Solutions to the Problems of Western Civilisation in the Novels of Michel Houellebecq

Timothy Peter Gouldthorp

B.A (English)

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the novels of controversial French author Michel Houellebecq not only diagnose profound problems in contemporary Western civilisation, but also envisage the possibility of resolving them. Many studies do not believe that Houellebecq’s novels propose any genuine solutions, and those that do arguably do not take into consideration the extent to which solutions in the novels emerge through a sustained reflection on the underlying causes of contemporary social problems. Previous studies have understandably focused on problems such as social atomisation, commodification of individuals as objects of erotic consumption, the breakdown of community and family life and the loss of transcendental values. However, these studies have tended to consider these problems within their specific social context. This thesis, in contrast, aims to show that Houellebecq’s novels frame contemporary social phenomena within a much broader biological and historical perspective. Taking this approach, it reveals that Houellebecq’s novels are able to envisage solutions precisely because they look beyond an apparently intractable social reality to its conceivably modifiable biological and historical bases.

The thesis focuses on the following four novels: *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005), *La Carte et le territoire* (2010) and *Soumission* (2015). After situating Houellebecq’s novels within a naturalistic tradition in the introduction, it shows, through a close reading of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, how Houellebecq envisages the creation of posthuman beings through the use of speculative biotechnology as a possible, albeit problematic, solution to the problems listed above. The analysis of these two novels reveals that no solution is possible unless it modifies human biology or involves a historical bifurcation away from the West’s centuries-old Enlightenment tradition. Consistent with this, our probing of the role of art and authenticity in *La Carte et le territoire* leads us to conclude that the novel does not envisage any viable alternatives for contemporary Western civilisation in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, Islam and a return to traditional, patriarchal values, as imagined in *Soumission*, does represent a possible solution as it represents a radical rejection of Western values. The thesis argues that, in spite of obvious differences, the theistic solution in *Soumission* shares many essential features with
the posthuman solution such as the promise of individual immortality and the deflation of personal liberty.

Without denying the specifically literary qualities in Houellebecq’s œuvre, this thesis contends that Houellebecq’s novels, in the tradition of 19th-century naturalist writers such as Zola, are relevant to contemporary Western society in the “real world” and should not be confined to the realm of fiction. The conclusion explores this real-world relevance by means of a comparison between ideas in the novels and ideas expressed by Houellebecq in non-fiction and interviews. By delineating their core ideology and exploring the solutions they propose, the thesis opens the way for further real-world engagement with the ideas in Houellebecq’s novels in the context of broader debates about Western civilisation, its discontents, and its future fate.
Declaration by Author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .........................................................................................................................p. 11

The real-world relevance of Houellebecq’s novels .................................................................p. 13

Zola and naturalism ....................................................................................................................p. 14

Houellebecq’s novels compared with Zola’s naturalism .........................................................p. 18

Critical approaches to Houellebecq and his novels ..............................................................p. 23

Justification of primary corpus .................................................................................................p. 34

Outline of argument ..................................................................................................................p. 41

**Chapter 1  *Les Particules élémentaires*** ..............................................................................p. 48

Summary of novel ......................................................................................................................p. 49

Secondary literature and significance of Comte ......................................................................p. 49

A utopian, technological solution .............................................................................................p. 54

The traumatic but inevitable decline of traditional values ......................................................p. 58

Reason and science drive history ............................................................................................p. 60

The necessity of love and religion ............................................................................................p. 62

The necessity of a collective rather than an individual solution .............................................p. 66

Political consensus and the implementation of utopia .............................................................p. 68

Houellebecq's biotechnological solution ....................................................................................p. 71

*Les Particules élémentaires* and Huxley’s *Brave New World* ..............................................p. 72

Pessimism about human nature ..............................................................................................p. 77

Qualifications to the successful posthuman solution ...............................................................p. 79

**Chapter 2  *La Possibilité d’une île*** ....................................................................................p. 83

Summary of novel ......................................................................................................................p. 84

Critical responses ......................................................................................................................p. 87
Problems of contemporary society .................................................................p. 91
Depiction of human “savages” ........................................................................p. 97
The neo-human solution .................................................................................p. 101
Failure of the neo-human solution .................................................................p. 106
The coming of the Futurs ................................................................................p. 108
Qualifying the solution of the Futurs ..............................................................p. 112
Conclusion ........................................................................................................p. 113

Chapter 3  La Carte et le territoire .................................................................p. 115
Summary of novel ............................................................................................p. 115
Critical responses to La carte et le territoire ......................................................p. 117
Baudrillard and the concept of simulation .........................................................p. 122
Tradition ............................................................................................................p. 125
Work ...................................................................................................................p. 130
Art .......................................................................................................................p. 134
Conclusion .........................................................................................................p. 139

Chapter 4  Soumission .......................................................................................p. 141
Summary of novel ............................................................................................p. 143
Critical responses to Soumission ......................................................................p. 145
The possibility of theistic belief .........................................................................p. 150
Huysmans .........................................................................................................p. 153
Polygamy and arranged marriage ....................................................................p. 158
Submission and autonomy ..............................................................................p. 165
Renewal of civilisation .....................................................................................p. 167
Demographics .................................................................................................p. 169
Conclusion .........................................................................................................p. 171
Conclusion .................................................................p. 173
Emergence of the posthuman and religious solutions across the novels ......................p. 174
Houellebecq on the posthuman solution .....................................................................p. 178
Houellebecq on a return to monotheistic religion and tradition ................................................p. 182
Houellebecq on direct democracy ..................................................................................p. 190
Uncertainty and remoteness of Houellebecq’s solutions ..............................................p. 196

Bibliography .................................................................................................................p. 198
Introduction

Michel Houellebecq, born in 1958 (or in 1956, according to Denis Demonpion\(^1\)), is, as Douglas Morrey writes, “without doubt the most famous living French writer.”\(^2\) Since the publication of his second novel, *Les Particules élementaires,* in 1998, Houellebecq has become a controversial public figure, and his novels have received not only extensive critical attention but also considerable notoriety in mainstream media. The controversy surrounding Houellebecq can be explained, in part, by the lurid descriptions of sex in his novels, by his perceived misogyny and hostility to immigrants (especially Muslims), and by the topicality of many of his themes: human cloning, Islam in France, sex tourism, and the impact of financial speculation on contemporary art. It can also be explained by the apparent ambiguity of the ideological stance of his work, which has tended to polarise its public reception into two camps, one denouncing and one defending it. This tendency was already apparent in the controversy surrounding *Les Particules élementaires,* and has not abated with the publication of subsequent novels. As Carole Sweeney observes, *Les Particules élementaires* was either, in the eyes of critics, “a deeply reactionary, sullen treatise that implicitly endorsed the ills of contemporary society on the one hand, or a brilliantly sharp Balzacian social satire condemning those same ills on the other.”\(^3\) In spite of this controversy, the award of the prestigious *Prix Goncourt* to Houellebecq, in 2010, for *La Carte et le territoire,* was nevertheless an indication of his acceptance by the French literary establishment and further enhanced his cachet as a preeminent figure in French cultural life. Houellebecq’s most recent novel to date, *Soumission,* which imagines France under an Islamic government, was published, coincidentally, on the eve of the Charlie Hebdo shootings, and it thrust Houellebecq into a new level of public exposure and controversy both within and outside of France.

The very fact that Houellebecq elicits such controversy is perhaps already an indication that his novels tend to be interpreted as offering direct commentary on contemporary social problems,

but he is for the most part considered to be an author engaged in critiquing and commenting on society rather than in proposing possible solutions to the problems he identifies. In this study, however, I will contend that Houellebecq’s novels not only diagnose profound problems in contemporary Western civilisation, but also envisage the possibility of resolving them. If most critics have tended to overlook this potential in Houellebecq’s novels, this is perhaps because their focus remains in the contemporary moment that oftentimes seems to be Houellebecq’s main concern. In situating contemporary social problems within a broader context, however, and contending that Houellebecq’s novels frame contemporary social phenomena within the biological perspective of Darwinian evolution and within a broad historical perspective, it becomes possible to claim that his novels, by looking beyond an apparently intractable social reality to its conceivably modifiable biological and historical bases, do envisage the possibility of resolving the problems that they diagnose. Through a close reading of *Les Particules élémentaires, La Possibilité d’une île, La Carte et le territoire* and *Soumission*, posthuman technology and a return to religion and tradition will be revealed as two potential solutions to Western society’s ills, even though because of their outlandishness most critics do not believe that Houellebecq is proposing them as viable solutions. By situating Houellebecq’s novels within a naturalistic lineage, I argue that these solutions and the problems to which they are a response are relevant to the real world, and should not be dismissed as literary fantasy.

I will thus begin this introduction by setting out an argument for the real-world relevance of Houellebecq’s novels, showing that they are quasi-naturalistic in their methods and themes. An understanding of the naturalism in Houellebecq’s novels frames my exploration of their ideas, and should be borne in mind throughout the reading of the thesis, even though it is only in the conclusion that I explicitly draw comparisons between the novels and statements made by Houellebecq in interviews and in non-fiction writing. Having thus situated Houellebecq’s novels within a naturalistic tradition, this introduction will then summarise the broad approaches that other critics have applied to Houellebecq’s work, positioning this thesis in relation to them. It will then explain the rationale for focussing on four of Houellebecq’s six novels, *Les Particules élémentaires,*
La Possibilité d’une île, La Carte et le territoire and Soumission, briefly discussing the other two novels, Extension du domaine de la lutte and Plateforme. This introduction will conclude by presenting an outline of the argument of the thesis across the chapters.

The real-world relevance of Houellebecq’s novels

Like most studies of Houellebecq to date, this thesis agrees that Houellebecq’s novels, in both their analysis of the problems of contemporary society and in the solutions that they propose, reflect – and reflect upon – the real world. This real-world relevance means that the significance of Houellebecq’s novels is not limited to a rarefied literary realm and that the ideas contained therein can be debated as a form of social commentary. At the outset, however, it must be made clear that this thesis does not explicitly attempt – until the conclusion – to explore the undeniable connections between the novels and real-world social issues or the author’s personal ideas and views. When in Chapter 2, for instance, I discuss the posthuman solution in Les Particules élémentaires, I am technically discussing a fictional solution to fictional problems with in a fictive literary universe. That this fictive literary universe manifestly parallels contemporary Western civilisation and the real world while leaving room for invention and imagination is an additional claim, one that I indeed make and invite the reader to accept, but one upon which the methodological approach in the following four chapters is not contingent.

The conclusion will observe broad consistency between the ideas in Houellebecq’s novels and his more direct social commentary in interviews and non-fiction writing; however, this does not mean that the novels should be read as literal predictions of the future of Western civilisation. I do not contend that the novels are a direct representation of the real world in which they are written and recognise them as literary texts with a high coefficient of artifice and fiction. I therefore hope to maintain a distinction between the broad problems and solutions identified in the novels, which are relevant to the real world and generally consistent with Houellebecq’s own views, and their sometimes fanciful dramatization. Arguing that the novels in general terms present ideas pertinent to real-world problems does not, for instance, imply that all arguments by characters in the novels
should be taken unproblematically as objective social analysis or as Houellebecq’s own views. By stating our argument for the real-world relevance of Houellebecq’s novels at the outset, the reader will be encouraged to bear this relevance in mind and make his or her own connections between our analysis of the ideas in Houellebecq’s literary universe and real-world issues.

That Houellebecq’s novels can be read, to a significant extent, as a form of social commentary, is implicitly or explicitly acknowledged by most of Houellebecq’s commentators. As Larry Duffy writes, “Houellebecq's narratives are grounded in the middle of the world, or in a milieu constituted by contemporary society in which experimental observation may take place.”

While the sense that Houellebecq’s novels are grounded in the world seems obvious in relation to their depictions of the problems of contemporary life, it seems less immediately apparent that the novels’ imagined futures – new posthuman species, an Islamic France – also constitute projections and hypotheses based on contemporary realities. I nevertheless argue that the imagined solutions in Houellebecq’s novels, in spite of their fanciful elements and unrealistic timeframes, are also based on an interpretation of social reality and represent long-term trajectories Western civilisation might possibly follow. In claiming that Houellebecq’s fiction, even in relation to its imaginary future scenarios, is grounded in or projected from contemporary social reality, I am in effect claiming, as do critics such as Duffy, that Houellebecq is situated in a lineage that follows on from 19th Century literary naturalism. In what follows it will thus be instructive to discuss the parallels with Émile Zola and literary naturalism. After introducing Zola and naturalism, I will discuss the parallels that exist between Houellebecq’s novels and naturalism, as well as the ways in which the novels do not fit neatly into this tradition.

Zola and naturalism

Let us begin by delineating some of the key features of literary naturalism as found in its most eminent representative, Émile Zola. As Chris Baldick notes, Zola was “the dominant practitioner

ponsor

and the chief exponent” of the doctrine of naturalism. I will not attempt here to give a comprehensive description of Zola’s naturalism, but will rather lay out some of the essential characteristics pertinent to Houellebecq’s fiction. Baldick defines literary naturalism as “a more deliberate kind of realism in novels, stories, and plays, usually involving a view of human beings as passive victims of natural forces and social environment.” In Zola, explanations of the behaviour and fate of individual characters are to be found less in the idiosyncrasies of their personality and psychology as original causes and more in the broader context of social and economic laws. Individual characters are loci where quasi-scientific forces and laws become manifest, and through their individual fates broad social realities are brought into relief. In naturalism, there is an emphasis on the scientific and in particular on the deterministic. As Dinah Birch observes:

Naturalism developed the existing tradition of realism in the direction of fully documented accuracy of representation of social and economic circumstances, with additional deterministic emphases on the supposed scientific ‘laws’ of human behaviour, understood to be governed by heredity and economic necessity.

Zola’s work, especially his cycle of twenty novels devoted to an exploration of the fate of the individual members of the Rougon-Macquart family, draws heavily upon 19th-century conceptions of science and determinism, with individual characters guided, unwittingly, by deterministic sociological and hereditary forces. In particular, these forces are used to explain darker problems of human existence involving sexuality and human failing. Although these novels explore determinism in the form of the inescapable recrudescence of destructive inherited traits within a family, Zola’s fiction also explores the ways in which broader social conditions and non-human infrastructure determine individual destinies. As Baldick writes:

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6 Ibid.
Naturalist fiction aspired to a sociological objectivity, offering detailed and fully researched investigations into unexplored corners of modern society—railways in Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1890), the department store in his *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883)—while enlivening this with a new sexual sensationalism.\(^8\)

As can be seen from this comment, Zola’s novels, like Houellebecq’s, retain elements of literary artifice and hyperbole. In spite of this, Zola’s naturalism, like Houellebecq’s fiction, involves an attempt to represent society as it is rather than as people might pretend or like it to be. As well as its emphasis on scientific detachment and the dramatization of sociological laws, Zola’s naturalism focussed on the pressing social problems of his age, and emphasised the unpleasant and the unromantic. As Nelson writes:

> At the heart of Zola’s naturalism is a concern with integrity of representation. For Zola, this meant a commitment to the idea that literature has a social function: to engage with the ‘order of the day’ through a representation of the sorts of things that concerned people on a daily basis in their social and individual lives.\(^9\)

Zola’s goal was to provide an accurate, undistorted representation of society, but, in the context of the profound changes and complexities of the industrial age, such a representation could not ignore sociological perspectives and the influence of new technologies such as railroads on human life. Zola’s naturalism, therefore, can be thought of in part as an attempt to register the changes brought about by industrial capitalism. As Nelson writes, “The motor of change was the rapid expansion of capitalism, with all that that entailed in terms of the altered shapes of the city, new forms of social practice and economic organisation, and heightened political pressures.”\(^10\) For Zola, the novel provided a space for exploring these complex new forces at the level of the individual and of society. This period, in which individuals began increasingly to be understood as

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\(^8\) Baldick, “Naturalism.”


\(^10\) Ibid., 295.
subject to vast, complex forces of which they themselves were at most vaguely conscious, demanded new literary forms more adequate to the task of representing an expanded social reality. Something analogous to the scientific technique, it was hoped, could enable a more expansive representation of contemporary society. Zola’s ambition was to write “a comprehensive history of contemporary society,” and this was no longer felt to be possible without reference beyond the individual to infrastructure and quasi-scientific processes. These elements, it was felt, were so crucial that they could no longer be excluded from literary texts aspiring to a comprehensive representation of social reality.

I have emphasised the objective and scientific qualities of Zola’s fiction, but Zola did not merely write about contemporary phenomena “forensically, as a would-be scientist,” but also “subversively, ironically, satirically.” In diagnosing ‘illnesses’ and contradictions in society, Zola’s novels constituted a powerful form of social critique. Like Houellebecq, Zola was a provocative public figure, and the notoriety in both cases is explained not only by a proclivity for controversial public statements, but above all by the reception of the novels themselves as political and social commentary rather than as simple exercises in imaginative fiction. As Nelson remarks:

As a body of literature, naturalist fiction represents a major assault on bourgeois morality and institutions. It takes an unmitigated delight – while also seeing the process as a serious duty – in revealing the vice and corruption behind the respectable facade.

As a social critic, Zola explored and denounced contemporary social problems both through novelistic fiction and through his work as a journalist and as an intellectual celebrity. While his novels provided a different, more experimental space for exploring contemporary social issues, they constituted, no less than his journalism or public statements, a form of commentary on these very same issues.

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11 Ibid., 294.
12 Ibid., 294.
13 Ibid., 295.
14 Ibid., 294.
In arguing that Houellebecq’s novels, like Zola’s, constitute a powerful form of social commentary, I am nonetheless not contending that Houellebecq’s novels simply resurrect the 19th-century naturalistic mode of writing. Although there are similarities between Houellebecq and Zola in terms of the type of content they concentrate on, the consistency both authors display across their novelistic universes and their real-world commentaries and the use of the novel as a space for diagnosing and exploring the problems of their respective societies, there are also differences. The most significant of these is that whereas Zola sets his novels within a realistic contemporary moment to comment on that moment, Houellebecq allows himself fantastical future hypotheses bordering on science fiction in order to think through the problems of the contemporary moment and where they may lead us in the future. Let us now compare Houellebecq’s novelistic œuvre with Zola’s naturalism, delineating the ways in which it does and does not conform to the naturalistic tradition.

_Houellebecq’s novels compared with Zola’s naturalism_

The resemblance Houellebecq’s fiction bears to Zola and naturalism is often conspicuous, and has not been lost on Houellebecq’s critics. As Duffy notes:

In literary terms, he has been likened to Maupassant and Zola, and, significantly, characterised as a “néonaturaliste”, not only because of his philosophical interests, but also on account of allusions to Zola, engagement with contemporary scientific ideas – notably with a “discours sociobiologique” – use of irony and second-degree narration, and provocative political interventions.15

In the discussion of Zola, I noted the emphasis on scientific forces and technological infrastructure. Duffy observes the significance of networks and infrastructure in Houellebecq’s novels, and sees in this a crucial parallel with literary naturalism:

15 Duffy, 211.
A striking feature of Michel Houellebecq's fiction is the pervasive presence of infrastructure, whether consisting of nineteenth-century transport and administrative networks underpinning a national territory, or modern-day electronic networks underpinning those of distribution and exchange in a liberal economy.¹⁶

In Zola’s work, reference to a vast background of knowledge subtending individual characters and events is a corollary of an attempt to represent increasingly complex social phenomena associated with industrialisation. Likewise, Houellebecq’s novels, insofar as they aspire to a representation of contemporary society, must consider unprecedentedly complicated networks and infrastructural systems as well as the vast demographic, economic, and sociological forces invisibly determining individual destinies. As Duffy writes:

Naturalist fiction is based on a vast infrastructure of knowledge, a knowledge economy with which it is an attempt to come to terms. The world that it represents is, like Houellebecq's, one of unprecedentedly extensive networks, and the means it uses to achieve its representation are similar to its object: it is an exhaustive network of contemporary knowledge.¹⁷

It is the premise of this thesis that Houellebecq’s novels can be read, like Zola’s, as attempts to explore contemporary society and to bring into relief the hidden operations of the social order. Duffy asks whether, like Zola and Balzac, “Houellebecq can be seen to be constructing a totalising epistemological account of his age.”¹⁸ In this thesis, I do not claim that Houellebecq’s novels aspire to a totalising representation of contemporary society; I make a slightly less ambitious claim on behalf of the novels, arguing that they offer a broad account of the experience of life in the contemporary West, an account informed and framed by an awareness of systematic forces. I claim that Houellebecq’s novels share with Zola’s naturalism an awareness that an adequate artistic representation of contemporary social reality must necessarily include reference to fundamental

¹⁶ Ibid., 212.
¹⁷ Ibid., 224.
¹⁸ Ibid., 224.
biological, social, and economic forces. In Houellebecq’s novels, for instance, there is a persistent emphasis on biological determinism and on the competitive instincts that humans share with other animals. Whereas Zola explored biological determinism in terms of hereditary traits passed down within the Rougon-Macquart family, Houellebecq’s novels examine a biological determinism observed in humanity as a whole, and based on fundamental Darwinian laws.

In Houellebecq’s novels, to an extent yet more radical than in Zola, the agency of individual characters is displaced by broader systems of knowledge. Duffy’s identification of an epistemological infrastructure in Houellebecq’s work can in fact be extended to include a plethora of perspectives that might be described as “posthuman” in the broad sense identified by Douglas Morrey, that is, “perspectives that deliberately play down the significance of individual humans,” by emphasising the contingency of individual humans to vast, anonymous forces. These include economic forces but also the biological infrastructure of life itself. In La Carte et le territoire, for instance, we will see how the role of the creative artist is displaced by the operations of the art market. In Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île, we will see how the possibilities for individual romantic relationships are determined by specific ideological conditions in the West at the end of the 20th Century. Throughout Houellebecq’s novels, Darwinian biology is used to explain human behaviour. The novels must avail themselves of such macroscopic perspectives if they are to have any hope of adequately conveying an experience of contemporary reality in which the human is displaced.

It is by understanding this aspect of Houellebecq’s œuvre that we can start to understand how to reconcile the work of a critic like Duffy who emphasises the naturalist, very human-centred world view that we find in Houellebecq with that of a critic such as Morrey who emphasises the novels’ posthuman insights. Houellebecq, like Zola before him, combines in novelistic form two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives: a view ‘on the ground’ that explores the intimate psychological details of individual characters, and a remote, objective view that takes into account

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the networks of infrastructure and knowledge described by Duffy and the “posthuman” forces identified by Morrey. It is the combination of these two approaches that explains the extreme disjunction that we find in the novels between, on the one hand, the atomised, individual worldview and a more cosmic vision in which the individual is ultimately insignificant. Much of the pathos of Houellebecq’s novels, indeed, is created by the extreme disjuncture between two incommensurable perspectives. According to the conception of contemporary life contained in Houellebecq’s novels, individuals are necessarily fixated on the self and on personal desires and fears because they are like atoms or islands, and all familial and communal horizons have been erased. At the same time, these individual perspectives are shown to be mere deterministic derivatives of vast social and biological processes. By juxtaposing these perspectives in the space of the novel, Houellebecq captures an experience of disjuncture characteristic of life in the contemporary West. As in Zola, a combination of large-scale and intimately personal perspectives permits a more comprehensive representation of contemporary social reality.

While Houellebecq’s inventive solutions – science fiction posthuman scenarios or an Islamic France – seem to bear hallmarks of fantasy and whimsy and may appear to stray from the naturalist model, I argue that they nevertheless retain a naturalist bent and involve projections based on contemporary reality. In the novels and, as we shall see, in Houellebecq’s non-fiction writing and interviews, these seemingly fanciful solutions are shown to be, not in their details or in their timeframe but in their broad direction, legitimate extrapolations based on contemporary realities. It will be a contention of this thesis that the posthuman and monotheistic solutions are then not simple fantasies arbitrarily attached to an otherwise naturalistic representation of contemporary society, but that the solutions themselves involve a naturalistic focus on determinism and extrapolation based on observation and an understanding of hidden forces. The scenarios presented in the novels involving posthuman technology or a large-scale return to monotheistic religion thus refer to possible futures in the real world, and it is therefore no surprise that they are explored by Houellebecq in his non-fiction as well as in his novels.
If, as I argue, Houellebecq’s novels, like Zola’s, aspire to a (non-literal and dramatized) representation of contemporary society, then there will necessarily be overlap between the problems explored in Houellebecq’s novels and the problems explored in his non-fiction and interviews. Indeed, what we find with Houellebecq is that both the novels and the non-fiction function as a form of social commentary, and it is no coincidence that, like Zola before him, Houellebecq has widely engaged in public commentary on a variety of contemporary issues. At times, Houellebecq even seems to be consciously assuming the role of a latter-day Zola: his open letter *J’accuse Hollande et défends les Français,*²⁰ for instance, directly alludes to Zola’s famous “J’accuse...” published in *L’Aurore* in 1894. To explore the multiple links that exist between Houellebecq’s novels and his public statements, however, is not to entirely conflate the two or to claim that statements made by characters in the novels can be directly ascribed to the author. A playfulness exists in the novels such that not every detail of apparent social criticism—and certainly not every detail of the solutions—can be read in a naturalistic vein. This playfulness indicates a level of self-consciousness that problematises the relation between author and work. Humour, irony, and ambiguity of authorial stance can be observed throughout the œuvre, perhaps most conspicuously in *La Carte et le territoire* with its self-referential play involving a character named ‘Houellebecq’.

Nevertheless, acknowledging the irony and playfulness in the novels does not negate our argument that the novels, in both their diagnosis of contemporary problems and in their imagined solutions, are oriented towards contemporary social reality and thus justify comparison with Houellebecq’s social criticism in non-fiction and interviews. Having thus introduced our claim for the real-world relevance of Houellebecq’s novels through a comparison with Zola and naturalism, let now outline some of the major critical approaches to Houellebecq and his work.

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Critical approaches to Houellebecq and his novels

There are three broad approaches to Houellebecq and his work that have been taken by critics and commentators. The first focuses on Houellebecq as a public figure, the second examines the stylistic qualities of his work, and the third engages with his novels as novels of ideas in which the novelistic medium is used to think through real-world problems. It is the third approach with which the argument in this thesis is generally aligned. The first approach engages with Houellebecq as a public and literary phenomenon, exploring his status as an unlikely celebrity. Especially in France, this approach has often been characterised by a polemic quality, as critics attempt to either defend or expose and deflate not only the works but also Houellebecq personally. One example of this approach is taken in Jean-François Patricola’s *Michel Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente*, in which Patricola argues that Houellebecq’s work is essentially vacuous and that Houellebecq’s success can be explained as a symbiotic relationship with the media in which Houellebecq plays the role of purveyor of faux-controversy. Patricola emphasises the commercial success of Houellebecq’s writing, and he investigates how he has surrounded himself with literary friends who collaborate in cultivating a Houellebecqian myth. For Patricola, as a myth and product, the intrinsic value of the writing is much less important than Houellebecq’s marketability. Even Houellebecq’s appearance – “chauve, quelconque, voire laid” – is a marketable asset as it distinguishes him from other celebrities in the society of spectacle and lends him an aura of authenticity: “Houellebecq n’a rien de vendeur : ni vulgarité ni faconde, c’est cela même qui assure son succès.” Denis Demonpion’s unauthorised biography, likewise, attempts to uncover the real Houellebecq behind the crafted media personality, sometimes exposing apparent lies or inconsistencies behind the public persona. It also claims to “expose” the biographical aspects of Houellebecq’s novels, with many scenes and characters, according to Demonpion, being taken directly from Houellebecq’s own life. In contrast to these rather *ad hominem* critiques, Dominique Noguez in *Houellebecq, en fait*.
praises not only the work but also attempts to defend Houellebecq personally against perceived misunderstandings and attacks.

In contrast to this attention on Houellebecq as an individual and as a public figure, the second and very different approach focuses on the intrinsically literary qualities of Houellebecq’s work and on its stylistic qualities in particular. An example of this type of approach is found in Murielle Lucie Clément’s *Michel Houellebecq revisité* in which Clément eschews engagement in the controversy of the political status of Houellebecq’s œuvre and instead attempts to engage with the novels “dans leur spécificité littéraire.” Clément proposes a close reading of the novels, focusing on the themes of dream interpretation, intertextuality, and eroticism. Another critic who focuses on the specifically literary qualities of Houellebecq’s work is Olivier Bardolle in *La Littérature à vif (Le cas Houellebecq)*. Bardolle castigates the bloodlessness and triviality of the contemporary French literary scene, praising Houellebecq as the only French writer capable of depicting the modern age. This reflection of the modern age is not, however, to be found, Bardolle argues, in the ideas contained in Houellebecq’s work so much as in the novels’ style. Bardolle argues that Houellebecq is the contemporary equivalent of Proust and Céline, having forged, like them, a new, distinctive style, representative of the contemporary moment. Houellebecq has succeeded, Bardolle explains, in creating a flat, cold style (“un style hostile”). For Bardolle it is this style, more than the originality of Houellebecq’s ideas, that represents Houellebecq’s enduring achievement.

In contrast to both the emphasis on Houellebecq’s personality and public image and the emphasis on the stylistic and specifically literary qualities of the works, the third broad approach – which this thesis takes – engages with the ideas contained in Houellebecq’s œuvre. The ideas contained in Houellebecq’s novels can, of course, be explored from a multitude of different angles. All approaches that engage with Houellebecq’s novels as novels of ideas, however, rely on certain assumptions about the status of the novels and their relation to the real world. They accept, at least

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26 Ibid., 13.
28 Ibid., 58.
implicitly, that Houellebecq’s novels are more than stylistic exercises or mere provocation. They also presume that Houellebecq’s novels incorporate social commentary and are socially and politically relevant, that is they are not merely an expression of the author’s individual psychology. As Morrey writes:

Some critics have argued that Houellebecq’s view of the mediocrity of contemporary civilisation is merely his projection of his own misery onto the rest of the world, which makes his judgement unrepresentative and unfair. But, to attempt a ‘corrective’ reading of Houellebecq, in which his work is seen to be the result of individual pathology, is surely to miss both the political and literary force of his writing.29

Morrey attributes Houellebecq’s success to:

his apparent ability to capture, in his writing, something of the mood of the times and to identify those areas of experience that are the site of most tension and anxiety in contemporary culture (sexuality, most notoriously, but also work, travel, and consumerism, as well as aging, loneliness and depression).30

This approach assumes not only that Houellebecq’s novels offer a reflection of contemporary social reality, but also that they reflect upon it. As Sweeney observes, “rejecting the linguistically inflected preoccupations of post-structuralism and the textual self-consciousness of postmodernism, Houellebecq’s novels are, in many ways, curiously old-fashioned romans à these.”31 In seeing Houellebecq’s novels as romans à these, Sweeney emphasises their didactic quality, since in the traditional roman à thèse, character and plot are exploited primarily to convey a particular philosophical, religious, or political argument.

Even when not explicitly stated in this way, approaches that treat Houellebecq’s novels as novels of ideas assume that they offer commentary on contemporary social reality. Within such a

29 Morrey, 33.
30 Ibid., 1.
31 Sweeney, xiv.
broad approach, however, there is room for great variation in the interpretation of the novels’ ideas. While there is a consensus among critics that Houellebecq’s novels depict a plethora of contemporary social ills in the form of atomisation, sexual exclusion and malaise, the erosion of higher values and the reification and commodification of human beings, the ideological framing of these problems in the novels is explored from different angles. These different approaches are exemplified in three major monographs on Houellebecq’s work by Sweeney, Morrey and Bellanger, all of which, though in very different ways, engage with Houellebecq’s novels as novels of ideas. As we will see, some of the apparent contradictions between the conclusions of these critics can be resolved by taking seriously the idea that the novels, even in their most extreme or seemingly fanciful moments, can be considered to present to the reader the outline of a solution to the problems of contemporary society and by understanding how the solutions are connected to a sustained reflection on the underlying causes of society’s problems.

In her book *Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, Sweeney explores the problems identified in Houellebecq’s novels in the context of neoliberal capitalism which, for Sweeney, is the ultimate cause as well the framework of problems including, but not limited to, loneliness, sexual malaise, and the desublimation of all values to market values. The “overarching hypothesis of Houellebecq’s œuvre,” Sweeney says, is that “market principles have come to determine and define every aspect of human life.” Houellebecq’s characters, Sweeney argues, are unable to embrace a world of total commodification, and are therefore “besieged and beleaguered, able only to half-exist among the affective ruins of relentless commodification.” Sweeney also recognises the atomisation and loneliness characteristic of Houellebecq’s works: “Houellebecq’s characters are profoundly emotionally and sexually isolated and have few meaningful kinship relations.” While these general problems have often been identified in Houellebecq’s novels, Sweeney’s specific approach consists in an attempt to explore the representation of the problems in relation to

32 Ibid., 42.
33 Ibid., 42.
34 Ibid., 42.
neoliberal late capitalism. This relationship, Sweeney argues, is deeply equivocal, simultaneously critical and complicit:

Putting his finger on a basic contradiction inherent in the ‘liquid times’ of late capitalism, that is the ontological tension between moral and personal freedom and the intense commodification of all human life under such conditions, Houellebecq offers a withering critique of neoliberal late capitalism that never manages to extricate itself entirely from accusations of complicity with its object of scrutiny.\(^{35}\)

Sweeney sees the novels as ideologically ambivalent, aware of the problems caused by neoliberalism but avoiding taking a clear stance against it. This ambivalence, she argues, explains much of the controversy surrounding Houellebecq and his novels. In her introduction, Sweeney writes, “I will argue in this book that critical attention, positive and otherwise, and popular success have accrued to Houellebecq’s novels in part because they can be read across the political spectrum, troubling all sides simultaneously.”\(^{36}\) Sweeney, however, does not attempt to enter this controversy and adjudicate whether the novels are, in the final analysis, to be understood as “for” or “against” capitalism; what she does attempt to do is show how the problems of contemporary society as depicted in the novels can all be explored under the rubric of neoliberal capitalism.

While Sweeney’s exploration of the ideas in Houellebecq’s novels before Soumission within the framework of neoliberal capitalism elucidates many pertinent issues, it is a contention of this thesis that neoliberal capitalism, as broad a framework though it apparently is, is still not broad enough and that if we are to understand the extent of Houellebecq’s reflections on contemporary society we need to go far wider. Sweeney’s insistence that Houellebecq’s novels cannot imagine solutions or alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, as well as her insistence that they are terminally ideologically ambivalent are, I argue, corollaries of not looking beyond neoliberal capitalism to the ways in which the novels frame – biologically and historically – neoliberal capitalism itself. It is

\(^{35}\) Ibid., ix.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., ix.
only when neoliberal capitalism in Houellebecq’s novels is understood not as an ultimate phase but as something contingent on potentially modifiable biological and historical parameters that their solutions can be taken seriously. Concluding her book, Sweeney writes, “Despair is not only inevitable in Houellebecq’s work, it is without anticipation of either hope or redemption.”  

It is understandably difficult for critics to see that, surprisingly, neoliberal capitalism is not the ultimate horizon in Houellebecq’s novels but a manifestation of deeper forces. It is only by exploring these deeper forces and by acknowledging the vast perspectives implied in the novels’ macroscopic concerns, however, that we can remain open to the possibility of finding in Houellebecq’s novels solutions or alternatives and not simply the apparent chronic ambivalence to neoliberal capitalism identified by Sweeney. Sweeney writes of Houellebecq, “His fundamental concern is the encroachment of capitalism… into all areas of affective human life.”  

In this thesis, however, I will contend that it is necessary to go beyond neoliberal capitalism as the ultimate cause of the problems he describes and explore how neoliberal capitalism in the novels is itself framed by biology as well as long-term historical processes.

It may be useful at this point to specify what I mean when I say that Houellebecq’s novels go beyond a critique of capitalism and identify fundamental biological and historical forces underlying the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. Houellebecq’s novels consistently emphasise a negative, animalistic quality in human nature. It is not simply that capitalism has perverted human nature and human relations, but that human nature is innately, biologically flawed. Humans, especially male humans, the novels suggest, have evolved to be selfish and competitive. Worst of all, biology dooms humans, like other animals, to mortality, and throughout the novels an awareness of individual mortality is presented as inimical to morality, social cohesion, and happiness. An apparent paradox emerges, however: if the fundamental cause of the problems explored in the novels is indeed biological human nature, why then are these problems shown to be characteristic of the contemporary West and not of other cultures or historical periods? Why, if human biological

37 Ibid., 190.
38 Ibid., ix.
nature has changed little over the millennia, have problems such as the decline of family bonds, atomisation, and the commodification of human beings emerged only in the West and only in recent decades? The relationship between biology (and scientific truth in general), and history in Houellebecq’s novels is complex, and will only emerge with clarity in Chapter 1 through a comparison with Comte’s theory of historical development. I can, however, briefly say that the paradox is resolved by understanding that, for Houellebecq, it is only in the contemporary West that the underlying truths of human biology and mortality are revealed in such an abject and undisguised way. Like Comte, Houellebecq’s novels emphasise the rise of materialism and science and the decline of religion, rather than economic forces, as the underlying narrative of Western history since the Enlightenment. In the contemporary age, as depicted in Houellebecq’s novels, we find ourselves at the end of this despiritualising process, and now that religion and the promise of individual immortality have been discredited, the reality of Darwinian struggle between discrete, mortal biological entities for scarce resources is all that remains. Rather than understanding the callous, despiritualised nature of contemporary Western civilisation as resulting from neoliberal capitalism, it is more accurate to see neoliberalism in Houellebecq’s novels as a response to an implicit awareness than humans are innately mortal, isolated, and competitive. Neoliberalism is naturalised in Houellebecq’s novels insofar as it is shown to be founded on the irrefutable truths of human biology and immortality. It cannot be displaced unless either human biology is altered (by means of posthuman technology) or unless, as in Soumission, the possibility of a widespread return to religion is reconsidered.

One approach that looks beyond the specific conditions of neoliberalism is found in Morrey’s Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath, which has the advantage of broadening the theoretical framework through which Houellebecq’s novels are read by exploring their “posthuman” perspectives. Morrey, however, like Sweeney, does not take Houellebecq’s solutions to be genuine, arguing that “Houellebecq is not really prescribing solutions, and nor is it necessarily his role to do
so. His reading does not integrate into a coherent vision the posthuman perspectives in Houellebecq’s novels with their ideals about traditional values, love, and immortality, leading him to argue that some elements of the novels that in our reading are fundamental remain, for him, merely the residue of a humanistic attitude that Houellebecq’s posthumanism is unable to fully surpass. The term posthumanism can be used in at least two distinct senses. The first refers to the idea of using technology to enhance or replace existing human biology, and the science fiction scenarios in Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* are examples of this sort of posthumanism. Posthumanism is used in a second sense to describe philosophical perspectives that criticise perceived anthropocentric biases in Western thought and that criticise the heritage of Enlightenment humanism and the ideals of human rationality and autonomy. Morrey, while including some discussion of ‘science-fiction’ posthumanism, focuses primarily on posthumanism in the second, broader and more philosophical sense. Morrey writes, “The goal of this book is to employ this broader definition of the posthuman in order to interpret Houellebecq’s work, not only those narratives which appeal to the futuristic tropes of science fiction, but the whole of Houellebecq’s novelistic œuvre.”

One aspect of the posthuman perspective that Morrey observes in Houellebecq is the realisation that it is no longer possible to separate human activities from the biology humans share with other animals:

> We are obliged to re-evaluate our sense of ourselves, both as individuals and as social beings, together with our understanding of human history and our political priorities, when we grasp, with the clarity of scientific demonstration, that we are, after all, just animals.

The central role of the human in the humanistic conception of the universe is displaced not only by a perspective which places the human in its animal context, but also by perspectives that focus on systems, technology, and economic forces operating beyond the conscious control of

39 Morrey, 153.
40 Ibid., 10.
41 Ibid., 9.
individual humans. Morrey’s posthuman reading of Houellebecq’s œuvre emphasises the way in which themes such as sexuality and art are presented in Houellebecq from sociological and economic (as opposed to humanistic) perspectives. Morrey discusses, for instance, Houellebecq’s enquiry into contemporary art in *La Carte et le territoire* as an example of a detached, posthuman perspective in which the creative role of the artist is displaced by anonymous market forces.

Morrey, however, sees a constant tension in Houellebecq’s work between these posthuman perspectives and the persistence of old-fashioned humanistic views: “Michel Houellebecq continues to waver between fully posthumanist and residually humanist understandings of the world and this uncertainty leads to many of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies within his œuvre.”

One such residual humanism in Houellebecq’s writing, from Morrey’s point of view, is the nostalgia for religion. The desire for religion is seen by Morrey as a failure or hesitation in the novels in following their posthuman vision to the full: “Houellebecq’s repeated, if tentative, turns to religious thought necessarily betray the difficulty of leaving behind a humanist conception of the world.”

The desire for religion, Morrey notes, seems to stem from dissatisfaction with ruthless and dehumanising market forces, “there is a persistent sense, in Houellebecq’s writing, that *something is missing* from our societies.” In contrast to the lack of credence given to politics as a way of filling this void, Morrey notes that “there is a recurring – though never entirely committed – appeal to religion as offering the promise of something more than just quantifiable value to the market.”

For Morrey, however, humanistic elements in Houellebecq’s novels like the desire for religion remain merely ‘residual’; they are vain hopes that posthuman insight (combined with a hard-headed, scientific approach) has yet to entirely extinguish. Viewed in this way, a fundamental opposition appears to exist in Houellebecq’s novels between posthuman and scientific perspectives on the one hand, and residual ideals like love and religion on the other.

