

Asking the Impossible: The Hunger for the Unknowable in Twentieth-Century American and European Thought

35th Annual Lecture of the German Historical Institute, Washington,
November 11, 2021

Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen

University of Wisconsin-Madison

It seems that one's twilight years can be a very fertile period for pondering ultimate questions of existence and the meaning of life. This certainly was the case for the nineteenth-century British philosopher Herbert Spencer, who in 1902, at the age of 83 (one year before he died), sought to lay bare the "riddle of existence." He contemplated: "Old people must have many reflections in common ... For years past when watching the unfolding buds in the Spring there has arisen the thought [in me] – Shall I ever see the buds unfold? ... Now that the end is not likely to be long postponed, there results an increasing tendency to meditate upon ultimate questions."¹ What is striking about this otherwise very common move is that it was coming from a famed atheist and materialist who spent his career pushing modern thought away from speculation about the ultimate nature of things—what he called "the

¹ Herbert Spencer, "Ultimate Questions," in *Facts and Questions* (New York, 1902), 288. For more on Spencer and "ultimate questions," see Lafcadio Hearn, "Ultimate Questions," *Atlantic Monthly* 96 (September 1905): 391-96; and Michael C.L. Chambers, "Unknowable Realism, 1860-1900: Realism Beyond Herbert Spencer's Limits to Knowledge" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2019).

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 69 (Fall 2021 / Spring 2022): 1-26
© Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen | ISSN 1048-9134
CC BY-SA 4.0

Illustrations included in this article are not covered by this license.

² Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (New York, 1899 [1862]), 116, 571.

³ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, Vol. 1 (London, 1864), 444.

Unknowable” for it “is for ever inscrutable.”² Modern thinkers’ time was better spent discerning unmistakable reality, laid bare by evolution, which brings lofty questions about the universe down to earth. Spencer endorsed what he called “the survival of the fittest,”³ a view that human society works by the natural—if unlovely—laws of tooth and claw, and that any attempt to gussy this up was willful romanticism and fruitless. But facing his own mortality, Spencer wondered why non-believers like himself should ask questions about the function of the universe only and be deprived of asking ultimate questions about its larger meaning.

What are ultimate questions? Many of them are with us today, even if they are not ones that trouble us on a daily basis. They include questions like:

Do human beings have free will?

Do human beings have a soul?

Is the soul immortal?

What is true happiness?

Is pleasure a good?

What is the good life?

What is the meaning of life?

Does God exist?

And if there is a God, how was God created?

How should I live?

There is no single sourcebook for ultimate questions. The Stoics asked how our mortality should inform our lives. Renaissance thinkers asked whether man had a special status in God’s creation. For Enlightenment philosophers, ultimate questions grew out of a fundamental concern with the scope and nature of human freedom. Ultimate questions may be ultimate, but the forms they take are not universal. Because they are invariably products of a specific time and place in human history, they bear the traces of the contexts in which they are posed. They are therefore master shapeshifters. Often they are born of crisis: some large-scale, like war,

famine, economic collapse, and what we today would call a “natural disaster” but in earlier times was understood as the workings of an angry God’s will. Throughout history people have been pressed to ask the impossible in response to something more personal—like illness, impending death, or the death of a loved one. However, ultimate questions typically have a shared feature—they are the kinds of big, audacious, searching, questions that seek to get beyond the limited economic, political, and moral conditions in which they were formulated, and to ask: *Why? How? Whence? Whither?* They seek answers that move beyond what is apparent to what is hidden. They seek to go beyond the furthest reaches of human possibility and grasp that which abides long after the human who poses them is dead and buried—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. They are the questions that seek to pierce the veil between the knowable and the unknowable. They are an expression of the human longing for transcendence.⁴

⁴ Bryan Magee’s *Ultimate Questions* (Princeton, 2016), is philosophical, not historical in its outlook but is valuable for considering how thinkers have approached what they either explicitly or implicitly understood as “ultimate questions.”

Asking impossible ultimate questions confesses a desire to get beyond the noise, the blinders, the time-bound, place-bound, tradition-bound, and to challenge the once radiant truths that have become dimmed, deformed, or destroyed by the hubris of their unquestioned authority.

Today, posing “ultimate questions” may seem like a worthy enough pursuit. But to a growing number of European and American thinkers during the late nineteenth century, these sorts of questions started to look pretty silly. The direction of modern thought—driven by an increasing empiricism, positivism, naturalism, and materialism (the sorts of scientific understanding that Herbert Spencer exemplified and fearlessly pursued)—disavowed them as hopelessly idealistic, sentimental, and otherworldly, and therefore unworthy of serious consideration. This is the period when the modern research university was coming into full form with a new generation of academic intellectuals at work carving up domains of inquiry and knowledge into narrower and narrower specialties—or what came to be referred to

5 This impulse at work in philosophy, pushing towards what would come to be called “analytic philosophy,” can be seen in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous remark that “die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt” [“the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”] in *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung [Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus]* (1921).

6 On transformations in turn-of-the-last-century philosophy, see: Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2001); H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York, 1958); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (New York, 1986); Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (Yale, 1977); Dean Moyar, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Nineteenth-Century Philosophy* (Abingdon/New York, 2010); Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, “Philosophy,” in *Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. Michael Saler (New York, 2015), 424-40; and Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland, 1831-1933* (Frankfurt a. M.; 1993).

as “intellectual disciplines.” This is the period in European and American thought when the natural and social sciences were gaining intellectual authority while theology and metaphysics were losing their spheres of influence in the academy. The late nineteenth century is when modern thinkers worked to professionalize knowledge by narrowing the field of inquiry and posing only those questions that were deemed answerable and verifiable by experts’ standards. They wanted a clearer set of ground rules for questions and answers which would be deemed intellectually legitimate and authoritative.⁵ So out with ultimate questions, and in with randomized control trials.

