, and for the Christian vocation to inclusive love for all our ‘neighbours’, the quest for justice in all our human affairs, a bias especially to the poorest and most disadvantaged, and the calling for environmental responsibility and care for the whole of God’s creation to enable human flourishing and the wellbeing of all creatures.

It is also a perspective which celebrates science and technology as gifts to be used, but cautions against allowing the idolatry of a technological mindset infecting all our human dealings, such that we treat one another as commodities with a price tag, and fails to restrain

technology, and economics, so that they further human values rather than becoming unregulatable masters.

The Christian perspective differs from Marxist utopianism especially by emphasising the human propensity to selfishness, greed, stupidity and sin which is always ultimately destructive. Human free will is bound by habits of self-love and self-will which claim an unwarranted autonomy instead of recognising our dependence on God as the source of life and of the means of life, and our interdependence within the natural order on all other God's creatures and gifts. Freedom from that bondage, with all its subsequent disorder and social fragmentation needs a return to the truth of God which is freeing, and to a power greater than human flaunted self-sufficiency, namely God's redeeming and healing grace.

I argue that although much of the analysis and diagnosis which Mason provides is persuasive, and very important, his theory of human nature derived from early Marx leads to an over-optimistic picture of human nature and to the vision of an unrealisable cyber-utopia based on development of the very technology which Mason has spent much of the book cautioning against. He is right in his passionate defence of humanity against the politics of hate and fear, and against the technological controls that some (especially the very rich) seek to exercise over others (especially the poor). In places it seems that he is searching for a 'metaphysics' in which to contextualise his quest, though he cannot quite allow himself to consider the historic Christian faith as an option. That faith, I argue, has a more realistic because more ambiguous picture of human nature as fundamentally good though, as the Pope's Encyclical underlined, now fragmented and broken yet redeemable, and a picture of human possibilities resting not in an optimism of human nature, nor of human technology, but in what Alcoholics Anonymous calls 'A Higher Power', and what I call the gift and love and faithfulness and grace of God.

David Atkinson