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42 Ibid., 149.
43 Ibid., 151.
44 Ibid., 141.
45 Ibid., 141.
By seeing Houellebecq’s novels as containing a posthuman perspective that sits uneasily with a residue of humanistic values, Morrey, like Sweeney, identifies an apparent tension in Houellebecq’s work. As with Houellebecq’s ambivalent attitude to capitalism, so his vacillation between fully posthumanist and residually humanistic attitudes can be clarified by an enquiry into the deep and idiosyncratic ideology subtending the novels. Far from being residual, the ‘humanistic’ elements in the novels are in fact fundamental to the novels’ ideology. The relationship between a scientific, posthuman perspective and nostalgia for old-fashioned values in the novels will only become fully apparent when I investigate the novels’ search for solutions that combine scientific and posthuman perspectives with values like religion and love. It is only by examining in detail the search for a return to these values not in spite of but by means of a posthuman and scientific perspective that we can begin to understand how Houellebecq’s seemingly oxymoronic combinations, such as anti-humanistic humanism and revolutionary conservatism, may in fact be unwritten by an idiosyncratic but surprisingly consistent logic.

In striking contrast to Sweeney’s interpretation of Houellebecq’s novels, which saw them as despairing and incapable of imagining alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, Bellanger in Houellebecq écrivain romantique depicts Houellebecq as a romantic and even utopian novelist. He argues that in Houellebecq’s novels, science and technology, far from representing a threat to humanistic and romantic ideals, in fact reinvigorate and extend them. As we have seen, Sweeney and Morrey do not believe that Houellebecq’s novels propose genuine solutions to society’s problems, but this is not the case for Bellanger, who takes seriously the science-fiction solutions explored in Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île. Whereas values like love and religion were for Morrey a residue in Houellebecq’s work, they are for Bellanger the driving force of his romantic imagination. Houellebecq, Bellanger argues, finds in science a way of realising his romantic ideals of love, religion, and even immortality. Emphasizing, approvingly, the important role of science in Houellebecq’s œuvre, Bellanger writes, “Aucune œuvre littéraire ne peut plus

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nous convaincre de rien si elle ignore la science.”47 In contrast to Morrey’s interpretation of the novels, Bellanger argues that in Houellebecq, science, technology and a posthuman perspective facilitate rather than oppose humanistic and romantic values. In Houellebecq, Bellanger argues, all ideals of morality, love, and immortality are ultimately naturalizable through technology.

Bellanger’s approach is useful in that it highlights the importance of values like religion and love in Houellebecq’s novels, and also because it treats seriously the possibility of science-fiction utopias as explored in Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île (it must be kept in mind, however, that Bellanger’s book was published before the publication of La Carte et le territoire and Soumission, novels that depart from the science-fiction scenarios of the earlier two novels). While Bellanger’s emphasis on the romanticism and optimism in Houellebecq’s novels is a useful counterbalance to interpretations of the novels as unequivocally despairing, it needs to be combined with an acknowledgement of the depth of pessimism in the novels about the state of contemporary society. While Bellanger argues that Houellebecq’s posthuman solutions reflect an exuberant romanticism, this thesis insists that it is the insight that contemporary Western civilisation is in a state of crisis with all ‘normal’ paths to amelioration blocked that drives Houellebecq’s search for fundamental solutions. This thesis agrees with Bellanger that Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île present a future transformation of society by means of posthuman technology as a credible possibility, but it is necessary to examine their deeply pessimistic depiction of the problems of erotic pauperisation, atomisation, the ubiquity of the market, and the decline of religion and love in order to understand the inadequacy of alternative, less radical solutions. This thesis argues that the solutions proposed in Houellebecq’s novels can then only be fully understood in their specificity when they are examined through the lens of the novels’ pessimistic insights into the deep biological and historical causes of contemporary society’s ills. I want to explore the underlying ideological framework driving both the search for solutions and the diagnosis of problems in the novels. I want to explore, moreover, the consistency and the evolution in this

47 Ibid., 10.
underlying ideological framework across the novelistic œuvre. Before outlining how I will do this, however, it is first necessary to explain the rationale for choosing to focus on just four from among Houellebecq’s six novels published to date.

Justification of primary corpus

In this thesis, I have decided to omit a close examination of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* ⁴⁸ and *Plateforme* ⁴⁹. In order to justify this omission, however, I will briefly introduce these two novels and position them in relation to the rest of the novelistic œuvre and in relation to the overall argument of the thesis, while explaining nonetheless why they do not need to be examined in depth herein. *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, published in 1994, was Houellebecq’s first novel. The unnamed narrator in this novel is a prototype of Houellebecq’s subsequent protagonists. 30 years old, he works in I.T. and earns two and a half times the national average, but he is physically unprepossessing and has not had sex for two years. He feels his work with computers to be inherently meaningless and alienating. Self-loathing and resentful of society, without friends or family, he embodies the atomisation that Houellebecq’s novels all observe in contemporary Western civilisation. He eventually has a nervous breakdown and is committed to a mental institution, setting a pattern for later Houellebecqian protagonists who contemplate or commit suicide. The other important character in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is Raphaël Tisserand, the narrator’s colleague and, at 28 years of age, still a virgin. Ugly and awkward, congenitally repulsive to women, Raphaël surpasses even the narrator in constituting a case study in extreme erotic deprivation. Drawing on his observations of Raphaël’s plight, the narrator expounds the central idea of the novel: that in contemporary society a sphere of brutal competition for scarce erotic resources exists, analogous to, but independent from, the economic sphere. The narrator and Raphaël are relative winners in the economic sphere, but miserable losers in the erotic one. The narrator argues that just as economic liberalism produces ruthless competition and economic inequality, so erotic

liberalism in the form of sexual liberation leads to erotic abundance for some but erotic poverty for unattractive or older people:

Le libéralisme économique, c’est l’extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. De même, le libéralisme sexuel, c’est l’extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société.\textsuperscript{50}

As exemplified in the quotation above, the title of the novel, \textit{Extension du domaine de la lutte}, aptly captures the central idea that an unregulated ‘struggle’ for scarce resources has now been extended to all spheres of life, including erotic and romantic relationships. As Morrey notes, the word \textit{lutte} is “hardly innocent, bringing with it a long tradition of Marxist rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{51} More specifically, the novel’s title is ironically redolent of Marxist slogans from the student movement of ’68, and in this it presages the more sustained critique of the liberatory activism of the 60s and 70s undertaken in \textit{Les Particules élémentaires}. The struggle for sexual and other freedoms, the title seems to suggest, merely precipitated an extension and intensification of market competition. From this perspective, sexual liberation is shown to have never been in fundamental opposition to capitalism. Read from this angle, the title \textit{Extension du domaine de la lutte} is bitterly ironic: the fight for liberation has merely succeeded in extending the boundaries of the battle of each against all. Morrey raises the question of whether the novel’s ambivalent title might not also be understood, alternatively, as some sort of rallying cry on behalf of the sexually dispossessed. Might not Houellebecq’s first novel be understood as a quasi-Marxist critique of the emergence of a sexual proletariat? Morrey, however, astutely observes that “the struggle Houellebecq describes is as much a neo-Darwinian ‘struggle for life’ as it is a post-Marxist class struggle.”\textsuperscript{52} He observes that Houellebecq appears to be at least as concerned with metaphysical questions about “the universe”

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Extension du domaine de la lutte}, 100.
\textsuperscript{51} Morrey, 53.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 53.
as about politics. As much as I agree with this analysis and as much as this novel resonates with the arguments made herein, however, it is not until Les Particules élémentaires that the complex and deep relations between a Darwinian struggle for life and post-Marxist class struggle are thoroughly explored and quasi-Marxist solutions implicitly excluded as incompatible with deep historical and biological realities. It is only in Les Particules élémentaires that a deep engagement with the historical and biological causes of contemporary social problems emerges, opening up the possibility of their radical resolution.

Without reference to these underlying frameworks, Houellebecq’s novels may seem contradictory or wilfully ambivalent. Like Morrey, Sweeney notes that Extension du domaine de la lutte might be interpreted as a Marxist critique of capitalism:

On the face of it, then, this seems like a standard leftist critique of the alienation and reification of late capitalism and as such amounts to, as some of Houellebecq’s less sympathetic critiques have noted, little more than an updating of the Communist Manifesto.

On the other hand, Sweeney acknowledges, Extension du domaine de la lutte and Houellebecq’s other novels often seem diametrically opposed to Marxist ideology: “Houellebecq, however, is certainly no Marxist and le monde houellebecqien, as it has come to be known, is a stubbornly un-dialectical space, which moves gradually further and further from any vital connection with the human and the social.” Houellebecq, Sweeney observes, appears to continually cross “ideological positions from right to left” and his novels “cannot be easily placed.” His writing is “ideologically forked” with the reader oscillating between equally unsatisfactory readings of Houellebecq as either a simple bigot or as a neo-Marxist satirist:

53 Ibid., 54.
54 Sweeney, x.
55 Ibid., x.
56 Ibid., xi.
57 Ibid., xi.
58 Ibid., xi.
His novels can be read, on the one hand, as a reactionary response to the progressive socio-cultural movements of the twentieth century such as feminism and multiculturalism, while on the other they seem to offer a compelling critique of the totalising mechanism of the ‘market’ with its hitherto unparalleled influence on human life.\(^{59}\)

Without attempting to explain away entirely the ambivalence and inconsistency sometimes found in Houellebecq’s novels, this thesis nevertheless argues that they are subtended by a certain ideological consistency that frames their representation of contemporary society. I contend that Houellebecq’s representation of the specific dynamics of neoliberal contemporary society should be examined within the framework of the novels’ fundamental understanding of biology and of Western history. Almost like a prelude to *Les Particules élémentaires, Extension du domaine de la lutte* hints at but does not thoroughly explore the fundamental causes of the competition and cruelty it observes in contemporary society. As John Sturrock notes, “Impressively bleak though it was, Houellebecq’s first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, was not of a size or reach to give one to think that he might next go on to write something with the philosophical ambitions of *Les Particules élémentaires*.\(^{60}\) It is for this very reason that I will not examine this novel in depth in this thesis, because the historical and biological dimension is not fully developed and the novel instead focuses on the stark realities of competition and exclusion in contemporary society rather than on an analysis of their historical development. With admirable bluntness, the novel puts its finger on what it perceives as the commodification of individuals and the evaporation of all non-market values in contemporary Western civilisation. It is not until *Les Particules élémentaires*, however, that these problems are explored in the context of deep historical and biological causation.

If I have chosen not to concentrate on *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, however, it is not only because of its far more limited focus, but also because, in contrast to a novel such as *Les Particules élémentaires*.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., xi.

élémentaires, it does not propose any solutions to the problems it identifies. As we shall see in this thesis, the categories of solution explored in the novels are inextricable from the novels’ underlying perspectives on biology and history. In fact, it is only in the subsequent novels that go beyond contemporary economic and social conditions, viewing them as contingent on underlying biological and historical forces, that the possibility of a solution emerges. In the novels from the more mature phase of Houellebecq’s career, the problems of contemporary society are shown to emerge inevitably given the context of existing human biology and a post-Enlightenment historical phase. If human biology could be modified or if society could affect an escape from the post-Enlightenment historical paradigm, then the problems of contemporary society would no longer be insoluble. By situating the underlying causes of society’s problems at such a fundamental level, the novels implicitly preclude any less extreme measures for redeeming society.

Insofar as the conditions of late capitalist society are seen as an ultimate framework for understanding the problems of individual characters, then it is indeed difficult, as Sweeney observes, to determine the novels’ ideological position. A ‘macroscopic’ contextualisation within contemporary social and economic realities is, in fact, too limited. The ideological position in Houellebecq’s novels only begins to emerge, however, after Extension du domaine de la lutte when contemporary, capitalist society is viewed within a yet more fundamental historical and biological framework. This thesis starts from the premise that to frame the problems faced by individual characters, as Sweeney tends to do, within the context of neoliberal capitalism is to miss the significance and idiosyncratic consistency in Houellebecq’s novels after Extension du domaine de la lutte. In Houellebecq’s novels, the role of the market is itself framed by both a pessimistic understanding of human biology and by a historical understanding that views the displacement of religion and morality by science and materialism as the fundamental narrative of Western history since the Enlightenment. This deeper perspective in Houellebecq’s novels in some ways ‘naturalises’ neoliberal capitalism by attaching it to a biological and historical foundation, but it also opens up for consideration the possibility of a foundational biological or historical shift enabling radical and unexpected solutions to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation.
Like *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Plateforme* tends to concentrate its focus solely on the contemporary moment and is therefore unable to imagine solutions arising from a radical shift in Western history or an alteration of flawed human biology. Published in 2001, *Plateforme* was Houellebecq’s third novel, coming after *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) and before *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005). Michel Renault, a middle-aged civil servant, is a familiar Houellebecqian protagonist. Jaded with his work and with life in general, Michel is also a relative loser in the European erotic marketplace. While on holiday in Thailand he is enchanted by the abundance of young, beautiful, and respectful prostitutes. He also meets a fellow tourist, Valérie, with whom he begins a passionate love affair. Together, Michel and Valérie decide to create a company specialising in sex tourism in developing countries. These plans collapse, however, when Valérie is killed in a bombing in Thailand by Muslim terrorists, and it is implied that Michel, having lost all interest in life, commits suicide. Sex tourism in *Plateforme* is shown to be a way of linking the two main spheres of competition and exclusion identified in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*: the economic and the erotic. Many Westerners, Michel and Valérie reason, have a relative abundance of economic wealth but are erotically impoverished because of their appearance or age. Young women (and men) in developing countries like Thailand have erotic capital in the form of their physical capacity, but are economically impoverished. The problem of economic poverty first identified in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is thereby solved by means of sex tourism, which additionally benefits the sex workers in the developing countries.

On the face of it, *Plateforme* offers a clear remedy to the problem of erotic poverty. It is a solution, incidentally, that Houellebecq unequivocally endorses. In an interview with Susannah Hunnewell, Houellebecq declared that he was “all for prostitution… because everybody wins.”61 He went on to explain, “It doesn’t interest me personally, but I think it’s a good thing. A lot of British and Americans pay for it. They’re happy. The girls are happy. They make a lot of money.”62

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62 Ibid.
Even though prostitution then seems to be proffered in Plateforme as a real, operable solution to one of the problems facing Western civilisation in Houellebecq’s novels, this thesis will not focus on this solution because Plateforme and other novels make clear that prostitution is at best an expedient and superficial solution that does not resolve the centuries-long rise of materialism nor the biological causes underlying contemporary social problems. I do not deny that sex tourism in Plateforme is presented in a generally positive light and that it is shown to provide a salutary service to sexually-deprived Westerners; mere sexual deprivation, however, does not go to the heart of the sense of deprivation experienced by Houellebecq’s characters. This was already apparent in Extension du domaine de la lutte, in which Raphaël explicitly rejected hiring prostitutes as a satisfactory solution to his erotic impoverishment. He tells the nameless narrator:

Tu comprends, j’ai fait mon calcul : j’ai de quoi me payer une pute par semaine ; le samedi soir, ça serait bien. Je finirai peut-être par le faire. Mais je sais que certains hommes peuvent avoir la même chose gratuitement, et en plus avec de l’amour. Je préfère essayer ; pour l’instant, je préfère encore essayer. 63

That prostitution is an unsatisfactory solution to erotic poverty is likewise implied in other novels. In La Possibilité d’une île, for instance, Daniel is wealthy enough to afford all the prostitutes he could want, but it is only his relationship with Esther, and not with prostitutes, that gives his life vitality. In Soumission, François’ recourse to prostitutes does nothing to alleviate his feelings of existential angst. Even in Plateforme, it is Michel’s romantic relationship with Valérie — rather than sex tourism — that galvanises him out of depression. Plateforme, like Houellebecq’s other novels, thus emphasises the importance of non-transactional values like love; in a world without love or higher values, sex tourism may be better than nothing, but it is not a fundamental solution. The central problem of Western civilisation in Houellebecq’s work is never simply inequality in access to sex, but the absence of love, community, religion, and meaning in life, which is to say, far deeper and more fundamental questions. These deep problems are alluded to in both

63 Extension du domaine de la lutte, 94.
Extension du domaine de la lutte and Plateforme, but it is in Houellebecq’s other four novels that they are analysed more thoroughly and explored in a broader historical and biological context and it is for this reason that this study will focus on those novels and leave aside Extension du domaine de la lutte and Plateforme in which the treatment of these questions is either not as well developed or more superficial in relation to the kinds of solutions proposed.

Outline of argument

If Houellebecq’s novels seek to elucidate some of the apparently intractable problems of Western civilisation and to see these as the product not simply of specific, short-term sociocultural, psychological or politico-economic contexts but, rather, of long-standing and fundamental biological and historical factors that constellate a complex set of questions, the methodological approach that I will take in this thesis will be no less broad. Indeed, while I have already situated Houellebecq’s novels within a naturalistic tradition by means of a comparison with Zola, in the conclusion I will extend this method by comparing the ideas in the novels with the author’s own statements and views. Before this, Comte’s philosophy of history will provide a framework for exploring the posthuman solutions in Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île, and Baudrillard’s theory of simulation will serve as a useful tool for interrogating the problems depicted in La Carte et le territoire. In Soumission, meanwhile, I will avail myself of the intertexts of Huysmans’ novels in analysing the psychology of religious conversion. As this study wishes to claim that we need a broader understanding of biological and historical context to appreciate truly the ideas of Houellebecq’s novels, their articulation to the real world, and how they can be seen to proffer credible solutions to contemporary problems, it is therefore fitting that the approach I take consciously connects Houellebecq’s thought to a broad sphere of reference and intellectual precedent.

Chapter 1 focuses on Les Particules élémentaires and the solution of using future biotechnology to address the root causes of society’s problems at a fundamental, biological level. In seeking to understand why such a radical posthuman solution is proposed, this chapter draws on the
philosophical and literary intertexts of Auguste Comte’s philosophy and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. By comparing the utopian solution of *Les Particules élémentaires* with the solutions explored in these intertexts, this chapter attempts to bring into relief Houellebecq’s posthuman solution in its specificity. The chapter elucidates the common ground existing between *Les Particules élémentaires* and Comte’s ideas, and examines the fundamental points on which the two diverge. Having examined Comte, the chapter turns its focus to the second key intertext, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, identifying many features common to both *Brave New World*’s society and the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*. We will see, however, that *Les Particules élémentaires* diverges from *Brave New World* on precisely the same point it diverges from Comte. As the chapter goes on to seek an explanation for this divergence, the underlying perspective on human nature and the human condition implicit in *Les Particules élémentaires* is brought into focus, and it is shown that the novel adheres to a highly pessimistic view of biological human nature whereby anything other than a posthuman solution is thought to be inadequate. Having clarified and examined this underlying understanding of the human condition in *Les Particules élémentaires*, the chapter shows how this understanding provides the philosophical grounding for a successful posthuman solution free from the flaws identified in both *Brave New World*’s society and in Comte’s philosophy.

Chapter 2 focuses on *La Possibilité d’une île*, exploring how the posthuman solution is problematised. Like *Les Particules élémentaires*, *La Possibilité d’une île* also explores the possibility of a posthuman solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation, but it involves an attempt to think through the solution formulated in *Les Particules élémentaires* at closer range, imagining how a technological solution might bring about undesirable results. The specific posthuman solution represented by the neo-human clones is shown to be a failure because it abnegates something essential about the human condition. The neo-humans speak, however, albeit in quasi-mystical and religious terms, of the future coming of an ultimate posthuman solution that will transcend the flaws in both human and neo-human life. The hope of a utopian posthuman solution is therefore not entirely extinguished in *La Possibilité d’une île*, although it is much more
remote and uncertain than in *Les Particules élémentaires*. Problematising the posthuman solution and suggesting that it may only be successful, if at all, in the distant future, *La Possibilité d’une île* nevertheless reiterates the categorical insistence in *Les Particules élémentaires* on the futility of all less extreme, non-biotechnological solutions to contemporary society’s problems.

In this chapter, I also explore the apparently paradoxical attitude in *La Possibilité d’une île* to the question of whether it is innate human nature or features specific to contemporary Western civilisation that are the cause of society’s problems, and I explore how the novel denies the possibility of a return to traditional values. The chapter discusses how the novel’s depiction of the remaining bands of human “savages” and of the animal world further reinforces the emphasis on cruelty and suffering as intrinsic to animal and human life. This pessimistic view of human nature leads to the abolition of both desire and sociality being posited as the only way of overcoming suffering and conflict, and in examining the details of the neo-human solution it is shown how desire and suffering are abolished by a combination of biological engineering and adherence to highly prescriptive lifestyle rules. The neo-human solution largely achieves its goal of abolishing desire, but rather than this producing the desired result of tranquillity, the result is instead a chronic sense of malaise and emptiness among the neo-humans. With the neo-human solution invalidated, the technological solution hoped for with the coming of the mysterious aliens known only as “les Futurs” is all that remains. Because the solution of “les Futurs” is remote and possibly mythical, however, this chapter concludes that *La Possibilité d’une île* postpones the possibility of an absolute solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation into the distant future. At the end of Chapter 2, therefore, we see that *La Possibilité d’une île* has not brought us any nearer to a solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. The posthuman solution explored in *Les Particules élémentaires* remains (albeit with the qualification that it is speculative and does not offer relief to present or past generations of humans) the only successful solution taking effect in the short to medium term depicted in Houellebecq’s novels up until this point.

Thus, in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, we see how a posthuman solution is needed because, by implication, no other solutions are possible. A return to tradition and religion is rejected, and reform
of society, without radical changes to human biology, is shown to be hopelessly idealistic. Whereas *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* focus primarily on the problems of sex and the deleterious traits of biological human nature, *La Carte et le territoire* shifts its focus to the corrosive influence of the market and the replacement of the real by simulation. In Chapter 3, I will then consider whether *La Carte et le territoire* offers any new solutions, or whether it continues the logic of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* by showing that, in the absence of a posthuman solution, contemporary Western civilisation is without hope of salvation. The theories of Baudrillard will be used in the reading of the novel to provide a framework for understanding its depiction of simulation. The chapter will examine how the loss of authenticity that is described in Baudrillard’s work plays out in relation to tradition, work, and art, and asks whether there is any hope that these might still offer solutions. It analyses the novel’s scenario of a return to tradition and the countryside, asking whether this is being presented as a genuine solution, discussing also the novel’s exploration of the possibility of finding authenticity in work in contemporary society. Finally, it examines the novel’s portrayal of the artist, asking whether the novel shows that it is possible for the artist to stand apart from the inauthenticity found elsewhere in society, and whether it shows art to be part of a solution to society’s problems.

I argue that *La Carte et le territoire* is a novel that is situated in a far more limited, contemporary temporal framework than *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* and in which any fundamental solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation is absent. In this it is consistent with the logic of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* which reject the possibility of any solution not involving posthuman technology, a solution which remains beyond the temporal sphere of *La Carte et le territoire*. Like *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, what is more, *La Carte et le territoire* denies the possibility of contemporary Western civilisation returning to tradition or religion. The rediscovery of tradition and the countryside depicted in the novel, this chapter argues, must be understood in the context of the novel’s concern with simulation, and does not represent a genuine rediscovery of lost
values. Like critics such as Louis Betty, I contend that Houellebecq, having abandoned hopes of a posthuman utopia, turns towards traditional, pre-modern values and religion as a possible solution to society’s problems. However, this chapter argues that this change is observed only in *Soumission*, and not in *La Carte et le territoire*. With all hopes for a solution having been abandoned in *La Carte et le territoire*, *Soumission* unexpectedly explores the possibility that Islam might facilitate a return to tradition and religion that the previous novels – including *La Carte et le territoire* – categorically deny is possible.

In the first three chapters, therefore, we will see that Houellebecq’s earlier novels reject the possibility of transforming the broad social, political, and economic realities of Western society without a technological, posthuman solution. The social and economic system of the West, based on transactions between autonomous individuals, are depicted as natural and therefore inevitable for a society no longer underwritten by theistic belief. Islam, as well as Christianity, will be shown to be ultimately doomed, unable to resist the corrosive forces of science and reason. In Chapter 4, however, I argue that *Soumission* represents a dramatic departure from Houellebecq’s previous novels in two significant respects: firstly, it contemplates the possibility of revolutionary social, political and economic changes occurring in contemporary Western civilisation without the assistance of biotechnology; secondly, it contemplates the possibility of a renewal of theistic belief in Western civilisation.

Islam, combined with a political and social restructuring of society, seems to offer in *Soumission* the possibility of a powerful new solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation; as I will show, however, the sometimes satirical depiction of the Islamic solution in the novel means that it is necessary to consider the extent to which it is seriously being presented as a viable possibility. This chapter argues that although there is much satire in the depiction of the details of the Islamic solution, the general idea of a return to religion and tradition as a way of escaping an Enlightenment ideology that has become pernicious is to be taken seriously. Indeed, the

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problems that Soumission diagnoses in contemporary Western civilisation – atomisation, the decline of community and family life, spiritual emptiness, sexual malaise, fear of death, and the need for religion – find parallels in Houellebecq’s previous novels. In Soumission, however, all these problems are placed under the rubric of Enlightenment ideology, and the thought experiment that the novel performs asks whether Islam might provide an exit from an ideology which has brought Western civilisation to the point of crisis and suicide. Soumission evinces a newfound belief in the potential of religion and politics as agents of social transformation, and the possibility of a non-technological solution to the problems of Western civilisation is thereby reopened for consideration.

That a return to religion and traditional patriarchal values is presented in Soumission as desirable should not, in the context of Houellebecq’s œuvre, come as a surprise, as Houellebecq’s novels all lament the secularity and excessive emphasis on autonomy found in contemporary Western civilisation. In contrast, the argument made in Soumission that a credible trajectory exists for a return to religion and traditional values represents a significant departure in Houellebecq’s œuvre. Soumission implies that atheism in the West is more apparent than real. It presents, moreover, a path to conversion for individual characters which does not dwell on metaphysical or theological questions and is not excessively burdensome. Soumission also offers an argument showing that the rise of Islam in Europe is likely in the long term for demographic reasons unrelated to the ideological advantages of the Islamic religion. While the specific political events that Soumission portrays as leading to the success of the Islamic regime are unpredictable (for instance, the emergence of a brilliant, charismatic leader in the form of the character Mohammed Ben Abbes), Soumission depicts Europe as inherently predisposed to a return to religion. In spite of the satire involved in the presentation of the solution, it is nevertheless possible to conclude that, in general terms, something like this change to an Islamic regime is being presented as both beneficial and plausible.

Our conclusion will summarise the findings of the thesis, noting a logical consistency across Houellebecq’s novels but also acknowledging the significant departure represented by Soumission. It will then discuss Houellebecq’s non-fiction and interviews, observing parallels with the
consistency and evolution found in the novelistic œuvre. The parallels I find between the ideas in the novels and the views voiced by Houellebecq in direct social commentary will further corroborate the argument that the novels are relevant to the real world and can be read in a naturalistic vein. While observing that, as in the novels, Houellebecq suggests that either posthuman technology or a return to religion might one day offer a credible solution to society’s problems, our conclusion also explores Houellebecq’s discussion of solutions not envisaged in the novels, such as his advocacy of direct democracy. I will explore how Houellebecq’s advocacy of a partial solution like political reform might be understood as a proposal for averting crisis in the period before a fundamental solution in the form of posthuman technology or a return to religion emerges, since even if, as I contend here, Houellebecq sees them as genuine solutions to the problems of Western society in his analysis, they are not solutions that would seem to be on the horizon for a considerable time to come.
Chapter 1 *Les Particules élémentaires*

This chapter will explore the proposal put forward in *Les Particules élémentaires* for a posthuman solution to the problems of contemporary Western Civilisation. This solution involves using future biotechnology to address the root causes of the problems at a fundamental, biological level. In seeking to understand why such a radical solution is proposed, I will draw on the philosophical and literary intertexts of Auguste Comte’s philosophy and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. By comparing the utopian solution of *Les Particules élémentaires* with the solutions explored in these intertexts, I will attempt to bring into relief Houellebecq’s posthuman solution in its specificity.

The chapter will be set out in the following way. After providing a summary of *Les Particules élémentaires*, I will discuss interpretations of the novel by Sweeney, Morrey, and Bellanger, explaining why the comparison with Comte is so necessary. I will elucidate the common ground existing between *Les Particules élémentaires* and Comte’s ideas, and will examine the fundamental point on which the two diverge. At this juncture, I will turn to the second key intertext, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, identifying a number of features common to both *Brave New World*’s society and the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, but also discovering that *Les Particules élémentaires* diverges from *Brave New World* on precisely the same point it diverges from Comte. As I go on to seek an explanation for this divergence, the underlying perspective on human nature and the human condition implicit in *Les Particules élémentaires* will be brought into focus. Having clarified and examined the fundamental understanding of the human condition that subtends *Les Particules élémentaires*, I will show how this provides the philosophical grounding for a successful posthuman solution free from the flaws identified in both *Brave New World*’s society and in Comte’s philosophy. Finally, the chapter will discuss the need to qualify the success of the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires* since at the present time it necessarily remains within the realm of science-fiction, and also because the solution cannot help present or past generations of humans.
Summary of novel

*Les Particules élémentaires* tells the story of two half-brothers, Michel and Bruno, narrated from the perspective of a posthuman being living in a future from which suffering, conflict, and death have been banished. The story highlights the misery of humans living in contemporary Western Civilisation. Born in the 1950s, the neglect which Michel and Bruno suffer at the hands of their egotistic, freedom-loving parents is shown to be characteristic of a general trend towards individualism and hedonism in post-war Western Civilisation. Individuals are shown to be atomised and subject to ferocious competition for sex, money, and narcissistic differentiation. Bruno is a classic example of the contemporary atomised individual. He is both a victim of this society, afflicted by a perceived lack of the erotic capital necessary to be a successful player in the erotic sphere, but also an embodiment of this society’s egotism and its inability to love (like his parents before him, he neglects his son, and is unable to accept the burden of caring for his lover, Christiane, when she becomes paralysed).

In contrast to the libidinous Bruno, Michel shows little interest in sex or in human interaction in general. He is a brilliant scientist, and it is his scientific theories that will provide the basis for the biotechnological, posthuman solution. Michel acts as a detached observer in the novel, horrified by the cruelty and suffering he observes in the natural world and which he sees re-enacted in contemporary society. Michel’s scientific quest is driven by a desire to overcome Darwinian cruelty and suffering and to restore the possibility of love. Significantly, however, Michel’s scientific discoveries are unable to provide any relief for the current generation of humans, including himself and Bruno. Soon after completing his scientific work, Michel disappears, apparently having committed suicide. Bruno suffers a nervous breakdown, and is heavily medicated and consigned to a mental health institution, apparently for the rest of his life.

Soon after Michel’s disappearance and the publication of his discoveries, there begins a period of intense public debate about whether to implement Michel’s theories in order to produce a new race of clones that are immortal, devoid of competitive instincts, and without sexual reproduction, but with enhanced capacities for auto-erogenous pleasure. The world community
finally approves the production of these clones. The posthuman narrator declares that the
posthumans live happy lives in which the basic problems of human existence have been resolved. A
few remnant populations of humans live on in this posthuman future but are said to be in terminal
decline. Humanity is said to have for the most part acquiesced to its own extinction and replacement
by the posthuman clones.

Secondary literature and significance of Comte

Before beginning our comparison of Les Particules élémentaires with Comte’s philosophical
ideas, let us show how using Comte’s philosophy as an intertext will help us open up a perspective
on the novel different from that reached by critics such as Morrey and Sweeney. Sweeney reads Les
Particules élémentaires in terms of its ambiguous attitude towards late capitalist society. She argues
that while the novel offers a “withering critique” of neoliberalism and its intrusion into all areas of
life, it is often complicit with the values it denounces.\textsuperscript{65} Sweeney sees characters like Bruno as the
“failed subjects” of late capitalism, characters who feel alienated from the world of consumption.\textsuperscript{66}
For Sweeney, the central problem in contemporary Western Civilisation as revealed in Les
Particules élémentaires is the way in which in neoliberal society “every last sphere of human
thought and behaviour has been recuperated under the sign of exchange.”\textsuperscript{67}

While Sweeney’s analysis of the novel’s depiction of the pervasiveness of neoliberal values in
contemporary society and of the novel’s ambiguous relation to these values is convincing, it tends to
overlook the way in which Les Particules élémentaires frames the specifically contemporary
phenomena of neoliberal society within the context of more fundamental historical trends in the
West stretching back centuries. Whereas Sweeney sees neoliberal society as producing the
atomisation and the instrumentalisation of human beings that the novel depicts, by reading Les
Particules élémentaires alongside Comte, I will show that the novel hints that neoliberal values are

\textsuperscript{65} Sweeney, ix.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., xiii.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., x.
a consequence of the rise of rationality and science in the West and the corresponding decline in religious and metaphysical values. Sweeney argues that Houellebecq’s work is symptomatic of neoliberalism’s closing down of possibilities because it fails to offer viable alternatives to neoliberal society. She concludes her book with the following summary: “Despair is not only inevitable in Houellebecq’s work, it is without anticipation of either hope or redemption.”

By comparing *Les Particules élémentaires* with Comte, however, we will be able to see how the crisis runs even deeper, how the neoliberal values depicted in the novel are shown to be grounded in more fundamental values and historical trends. Although this view of contemporary neoliberal society as grounded in deep-seated historical conditions might seem, at first, to provide an explanation of the despair about finding alternatives which Sweeney identifies in Houellebecq’s work, this is only part of the picture. By reading *Les Particules élémentaires* alongside Comte, we will see that although neoliberal society may be implicitly inevitable given present historical and biological conditions, these conditions may themselves be subject to radical transformation. We will see how *Les Particules élémentaires*, by theorising the possibility of radical biological and historical change, indeed imagines new alternatives to neoliberal society.

As well as overlooking the underlying historical forces which, according to the worldview expressed in *Les Particules élémentaires*, explain the emergence of neoliberal society, critiques which focus exclusively on the contemporary origins of society’s ills often also overlook the novel’s emphasis on the link between competitive, neoliberal society and Darwinian human nature. This link is noted by Morrey, who points out that the problems of contemporary Western Civilisation as depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires* are deeply grounded in fundamental problems about the human condition. The novel’s portrayal of contemporary society’s focus on sex and youth and its disdain for the elderly, as well as the repeated comparisons made between human and animal life serve, in Morrey’s words, “to underline these aspects of human behaviour as so many evolutionary facts.”

In formulating his argument, Morrey makes note of the parallels with Schopenhauer’s

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68 Ibid., 190.
69 Morrey, 131.
pessimistic philosophy, writing, “For Schopenhauer, as for Houellebecq, life is struggle and life is suffering.” Morrey quotes Schopenhauer’s prediction that even in a utopian society in which “lovers find one another without any delay and keep one another without any difficulty… some men would die of boredom or hang themselves, some would fight and kill one another, and thus they would create for themselves more suffering than nature inflicts on them as it is.” Morrey is quite correct in noting that a deep pessimism about the human condition permeates Les Particules élémentaires, and, as we shall see, it is this pessimism which constitutes a challenge to the proposals for a utopian society found in Comte and in Brave New World. However, by reading the novel alongside Comte, we can see how extreme pessimism about the human condition is reconciled with an unexpected optimism about the final consequences of the progress of science and technology.

Morrey notes an apparent contradiction in Houellebecq’s work, suggesting that “Michel Houellebecq continues to waver between fully posthumanist and residually humanist understandings of the world and this uncertainty leads to many of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies within his œuvre,” while never really providing the key to understanding why this contradiction might exist. A Comtean framework, however, will help us understand the novel’s attempt to reconcile scientific and humanistic perspectives. On the one hand, what Morrey calls a “fully posthumanist” understanding of the world – that is an impersonal understanding devoid of all metaphysical values – is shown to be both traumatic and true. On the other hand, this impersonal, scientific approach is harnessed to achieve humanistic ends. What Morrey calls residual humanism, therefore, is shown in Les Particules élémentaires to be not merely a despairing resistance to the domination of cold, impersonal, and amoral science, but much more positively it is the moral force which will coordinate the application of science and technology in achieving moral goals.

The important affinity between Houellebecq’s ideas and the philosophy of Comte has already been remarked upon by Bellanger who notes, in particular, the similarity in the attempt by both to

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70 Ibid., 121.
71 Ibid., 124.
72 Ibid., 149.
create an alliance between science and morality. As part of his argument for Houellebecq as a romantic writer, Bellanger sees Houellebecq as sharing something of the optimism and romanticism inherent in Comte’s attempt to “attribuer une valeur aux transcendants romantiques (l’esprit, la religion, la société, l’amour).” Bellanger identifies the combination of a rational, scientific outlook on life with irrepressible idealism as characteristic of both Houellebecq and Comte. Bellanger writes:

Le positivisme est le deus ex machina de toutes les angoisses houellebecquiennes. Si Houellebecq n’a jamais négligé le côté idéologue du métier d’écrivain, le positivisme est la seule doctrine qu’il ait constamment défendue : le moraliste s’est reconnu dans cette philosophie qui rapportait l’histoire des sciences à un projet de moralisation du monde.

While I agree entirely with Bellanger’s insight into the importance of Comte to Houellebecq’s work, I wish to contend herein that it is necessary to go far deeper into an exploration of the multiple parallels that exist between Comte’s philosophy and Les Particules élémentaires, if we are to grasp their full import. Comte’s philosophy will indeed provide a framework for understanding not only the appeal of the religious and collectivist posthuman society of Les Particules élémentaires, but also for understanding how this utopia might be compatible with scientific rationality.

As well as noting similarities between Houellebecq and Comte, Bellanger also notes a crucial difference between them. He suggests that for Houellebecq the promise of individual immortality is the sine qua non of a credible religion and he quotes Houellebecq’s dismissal in Approche du désarroi of Comte’s Religion of Humanity on the grounds that it is not underwritten by individual immortality:

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73 Bellanger, 43.
74 Ibid., 51.
The rejection of Comte’s idea of creating a religious utopia in the absence of the promise of individual immortality, however, is only part of the divergence with Comte implicit in Les Particules élémentaires. In this chapter, I will show that the invalidation of Comte’s positivist religion by the persistence of individual mortality can be subsumed into a more fundamental incompatibility between flawed human nature and utopian visions of moral amelioration and human happiness. In Les Particules élémentaires, death is just one of the negative consequences of Darwinian evolution alongside genetic variation, competitive drives, sexuality, and the sense of individuality, and these must all be overcome before Comte’s vision of a happy, stable and religious society can be realised. Before examining this critical divergence from Comte’s philosophy in detail, however, let us begin by examining six key aspects of Les Particules élémentaires which find parallels in Comte’s philosophy, namely, the utopian and teleological nature of the solution, the necessary but traumatic decline of traditional values, reason and science as the driving force of history, the necessity of religion and love, the collective rather than individual nature of the solution, and the implementation of utopia by means of political consensus.

A utopian, technological solution

The posthuman solution in Les Particules élémentaires shares with Comte an understanding of human historical progress which is teleological and utopian. Utopian, in the case of Comte, because a new phase of human history is envisaged in which an ideal social order is permanently achieved. Comte envisages a worldwide regime of altruism and social stability unprecedented in human history. In the case of Les Particules élémentaires, the utopian denouement is even more

75 Ibid., 60.
extreme: in this society, the posthumans enjoy nothing less than a blissful eternity devoid of all conflict and suffering. The posthumans are described as being bathed “dans un halo de joie.” The posthuman narrator declares that “à l’estimation des hommes, nous vivons heureux; il est vrai que nous avons su dépasser les puissances, insurmontables pour eux, de l’égoïsme, de la cruauté de la colère.” In the case of both Comte and Les Particules élémentaires, it is a total and lasting solution that is sought, a utopia, rather than mere amelioration.

In the case of both Comte and Les Particules élémentaires, the utopias found in these works are presented neither as wishful thinking nor as based on faith and revelation. Both attempt to justify their utopias as possible, or even inevitable, by showing that utopia is brought about by a trajectory of forces observable in human history. The prediction of utopia is justified on the basis of hidden but discoverable historical laws. The utopian solutions in Comte and Les Particules élémentaires are then teleological, because the new phase of human civilisation arises as the maturation of impersonal, hidden forces which can be traced back centuries. Comte’s specific understanding of history and teleology offers many parallels with Les Particules élémentaires. By unpacking Comte’s understanding of the relationship between the three phases into which he divides history, I will not only acquire a framework locating the societal crisis depicted in Les Particules élémentaires within its historical context, but also see how the contradictions depicted in the novel contain the forces which lead to the resolution of the crisis by means of the posthuman solution.

In his famous “La loi des trois états”, Comte divides European history (and by extension, all human history) into three phases, “l’état théologique”, “l’état métaphysique” and “l’état postif.” Western civilisation, according to Comte, had left behind the theological phase in which temporal values were securely underwritten by belief in a supreme deity, and was progressing towards a positivist phase in which moral values and social order would find a foundation in reason and

76 Les Particules élémentaires, 12.
77 Ibid., 393.
science. The theological phase is exemplified by the Catholic Middle Ages, and represents a unified and stable economic, political, and spiritual system secured by theistic belief. The posthuman narrator in *Les Particules élémentaires*, echoing Comte, notes that “lorsque la science moderne apparut, le christianisme médiéval constituait un système complet de compréhension de l’homme et de l’univers.” The positive phase, which Comte believed to be in the process of emerging in the 19th Century, is characterised by a unified science which would, like the theological system, comprise a stable and unified whole (but in contrast to the theological system, the unified positive phase is based not on superstition but on the secure foundation of science, rationality, and humanistic values). The posthuman narrator’s description of a third metaphysical mutation matches closely with Comte’s positive phase. While Michel’s theories are the immediate trigger of the posthuman breakthrough (the third mutation which parallels the advent of the positive era in Comte), his work is situated within a much more general teleo-historical shift towards a new positivistic phase, “Michel Djerzinski ne fut ni le premier, ni le principal artisan de cette troisième mutation métaphysique, à bien des égards la plus radicale, qui devait ouvrir une période nouvelle dans l’histoire du monde.” As in the shift to Comte’s positive phase, science (in the novel specifically human biotechnology), rather than theistic belief or metaphysics, is shown to hold the key to realising ideals like love and societal tranquility.