This move toward increased specialization, professionalization, and secularization had implications across all fields of knowledge in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century academy, in particular, and in northern transatlantic intellectual life more broadly. But it had the greatest ramifications for philosophy, which, given its historical linkages to theology, had long been regarded the “queen” of the speculative sciences. Now, however, philosophers were eager to dissociate themselves from theologians, and they made dramatic efforts to reduce their domain of inquiry by leaving behind cosmology, ontology, and aesthetics, and limiting their jurisdiction to epistemology (the nature and scope of knowledge) and logic (the study of reasoning). While some applauded and others mourned the abandonment of ultimate questions, all recognized the need to keep philosophy in line with the winds of modern thought.⁶

Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James stands out as a voice of protest. He understood the value of scientific testing, but he also had a heart that ached for larger questions of the human self, meaning, and morality—questions that gave life a sense of purpose and even grandeur. James longed for the existential consolation of religion even though he could not quite be a believer himself. As he observed in 1879: “Now our Science tells our Faith that she is shameful,



Figure 1. William James at a séance pursuing his “psychical research” to widen “the field of search of God,” n.d., Houghton Library, Harvard University.

and our Hopes that they are dupes; our Reverence for truth leads to conclusions that make all reverence a falsehood.”⁷ James thus developed his “pragmatic method,” which would come to be known as philosophical “pragmatism,” to welcome the human desire to ask these larger ultimate questions, while encouraging modern inquirers to recognize that their answers could be only provisional and partial, and that they needed to be tested against their own experiences. For James, then, the question moderns should ask was no longer: *Does God exist?*—which he considered an unanswerable question. But rather: *What does belief in God make possible for human beings?* Now *that’s* a question that is answerable, according to James. What James sought at the dawn of the twentieth century was a rapprochement between science and religion—and one that preserved a space for asking ultimate questions and for what he called “the will to believe” in answering them.⁸ This meant believing in something even when the evidence for it was not forthcoming. What James wanted was to have modern inquiry “[widen] the field of search for God.”⁹

There would not be much more to this story if James’s line of argument had been more persuasive to his fellow philosophers. But he was not without his formidable critics, many of whom regarded his philosophy as naïve empiricism mixed with guileless romanticism.

⁷ William James, “Clifford’s ‘Lectures and Essays,’” in *Collected Essays and Reviews* (London, 1920), 140.

⁸ William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago, 1977 [1967]), 717.

⁹ William James, “What Pragmatism Means,” in *Writings of William James*, 390.

10 Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York, 1959 [1912]), 7, 161.

11 Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York, 1972 [1946]), 818, 814.

12 Bertrand Russell, *Freethought and Official Propaganda* (London, 1922), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/44932/44932-h/44932-h.htm>, accessed January 14, 2022.

Just two years after James's death in 1910, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell sought to set the record straight about the limits and possibilities of modern philosophy in his *Problems of Philosophy* (1912). According to Russell, modern philosophy certainly can pose and seek to answer what he called "ultimate questions," but must not do so "carelessly and dogmatically as we do in ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically, after exploring all that makes such vague questions puzzling." Indeed, he maintained that

philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation.¹⁰

However, in the years that followed, though he had some words of affection for James, Russell repeatedly ridiculed what he regarded as the American pragmatist's fast and loose regard for "facts" and his vague conception of "experience." James's genial pluralism seemed to Russell to be "benevolence, not philosophy," for to be philosophy, inquiry must observe "the moral duty of veracity."¹¹ Russell thus sought to narrow (to the point of oblivion) James's widened field of search for God: "William James used to preach 'the Will to Believe.' For my part, I should wish to preach the 'will to doubt' In all affairs it's healthy ... to hang a question mark on things you have long taken for granted."¹²

Russell essentially engaged in a philosophical brawl with many of the foremost early twentieth-century philosophers on both sides of the northern Atlantic. The horrors of the First World War—the belligerent nationalism; the religious, racial and ethnic chauvinism; the blood and iron imperialism; not to mention the trenches, flamethrowers, and mustard gas—added urgency to philosophers' internal debates about how

to adjudicate contradictory truth claims. But while philosophers were busy tending to difficult technical matters of their transforming field and turning their attentions from a larger educated audience to one another, ultimate questions slipped out from their traditional domains of authority and started to migrate to other fields of twentieth-century inquiry, including cultural criticism, literature and the arts, and even the natural sciences. It is these other domains that I want to explore here.

Where did ultimate questions go when they lost much of their authority and credibility in professional philosophy? What forms did they take? What uncertainties and longings did they seek to assuage, and why?

Before turning to explore some of the peregrinations of ultimate questions in twentieth-century American and European thought, it is helpful to consider how I, as a historian, go about tracking them. A fruitful method here is what intellectual historian Sarah Igo describes as “free-range intellectual history.”¹³ It is an approach that is necessary when a particular discourse—like “ultimate questions”—slips out of its disciplinary and institutional settings and starts to wander off into other domains and registers of twentieth-century thought, sometimes very far from its original home. During and after the First World War, an increasing number and variety of intellectuals began to welcome (or at least not recoil from) the pressure of accountability to a larger audience of nonspecialists, who felt whiplashed by the traumas of modernization, and eager for direction and clarity. This is not to say that professional philosophers and theologians wholly abandoned them. Nor is it to suggest that their seminar rooms, lecture halls, seminaries, and places of worship resembled battery cages for idea production. But I think there is a value—indeed a high necessity—for the historian to pay close attention to moments of intellectual rupture, when a discourse gets adopted, transformed, and repurposed in diverse—and often unexpected—genres of thought. After the war, ultimate questions traversed a wide range of inquiry, to which no short talk can fully do justice.