The most easily misinterpreted of Comte’s three phases is, however, the metaphysical phase. It will be illuminating to understand with some subtlety Comte’s understanding of this phase, as the problems of late 20th Century life in the West as described in *Les Particules élémentaires* seem closely correlated to the final period of this phase. As Gane convincingly argues, the metaphysical phase should not be misconstrued as a truly independent paradigm. It is rather a temporary and ultimately untenable accommodation which functions as a buffer in the transition from the theological to the positive phase. According to Comte, “since the fall of the Roman empire

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79 Ibid., 10.
80 Ibid., 10.
there has only been one social ‘normal’ organism in European history, the feudal-Catholic Middle-Ages, which have been followed by a state of exceptional transition, the modern crisis." The key point of fracture is therefore not between the metaphysical and the positive state, but between the positive and the theological state. As Gane notes, “The real point and location of the break as it were occurs between the metaphysical and scientific states, since metaphysics is really a ‘prolongation’ of theology rather than being a pure state in itself.” An intermediary metaphysical state emerges as form of mediation between the theological and positive states. The rise of science and reason will ultimately furnish the tools permitting the construction of the positivist utopia, but the initial effect is one of trauma and disintegration as they collide with the established theleological order and its institutions. As Gane writes, “It is the radical antagonism between these two basic forms, which explains for Comte, the virulence of the revolutionary crisis and why ‘intermediary’ metaphysical phenomena come into existence.”

Set in the last decades of the 20th Century, the sense of crisis in Western Civilisation depicted in Les Particules élémentaires can be understood as the breakdown of the untenable ‘metaphysical’ accommodation between the fundamental theological and positive phases. Science and reason have destroyed the last of the remaining metaphysical antibodies (the political and philosophical ideals partially bridging the gap left by the decline of the theological age), but because they have not yet provided a new basis for morality and value the result is an atmosphere of nihilism. In order to understand how the crisis depicted in Les Particules élémentaires might lead, in spite of all appearances, to a final utopian solution, it is useful to understand Comte’s concept of the rising and the decompositional series. According to Comte, the positive phase of human history represents the culmination of a series which rises from mathematics to physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology, and is crowned finally by the new positive social order and the new spiritual authority. Under the corrosive influence of science and reason, a parallel decompositional series is set in motion, with

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82 Ibid., 81.
83 Ibid., 27.
84 Ibid., 80.
85 Ibid., 81.
Catholicism giving way to Protestantism, Protestantism giving way to deism, and deism giving way
to atheism. It is especially pertinent that for Comte, as in *Les Particules élémentaires*, the
decompositional series represents an inevitable, irreversible decline. There is no countenancing of a
return to theistic belief, whatever the nostalgia for religion and tradition. The final utopian positive
phase, although reinstating a central role for religion, emerges solely from the rising series rather
than from an integration of the two-opposing series. The ultimate incompatibility of these series in
Comte provides a vital insight into the pessimism in *Les Particules élémentaires* about both any
return to tradition and the possibility of Western Civilisation continuing to survive in its current
form. Like Comte, *Les Particules élémentaires* presents the view that civilisation cannot survive
without values such as love and religion. However, as for Comte, the only hope that these values
might one day be restored lies in the possibility of the rising series leading not to a dead end, but to
a technological or societal breakthrough.

*The traumatic but inevitable decline of traditional values*

*Les Particules élémentaires* and Comte both combine a rational commitment to atheism and
science with dismay at the prospects of a society in which religion, the family, and traditional values
are in terminal decline. Like Comte, *Les Particules élémentaires* presents the view that the decline
of theistic religion cannot be quarantined and that this threatens to bring about a generalised
collapse of values including societal order, the family, morality, and love. Both *Les Particules
élémentaires* and Comte view this collapse of values as humanity’s ultimate disaster, a disaster
which fortunately can be averted at the most critical moment by restoring traditional values not on
untenable theistic and metaphysical foundations, but on a new positivist-sociological basis (in
Comte) or on a new biological basis (in *Les Particules élémentaires*). The crisis of Western
Civilisation as depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires* can, through reference to Comte, be
identified as occurring at a point at which the decompositional series has exhausted itself, but at
which the final phase of the rising series has not yet been achieved. Comte helps us understand the
crisis of modernity depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires* as a traumatic, but necessary and
temporary phase. Traumatic, because the theological basis of values like love and religion has completely collapsed; necessary, because a positivistic worldview devoid of theological or metaphysical elements provides the new, secure basis for the utopia to come. As the posthuman narrator notes when looking back at this period, “Il n’empêche que le matérialisme avait eu son importance historique : il fallait franchir une première barrière, qui était Dieu ; des hommes l’avaient franchie, et s’étaient trouvés plongés dans la détresse et dans le doute.”

The teleological perspective in both Comte and Les Particules élémentaires explains the method, common to both, of working back from the future in order to understand the present. Gane notes that, for Comte, “the correct and objective method entailed the following logic: first to discover the logic of the past, then that of the future and only then could the present state, an intermediate point, be determined.” The transitive essence of the contemporary age can only be grasped retrospectively through a projection into a predicted future. In Les Particules élémentaires this perspective is provided through the fictional device of the posthumans looking back at humanity in the 20th Century. The novel juxtaposes this future perspective – which is able to discern in late 20th Century society the hidden progression towards utopian, posthuman solutions – with the perspective ‘on the ground’, limited to the contemporary age and the past, a perspective from which only the destructive series and the decline of traditional values can be perceived.

The sense of society having reached a dead end, a point zero which permeates Les Particules élémentaires, occurs insofar as the novel presents the development of Western Civilisation along the decompositional axis. The utopian society which is achieved as the final stage of development along the rising axis is hidden from the view of the characters in Les Particules élémentaires, who inhabit a society imbued with a feeling of terminal decline. Throughout Les Particules élémentaires (but in contrast to Soumission), the possibility of return along the decompositional axis is excluded. The despair which permeates the novel can then be understood as the result of a longing for a return along the decompositional axis and ultimately a return to theistic religion and traditional values

86 Les Particules élémentaires, 373.
87 Gane, 3.
combined with a conviction that such a return is impossible. It is only in retrospect, from the point of view of the posthumans, as well as in the prophetic insights of Michel, that the teleological process of Western Civilisation’s progress towards utopia becomes apparent. It is only from this perspective that the answer to the crisis of Western Civilisation can be seen to lie not in a reaction against the hitherto morally destructive rise of science, but in pursuing the development of science to its ultimate teleological and utopian conclusion.

_Reason and science drive history_

In contrast to the Marxist theory of class struggle as the driving force of history, in both Comte and _Les Particules élémentaires_ it is the rise of science and science’s irreconcilable opposition to theistic belief that constitute the fundamental crisis of modernity. In both Comte and _Les Particules élémentaires_, the central story of modern Western history is the erosion of theological and metaphysical beliefs (together with the social order and institutions, which are implicitly founded on these beliefs), by the irresistible advance of reason and science. Class struggle, nationalism, and ethnic conflict can be understood as expressions of the trauma and social instability caused by the transition from one great stage to the other; they do not in themselves, from a long-term perspective, drive history, but can be subsumed within a central narrative of the rise of science and reason. _Les Particules élémentaires_ presents the rise of irrational forces, immorality, and a general descent into barbarity, as well as the emergence of New Age and spiritual practices. But, as in Comte, these phenomena are all secondary, the result of attempts to fill the empty space of traditions, and a response to the decline of traditional moral constraints. New Age beliefs, for instance, which are not in any case held by any of the main protagonists in Houellebecq’s novels, attest to a desire for religion in contemporary Western civilisation but do little to resolve society’s underlying problems. In an age of uncertainty and instability, the continued triumph of science and reason stands out as the one certainty in an unpredictable world. In the long term, this progress is more or less unimpeded by transient political or religious trends. The rise of science is depicted in _Les Particules élémentaires_ as inevitable. We are told by Michel’s colleague Desplechin, for
instance, that the recent growth of Islam is merely “un phénomène superficiel et transitoire.” and 
that,“à long terme l’Islam est condamné, encore plus sûrement que le christianisme.” Whatever 
the advantages of religion for society as acknowledged by Comte and by Les Particules 
élémentaires, the mere advantageousness or moral value of a religion is not enough to sustain it if 
the religion conflicts with reason and science. Desplechin recounts that a childhood friend once told 
him, “Ce qui décide de la valeur d’une religion, c’est la qualité de la morale qu’elle permet de 
fonder.” After many years, however, he comes to realise that this is not true, explaining that, “j’en 
suis venu à penser que les religions sont avant tout des tentatives d’explication du monde ; et 
aucune tentative d’explication du monde ne peut tenir si elle se heurte à notre besoin de certitude 
rationnelle.”

The progress of science and reason in Les Particules élémentaires, as for Comte, is an 
invariable that can be relied on in making predictions about the future. But this certainty about the 
thrump of science and reason is not accompanied by any presuppositions about the moral 
consequences of this triumph. For the greater part of Les Particules élémentaires, progress in 
science and reason is in fact associated with moral regression and a regression in human happiness. 
Michel, who embodies science and rationality, is incapable of love and leads a life devoid of 
happiness. The novel therefore seems to bitterly reject the idea of moral progress and happiness 
marching in lockstep with science and reason, overcoming benighted superstition, and claiming new 
territory for human happiness and enlightened morality. Reason is almost seen as an affliction, 
beyond the power of any individual or society to halt. As Desplechin explains, “à ce besoin de 
certitude rationnelle, l’Occident aura finalement tout sacrifié : sa religion, son bonheur, ses espoirs 
et en définitive sa vie.” What Desplechin cannot see, and what Comte and Les Particules 
élementaires reveal, is how, in spite of appearances, this destructive juggernaut of science and 
reason will ultimately bring about moral utopia.

88 Les Particules élémentaires, 336.
89 Ibid., 336.
90 Ibid., 335.
91 Ibid., 335.
The necessity of love and religion

We have seen the common features which exist between Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* in terms of their understanding of the historical forces at work in modern Western Civilisation. Perhaps even more striking, however, is the similarity in the characteristics thought indispensable for an ideal society. In particular, both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* focus on the necessity for religion and love in their utopias. Both present a future in which their shared longing for love and religion is finally made compatible with the inevitable progress of science. And in both, technological progress is a means for achieving moral ends. It is revealing that in Comte as in *Les Particules élémentaires* so little emphasis is placed on enhanced intelligence, power, wealth, or knowledge. While scientific endeavour continues in Comte’s utopia as well as in the society of the posthumans (but with less urgency), in *Les Particules élémentaires*, there is remarkably little emphasis on the dreams of unlimited power and intergalactic exploration which feature prominently in so many futuristic visions – although the reason for this focus on social stability and the overcoming of suffering should already be apparent from our discussion of the destructive power of science and reason. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, the advances of science and reason, in themselves, lead only to spiritual poverty, immorality, atomisation, and suffering. Posthuman visions of vastly enhanced intelligence and unlimited power are shown to hold little seductive power in a world depicted as being in desperate need, above all, for the consolation of love and religion.

In *Les Particules élémentaires* the emphasis on restoring the possibility of love by engineering a new race of posthumans is connected to the revelation of love that Annabelle brings to Michel. The word revelation is appropriate, because in both *Les Particules élémentaires* and Comte, love and religion are intimately connected. Michel’s new awareness of the importance of love, inspired by Annabelle, closely parallels the revelation of love brought about in the life of Comte through his meeting with Clotilde de Vaux, a critical event which shaped the future direction
of Comte’s philosophy. After meeting Clotilde, Comte came to realise that his life had previously been entirely cerebral and cold. Clotilde revealed to Comte the importance of platonic love, and after her death in 1846 at the age of 31, her memory continued to inspire him to place greater emphasis on love and religion within his philosophical system. The inspiration of feminine love was henceforth incorporated into Comte’s vision of the perfect society. Clotilde became the Madonna of Comte’s Religion of Humanity, to be worshipped daily through elaborate prayers and rituals in her memory. In *Les Particules élémentaires* Michel, like Comte, is a cold, cerebral character, who is partially thawed by Annabelle’s love. Michel is unable to return Annabelle’s love and at most he is able to pity her, but through her he is able to imagine at least a posthuman future in which love is once again possible: “sans avoir lui-même connu l’amour, Djerzinski avait pu, par l’intermédiaire d’Annabelle, s’en faire une image ; il avait pu se rendre compte que l’amour, d’une certaine manière, et par des modalités encore inconnues, pouvait avoir lieu.” Like Clotilde, Annabelle dies young, leaving Michel, like Comte, with the task of designing a new society inspired by this love. It is no coincidence that Michel has a dream prophetically connected with the posthuman society to come while asleep in Annabelle’s embrace. He dreams that he is choosing between two spheres, the sphere of peace and the negation of self, and the sphere of individuality and war:

Il vit l’espace comme une ligne très fine qui séparait deux sphères. Dans la première sphère était l’être, et la séparation ; dans la seconde sphère était le non-être, et la disparition individuelle. Calmement, sans hésiter, il se retourna et se dirigea vers la seconde sphère.

The sense of being bathed in a maternal sea in which selfhood is lost, in which the pain of separation is abolished, seems to be crucial to the happiness of the posthumans. In both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires*, the moral superiority of women over men is emphasised, with this

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93 Ibid., 81.
95 Ibid., 292.
superiority consisting above all in the capacity of women for unconditional love. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, men are shown to be congenitally incapable of love and inferior to women. We are told, for instance, “Décidément, les femmes étaient meilleures que les hommes. Elles étaient plus caressantes, plus aimantes, plus compatissantes et plus douces.” Masculinity is even considered a menace to civilised society, necessitating its replacement with more feminine traits in the posthuman utopia to come: “à des époques antérieures, où les ours étaient nombreux, la virilité avait pu jouer un rôle spécifique et irremplaçable ; mais depuis quelques siècles, les hommes ne servaient visiblement à peu près plus à rien.” During the propaganda campaign promoting the posthuman solution, a central slogan is “demain sera féminin.” In promoting Michel’s posthuman project, Hubczejak, Michel’s biographer, writes, “le monde que nous connaissons, le monde que nous créons, le monde humain est rond, lisse, homogène et chaud comme un sein de femme.” In Comte’s utopia masculinity is not to be abolished, but women are to be a source of moral guidance and inspiration, worshipped by men in the tradition of courtly love. In both utopias, love is associated with femininity but is separated from sexuality. Comte’s utopia envisaged that women, while consigned to a domestic sphere, would provide the moral force in society. Women, who represent the possibility of selfless love and moral purity are to be worshipped, such that the violent and selfish characteristics of men are chastened. Comte advocated complete celibacy, and although marriage would remain an important institution in his positivist utopia, men and women would live separately and, in order to preserve the purity of women, reproduction was to occur by means of parthenogenesis! In the posthuman utopia of *Les Particules élémentaires*, meanwhile, sexual pleasure is retained, but sexual difference is abolished. In both cases, masculinity and masculine sexuality are thought to be too destructive, necessitating their replacement with selfless femininity and love.

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96 Ibid., 89.
97 Ibid., 89.
98 Ibid., 388.
99 Ibid., 387.
100 Ibid., 389.
As well as emphasising the need for restoring the possibility of love, both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* emphasise the need for religion, while categorically rejecting the possibility of a return to traditional forms of religion. Comte spent the latter part of his life attempting to promote a new religion of his own design, the Religion of Humanity, complete with its own “rational” catechism, ceremonies, rites, and religious offices. Likewise, Michel is deeply troubled by the absence of religion in contemporary society, and the posthuman future that his work engineers can be said to be a religious ideal insofar as it provides eternal life, redemption from suffering, and a perfect state of morality and happiness. In both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires*, religion is then necessary not only because of the meaning and consolation it provides to individual lives, but because without it, society is thought to be destined to be torn apart by conflicting selfish ends. Religion is a necessary mechanism for maintaining order in society, a realisation that sends Michel to his bed for two weeks to meditate on the problem of religion:

Pendant plusieurs jours, il contempla le radiateur situé à gauche de son lit. En saison les cannelures se remplissaient d’eau chaude, c’était un mécanisme utile et ingénieux ; mais combien de temps la société occidentale pourrait-elle subsister sans une religion quelconque ?

Likewise, in acknowledging the correct insights of the New Age movement, the posthuman narrator sees in it a realisation that a new type of society, one which might be qualified as religious, had become necessary:

Le New Age manifestait une réelle volonté de rupture avec le XXe siècle, son immoralisme, son individualisme, son aspect libertaire et antisocial ; il témoignait d’une conscience angoissée qu’aucune société n’est viable sans l’axe fédérateur d’une religion quelconque ; il constituait en réalité un puissant appel à un changement de paradigme.

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101 Ibid., 202.
102 Ibid., 388.
It is a feature of both Comte’s philosophy and the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, that values like love and religion are considered from a naturalistic rather than a theological or metaphysical perspective. In both cases, a strictly scientific approach is used to secure values like love and religion. It is not that such values exist in a realm separate from science, surviving through an accommodation with science, because in *Les Particules élémentaires*, as in Comte, the rational, scientific perspective is seen as irrepressible, penetrating all aspects of human existence. Love, morality, and religion have a physiological and a sociological basis that can be manipulated to achieve desired utopian results. Although Comte’s investigation of the physiological basis for love, morality, and religion in the human species drew on phrenological science, his emphasis was on sociological science as a means of understanding and producing these values. The posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, in contrast, is based on speculative genetic modifications which, by the late 20th Century, were much more conceivable than in Comte’s time. Whereas Comte foresaw the culmination of the rising series in sociology and a new positivist priesthood, *Les Particules élémentaires* sees it culminating in the direct manipulation of human genes. As we shall see, while both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* share an insistence on the necessity of religion and love, they diverge in their understanding of the means by which a society embodying religion and love might be achieved.

The necessity of a collective rather than an individual solution

The solutions proposed in *Les Particules élémentaires* and by Comte can only be achieved collectively. Although the problems of contemporary Western Civilisation are experienced at an individual level, the only effective solution for Comte and for *Les Particules élémentaires* is one which resolves the systemic causes of these problems. The double perspective of *Les Particules élémentaires* shows, on the one hand, characters seeking, largely unsuccessfully, individual solutions to systemic problems. On the other hand, the macroscopic view of the detached, scientific Michel, as well as the yet more detached view of the posthuman narrator, reveal that the problems faced by the novel’s characters share common causes and that their individual sufferings are
instantiations of the broader historical and societal malaise. Michel and Annabelle’s love is doomed because “au milieu du suicide occidental, il était clair qu’ils n’avaient aucune chance.”  

In spite of contemporary Western civilisation’s celebration of individualism, *Les Particules élémentaires* shows how closely the beliefs, desires, and problems of individual characters conform to historical and societal trends. Bruno, for instance, is seen by Michel as “une monade” rather than as an individual. Michel asks himself:

Pouvait-on considérer Bruno comme un individu ? Le pourrissement de ses organes lui appartenait, c’est à titre individuel qu’il connaîtrait le déclin physique et la mort. D’un autre côté, sa vision hédoniste de la vie, les champs de forces qui structuraient sa conscience et ses désirs appartenaient à l’ensemble de sa génération.

The characters in *Les Particules élémentaires* are depicted as being forced to pursue (to paraphrase Ulrich Beck) biographical solutions to systemic contradictions. Therefore, from the individual (the atomic) perspective, there is little hope. The indifference to politics which I have discussed is concomitant with this exclusion of solidarity or solutions beyond the individual horizon. Once again, a comparison with Comte is illuminating, as the posthuman solution and the positivist solution are both based on the idea that only a systemic solution to systemic problems will do. Since the systemic problems of contemporary society in both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* are understood to be especially deep, rooted not merely in a specific political and economic context but in the underlying crisis of the transition from the theological to the positive phase, only a correspondingly deep and fundamental solution will be adequate.

For Comte, the new science of sociology could be applied to design (or rather discover), the laws and structures of the ideal society. If only the plan for the ideal society could be discovered and applied, (and Comte believed that he had discovered it), then the utopian results would occur

103 Ibid., 295.
104 Ibid., 232.
105 Ibid., 221.
automatically at the individual level. Comte had only to tweak the division between the spiritual and secular powers, engineer a comprehensive new educational system, and prescribe the rites, rituals, and institutions of his utopian society in minute detail, and it was presumed that altruism, social stability, and love would prevail at the individual level. Comte believed that society determines consciousness, and the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires* likewise does not concern itself with individual variation, but seeks a solution to be applied at the level of society as a whole. If only the right posthuman design can be discovered, then all individual problems will be automatically resolved. The posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires* is, in a sense, a more extreme but also a more elegant solution in that it attempts to bypass analysis of the vast complexity of human interactions by concerning itself only with the genetic precondition of those interactions.

Michel’s theory, while aiming ultimately to restore “la possibilité pratique des relations humaines,” is said to reject any focus on individuals or objects. It is said to be based instead on an ontology of states, which seems to have been partly inspired by Michel’s fascination with the intricate, imbricated motifs in the Book of Kells. Values analogous to the traditional humanistic values of fraternity, sympathy, and love are made possible by a posthuman ontology which substitutes individuality with wave functions:

Dans une ontologie d’états les particules étaient indiscernables, et on devait se limiter à les qualifier par le biais d’un observable nombre. Les seules entités susceptibles d’être réidentifiées et nommées dans une telle ontologie étaient les fonctions d’onde, et par leur intermédiaire les vecteurs d’état — d’où la possibilité analogique de redonner un sens à la fraternité, la sympathie et l’amour.

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108 Ibid., 375.
109 Ibid., 372.
Political consensus and the implementation of utopia

Another point in common between *Les Particules élémentaires* and Comte is the possibility of a utopian society being brought about, rapidly, once a political consensus has been obtained. In neither case is it suggested that politics alone can provide a solution to society’s problems, although it may provide a supportive role in facilitating a transition once historical and technological conditions are ripe. As we have seen, utopia in both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* is the end result of deep teleological forces stretching back far into the past. Although the general tendency of human history’s progress towards utopia is inevitable, a period of proselytization is necessary to introduce the utopian solution to a society which is finally ready for it. In both Comte and *Les Particules élémentaires* it is envisaged that this proselytization rapidly overcomes opposition and that the solution is rapidly embraced by society. Comte’s enterprise of the Religion of Humanity was based on, as Bellanger says, “la certitude que la société peut être réorganisée sur des bases entièrement rationnelles en l’espace de quelques générations – voire de quelques années, suivant la formation sociale concernée.” Comte believed that once conditions were ripe, the leap from deep crisis to utopia could occur in as little as a generation. Both Comte’s utopia and the posthuman solution constitute total and complete systems, to be implemented in their entirety. The posthuman solution is adopted so rapidly in *Les Particules élémentaires* because the two preconditions, the development of the technological capability (the result of the progress of science and reason), and society’s willingness to apply it (also the result of science and reason’s erosion of theological and of metaphysical taboos) have already been met.

The political consensus in *Les Particules élémentaires* occurs because the utopian solution conforms to the movement and direction of history. This provides an explanation for what might otherwise be thought of as an apparent contradiction in the novel. Throughout *Les Particules élémentaires*, the possibility of political action as a solution is derided, with political engagement of

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110 Bellanger, 56.
all sorts on the left and right, as well as nationalism and environmentalism, being lampooned throughout the novel as hypocritical or idiotic. The implication of this distaste for politics is not only that in an atomised society the solidarity or sense of a common cause implicitly necessary for political action rings hollow, but also that the content of political positions and debates as generally conceived, does little to address the fundamental problems of Western Civilisation. The political movement advocating the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, like Comte’s political program for implementing his utopia, is, however, quite different from most contemporary political movements, as it aims to bring about not amelioration, but an ultimate solution to humanity’s most fundamental existential problems.

In his attempt to promote the adoption of his utopian society, Comte attempted to create simultaneous political alliances with both socialists and conservatives, with religious leaders and with heads of state, with industrialists and with the intellectual elite. While this might seem at first madness or hypocrisy on Comte’s part, it is consistent with the idea that the utopian solution he proposed sought to transcend traditional political factions and class barriers. While Comte’s practical attempts at political promotion of his utopia failed miserably, the successful publicity campaign for the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires* shares the idea of a new, fundamental political program in which traditional political categories have become irrelevant. The campaign is able to succeed because the extreme and pervasive sense of malaise which the novel portrays as endemic in contemporary Western Civilisation makes society willing to acquiesce to such an extreme solution. Importantly, metaphysical and theological taboos against human hubris and violations of free will and human liberty are depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires* as having already lost credibility. The political campaign is therefore able to overcome the faltering resistance of religious leaders and obtain funding for the posthuman project from UNESCO.
Houellebecq’s biotechnological solution

We have seen that Les Particules élémentaires shares with Comte many similarities not only in its vision of a utopia emphasising love, religion, and social cohesion and harmony, but also in its understanding of science and reason as the vehicles by which these ideals will be realised. However, Les Particules élémentaires diverges from Comte in one vital way: Comte believed that human consciousness and human behaviour could be radically reshaped by means of an applied sociological science prescribing a complete system of social interaction, education, and ritual, whereas Les Particules élémentaires suggests that a fundamental solution is impossible unless biological human nature is modified. The campaign to adopt the posthuman solution in Les Particules élémentaires uses the slogan “La mutation ne sera pas mentale, mais génétique.” This slogan encapsulates the point of divergence with Comte. While accepting Comte’s idea of the need for a paradigm shift or a “mutation” in human history, the posthuman solution insists that this shift can only be brought about through genetic modification and that merely cultural or “mental” changes which leave human biology unaltered – even non-biological changes as radical as those proposed in Comte’s elaborate sociological program – are insufficient.

The implicit rejection of Comte’s sociological solution and the insistence on the need for a biotechnological solution in Les Particules élémentaires can be explained by the novel’s pessimism about the consequences of the human genetic condition. One aspect of this pessimism is the fact that unmodified human biology entails death for the individual. In the introduction, we saw that in Approche du désarroi Houellebecq dismissed the possibility of Comte’s Religion of Humanity succeeding because it lacked the promise of an individual afterlife. Without the promise of individual immortality, religion loses its power to coerce, console, and lead society. When Michel tells Bruno, “selon Auguste Comte, la religion a pour seul rôle d’amener l’humanité à un état d’unité parfaite,” Bruno angrily responds, “Auguste Comte toi-même!” arguing that, “à partir du moment où on ne croit plus à la vie éternelle, il n’y a plus de religion possible. Et si la société est... 

111 Les Particules élémentaires, 392.
impossible sans religion, comme tu as l’air de le penser, il n’y a plus de société possible non plus.”

Individual mortality is a consequence of human biology, and the problem of death can be subsumed in Les Particules élémentaires under the fundamental problem of a biological nature which is not conducive to human happiness and morality. The badness and limitation in human biological nature lies not only in the finitude of individual human lives, but more generally in a biologically determined propensity to selfishness, violence, conflict, and psychological suffering in the human species. I will return to a more detailed discussion of the pessimistic view of human nature in Les Particules élémentaires after comparing the novel with Huxley’s Brave New World. It is enough to note here that it is this pessimism about human nature in Les Particules élémentaires that explains the divergence with Comte and the insistence on the posthuman solution. Comte did not believe that human nature was intrinsically good, but his philosophy contains implicit faith in human perfectibility (albeit by means of his baroque system of social training and control). Les Particules élémentaires, in contrast to Comte, conveys the view that humanity’s failings are so deep-seated as to be intractable to social conditioning. Unless this fundamentally flawed nature is radically altered, any attempt to resolve the problems of contemporary Western civilisation are destined to fail.

Les Particules élémentaires and Huxley’s Brave New World

Brave New World113 is another key intertext for Les Particules élémentaires, and, as with Comte, many parallels exist between its solution and the solution proposed in Les Particules élémentaires. Nevertheless, Brave New World’s solution is rejected by Houellebecq here because, like Comte’s solution, it is thought to overestimate the extent to which society can be changed without extreme biological modification. By examining in detail Bruno and Michel’s discussion of Brave New World, we will see just how pessimistic Les Particules élémentaires is about human

112 Ibid., 321.
nature and how the rejection of *Brave New World*’s solution implicitly delineates the necessary characteristics of a successful posthuman solution.

When discussing *Brave New World* with Michel, Bruno says that he is struck “par l’extraordinaire justesse des prédictions faites par Aldous Huxley,” and claims that since the novel was written in 1932, “la société occidentale a constamment tenté de se rapprocher de ce modèle.” There are indeed many striking parallels between the society of *Brave New World* and contemporary Western civilisation as depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires*. In *Brave New World*, babies are “decanted” in “hatcheries”, removing the possibility of familial attachments and freeing individuals to follow hedonistic lifestyles. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Bruno sees his son as an encumbrance and a threat, and his mother Janine’s abnegation of the responsibility of child-raising in the pursuit of freedom (sexual freedom in particular), is depicted as symptomatic of the decline of the family and the rise of the cult of individualism in post-war France. In both *Brave New World* and *Les Particules élémentaires*, liberation from the responsibility of raising children is a precondition for the youthful pursuit of fun and freedom. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, contemporary Western civilisation conditions people to live as perpetual kids, and *Brave New World*, with its songs and propaganda jingles promoting “orgy-porgy”, similarly depicts a society which is both infantilised and sexualised. In the society of *Brave New World* “everyone belongs to everyone else,” and promiscuity is mandated.

These hedonistic and anti-traditionalist aspects of *Brave New World*’s society, according to Bruno, embody contemporary Western Civilisation’s ideal of the perfect society, an ideal which has not yet been achieved, but towards which Western civilisation is moving. He says, “C’est exactement le monde auquel aujourd’hui nous aspirons, le monde dans lequel, aujourd’hui, nous souhaiterions vivre.” Bruno says that “la société décrite par *Brave New World* est une société

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115 Ibid., 195.
116 *Brave New World*, 40.
heureuse, dont ont disparu la tragédie et les sentiments extrêmes.”

Contemporary Western civilisation is not yet able to overcome physical deterioration through aging, and the indignity and distress of possessing an aging body in a society which values youth above age, physical above spiritual attributes, is a recurring theme in Houellebecq’s work. But in *Brave New World*, as Bruno notes, the problem of aging has been overcome “grâce aux progrès pharmaceutiques” and there are no distinctions based on age, “dans le monde décrit par Huxley les hommes de soixante ans ont les même activités, la même apparence physique, les mêmes désirs qu’un jeune homme de vingt ans.”

Bruno is well aware that *Brave New World* was written as a dystopia and has been almost universally interpreted as such, admitting, “on décrit en général l’univers de Huxley comme un cauchemar totalitaire, qu’on essaie de faire passer ce livre pour une dénonciation virulente.”

However, for Bruno this is nothing more than “une hypocrisie pure et simple.”

At this point it will be useful to look at the near universal interpretation of *Brave New World* as “un cauchemar totalitaire,” and why Bruno might reject this as “une hypocrisie.” *Brave New World*, as Bruno argues, depicts a society in which suffering and conflict have been largely eliminated. What is thought objectionable about this society is not its success in bringing about relative peace, but the idea that peace and happiness have been acquired at the cost of something more valuable. The society of *Brave New World* might be thought objectionable for two main reasons. Firstly, on the grounds that this society, though seemingly benevolent, is in fact totalitarian, with people being bred and conditioned to think and behave in certain ways and thereby lose their individuality and liberty. Secondly, because, in spite of its happiness and harmony, this society is somehow repugnantly shallow. People are happy, but love, religion, art and scientific endeavour have all been sacrificed. These two objections are epitomised in the rejection of this society by John the Savage, an outsider presented in the novel as the voice of wisdom. John the Savage stands as a

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118 Ibid., 195.
119 Ibid., 195.
120 Ibid., 195.
121 Ibid., 196.
122 Ibid., 196.
refutation of Mustapha Mond, the “World Controller” and former scientist who has rejected science, truth, and literature in favour of societal happiness. For the sake of deeper values and individual liberty, John the Savage is prepared to endure aging, sickness, and psychological suffering. Bruno rejects these objections to Brave New World’s society as “hypocrisy”, and the whole portrait of contemporary society in Les Particules élémentaires shows that individual liberty is a pernicious illusion and that things of higher value like art have become irrelevant. If freedom is a myth, there is no good reason to reject Brave New World’s society (or a posthuman society involving genetic engineering), on the basis that individual liberty is compromised. Likewise, if art and “depth” have already become extinct in contemporary Western civilisation, as Les Particules élémentaires implies, then their absence in a utopia should not scandalise. From the point of view of Les Particules élémentaires, therefore, there is no dismay at the “nightmarish” prospect of human tranquillity acquired at the price of totalitarianism. The implicit criticism of Brave New World’s society in Les Particules élémentaires, voiced by Michel, comes from a completely different direction, namely that the measures taken in Brave New World are still insufficiently radical to plausibly neutralise the nefariousness of human nature.

Although Brave New World envisages the widespread application of drugs, eugenics, and advanced techniques of conditioning, its utopia is achieved, like Comte’s, primarily by sociological and not by biotechnological means. Michel does not object to Brave New World’s society on the basis that human liberty and depth are compromised, but rather because such a society is not feasible. Michel does not take the line of arguing that in Brave New World’s society the happiness and the absence of conflict are marred by a lack of depth and a lack of individual liberty; he argues, on the contrary, that it is naïve to think that a society like Brave New World’s would be enough to suppress the innate human tendency towards competition and domination. He believes that it is naïve to think that competition, especially sexual competition, can be overcome without abolishing sex and individuality. The solution proposed in the society of Brave New World attempts to eradicate economic and sexual competition by providing total material abundance and by disassociating sex from evolutionary selection:
La compétition économique, métaphore de la maîtrise de l’espace, n’a plus de raison d’être dans une société riche, où les flux économiques sont maîtrisés. La compétition sexuelle, métaphore par le biais de la procréation de la maîtrise du temps, n’a plus de raison d’être dans une société où la dissociation sexe-procréation est parfaitement réalisée.123

Even in a society of abundance, Michel implies, it would be human nature to create new forms of scarcity and competition. The drive for individual distinction, separate from the satisfaction of more basic needs, has become particularly pronounced in a society in which individual atomisation and the awareness of mortality have become acute. Individualism and competition are not simply created by contemporary capitalist society, but are, from a certain perspective according to Michel, rational and therefore inevitable responses to a materialistic worldview implying the isolation of individuals and the absence of resurrection after death:

La mutation métaphysique ayant donné naissance au matérialisme et à la science moderne a eu deux grandes conséquences : le rationalisme et l’individualisme. L’erreur d’Huxley est d’avoir mal évalué le rapport des forces entre ces deux conséquences. Spécifiquement, son erreur est d’avoir sous-estimé l’augmentation de l’individualisme produite par une conscience accrue de la mort. De l’individualisme naissent la liberté, la sensation du moi, le besoin de se distinguer et d’être supérieur aux autres.124

Huxley, according to Michel, failed to grasp the power of individualism: “Il n’a pas su comprendre que le sexe, une fois dissocié de la procréation, subsiste moins comme principe de Plaisir que comme principe de différenciation narcissique ; il en est de même du désir de richesses.”125 Sexual and economic inequality are inherent in human nature, and competition is inextricably tied to individuality and the awareness of death. This explains, according to Michel, why political or social solutions to economic and especially erotic inequality are futile:

123 Ibid., 199.
124 Ibid., 199.
125 Ibid., 200.
Pourquoi le modèle de la social-démocratie suédoise n’a-t-il jamais réussi à l’emporter sur le modèle libéral ? Pourquoi n’a-t-il même jamais expérimenté dans le domaine de la satisfaction sexuelle ? Parce que la mutation métaphysique opérée par la science moderne entraîne à sa suite l’individuation, la vanité, la haine et le désir.\textsuperscript{126}

The discussion of \textit{Brave New World} by Bruno and Michel points towards the need for a biotechnological solution (only biotechnology can overcome, for instance, physical aging), and rejects the ethical objections which might be raised against a technology which compromises human freedom and alters human nature. Going much further, however, Michel’s critique of the naivety of the solution proposed in \textit{Brave New World} makes it clear that the biotechnological solution should deliberately aim at abolishing individuality and death, as any traces of mortal individuality will lead inevitably to competition and therefore suffering. Michel’s critique is based on a profound pessimism about human nature, which causes him to regard even \textit{Brave New World’s} extreme measures as inadequate. In Michel’s critique of \textit{Brave New World’s} solution, therefore, we have a blueprint for the absolute posthuman solution, a solution in which death and individuality have been abolished, which will later succeed.

\textit{Pessimism about human nature}

\textit{Les Particules élémentaires} presents an extremely negative portrait of human nature, and it is this portrait that ultimately justifies the idea that all solutions, including the quite extreme solutions in Comte and \textit{Brave New World}, are inadequate without an extreme genetic makeover for humankind. \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} implies that barbarity and cruelty come naturally to humans; they have not been invented by contemporary society, but in contemporary society they are no longer suppressed. \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} repeatedly presents life in its natural state as fundamentally bad. As a child watching the wildlife documentary \textit{La Vie des animaux}, Michel is appalled by the savagery he observes in the natural world. In the natural world no creature, not even

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 200.
the most ferocious and dominant, can escape predation and suffering. Lions are devoured from within by parasites and “certains parasites étaient eux-mêmes attaqués par des parasites plus petits ; ces derniers étaient à leur tour un terrain de reproduction pour les virus.” At a young age Michel develops the conviction that the destruction of Darwinian life is a moral imperative:

Michel frémissait d’indignation, et là aussi sentait se former en lui une conviction inébranlable : prise dans son ensemble la nature sauvage n’était rien d’autre qu’une répugnante saloperie ; prise dans son ensemble la nature sauvage justifiait une destruction totale, un holocauste universel – et la mission de l’homme sur la Terre était probablement d’accomplir cet holocauste.

In *Les Particules élémentaires* contemporary society is depicted as having returned to a natural state, having discarded the civilising forces which once, however tenuously, distinguished the human species from other animals. Humanity, *Les Particules élémentaires* implies, was never far from the barbarity of Darwinian life, of nature red in tooth and claw. As a young boy, Michel is struck by the cruelty of his male classmates, remarking that “on pouvait réellement s’étonner du naturel joyeux, instinctif, avec lequel il piquaient les crapauds de la pointe de leur compass ou de leur porte-plume.” Human behaviour is shown to be fundamentally similar to that of other animals, and the posthuman narrator describes humanity as “à peine différente du singe.” In the novel the negative aspects of Darwinian life in humans and other animals are almost exclusively emphasized, with no discussion of evolved altruistic and cooperative tendencies (the one exception is motherly love, as shown, for instance, by a female squid defending her offspring).

Several commentators have noticed parallels between the extreme aversion not only to contemporary society but to life itself in Houellebecq’s novels and pessimistic philosophy. Walter Wagner writes, “Les univers philosophico-esthétique de Schopenhauer et de Houellebecq ont pour

127 Ibid., 47.
128 Ibid., 47.
129 Ibid., 204.
130 Ibid., 394.
fondement une aversion profonde contre le monde.”\textsuperscript{131} In \textit{Les Particules élémentaires}, as in Schopenhauer and Buddhism, human desire, when combined with human finitude and mortality, leads to suffering, and even in the most utopian social system imaginable, suffering is inevitable. While the pessimism about human life in \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} is expressed primarily as pessimism about a humanity constrained and tainted by Darwinian evolution, at times it goes further, expressing regret for any form of psycho-spatial separation and for temporal change and decline. Michel writes “La séparation est l’autre nom du mal,”\textsuperscript{132} and as a child he fixed a ruler with scotch tape rather than discard it: “Enfant, il ne pouvait pas supporter la dégradation naturelle des objets, leur bris, leur usure.”\textsuperscript{133} The posthuman technological solution alone can overcome not only Darwinian evolution, but separation and entropy at the most fundamental level.

\textit{Qualifications to the successful posthuman solution}

Throughout \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} we have been presented with several attributes which any absolute solution would have to possess. It must provide an adequate substitute for traditional religion, and must ensure individual immortality. It must abolish the competitive and violent impulses inherent in human nature. It must overcome the sense of isolation that comes from excessive individuality. It must restore the possibility of love. It must be consistent with modern science and materialism, eschewing belief in the supernatural. Finally, it must abolish competitive and violent impulses presented as the inevitable result of Darwinian evolution. The posthuman solution in \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} possesses these attributes, and therefore succeeds in creating a paradise on earth.

In this chapter, I have argued that the posthuman solution depicted in \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} succeeds in achieving utopia, ensuring happiness and immortality for the posthumans. I have shown, moreover, that far from being a fanciful \textit{deus ex machina} disconnected from

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Les Particules élémentaires}, 376.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 203.
contemporary social, technological and historical realities, *Les Particules élémentaires* posits the posthuman solution as a logical final stage in the development of Western civilisation. While maintaining that this posthuman solution should be taken seriously, I must nevertheless qualify this assertion in two important ways. Firstly, the solution, as depicted, would not help living humans. *Les Particules élémentaires* does not envisage the possibility of existing individual human consciousness acquiring happiness and immortality by means of imagined technologies such as mind-uploading. There is no bridge across which present day humans can enter into the paradisiacal state enjoyed by the posthumans. The posthuman solution described in *Les Particules élémentaires* implies the extinction of the human species, and the posthuman narrator states that although isolated pockets of humans remain in regions of the world still influenced by religion, birth rates are falling. Referring to these few remaining humans, the narrator concludes, “leur extinction semble à présent inéluctable.” In acquiescing to the absolute posthuman solution, humankind has chosen extinction. Having finally comprehended the inherent badness of human life, it is with relief that humanity renounces its place on Earth in favour of the posthumans. The narrator says, “on est même surpris de voir avec quelle douceur, quelle résignation, et peut-être quel secret soulagement les humains ont consenti à leur propre disparition.” Houellebecq’s utopian posthuman solution, therefore, is not without an ironic and even deeply pessimistic shadow.

A second qualification to the posthuman solution is that because the paradigm shift and consequential biotechnological advances brought about by Michel’s theories remain in the realm of speculative science fiction, we are being presented with a solution that is not in fact available at the current time in the real world. In the conclusion, we will see that this is not a reason to dismiss the posthuman solution as mere fiction; while the timeframe for the emergence of radical posthuman technology in *Les Particules élémentaires* is admittedly hardly credible, the novel’s solution may be interpreted as a dramatic acceleration of plausible but long-term possibilities. This qualification does, however, implicitly give rise to the question of how individuals and society as a whole should

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134 Ibid., 392.
135 Ibid., 392.
live given that, in the real world, the absolute posthuman may be unavailable anytime in the near future.

Having proposed an ultimate posthuman solution and having shown why this solution alone is adequate, *Les Particules élémentaires* implies the inadequacy of all less radical solutions that might actually be available at the present time. From one perspective, the posthuman solution depicted in *Les Particules élémentaires* might be seen as optimistic, implying that although no absolute solution exists at present, in the near or more distant future an absolute solution might for the first time become available; from another perspective, however, this imagined solution might be seen as rather pessimistic about the possibilities for life in the contemporary West and for human life in general. From this perspective, the more paradisiacal the outcome for the posthumans, the more tragic and cruel and absurd the suffering of human life in the contemporary West must appear. Viewed in analepsis by the posthuman narrator, contemporary Western Civilisation reveals its specific historicity as a chronic cul-de-sac resulting from the gradual corrosion of religion, morality, and humanistic values like love. Western Civilisation finds itself in a strange and terrible limbo between seeing the depressing truth and being able (through technology) to remedy it. It finds itself in a space between the historical destruction of the illusion of immortality and love, and the engineered reality of immortality and love to come. Such a view imbues contemporary Western Civilisation with a pathos difficult to sense without stepping outside of our own epoch: from the perspective of the posthumans, the human species, although “douloureuse et vile,”136 embodies at the same time “tant d’aspirations nobles.”137 But this grudging respect is surely limited comfort in the face of suffering and mortality made absurd once it is shown to be the arbitrary result of insufficiently advanced technology, neither natural nor philosophically necessary. Stranded in time on the eve of posthumanity, Bruno and Michel, belonging to one of the last generations of humans, are denied even the consolation that death and suffering are universal and inevitable. Replacing the human race with a happier, more benevolent type of being may indeed be the only ultimate solution

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136 Ibid., 394.
137 Ibid., 394.
to society’s problems, but it is a prospect in which contemporary humans cannot unequivocally rejoice.

In the next chapter, I will examine *La Possibilité d’une île*, which also explores a radical, biotechnological solution to the problems of contemporary Western Civilisation. In contrast to the solution described in *Les Particules élémentaires* which, from the perspective of the posthumans at least, is a total success, the solution described in *La Possibilité d’une île* has consequences that lead the posthumans to question the wisdom of the solution. While a technological, posthuman solution as introduced in *Les Particules élémentaires* remains, in *La Possibilité d’une île*, as an ultimate and ideal solution, we will see how it is now problematised and shown to be fraught with potential dangers and disappointments.
Chapter 2 La Possibilité d’une île

I now turn my attention to La Possibilité d’une île, a novel that, like Les Particules élémentaires, explores the possibility of using posthuman technology as a means of resolving the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. In La Possibilité d’une île there is an attempt to think through, at close range, a different type of posthuman remedy that, unlike the solution in Les Particules élémentaires, aims to ablate all desire, pleasure and affection. In removing not only the negative aspects of human nature but also all positive values, this solution fails because it abnegates something essential about the human condition. While the promised coming of the mysterious Futurs leaves open the possibility of an absolute biotechnological solution in the distant future, in comparison with Les Particules élémentaires, posthuman technology as an answer to society’s problems is here much more remote and uncertain. Combined with the dismissal of all non-biotechnological solutions, this implies that Western civilisation may face a long period without any prospect of societal salvation.

In this chapter, I will explore La Possibilité d’une île’s paradoxical attitude to the question of whether it is innate human nature or features specific to contemporary Western civilisation that are the cause of society’s problems. I will show that the novel denies the possibility of a return to traditional values. I will discuss how the novel’s depiction of the surviving bands of human “savages” and of brutality in the animal world further reinforces an emphasis – which we observed also in Les Particules élémentaires – on cruelty and suffering as intrinsic to animal and human life. An extremely pessimistic view of evolved human nature leads to the abolition of desire and sociality being posited as the only way of overcoming suffering and conflict. Through an examination of the details of the neo-human solution, we will see how desire and suffering are abolished by a combination of biological engineering and adherence to highly prescriptive lifestyle rules. The neo-human solution largely achieves its goal of abolishing desire, but the result is not the predicted tranquility but a chronic sense of malaise and emptiness among the neo-humans that reveal the solution to be a failure. With the neo-human solution invalidated, the uncertain hope
offered by the “Futurs” is all that remains, but this is too remote to offer significant comfort to either contemporary humans or the neo-human clones.

Summary of novel

*La Possibilité d’une île* alternates between the story of Daniel, a comedian living in the contemporary West, and the narratives of Daniel’s distant, clone descendants, Daniel24 and Daniel25, living two millennia in the future. The novel thinks through the posthuman solution here by playing out a revisionist evolutionary narrative involving contemporary humans, neo-human clones, human “savages” as well as the (perhaps mythological) *Futurs*. The clones in the novel are described as “neo-humans” because they have been genetically modified. They lack a digestive system and produce energy photosynthetically, and psychologically they have been engineered in such a way that their capacity for passion, whether positive or negative, is dulled. Each neo-human lives in complete physical isolation from other neo-humans in a self-sufficient compound, and the only contact between neo-humans takes place via cryptic messages they send one another via an Internet-like communication system. As well as providing accounts of their own lives, Daniel24 and Daniel25 examine and reflect on Daniel’s life, and, by extension, on life in the contemporary West, trying to understand his passions and psychological afflictions. Two perspectives on contemporary Western civilisation are therefore juxtaposed in the novel: a neo-human perspective that is external not only to a specific human civilisation or epoch but outside humanity itself; and Daniel’s perspective, that gives an account from the inside of the experiences of a human living in the contemporary West. Once again, *La Possibilité d’une île* employs the narrative technique used in *Les Particules élémentaires*, in which the discontents of Bruno’s life were explored from the inside as well as externally through the objective gaze of the posthuman narrator and the detached, scientific Michel.

Daniel’s story begins in midlife, when he is already a successful and wealthy comedian. His humour consists in harsh satire of contemporary society, satire which he deploys not to chasten society or as a form of political protest, but cynically to create controversy and thereby ensure
success. More than perhaps any other character in Houellebecq’s fiction, Daniel exudes pessimism and spite. He is both self-hating and misanthropic. He hates children, and admits complete indifference to the suicide of his son. He is convinced by the idea, repeated in different ways throughout Houellebecq’s works, that contemporary society can essentially be reduced into two discrete hierarchies of competition and dominance, one based on sex and the other on money. He is distraught that his money and fame have not sufficiently enhanced his erotic capital. Daniel is a character who himself embodies the worst characteristics of the society he reviles. For instance, he shows contempt for aging and unattractive women, valuing only youth and physical beauty, while railing against the cult of youth and the cruelty of a society in which middle-aged men are unable to enjoy the love of young women. In spite of his general misery, Daniel’s life is illuminated by two love affairs, and his experience of love comes to be seen by his clone descendants as something mysterious and of great value. Daniel’s first love affair is with the intelligent, compassionate Annabelle, who is about the same age as him and whom he eventually marries. In spite of Annabelle’s compassion and understanding, their relationship is shown to be doomed once their erotic life dwindles. Love, Daniel comes to realise, cannot survive the aging of the lover’s body. Esther, Daniel’s second and final love, comes into his life two years after his separation from Annabelle. The young, hedonistic Esther gives Daniel a new lease on life, and he is intoxicated by their sexual relationship. Daniel’s infatuation with Esther is not reciprocated, however, and when she leaves him Daniel is thrown into a despair that eventually culminates in his suicide.

As well as giving an account of his hatred of society, his despair, and his two love affairs, Daniel describes his experiences with the Elohimite Church, a fictional sect based on the real-life Raëlian religion. The Elohimite Church believes in the return of benevolent, technologically advanced aliens, the original creators of life on earth as revealed by their prophet. The Elohimite Church is shown to be a religion perfectly suited to the needs and aspirations of contemporary Western society, and it is for this reason, the neo-humans tell us, that in the final stages of human civilisation the Elohimite Church displaced both Christianity and Islam. The Elohimite Church promotes sexual freedom, it is youth-oriented and focuses on physical health, it embraces
technology, and it does not impose any onerous duties on its adherents. Its hedonism and lack of spiritual depth mirror the contemporary Western society that gave birth to it. The Elohimite Church, above all, promises an eternal life of individual pleasure, with DNA samples being taken from adherents for future cloning and reincarnation through mind-uploading. While the Elohimite Church’s hedonistic ideals and hopes for individual immortality are never realised in the neo-humans, the clone descendants of Daniel and his dog, Fox, are derived from DNA samples given by Daniel to the Elohimite Church.

Through the narratives of Daniel24 and Daniel25, we are given glimpses into the experiences of neo-human life. The neo-humans live in accordance with the philosophy of the mysterious Sœur suprême, whose teachings emphasise the extinction of desire through a monastic and reflective life devoid of passion, this being done in part by studying the autobiographies of the original human forebears so as to identify, understand and then overcome vestigial traces of human passion. The neo-humans also speak mysteriously of the coming of a new type of being, the Futurs, and the asceticism of the neo-humans is thought to prepare their coming. In contrast to the hopes of the Elohimite Church, the neo-humans have failed to achieve immortality by means of the transference of consciousness through mind-uploading across clone avatars. By reading the life-stories left by previous clones in the lineage, however, a certain psychological continuity is achieved (this, however, is a much more limited form of “immortality” than that enjoyed by the posthumans in Les Particules élémentaires). The examples of Daniel24 and Daniel25 show that the quelling of passions in neo-human life has not brought serenity and peace as had hoped, but, rather, lethargy, malaise, and nostalgia for the vitality of their human ancestors. Daniel25 finally rebels against the teachings of the Sœur suprême and leaves his compound, setting out in search of a colony of remnant civilised humans or defecting neo-humans said to be found at Lanzarote. Outside the compound Daniel25 experiences suffering, feels sadness at the death of his dog Fox, and cries (tears had not been experienced by the neo-humans for many generations). Daniel25 never finds the colony, and the novel ends with him bathing in the sea in a vegetative state, devoid of hope, thoughts, and feelings.
Bellanger is one of the few critics to take the science-fiction scenarios in *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* seriously as possible solutions to problems such as human mortality, rather than as mere incidental framing for a critique of contemporary Western civilisation. As was the case in my analysis of *Les Particules élémentaires*, I will follow Bellanger in remaining open to a potential posthuman solution in *La Possibilité d’une île*. Like Bellanger, I will distinguish between two distinct solutions in the novel: a flawed neo-human solution and a utopian solution in the form of the *Futurs*. In contrast to Bellanger, however, I will emphasise the uncertainty of the solution of the *Futurs* in the novel and its remoteness from contemporary problems. Bellanger acknowledges that, unlike the absolute solution in *Les Particules élémentaires* which was realised within the temporal framework of the novel and only a few decades in advance of the contemporary age, the solution of the *Futurs* remains a distant promise on the temporal horizon of the neo-humans. Indeed, he suggests that “*La Possibilité d’une île* marque un recul par rapport à l’idéal des *Particules élémentaires*. C’est une éternité dont les satisfactions n’existent qu’à l’état de promesse.”\(^{138}\) Nevertheless, in keeping with his reading of Houellebecq as an optimistic and romantic novelist who sees in technology the answer to humanity’s most fundamental problems, the utopian promise of the *Futurs* is seen as delayed rather than as simply fanciful. Bellanger reads *La Possibilité d’une île* as a novel that, rejecting all outmoded metaphysics, puts great hope in the power of science, writing that “la naissance de l’esprit, sur les ruines de l’âme, est l’unique moyen de parvenir à une amélioration du monde.”\(^{139}\) For Bellanger, Houellebecq is a romantic and even an optimistic writer because his novels remain open to the possibility of immortality and love. The solution of the *Futurs* in *La Possibilité d’une île*, Bellanger argues, provides a rational and scientific means of realising romantic goals: “le culte des Futurs semble assez rationnel. C’est un millénarisme scientifiquement aidé dont toutes les apories demeurent contournables et dont

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\(^{138}\) Bellanger, 234.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 65.
Bellanger sees in the *Futurs* the radical possibility of resolving certain fundamental aporias of human existence. Bellanger even implies that the solution of the *Futurs* may provide redemption for past human and neo-human lives (which would overcome the qualification I applied to the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires* in the previous chapter, namely, that it offers no succour to present or past human lives):

Les néo-humains pourraient n’exister alors que dans les seuls esprits de leurs lointains successeurs, comme dans la main d’un dieu numérique, qui garantirait éternellement leur sortie du monde de la matière. Toutes les générations sacrifiées revivraient dans le paradis de leurs cerveaux.\footnote{Ibid., 266.}

In contrast to Bellanger, I will argue that a chasm is shown to exist between the problems of contemporary society and the problems of the neo-humans and the utopian solution of the *Futurs*. While the neo-human narrators offer sufficiently detailed speculation about the nature of the *Futurs* to give the solution an air of plausibility, I will argue that the *Futurs* are cloaked in such uncertainty and contradiction that the novel cannot unproblematically be read as romantic or optimistic. In contrast to Bellanger, I will consider the suggestion in *La Possibilité d’une île* that the *Futurs* may be a mere myth and a mirage, arguing that although posthuman technology remains in *La Possibilité d’une île* as a possible, long-term solution, it is presented with more ambivalence than in *Les Particules élémentaires*.

Bellanger’s optimistic reading of *La Possibilité d’une île* is based on the assumption that the *Futurs* consist of a vast network of numerical consciousness:

Les Futurs, aperçus dans *La Possibilité d’une île*, disposeront de la totalité du temps pour explorer les secrets de la complexité informatique. Leur éternité est une éternité de théorème. L’informationnel succède au charnel. Les mathématiques remplaceront l’amour, dans un monde de silicium aux propriétés sociales pour l’instant inconnues.\footnote{Ibid., 265.}
I will show, however, that this theory about the nature of the Futurs is presented in *La Possibilité d’une île* as mere speculation; the nature and even the existence of the Futurs is ultimately presented in the novel as unknowable to the neo-humans. Bellanger’s optimistic interpretation of the possibility of rebirth of humans and neo-humans within a future digital consciousness is only one possibility hinted at in the novel, which equally can be read as emphasising the separation and mortality of both humans and neo-humans as corporeal entities, irredeemably excluded from the solution of the Futurs should it ever come to pass.

Morrey is another critic who approaches the science-fiction speculation in *La Possibilité d’une île* seriously, arguing that through it Houellebecq grapples with the possibility of a posthuman future. He writes:

> The future Utopia of *La Possibilité d’une île*, in which humanity engineers its own overcoming, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical view of evolution and the novel can be seen as an attempt to think the unthinkable; that is to say, what kind of shape would be taken by the life of a future species for which our own systems of value and modes of understanding the world had ceased to be meaningful?

Morrey focuses on innate characteristics of the human condition, and biology in particular, as the root causes of Houellebecq’s pessimism, a pessimism which points naturally towards the need for a posthuman solution. In contrast to critics like Sweeney, who see the contradictions and injustices of neoliberal capitalism as the origin of the problems depicted in Houellebecq’s novels, Morrey argues that a Schopenhauerian pessimism about human existence lies at the heart of Houellebecq’s work, claiming that “humanity’s suffering is the result of its focus on individual desire, which makes us only superficially distinct from the brutal evolutionary tussle that unites the other animals in strife.”

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143 Morrey, 114.
144 Ibid., 126.
depicted by Houellebecq, Morrey argues that it is necessary to look deeper than specific contemporary social conditions:

This whole depressing situation – the ruthless sexual competition for access to nubile bodies and the equally unmerciful sidelining of the old – despite the particular characteristics it takes on in contemporary society, can be seen to stem ultimately from a deep atavistic heritage.\textsuperscript{145}

Morrey identifies in \textit{La Possibilité d’une île} a particular understanding of the role of Darwinian evolution in human existence, suggesting that “the rather oppressive view of evolution as the survival of the fittest that pertains in \textit{La Possibilité d’une île}… is a somewhat dated view that was already criticised by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{146} Such a view, although criticised for ignoring the fact that “humanity has not been simplistically subjected to the laws of nature since prehistoric times,”\textsuperscript{147} explains for Morrey the impossibility of any political solution in the novel:

Such an ethics tends to lead to the reactionary assertion that social change is impossible as when Daniel admits that he always avoided politics because ‘la racine de tout mal était biologique, et indépendante d’aucune transformation sociale imaginable’.\textsuperscript{148}

Morrey is not the only critic to identify a fundamental pessimism about the human condition in Houellebecq’s novels. Place-Vergnes, for instance, reads in Houellebecq a Schopenhauerian understanding of suffering as the inevitable result of desire and will, stating: “comme chez Schopenhauer, la souffrance est le concept fondateur de l’idéologie houellebecqienne, celui dont tout dérive.”\textsuperscript{149} For Place-Vergnes, the specific characteristics of contemporary society are

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{149} Floriane Place-Vergnes, “\textit{Houellebecq/Schopenhauer: Souffrance et désir gigognes},” in \textit{Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe}, ed. Murielle Lucie Clément et. al. (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 127.
I would contend that, with their latent Pauline themes, the writings of Houellebecq constitute an extended commentary on Pascal’s assertion ‘Que le Moi est haïssable’. What we have here, then, is a very sophisticated grafting of the Pauline and Pascalian anthropology onto the social and cultural fabric of late twentieth-century France.151

Whether the focus is on Darwinian evolution, Schopenhauerian philosophy or Christian moralism, Morrey, Place-Vergnes, and Abecassis all emphasise, as I do, that pessimism about innate human nature is central to Houellebecq’s work. However, things are perhaps not quite so simple and I will need in what follows to complicate this position and unpack the paradoxical relationship which exists in La Possibilité d’une île between the conditions of contemporary society and innate human nature, exploring the ways in which contemporary Western civilisation is shown to expose humanity’s brute biology while denying the possibility of amelioration through traditional values.

Problems of contemporary society

Through the story of Daniel, La Possibilité d’une île plunges into a society depicted as being in a state of crisis. As in Les Particules élémentaires, the problems of contemporary Western civilisation manifest as a syndrome of related symptoms brought about by the decline of traditional values and religion, the rise of individualism, and the domination of a materialistic worldview. Contemporary Western civilisation is shown in La Possibilité d’une île to have lost its way, but the
possibility of any return to traditional values, social structures and religion is explicitly disavowed. Contemporary Western civilisation is depicted here as simultaneously insupportable and inevitable, resulting in a sentiment, expressed most clearly in the character of Daniel, in which indignation combines with resignation. Daniel is both a case study in the crisis of Western civilisation as well as an incisive diagnostician of its illnesses. Daniel says, “j’étais, en effet, un observateur acéré de la réalité contemporaine.” Daniel explains that his humour satirises two scales of differentiation, that between rich and poor, and that between the erotically desirable and the erotically undesirable. In Daniel’s eyes, any relationships or values which fall outside the spheres of economic and erotic competition (such as relationships of family or friendship) simply no longer have any place within contemporary Western society.

Daniel, however, goes on to explain that the economic and erotic forms of differentiation that characterise contemporary Western society are both “aisément résumable à la vanité et à la competition narcissique, déjà bien décrites par les moralistes français trois siècles auparavant.” An apparent contradiction therefore arises in the representation of the problems of contemporary Western civilisation in La Possibilité d’une île: are the phenomena of competition, cruelty, selfishness, and narcissistic differentiation which Daniel decries specifically characteristic of contemporary Western civilisation? Or do they exist in all cultures and epochs? Are these phenomena produced by the socio-historical conditions of contemporary Western civilisation, or are they simply expressions of a universal human nature? This contradiction is partially resolved by admitting that these phenomena are indeed rooted in a fundamental human tendency towards individual distinction and desire, while also recognising that something has taken place in the contemporary West whereby the negative aspects of human nature have become aggravated, and positive values, like love and religious faith, have lost their power to countervail and redeem. In a rare moment of objective balance in his evaluation of contemporary Western civilisation, Daniel admits that “on pouvait ergoter à l’infini pour savoir si les hommes étaient ou non plus heureux.

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152 La Possibilité d’une île, 21.
153 Ibid., 22.
This perspective is however an exception in *La Possibilité d’une île* which, taken as a whole, overwhelmingly conveys the impression that life in the contemporary West is especially bad and that contemporary Western civilisation indeed finds itself in a unique state of crisis that is not simply a reiteration of the disheartening status quo of human history. Daniel reveals that in the period following Daniel’s death, the nihilism of contemporary Western civilisation spreads across the world and brings about the downfall of humanity: “la vérité, c’est que les hommes étaient simplement en train d’abandonner la partie.” Whatever the flaws in other cultures and in previous ages, the suicidal crisis is said to be unprecedented and it is shown to emerge first in the contemporary West.

If contemporary Western society is shown in *La Possibilité d’une île* to be worse in essential ways than other cultures and ages, a bifurcation towards other existing forms of human society or a return to traditions which have been lost in the West might offer, if not an absolute solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation, then at least their amelioration. A bifurcation away from the atheism and individualism of contemporary Western civilisation towards a society emphasising religion, tradition, and family might provide a partial antidote to the untrammelled expression of negative aspects of human nature in the contemporary West. The possibility of such an escape from contemporary Western civilisation for a character as disillusioned as Daniel would be highly appealing, and as if in anticipation of *Soumission*, Daniel remarks, “c’est triste, le naufrage d’une civilisation, c’est triste de voir sombrer ses plus belles intelligences – on commence par se sentir légèrement mal à l’aise dans sa vie, et on finit par aspirer à l’établissement d’une république islamique.” Such hypothetical escapes, and specifically an escape in the form of Islam, though preferable to the continued malaise of contemporary Western civilisation, are nevertheless rejected in *La Possibilité d’une île* (as in *Les Particules élémentaires*) as impossible. In

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154 Ibid., 30.
155 Ibid., 46.
156 Ibid., 350.
contrast to *Soumission*, which implies that the West’s atheism might be more superficial than is at first apparent, *La Possibilité d’une île* emphatically depicts the rise of atheism in the West as absolute and irreversible. Daniel says, “mon athéisme était si monolithique, si radical que je n’avais même jamais réussi à prendre ces sujets totalement au sérieux,” and his atheism is shown to be the rule rather than the exception in contemporary Western civilisation. Even professed believers, Daniel argues, “ne croyaient évidemment pas,” and their belief is merely belief “au second degré,” a means of access to a community of believers. Daniel argues that even in Catholic Spain, Ireland, and Poland, the last bastions of Christianity in Europe, religious faith has all but evaporated: “dans ces pays aujourd’hui plus personne ne croyait en Dieu, n’en tenait le moindre compte, ne se souvenait même d’avoir cru.” The decline of Christianity and its social structures and values is presented as inevitable, though regrettable, and irreversible: “lorsqu’un système social est détruit, cette destruction est définitive, et aucun retour en arrière n’est possible.”

Not only is contemporary Western civilisation blocked from returning to its own Christian heritage, but *La Possibilité d’une île* also excludes the possibility of revitalising contemporary Western civilisation through a turn towards an alternative theistic tradition. Indeed, at the same time as the possibility of the rise of Islam in the West is rejected, exposure to Western civilisation is predicted to inevitably result in the decline of Islam in its countries of origin:

> La chute de l’islam en Occident rappelle en fait curieusement celle, quelques décennies plus tôt, du communisme : dans l’un et l’autre cas, le phénomène de reflux devait naître dans les pays d’origine et balayer en quelques années les organisations, pourtant puissantes et richissimes, mises sur pied dans les pays d’accueil.

The materialistic atheism, individualism, and hedonism which are shown to have brought about only misery and crisis in the West, are the inescapable destiny of all humanity. This can be explained

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157 Ibid., 258.
158 Ibid., 258.
159 Ibid., p. 354.
160 Ibid., p. 358.
161 Ibid., p. 359.
if contemporary Western civilisation is understood not simply as a culture but, rather, as a state in which the truth of the human condition has been revealed. Daniel’s atheism, and by extension the atheism of the West, is simply the inevitable consequence of exposure to what are seen as irrefutable scientific facts. As Daniel explains:

Non seulement je n’avais jamais adhéré à une croyance religieuse, mais je n’en avais même jamais envisagé la possibilité. Pour moi, les choses étaient exactement ce qu’elles paraissaient être : l’homme était une espèce animale, issue d’autres espèces animales par un processus d’évolution tortueux et pénible ; il était composé de matière configurée en organes, et après sa mort ces organes se décomposaient, se transformaient en molécules plus simples.”

As with Comte, supernatural belief is thought to be irreconcilable with scientific rationality, with the latter inevitably prevailing. Religious belief, *La Possibilité d’une île* implies, can only be maintained on the basis of ignorance and compulsion. As Daniel notes, “il devint alors parfaitement clair, aux yeux des populations occidentales, que les pays musulmans n’avaient été maintenus dans leurs foi primitive que par l’ignorance et la contrainte.” The inevitability of atheism is paralleled by the inevitable proliferation of individualistic and hedonistic values:

Lorsque les pays arabes purent enfin accéder à un mode de vie basé sur la consommation de masse, la liberté sexuelle et les loisirs, l’engouement des populations fut aussi intense et aussi vif qu’il l’avait été, un demi-siècle plus tôt, dans les pays communistes.

The insidious rise of individualism and hedonism, like the rise of atheism, is presented as the inevitable consequence of insight into the truth of the human condition. Individualism and hedonism are the residue which remains once ideals higher than pleasure and allegiances which transcend the individual have evaporated and been revealed as myths. Implicit throughout *La

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162 Ibid., 257.
163 Ibid., 359.
164 Ibid., 359.
Possibilité d’une île is the Nietzschean insight that the death of God in the West is not an isolated event, but precipitates the collapse of many cherished, collateral myths. The idea of community is replaced by an understanding of the individual as fundamentally isolated, summed up in the idea that “au fond on naît seul, on vit seul et on meurt seul.” As Daniel sardonically notes, “de telles dispositions d’esprit ne peuvent guère, à long terme, favoriser une sociabilité riche.” In the contemporary West “la sociabilité avait fait son temps, elle avait joué son rôle historique.” Love is another casualty of the collapse of traditional values in the West. Daniel writes, “quant à l’amour, il ne fallait plus y compter ; j’étais sans doute un des derniers hommes de ma génération à m’aimer suffisamment peu pour être capable d’aimer quelqu’un d’autre.” There is nothing liberating about the collapse of society, family, and love as presented in La Possibilité d’une île. It is an unmitigated but inevitable tragedy. Religion, love, society and family are necessary, life-preserving myths, but are unable to survive insight into the depressing reality of isolation and mortality in human life.

The individualism, competition for status and pleasure, and focus on sex and physical attractiveness identified in La Possibilité d’une île as characteristic of contemporary Western society are natural responses, the novel implies, to a world without religion and without edifying myths, to a world in which the mortal and animalistic nature of humanity has been exposed. Contemporary Western civilisation, presented in La Possibilité d’une île as the vanguard of human development, to which “primitive” and “ignorant” traditions like Islam must inevitably give way, results finally in a return to the dawn of humanity and a state of barely concealed barbarity. Contemporary Western civilisation has the dubious distinction of fully exposing humanity’s barbaric nature while showing that any religious or communitarian alternatives are henceforth impossible. Stripped of all its civilising myths, the values of contemporary Western society come to resemble those of the tribes of savages who have survived into the neo-human future. These savages

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165 Ibid., 420.
166 Ibid., 420.
167 Ibid., 420.
168 Ibid., 421.
represent the barbarity and suffering inherent in human existence, stripped entirely of any redemptive qualities.

*Depiction of human “savages”*

The savages, described in *La Possibilité d’une île* as the last remnants of a human species doomed to extinction, embody humanity at its worst and show why humanity must be replaced. After leaving his compound, Daniel25 has the opportunity to observe a tribe of savages at close range, noting that “la tribu était organisée selon un système hiérarchique strict.”\(^{169}\) The tribe is controlled by a chief and his two subordinates, who have unrestricted sexual access to the females. The females rebuff sexual advances from any of the other, less dominant males in the tribe. Daniel25 notes that there are no elderly members in the tribe, and the reason for this becomes apparent when he observes two older savages being forced to fight to the death. When one of the combatants is seriously injured, the rest of the tribe swarms upon him, tearing off pieces of his flesh and lapping his blood.\(^{170}\) The savages, stripped of all higher culture, have returned to an underlying and universal natural order, an order in which individual organisms, consciously or unconsciously, strive to realise basic drives and desires, inflicting violence on other organisms in the process. In this society, the weak and the old are unable to survive, and the cruel and powerful dominate. This is not an isolated phenomenon, as Marie23, a neo-human living in New York, observes similar demonstrations of violence and cruelty among the savages there. Daniel25 concludes that violence and domination are the inevitable result of natural selection:

Il est naturel que ce soient les individus les plus brutaux et les plus cruels, ceux disposant du potentiel d’agressivité le plus élevé, qui survivent en plus grand nombre à une succession de conflits de longue durée, et transmettent leur caractère à leur descendance.\(^{171}\)

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\(^{169}\) Ibid., 458.
\(^{170}\) Ibid., 426.
\(^{171}\) Ibid., 476.
The cruelty, violence, and suffering depicted in the savages is not an aberration, but represents the essence of life resulting from Darwinian evolution, and is therefore present among non-human animals, the savages, and contemporary humans alike. The problems afflicting the savages and contemporary humans are the inevitable result of a universal natural order explored through the novel’s description of animal life. Daniel25, for instance, defines animals as “des tubes digestifs sur pattes, terminés par des dents, dont la vie se résumait à rechercher d’autres tubes digestifs afin de les dévorer et de reconstituer leurs réserves énergétiques.” As in human society, struggle and competition between organisms to satisfy their own needs is shown to be the essence of life in the animal kingdom. Daniel observes the natural cruelty of stray dogs in Spain for whom “les combats étaient constants, que ce soit pour la nourriture ou la possession des femelles ; les petits étaient laissés à l’abandon, et parfois dévorés par leurs frères plus âgés.” This violent natural essence reasserts itself in Fox the dog who, accompanying Daniel25 outside the compound, begins to kill and disembowel rabbits. In the natural world to which both animals and humans belong, predation, violence, and suffering form an unending cycle in which those who inflict suffering are also simultaneously victims in an unending battle of each against all. Daniel25’s Fox, though himself a killer of rabbits, is tormented by ticks who feed on his blood. Once outside the compound Daniel25 is exposed to the cruelty and suffering inherent in the natural world and begins to understand that “ainsi était constitué le monde naturel,” a natural world that encompasses human (but not neo-human) life: “je commençai, alors, à comprendre ce qu’avait été la vie des hommes.”

The major dividing line exists between animals, the savages, and contemporary humans on the one hand, all similarly contaminated by the violence and suffering inherent in the Darwinian order, and the neo-humans on the other. La Possibilité d’une île repeatedly attempts to show that, despite superficial differences, contemporary “civilised” humans should be classified together with the animals and the savages. Life in the contemporary West is also shown to be characterised by a

172 Ibid., 466.
173 Ibid., 75.
174 Ibid., 441.
175 Ibid., 441.
natural order of competition and cruelty. When the savages brutally kill Fox’s clone descendent, for instance, cutting off his ears, they are merely re-enacting the bloody demise of the original Fox who was deliberately run over by a truck driver.176 Further emphasising the similarity between contemporary Western civilisation and the society of the savages, the cruel ceremony observed by Daniel25 is presided over by a chief wearing an Ibiza Beach T-shirt: “Le chef présidait la réunion dans ce qui ressemblait à un siège de voiture défoncé ; il portait un tee-shirt « Ibiza Beach » et une paire de bottines montantes ; ses jambes et ses organes sexuels étaient à découvert.”177 The emphasis in this image on youth and sexual competition associated with the party island of Ibiza becomes a symbol of contemporary Western society, a society which is shown to be fundamentally equivalent to the society of the savages. Daniel25 is convinced that a contemporary Westerner like Daniel would already be familiar with the laws and values of the society of savages: “j’étais certain que Daniel1 n’aurait pas été dépaysé dans cet univers.”178 Differences between the society of the savages and society in the contemporary West are then merely superficial, and as Daniel25 notes, “en somme, c’était un mode d’organisation qui évoquait d’assez près les sociétés humaines.”179 The society of the savages and society in the contemporary West are so alike because both share a common denominator, namely the cruelty and competition inherent in the natural world. The savages and their confreres in the contemporary West are simply instantiations of an order found elsewhere in the animal kingdom. Observing the way in which the elderly savages are killed and reproduction is restricted to the most dominant male members of the tribe, Daniel25 notes, “tout cela était dans l’ordre des choses.”180 Whether in the undisguised barbarity of the savages or in the systems of economic and erotic exchange characteristic of the capitalist societies of the contemporary West, what we see are variations on an essentially Darwinian struggle amongst organisms. *La Possibilité d’une île* shows that this natural, Darwinian order produces only suffering

176 Ibid., 467.
177 Ibid., 462.
178 Ibid., 248.
179 Ibid., 462.
180 Ibid., 459.
and conflict, and must be extirpated or at least suppressed if the contemporary West is to find an escape from its suicidal predicament.

Whatever potential human culture may once have had, especially through love and religion, to partially mitigate its negative Darwinian side, *La Possibilité d’une île* shows that the savages (and the savages that contemporary Westerners have almost become) are unworthy of continued existence. Daniel25 fails to find in the savages even vestigial traces of human ideals, “ce n’est pas au milieu d’eux que je trouverais l’amour, ou sa possibilité, ni aucun des idéaux qui avaient pu alimenter les rêveries de nos prédécesseurs humains.”\(^\text{181}\) Contemporary characters like Daniel who retain certain ideals are, for all their flaws, not yet entirely equivalent to the savages who “n’étaient que le résidu caricatural des pires tendances de l’humanité ordinaire.”\(^\text{182}\) Nevertheless, we have seen how these ideals are shown to be in terminal decline in the contemporary West. The condemnation of the savages therefore stands also as a condemnation of contemporary society, and there is no hope for amelioration without the abolition of humanity itself. Everything that Marie23 and Daniel25 observe confirms “le verdict définitif que la Sœur suprême avait porté sur l’humanité.”\(^\text{183}\) The natural order (which is all the savages and contemporary Western civilisation are left with), is inherently bad and must be destroyed. Outside the compound, Daniel25 starts to enjoy killing animals, seeing the destruction of Darwinian life as a cleansing of the Earth of an evil order: “toute destruction d’une forme de vie organique, quoi qu’il en soit, était un pas en avant vers l’accomplissement de la loi morale.”\(^\text{184}\) Daniel25 concludes that the extinction of humanity is desirable, explaining, “j’étais, pourtant, et plus que jamais, conscient que l’humanité ne méritait pas de vivre, que la disparition de cette espèce ne pouvait, à tous points de vue, qu’être considérée comme une bonne nouvelle.”\(^\text{185}\) Daniel24 also expresses contempt for the savages and satisfaction in the extinction of humanity, stating, “pour eux je n’éprouve aucune pitié, ni aucun sentiment

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\(^{181}\) Ibid., 462.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 462.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 476.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 465.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 445.
d’appartenance commune ; je les considère simplement comme des singes un peu plus intelligents, et de ce fait plus dangereux.”

Observing savages in the distance, Daniel says, “regarde les petits êtres qui bougent dans le lointain ; regarde. Ce sont des hommes. Dans la lumière qui décline, j’assiste sans regret à la disparition de l’espèce.”

Just before his death Daniel senses that his autobiography, which distils the cruelty and suffering of life in the contemporary West, will lead to a general realisation that a future for humanity is no longer possible, “mon récit de vie, une fois diffusé et commenté, allait mettre fin à l’humanité telle que nous la connaissions.” Daniel senses that the destruction of the human species and its replacement by something else had become inevitable and he conjectures that, “alors disparaîtrait l’espèce, sous sa forme actuelle ; alors apparaîtrait quelque chose de différent, dont on ne pouvait encore dire le nom, qui serait peut-être pire, peut-être meilleur, mais qui serait plus limité dans ses ambitions.”

Daniel correctly predicts that the future will bring a turning away from desire and ambition, which is what happens in the neo-human solution. The representation of the savages in *La Possibilité d’une île* corroborates Daniel’s intuition that humanity is beyond saving. Through the depiction of the savages, a stark choice is offered between humanity irredeemably stripped to its basic and destructive drives, and the neo-human attempt to bifurcate away from ambition and desire. No longer is a solution sought in fostering positive values and ideals as a way of overcoming the savagery of human nature; humanity, along with its desires, sociality, and biology must be discarded.

*The neo-human solution*

The neo-human alternative to humanity attempts, by means of a combination of biotechnological redesign, indoctrination and the absence of direct social interaction, to abolish desire and individual volition. Individual will, which asserts itself in the animal and human world as

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186 Ibid., 26.
187 Ibid., 26.
188 Ibid., 418.
189 Ibid., 419.
a struggle to dominate and possess, is identified in La Possibilité d’une île as a fundamental cause of suffering and conflict. The neo-human solution makes no attempt to distinguish between positive and negative expressions of will and desire, and the desire for love and companionship, for instance, is suppressed together with the desire for sex and domination.

The biotechnological design of the neo-humans reflects the moral goal of overcoming the natural order and abolishing desire and suffering. The natural order of sexual reproduction and childbirth is done away with, cloning providing an alternative to the Darwinian propagation of genes and the survival of the fittest. In her Seconde Réfutation de l’Humanisme, the Sœur suprême says that “les conditions du Malheur” will continue so long as women continue to give birth.190 Not only is sexual reproduction abolished, but the neo-humans are without libido, thereby providing a resolution to the problems that sexuality is shown to bring through characters like Daniel. The carnivorous savagery of the natural world is resolved by a design in which the neo-humans produce energy photosynthetically.191 This photosynthetic self-sufficiency is symbolic of the aims of the neo-human project as a whole, which attempts to overcome reliance on others for the satisfaction of needs, as reliance brings with it the possibility of both violence and disappointment. In keeping with this goal, the skin of the neo-humans is also modified to make it less sensitive. This decreased sensitivity functions not only to decrease physical pain exerted by the external world, but also to remove the longing for physical contact and thereby “diminuer les souffrances liées à l’absence de contact.”192 Not only does the neo-human design attempt to protect the neo-humans from suffering imposed from the outside, but it attempts to overcome the suffering caused by unsatisfied needs and desires by means of suppressing need and desire themselves. If a deficit between desire and its satisfaction results in suffering, then two approaches to closing this deficit seem possible: either desire is reduced or abolished, or the satisfaction of desire is enhanced. The latter approach was the one taken in the posthuman solution of Les Particules élémentaires, in which the sensitivity of the

190 Ibid., 445.
191 Ibid., 372.
192 Ibid., 167.
skin was enhanced in such a way as to inundate it with pleasurable sensations. The neo-human solution of _La Possibilité d’une île_, however, is based on the pessimistic insight that desire inevitably outstrips all possibilities for its satisfaction, and it adheres consistently to the first approach.

The biological modifications in the design of the neo-humans, however, are only one aspect of the neo-human project of abolishing desire and escaping suffering. Biotechnology is combined with an absence of social interaction, indoctrination into the teachings of the _Sœur suprême_, and adherence to highly prescriptive rules for living. The neo-human solution, therefore, is a hybrid one. A clean biological break with the species _Homo sapiens_ (and with evolved life in general), is indispensable, but it must be supplemented by sociological and inculcatory measures. The teachings of the _Sœur suprême_ are central to the way of life of the neo-humans, with Daniel25 saying, “l’enseignement de la Sœur suprême est la base de nos conceptions philosophiques.”

The _Sœur suprême_ remains a mysterious figure in _La Possibilité d’une île_, but is apparently prophetess for the neo-humans for we are told that, “au commencement fut engendrée la Sœur suprême, qui est première.” The teachings of the _Sœur suprême_ emphasise the inseparability of desire and suffering, exhorting the neo-humans to preserve a state of detached tranquility: “selon la Sœur suprême, la jalousie, le désir et l’appétit de procréation ont la même origine, qui est la souffrance d’être.” Mysterious, also, are the _Sept Fondateurs_, who appear to have laid out the foundations of the neo-human way of life in accordance with the philosophy of the _Sœur suprême_ and whose “objectif était naturellement en premier lieu d’en finir avec l’argent et avec le sexe, deux facteurs dont ils avaient pu, au travers de l’ensemble des récits de vie humains, reconnaître l’importance délétère.” In establishing the neo-human way of life, the first step was to abolish sexuality and money, the two spheres into which Daniel divides contemporary Western civilisation. But this is

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193 Ibid., 424.
194 Ibid., 424.
195 Ibid., 376.
196 Ibid., 450.
only an objective “en premier lieu”, as the neo-human solution seeks ultimately to eradicate not only sex and money, but all desire and almost all forms of sociability.

A prime feature of neo-human life indeed is the absence of sociality: “la disparition de la vie sociale était la voie, enseigne la Sœur suprême.” In keeping with the fundamental philosophy of the neo-human project, no attempt is made to transform social structures to make society more altruistic and less competitive; society, like human nature, is thought to be fundamentally irredeemable, and solutions of a Comtean sort are therefore implicitly rejected. As Daniel notes, “la séparation physique totale constitue à vrai dire une configuration sociale possible, compatible avec les enseignements de la Sœur suprême, et allant globalement dans le même sens.” The neo-human solution is based on abolition, not amelioration. Society is a means by which individuals, motivated by diverse desires, interact and compete. Society therefore gives rise to conflict, as well as providing a space for the conceptualisation of desires. Without a society through which desires can be conceived and pursued, the very existence of desire is further suppressed: “le contact disparu, s’envola à la suite le désir.” A very limited sociality remains in the neo-human world, it is true, in the form of the cyber-messages the neo-humans send one another, but these interactions, detached and without physical proximity, represent an extremely etiolated form of sociality. Even this highly limited sociality, however, is somewhat dangerous from the point of view of the neo-human project, as the neo-human cyber-interactions sometimes seem on the verge of developing affective qualities which run counter to the neo-human ideal of cerebral detachment.