¹³ Sarah Igo, “Toward a Free-Range Intellectual History,” in *The Worlds of American Intellectual History*, eds. Joel Isaac, James Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen (New York, 1917), 324-42.

14 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds. (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/hamlet/act-2-scene-2/>, accessed February 28, 2022.

But this talk can, at least, draw our attention to a handful of notable episodes in their journey: through cultural criticism; children’s literature; popular discourses of science, which at mid-century molded into a form of moral inquiry; and nature writing, before circling back to the relevance of asking impossible “ultimate questions” for us today.

Ultimate Question 1: *What (a Piece of Work) is Man?*

Let us start with an ultimate question as it appeared to the American literary critic Joseph Wood Krutch in 1929. At the time, Krutch was a well-respected drama critic for the *Nation* magazine, but it was his exceptionally bleak jeremiad *The Modern Temper*—a stark counterpoint to the riotous image of the “roaring twenties”—that established his reputation as an influential humanist and public moralist in twentieth-century American life. Surveying the consequences of modern science for man’s view of himself and his world, the book turned the exclamatory sentence of Shakespeare’s Hamlet—“*What a piece of work is man?*” into an interrogatory one. This question was one that Krutch was unable and ill-disposed to answer with Shakespeare: “how infinite in faculties, ... in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god.”¹⁴ Krutch’s modern man was in no way an angel, and certainly not like a god—though, in his arrogance, the modern scientist sought to pull the entire universe into the range of human comprehension and mastery.

Krutch argued that the universe revealed by modern knowledge was either mechanistic or organic, neither of which make it particularly hospitable for human flourishing. He believed that tragedy was no longer possible for the modern mind because it required a noble sense of man, which Freud had turned into rubbish. “A tragic writer does not have to believe in God, but he must believe in man.” The terrible paradox that modern knowledge presents for modern man is that he has

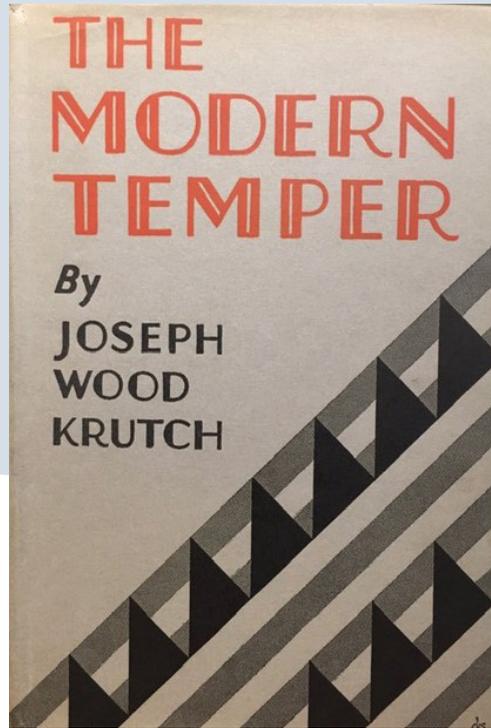


Figure 2. Joseph Wood Krutch's *Modern Temper* (1929), which he called "a study and a confession," lamented the loss of ultimate questions in modern thought.

been rendered just another mean creature trapped in nature's "blind thirst for life." The only difference between him and nonhuman creatures is that he is cursed with the consciousness of being in a world inhospitable to his craving for moral orientation and meaning. Krutch thundered:

God, instead of disappearing in an instant, has retreated step by step and surrendered gradually his control of the universe [T]he role which he plays grows less and less, and man is left more and more alone in a universe to which he is completely alien. His world was once, like the child's world, three-quarters myth and poetry. His teleological concepts molded it into a form which he could appreciate and he gave to it moral laws which would make it meaningful, but step by step the outlines of nature have thrust themselves upon him, and for the dream which he made is substituted a reality devoid of any pattern which he can understand.

For Krutch, no degree of intellectual modernization will keep man from being an "ethical animal." And yet the problem with modern knowledge was that it yielded an image of "a universe which contains no ethical element."¹⁵

¹⁵ Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (New York, 1929), 87, 7-8, 10.

16 Ibid., 32-33. It would be another thirty years before C.P. Snow would introduce his notion of the "two cultures." But in *Modern Temper*, Krutch worked so powerfully with literary imagery and made such an urgent case for the power of the literary imagination that it helped set the terms for debates for the coming century about the need for humanistic modes of inquiry, and with them, the practice of posing open questions without absolute answers.

17 Ibid., 101, 168-69.

Krutch's *Modern Temper* is Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world" on steroids and depressants. It took a dark view of the consequences of modern scientific culture for the human types in its wake. Modern industrial society created the human being who will "perform without question the part assigned to him in the division of labor." This modern society "owes both its stability and efficient harmony to the absence of any tendency on the part of individuals ... to question the value of existence." For Krutch, to question is human, but in a thoroughly naturalistic worldview, the human is just another creepy, crawly creature, whose tendency to ask questions about "the human condition" is nothing more than a burden for his smooth functioning. For Krutch, then, the modern world is more hospitable to the ant than to man. "When a man looks at an ant he realizes the meaning of his humanity." After all, the ant has "no art and no philosophy," but this is all to the good because these two forms of human inquiry and expression have no place in the modern world.¹⁶

Krutch's "confession" may best be understood as a protest not only against transformations in modern knowledge but also against the sorts of inquiry deemed legitimate for the modern mind. "As soon as one begins to raise a question as to the purpose of life," he averred, "then the problem of conducting that life ceases to be merely a problem of technique and begins to involve certain ultimate questions concerning the end which we wish to reach or concerning what may properly be called success in life." Krutch seemed convinced that the universe did not much care to respond to humans' pesky and outmoded ultimate questions, but "at least ... we have discovered the trick which has been played upon us and that whatever else we may be we are no longer dupes." *The Modern Temper* thus ends on ultimate questions as a form of protest: "Ours is a lost cause and there is no place for us in the natural universe, but we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals."¹⁷

Ultimate Question 2: *Look up at the Sky. Ask Yourself: is it yes or no?*

Over the course of the twentieth century, ultimate questions have taken strange forms, and they have been posed by strange figures, both real and imagined. There is no straight line from Joseph Wood Krutch's interwar social criticism to the mid-century burgeoning children's book industry in the United States. And yet the case of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry suggests that American and European authors who built a career writing for adults came to identify writing for young readers as a legitimate mode of yearning for the unknowable. Some of the more notable examples of twentieth-century authors who made their fame writing for adults before writing a book (or more) for children include Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, C.S. Lewis, E.B. White, Aldous Huxley, James Baldwin, and Ken Kesey. Saint-Exupéry is particularly striking because, unlike the others, he is best known as a children's book author (though his entire corpus, with the exception of *The Little Prince*, was written for adults). Why the pivot to a children's book? Because, according to Saint-Exupéry, only children were still allowed to "look up at the sky" and ask the impossible.¹⁸

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1943 *The Little Prince* is one of many examples of the migration of ultimate questions into twentieth-century children's literature.¹⁹ Saint-Exupéry had made a name for himself with his novel *Vol de Nuit* [*Night Flight*] in 1931 and continued to build an international reputation with his memoirs *Terre des hommes* [with the title *Wind, Sand and Stars* in English translation] in 1939, and *Pilote de guerre* [*Flight to Arras*] in 1942. But faced with fragile health, disconsolate in his unintended exile in New York City, unable to speak English but also unable to publish back in Vichy France (where his works had been banned), and thoroughly dispirited with a world again at war, Saint-Exupéry took refuge in "the child's world [of] myth and poetry,"

¹⁸ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, transl. Katherine Woods (New York, 1943), 91.

¹⁹ Though drawing out the authors' varying commercial incentives and artistic desires to write a children's book are often difficult, few of these authors seem to have made the choice because of an overwhelming desire to write for children. Rather, it was because the conceit of a children's book allowed them to ask ethical and even existential questions they felt they could not ask in their work otherwise. See: Marilyn Apseoff, *They Wrote for Children Too: An Annotated Bibliography of Children's Literature by Famous Writers for Adults* (Westport, CT, 1989); "They Also Wrote Children's Books" Exhibit at Grolier Club, NYC, March 2020, <https://vimeo.com/465950963>, accessed January 14, 2022; and Bruce Handy, *Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult* (New York, 2017). A helpful essay interrogating the concept of "children's literature" both in theory and practice is Marah Gubar, "On Not Defining Children's Literature," *PMLA*, 126 (Jan. 2011): 209-16.

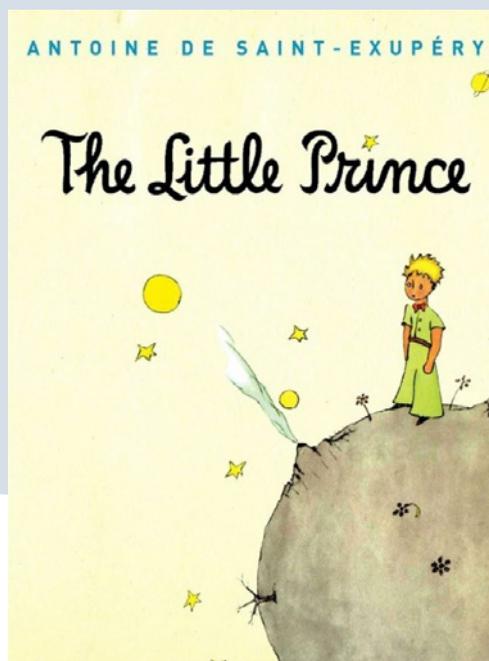


Figure 3. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote *The Little Prince* (1943) for children because “no grown up will ever understand [matters] of so much importance.”

²⁰ Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, 8. For biographical information on Saint-Exupéry, see Stacy Schiff, *Saint-Exupéry: A Biography* (New York, 1994); and Joy D. Marie Robinson, *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (Boston, 1984).

which Krutch believed the acids of modernity had destroyed. If, as Krutch saw it, asking “ultimate questions” was no longer really dignified to the stoutly modern, secular mind—if it was time to put away childish things—fine, then: Let a child ask them! And that’s exactly what Saint-Exupéry set out to do. As the narrator of *The Little Prince* puts it: “Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”²⁰

The story begins with an aviator who is stranded in the desert and encounters a strange little boy—a little prince, who, we learn, hails from Asteroid B-612, which was the size of a house, and where he lived alone with a single rose, three volcanoes, and a pesky infestation of baobab trees. The little prince had what appears to be a lover’s quarrel with a petulant, fragile rose, and takes off with a flock of birds to other planets, where he encounters a king, a conceited man, a drunkard, a businessman, a lamplighter, a geographer—all in some way dehumanized, reduced to their mere functions, unable to break out of their mindless habits and blinkered understanding. All lacked curiosity and a sense of wonder. He then makes it to Earth where he discovers that all the problems of these other

planets are scaled up—and with them, the sense of wonder and existential comforts are scaled down.²¹

The Little Prince is crowded with ultimate concerns. But it raises questions and then provides tantalizingly, frustratingly, incomplete answers. Why the crazy plague of baobab trees? It's not clear, but what is clear is that the little prince has to take good care of his planet or else it will be destroyed. Why the love of a single, demanding flower—especially when he learns there are so many more he can choose from on Planet Earth? It's not clear, but surely he learns that love doesn't need explanations; what it does need, however, is care. The little prince meets a fox who wants the prince to tame him: "One only understands the things that one tames," said the fox. "Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends any more. If you want a friend, tame me." This sly fox also tells the little prince a hint about the unknowable: "What is essential is invisible to the eye."²²