The abolition of society in the neo-human world is not combined with a focus on the individual or an attempt to allow the individual in isolation and free from the bondage of social interaction to develop his or her unique personality and make it flourish. On the contrary, and in keeping with the abolitionist nature of the neo-human solution, the sense of individuality is deliberately suppressed. The suppression of individuality is facilitated, in the first place, by the use

197 Ibid., 167.
198 Ibid., 376.
199 Ibid., 376.
of cloning rather than sexual reproduction. No neo-human is genetically unique, and this undermines any sense of individuality. Furthermore, the neo-humans are without unique names, and are identified instead by serial numbers within their respective lineages. What is more, the neo-humans live according to highly prescriptive rules which undermine their individuality and negate the possibility of liberty and choice. In order to avoid the need for any individual response to a given situation, the neo-humans are provided with “une cartographie exhaustive des situations de vie envisageables.” In direct opposition to the celebration of individuality and choice in contemporary Western civilisation, and more generally in opposition to the focus on autonomy in the tradition of the Enlightenment, it is the aim of the neo-human project that “le comportement individuel devait devenir aussi prévisible que le fonctionnement d’un réfrigérateur.” Without individuality and without autonomy, it follows that any need for political freedom is also denied, and thus, “il s’agissait également d’écarté toute notion de choix politique.” The rejection of individuality, autonomy and political freedom is a necessary concomitant of the attempt to abolish desire and suffering in the neo-human solution. Selfhood (and expressions of selfhood), must be suppressed, as it is the locus from which desires emerge and through which attachments are formed. In her Instructions pour une vie paisible, the Sœur suprême teaches that “l’initiative individuelle est la matrice de la volonté, de l’attachement et du désir.” Both individuality and society must therefore be abolished according to the philosophy of the neo-human solution.

A close reading of the novel shows that the neo-human solution is presented as a negative one which does not attempt to create or preserve any positive values. The essence of this solution is abolitionist: the abolition of suffering requires the abolition of desire, which in turn requires the abolition of individuality and society. In spite of appearances, however, the ultimate goal of the neo-human solution is not nihilistic. The neo-human solution aspires to the emergence of a state of serene tranquility that might be called joyful, a state predicated upon, but not reducible to, the

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200 Ibid., 451.
201 Ibid., 451.
202 Ibid., 450.
203 Ibid., 450.
extinction of desire: “c’est la souffrance d’être qui nous fait rechercher l’autre, comme un palliatif; nous devons dépasser ce stade afin d’atteindre l’état où le simple fait d’être constitue par lui-même une occasion permanente de joie.”

The neo-human solution postulates a state of intellectual lucidity beyond individuality and beyond desire:

Planifiant l’extinction du désir en termes bouddhiques, la Sœur suprême avait tablé sur le maintien d’une énergie affaiblie, non tragique, d’ordre purement conservatif, qui devait continuer à permettre le fonctionnement de la pensée – d’une pensée moins rapide mais plus exacte, parce que plus lucide, d’une pensée délivrée.

Detached intellectual functioning is the only human trait not condemned as deleterious in the neo-human project, and on it depends the positive state of lucid tranquility, “l’existence d’une activité mentale résiduelle, détachée de tout enjeu, orientée vers la connaissance pure, constitue l’un des points clefs de l’enseignement de la Sœur suprême.” The neo-human solution, therefore, is implemented on the basis of a hypothesis about the state which will emerge once all desires have been stripped away. The problem is that this hypothesis is false and that the neo-human solution fails, as becomes clear through the experiences of the neo-human narrators.

Failure of the neo-human solution

The neo-human project succeeds in almost entirely eliminating desire and sociality. As Daniel24 says, “les joies de l’être humain nous restent inconnaissables, ses malheurs à l’inverse ne peuvent nous découdre.” And yet the hoped-for ideal of lucid thought, liberated from attachments and desires, fails to emerge: “ce phénomène ne s’était produit que dans des proportions insignifiantes, et c’est au contraire la tristesse, la mélancolie, l’apathie languide et finalement mortelle qui avaient submergé nos générations désincarnées.” Not only has the hoped-for joyful

204 Ibid., 376.
205 Ibid., 440.
206 Ibid., 425.
207 Ibid., 11.
208 Ibid., 440.
tranquillity been definitively exposed as a myth, but the sense of emptiness felt by the neo-humans is in itself difficult to bear: “le bonheur n’était pas venu, et l’équanimité avait conduit à la torpeur.”

Purely intellectual reflection, without affective or corporeal experience, has failed to produce lives worth living. Among “les faibles joies des néo-humains,” Daniel25 tells us, one of the primary ones is “le classement et le déplacement minutieux et rationnel d’objets de petite taille.”

As a means of achieving meaning and value in life, Daniel25 dryly notes, such “joies s’étaient révélées insuffisantes.”

The state of vacuous malaise experienced by the neo-humans is possibly even worse than the turmoil and suffering experienced by Daniel in contemporary Western civilisation, and as Daniel25 acknowledges, “ma propre vie pourtant, j’y pense souvent, est bien loin d’être celle qu’il aurait aimé vivre.”

Fully aware of the suffering and conflict inherent in human life, Daniel25, nevertheless, comes to envy the passion that Daniel was able to feel but which is absent in the neo-human world, explaining, “j’en étais venu sur la fin à envier la destinée de Daniel1… quelles qu’aient pu être ses souffrances, et sa fin tragique au bout du compte.”

Nostalgia for human passions, combined with a realisation that the neo-human solution has failed to bring about its intended goal, leads some neo-humans to defect from the teachings of the Sœur suprême and the neo-human project. For Daniel25, neo-human life has become unbearable: “cette routine solitaire, uniquement entrecoupée d’échanges intellectuels, qui avait constitué ma vie, qui aurait dû la constituer jusqu’au bout, m’apparaissait à présent insoutenable.”

Marie23, influenced by the farewell letter written by the original Daniel to Esther, is another defector, leaving her compound in search of a rumoured community of humans or neo-humans living according to “un nouveau mode d’organisation relationnelle.”

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209 Ibid., 440.
210 Ibid., 440.
211 Ibid., 440.
212 Ibid., 315.
213 Ibid., 440.
214 Ibid., 439.
215 Ibid., 432.
sociality taught by the *Sœur suprême*, that “la séparation radicale” experienced by the neo-humans “pouvait être abolie dès maintenant.”

Disillusioned with the neo-human solution, the neo-humans look to both the passion of human life and the coming of the mysterious *Futurs* as alternatives to the isolation and emotional sterility of neo-human life. While the neo-human experience leads to a partial re-evaluation of the worth of human life, the suffering and conflict inherent in human life has nevertheless been thoroughly revealed. Moreover, the type of noble, albeit tragic, human passions and emotions for which the neo-humans come to feel nostalgia are shown to be in inevitable decline in the contemporary West, and entirely absent among the savages found beyond the walls of the neo-human enclosures. The coming of the *Futurs* remains, therefore, the only possible solution, the one possible hope for overcoming suffering and conflict while preserving or enhancing both pleasure and ideals like love.

*The coming of the Futurs*

The coming of the *Futurs* hints at an absolute solution characterised by oneness, eternal life, and the restoration of love. From the commentary of the neo-humans we are able to form an outline of the essential features of this solution, although its details remain a matter of debate among the neo-humans themselves. The neo-humans’ use of the term “Futurs” captures the remoteness and uncertainty of the solution: some sort of beings, it is believed, will appear in the future, providing a solution to all of the problems of human and neo-human society, but the nature and origins of these beings cannot be clearly formulated. Neo-human belief in the coming of the *Futurs* seems linked to the belief within the original Elohimite Church in the coming of technologically-advanced aliens who will reward the worthy among humanity, and we are told that, “ils avaient vaincu le vieillissement et la mort, et ne demandaient qu’à partager leurs secrets avec les plus méritants d’entre nous.” Just as the Elohimite Church builds an embassy to welcome the future coming of the aliens, so neo-human life is sometimes spoken of as a necessary preparation for the coming of

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216 Ibid., 432.
217 Ibid., 111.
the *Futurs*. Daniel24, for instance, says, “je suis la Porte, et le Gardien de la Porte. Le successeur viendra ; il doit venir. Je maintiens la présence, afin de rendre possible l’avènement des Futurs.”

Unlike the Elohimite Church, however, there is considerable ambiguity about whether the *Futurs* are extra-terrestrial visitors or, rather, a poetic description of an advanced stage of autochthonic development surpassing the human and neo-human.

In addition to the ambiguity about whether the *Futurs* are to be thought of as extra-terrestrial in origin, there is ambiguity about whether the coming of the *Futurs* is to be prepared by the neo-human eradication of desire as taught by the *Sœur suprême* or whether, on the contrary, the restoration of forbidden human emotions like love is integral to the solution of the *Futurs*. Just as the *Sœur suprême* teaches that the suppression of desire will produce a state of joyful tranquillity, so there are several hints that the coming of the *Futurs* is contingent on a diligent extirpation of human emotions. Daniel24, for instance, tells us that the life stories of the original humans are not edited by the neo-humans, even if the stories are boring or repugnant: “ce sont justement cette repugnance, cet ennui qu’il convient de développer en nous, afin de nous démarquer de l’espèce. C’est à cette condition, nous avertit la Sœur suprême, que sera rendu possible l’avènement des Futurs.”

It is as if the neo-humans, in studying the life stories of the original humans, need to identify and purify themselves of vestigial traces of human desire in order to make the coming of the *Futurs* possible, for we read that, “si nous voulions préparer l’avènement des Futurs nous devions au préalable suivre l’humanité dans ses faiblesses, ses névroses, ses doutes ; nous devions les faire entièrement nôtres, afin de les dépasser.” In contrast to this, however, there are also certain indications in the novel that the solution of the *Futurs* involves the restoration of love and pleasure, positive aspects of human life which the neo-human solution believes must be sacrificed. From this perspective, the solution of the *Futurs* represents a bifurcation away from the abolitionist neo-human project and towards the creation of positive pleasure and value. As Daniel25 says, “la vie des néo-humains se

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218 Ibid., 71.
219 Ibid., 102.
220 Ibid., 183.
voulait apaisée, rationnelle, éloignée du plaisir comme de la souffrance, et mon départ était là pour témoigner de son échec. Les Futurs, peut-être, connaîtraient la joie, autre nom du plaisir continué.”

Among the positive values the solution of the *Futurs* will restore, love is central. Daniel25 accords a special role to love in the history of the human species, remarking that, “l’amour semble avoir été pour les humains de l’ultime période l’acmé et l’impossible, le regret et la grâce, le point focal où pouvaient se concentrer toute souffrance et toute joie.” In contrast to the teachings of the *Sœur suprême*, for whom happiness was envisaged as a state arising after the extinction of desire, Daniel25 identifies love as the necessary precondition of happiness:

Que l’amour inconditionnel soit la condition de possibilité du bonheur, cela les humains le savaient déjà, du moins les plus avancés d’entre eux. La pleine compréhension du problème n’a pas permis, jusqu’à présent, d’avancer vers une solution quelconque.

Love, therefore, represents the only possibility of happiness for both humans and neo-humans, and must therefore be an integral component of any solution. The neo-human narrators find examples of love in the life story of the original Daniel, and also in the unequivocal loyalty of dogs. As Daniel24 says:

La bonté, la compassion, la fidélité, l’altruisme demeurent donc près de nous comme des mystères impénétrables, cependant contenus dans l’espace limité de l’enveloppe corporelle d’un chien. De la solution de ce problème dépend l’avènement, ou non, des Futurs. Je crois en l’avènement des Futurs.

The key to the solution of the *Futurs*, then, is the restoration of love, present already in the human and even animal world. This restoration must occur, however, without a return to the

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221 Ibid., 475.
222 Ibid., 91.
223 Ibid., 78.
224 Ibid., 79.
suffering and conflict depicted in *La Possibilité d’une île* as inherent in human and animal life. In human life, love can only partially overcome the separation of individuals, and it cannot abolish death. The solution of the *Futurs*, by contrast, hints at the possibility of immortality and the merging of beings within an amorous unity. Marie23, echoing the poetic descriptions of the absolute solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, likens the solution of the *Futurs* to a sea in which separation has been overcome: “Après l’événement de la sortie du Vide, / Nous nagerons enfin dans la Vierge liquide.”

The solution of the *Futurs* cannot be expressed in terms of human or neo-human states of being. Marie22 says, “nul ne sera contemporain de la naissance de l’Esprit, si ce n’est les Futurs ; mais les Futurs ne sont pas des êtres, au sens où nous l’entendons.” The solution of the *Futurs* promises to overcome the separation and death inherent in both human and neo-human life. It promises a radical new type of selfhood, and is therefore difficult, even for the neo-humans, to envisage or articulate with precision:

Les Futurs, contrairement à nous, ne seront pas des machines, ni même véritablement des êtres séparés. Ils seront un, tout en étant multiples. Rien ne peut nous donner une image exacte de la nature des Futurs. La lumière est une, mais ses rayons sont innombrables.

The technological means by which this ideal state will be achieved are a source of speculation for the neo-humans, as it far surpasses both human and neo-human technological capacities. It is speculated, for instance, that the solution of the *Futurs* will be based on the emergence of a vast, conscious electronic network: “d’après certaines hypothèses la biologie du carbone avait fait son temps, et les Futurs seraient des êtres de silicium, dont la civilisation se construirait par interconnexion progressive de processeurs cognitifs et mémoriels.”

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225 Ibid., 201.
226 Ibid., 15.
227 Ibid., 475.
228 Ibid., 482.
strange dreams experienced by the neo-humans might be an indication of the early emergence of this conscious network: “d’après d’autres interprétations, certains de nos songes sont d’un autre ordre que ceux qu’ont pu connaître les hommes… un organisme gigantesque demanderait à naître, à former une conscience électronique commune.”229 Such a network of consciousness would seem to allow, in principle, an escape from the death inherent in biological life as well as a radical redrawning of the boundaries between separate individuals. It seems, in principle at least, to offer a technological means of realising the hopes placed on the coming of the Futurs. According to Daniel25, however, the theory of the emergence of a conscious network is no more than a “hypothèse paranoïde.”230 We are therefore left without any reliable indication of what the technology associated with the solution of the Futurs might be like. Moreover, the narratives of the neo-humans reveal that the solution of the Futurs might possibly be just a myth. If the neo-humans themselves doubt the coming of the Futurs and if this future salvation is ultimately presented as an ambiguous and remote possibility, then it does not seem to offer a convincing answer to society’s problems anytime soon.

**Qualifying the solution of the Futurs**

While in principle offering, like the posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, an absolute solution to the problems of both neo-humans and of contemporary Western civilisation, the solution of the Futurs must nevertheless be qualified for two reasons. The first is that it remains remote and vague, couched in the apocalyptic language of the Sœur suprême, with some neo-humans even denying the existence of the Futurs. The coming of the Futurs is a matter of faith for the neo-humans, connected with the teachings of their prophet. Just as some of the neo-humans come to doubt and finally reject her teachings about the abolition of desire, so too her claims about the coming of the Futurs must be considered doubtful. Daniel25 tells us that disbelief in the existence of the Futurs began to emerge many generations ago among the neo-humans: “c’est

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229 Ibid., 224.
230 Ibid., 224.
autour de la douzième génération néo-humaine qu’apparurent les premiers doutes concernant l’avènement des Futurs.”

In his commentary, for instance, Ferdinand writes, “nous tournons nos regards vers les cieux, et les cieux sont vides.”

The second qualification to the solution of the *Futurs* is that even if the coming of the *Futurs* is imagined to be a possibility, it remains unclear – *pace* Bellanger – whether this is a solution in which either humans or neo-humans will ever partake. It is equally hinted in the novel that, like the absolute posthuman solution in *Les Particules élémentaires*, the solution of the *Futurs* offers little hope of resurrection and redemption to humans or neo-humans. For example, although Daniel maintains to the last his faith in the coming of the *Futurs*, he realises that it is a solution from which he is excluded, noting, “je songeais au grand soleil de la loi morale, qui, d’après la Parole, finirait par briller à la surface du monde ; mais ce serait un monde dont je serais absent, et dont je n’avais même pas la capacité de me représenter l’essence.”

The original Daniel, likewise, realises that the Elohimite Church’s attempt to create immortality cannot save contemporary humans, that, “les recherches de Miskiewicz constituaient un espoir, le seul espoir en fait, mais ce ne serait pas pour moi, ni pour personne de ma génération.”

Even if a blissful utopia emerges in the future, for humans and neo-humans alike, “le bonheur n’était pas un horizon possible.”

**Conclusion**

Like *Les Particules élémentaires*, *La Possibilité d’une île* seems to suggest that a posthuman solution represents the only chance of contemporary society escaping from its current impasse.

Some of the qualifications to this solution, already hinted at in *Les Particules élémentaires*, are here thought through in a slightly different way such that a purely bioengineered solution based on sci-fi extrapolations now seems more problematic. The posthuman scenario envisaged takes a far less

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231 Ibid., 413.
232 Ibid., 413.
233 Bellanger, 266.
234 *La Possibilité d’une île*, 484.
235 Ibid., 276.
236 Ibid., 485.
certain turn as it is projected into the remote future. What is more, although still based on science and technology, it now takes on mystical and quasi-religious overtones that reinforce the uncertainty with which the solution is now cloaked as well as adumbrate the turn to a fully religious solution in *Soumission*. Houellebeccq’s next novel, *La Carte et le territoire*, however, imagines a world in which posthuman technology is absent from the horizon of the near future and in which society seems bereft of any fundamental solution to its problems. In this it is consistent with the implication of *La Possibilité d’une île* that only a posthuman solution is adequate, but that this solution is unlikely to be available any time soon.
Chapter 3 *La Carte et le territoire*

In the previous two chapters, I have explored Houellebecq’s posthuman solutions to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. A posthuman solution was needed because, by implication, no other solutions were possible. A return to tradition and religion was shown to be impossible, and positive change via reform of society, without radical changes to human biology, was shown to be hopelessly idealistic. Whereas *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* focussed primarily on the problems of sex and biology, *La Carte et le territoire* shifts its focus to the corrosive influence of the market and the replacement of reality by simulation. In this chapter, I will consider whether *La Carte et le territoire* offers any new solutions, or whether it continues the logic of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* by showing that, in the absence of a posthuman solution, contemporary Western civilisation is without hope of salvation. After summarising the novel, I will first look at some of the critical responses to *La Carte et le territoire*, positioning my argument in relation to these. I will then avail myself of the theories of Baudrillard in order to establish a framework for understanding the novel’s depiction of simulation. This will assist in exploring how the loss of authenticity plays out in relation to tradition, work, and art, and in answering the question of whether there is any hope that these might still offer solutions. This exploration will necessarily involve a discussion of the novel’s portrayal of a return to tradition and the countryside, and I will consider whether this is being presented as a genuine solution. I will discuss the novel’s exploration of the role of work in contemporary society, asking whether it countenances the possibility of developing greater authenticity in work. Finally, I will examine the novel’s portrayal of the artist, asking whether the novel shows that it is possible for the artist to stand apart from the inauthenticity found elsewhere in society, and whether it shows art to be part of a solution to society’s problems.

**Summary of novel**

The narrative of *La Carte et le territoire* is centred around the life of Jed Martin, an artist living in contemporary France. Like the protagonists in Houellebecq’s previous novels, Jed is an
“atomised” character, and like previous novels, *La Carte et le territoire* continues to present the idea that family and community life have become impossible in contemporary Western society. Jed experiences two romantic relationships in his life, one with Geneviève and one with Olga, but neither of these relationships endure. Jed’s mother committed suicide when Jed was still a child, and as an adult Jed only meets his father once a year at Christmas. Jed’s father is no less isolated than Jed, and he lives alone after his retirement in a large mansion, finally choosing suicide in a Swiss euthanasia clinic, (the profitability of which is emphasised). In spite of youthful ambitions to create beautiful and authentic architecture, Jed’s father has become wealthy and successful working together with developers to create tourist resorts.

Jed, in a way reminiscent of Michel in *Les Particules élémentaires*, is distinguished from other characters by his lifelong devotion to his vocation. Jed’s seriousness as an artist is repeatedly emphasised, and it is artistic intuition rather than the desire for money or fame that guides him in the creation of works of art. In his early period Jed takes meticulous, high-quality photographs of industrial objects, but his first major breakthrough is when, after a moment of epiphany, he begins photographing Michelin maps. Olga, a representative of Michelin, proposes sponsorship of Jed’s work, and the partnership turns out to be lucrative for both Jed and Michelin. A publicist called Marylin plays a critical role in transforming Jed from an unknown artist into a celebrity, ensuring that his exhibition becomes a media event. Jed’s demeanour of aloofness and his serious attitude to art are shown to be marketable qualities. Jed begins a relationship with Olga, who is involved in the publication of tourism and gastronomy guides at Michelin. Olga’s work reveals how an aura of authenticity and tradition is created within the tourism and hospitality industries and how these qualities are appropriated for commercial ends.

After withdrawing from public life as an artist for a number of years, Jed is ready to exhibit what will become his most acclaimed artistic endeavour, a series of portraits depicting various occupations, from horse-butcher and prostitute to a painting of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. In preparation for this exhibition, Jed’s gallerist suggests that a famous novelist named Houellebecq be
hired to write a catalogue essay for the exhibition. Jed meets ‘Houellebecq’, a tragic-comic figure, living in isolation in Ireland, unkempt and apparently a heavy drinker. The exhibition, once again organised by Marylin, is a tremendous success, with the likes of Carlos Slim and Roman Abramovich vying to acquire Jed’s paintings. Having returned to France, ‘Houellebecq’ buys his grandparents’ house in the countryside and lives a simple life with his dog before being brutally murdered. ‘Houellebecq’s’ body is mutilated and scattered around the house in what appears to be a bizarre artistic arrangement. The police investigation considers whether the murder might be motivated by hostility to ‘Houellebecq’ within literary circles or whether it might be the work of a deranged artist. It transpires that a prosaic financial motive – theft of the expensive portrait given to ‘Houellebecq’ by Jed – is the key to the murder, as it is the key to so much else in contemporary society as depicted in the novel.

Not long after the exhibition of his portrait series, Jed follows ‘Houellebecq’s’ footsteps in purchasing his grandparent’s home in the countryside where he lives in isolation for another twenty or thirty years. During this time, the village evolves from a decrepit backwater to a flourishing tourist attraction, with many new houses built in the traditional style and a brisk trade in local and artisanal products. By the middle of the 21st Century, France’s economy is shown to be enjoying a period of extended stability, enriched by a lucrative recreation of traditional, rural life for the benefit of foreign tourists. At the end of his life Jed creates strange artworks in which industrial items and human figurines are filmed in time-lapse as they undergo corrosion by the elements or are engulfed by vegetation. The novel therefore ends on a nihilistic note, with Jed’s final artworks presaging the downfall of humanity.

237 I will use ‘Houllebecq’ with brackets to designate the character in La Carte et le territoire and Houellebecq without brackets to designate the novel’s author.
Critical responses to La Carte et le territoire

A number of critics read *La Carte et le territoire* as presenting, in contrast to the preceding novels, an optimistic view of France’s future fate. Judith Shulevitz, for instance, writes that “the novel fast-forwards into Jed Martin’s old age on a note of oddly chipper futurism.” Other critics note the apparent nostalgia in *La Carte et le territoire* for traditional ways of life and a more authentic approach to art. Claude Dédomon, for instance, reads *La Carte et le territoire* as suggesting a return to traditional art as a remedy to the corrupting influence of the market in the contemporary world of art:

On sent une véritable fascination pour le vieux monde, l’ordre ancien. Il y a une vraie nostalgie, une sensation de perte dans le passage de l’art traditionnel à l’art moderne et contemporain. Il fait revivre ce moment en se référant aux auteurs et moralistes des siècles passés.

Douglas Morrey also reads *La Carte et le territoire* as a relatively optimistic novel, writing, “Houellebecq’s future predictions are more restrained as well: rather than apocalyptic visions of the end of the human species, in *La Carte et le territoire* he paints a broadly optimistic portrait of France in the mid-twenty-first century.” Morrey notes that the novel often seems to uphold “a rather traditional, romantic view of art,” but qualifies this with the statement that “Houellebecq’s novel is also clearly aware of this less romantic, more hard-headed side of the art world.”

Louis Betty is another critic who reads Houellebecq’s vision of the future of France in *La Carte et le territoire* as positive, calling it “a strangely optimistic novel.” Betty reads *La Carte et le territoire* as a novel in which Houellebecq, having become disillusioned with the progressive

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240 Morrey, 108.
241 Ibid., 94.
242 Ibid., 96.
ambitions for a utopian future explored in previous novels, moves in the opposite direction and finds a solution to society’s ills in the form of a return to pre-modern values:

Houellebecq explores utopian remedies to this fragmented hypermodern nightmare in subsequent novels, and, having found them wanting, moves in a different direction in *La Carte et le territoire*—a direction one can qualify as anti-modern or even anti-hypermodern.\(^\text{244}\)

For Betty, Houellebecq in *La Carte et le territoire* does not abandon his hope for a utopian solution to society’s problems, but now seeks it in a rejection of modernity:

*La Carte et le territoire* should be read neither as provocation nor reaction, but rather as the exploration of an anti-modern utopia capable of overcoming the disenchantment with nineteenth-century utopian thought that Houellebecq’s previous novels enact.\(^\text{245}\)

Betty does not merely argue that *La Carte et le territoire* expresses nostalgia or desire for pre-modern values, but that the novel actually depicts a widespread return to tradition and even religion:

The coincidence of Houellebecq’s return to his country estate and his conversion to Catholicism suggests that the return to the countryside also augurs a return to the Catholicism that used to animate it. Liberty, equality, and fraternity have yielded in *La Carte et le territoire* to a decidedly pre-modern or pre-revolutionary set of values: Land, Family, and Church.\(^\text{246}\)

In contrast to Betty, I argue that while *La Carte et le territoire* sometimes expresses nostalgia for tradition and pre-modern values, it denies any possibility of Western civilisation genuinely resuscitating these dying values. The return to tradition and the countryside in *La Carte et le territoire* does not represent an escape from the nightmare of hypermodernity but, rather, an

\(^{244}\) Ibid., 106.
\(^{245}\) Ibid., 98.
\(^{246}\) Ibid., 98.
involution into the hyperreal and the simulacral. Betty reads La Carte et le territoire as imagining a world, “where social harmony and personal happiness are no longer predicated on individualism, self-determination, and rights, but rather on one’s placement within a meaningful system of institutions and social constraints.”

In my reading, however, La Carte et le territoire contains scant evidence of society’s rejection of individualism or its return to traditional modes of work and family life. Although Jed and ‘Houellebecq’ return to their ancestral homes, they live without family or community. Without a foundation in religion and community, the image of the traditional countryside in La Carte et le territoire is shown to be a mere simulation, a marketing gimmick. Likewise, ‘Houellebecq’s’ rumoured conversion to Catholicism should be read in the context of the author’s mischievous play with a character bearing his own name, and does not indicate a widespread return to Catholicism in France. Elsewhere in the novel religion is shown to be dying out, as when a painting of John-Paul II at Shannon Airport is described as depicting the Pope opening his arms “pour saluer une des dernières populations catholiques européennes.”

La Carte et le territoire, then, is more consistent with the logic of Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île than Betty admits. Like those novels, Les Particules élémentaires expresses nostalgia for the traditional values of religion, love and community while nevertheless depicting these values as irretrievably lost. Aware that a return to pre-existing tradition and religion was impossible, Les Particules élémentaires explored a posthuman solution through which amorous, religious, and anti-individualistic ideals might be realised. In this Les Particules élémentaires broadly followed Comte’s utopian attempt to recreate many of the values and social structures of Medieval Europe on the basis of science and progress rather than Catholicism, a return to which was considered impossible. La Carte et le territoire abandons the attempt to revive traditional values by means of posthuman utopias, but it does so without rescinding its verdict on the impossibility of a direct return to tradition. La Carte et le territoire is a novel in which the return of traditional values is impossible by any means whatsoever. And because the traditional values of

247 Ibid., 97.
248 La Carte et le territoire, 136.
religion, love, and community are presented in *La Carte et le territoire*, as elsewhere in Houellebecq’s œuvre, as necessary for a happy and meaningful life, their irretrievable loss means that *La Carte et le territoire* cannot be considered an optimistic novel.

That *La Carte et le territoire* lacks the previous novels’ sense of crisis and foreboding of the imminent suicide of Western civilisation is not a sign of optimism, but rather indicates the total absence of all alternatives and solutions. Relative economic prosperity and a simulated return to tradition are little consolation for a society in which atomisation, spiritual emptiness and masked callousness to other human lives continue into the foreseeable future. Betty’s observation that “technology, environmentalism, and green capitalism all play a role in the novel’s idyllic conclusion” fails to recognise that ‘environmentalism’ is so often almost a pejorative concept in Houellebecq’s novels, as when the unceremonious dumping of human ashes in the local lake by a mercenary Swiss euthanasia clinic provokes protests only because its activities might upset the local ecosystem. Anything but idyllic, *La Carte et le territoire* presents a depressing vision of loneliness and emptiness unredeemed by the insipid pleasures of consumerism. The best that this society seems to offer is a sterile, joyless calm, as experienced by Jed ensconced in his 4WD, described as follows: “Il serait dans la vie comme il l’était à présent dans l’habitacle à la finition parfaite de son Audi Allroad A6, paisible et sans joie, définitivement neutre.”

In *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, the possibility of a direct return to traditional values was rejected because their religious and communitarian foundation had been eroded by science. *La Carte et le territoire* explores the impossibility of a return to traditional values from a slightly different perspective by showing how capitalism and marketing appropriate the very image of tradition in such a way that a simulacrum of tradition is made available for consumption even when ‘real’ tradition has long since evaporated. A reading of Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacral nature of contemporary society will help elucidate why in *La Carte et le territoire*...

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249 Betty, 107.
250 *La Carte et le territoire*, 368.
251 Ibid., 269.
nostalgia for tradition and for authenticity in work and art are satisfied by simulation and not the real thing. Baudrillard will help us understand why, in spite of the novel’s vision of an enthusiastic return to the countryside and to tradition, true traditional values and ways of life remain as unattainable in *La Carte et le territoire* as they were in previous novels.

**Baudrillard and the concept of simulation**

The title *La Carte et le territoire* refers to Jed’s first exhibition in which his photographs of maps were advertised as more interesting than the territory they depicted. It also alludes, however, to Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra. In both cases, the metaphor of the map and the territory is used to express an awareness of the loss of the real in contemporary Western society, the eclipse of the real by the simulacral. In *Simulacres et simulation*, Baudrillard explores the metaphorical significance of Borges’ fable in *On Exactitude in Science*. Borges’ fable imagines a map so detailed that it covers the entire territory of a kingdom. The map is eventually allowed to rot, so that only shreds remain here and there on the surface of the territory. Baudrillard considers whether this fable might be used, in inverted form, as a metaphor for the simulacral nature of contemporary society:

Le territoire ne précède plus la carte, ni ne lui survit. C’est désormais la carte qui précède le territoire – précession des simulacres –, c’est elle qui engendre le territoire et, s’il faillait reprendre la fable, c’est aujourd’hui le territoire dont les lambeaux pourrissent lentement sur l’étendue de la carte.

Reality, for instance the reality of traditional life in the French countryside, threatens to become a dwindling derivative of its representation through, among other means, marketing and advertising. It might be hoped that shreds of reality might still be found in a society otherwise dominated by marketing and advertising. It might be hoped that art, tradition, authentic work, and the countryside might be instances of such shreds, the persistence of which, even though scattered,

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253 Ibid., 10.
would confirm the existence of an underlying reality, would reveal, through contrast, the simulatory character of ‘the map’. If this were so, the fake and the inauthentic might still dominate, but they would at least be clearly delineated from the authentic and the real. Baudrillard, however, argues that in contemporary society the map produces the territory, and that there is no longer a territory antecedent to its simulacral representation. In fact, he even argues that the loss of the real is yet more profound than a simple inversion of the territory-map hierarchy, and that we have entered a stage in which all distinctions between real and simulation have been erased:

En fait, même inversée, la fable est inutilisable. Seule subsiste peut-être l’allégorie de l’Empire. Car c’est avec le même impérialisme que les simulateurs actuels tentent de faire coïncider le réel, tout le réel, avec leurs modèles de simulation. Mais il ne s’agit plus ni de carte ni de territoire. Quelque chose a disparu : la différence souveraine, de l’une à l’autre, qui faisait le charme de l’abstraction.\(^\text{254}\)

Reality has been colonised by representation to such an extent that difference has disappeared and the one is assimilated into the other. The real has been lost, but is perpetually retrieved in the form of simulation. In *Simulacres et simulation*, Baudrillard describes the progressive loss of the real through four “phases successives de l’image.”\(^\text{255}\) In the first phase, the image constitutes “le reflet d’une réalité profonde.” In the second, it masks and denatures profound reality. In the third, the image masks “l’absence de réalité profonde.” In the fourth, the image is “sans rapport à quelque réalité que ce soit : elle est son propre simulacre pur.”\(^\text{256}\) Paul Hegarty argues that contemporary society is characterised by the third phase of the image in which “there is no real to imitate as the simulation is not an imitation, but a replacement.”\(^\text{257}\) Contemporary society in *La Carte et le territoire* likewise appears dominated by simulation and the replacement of the real. *La Carte et le territoire* explores a society in which authentic art, tradition, and the countryside are no longer merely dissimulated and distorted, but in which their disappearance is hidden, their absence

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254 Ibid., 17.
255 Ibid., 17.
256 Ibid., 18.
inconspicuous. In *La Carte et le territoire* the “imperialistic” simulation of which Baudrillard speaks threatens to create a situation in which the reality of art, tradition and the countryside is not merely distorted, but is no longer a meaningful concept. In this case authentic art, for instance, would not simply be appropriated for commercial ends, but would itself be simulacral. The transition from the second to the third phase in Baudrillard’s schema is critical, as it constitutes a point of no return after which it is no longer possible to reject the fake and seek out the genuine. As Baudrillard writes, “Le passage des signes qui dissimulent quelque chose aux signes qui dissimulent qu’il n’y a rien, marque le tournant décisif.” If Baudrillard is correct, a decisive break has occurred with earlier phases of modernity in such a way that neither authentic art nor a return to tradition is possible. For Baudrillard, there no longer exists a point of authenticity beyond the play of simulacra, there is no longer any privileged point from which distinctions like true and false might be made. Contemporary Western civilisation has passed over an event horizon, and the mimetic pull of simulacra is such that there is no way of ever getting back to the real.

Baudrillard suggests that the absence of the real is accompanied by an exuberant proliferation of images of reality. Hegarty writes, “Instead of a true reality, we get various types of simulacra, which present themselves as real. The more simulation becomes complete, the more we have a sense of the real, of being immersed in reality.” Paradoxically, the emphasis on the real is a symptom of its absence, or as Hegarty puts it, “Overall, it seems that there is a move to an increased emphasis on the ‘real’ as it slips away.” Likewise in *La Carte et le territoire*, as we shall see, growing nostalgia for the real is not a prelude to the real’s return but an indication that it is henceforth irretrievable. As Baudrillard writes, “Lorsque le réel n’est plus ce qu’il était, la nostalgie prend tout son sens. Surenchère des mythes d’origine et des signes de réalité. Surenchère de vérité, d’objectivité et d’authenticité seconde.” When reading *La Carte et le territoire* we should bear in mind that the nostalgia for lost traditions and the abundance of images purporting to refer to the real

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258 Baudrillard, 17.
259 Hegarty, 49.
260 Ibid., 50.
261 Baudrillard, 17.
are an indication that the age of simulation has arrived, and cannot be taken on face value as constituting a genuine return to pre-modern roots. Even if *La Carte et le territoire* is interpreted as offering isolated cases of authentic work and art that persist as islands of reality in a sea of simulation, Baudrillard’s theory remains highly relevant to the general depiction of contemporary society in the novel. Drawing on Baudrillard’s ideas, let us then explore how nostalgia and the valorisation of authenticity play out in the novel in relation to tradition, work, and art.

*Tradition*

In *La Carte et le territoire* the nostalgia for the real of which Baudrillard writes finds expression in growing demand for the traditional. What we see is not just the distortion of authentic traditions for commercial ends, but their usurpation by simulacra claiming to be the real thing. In *La Carte et le territoire*, demand for the traditional is expressed in a newfound interest in the French countryside and we are informed that “pour la première fois en réalité en France depuis Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la campagne était redevenue tendance.” The countryside is reinvented – lucratively – as a locus of authenticity felt to be lacking in the city. Neither Jed nor Olga have much direct experience of the countryside outside Paris, but the guidebooks present an image of an enchanting place, “une mosaïque de terroirs superbes constellés de châteaux et de manoirs, d’une stupéfiante diversité mais où, partout, il faisait bon vivre.” Guidebooks like *French Touch* do not merely mediate or enhance the reality of the French countryside, they in some sense create it. 

Demand for tradition is also directed towards traditional and local cuisine in France and abroad that is perceived as uncorrupted by foreign influences or innovation. Even ordinariness has become a marketable quality, with French tourists on Hvar preferring to taste “le véritable vin ordinaire au lieu du champagne.” A report into the culinary industry shows burgeoning demand for “une expérience vintage, voire hardcore.” Restaurants and hotels profit by tapping into this demand

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262 *La Carte et le territoire*, 87.
263 Ibid., 92.
264 Ibid., 28.
265 Ibid., 96.
for tradition and rugged reality, with the report noting, “Quelle que soit la région, les restaurants se prévalant d’une image « traditionnelle » ou « à l’ancienne » enregistraient des additions supérieures de 63 % à l’addition médiane.” The report, significantly, notes only that restaurants presenting an *image* of the traditional enjoy growth, the implication being that, in satisfying customers’ nostalgic demand, the question of whether the restaurants and their cuisine are *actually* traditional is irrelevant. Indeed, the image of authenticity is often more convincing and satisfying than its reality. Olga is not satisfied with French cuisine, but wants “franco-français.” Simulation may actually seem better than the real thing, more traditional than the traditional, more French than French.

The contrast between a reality in which traditional values have all but died out on the one hand and the insatiable consumption of simulated images of tradition on the other is a source of much ironic humour in *La Carte et le territoire*. Jed has Christmas dinner with his father at a restaurant that promises – using a buzzword proven to ensure commercial success – “une qualité traditionnelle, à l’ancienne.” The name of the restaurant – *Chez Papa* – is poignantly ironic in the context of Jed’s relationship with his father and the generalised breakdown of the family in contemporary society. Jed and his father meet once a year, and their Christmas dinner is held in a restaurant and not in the family home. Jed’s mother has committed suicide and wifeless Jed regrets that there is no woman by his side to facilitate conversation with his father. The nostalgia for images of home and family to which *Chez Papa* plays becomes most apparent once traditional forms of family life are facing extinction. Nostalgia for tradition and the proliferation of images simulating tradition are both indications that the traditional is about to – or has already – disappeared. The growing consumption of foods and tourism marketed as traditional is not an indication of a genuine rediscovery of traditional social practices, institutions, and ways of life, but a confirmation that a genuine return to tradition has become impossible.

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266 Ibid., 96.
267 Ibid., 94.
268 Ibid., 19.
269 Ibid., 22.
Although *La Carte et le territoire* emphasises the simulatory character of tradition in contemporary society, it does on occasions appear to depict traditional life in the countryside as persisting, in isolated pockets, beyond the pale of marketing and simulation. The novel makes clear, however, that these traditional ways of life are doomed to extinction and replacement by simulacra. At the funeral of Jed’s grandmother in a tiny village in the Limousin, Jed and his father experience a traditional way of life that is already alien to both men. A funeral mass is held “à laquelle tout le village assistait.”²⁷⁰ Religion and the existence of genuine community contrast with the atomisation experienced not only by those living in cities, but also by Jed and ‘Houellebecq’, even after they return to their grandparents’ homes in the countryside. Jed’s father, living alone in his mansion and dying a lonely death in a foreign country, ‘Houellebecq’ with only a dog for company, and Jed, who on one occasion goes a month without speaking to anyone except the cashier at the supermarket, show how utterly the sense of community and belonging – still vestigially present in Jed’s grandmother’s village – has disappeared from contemporary society. The solemnity and respectfulness of Jed’s grandmother’s funeral contrasts with funerals in Paris where, as Jed recalls, members of the congregation do not always turn off their mobile phones. This is the first time Jed has experienced a traditional funeral, as he himself realizes: “Jed se rendit compte que c’était la première fois qu’il assistait à un enterrement sérieux, à l’ancienne.”²⁷¹ While the expression à l’ancienne, italicised, is ironically reminiscent of the advertising slogans used to market restaurants and hotels, and subtly indicates Jed’s inability to recognise authenticity even when directly confronted with it, this funeral is a rite belonging to an entire way of life based on community, family, and religion.

*La Carte et le territoire* expresses an idea voiced throughout Houellebecq’s œuvre: that traditional values like family and even love are impossible without religion. Family and love were possible for Jed’s grandmother because her life involved religion. “Elle croyait en Dieu, tu sais,”²⁷²

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²⁷⁰ Ibid., 54.
²⁷¹ Ibid., 55.
²⁷² Ibid., 54.
Jed is told by his father, thereby emphasising the difference between atheistic Jed and his father. Jed’s father, we are told, “avait essayé, ne serait-ce que quelques années, de construire une vie de famille.” This failure is not so much an individual failing as an indication of the impossibility of family life without the support of a traditional and religious social context. For Jed, this lost possibility of family life and love is evoked by his grandparent’s home, and we are told that, “Il était tenté dans cette maison de croire à des choses telles que l’amour, l’amour réciproque du couple qui irradiie les murs d’une certaine chaleur douce qui se transmet aux futurs occupants pour leur apporter la paix de l’âme.” This nostalgia for a way of life in which love was still possible cannot be satisfied through the consumption of floating images of tradition detached from the social base. It can only be satisfied by a revival of religion and of the social practices that make love, family, and community possible. *La Carte et le territoire*, however, makes it clear than such a revival is impossible.