The Little Prince is also a meditation on the frustration of yearning for answers to questions and not getting them. Curiosity is essential, but it is often greeted by an inscrutable, reticent universe. There is a scene where the little prince climbs a high mountain on this strange planet called Earth, and says to the universe "Good morning," and hears in response: "Good morning-good morning." "'Who are you?' says the little prince." "'Who are you—Who-are you—who are you?' answered the echo." In his innocence, the little prince calls out: "Be my friends, I am all alone," thinking that the voices are coming from a number of children. "'I am all alone—all alone—all alone,' answered the echo." Saint-Exupéry here shows the same indignity as Krutch, where the earnest inquirer calls out to an indifferent universe and receives no answer, only an echo.²³

The *Little Prince* opens with a line that was shared by other authors who turned to children's literature to ask their

²¹ The published version ends with a somewhat mysterious, open-ended conclusion, but Saint-Exupéry experimented with a more "agonized and melancholy" conclusion, confessing the torments and trauma of war. Ula Ilyntzky, "The Little Prince: A New York Story," *Washington Post* (January 10, 2014), https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-little-prince-a-new-york-story/2014/01/09/2763abf2-77cf-11e3-8963-b4b654bcc9b2_story.html, accessed February 25, 2022.

²² Antoine de St. Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, transl. Katherine Woods (New York, 1943), 67, 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61. For a similar treatment of earnest questions answered by echoes, see: Thomas Carlyle's chapter 7 "The Everlasting 'No,'" in *Sartor Resartus* (1836): "Thus has the bewildered Wanderer to stand, as so many have done, shouting question after question into the Sibyl-cave of Destiny, and receive no Answer but an Echo." <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1051/1051-h/1051-h.htm>, accessed February 26, 2022.

24 Ibid., from the book's dedication to Leon Werth.

25 On clues to Saint-Exupéry's mysterious disappearance, see John Tagliabue "Clues to the Mystery of a Writer Pilot Who Disappeared," *New York Times* (April 11, 2008) <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/11/world/europe/11exupery.html>, accessed February 24, 2022.

26 Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley, 2000). The United States has arguably become even more religious since then. According to a Pew research poll of 2017, "the vast majority [90%] believe in some kind of higher power [with 56% believing in "God as described in the Bible"]. Dalia Fahmy, "Key Findings about Americans' Belief in God" (April 25, 2018), from the Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/25/key-findings-about-americans-belief-in-god>, accessed February 28, 2022. Nevertheless, Wuthnow himself gives us good reason to greet poll numbers on religious belief and affiliation with some skepticism in his *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith* (New York, 2015).

ultimate questions: "All grown-ups were once children—although few of them remember it."²⁴ This line—like the little book from which it came—is singular. But the move its author made—using the garb of childhood innocence and curiosity to hunger after the unknowable—became increasingly popular, though few of these other experiments would achieve even a tiny fraction of *The Little Prince's* critical and commercial success. Saint-Exupéry would not live long enough to see his book in print, nor to discover that it would be translated into 250 languages and become the second most read book worldwide since its 1943 publication. He left America in April 1943 to join a French squadron in Algeria, and a year later went missing on a reconnaissance mission that departed from Corsica on July 31, 1944, never to be heard from again.²⁵

Ultimate Question 3: *Is God Dead?; Or, What are the limits of a "holy curiosity"?*

Joseph Wood Krutch's secular apologia for faith was premature. God did not "retreat step by step" from twentieth-century moral imaginations. So when editors at *Time* magazine ran a stark black-and-red cover on April 8, 1966 asking: "Is God Dead?" (referring to its lead article about a small circle of "death of God" theologians), they knew full well that their readers would answer—with more than a touch of outrage—in the negative. (And they, of course, counted on this outrage to help catalyze brisk sales). They knew that the question was provocative rather than sincere because they ran it at a time when religious affiliation in the United States was, by many measures, on the rise.²⁶

Despite the surge in religiosity, several of the most prominent mid-century religious intellectuals in the United States felt pressed to defend their abiding commitment to a theistic universe, especially in light of the Holocaust, the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and the widespread devastation of the Second World War. It is at this time that we see stirring defenses of religion by clergy and theologians, who main-

tained that the horrors and dislocations of the twentieth-century world demanded the continual reckoning with the unknowable. For theologian and Civil Rights activist Howard Thurman, “suffering ... [is a] vast but solitary arena. It is here that [the person] faces the authentic adversary. He looks into the depth of the abyss of life and raises the ultimate question about the meaning of existence. He comes face to face with whatever is his conception of ultimate authority, his God.”²⁷ Polish émigré rabbi and Civil Rights activist Abraham Joshua Heschel maintained that “the realm of the ineffable rather than speculation is the climate in which the ultimate question comes into being, and in its natural abode ... the question must be studied.”²⁸ And the exiled German Protestant theologian Paul Tillich insisted that “religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life.”²⁹ Though coming from different faith traditions, all these religious thinkers sought to demonstrate that religious faith was the natural home of ultimate questions about the self (or soul) and the world, neither of which could be usurped by science.³⁰

Though the United States remained a deeply pious country, the modern sciences, with their capacity to map the universe, the human psyche, and genetic codes, enjoyed deep and widespread reverence as well. Many Americans still hungered after what they regarded as unknowable, but they sought guidance on their “ultimate questions” from professional scientists.³¹ No

³¹ Works that have been helpful to me in conceptualizing the role and social location of professional scientists as public moralists include Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life*

in Britain, 1850-1930 (Oxford, 1993); Nancy Lutkehaus, *Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Ira Katznelson, “The Professional Scholar as Public Intellectual: Reflections Prompted

by Karl Mannheim, Robert K. Merton, and C. Wright Mills,” in *The Public Intellectual: Between Philosophy and Politics*, ed. Arthur Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (Lanham, MD, 2003), 189-200;

²⁷ Howard Thurman, “Suffering” (1963) in Thurman, *The Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston, 1998), 45.

²⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 1976), 59.

²⁹ For Paul Tillich on “ultimate concern” (and the ambiguities in his different uses of the phrase), see: *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1951) and *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, 1957).

³⁰ Heschel points out that “the moment we utter the name of God we leave the level of scientific thinking and enter the realm of the ineffable. Such a step is one which we cannot take scientifically, since it transcends the boundaries of all that is given. It is in spite of all warnings that man has never ceased to be stirred by ultimate questions. Science cannot silence him, because scientific terms are meaningless to the spirit that raises these questions, meaningless to the concern for a truth greater than the world that science is engaged in exploring.” (*God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* [New York, 1955], 102.)

Declan Fahy, "A Brief History of Scientific Celebrity," in *The New Celebrity Scientists: Out of the Lab and Into the Limelight* (Lanham, MD, 2015), 1-17; David Hecht, "Constructing a Scientist: Expert Authority and Public Images of Rachel Carson," *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 41 (Summer 2011): 277-302; David Hecht, "The Atomic Hero: Robert Oppenheimer and the Making of Scientific Icons in the Early Cold War," *Technology and Culture* 49 (October 2008): 943-66; and Britta Scheideler, "The Scientist as Moral Authority: Albert Einstein Between Elitism and Democracy, 1914-1933," *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences* 32 (March 2002): 319-46.

32 Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston, 1971), 251.

doubt, after the shocks and horrors of the Second World War, an increasing number of commentators looked at the atomic bomb as an example of the amoral—even immoral—arrogance of science to prostrate itself and turn its discoveries into technologies of doom and destruction. Just as religious commentators felt pressed to defend their tenacious faith in God, professional scientists felt called to account for the role of science in making such widespread devastation possible. They were called to account not only for the "hows" of the world (that is the workings of the world), but also, and more importantly for the "whys" (that is, questions of meaning).

Many of the marquee figures of post-World War II modern science were sought out by their publics to provide answers to their "ultimate questions." Theoretical physicists Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer; physician and medical researcher Jonas Salk; anthropologists Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Ashley Montagu; primatologist Jane Goodall; mathematician Jacob Bronowski; astronomer Carl Sagan; and biologist E.O. Wilson all understood that lay audiences turned to them as their "North Star" for the question whether the unknown would always remain unknowable. Some of these scientists reluctantly and others with great gusto explained how their scientific discoveries offered perspectives on human ethics even if the subject of their research had nothing to do with human ethics, or even human beings for that matter. Lay audiences often turned to Goodall, for example, not for information on chimpanzees in Tanzania but rather for what living among chimpanzees in Tanzania had taught her about what it means to be human. (One of her answers was that humans, unlike their chimp relatives, ask the "whys" of their existence: "Man demands an explanation of the mystery of his being and the wonder of the world around him and the cosmos above him."³²) Similarly, lay audiences often turned to Carl Sagan not for an explanation of the formation of the stars but rather how his understanding of space, time, motion, and matter could help human beings explain themselves to themselves.

Einstein, in particular, was repeatedly asked how—or if—he reconciled his scientific theories with a view of the divine, and he was repeatedly prodded to reconcile them for others. While he encouraged readers to “never lose a holy curiosity,” Einstein was unabashed in reminding them that even the holiest of curiosities will not fully break open the structure of ultimate reality.³³ As he put it in a letter to an Oberlin College student, who in 1951 asked him the ultimate question “Why are we alive?”: “The question ‘Why’ in the human sphere is easy to answer: to create satisfaction for ourself and for other people. In the extra-human sphere the question has no meaning. Also the belief in God is no way out for in this case you may ask ‘Why God.’”³⁴

A rather charming example of how lay audiences turned to Einstein to help them answer their ultimate questions can be found in a letter written by a young girl named Phyllis, from the Riverside Church in Manhattan in 1936. Addressed to “My dear Dr. Einstein,” her letter shared that:

We have brought up the question: Do scientists pray? in our Sunday school class. It began by asking whether we could believe in both science and religion

We will feel greatly honored if you will answer our question: Do scientists pray, and what do they pray for?

We are in the sixth grade, Miss Ellis’s class.

Respectfully yours,
Phyllis

Less than a week later, on January 24, 1936, Einstein penned Phyllis a reply:

Dear Phyllis,

I will attempt to reply to your question as simply as I can.
Here is my answer:

³³ Albert Einstein, as quoted in “Death of a Genius: His fourth dimension, time, overtakes Einstein,” *Time* (May 2, 1955), <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,866292,00.html>, accessed February 28, 2022.

³⁴ Albert Einstein to Marion Block, April 28, 1951 as documented in *themarginalian.org*, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/11/27/einstein-on-why-we-are-alive/>, accessed March 1, 2022.

35 This exchange is documented in Alice Calaprice, *Dear Professor Einstein: Albert Einstein's Letters to and from Children* (Amherst, NY, 2002), 127-29.

Scientists believe that every occurrence, including the affairs of human beings, is due to the laws of nature. Therefore a scientist cannot be inclined to believe that the course of events can be influenced by prayer, that is, by a supernaturally manifested wish.

However, we must concede that our actual knowledge of these forces is imperfect, so that in the end the belief in the existence of a final, ultimate spirit rests on a kind of faith. Such belief remains widespread even with the current achievements in science.

But also, everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that some spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe, one that is vastly superior to that of man. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is surely quite different from the religiosity of someone more naive.