The traditional way of life experienced by Jed on the occasion of his grandmother’s funeral is already almost an anachronism. The population of the village is elderly, and the priest is described as “un vieux routier des enterrements, qui devaient être, vu la moyenne d’âge de la population, de loin son activité principale.” The traditional way of life is dying out with these last elderly villagers and is no longer being transmitted as a living culture. No familial or cultural genealogy connects the generation of Jed’s grandparents with the new inhabitants of the revitalised countryside imagined in *La Carte et le territoire*, indeed, we are told that, “Les nouveaux habitants des zones rurales ne ressemblaient nullement à leurs prédécesseurs.” By mid-century, Jed’s grandparents’ village has been transformed into a flourishing tourist attraction with houses in the traditional style, local products, artisanal art, internet access, and faux belle époque cafés. The fashionableness of tradition and the redevelopment of the countryside, however, merely hide the fact that another form of traditional rural life, one rooted in love, family and religion, once existed and is now absent.

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273 Ibid., 401.
274 Ibid., 59.
275 Ibid., 55.
276 Ibid., 416.
It would likewise be a mistake to interpret the return of Jed and ‘Houellebecq’ to their grandparents’ homes in the countryside as a genuine reconnection with dying traditions. Jed acquires his grandparents’ house, but lives there in hermetic isolation, without the family life which once imbued the house with love. He does not attempt to integrate himself into the local community, surrounding the property with a three-metre high electrified fence. This fence, which blocks “tout droit de passage aux chasseurs qui poursuivaient biches et sangliers dans ces forêts depuis des générations,” indicates Jed’s indifference to the preservation of local customs. Jed’s return to the countryside cannot even be described as a failed attempt to rediscover his roots or rekindle lost traditions. Since unlike ‘Houellebecq’ he did not grow up in his grandparents’ home, “Il n’avait pas passé son enfance dans la Creuse, seulement quelques vacances d’été dont il ne gardait aucun souvenir précis.” His main motivation for moving to the countryside, in fact, seems to be a hope that solitude and a sense of nothingness “riche de possibilités innombrables” will provide inspiration for new art. Jed tells himself that, “Ce n’était pas comme Houellebecq, pour partir à la recherche d’un hypothétique état d’enfance.” In spite of this idealised image of this quest, however, the return of ‘Houellebecq’ to his childhood home in the Loiret in search of tradition and childhood memories is depicted with much irony and humour. He lives alone with his dog Pluto, and cooks traditional pot-au-feu dinners. Even if ‘Houellebecq’s’ return to the countryside is understood as an attempt to reconnect with tradition, the novel makes clear that this attempt has failed. Far from providing reinvigoration through the rediscovery of traditional values, ‘Houellebecq’s retreat to the countryside involves a premonition of impending death. ‘Houellebecq’ writes what he says may be his last poem, and tells Jed, “j’en ai juste assez, je voudrais juste que tout se termine sans souffrances excessives.” The village in which ‘Houellebecq’ lives has already lost its original aspect, and when Jed visits, “tout donnait l’impression d’un décor, d’un

277 Ibid., 409.
278 Ibid., 409.
279 Ibid., 400.
280 Ibid., 400.
281 Ibid., 400.
282 Ibid., 252.
village faux, reconstitué pour les besoins d’une série télévisée.” As with all the other city-dwellers and foreigners who relocate to the countryside, it is clear that neither Jed nor ‘Houellebecq’ has managed to revive defunct traditional values.

La Carte et le territoire thus clearly shows us that in contemporary society traditional values have been irretrievably lost, their simulacral revival through marketing notwithstanding. If the novel’s implicit critique of this inauthentic state of affairs would seem to call for a way out, the attempt to revert to the values and traditions of an earlier, more authentic era is shown to be fundamentally misguided, since the past and indeed the very concept of authenticity have been irretrievably lost. This is not the only possible way out of despair that characters in the novel attempt, however, and another comes through the figure of work.

Work

La Carte et le territoire questions whether it is possible to find authenticity and meaning through work in contemporary society, and examines the possibility of renewing certain traditional work practices. As Morrey writes, “If La Carte et le territoire questions the very possibility of identifying an ‘authentic’ France today, it raises a similar query about the nature of work in the twenty-first century.” La Carte et le territoire emphasises the centrality of work in people’s lives, with Jed observing that “l’existence des hommes s’organisait autour du travail, qui occupait la plus grande partie de la vie.” Jed’s gallerist, Franz, notes that people tend to be defined by the work they do rather than by whether they are married or have children, that, “C'est sa place dans le processus de production, et pas son statut de reproducteur, qui définit avant tout l'homme occidental.” Given this, it is not unreasonable to suggest that any solution to the problems of contemporary society must necessarily involve a new relationship to work.

283 Ibid., 280.
284 Morrey, 93.
285 La Carte et le territoire, 105.
286 Ibid., 154.
As was the case with the dying traditions of Jed’s grandmother’s village, *La Carte et le territoire* sometimes seems to express nostalgia for forms of work that, although dying out, are perceived as more authentic. Morrey notes the nostalgia in *La Carte et le territoire* for the notion of a “noble trade.” Such nostalgia can be observed in the depiction of the plumber from Croatia. After unsuccessfully attempting to obtain plumbing services through the intermediary of websites and telephone hotlines, Jed finds a plumber whose only form of advertising is a handwritten message. As was the case with Jed’s grandmother’s village, what is appealing about the plumber is the way in which his work is part of a broader culture and way of life, one that contrasts positively with the rest of contemporary society. Jed feels reassured by the plumber’s old-fashioned approach, which evokes for Jed impressions of homely wisdom: “Il donnait l’impression d’en savoir gros sur la vie.” The authentic qualities of the plumber’s work extend to other aspects of his behaviour, such as not overcharging Jed and returning to wish him a happy Christmas (there is even here a hint of religious tradition). The plumber’s authenticity as a worker does not exist in isolation, but is an expression of a more general sincerity towards others.

While there is undoubtedly irony in this romantic portrayal of the noble artisanal trade of plumbing, even allowing for genuine nostalgia, this mode of work, like the traditions of the French countryside, is shown to be almost extinct. The plumber is an ‘outsider’ from Croatia, and he represents a type of authentic artisan that has almost died out in France. In a city like Paris, he is already something of an anachronism. Just as the village where Jed’s grandmother lived is opened up by investors seeking to exploit the demand for tradition and the countryside, so the Croatian plumber is thinking of returning to Hvar to rent jet skis to tourists. The extinction of authentic work and the spread of simulation to previously untainted regions is presented in *La Carte et le territoire* as inevitable, but regrettable, as we understand from Jed’s reaction: “Jed ressentit une déception humaine obscure à l’idée de cet homme abandonnant la plomberie, artisanat noble, pour louer des

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287 Morrey, 94.
288 *La Carte et le territoire*, 15.
engins bruyants et stupides à des petit péteux bourrés de fric habitant rue de la Faisanderie." The decline of authentic, artisanal work, like the loss of tradition and, as we shall see, the impediments to authentic art, is part of something systemic extending well beyond the borders of France and affecting human activities as diverse as plumbing and art. Jed’s father, too, is both a victim of this form of capitalism as well as, almost haplessly, a participant and an accomplice. One of his last projects was to design a marina on Hvar, and in this way Jed’s father is linked, indirectly, with forces that also operate upon the Croatian plumber.

Jed’s father provides an example of someone who attempts to maintain authenticity in his work, but who succumbs to the exigencies of the society in which he lives. As with his failure to preserve a traditional family life, this is not so much a personal failing as an indication that contemporary society offers few opportunities for authentic work. As a student, Jed’s father dreamt of creating a style of architecture that would be liberating for the people living and working in those buildings. Jed’s father hoped to find meaning and authenticity in his own work by producing architecture facilitating the development of authenticity in the lives of others. Inspired by Charles Fourier’s utopian ideas, Jed’s father and his fellow students believed that an ideal society, “complexe, ramifiée, aux niveaux d'organisation multiples”, demanded an architecture that was correspondingly “complexe, ramifiée, multiple, laissant une place à la créativité individuelle.”

The idealism of Jed’s father and his fellow students contrasts strikingly with the cynicism and sense of resignation shown to be endemic in the 21st Century. Not without nostalgia, Jed’s father reminisces about a time when people still believed that the world might be changed for the better, musing, “Paris était gai à l’époque, on avait l'impression qu'on pouvait reconstruire le monde.”

Jed’s father’s hopes for a useful, beautiful and authentic style of architecture are never realized, and “l’espérance et l’échec” of his idealism forms “l’histoire de sa vie.” His failure to create authentic architecture is associated, pathetically, with his attempt as a child to build a nest for

289 Ibid., 27.
290 Ibid., 215.
291 Ibid., 215.
292 Ibid., 229.
swallows, which the swallows shunned. Jed’s father’s work has made him wealthy, but he is acutely aware of having betrayed his erstwhile ideals. His feeling of inauthenticity comes to a crisis one day when, at the age of forty, stuck in traffic in his Mercedes, he feels compelled to put into practice his youthful ideals. Jed’s father finds out, however, that he is alone, and that his friends from his student days have sold out to the system they once sought to subvert. As in Les Particules élémentaires, the rebelliousness of the 60s generation is shown to segue into a new style of capitalism. Although there is a sense of inevitability in the capitulation of this youthful idealism to the world of business, Jed’s father nevertheless bitterly regrets having wasted his life on inauthentic projects, and he tells Jed, “je t’avoue que j’espérais autre chose de ma carrière d’architecte que de construire des résidences balnéaires à la con pour des touristes débiles, sous le contrôle de promoteurs foncièrement malhonnêtes et d’une vulgarité presque infinie.” 293 The example of Jed’s father shows the importance and the desirability of authentic work, but it also shows that work in contemporary society is almost inevitably inauthentic and alienating.

Jed’s father, through a discussion of the ideas of Charles Fourier, opens up the question of what work should be, and whether society as a whole might rediscover a more authentic attitude to work. Jed’s father explains that the great question posed by Fourier was “pourquoi l’homme travaille-t-il?” 294 In answering this question, Jed’s father says, the liberals “répondaient que c’était l’appât du gain.” The Marxists, on the other hand, “ne répondaient rien.” 295 Fourier, by contrast, who was old enough to experience life in the Ancien Régime first hand, understood that people might be motivated to work for reasons other than material gain. From a contemporary perspective such motivations seem obscure, but they involve, according to Jed’s father, something like “l’amour de Dieu, dans le cas des moines, ou plus simplement l’honneur de la fonction.” 296 Jed’s father fails, however, to create architecture consistent with Fourier’s elevated philosophy of work, and his career is devoid of the sense of honour and sacrament that might have imbued his life with meaning.

293 Ibid., 208.
294 Ibid., 214.
295 Ibid., 214.
296 Ibid., 214.
La Carte et le territoire also discusses the ideas of William Morris, another utopian thinker placing great importance on the spiritual aspect of work. Like Fourier, Morris hoped to return to idealised pre-modern traditions in which work was inherently meaningful and rewarding. Like Fourier, Morris thought that the reduction of work to a transactional exchange of labour for money was harmful to workers and to society as a whole. Morris similarly believed that it is vital that workers find their work meaningful and in order to be meaningful, Morris claimed, workers should produce things that are useful and beautiful. In his influential pamphlet “Art and Socialism,” Morris argues that in modern society workers are harmed and degraded by being forced to produce useless things. Writing in the 19th Century, Morris had in mind the mass production of superfluous luxury products for the middle and upper classes. But the idea that much of what is produced in contemporary society is inherently ‘useless’ or even harmful could be extended to Olga’s work producing images promoting tourism in France, or the Croatian plumber’s ambition to rent jet skis, or the creation of fashionable resorts for the rich by Jed’s father. Labour, Morris argues, should be understood as a joy and a blessing, and this is only possible when work becomes a form of art. Jed’s father explains that Morris believed that “la distinction entre l’art et l’artisanat devait être abolie.” Morris wanted to liberate workers from industrial production, and by promoting the production of beauty, work would be inherently meaningful, beneficial to the worker and to society as a whole.

‘Houellebecq’ also discusses Morris’ utopian ideas, explaining to Jed how G. K. Chesterton paid homage to Morris in his novel The Return of Don Quixote: “C’est un curieux roman, dans lequel il imagine une révolution basée sur le retour à l’artisanat et au christianisme médiéval.” Like Jed’s father, ‘Houellebecq’ expresses a certain admiration for these utopian projects seeking to renew pre-modern traditions and a pre-modern relation to work. ‘Houellebecq’ tells Jed, “On a du mal à imaginer aujourd’hui la richesse de la réflexion politique de cette époque.” In spite of a

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298 La Carte et le territoire, 227.
299 Ibid., 253.
300 Ibid., 256.
certain sympathy towards these ideas, however, ‘Houellebecq’ is nevertheless unequivocal in declaring them to be hopelessly naïve. He tells Jed, “C’est difficile de lire toutes ces absurdités sans un mélange de compassion et d’écœurement.”\(^{301}\) If the rest of society was imbued with the altruism and idealism characteristic of Morris, ‘Houellebecq’ argues, the implementation of Morris’ ideas might be a possibility: “Ce qu’on peut sans doute dire, c’est que le modèle des sociétés proposé par William Morris n’aurait rien d’utopique dans un monde où tous les hommes ressembleraient à William Morris.”\(^{302}\) As in Houellebecq’s preceding novels, however, \textit{La Carte et le territoire} shows that humanity, and contemporary Western civilisation in particular, is hardly characterised by altruism. As the failure of Jed’s father shows, there is then little hope of using the ideas of Fourier or Morris to affect a more authentic, more rewarding relationship to work in contemporary society.

\textit{La Carte et le territoire} shows that in contemporary society idealistic notions of honour and authenticity in work have been irrevocably lost. We saw how Morris’ ambition for all work and production to become modes of artistic expression is shown to be hopelessly unrealistic; the question now remaining is not whether art can be incorporated into other forms of work, but whether or not art itself has succumbed to the purely commercial attitude of other forms of production. I will now examine whether the artist, as a special category of producer, is able to offer an exception to the inauthenticity and the focus on money shown to be inherent in other forms of production.

\textit{Art}

\textit{La Carte et le territoire} sometimes seems to suggest the continued possibility of artistic production motivated not by money but by an obscure calling to artistic integrity, an integrity that might point towards a possible remedy to the existential malaise and deepseated pessimism of contemporary society. Jed and ‘Houellebecq’ sometimes seem to stand apart in the novel as romantic figures, distinguished as serious artists from the rest of the art world in which artistic

\(^{301}\) Ibid., 257.  
\(^{302}\) Ibid., 257.
production, like all other forms of production, has become a commercial rather than a spiritual activity. *La Carte et le territoire* seems to imply, on occasions, that so long as the artist remains true to his or her inner calling, then even participation in the commercial activities of the art world will not tarnish the artist’s fundamental integrity. This artistic calling is something obscure and profound and Jed is reluctant to articulate it, but he does speak of mysterious and categorical intuitions:

Être artiste, à ses yeux, c’était avant tout être quelqu’un de soumis. Soumis à des messages mystérieux, imprévisibles, qu’on devait donc faute de mieux et en l’absence de toute croyance religieuse qualifier d’intuitions ; messages qui n’en commandaient pas moins de manière impérieuse, catégorique, sans laisser la moindre possibilité de s’y soustraire - sauf à perdre toute notion d’intégrité et tout respect de soi-même.303

As with other forms of mystical revelation, it is easier to define artistic intuition by what it is not. The authentic artist responds to a voice, a mysterious demand, which is to be contrasted with the voices and imperatives of society, artistic fashion, and the art market. Although it is made explicit that Jed’s artistic intuition is to be understood in the absence of any religious faith, Jed’s intuition has certain parallels with religious revelation. Jed’s artistic intuition functions as a supreme arbiter of artistic value and integrity, a point of reference beyond the simulacra-dominated society in which, as Baudrillard argues, “il n’y a plus de Dieu pour reconnaître les siens, plus de Jugement dernier pour séparer le faux du vrai.”304 Jed’s intuition seems to do that which Baudrillard maintains is no longer possible, namely, it stands aloof from the world of simulation and thus serves as a basis for differentiating authentic art from marketable impostures.

Jed’s obedience to the mysterious and imperious dictates of true art determines his behaviour at key points throughout the novel. It is obedience to an inner intuitive voice that causes him to destroy his painting of Hirst and Koons, and that causes him to abandon his lucrative career photographing Michelin maps in order to take up painting. Franz tells Jed, “Je sais que, dans ton

303 Ibid., 104.
304 Baudrillard, 17.
Franz is unable to fully explain the “sense” of Jed’s return to painting, but he is conscious that it is neither arbitrary nor driven by financial motivations. Jed is aware that his turn to painting coincides with market demand, saying “un objet, c’est plus facile à stocker et à revendre qu’une installation, ou qu’une performance.” It is nevertheless clear that such considerations play no role in his turn to painting, based as it is on an imperious intuition that Jed himself cannot predict. Jed is shown to be fundamentally indifferent to money, and Franz is scandalised by Jed’s lack of interest in the question of the best time to sell his paintings when millions of dollars are at stake. “J’ai l’impression que ça ne te fait ni chaud ni froid,” he tells Jed. When Jed’s artistic intuition tells him that he has reached the end of a cycle, he refuses offers to paint portraits for millions of euros. Jed’s intuition alone differentiates his artistic production from all other forms of work, indeed we are explicitly told that “c’est en cela aussi, et en cela seulement, qu’elle se différenciait de ces professions ou métiers auxquels il allait rendre hommage dans la seconde partie de sa carrière.”

As we have seen, La Carte et le territoire shows that work in contemporary society lacks the profound meaning that Fourier and Morris imagined it held in pre-modern society. The presentation of Jed’s work as an artist would at times seem to suggest, nevertheless, that a solution to the existential malaise of society might be found in an art that has managed to retain its authenticity. This though seems to depend on the absolute division we find here between art motivated by intuition and other forms of work motivated by money. Having taken professional photographs of merchandise as a side job, Jed feels incapable of continuing to photograph industrial objects in an artistic capacity, “Comme si le fait qu’il en soit venu à photographier ces objets dans un but purement professionnel, commercial, invalidait toute possibilité de les utiliser dans un projet

305 La Carte et le territoire, 154.
306 Ibid., 145.
307 Ibid., 205.
308 Ibid., 206.
309 Ibid., 105.
This situation is evidently to be distinguished from the occasions where, having submitted to his artistic intuition in the production of art, his artworks subsequently make him wealthy. The sole criterion of artistic integrity appears to be the purity of motivation at the moment at which art is created, which *La Carte et le territoire* implies is independent of the subsequent fate of the artworks produced and the uses to which they are put.

As long as Jed remains obedient to the voice of intuition, *La Carte et le territoire* seems to suggest, his authenticity as an artist is not compromised even when his final artistic product is relinquished to the forces of marketing and commerce. Nor is it compromised when, as a celebrity on the art scene, his personality becomes a marketable commodity. Jed’s artistic purity indeed seems to possess a mysterious inviolability whereby it is not diminished by the trappings of money and success, and *La Carte et le territoire* eschews a number of stereotypes in its depiction of the authentic artist. There is nothing ostentatious about Jed’s authenticity, and he neither denounces the influence of the market over art nor refuses to play a role in the marketing of his own art. In a way, the absence of any conspicuous insistence on authenticity by Jed is another confirmation of his authenticity, as it clears him of the suspicion of deliberately vaunting his authenticity as a form of self-promotion. Jed expresses no qualms about his art being ‘sullied’ by contact with marketing and money. He collaborates with Michelin, sells prints of his art online, submits to Marylin’s marketing strategies, and is not offended when his paintings end up in the vulgar hands of billionaires. A similar absence of any ostentatious hostility to money is displayed by ‘Houellebecq’: in principle, we are told, “il s’en fout de l’argent,” but in the context of a recent costly divorce he is happy to write Jed’s catalogue for extra cash. In the society of simulacra, any attempt at overt rebellion, any overt insistence on one’s authenticity, might evoke the suspicion that is is merely a marketable pose. Jed’s radical indifference might represent a strategy for maintaining authenticity in the society of simulacra, but its effectiveness lies precisely in its unreflective, unpremeditated nature. If the whole world is perceived as inauthentic, one can only be true to oneself and one’s inner artistic calling.

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310 Ibid., 50.
311 Ibid., 127.
Jed’s authenticity and purity take the form of a childlike equanimity to all things outside the process of artist creation. Jed does not covet success or money, nor is he disconcerted with them when they arrive as if by accident.

It appears, then, that *La Carte et le territoire* indeed invites us to give credence to the idea that a residual sense of authenticity continues to be found in artists like Jed and ‘Houellebecq’.

Depressingly, however, it is simultaneously made clear just how impotent this artistic authenticity is in transforming society or even the artists’ own lives. *La Carte et le territoire*, on the one hand, vindicates art by showing that authenticity is not yet entirely extinct; on the other hand, and more importantly, it shows that this authenticity is extremely circumscribed and cannot possibly offer a basis for a solution to society’s problems. Jed and ‘Houellebecq’, as figures embodying an understated authenticity and romanticism, are set apart from the rest of society by their obedience to artistic intuition and by their fundamental lack of interest in money and fame; it is nevertheless also clear that they embody an isolated and anachronistic attitude to art and that, like the way of life of Jed’s grandmother, they at best represent residual values doomed to extinction in contemporary society. In fact, the scope of Jed’s and ‘Houellebecq’’s authenticity is even more limited than that of the traditional values surviving in the countryside in Jed’s grandmother’s generation. Those values were at least to be found within a residual medium of community and religion. Jed’s and ‘Houellebecq’’s authenticity, such as it is, applies only to the moment of artist creation, and is completely detached from the milieu in which they work and live. Importantly, it can have no influence over the reception of their art in society. The voice of intuition aside, in the final analysis Jed and ‘Houellebecq’’s art is a commodity like any other. *La Carte et le territoire*, having made an argument for the continued possibility of vestigial authenticity in art, shows how little this authenticity can do and why it can play no role in the creation of a better society, as if proffering a solution to contemporary society’s malaise only to snatch it away.
Conclusion

My reading of *La Carte et le territoire* has shown it to be a novel in which any fundamental solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation is absent. In this it is consistent with the logic of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, which deny the possibility of any solution not involving posthuman technology. Turning away from the sci-fi posthuman utopias that were problematised in *La Possibilité d’une île*, it looks towards dying traditional values and ways of life, as well as towards authenticity in work and art, as possible solutions to society’s problems. Alas, *La Carte et le territoire* reveals that authenticity in work and art is marginal and has lost all reformative power, and that the only future for tradition is in the form of simulacral tourist attractions and products. *La Carte et le territoire* hints at the close interdependency of traditional values and religion, and a genuine future for either is shown to be highly improbable. It therefore comes as a great surprise when, in *Soumission*, a return to religion and tradition emerges as a possible route to society’s salvation. With all hopes for a solution having been abandoned in *La Carte et le territoire*, *Soumission* unexpectedly explores the possibility that Islam might facilitate the return to tradition and religion that the previous novels – including *La Carte et le territoire* – categorically deny is possible.
Chapter 4 Soumission

In this chapter, I examine Soumission and argue that the novel proposes the idea of a return to theistic belief and traditional, patriarchal society as a possible and credible solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. In our reading of La Carte et le territoire in the previous chapter, we saw how submission to the inner voice of artistic intuition, devoid of all religious connotations, was shown to be incapable of changing society at large. The form of submission proposed in Soumission, however, is very different, involving not only submission to God but also obedience to prescribed gender and social roles. The return to religion and tradition in Soumission comes as something of a surprise, since in my reading of Les Particules élémentaires, La Possibilité d’une île and La Carte et le territoire, we saw that the novels reject the possibility of transforming the broad social, political and economic realities of Western society without a technological, posthuman solution, and seem implicitly to rule out a revival of theistic religion. In these novels, indeed, the social and economic system of the West, shown to be based primarily on transactions between autonomous individuals, was depicted as natural and therefore inevitable for a society no longer underwritten by theistic belief. In this context, both Islam and Christianity were shown to be ultimately doomed, unable to resist the corrosive forces of science and reason. Soumission thus represents a dramatic departure from these novels in two significant ways: firstly, it contemplates the possibility of revolutionary social, political, and economic changes occurring in contemporary Western civilisation without the assistance of biotechnology; secondly, it contemplates the possibility of a renewal of theistic belief in Western civilisation.

Islam, combined with a political and social restructuring of society, seems to offer in Soumission the possibility of a powerful new solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilization. As we shall see, however, the often-satirical depiction of the Islamic solution in the novel means that it is necessary to consider the extent to which it is being presented seriously as a viable possibility. In this chapter, I will argue that although there is much satire in the depiction of the details of the Islamic solution, the general idea of a return to religion and tradition as a way of escaping an Enlightenment ideology that has become pernicious should be taken seriously. The
problems that *Soumission* diagnoses in contemporary Western civilisation – atomisation, the decline of community and family life, spiritual emptiness, sexual malaise and the fear of death – parallel those found in Houellebecq’s previous novels. In *Soumission*, however, all of these problems are placed under the rubric of Enlightenment ideology, and the experiment elaborated in the novel consists in the formulation of a hypothesis in fictional form to ask whether Islam might provide an exit from an ideology which has brought Western civilisation to the point of crisis and suicide. *Soumission* evinces a newfound belief in the potential of religion and politics as agents of social transformation, and the possibility of a non-technological solution to the problems of Western civilisation is thereby reopened for consideration.

In this chapter, after summarising the novel, I will explore some critical responses to it, outlining, by way of comparison, my argument that *Soumission* offers an alternative to Enlightenment values. Next, I will explore how, in spite of the irony, contradiction, and uncertainty in the novel, *Soumission* no longer maintains that atheism is inevitable in Western civilisation but implies, on the contrary, that belief in God remains a viable possibility for individuals and for society as a whole. This new openness to theistic belief provides a space in the novel in which religious solutions can be considered. Having shown how *Soumission* questions the inevitability of atheism in contemporary Western civilisation, I will discuss the role of Huysmans in the novel as an example of a path to conversion that someone like François could realistically follow. I will explore the ways in which Islam, in spite of obvious differences, offers François an escape from decadent despair that parallels Huysmans’ conversion to Catholicism. My discussion of Huysmans will lead into an exploration of the benefits that the Islamic solution is shown to bring about, focussing on polygamy and arranged marriage, submission, and the renewal of civilisation. Having explored these benefits, I will turn to the argument in the novel that the rise of Islam in Europe is likely for purely demographic reasons independent of the theological or pragmatic advantages of Islam. I conclude by finding that, notwithstanding its satire and ambiguity, *Soumission* proposes something like the Islamic solution as both desirable and plausible in practice, and that it is thus presented as a viable solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation.
Summary of novel

*Soumission* is written entirely in the first-person from the perspective of its main protagonist, François, a forty-something professor at La Sorbonne and expert on Huysmans. François is a typical Houellebecqian male protagonist. Like his equivalents Bruno in *Les Particules élémentaires*, Michel in *Plateforme*, and Daniel in *La Possibilité d’une île*, François serves as a case study in problems endemic in contemporary Western civilisation. He has little contact with either of his divorced parents, shows no interest in raising a family of his own, and is therefore an example of the breakdown of family ties in Western society. François has no close male friendships, and his romantic relationships with his young students never last more than a year. He has no religious or political convictions, and is an exemplar of the atomised individual. Outside of his work at the university his interaction with society is entirely transactional, for instance paying bills or calling someone to fix his Internet connection. François acknowledges that his life is objectively comfortable, but gourmet dining, sport, career ambitions, and other pursuits fail to provide much consolation for François who, like Bruno in *Les Particules élémentaires* and Daniel in *La Possibilité d’une île*, tends to view sex and romantic relationships as offering the sole possibility of consolation. The jaded François fails to feel much pleasure even with the prostitutes he hires, and he is overcome by a sense of existential malaise. He says, “les possibilités vivantes coulaient entre mes doigts avec une rapidité croissante,” and comes to feel that there is nothing to give his life meaning or obscure its inherent emptiness.

His view of life becomes increasingly pessimistic, and when he is afflicted by a skin infection in his foot, he observes that his body, while no longer capable of experiencing pleasure, is still capable of causing him pain. On one occasion, François, waking at three in the morning afflicted by a feeling of existential emptiness, looks out through his window at the thousands of cell-like

312 *Soumission*, 99.
313 Ibid., 205.
314 Ibid., 206.
apartments in which single occupancy has become the norm. He says, “Je n’avais, pas davantage que la plupart de ces gens, de véritable raison de me tuer.” The sub-suicidal existential malaise and emotional isolation which François feels are shown to be problems in society at large. François recognises himself in his fellow humans, but because of his general misanthropy and self-loathing, this recognition does not lead to a sense of solidarity: “ces humains étaient mes semblables, mais c’était justement cette ressemblance qui me faisait les fuir.” Without religious consolation and without any possibility of finding meaning in life through family, lasting relationships or social engagement, François is left with the depressing prospect of aging alone without anything to give his life a sense of meaning.

François’ individual angst is similar to that of other characters in Houellebecq’s previous novels, but in Soumission it occurs in the broader context of profound political and social changes taking place in France. Amidst widespread antipathy towards the political establishment, the National Front and the Muslim Brotherhood Party emerge as the main contenders for the 2022 national election. Under the brilliant leadership of the charismatic Mohammed Ben Abbes, the Muslim Brotherhood Party is able to form an alliance with the left and wins the election. Although the lead-up to the election is marked by outbreaks of violence with riots and assassinations, after the election the transformation of France into an Islamic state occurs smoothly and peaceably. Women take to wearing the veil in public and seem to acquiesce to leaving the workforce. The French economy is revitalised under the new regime, generously supported by Saudi Arabia. Catholic churches and schools, bars, and luxury shopping are tolerated under the new regime which, in pursuing its ideological goals, emphasises moderation and persuasion over coercion. Returning to Paris from the countryside where he had sought refuge from what he had thought was impending civil war, François is courted by Roger Rediger, head of the now Islamic Sorbonne, who solicits his conversion to Islam and return to the university. With massive funding from Saudi Arabia, the university is able to offer François a highly lucrative position. Rediger explains to François why

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315 Ibid., 206.
316 Ibid., 207.
only Islam is able to offer a way of revitalising moribund European culture, but François is more interested in questions of personal gain. Captivated by the possibility of acquiring several young, attractive, and obedient wives, he finally converts to Islam.

Critical responses to Soumission

Immediately following the publication of *Soumission*, a number of articles and reviews appeared in French and English rebutting the idea that the novel was essentially a satire or denouncement of Islam. These articles converge in reading *Soumission* as above all a critique of contemporary French society. The hostility to be found in the novel is shown to be directed not at a perceived external threat in the form of Islam, but rather internally at French society. Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*, for instance, reads *Soumission* as a “Francophobic” satire about the “spinelessness” of the narrator and the French intellectual and political classes.317 Gopnik argues that “the charge that Houellebecq is Islamophobic seems misplaced. He’s not Islamophobic. He’s Francophobic.”318 According to Gopnik, *Soumission* is above all an attack on the complicity of the French who are shown to collaborate so quickly with the new regime: “One of the few objects of real scorn in the book is François Bayrou, the (actual) French centrist politician whose dancing between left and right in electoral politics is legend, and who becomes Ben Abbes’s chief apologist and mouthpiece.” Gopnik positions *Soumission* within the broader context of a “French obsession with decline,”319 linking this obsession with, among other things, French uneasiness about the decline of French as a world language. While this chapter agrees with Gopnik’s view that *Soumission* is less a dramatization of an external Islamic threat than a critique of internal problems, Gopnik fails to see that the object of Houellebecq’s critique is much more fundamental than specifically French social and political problems. While the novel is set in France and parodies political conditions specific to France, the concerns raised in the novel are of relevance to

318 Ibid.
319 Ibid.
contemporary Western civilisation as a whole, and not just one country. The obsession with decline which Gopnik correctly identifies in Soumission is then not merely an obsession with France’s declining position in the world but, rather, an obsession with the decline and suicide of Western civilisation as a whole.

In arguing that the primary target of critique in Soumission is French complicity with the new regime, Gopnik fails to recognise the underlying critique of liberal Western values in the novel. While scorn is indeed directed at characters like Bayrou, the novel is less about the betrayal of Western values by collaborators than about the inherent bankruptcy of those values. Similiarly, although the novel contains nostalgia, even sadness at the passing of Europe, one can hardly agree with Mark Lilla’s statement that “There is no doubt that Houellebecq wants us to see the collapse of modern Europe and the rise of a Muslim one as a tragedy.”

320 The problem with this interpretation is that it ignores both the many improvements that the Islamic regime is shown to bring about as well as the extent of the disenchantment expressed about life in modern Europe. Soumission does not merely critique the hollowness of the commitment to secular, liberal values among politicians and academics in France, but rather questions whether these values are worth defending at all. Towards the end of his article, in fact, Lilla seems to revise his reading of the collapse of modern European values as a tragedy in Soumission, writing:

Houellebecq’s critics see the novel as anti-Muslim because they assume that individual freedom is the highest human value – and have convinced themselves that the Islamic tradition agrees with them. It does not, and neither does Houellebecq. Islam is not the target of Soumission, whatever Houellebecq thinks of it. It serves as a device to express a very persistent European worry that the single-minded pursuit of freedom – freedom from tradition and authority, freedom to pursue one’s own ends – must inevitably lead to disaster.

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321 Ibid.
Although what Gopnik described as a “French obsession” is here extended to a “European worry,” the crisis of Enlightenment values with which the novel grapples would be better described as a crisis affecting Western civilisation as a whole. Lilla hints here at what this chapter takes to be the fundamental problem in the novel (as in Houellebecq’s other novels): the idea that Western Enlightenment values have become toxic and that another route, an escape, is desperately needed. To understand the problems of contemporary Western civilisation in Houellebecq’s novels it is necessary to take a broader perspective of the consequences of the Western Enlightenment. Lilla writes of Houellebecq:

He appears genuinely to believe that France has, regrettably and irretrievably, lost its sense of self, but not because of immigration or the European Union or globalisation. Those are just symptoms of a crisis that was set off two centuries ago when Europeans made a wager on history: that the more they extended human freedom, the happier they would be. For him, that wager has been lost.322

Louis Betty, meanwhile, argues that a historical perspective is needed when approaching the problems explored in Houellebecq’s novels. In contrast to Sweeney, whom we saw identified contradictions in contemporary neoliberal society as the source of these problems, Betty argues that, “with each new novel it becomes clearer that Houellebecq thinks that the crucial historical turning point was much earlier, at the beginning of the Enlightenment.”323 According to Betty, having experimented in previous novels with utopian solutions to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation, in Soumission Houellebecq explores a return to premodern values and social structures:

Houellebecq’s work may be read in terms of a progressive disenchantment with nineteenth century utopian remedies to social and existential ills, culminating in their repudiation in La Carte et le territoire in favour of a more traditional form of social order evocative of the social, spiritual, and moral values of the Old Regime: Family, Land, and Church.324

322 Ibid.
324 Ibid., 100.
Lilla similarly argues that Islam is a stand-in for the premodern, religious values to which the novel appears to be attracted. He writes:

The qualities that Houellebecq projects onto Islam are no different from those that the religious right ever since the French Revolution has attributed to premodern Christendom – strong families, moral education, social order, a sense of place, a meaningful death, and, above all, the will to persist as a culture.\textsuperscript{325}

The idea that \textit{Soumission} is primarily about the bankruptcy not just of contemporary French society, but of Enlightenment philosophy in general is reiterated in Houellebecq’s own reading of the novel as discussed in his interview with Sylvain Bourmeau.\textsuperscript{326} Houellebecq reveals that the original version of the novel was entitled \textit{La Conversion}, and that in this early version the narrator, following in the footsteps of Huysmans, converted to Catholicism. Houellebecq came to feel, however, that conversion to Islam, a religion perceived as vigorous and on the rise, might be more convincing, explaining, “if Catholicism doesn’t work, that’s because it’s already run its course, it seems to belong to the past.” Houellebecq seems to agree therefore with the idea that the role of Islam in the novel is to serve as a more vigorous substitute for Christianity and as a revitaliser of traditional values. In the interview, Houellebecq reiterates once again the idea that religion is necessary for society’s survival: “I remain in many ways a Comtean, and I don’t believe that a society can survive without religion.” Houellebecq argues that Enlightenment values should not be thought of as representing the final stage of historical development, stating that, “We are in what he (Comte) calls the metaphysical stage, which began in the Middle Ages and whose whole point was to destroy the phase that preceded it. In itself, it can produce nothing, just emptiness and unhappiness.”

\textsuperscript{325} Lilla, “Slouching Towards Mecca.”
Whereas in *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* Houellebecq experimented with posthuman equivalents to traditional religion, in *Soumission*, he considers, for the first time, the possibility of society embracing an existing religion: “The clearest point of connection with my other books is the idea that religion, of some kind, is necessary. That idea is there in many of my books. In this one, too, only now it’s an existing religion.” In Houellebecq’s previous novels, however, a possible solution in the form of theistic religion was ruled out by a conviction in the irrefutability of atheistic materialism. In our chapter on *Les Particules élémentaires*, for example, we saw how the novel argued against the possibility of acquiring the social and individual benefits of religion without belief in God or an afterlife (which science and reason were shown to have made impossible). By contrast, a newfound openness to the possibility of theistic belief underlies *Soumission* and constitutes an important departure from Houellebecq’s previous novels. Houellebecq explains that he was once an atheist but now sees himself as an agnostic, and that this shift was a major motivation in writing *Soumission*. Houellebecq explains, “When, in the light of what I know, I re-examine the question whether there is a creator, a cosmic order, that kind of thing, I realise that I don’t actually have an answer.” This newfound openness to the existence of God is combined with his longstanding hostility to Enlightenment values. Houellebecq says, “My book describes the destruction of the philosophy handed down by the Enlightenment, which no longer makes sense to anyone, or to very few people.” He goes on to declare, “the Enlightenment is dead, may it rest in peace.” He claims that the destruction of Enlightenment philosophy “has to happen sometime and it might as well be now.”

This chapter agrees with Betty, Lilla, and Houellebecq that *Soumission* continues the critique of the fundamental problems of contemporary Western civilisation begun in earlier novels, problems reframed in *Soumission* as the toxic consequences of an Enlightenment tradition. The hostility to Enlightenment philosophy is present, at least implicitly, in all of Houellebecq’s novels, but, more directly than anywhere else, it is in *Soumission* that a shared worldview and social system based on Enlightenment philosophy is identified as the underlying cause of the problems in contemporary Western civilisation. *Soumission* is the only novel which imagines neither continued
stagnation as in *La Carte et le territoire* nor a breakthrough into a utopian or dystopian posthuman future as in *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* but, rather, the rediscovery of values that have been on the decline in the West for centuries. Let us now turn to the newfound openness to theistic belief evinced in *Soumission*, as it is the precondition of a renewal of traditional values thought in previous novels to be irremediably lost.

*The possibility of theistic belief*

As a precondition to considering the advantages that an Islamic solution might bring, *Soumission* needs to show that, for individuals and for society, theistic belief remains a viable possibility. *Soumission* constitutes a break with Houellebecq’s previous novels not because it invokes the desirability of a return to theistic religion, but because it presents such a return as possible at an individual and societal level. The possibility of a return to theistic belief is portrayed in *Soumission* as offering two vital advantages. Firstly, it is a way of giving consolation and meaning to individual lives, especially through the promise of personal immortality. It is potentially a powerful means of alleviating the chronic, existential angst shown to afflict people like François in the West. Secondly, belief in God is the cornerstone of a social system based on traditional institutions and social cohesion. In my analysis of *Les Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq argues that desirable traditional and communitarian social structures could not be revived once they were disconnected from theism and belief in immortality. The idea that an atheistic worldview is not only discouraging for individuals but that it leads to a progressive breakdown in the social and moral fabric of Western civilisation, a familiar Houellebecqian theme. In contrast to previous novels, instead of merely lamenting the trauma caused by the inevitable decline of religion, *Soumission* attempts to show that a return of religion in the form of Islam might be plausible and not a mere idle fancy. As an Islamic solution requires, as a minimum, openness to theistic belief, *Soumission* needs to provide at least some arguments that atheism is not as inevitable – at the level of the individual and of society – as the previous novels imply.
One argument put forward in *Soumission* against the inevitability of atheism is that while the West indeed appears to have become more and more secular, this appearance is deceiving, and atheism in the West is in fact superficial, more illusory than real. Belief in God is no longer presented as doomed to inevitable decline, but as something that Europe, in spite of appearances, is poised to embrace. François articulates the position of Houellebecq’s previous novels when he says, “j’avais l’impression que l’athéisme était universellement répandu dans le monde occidental.”

Rediger, however, counters this position by arguing that “les vrais athées, au fond, sont rares.” Rediger claims that genuine atheists represent a minority of “révoltés” for whom belief in God is incompatible with their ambitions for human independence:

 Ils ne se contentaient pas de constater froidement la non-existence de Dieu, ils refusaient cette existence, à la manière de Bakounine, « Et même si Dieu existait, il faudrait s’en débarrasser… » enfin c’étaient des athées à la Kirilov, ils rejetaient Dieu parce qu’ils voulaient mettre l’homme à sa place, ils étaient humanistes, ils se faisaient une haute idée de la liberté humaine, de la dignité humaine.

François, unsurprisingly, finds little to identify with in this portrait of the heroic atheist. Even the word humanism makes him feel like vomiting. François’ misanthropy, lethargy, and anomie make it unthinkable that he would reject religious consolation out of pride or out of a need to hubristically assert humanity’s freedom and power.