With cordial greetings,
your A. Einstein³⁵

Alas, not all of Einstein's answers were so agreeable. Take, for example, his response to a father named Robert Marcus who wrote him on February 9, 1950 asking him the impossible: *is there an afterlife?* The father wrote:

Last summer my 11-year-old son died of polio ... His death has shattered the very structure of my existence, my very life has become an almost meaningless void, for all my dreams and aspirations were somehow associated with his future and his strivings. I have tried during the past months to find comfort for my anguished spirit, a measure of solace to help me bear the agony of losing one dearer than life itself—an innocent, dutiful and gifted child who was the victim of such a cruel fate. I have sought comfort in the belief that man has a spirit which attains immortality—that somehow, my son lives on in a higher world

Marcus added “without immortality the world is moral chaos,” and then pleaded with Einstein:

I write you all this because I have read your volume *The World as I See It*. On page 5 you stated: “Any individual who should survive his physical death is beyond my comprehension Such emotions are for the fears or absurd egoism of feeble souls.” And I inquire in the spirit of desperation, is there in your view no comfort, no consolation for what has happened ... [to] my beautiful darling child?

May I have a word from you? I need your help badly.

Sincerely yours, Robert S Marcus

Einstein wrote back three days later on February 12, 1950:

Dear Dr. Marcus:

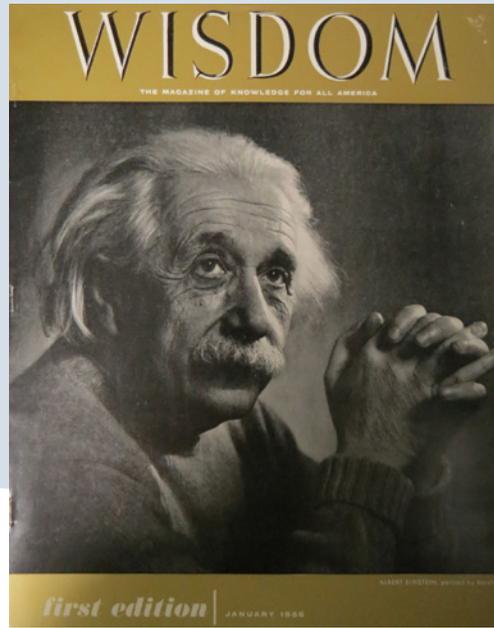
A human being is part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.

With my best wishes, sincerely yours,
Albert Einstein³⁶

Einstein responded here not to any grieving father, but a grieving father who also happened to be a rabbi. Dr. Robert S. Marcus was also known as *Rabbi* Robert S. Marcus, who was ordained in 1931 and served an Orthodox congregation before leaving to work at the American Jewish Congress and eventually as an Army chaplain during the Second World War. Rabbi Marcus was one of the first chaplains to gain access to Buchenwald and help in its liberation in April of 1945. During its liberation, he discovered 904 Jewish orphans at the camp,

36 Marcus's and Einstein's letter exchange is documented in Naomi Levy's *Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul* (New York, 2017).

Figures 4 & 5. Albert Einstein's presence on the inaugural issue of *Wisdom* magazine (1956) shows how lay audiences thought of him: as a source of timeless wisdom. Clearly some religious audiences did as well, as we see in Einstein's inclusion among saints in the façade of the Riverside Church in Manhattan, built in 1930. Young Phyllis attended Sunday school at the church, and so she and her sixth-grade classmates likely passed by "St. Albert" every week.



37 For the fuller treatment of Marcus's biography, see: "Reviving Souls" in *ibid.*, 15-22.

who were hidden by the adult inmates. Marcus made it his mission to care for the children (among them was a young Elie Wiesel) and provide them all safe passage out of Germany and to adoptive homes. After the war, Marcus became the political director of the World Jewish Congress, and from there one of the WJC's representatives at the United Nations. It was in 1949, as he was en route to France to do advocacy work on behalf of European Jews, when he got word that all three of his children back home had been infected with polio, and his eldest son, age 11, did not survive. To process his grief, he wrote to Einstein.

To be sure, any father who loses a child would be desperate for answers whether there is a moral order to the universe, whether the soul is immortal, whether God exists, and if so, whether that God is just and benevolent. But the astonishing fact that this particular father was an Orthodox Jewish rabbi (not to mention that he experienced firsthand the horrors of the Nazi genocide, which Einstein himself escaped), makes an already heart-rending exchange almost excruciating to behold. Why Marcus thought a secular physicist would have answers about the afterlife when he could have turned to his own faith tradition to find them, we will never know. Eleven months after receiving Einstein's letter, Rabbi Marcus died of a heart attack at the age of 41.³⁷



Ultimate Question 4: “What (a piece of work) is man?,” revisited

Let us now meet up with Joseph Wood Krutch again, because his intellectual trajectory enables us to see how, in the twentieth century, ultimate questions often transformed themselves along with the thinkers who posed them. In 1950, the same year that Einstein shared with Marcus his conviction that the “human being is part of the whole,” Joseph Wood Krutch moved from New York City to Tucson for a climate and lifestyle more hospitable to the wholeness he was seeking. Krutch had built a vibrant career both as a professor of English at Columbia University and as what we would today call a “public intellectual,” writing a variety of criticism and commentary for nonacademic audiences. While it might seem that coming out with his excessively downbeat *Modern Temper* in the same year as the stock market crash and at the dawn of the global economic crisis and the rising specters of Fascism and Nazism would have turned Krutch into a pretty unpopular writer, those unhappy turns of events likely helped boost his credibility as a sober and discerning thinker. Indeed, Krutch emerged as one of the most esteemed, sought-after intellectuals in interwar American life. All of the books that follow *Modern Temper* in his impressive oeuvre trafficked in ultimate questions. But they

38 Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau* (New York, 1948), 78.