If the only obstacle to theistic belief was its incompatibility with an aggrandised conception of humanity in the universe, then atheism would indeed seem a minority position, and the return of theism in the West would seem inevitable. Read in the context of Houellebecq’s previous novels, however, Rediger’s equation of atheism with hubristic humanism might be thought disingenuous. In novels like *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, belief in God was rejected as a possibility because of its incompatibility with science and reason. The implication of both novels

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327 *Soumission*, 250.
328 Ibid., 250.
329 Ibid., 250.
330 Ibid., 250.
was that scientific materialism simply leaves no space for belief in the existence of God. Rediger’s argument discreetly ignores the role of scientific materialism and simple incredulity in the face of religion as explanations of atheism. Rediger’s claim that genuine atheism is synonymous with radical humanism indeed ignores the class of atheist to whom all of Houellebecq’s previous protagonists implicitly belong, namely, the class of atheist who would like the consolation of religious belief, who is devoid of ideals of heroic humanism, but who is persuaded by the evidence for the nonexistence of God. For this type of atheist, atheism is depressing rather than empowering. Characters like Bruno, Daniel, and François, and by extension contemporary Western civilisation in general, would seem to have a great psychological need for religious succour with their isolation, their fears of aging and death, their desire to be saved, their sense of meaninglessness, their disillusionment with the world, their self-loathing, and their lack of faith in abstract humanity. Wanting or needing to believe but being unable to do so because the evidence is lacking is the predicament of the Houellebecqian atheist in the novels before *Soumission*. It is a predicament to which Houellebecq gave voice in a letter to Bernard-Henri Lévy, explaining that although he was attracted to religion and had regularly visited churches for many years: “le problème c’est que Dieu, je n’y crois toujours pas.”331 By equating atheism with humanistic hubris, *Soumission* presents genuine atheism in the West as a rarity, opening the possibility of a generalised return to religion. By seeming to sidestep the central arguments for the inevitability of atheistic materialism raised in previous novels, however, a shadow of doubt is cast over the argument Rediger provides.

As well as providing an explanation of the psychology of disbelief, Rediger presents an argument for the existence of God. His argument is essentially an argument “from design” in which order and complexity in the universe are taken as evidence of a supremely intelligent and omnipotent designer: “l’univers porte à l’évidence la marque d’un dessein intelligent, qu’il est à l’évidence la réalisation d’un projet conçu par une intelligence gigantesque.”332 This argument appears convincing, to François at least, who promptly acknowledges that his atheism “ne repose

332 *Soumission*, 253.
pas sur des bases très solides.” Although we might ask ourselves whether this argument from design would have been likely to convince an atheist like Michel in *Les Particules élémentaires*, there are no indications in *Soumission* that Rediger’s arguments are flawed. Only Rediger’s excessive suaveness and worldliness cast a satirical shadow on this otherwise authoritative character. In any case, it is important to note that *Soumission*’s general position that a return to religion is plausible need not rely on any one of Rediger’s specific arguments. The arguments serve to open up a space in the novel in which the credibility of theistic belief is reconsidered, a credibility categorically denied in Houellebecq’s previous novels. By retreating from the position of adamant atheism of the previous novels, sufficient latitude is granted in *Soumission* to imagine a credible solution based on theism and Islam. It should be noted, however, that this newfound intellectual openness to the possibility of the existence of God does not of itself lead to conversion, and that the desirability of religion as a means of transforming one’s life is much more important than any analysis of abstract theological arguments. Huysmans is offered in *Soumission* as an example of someone for whom the personal desirability of religion translates directly into conversion, with intellectual evaluation of religious “truth” being almost an afterthought. Huysmans’ conversion to Catholicism provides a point of reference with which François’ conversion to Islam is compared and contrasted.

*Huysmans*

Huysmans serves as an example of a path to conversion that might plausibly be followed by a character like François. It would be difficult to imagine someone like François, for instance, being attracted by the moral and philosophical aspects of religion. It would also be inconceivable that someone like François would convert to a religion demanding a strictly ascetic lifestyle. Huysmans’ example, in modified form, offers a much more realistic pathway to conversion for someone like François, with religion offering reinvigoration to the jaded, pessimistic individual without

333 Ibid., 253.
demanding onerous sacrifices in return. Although there are obvious differences between Huysmans’ conversion to Catholicism and François’ conversion to Islam, both lead from jaded pessimism to renewal, and in both cases, considerations of individual benefit are much more important than moral or philosophical concerns.

For both Huysmans and François, religious conversion is preceded by a period of jaded decadence and pessimism. In À rebours, Huysmans explores how the novel’s world-weary hero, Jean des Esseintes, finally comes to the awareness that religion alone has the power to reinvigorate his life. Jean des Esseintes and François share many common characteristics: both are misanthropic, both attempt to fill the emptiness in their lives with decadent distractions that ultimately lose their efficacy, both eventually fall into a pessimistic worldview in which suffering is seen as the essence of existence. This weariness with life afflicts François to the extent that he begins to contemplate suicide, saying “je me rapprochais du suicide, sans éprouver de désespoir ni même de tristesse particulière.”³³⁴ Like Jean des Esseintes in À rebours, François is weary of life itself, saying, “La simple volonté de vivre ne me suffisait manifestement plus à résister à l’ensemble des douleurs et des tracas qui jalonnent la vie d’un Occidental moyen, j’étais incapable de vivre pour moi-même, et pour qui d’autre aurais-je vécu ?”³³⁵

This brings us to an essential common feature in the conversions of Huysmans and François. For both, religion is embraced because it is needed, because it offers a cure, and because it offers personal benefits. In both cases, detailed reflection on the theological teachings of the relevant religion are beside the point. What is important is the capacity of the religion to act as a stimulant, reawakening the will to live. François describes Huysmans’ aestheticism and indifference to metaphysics:

Sa dilection esthétique et presque charnelle pour la liturgie catholique transparaissait dans chacune des pages de ses derniers livres ; mais les questions métaphysiques qu’avait soulevées Rediger la veille, il n’en faisait jamais mention. Les espaces infinis

³³⁴ Ibid., 207.
³³⁵ Ibid., 207.
qui effrayaient Pascal, qui plongeaient Newton et Kant dans l’émémerveillement et le respect, il ne les avait pour sa part nullement aperçus.336

Like Huysmans before him, François’ world-weariness and pessimism have ripened him for religious conversion. It is “une crise de larmes imprévue, interminable”337 that first pushes him in the direction of religion when he decides to stay at Ligué Abbey, where Huysmans was received as an oblate. Although François is unable to follow Huysmans on the path of conversion to Catholicism, the initial impulse towards a religious solution for both François and Huysmans is the sense of malaise that their pessimistic insight brings. Huysmans identifies this pessimism with Schopenhauer, and Jean des Esseintes in À rebours is initially a great admirer of the German philosopher. While Schopenhauer is not specifically alluded to in Soumission, Schopenhauer’s influence on Houellebecq has been well-noted,338 and François’ pessimism and misanthropy are reminiscent of Schopenhauer. In an introduction to À rebours, written twenty years after the novel was first published, Huysmans explains how, in retrospect, his Schopenhauerian pessimism and world-weariness prepared him for religious conversion. From Schopenhauer to Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job, Huysmans writes, “il n'y avait qu'un pas.”339 Schopenhauerian pessimism, for pre-conversion Huysmans and for François, reveals that the malaise they experience in their lives is inherent in existence itself. They have become all too aware of the nature of their predicament, but have no way of resolving it. Returning to Paris and society at the end of À rebours, Jean des Esseintes is painfully aware that pessimistic insight brings no consolation:

Il appelait à l’aide pour se cicatriser, les consolantes maximes de Schopenhauer ; il se répétait le douloureux axiome de Pascal : « L’âme ne voit rien qui ne l’afflige quand elle y pense », mais les mots résonnaient, dans son esprit comme des sons privés de sens ; son ennui les désagrègeait, leur ôtait toute signification, toute vertu sédative, toute vigueur effective et douce.340

336 Ibid., 265.
337 Ibid., 208.
338 Wagner, “Le bonheur du néant.”
340 Ibid., 290.
In his retrospective preface to À rebours, Huysmans describes Schopenhauer as a “médicastre allemand”\(^{341}\) who “après vous avoir bien démontré que l’affliction dont vous souffrez est incurable, vous tourne, en ricanant, le dos.”\(^{342}\) He claims that the Church, by contrast, “vous traite et elle vous guérit.” Religion came to be seen by Huysmans not only as therapeutic, but as the only alternative to suicidal despair. In an article on À rebours, Barbey d’Aurevilly thought that the pessimistic insights contained in the novel left Huysmans, like Baudelaire before him, with a stark choice between Catholicism and suicide. Barbey d’Aurevilly writes, “Après Les Fleurs du mal dis-je à Baudelaire, il ne vous reste plus, logiquement, que la bouche d’un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix. Baudelaire choisit les pieds de la croix. Mais l’auteur d’À rebours les choisira-t-il ?”\(^{343}\) François’ world-weariness has also brought him to a point not far from suicide. As for Huymans and his character Jean des Esseintes, the appeal of a religious solution for François seems obvious. François’ fatigue with society, with himself, and with life in general, makes him a prime candidate for religious conversion. Like À rebours, Soumission depicts its character in a phase of growing pessimism antecedent to conversion. Before meeting Rediger, François has already felt an impulse towards religion as evidenced by his visit to the abbey, but has yet to find a style of religion capable of transforming his life. Soumission begins with an epigraph from En route containing the line “Je suis bien dégoûté de ma vie, bien las de moi, mais de là à mener une autre existence il y a loin!” This accurately captures François’ predicament before his conversion to Islam: the need for religion already exists, but a suitable form of religion has not yet been found.

Religion offers clear personal benefits to Huysmans and François without at the same time demanding that they make any onerous sacrifices. François notes that after his conversion to Catholicism Huysmans was not obliged to sacrifice worldly pleasures. François explains that Huysmans, as an oblate, was not required to live permanently in the monastery. At the monastery,
Huysmans retained a servant who cooked delicious meals, and he also had access to books and a good supply of Dutch tobacco. Likewise for François, conversion to Islam does not appear to involve any serious sacrifices. François is relieved, for instance, to discover that drinking is permitted and he is impressed by the possibility of servants and a wife’s good cooking. The image of Huysmans presented by François has many affinities with himself. He is shown to tend towards cynicism and misanthropy, places importance on worldly comforts, is unwilling to make great sacrifices for his new religion. Precisely because of this, however, Huysmans provides a model of conversion which François might plausibly follow.

In the case of Huysmans, the aesthetic aspect of Catholicism is the key to conversion. François’ conversion, by contrast, is precipitated primarily by the titillating erotic possibilities of possessing multiple young, obedient wives. In both cases, however, whether the appeal is aesthetic or erotic, metaphysical and social questions are sidelined and the sole concern is the beneficial change that conversion will bring to the individual. François shows little interest in the aesthetic aspect of religion, admitting, “je n’étais pas un esthète, infiniment moins que Huysmans.” His interest in religion is even less spiritual than Huysmans’, and his interest in conversion is primarily pragmatic (Rediger admits that most people, and not only François, are less interested in metaphysical questions about the origins of the universe than in questions concerning individual gain, such as remuneration and the number of wives permitted under Islam.) Whereas Huysmans had opted for “l’exotisme plus radical de la divinité,” François decides that what he needs is a woman: “une femme est certes humaine mais représente un type légèrement différent d’humanité, elle apporte à la vie un certain parfum d’exotisme.” In François’ conversion to Islam, erotic and religious solutions are felicitously combined, with conversion to Islam packaged with the exotic perfume of young, obedient wives. François’ conversion to Islam does not involve some profound

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344 *Soumission*, 265.
345 Ibid., 217.
346 Ibid., 292.
347 Ibid., 208.
348 Ibid., 207.
religious awakening, nor does it involve participation in some cause greater than himself, nor does it lead him into a new relationship with society and with others. It simply offers a new form of exotic titillation for his jaded appetite. His spiritual, intellectual, and emotional horizons have not changed, but like the decadent Huysmans, conversion provides an unexpected hope for individual reinvigoration. Although François’ motivations for conversion might be thought of as lamentably shallow, *Soumission* does indeed appear to lay out a path to conversion to Islam that is psychologically plausible for a character like François.

**Polygamy and arranged marriage**

An important aspect of the Islamic solution in *Soumission* is polygamy and arranged marriage, and they play a decisive factor in François’ conversion to Islam. We saw in the discussion of Huysmans that *Soumission* emphasises the practical benefits of religion, and this pragmatic approach is further manifest in the novel’s discussion of polygamy and arranged marriage. These, the novel suggests, may offer a welcome alternative to the deregulated erotic marketplace described throughout Houellebecq’s œuvre. In considering the possible advantages of polygamy and arranged marriage as depicted in *Soumission*, however, we must always bear in mind the question of whether they are being presented as possible solutions for problems in contemporary Western civilisation as a whole, or merely as solutions for a specific category of men. By emphasising the erotic benefits that Islam offers to certain individuals, the question implicitly arises whether the atomisation and selfishness criticised throughout Houellebecq’s œuvre have in any way changed in the Islamic solution. Arranged marriage and polygamy offer an effective solution in *Soumission* to the problem of erotic poverty suffered by a certain type of Houellebecqian male, but they also imply new categories of exclusion. Thus, while the novel presents arranged marriage and polygamy in a generally positive light, support for this aspect of the religious solution is somewhat circumspect and nuanced.

In *Soumission*, Islam offers a solution to the problem faced by men who, in spite of their relative wealth and social status, feel themselves to be physically unprepossessing and therefore...
disadvantaged in the “struggle” to acquire young and physically attractive women. This problem, explored in all of Houellebecq’s novels, is expressed most succinctly in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*:

> Le libéralisme économique, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. De même, le libéralisme sexuel, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société.\(^{349}\)

In contemporary Western society, economic liberalism is shown to find an exact equivalent in erotic liberalism. Just as deregulation of the economic sphere produces great inequality, with certain people accumulating vast wealth while others are reduced to poverty, so sexual deregulation in the form of sexual liberation has resulted in a gulf between winners and losers in the erotic sphere. Those with low erotic capital find it difficult to find willing, unpaid partners, while those with high erotic value enjoy an exciting and varied sex life. Throughout Houellebecq’s novels, these two spheres are presented as more or less discrete: it is possible to be affluent economically but impoverished in the erotic sphere, and vice-versa. Erotic capital is presented as determined primarily by basic biological determinants of physical attractiveness, and is not significantly augmented by financial or cultural attainments. *Soumission*, however, explores the possibility of linking the erotic sphere with the sphere of wealth and status by means of arranged marriages.

*Soumission* presents an example of how arranged marriage might remedy male erotic pauperism through the character of Loiseleur, the unkempt, greasy-haired scholar who, at the age of sixty, François imagines to be a virgin. Loiseleur, like Tisserand in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, is a perfect case study of the man who, in spite of his relative wealth and social status, remains an unwanted commodity on the sexual market, unable to find a partner. In a society in which women are left to choose for themselves, a man like Loiseleur has little hope of finding a partner, and even less of finding a young or attractive one. François says, “Dans un cas comme le sien, le

\(^{349}\) *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, 100.
huiage arrangé était à l'évidence la seule formule.” François, who has repeatedly succeeded in seducing female students, does not find himself in Loiseleur’s predicament of extreme erotic deprivation, but he admits to Rediger that he does not consider himself “un mâle dominant.” François, like Loiseleur, is therefore also a potential beneficiary of a regulated system in which men’s financial wealth and social status convert directly into erotic purchasing power.

In the system of arranged marriages expounded by Rediger, men would be implicitly ranked according to their wealth and social position, with this ranking determining the number of wives each man is permitted to have as well as the physical attractiveness of those wives. The selection of a wife, Rediger explains, is made by a marieuse who scrutinises naked, young girls (Rediger calls this “une espèce d'évaluation”), and matches “leur physique avec le statut social des futurs époux.” In this way the erotic sphere, which in the West has become detached, is relinked with the spheres of wealth and social status. Such a system, significantly, does not attempt to abolish erotic inequality; its goal is not a form of erotic communism. An erotic marketplace continues to exist, but it is now one that favours men with a certain level of wealth and social status. The archetypical Houellebecqian male, middle-aged, relatively wealthy, holding a respectable job but not highly desirable physically, would clearly benefit under such a system. Such men can leverage their wealth and social status into erotic purchasing power without recourse to prostitution, which, as we shall see, is presented in Soumission, as in other novels, as a less satisfactory way of reconnecting the economic and the erotic spheres.

In justifying arranged marriages, Rediger acknowledges that it is natural for both men and women to choose a spouse on the basis of physical attractiveness. Rediger explains that “les femmes sont elles aussi avant tout attirées par les avantages physiques,” but unlike men they can be conditioned, to a certain degree, to confer erotic value on men who are wealthy or who have a high social status. In the case of men, however, there is no possibility of conditioning them to

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350 *Soumission*, 294.
351 Ibid., 291.
352 Ibid., 293.
353 Ibid., 294.
consider non-physical aspects in their choice of partner, and their valuation of physical attractiveness displays a high degree of homogeneity: “L’homme, lui, est rigoureusement inéducable. Fût-il un philosophe du langage, un mathématicien ou un compositeur de sérielle, il opérera toujours, inexorablement, ses choix reproductifs sur des critères inchangés depuis des millénaires.”\textsuperscript{354} Given that “on observe que tous les hommes, mis en situation de choisir, font exactement les mêmes choix”,\textsuperscript{355} there is no need for men to make the choice of spouse themselves. In Rediger’s opinion, women are necessarily reduced in men’s estimation to a position on an objective scale of physical attractiveness. In the system of arranged marriages described by Rediger, men but not women are spared the indignity of being evaluated solely as objects of erotic desire. Nevertheless, in this system both men and women are reduced to objects, to interchangeable commodities. The difference is that while women are reduced to the value of their physical attractiveness, men are reduced to the value conferred by their wealth or social status. The instrumentalising logic that turns people into objects of exchange, lamented in the previous novels as a depressing feature of contemporary Western society, has not been displaced in this system of arranged marriages.

Just as the system of arranged marriage and polygamy is based on acceptance of human objectification, so it institutionalises erotic inequality. Erotic inequality is not simply an unintended consequence of this system; it is, as Rediger explains, a natural and necessary feature of Islam. In support of this position, Rediger relies on a form of social Darwinism. In Chapter 7 of his book \textit{Dix questions sur l’islam}, Rediger justifies polygamy on the basis that it accords with laws of nature applying to all animals, including humans. Rediger claims that it is a fundamental law of nature that not all are called upon to transmit their genes to future generations:

\begin{quote}
L’inégalité entre mâles – si certains se voyaient accorder la jouissance de plusieurs femelles, d’autres devraient nécessairement en être privé – ne devait donc pas être
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 294.
\textsuperscript{355} Ibid., 293.
considéré comme un effet pervers de la polygamie, mais bel et bien comme son but réel. C’est ainsi que s’accomplissait le destin de l’espèce.356

Polygamy, Rediger is arguing, is based on a natural (and, for the theist, God-given), law of inequality between males, where alpha males mate with many females at the expense of less dominant males. The same naturalistic justification, incidentally, is used to defend economic inequality, and in an article Rediger reveals himself to be “nettement en faveur d’une répartition très inégalitaire des richesses.”357 Instead of lamenting the persistence of Darwinian behaviour in contemporary society, Rediger uses it to justify the erotic and economic inequality present in the Islamic solution. The idea that human interactions in contemporary Western civilisation have become reduced to fierce competition for scarce economic and erotic resources is a recurring theme in Houellebecq’s novels. The novels show that without religion and community, contemporary Western civilisation functions according to a barely disguised law of the jungle. However, in novels like Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île this state of affairs is depicted with indignation, even outrage, and the only possible solution involves abolishing natural competitive tendencies by means of biotechnology. The valorisation of “natural” inequality in Soumission, therefore, seems to diametrically conflict with the diagnosis made in previous novels.

Throughout Houellebecq’s novels, concerns are also repeatedly voiced about the intrusion of calculation into the realm of erotic and romantic love (a concern distinct from the concern about the distribution of erotic resources in a given system). Annabelle in Les Particules élémentaires found it painful to be considered “comme du bétail interchangeable,”358 even though she passed “pour une belle pièce,” and the wealthy Daniel in La Possibilité d’une île repeatedly expressed the desire to be loved for himself and not for his money. Even in Platforme, a novel which proposes sex tourism as a solution to the predicament of economically wealthy but erotically impoverished Westerners, it is

356 Ibid., 269.
357 Ibid., 271.
358 Les Particules élémentaires, 290.
the main character’s relationship with Valérie, and not prostitutes, which is shown to have life-
transforming potential. In Extension du domaine de la lutte, the 28-year old virgin Tisserand
decludes prostitution as a solution to his problems, struggling against the odds in the hope of finding
a less transactional relationship. In Soumission too, François’ visits to prostitutes do little to
alleviate his sense of feeling jaded with life, in contrast to his relationship with Myriam which, by
combining friendship and sex offers a superior form of consolation. The reductionist, transactional
system of arranged marriages and the appeal to a natural, competitive order as the moral basis of
society in Soumission, therefore, seem inimical to the higher ideal of erotic and romantic
relationships that Houellebecq’s previous novels sometimes seem to promote.

In spite of what therefore appears to be in many respects a serious proposition, there remains
some ambiguity in Soumission about the extent to which the proposal of polygamy and arranged
marriage should be taken seriously. The very improbability of a scenario (from the point of view of
contemporary Western society), in which a character like Loiseleur is able to marry multiple
attractive young wives, adds a satirical flavour that somewhat undermines the seriousness of the
solution. Its improbability also tends to draw emphasis away from the proposed solution towards
the reality of things as they are actually are in a society in which – fantasies of salvation in the form
of Islamic arranged marriages aside – characters like Loiseleur are doomed to erotic poverty.
Likewise, Rediger’s description of the evaluation of future wives may, in part, be a wry
commentary on the tendency of men to view women as objects. The system of arranged marriage
and polygamy advocated by Rediger may then function as a satirical reduction of transactional
relationships in the contemporary West. From this perspective, the proposed solution of arranged
marriage and polygamy serves to satirise the hypocrisy of a society whose members take a much
more transactional approach to relationships than is openly admitted. If in contemporary Western
society people already select partners primarily on the basis of narrow criteria of wealth or physical
appearance, then a system of arranged marriages which merely makes these criteria explicit should
not be shocking. A system of arranged marriages would merely regulate relationships that are in any
case a form of transaction.
The problem of how seriously the proposal of arranged marriage and polygamy is to be taken is further complexified by the fact that it is only discussed from the perspective of characters who benefit under the system. The absence of a female perspective, or the perspective of males who would have difficulty finding partners under the new system, are conspicuously absent. This conspicuous bias means that the system of arranged marriages and polygamy may not constitute a solution for contemporary Western civilisation as a whole, but only for a limited class of beneficiary. In evaluating Soumission’s view of arranged marriages and polygamy as well as more generally the desirability of the Islamic solution, it is necessary to at least attempt to draw a distinction between a solution which is desirable for society as a whole and a solution which is beneficial only for François and a category of men like him. This distinction is often difficult to make, in part because our view of the Islamic solution is filtered through the first-person narrative of François. François is simultaneously the narrator of events and a character symptomatic of contemporary Western civilisation’s atomisation and lack of concern for things beyond the horizon of individual interest. That a character like François considers only the personal advantages of the new Islamic regime and not the greater good of society is in keeping with the depiction of selfishness and atomisation repeated throughout Houellebecq’s novels. This narrowness, however, means that any problems with the solution are obscured so long as they are not problems for François personally (the experience of women under the new regime being an important example).

While it is necessary to keep in mind the satire and ambiguity about the solution which Soumission constantly evokes, it is nevertheless possible to discern in the novel the idea that submission and the loss of autonomy might be a good thing. Regardless of the extent to which the specific proposal of arranged marriages in Soumission is thought to be satirical, an overall argument can nevertheless be discerned that excessive autonomy is harmful and that a religious solution involving anti-libertarian values is desirable.
Submission and Autonomy

The defence of arranged marriage in *Soumission* is connected to the broader critique in the novel of the concept of autonomy. *Soumission* explores the idea that liberty and autonomy – core values of contemporary Western civilisation – are overvalued and that submission might be a better way of ensuring individual and societal happiness. *Soumission* does not merely countenance the idea that it is necessary to sacrifice freedom for some higher imperative such as societal harmony; it suggests that restricting individual freedom is in itself desirable and that too much freedom is inherently bad. On a train, François observes the two young wives of a Muslim businessman. They eat lollies and read magazines. François observes the supposedly “infantile” quality of Islamic women:

En régime islamique, les femmes – enfin, celles qui étaient suffisamment jolies pour éveiller le désir d’un époux riche – avaient au fond la possibilité de rester des enfants pratiquement toute leur vie. Peu après être sorties de l’enfance elles devenaient elles-mêmes mères, et replongeaient dans l’univers enfantin.359

The idea of intellectual maturity, of individuals and humankind collectively leaving behind nonage and entering into rational autonomy was famously expressed by Kant in *What is Enlightenment?* François, unimpressed by this central tenent of the West’s Enlightenment tradition, refuses to be shocked by the infantilisation and loss of autonomy that he observes in the young Islamic wives: “évidemment elle perdaient l’autonomie, mais *fuck autonomy*…”360 Rediger argues that submission and the loss of autonomy are inherently desirable, and in support of this position he surprisingly relies on Anne Cecile Deslos’ *Histoire d’O*, a pornographic novel (published under the pen name Pauline Réage) exploring the idea of female sexual submission. For Rediger, this novel captures “l’idée renversante et simple, jamais exprimée auparavant avec cette force, que le sommet du bonheur humain réside dans la soumission la plus absolue.”361 Rediger’s fascination with

359 *Soumission*, 227.
360 Ibid., 227.
361 Ibid., 260.
*Histoire d’O* is such that he has acquired, with great difficulty, the house in which the novel was written. Rediger explains that he sees in the novel a direct parallel with his own conception of submission in Islam: “Il y a pour moi un rapport entre l’absolue soumission de la femme à l’homme, telle que la décrit *Histoire d’O*, et la soumission de l’homme à Dieu, telle que l’envisage l’islam.”362

As with many of Rediger’s arguments, the outrageousness and idiosyncrasy of his views give them a satirical flavour which results in ambiguity about how seriously they are to be taken. Because Rediger’s arguments are never subjected to scrutiny by alternative points of view, it is difficult to determine how authoritative they are in the context of the novel as a whole. *Histoire d’O* might equally be interpreted as a declaration of gender equality, and while it portrays scenes of sexual submission, it is above all a transgressive novel rather than a novel advocating a patriarchal social system. Rediger’s idea that women should submit to men as men submit to God is problematic, and not only because it implies a Godlike authority of men over women. As we have seen, in the Islamic regime portrayed in *Soumission* it is very clear that wealthy men like Rediger face very few limitations and sacrifices after having submitted to Islam. The abstract submission of men to God is qualitatively different to the very real, very limiting submission expected of women towards men. A very one-sided and idiosyncratic view of the advantages of submission is therefore being given by Rediger, with François acting as a foil for these views.

This dissymmetry whereby only biased views are presented is so flagrant that it might possibly be thought of as the novel’s way of exposing Rediger’s hypocrisy and thereby implicitly undermining the proposed Islamic solution. In the absence of refutation by François or any other character in the novel, however, Rediger’s arguments retain, by default, an ambivalent authority. Although Rediger’s criticism of autonomy by reference to sexual submission undoubtedly involves elements of provocation and satire, there is nothing in the novel to suggest that the attack on the value of autonomy is disingenuous. This deflation of autonomy is, moreover, in keeping with the rest

362 Ibid., 260.
of Houellebecq’s œuvre and, without appealing to authorial intention, in keeping with Houellebecq’s comment to Bourmeau that the destruction of Enlightenment philosophy “has to happen sometime and it might as well be now.”\(^363\) In spite of its undeniable satire, a core argument can nevertheless be discerned within the novel suggesting that too much autonomy is harmful and that an Islamic solution emphasising submission might be beneficial to individuals and to society as a whole.

\textit{Renewal of civilisation}

We saw that in the case of both Huysmans and François, conversion is viewed from an entirely personal perspective. Both seek religion as an answer to problems in their own lives, giving little consideration to religion as a possible solution to problems in society as a whole. The system of arranged marriages and polygamy too was discussed in terms of the benefits it could bring to specific individuals, and submission was shown to be a prerequisite for individual happiness. In \textit{Soumission}, however, in addition to being a personal solution for individuals like François, Islam is portrayed as having the power to revitalise European civilisation as a whole. While this advantage of the Islamic solution does not involve calculations of personal gain, it is the utility of religion that is decisive. Metaphysical questions about the existence of God or about the theological superiority of Islam, while touched upon by Rediger, are secondary to his consideration of the possibilities of Islam as a catalyst for renewing European society and culture. More important than the inherent truth of Islam, it seems, is the pragmatic question of whether it might be a useful tool for overcoming the problems of the contemporary West.

Rediger explains his own conversion to Islam as the final step in his quest for “un moyen de sortir de l’humanisme athée,”\(^364\) a quest which led him first to Catholicism and then to right-wing nationalism.\(^365\) His attraction to Islam is intimately linked with the question of the cultural destiny

\(^{363}\) Houellebecq, “Scare Tactics.”

\(^{364}\) \textit{Soumission}, 254.

\(^{365}\) Ibid., p. 255.
of France and Europe. Like Comte, for whom the nation state was the metaphysical entity par excellence and as such lacked the enduring stability associated with the theological stage, Rediger believes that European nation states, once detached from their Christian origins, are invariably doomed to decline, explaining that “Les fascismes me sont toujours apparus comme une tentative spectrale, cauchemardesque et fausse de redonner vie à des nations mortes ; sans la chrétienté, les nations européennes n’étaient plus que des corps sans âme – des zombies.”

Rediger asked himself, “la chrétienté pouvait-elle revivre?,” and believed for a number of years that a return to Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, might restore Europe to its former greatness. He came, however, to believe that Europe had committed suicide, that the entire civilisation, both its culture and its religion, could no longer be revived, that “Cette Europe qui était le sommet de la civilisation humaine s’est bel et bien suicidée.”

Rediger catalogues the symptoms of the decay of European culture, but it is the closure of the bar at the Hotel Métropole in Brussels in 2013 which brings about Rediger’s final enlightenment about the death of Europe. For him this bar represented a last link with European culture of the Belle Époque, a period which Rediger presents as one of late cultural flourishing before Europe’s suicide and decay (“une époque extraordinairement brillante à la fois du point de vue technologique… et du point de vue artistique”).

Rediger spends the last evening before its closure in the bar of the Hotel Métropole, and within two weeks he has converted to Islam.

What is striking about Rediger’s account of his conversion is the absence of any consideration of the teachings of Islam itself. Having realised that European culture has died and Christianity cannot revive it, he seizes upon Islam as a vehicle for the renewal of civilisation. Looking for a way out of Europe’s dead-end of atheistic humanism, he views the return of religion as not only desirable but inevitable: “Le retour du religieux… je le savais pour ma part inéluctable dès l’âge de

366 Ibid., p. 255.
367 Ibid., p. 255.
368 Ibid., p. 257.
369 Ibid., p. 256.
Islam, quite independently of its beliefs and teachings, is a natural choice, once Christianity has been excluded, for a proselytising theistic religion with a proven capacity for empire building. Rediger’s conversion to Islam has parallels with the conversions of Huysmans and François in that it occurs as a response to crisis or insufficiency, not just in the individual but in European civilisation as a whole. Just as the title of François’ doctoral thesis – *Joris-Karl Huysmans, ou la sortie du tunnel* – implies the search for an escape at an individual level, Islam in *Soumission* offers an escape at the level of society from the “tunnel” of contemporary Western civilisation. In the end then, the theological qualities of Islam are incidental; what matters is that it offers an escape from a civilisation seen as having become trapped in a dead-end.

**Demographics**

We have seen how an Islamic solution is presented in *Soumission* as potentially desirable at an individual and societal level, but *Soumission* additionally attempts to show how this solution is plausible in practice. It attempts to show that this solution is not merely an idle fantasy but an objective possibility. It does this, partly, through the argument that atheism in the West is superficial and that the conversion of Westerners to a religion like Islam is therefore possible. Throughout *Soumission* the potential desirability of an Islamic solution and the likelihood of this solution emerging is sometimes conflated. The portrayal of widespread dissatisfaction with liberal values in the West is at once a value judgement on the bankruptcy of these values but also an “objective” statement of the West’s readiness to turn away from these values. For instance, it is the West’s apathy towards its own values and the specific political conditions and alliances that permit the electoral victory of Ben Abbes in France and set a plausible context for the rise of Islam in *Soumission*. Whether the motivation for conversion is personal, as with Huysmans and François, or involves a broader ambition for civilisation renewal, conversion to Islam involves reflection about the truth of the religion or the benefits it brings (we have seen that in *Soumission* the latter is much

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370 Ibid., p. 254.
371 Ibid., 11.
more important than the former). There is, however, another quite separate justification in *Soumission* for the view that Islam is likely to dominate Europe in the future, one that bypasses the need for persuasion and mass conversion: the demographic argument. This argument, expressed at different points throughout the novel, is simply that Islam will come to dominate France and the rest of Europe because Muslim birthrates are above average and Islamic beliefs tend to be transmitted to the children.

This importance of demographics in the rise of Islam in Europe is expressed in an article by Rediger where he writes, “lorsque l’individualisme libéral s’attaquait à cette structure ultime qu’était la famille, et donc à la démographie, il signait son échec final ; alors venait, logiquement, le temps de l’Islam.” According to this argument, Western liberal values, transmitted within liberal Western families, are doomed to decline because liberal individualism attacks the family unit and results in lower birth rates. The decline of liberal values and the rise of Islam is therefore presented not merely as desirable, but as a probable outcome based on a sociological analysis of a specific phenomenon. There is evidence that this idea is presented in *Soumission* as a convincing argument and not merely an idiosyncratic theory of Rediger’s, as it is repeated by Alain Tanneur, a former intelligence officer and expert on the Muslim Brotherhood. The intelligent and knowledgeable Tanneur, who is not a Muslim, provides a reliable and objective corroboration of Rediger’s argument that the rise of Islam is supported by demographic trends. In describing the Muslim Brotherhood’s long-term strategy, Tanneur says, “pour eux l’essentiel c’est la démographie, et l’éducation ; la sous-population qui dispose du meilleur taux de reproduction, et qui parvient à transmettre ses valeurs, triomphe.” From this long-term perspective, Rediger’s and François’ conversion to Islam are exceptions. Conversion, and the accompanying need for persuasion about the truth or the advantages of Islam, play only a minor role in the predicted long-term rise of Islam, and this, perhaps more than anything else, indicates that the novel cannot be summarily dismissed as simply satirical. This focus on demographics continues a persistent emphasis in Houellebecq’s

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372 Ibid., 271.
373 Ibid., 82.
novels on long-term, large-scale sociological trends as the driving force of history. The argument from demographics depicts the rise of Islam “neutrally” as a sociological probability. In this respect, *Soumission*’s argument for the inevitability of the rise of Islam in Europe is analogous to the Marxist understanding of the advent of communism as both desirable and as something likely or inevitable based on objective “scientific” laws. The demographic argument shows that the rise of Islam is not, in the long term, contingent on any one of the arguments *Soumission* makes in its favour (metaphysical arguments for the existence of God, personal benefit, and civilizational renewal). Islam is shown in the novel to be set to dominate Europe not primarily for ideological reasons, but in accordance with scientific and objective demographic laws.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have delineated two aspects to the Islamic solution in *Soumission*. The first is the question of its desirability, the question of whether, if it were indeed possible, such a solution would represent a significant improvement on life as it is now lived in the West. The second aspect is the question of feasibility, the question of whether an Islamic regime might conceivably emerge out of the current political and social conditions of Europe (even if not within the timeframe envisaged in *Soumission*). In order to represent a solution both criteria need to be met, that is, the new regime must be both desirable and objectively plausible. As to the desirability of the solution, I have shown that *Soumission* tentatively and in general terms presents the Islamic solution as desirable. Islam is shown to provide benefits in terms of providing a basis for a flourishing new Empire and offering an alternative to values of excessive autonomy presented as pernicious. Clear advantages accrue to specific people from certain groups within society, for instance to François, for whom arranged marriage and polygamy offer a potential solution to his erotic needs. I have shown that while the existence of other perspectives is implied in *Soumission*, these perspectives are never directly articulated. While satire and the conspicuous absence of alternative perspectives in *Soumission* prevent the novel being read as a straightforward manifesto for the Islamic solution, this solution is shown to be a step in the right direction.
That a return to religion and traditional patriarchal values is presented in *Soumission* as desirable should not, in the context of Houellebecq’s œuvre, come as a surprise, as Houellebecq’s novels all lament the secularity and excessive emphasis on autonomy in contemporary Western civilisation. In contrast, the argument made in *Soumission* that a credible trajectory exists for a return to religion and traditional values represents a significant departure in Houellebecq’s œuvre. *Soumission* provides arguments for the return of religion and, as we have seen, argues that atheism in the West is more apparent than real. *Soumission* provides a path to conversion for individual characters which does not dwell on metaphysical or theological questions and is not excessively burdensome. *Soumission* also offers an argument showing that the rise of Islam in Europe is likely in the long term for demographic reasons unrelated to the inherent advantages of the Islamic religion. While the specific political events that *Soumission* portrays as leading to the success of the Islamic regime are unpredictable (for instance, the emergence of a brilliant, charismatic leader like Ben Abbes), *Soumission* depicts Europe as inherently predisposed towards a return to religion. In spite of the novel’s sometimes satirical overtones, it is thus nevertheless possible to conclude that, in general terms, something like this change to an Islamic regime is being presented as both beneficial and plausible. *Soumission* therefore reopens the possibility of religion as a solution to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation, a solution adamantly denied in previous novels. No longer does posthuman technology offer the solitary albeit uncertain hope for societal salvation in Houellebecq’s œuvre; theistic religion combined with traditional values is now contemplated as an alternative possibility for resolving deep-seated discontents in Western civilisation. Moreover, while a return to religion and tradition may not be realistically feasible in the immediate future as imagined in *Soumission*, it is a solution that is nevertheless arguably less remote than the advent of posthuman technology.
Conclusion

In the previous chapter, we saw how *Soumission* offered a return to religion and tradition, in contrast to solutions relying on posthuman technology as explored in *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, as an alternative and arguably less remote answer to the problems of Western civilisation. In this conclusion, I will examine statements made by Houellebecq in interviews and non-fiction, comparing these with ideas contained in the novels. In the introduction, I argued that, like Zola before him, Houellebecq uses the medium of the novel to diagnose and depict contemporary social problems. I also argued that Houellebecq’s novels can be read in a quasi-naturalistic fashion and that they are relevant to the real world. We should therefore expect some consistency between the ideas in the novels and the ideas expressed by Houellebecq in more direct social commentary. Given Houellebecq’s predilection for controversy and his alleged tendency to carefully manage his public persona, however, it might be asked, at the outset, whether the consistency we observe between the ideas in the novels and Houellebecq’s personal statements is simply the result of a deliberate mimicry on Houellebecq’s part of controversial ideas voiced by characters in his novels, and thereby not indicative of the novel’s real-world relevance. While the possibility that, on occasions, Houellebecq deliberately echoes ideas in his novels for controversial effect cannot, of course, be ruled out, the overlap between the ideas in the novels and Houellebecq’s statements across the course of many years, in a wide range of forums and not only in the mass media, strongly suggests that many of the essential ideas in the novels are based on Houellebecq’s own thoughts and opinions about the problems facing contemporary Western civilisation and about possible solutions to those problems. Houellebecq’s statements, moreover, though sometimes controversial, are not generally sensationalistic, and often seek to nuance or qualify the more extreme scenarios and opinions voiced in the novels. While Houellebecq’s statements can be challenged and critiqued, they contain enough reasoned argumentation to make it difficult to dismiss them, wholesale, as a form of literary role-play with little connection to the real world or even Houellebecq’s personal ideas. Indeed, they bear witness to a sustained engagement on Houellebecq’s part with the real-world problems of contemporary Western civilisation as he
understands them, an engagement which, I argue, is carried into the exploration of solutions in his novelistic fiction.

In this conclusion, I will demonstrate that Houellebecq’s commentary is generally consistent with the ideas expressed in his novels. For instance (and most notably), Houellebecq himself in non-fictional contexts has argued that, from a long-term perspective, both posthuman technology and a return to monotheistic religion may be possible solutions to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. Examining a range of non-fictional texts from different periods in Houellebecq’s career, I will show that, as in the novels, a shift occurs in Houellebecq’s views whereby an earlier denial of the possibility of a return to religion and tradition is later reconsidered. The parallels identified between the novels and Houellebecq’s statements will further corroborate my claim made in the introduction, that Houellebecq’s novels are naturalistic in nature and that their solutions are more than just fantasy. After briefly reviewing the evolution of ideas across the four key novels and the emergence of two distinct but related solutions, I will compare the novels with Houellebecq’s statements about posthuman technology and a return to religion and tradition. I will conclude with a discussion of Houellebecq’s advocacy of direct democracy, which is not broached in the novels but which, I argue, can be understood as a limited and contingent measure in the interregnum before the advent of posthuman technology or the return to religion.

Emergence of the posthuman and religious solutions across the four key novels

In the reading of Les Particules élémentaires in Chapter 1, we first encountered a dramatization of the fundamental problems facing Western civilisation which would be repeated, from different angles, in Houellebecq’s subsequent novels. Comte’s philosophy provided a framework for understanding how these problems emerged historically and how they might be resolved. In particular, Comte’s philosophy helped us understand how the plethora of social problems depicted in Les Particules élémentaires were symptomatic of an underlying crisis in which a scientific, materialist worldview inexorably displaces one based on theology and tradition. Western society, as depicted in Les Particules élémentaires and subsequent novels, finds itself at the
end of this process of displacement: scientific materialism has destroyed religion, tradition, family life, and love, and all that remains is the depressing realisation that humans are mortal animals, atomised and doomed, competing frenetically for access to pleasure and narcissistic differentiation. In agreement with Comte, Les Particules élémentaires explicitly rejects the possibility of being able to stop the historical juggernaut of science and rationality; social cohesion and a renewal of love, the novel implies, could only come about by following the hitherto destructive trajectory of scientific progress to a utopian telos. Les Particules élémentaires rejects Comte’s vision of an atheistic Religion of Humanity as a way of reconciling the progress of science with humanity’s need for religion on the grounds that such a religion offers neither individual immortality nor a reprogramming of human biological nature. Like Comte’s Religion of Humanity, however, it posits the creation of a utopian society – that of the immortal, blissful posthuman clones – as achievable not in spite of, but by means of scientific progress. Posthuman technology in Les Particules élémentaires is suggested as a way of successfully realizing the ideals of love and social cohesion where Comte’s religion failed.

Through my reading of La Possibilité d’une île in Chapter 2, we saw how this novel continues the extremely negative depiction of contemporary society found in Les Particules élémentaires. The same basic idea pervades both novels: religion and higher values have been destroyed by rationalistic materialism, and all that remains is competition, cruelty, and the abjectness of suffering and mortality without hope of salvation. Not only does La Possibilité d’une île rule out a return to tradition and religion within Western society, it also predicts that the corrosive influence of Western individualism will ultimately destroy Islam even in the countries of origin. As in Les Particules élémentaires, a return to religion and tradition is blocked and the West’s (and ultimately humanity’s) only hope of escaping the seemingly irremediable plight of the current age is through posthuman technology vanquishing death and correcting flawed biological human nature. In contrast to Les Particules élémentaires, however, the success of the posthuman solution in La Possibilité d’une île is ambiguous. In Chapter 2 we saw how the society of the affectless neo-human clones, while devoid of negative, competitive human instincts, was in many ways even less desirable than
contemporary society. A utopian hope for a posthuman solution remains in *La Possibilité d’une île* in the form of the mysterious *Futurs*, but this posthuman solution is much more distant and uncertain than the one in *Les Particules élémentaires*.

Having thus problematised and at least postponed the predicted arrival of a posthuman utopia in *La Possibilité d’une île*, Houellebecq’s subsequent novels imagine near futures in which human biological nature remains unchanged. Without a posthuman solution on the horizon of the immediate future, and without the possibility of a genuine return to religion and tradition, *La Carte et le territoire* depicts contemporary society as facing chronic stasis, with no solutions apparent. Although the novel depicts a renewed interest in tradition and authenticity, and seems to offer these up as possible (but unsuccessful) ways in which Western civilisation may be able to turn back the dial and reverse the slide into deep existential malaise, in Chapter 3 we saw how tradition and authenticity were definitively shown to be merely the simulacral creations of astute marketing. Reading *La Carte et le territoire* in light of Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, we saw that tradition and authenticity do not merely disappear, but are emptied of content and resurrected as virtual images. If, in my reading of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, I showed that a return to religion and tradition was considered impossible, in *La Carte et le territoire* the situation is then exacerbated by the simulacral resurrection of the concept of “tradition” through marketing. A solution of sorts is considered through the character Jed who maintains a sense of artistic integrity despite ambient inauthenticity, but it is made clear that Jed represents an anachronism and that his art, like almost everything else, is inevitably co-opted by the forces of marketing and commerce.

*Les Particules élémentaires*, *La Possibilité d’une île*, and *La Carte et le territoire* all subscribe to a common logic in which the contemporary moment is positioned as if on a railroad leading inexorably away from religion and tradition (the apparent return to tradition in *La Carte et le territoire*, we saw, was merely simulacral). Having left behind religion and tradition, the West finds itself in a badlands characterised by competition, atomisation, and the absence of all higher values. The only glimmer of hope lies in the prospect of a posthuman solution farther down the tracks of technological development. *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* also expressly
reject the possibility of a bifurcation away from Enlightenment values towards Islam; Western values, powered by scientific materialism, are considered as the locomotive of world history, with the Islamic world being pulled inevitably down the same tracks away from religion and tradition. At the beginning of *Soumission*, the view from the window of the contemporary moment is similar to that in the previous novels: a depressing vista of atomised individuals, the absence of family bonds, and material affluence doing little to alleviate spiritual emptiness and fear of death. *Soumission*’s diagnosis of the cause of the West’s social malaise is then consistent with the previous novels: in the absence of religious belief promising immortality, there is no longer any secure basis for family life and tradition, and all that remains are more or less futile attempts to disguise the underlying nihilism of contemporary life.

*Soumission*, however, for the first time in Houellebecq’s novelistic œuvre, departs from the notion of unidirectional historical development away from monotheistic religion and tradition. The West’s atheism and its cult of individualism, *Soumission* implies, may be more apparent than real, and Islam may, instead of facing inevitable corrosion by Western values, in fact offer the West a chance of returning to the lost traditions of monotheism, family life, and patriarchy. While openness to the possibility of a return to monotheistic religion in *Soumission* may seem incompatible with the ideas contained in previous novels, ideas which pointed to posthuman technology as the only credible solution, it is nevertheless possible to discover much common ground between *Soumission* and the earlier novels and between the posthuman and the monotheistic solutions. The religious solution in *Soumission* does not therefore represent a wholesale abandonment of earlier ideas but, rather, a revision of certain presumptions. *Soumission* indeed is consistent with the previous novels in considering religion (or quasi-religious posthuman technology), as the only means of society’s salvation, and in considering the promise of individual immortality to be the *sine qua non* of any prospective solution. What is new in *Soumission* is not, then, the idea that a return to religion and tradition might be desirable, but that such a return is historically possible. Even in *Soumission*, however, the argument for the possibility of a European turn towards Islam focuses on quasi-scientific forces rather than on ideology. In my reading of *Soumission* in Chapter 4, I have shown
how claims of a quasi-Darwinian selective advantage were used to justify the prediction of the
domination of Islam. As in previous novels, *Soumission* attempts to found its solution on long-term,
objective, scientific laws. In *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, the solution is
based on an imaginative extrapolation of technological progress; in *Soumission*, extrapolations
based on demographic laws show how the track of Western historical development might bifurcate,
allowing the West to circle back to tradition and religion. In our reading of Houellebecq’s four key
novels, two possible solutions to the problems of Western civilisation have therefore been
identified, one involving posthuman technology and the other involving Islam and a return to
monotheistic religion and patriarchal tradition. While the possibility of a return to monotheistic
religion in *Soumission* represents a reconsideration of some of the presumptions of the earlier
novels, all four novels are consistent in suggesting that only religion (whether an existing religion or
its technologically-enabled equivalent) and the promise of individual immortality are able to
provide an exit from the crisis of Western civilisation. What is striking is that Houellebecq’s own
statements in the non-fictional realm about posthuman and monotheistic solutions concur with the
ideas in the novels, which is to say that Houellebecq has, at different times, argued for the
plausibility, from a long-term perspective, of both these solutions in the real world.

*Houellebecq on the posthuman solution*

In interviews and non-fiction texts, Houellebecq has expressed his belief that radical
posthuman technology is likely to be available in the future, and that the application of such
technology would be justified. In an interview for *Lui* magazine, he told Frédéric Beigbeder, “J’ai
beaucoup lu sur le clonage, sur la fabrication d’un être humain à l’identique. Je pense qu’on pourra
un jour créer directement un néo-humain adulte, c’est-à-dire de 18 ans.” Houellebecq therefore
accepts the possibility that some of the technology described in his novels, for instance the
production of adult human clones in *La Possibilité d’une île*, might eventually be available in

http://www.luimagazine.fr/culture/livres-bd/michel-houellebecq-par-frederic-beigbeder/
reality. He also envisages that, in the long term, posthuman technology will make possible the immortality coveted in his novels:

À long terme, l’intervention directe sur le code génétique devrait permettre de dépasser certaines limitations actuellement considérées comme inséparables de la condition humaine (les plus spectaculaires étant bien entendu le vieillissement et la mort). 375

Houellebecq, however, refrains from any claims that such technology might be imminent, in contrast to Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île in which radical posthuman technology is available in the immediate future. The uncertainty at the present time about the forms posthuman technology might take leaves Houellebecq considerable latitude in exploring different possibilities in his novels. In an interview with Paris Match, Houellebecq explains, “La science-fiction me permet de bifurquer vers une littérature plus poétique et plus ouverte au rêve.” 376 The future possibility of posthuman technology allows Houellebecq to imagine categories of solution unavailable at the present time. As he says, “En se projetant dans l’avenir, on peut imaginer d’autres ressorts.” 377 These projections into a posthuman future, however, while involving imagination and invention, are not simple fantasy in their underlying premises, and Houellebecq sets out cogent reasons why a technological solution may be the only answer to the problems of contemporary society. His reasoning in interviews and non-fiction is similar to the ideas contained in Les Particules élémentaires, and it is likewise through a critique of Comte that he is led to conclude that a posthuman solution is necessary.

In an introduction to Comte’s philosophy, Houellebecq notes that instead of an individual afterlife, “il proposait une survie théorique dans le mémoire des hommes… Eh bien cela n’a pas suffi.” 378 As in Les Particules élémentaires, Houellebecq identifies the absence of individual immortality as the Achilles’ heel in Comte’s positivist religion. According to Houellebecq, the

376 Ibid., 261.
377 Ibid., 261.
378 Ibid., 176.
attractiveness of monotheistic religions, together with their capacity to provide a foundation for social relations, depends almost entirely on their promise of individual immortality. Immortality, Houellebecq dryly notes, is “un fantastique produit d’appel.” Comte’s attempt to found a positivist religion, Houellebecq emphasises, failed miserably: “Comte, j’y insiste, a échoué ; il a radicalement et lamentablement échoué.” For Houellebecq, Comte’s religion failed precisely because it did not take into account humanity’s most basic hope: “C’est très simple: les êtres humains veulent vivre et pourtant ils doivent mourir. À partir de là, le premier désir est d’être immortel.” As we shall see, Houellebecq did not at this time consider a renewal of monotheistic religion as a credible solution at a personal level or at the level of society as a whole. As for Comte, there was for Houellebecq no question of renewing an existing religion, and the challenge was to create a new religion compatible with reason and science. In an interview with Jérôme Garcin, Houellebecq repeats the idea contained in *La Possibilité d’une île* that a new religion like Raëlism, promising technological immortality, is likely to replace traditional monotheistic religions. Houellebecq explains the attractiveness of the Raëlian religion, saying, “Elle est adaptée aux temps modernes, à la civilisation des loisirs, elle n’impose aucune contrainte morale et surtout elle promet l’immortalité. C’est cette idée d’immortalité qui m’a attiré vers les raéliens.” For Houellebecq, the necessary condition of a successful new religion is not belief in God, but the promise of immortality, “Une religion sans Dieu est peut-être possible… mais rien de tout cela ne me paraît envisageable sans une croyance à la vie éternelle.” As in *Les Particules élémentaires*, Houellebecq looks to technological immortality as a way of achieving a science-based religion where Comte had failed, suggesting that “L’établissement de l’immortalité physique, par des moyens qui appartiennent à la technologie, est sans doute le passage obligé qui rendra, à nouveau, une religion possible.”

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379 *Ennemis publics*, 171.
380 Ibid., 177.
381 *Interventions*, 179.
383 *Interventions*, 77.
384 Ibid., 351.
Houellebecq does not admit any ethical objections to the posthuman project, and this is consistent with his novels and their deflation of humanist values. He declares himself in favour of “une humanité augmentée,” saying “si on peut vivre trois cent cinquante ans, je suis pour.” Houellebecq bluntly tells Beigbeder, “J’ai pas envie de me laisser emmerder par les humanistes. Si on peut améliorer l’humanité, pourquoi pas ?” As in the novels, Houellebecq denies that there is anything sacred about the human species that ethically prohibits biological modification or even replacement by an entirely new form of being. Indeed, if the human species loses its capacity for compassion, then its modification or replacement may become an ethical imperative. In the posthuman scenarios of Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île, posthuman technology offered not only immortality but also an eradication of moral flaws in human nature. Redemption from moral viciousness was as important as redemption from death. For Houellebecq too, if humanity has indeed reached a stage in which it is beyond moral redemption, then its replacement with a morally superior species should be welcomed:

Et si la compassion venait à disparaître ? Eh bien je crois que l’humanité disparaîtrait à son tour. Et que la disparation de cette humanité-là serait plutôt une bonne chose. Et qu’il faudrait attendre la venue d’une autre espèce intelligente, plus coopérative, mieux adaptée par son organisation tribale d’origine à la montée vers la loi morale.

As in the novels, Houellebecq sees posthuman technology and a rejection of humanism not as a threat to morality, but as a way of restoring it. As he writes, “Sortir de l’humanisme n’implique nullement de sortir de la morale, celle-ci découlant de l’organisation apparente du monde en êtres séparés.” Houellebecq positions himself outside of the more common framing of the question of posthuman technology in terms of individual liberty weighed in the balance against religious and moral concerns. As in his novels, Houellebecq thus sees posthuman technology as a way of

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385 Houellebecq, “Mon projet pour la France.”
386 Ibid.
387 Ibid.
388 Ibid., 180.
389 Interventions, 180.
realising the sort of moral and religious utopia that Comte failed to achieve by means of his Religion of Humanity.

Houellebecq’s interest in posthuman technology as expressed in these interviews and writings reveals him to be attracted, above all, by the possibility of immortality and the renewal of religion and morality. As in the novels, these three fundamental goals are for Houellebecq inextricably linked. For Houellebecq, as for Comte, a moral society cannot be sustained in the long term without a foundation in religion. Religion, however, cannot be separated from the promise of immortality. It can therefore be said that Houellebecq, as in his novels, consistently states a belief that only a religious solution (or quasi-religious posthuman solution), to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation is adequate. What is more, the main shift that occurs in Houellebecq’s views—coinciding with Soumission and a similar shift in the novelistic œuvre—does not relate to the perceived desirability of religion and tradition, but to the possibility that a return to monotheistic religion and tradition might actually occur.

_Houellebecq on a return to monotheistic religion and tradition_

Given the strong parallels that have been observed between Houellebecq’s ideas as expounded in both his fiction and non-fiction, it should come as no surprise that Houellebecq, around the time of the publication of Soumission, for the first time expresses the view that a return to religion is a realistic possibility. Before Soumission, Houellebecq’s fiction and non-fiction concurred in regarding a return to religion and tradition as desirable, but unfortunately impossible. The correlation of the shift that occurs between Soumission and Houellebecq’s previous novels with the shift in Houellebecq’s own views as revealed in interviews further corroborates our claim for the real-world relevance of the novels, and indicates that their solutions are not arbitrary but reflect Houellebecq’s own thinking about real-world problems. In his non-fiction and interviews, as in his novels, both continuity and evolution may be observed in Houellebecq’s attitude to religion and tradition. Continuity is observed in his consistent nostalgia for religion and a lost social order perceived as less competitive and less alienating. Just as much of his thinking about religion in the
novels is similar to Comte’s, so in interviews and non-fiction he consistently prosecutes a line of thinking that is identifiably Comtean. Houellebecq holds firmly to the view that Enlightenment values and the progress of science and reason have eroded religion and the social bonds that religion once underwrote. Enlightenment values, Houellebecq believes, have become toxic and destructive to society. As in his novels, Houellebecq expresses the view that Enlightenment values have in some way turned against themselves, and that the advances of science and reason were always in some way treacherous. Houellebecq argues that this danger only became apparent when it was already too late, claiming that “les étonnants progrès scientifiques et techniques de la Renaissance s’étaient accomplis dans une sorte d’innocence philosophique.”

Taking his lead from Comte, Houellebecq presents Western history since the Middle Ages as the story of a fundamental conflict between the ascending positivistic forces of science and reason and the declining social and epistemological forces of a theological system once securely founded on the authority of the Catholic Church. Indeed, for Houellebecq, “l’Église catholique n’aperçut pas immédiatement le danger, et ne réagit que trop tard, lorsque les bases de son autorité spirituelle étaient déjà minées.”

The cascading collapse of religious and traditional values in the face of reason and science is for Houellebecq disastrous, but nowhere before interviews given around the time of the publication of Soumission does he give any indication that this process is reversible. Before this time, Houellebecq consistently presented a stark picture of the ineluctable decline of spiritual values, suggesting, for instance, that “la catégorie de l’esprit devait connaître un déclin tumultueux, marqué par diverses tentatives pour lui redonner un semblant d’existence – certaines furent grandioses, comme le kantianisme ; d’autres misérables, comme les psychologies.” By contrast, Houellebecq observes, “la matière, de son côté, semblait voler de succès en succès.” When asked by Sylvain Bourmeau for his evaluation of Enlightenment philosophy, Houellebecq replies:

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390 *Interventions*, 246.
391 Ibid., 246.
392 Ibid., 247.
393 Ibid., 247.
In this sense, too, I am a Comtean. We are in what he calls the metaphysical stage, which began in the Middle Ages and whose whole point was to destroy the phase that preceded it. In itself, it can produce nothing, just emptiness and unhappiness.\textsuperscript{394}

But with Comte’s vision of a positivist religion without individual immortality derided as hopelessly naïve and the posthuman solution unavailable at the present time, is Houellebecq’s professed hostility to Enlightenment values an impotent hostility, a futile wish that things were otherwise? In interviews and non-fiction before the time of the publication of \textit{Soumission}, Houellebecq is indeed conscious of a futility in his hostility to Enlightenment values; just as in the novels before \textit{Soumission}, he is convinced that the destruction of monotheistic religion is irreversible. Houellebecq affirms that contemporary Western civilisation still finds itself languishing in the midst of the traumatic, untenable metaphysical stage that Comte had thought, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century, was on the verge of giving way to the utopian, positivist phase, and that “nous ne sommes toujours pas sortis de l’état métaphysique, dont la disparition lui paraissait imminente – nous avons même, moi que jamais, l’intention d’en sortir.”\textsuperscript{395}

In \textit{Les Particules élémentaires} and \textit{La Possibilité d’une île}, as well as in Houellebecq’s non-fiction and interviews, the possibility of society evolving out of the metaphysical phase is contingent on the uncertain future prospect of posthuman technology. Nowhere in the novels or in the non-fiction and interviews before \textit{Soumission} is the idea entertained that Western civilisation might reverse the entropic progression in Comte’s historical theory and revert back to something like the theological phase. Writing in 2002, Houellebecq’s non-fiction treats the idea of an escape from the intolerable metaphysical phase by means of a simple U-turn not as a serious possibility but as a matter for satire: “au vu des magazines titrant régulièrement sur le « retour de Dieu », un satiriste pourrait même se demander si nous ne sommes pas menacés d’en sortir \textit{par le bas}.”\textsuperscript{396}

\textsuperscript{394} Houellebecq, “Scare Tactics.”
\textsuperscript{395} \textit{Interventions}, 245.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 245.
Writing in *Ennemis publics* in 2008, Houellebecq revealed that he would like to believe in God but is unable to do so. In spite of regularly attending Church, Houellebecq claimed that “le problème c'est que Dieu, je n'y crois toujours pas.” Elsewhere in *Ennemis public*, Houellebecq reiterates his atheism, proclaiming, “Je ne crois pas en Dieu, il n’est pas nécessaire, ni ici ni au paradis.” Houellebecq’s personal atheism at this time coincides with a conviction that monotheistic religion is doomed at the level of society as a whole. In this respect Houellebecq’s views are consistent with the depiction of the fate of monotheistic religions in the novels before *Soumission*. In a 2006 interview, indeed, Houellebecq said:

> Je continue de penser que la croyance en Dieu devrait normalement décroître, même si les événements semblent me donner tort. J’ai l’impression que l’on se comporte aujourd’hui avec les religions comme avec les danses bretonnes : du moment que c’est un peu traditionnel, un peu vieux, ça devient respectable et presque sympathique.

Houellebecq is arguing here that religion, having lost any essential function in Western civilisation, survives like an interesting anachronism, much like country life and rustic cuisine in *La Carte et le territoire*. Houellebecq defends his prediction in *La Possibilité d’une île* of “la mort des grands monothéismes et le triomphe de la secte des raéliens,” saying that the idea of the decline of monotheistic religion in the West is “une conviction que je tire d’une simple expérience personnelle.” Echoing ideas contained in *Les Particules élémentaires*, *La Possibilité d’une île* and *La Carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq argues that he witnessed the collapse of the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland and Spain, the last bastions of European Catholicism:

> Pendant deux années, j’ai vécu à cheval entre deux pays naguère très catholiques, l’Irlande et l’Espagne. J’y ai assisté, médusé, à l’écroulement brutal de la religion. C’est

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397 *Ennemis publics*, 143.
398 Ibid., 182.
399 *Interventions*, 264.
401 Ibid., 9.
comme si les Irlandais et les Espagnols oublaient leur civilisation originelle. La tradition catholique a totalement disparu.  

At the time of the publication of *Soumission*, Houellebecq’s observation of the decline of an etiolated Christianity in Europe is shown to be compatible with the idea of its replacement by vigorous Islam. Before this time, however, for instance in an interview in 2005, Houellebecq explicitly argues that Islam is subject to the same process of inevitable decline, saying, “je suis sûr que l’islamisme, actuellement très en vogue chez les jeunes, disparaîtra lui aussi. De la religion musulmane, comme du mouvement punk, il ne restera rien de plus qu’une esthétique.” This view is in accord with *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île*, which both predicted that Islam, even in the countries of origin, would be unable to withstand the irresistible influence of Western secularism. In my reading of *Soumission* in Chapter 4, we saw how the prediction in previous novels of the inevitable decline of monotheistic religions in the West, including Islam, was dramatically reversed and that an Islamic empire in Europe was depicted as possible or even likely.

We observe a similar change in position in Houellebecq’s interviews from this time with Houellebecq himself now identifying as agnostic and arguing that an eventual return to monotheistic religion is likely for demographic reasons. Houellebecq’s previously unequivocal atheism now gives way to a newfound agnosticism, and he claims, for instance, that “Mon athéisme, ou plutôt mon rationalisme, est très relatif, parce que j’ai parfois l’impression de sentir des vibrations spirituelles.” Houellebecq admits to Bourmeau, “I thought I was an atheist, yes. Now I really don’t know.” This personal change in his religious convictions is paralleled by a shift in his ideas about the fate of religion at the level of society as a whole. Even if Catholicism is still thought of as a spent force in Europe, Houellebecq now sees Islam as a viable alternative: “If Catholicism doesn’t work, that’s because it’s already run its course, it seems to belong to the past, it

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402 Ibid., 9.
403 Ibid., 9.
405 Houellebecq, “Scare Tactics.”
has defeated itself. Islam is an image of the future." In contrast to the prediction, expressed in both earlier novels and in early interviews and non-fiction, of the inevitable worldwide decline of monotheistic religions, Houellebecq now sees both Islam and evangelical Christianity as religions on the rise: “Il n’y a pas que l’islam qui soit en progression aujourd’hui, il y a aussi l’évangélisme qui a du succès en Amérique du Sud et en Afrique ; ces deux puissances religieuses sont en pleine ascension.” It can thus be seen that Houellebecq’s interviews at the time of the publication of *Soumission* indicate, like the novel, a diametric reversal of previous predictions of the decline of monotheistic religion. This in turn suggests that the Islamic solution in *Soumission* is not simple fantasy, but is based on Houellebecq’s reconsideration of real-world observations.

In my reading of *Soumission* we discovered that a central argument given for the eventual domination of Islam in Europe was the assertion that birth rates in Islamic communities are higher than in society at large, that religion is generally passed down through families, and that the influence of Islam will therefore continue to grow on the basis of simple demographic laws. Similar views are expressed by Houellebecq in interviews given around the time of the publication of *Soumission*. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Houellebecq argued that belief in God is “ein selektiver Fortpflanzungsvorteil”, a selective advantage. Believers, Houellebecq claims, have more children, and pass on their beliefs in the upbringing of their children: “Wer gläubig ist, bekommt mehr Kinder. Und die Mehrheit setzt irgendwann ihre Werte und Vorstellungen durch.”

In another interview, Houellebecq uses the same demographic argument to show that traditional family values and patriarchy will inevitably prevail:

Démographiquement, les valeurs patriarcales gagnent. L’idéologie n’y peut rien. Interrogeons-nous sur le succès de la « manif pour tous ». Ce n’est pas que l’islam qui

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406 Ibid.
407 Houellebecq, “Michel Houellebecq, de conversion en soumission.”
409 Ibid. “Believers have more children, and pass on their beliefs through the upbringing of the children.”
est concerné par cette question. La démographie est une force puissante. Le conservatisme a le vent en poupe.  

_Soumission_, Houellebecq argues, shows how feminism is doomed for purely demographic reasons, and he suggests that “The thing that may rub people the wrong way is that I show how feminism is demographically doomed. So the underlying idea, which may really upset people in the end, is that ideology doesn’t matter much compared to demographics.” In previous novels as well as in the non-fiction and interviews, the decline of religion and tradition was presented as a depressing but indisputable fact; now, however, the eventual triumph of religion and patriarchal values is a neutral observation.

While in some of his statements in recent interviews Houellebecq presents himself as a simple messenger bearing tidings of indisputable demographic fact, in others he seems to additionally imply that the patriarchal system described in _Soumission_ might be desirable and certainly not something to be feared: “You can’t really describe this book as a pessimistic prediction. At the end of the day, things don’t go all that badly, really.” In Chapter 4, I discussed the ambiguity in _Soumission_’s framing of the patriarchal views expressed by certain of its characters. Houellebecq’s acknowledgment, however, that “certainly a feminist is not likely to love this book,” implies that he expects the novel to be interpreted as incompatible with feminist ideology rather than as a crypto-feminist satire of patriarchal views. Houellebecq also evinces a tentative ideological sympathy for Islamic patriarchy in opposition to feminism when he says, “I feel, rather, that we can make arrangements. The feminists will not be able to, if we’re being completely honest. But I and lots of other people will.” It is not entirely clear what Houellebecq means by feminism, but these statements indicate that he believes, at the very least, that a return to a more traditional role for women in society is not something to be feared. This is further corroborated by Houellebecq’s claim that the sort of Islam described in _Soumission_, that is, an Islam promoting polygamy, arranged

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410 Houellebecq, “Michel Houllebecq, de conversion en soumission.”
411 Ibid.
412 Ibid.
413 Ibid.
marriages, discouraging education for girls, discouraging employment for women and enforcing modest dress, is in fact rather reassuring: “L’islam, dans mon livre, est un islam plutôt rassurant.”

These statements suggest that Houellebecq would regard favourably something like the Islamic regime described in *Soumission*, indicating that the novel, in general terms, is pointing towards a solution that Houellebecq might welcome in the real world.

When Houellebecq describes the patriarchal regime in *Soumission* as “plutôt rassurant,” and the social-political system of the European Middle Ages as “pas mal,” this is in keeping with the consistent hostility to Enlightenment values found throughout his novels, non-fiction, and interviews. Houellebecq argues that “the destruction of Enlightenment philosophy has to happen sometime and it might as well be now.” He unequivocally declares, “I am hostile to Enlightenment philosophy, I need to make that perfectly clear.” It can therefore be seen that Houellebecq, not only in his novels but also in his interviews, affirms the desirability of rejecting Enlightenment values and of a return to tradition and religion. In a review of *Soumission*, Phillipe Maxence describes Houellebecq as “un Chesterton contemporain,” but qualifies this by saying “c’est un Chesterton triste.” This description might accurately be applied to Houellebecq in relation to his novels and statements before *Soumission*, when he considered that a return to monotheistic religion and tradition was desirable but impossible in reality. It does not, however, apply to *Soumission* and Houellebecq’s later optimism about a return to monotheistic religion in the West.

Yet there remains one important qualification that applies to the optimism evinced by Houellebecq in both novels and statements about the possibility of a solution, in the form of posthuman technology or a return to religion, eventually being found. While *Les Particules élémentaires* and *Soumission* depict posthuman and religious solutions respectively as occurring in

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414 Ibid.
415 Ibid.
416 Ibid.
417 Ibid.
418 Ibid.
420 Ibid.
the immediate future, they should be understood as dramatic accelerations of real-world, but long-term, possibilities. In an interview Houellebecq explains that while French politics may in the future be dominated by an Islamic party, the timeline presented in Soumission is not realistic: “C’est possible, mais la situation que je décrit ne se réalisera pas en 2022.”

The success of such an Islamic party in France would depend, Houellebecq argues, on the creation of “une société parallèle,” involving a network of social and educational organisations, a process that would take, in Houellebecq’s estimation, “des dizaines d’années pour porter ses fruits.”

Houellebecq’s novels depict future solutions towards which the West may be gradually heading, but which might not be realised soon. This does not mean that the posthuman and religious solutions are fantasy, unrealisable in the real world, but that society may well have to wait decades or longer before they become available. In the meantime, individuals and society can only manage as best they can, and it is in keeping with a sober timeline for posthuman or monotheistic societal salvation that Houellebecq, in the real world, deigns to consider lesser, stop-gap measures such as direct democracy.

**Houellebecq on direct democracy**

In interviews and public statements, Houellebecq has argued for the implementation of direct democracy as a necessary political reform. In the form of direct democracy proposed by Houellebecq, the budget and all new laws would be determined by referendum, as would presidential and judicial posts. He tells Beigbeder, “En résumé, je suis pour le référendum d’initiative populaire comme unique moyen de changer les lois. Mais cela ne s’arrête pas là, la population devrait également voter le budget.”

He goes on to explain that, in his opinion, Parliament should be suppressed:

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421 Houellebecq, “Michel Houellebecq, de conversion en soumission.”
422 Ibid.
423 Ibid.
424 Houellebeq, “Mon project pour la France.”
Eh bien, tout d’abord, je souhaite généraliser la démocratie directe en supprimant le Parlement. À mon avis, le président de la République doit être élu à vie mais instantanément révocable sur simple référendum d’initiative populaire. Troisième mesure importante : la fonction de juge deviendra élective.  

In the context of the ideas expressed in Houellebecq’s novels and in much of his non-fiction and interviews, this advocacy of direct democracy may come as a surprise. In his analysis of the problems of contemporary society and in his search for possible solutions, Houellebecq has consistently emphasised the vast technological, demographic, biological and historical forces acting upon individuals and society against which individual or collective volition seems powerless to resist. He has also argued that without the promise of individual immortality, a genuinely cohesive society will never be possible. Political engagement, unless tied up with the fundamental solutions of posthuman technology or a return to religion and tradition, seems insignificant and ineffective when viewed from the grand historical and biological perspectives Houellebecq is wont to take. Les Particules élémentaires, for instance, shows how depressive insight reveals the relative insignificance of politics and of nationalism in particular: 

La traditionnelle lucidité des dépressifs, souvent décrite comme un désinvestissement radical à l’égard des préoccupations humaines, se manifeste en tout premier lieu par un manque d’intérêt pour les questions effectivement peu intéressantes. Ainsi peut-on, à la rigueur, imaginer un dépressif amoureux, tandis qu'un dépressif patriote paraît franchement inconcevable. 

Politics and patriotism are, from this point of view, fundamentally uninteresting because they have no bearing on individual happiness or on genuine societal salvation. Houellebecq’s depressive insight, manifest in all of the novels and also in his non-fiction and interviews, looks beyond politics and nations to the underlying problems of Darwinian competition, the ubiquitous application of market principles to human sociality, the erosion of morality, and the inevitability of

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425 Ibid.
426 Les Particules élémentaires, 226.
death. Politics cannot change the essential facts of contemporary society, nor can it change fundamental realities of human nature and mortality. It cannot reverse the tendency towards simulation and the loss of the real described in *La Carte et le territoire*.

Not only does a solution like direct democracy seem insignificant in the context of the fundamental problems Houellebecq’s work identifies, it even seems to be in direct contradiction with ideas expressed in the novels, non-fiction, and interviews. How can Houellebecq’s support for direct democracy be squared, for instance, with his excoriation of Enlightenment values, his extolment of submission, and his deflation of individual autonomy? Houellebecq’s novels show that individuals are not really free, and that their thoughts and behaviour are controlled by both biological impulses and marketing. Michel in *Plateforme* put this memorably when he said, “Dans la plupart des circonstances de ma vie, j’ai été à peu près aussi libre qu’un aspirateur.” Insofar as direct democracy presupposes a capacity in individuals to think and choose freely, it seems undermined by the determinism depicted in the novels. In the face of these apparent contradictions, then, it might seem that only one of two conclusions is valid: either Houellebecq’s advocacy of direct democracy is undermined by his own arguments in novels, non-fiction, and interviews, or his support of direct democracy, on the contrary, reveals that views expressed denouncing Enlightenment values and insisting on the necessity of a posthuman or monotheistic solution were hyperbole and provocation, revealed as such by his much more “realistic” commitment to democratic reform.

Houellebecq’s advocacy of direct democracy, however, does not imply a rejection of the novels’ central ideas, but merely an awareness that posthuman and religious solutions may not be imminent and that temporary, limited measures are better than nothing. The apparent contradiction between Houellebecq’s democratic convictions and his other ideas is partially resolved if we accept that direct democracy is not being proposed by Houellebecq as a solution of the same order as the fundamental posthuman and monotheistic solutions. It is a temporary and partial solution, modest in

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427 *Plateforme*, 94.
scope. It does not imply on Houellebecq’s part a categorical ideological commitment to the nation-state or to the political rights of individuals. When Houellebecq speaks of direct democracy as a solution, it is clear that this solution is of a different order to the fundamental solutions I have explored in Houellebecq’s novels. Houellebecq’s statements in support of direct democracy do not indicate that, in addition to posthuman technology and a return to religion and tradition, he has discovered a new path to societal salvation. Indeed, in an interview with Emmanuel Macron Houellebecq makes it clear that he does not look to politics as a possible means of attaining individual or societal happiness:

On ne peut promettre ni prospérité ni bonheur. Je ne demande pas cela à un président de la République, mais plutôt d’être un bon chef, un chef des administrations et aussi des armées (il ne faut pas oublier les armées, je n’ai jamais pensé que le temps des guerres était derrière nous).”

In contrast to the novels’ exploration of fundamental solutions promising happiness, morality, and even immortality, the solution of direct democracy would “merely” ensure, in Houellebecq’s view, the election of a leader capable of protecting France’s national security. Such a leader would be, as Houellebecq puts it, “quelqu’un en qui je puisse avoir confiance en cas de grosses difficultés.” Direct democracy, for Houellebecq, would redress what he sees as the failure of successive governments to protect the French people:

Les gouvernements qui se sont succédés au cours des dix (vingt ? trente ?) dernières années ont lamentablement échoué, systématiquement, lourdement dans leur mission fondamentale, c’est-à-dire protéger le peuple français confié à leur responsabilité.

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429 Ibid.
Houellebecq sees France as threatened by the prospect of civil war, and direct democracy as a way of defusing imminent disaster. He tells Beigbeder, “Je suis triste de l’état de mon pays. Tu veux que je te dise ? Je redoute une guerre civile. C’est très tendu en ce moment. Ça peut exploser à tout instant.”

He explains, “Il me semble que la seule solution qu'il nous reste serait celle de se diriger lentement vers l'unique forme de démocratie réelle, j'entends par là la démocratie directe.”

While Houellebecq does not expect that direct democracy can overcome the fundamental problems of Western civilisation, he believes that it would serve a useful role in ensuring France’s national security and preventing the outbreak of violent conflict. Houellebecq gives an indication of the sorts of policies that might be enacted under direct democracy by referring to the results of opinion polls. As an indication of the people’s will, Houellebecq argues, “Les sondages d’opinion sont toujours autorisés.” Opinion polls, Houellebecq notes, have consistently revealed that “la population française a toujours gardé confiance et solidarité vis-à-vis de l’armée et des forces de police” and that “elle a accueilli avec mépris les discours de la « gauche morale » sur l’accueil des réfugiés et des migrants.”

Houellebecq castigates successive French governments for “des coupes budgétaires dans les forces de police,” and for promoting the idea that “les frontières sont une vieille absurdité, symbole d’un nationalisme dépassé et nauséabond.”

As Western civilisation waits for salvation in the form of posthuman technology or a return to monotheism and tradition, France would benefit, in Houellebecq’s view, from direct democracy and tighter control of France’s borders, a reversal of its integration into Europe, increased support for the police and the military, and greater limitations on migrants and refugees. If Houellebecq was understood to promote direct democracy on the basis of a fundamental ideological commitment to the inalienable democratic rights of individual citizens, then this would indeed sit uneasily with his consistently anti-Enlightenment position. Houellebecq, however, seems to favour direct democracy on much more

431 Houellebecq, “Mon projet pour la France.”
432 Ibid.
433 Houellebecq, “J’accuse Hollande.”
434 Ibid.
435 Ibid.
436 Ibid.
pragmatic and much more limited grounds: it is simply a *modus vivendi* by means of which, in the absence of fundamental religious or posthuman solutions, society can at least reduce the risk of social contradictions escalating into violence and civil war.

I have argued in this thesis that Houellebecq’s novels constitute a form of social commentary and explore solutions relating to the real world. In this conclusion, I have shown that such an interpretation of the novels is supported by the general consistency between Houellebecq’s statements in interviews and non-fiction, and the ideas contained in the novels. Houellebecq’s support of direct democracy, however, in the context of the absence of any discussion of direct democracy in the novels, may on first consideration seem to imply that the novels and their solutions are much more remote from the real world than we have argued. Houellebecq remarks that even though he considers direct democracy to be the sole political solution available at this time, nowhere is it discussed in *Soumission*: “Ce qui est bizarre, c’est que je n’ai jamais été aussi politisé qu’aujourd’hui et que ça ne joue aucun rôle dans ce livre. Par exemple, je suis sérieux quand je parle de la démocratie directe, que je considère comme la seule solution politique.”

In this conclusion I have shown, however, that the absence of direct democracy in the novels does not demonstrate their remoteness from real-world problems and solutions but, rather, is in keeping with their macroscopic focus on real-world, but long-term and fundamental solutions. Once it is understood that direct democracy is being proposed by Houellebecq not as a fundamental solution of the same order as the posthuman and religious solutions, but as a much more limited expedient, it can be shown to complement rather than contradict the ideas in the novels. Direct democracy, for Houellebecq, is of vital importance in relation to France’s national security in the contemporary moment, but in comparison with the profound problems and fundamental solutions discussed in his novels, it is a parochial concern. As we have seen, for Houellebecq as for Comte, nationhood is an unstable metaphysical entity, and direct democracy can at best be part of a *modus vivendi* pending a fundamental posthuman or monotheistic solution. Houellebecq’s interest in direct democracy, far

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438 Houellebecq, “Michel Houellebecq, de conversion en soumission.”
from indicating a turning away from fundamental problems and solutions, is then still generally consistent with the ideas in the novels: only posthuman technology or a return to religion and tradition can ultimately redeem society, but these solutions may not be available immediately.

**Uncertainty and remoteness of Houellebecq’s solutions**

At the start of this thesis I explained that I would argue, in contrast to the majority of critics, that Houellebecq’s novels do in fact envisage possible solutions to the problems of contemporary Western civilisation. Through a reading of four of Houellebecq’s novels, I have shown how two solutions – posthuman technology and a return to monotheistic religion and tradition – are presented as potential remedies to society’s problems. Within the novelistic œuvre itself, I noted, these solutions are implicitly qualified: *La Possibilité d’une île* shows that posthuman technology, although potentially able to bring about a radically utopian remedy, is not guaranteed to succeed and may not be available soon. *Soumission*, while presenting arguments that a return to monotheistic religion is not only desirable but also actually possible, contains sufficient satire and exaggeration that we should be cautious in taking the events in the novel as a literal prognosis for the immediate future. I have suggested that Houellebecq’s own statements about these two broad solutions reveal that he takes them seriously, backing them up, as in the novels, with coherent (although, depending on the reader, not necessarily convincing) arguments based on an interpretation of the West’s long-term historical development. Houellebecq nevertheless qualifies these solutions, distancing himself from an excessively literal construal of the events depicted in his novels, and in particular he acknowledges that the timelines imagined in them may be too short to be realistic. Aware that the fundamental solutions of posthuman technology or a return to religion are not – in the real world – likely in the immediate future, I have argued that it is not inconsistent with Houellebecq’s belief in these long-term possibilities that he should give consideration to short-term but more mundane measures such as democratic reform.

In spite of this, at the end of this thesis, a final doubt about my argument remains to be dispelled: might not Houellebecq’s critics be right, after all, in their dismissal of the real-world
relevance of the solutions explored in the novels given that, as we have seen, Houellebecq himself acknowledges that they are not likely to occur in the immediate future? Our answer to this is a resounding no. To qualify the novels’ solutions in their application to the real world, to acknowledge that they are possibilities and not iron-clad certainties, to admit that they are likely to take place only in the medium-term or more distant future is not to reduce them to the status of mere literary fantasy with little or no bearing on the real world. On the contrary, by contemplating solutions that may not be immediately realisable but that are nevertheless grounded in an interpretation of contemporary trends and historical forces, Houellebecq’s novels remain open to the possibility of solutions involving seismic shifts and revolutions in Western civilisation. We have argued that in diagnosing contemporary problems the novels attempt to place them within the long-term trajectory of Western historical development. The contingency of society upon underlying historical and biological forces is, in Houellebecq’s novels, a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it implies the inadequacy of more limited but immediately-available solutions; on the other, it implies that in the longer-term the problems of Western civilisation may be resolved at their very core. In an age in which grand historical narratives and utopias of societal salvation have fallen out of favour, the allegedly resigned Houellebecq in fact imagines transformations of society of an audacity to rival those of the 19th Century utopian thinkers – most prominent among them Comte – which have provided him with such an enduring source of inspiration. The problems of contemporary Western civilisation, Houellebecq’s novels tell us, need not endure forever. The solutions which his novels propose challenge us to look beyond the horizon of the immediately possible, restoring a type of utopian thinking based not on fantasy and wishful thinking but on a coherent investigation into the problems of contemporary Western civilisation at their most fundamental level.
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