39 The works of the later Krutch who made his fame (anew) as a nature writer and environmentalist include *The Desert Year* (1951), *The Measure of Man* (1954), *The Voice of the Desert* (1954), *The Grand Canyon* (1957), and more. On Krutch's transformation from literary critic to nature writer and naturalist, see: John Margolis, *Joseph Wood Krutch: A Writer's Life* (Knoxville, 1980); James I. McClintock, "Joseph Wood Krutch, 'Metabiologist'" in *Nature's Kindred Spirits* (Madison, 1994), 46-65; Robert Rowley, "Joseph Wood Krutch: The Forgotten Voice of the Desert," *The American Scholar*, 64 (Summer 1995): 438-43.

changed quite dramatically as Krutch himself changed, thus showing how urgent questions of meaning shapeshifted depending on the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which they were framed, as well as the life course of those asking them.

In the 1940s, Krutch's sensibility and the subjects of his moral inquiry underwent a slow, subtle, but unmistakable transformation. Krutch never backed off from his challenges to what he regarded as the arrogance of modern science, but he did start to appreciate what might be possible with a more naturalistic view of man. That is, he started to look at the natural world and reconsider whether it was so inhospitable to human flourishing after all.

In the 1940s, Krutch embarked on writing a biography of Henry David Thoreau, which helped him reconsider what he called "human nature and the human condition" by reexamining the natural world through his protagonist's eyes. Thoreau's "simple, self-sustaining existence" during his two-year experiment living close to nature at Walden Pond "was not an end in itself." "Thoreau was ... enough of a Transcendentalist to believe that there was also some ultimate truth beyond 'phenomena' and 'actuality' which could be caught only, if at all, by grace of direction, super-rational communication from nature to man."³⁸ Krutch's biography of Thoreau, quickly followed by his first collection of nature writings, *The Twelve Seasons* (1949), marked a striking redirection in his searching prose, and the beginning of a new path as nature writer.³⁹

To be sure, Krutch the nature writer of the 1950s and 1960s remained very much a humanist, never losing his focus on questions about what makes a human life significant. But he no longer used the disparaging image of the feverish anthill to think about modern humanity, and instead adopted a lyrical vision of birds. He began to examine the sublime pleasures of being part of the natural world, and noted that having a place



Figure 6. Joseph Wood Krutch in Tucson, Arizona ca. 1960, making a home in nature and a space for “meaningless” questions. Courtesy of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

within “the great chain of life” warranted awe and reverence rather than fear and trembling.⁴⁰ Exchanging a language of declension for interconnectedness, Krutch observed that “one of the most striking aspects of the human condition is the simple fact that we share the earth with a vast number and a vast variety of other living things.”⁴¹ Thus Krutch delighted in the “intricate marvel” of the desert toad and the ragged landscapes of the southwest.⁴² Nature, though, is “more than a tonic.”⁴³ It is a site—and to his mind sturdy evidence—of larger structures of meaning. “Personally, I feel both happier and more secure when I am reminded that I have the backing of something older and perhaps more permanent than I am—the something, I mean, which taught the flower to count to five and the beetle to know that spots are more pleasing if arranged in a definite order. Some of the most important secrets are, they assure me, known to others beside myself.”⁴⁴ Humility, awe, wonder, patience, reverence: these were the lessons of the natural world. This is the Krutch who now wanted moderns to find a home in nature, and even existential consolation in naturalism.

With Krutch’s turn to nature, and with it a more naturalistic perspective, he continued to ask the impossible. However, he

40 Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Great Chain of Life* (Boston, 1957).

41 Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Best Nature Writing of Joseph Wood Krutch* (New York, 1969), 14.

42 Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Best of Two Worlds* (New York, 1950), 170.

43 Krutch, *The Best Nature Writing*, 14, 251.

44 Krutch, *The Best of Two Worlds*, 170, 128.

45 Krutch, *Best Nature Writing*, 346; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Conservation is not Enough!," *American Scholar* (Summer 1954): 295-305.

46 Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Meaning of the Meaningless Question," in *Human Nature and the Human Condition* (New York, 1959), 155-67.

no longer sought a God's eye view—or even a disenchanting modern's human eye view—but rather a perspective attentive to the interdependence of the human and nonhuman world. While awareness of the interconnectedness of man and nature can be psychologically consoling and aesthetically enlivening, for Krutch it also came with an urgent moral imperative to recognize that human beings are "the most dangerous predator[s]" putting other species and themselves at grave risk, and that "conservation is not enough."⁴⁵

For the naturalist Krutch, "What [a piece of work] is man?" no longer stood as the ultimate of ultimate questions, gripping his moral imagination. Nevertheless, he remained defiant in his endorsement of "the meaning of the meaningless question," arguing that to narrow the scope of modern inquiry only to questions that have verifiable, reproducible answers, is to narrow moderns' "field of competence [to] technology rather than what used to be called wisdom."⁴⁶ This Krutch was more ecumenical in terms of his appreciation of impossible questions; but he was quite sure whatever they asked, that their answers must widen the field for epistemic humility and a humanism that embraces naturalism.

Conclusion

The handful of philosophers (James and Russell), literary and social critics (Krutch, 1.0), children's book authors (Saint-Exupéry), religious and scientific public moralists (Heschel, Thurman, Tillich, Goodall, and Einstein), and environmentalists (Krutch 2.0), examined here offers nothing more than a tiny and imperfect sampling of the variety of twentieth-century American and European intellectuals who navigated the persistent yearning to ask ultimate questions, either of themselves or on behalf of others. Though they recognized the impossibility of answering ultimate questions with ultimate answers, they nevertheless recognized their importance for living the examined life. Indeed, some went so far as to

suggest that only the most impossible questions warranted our attention. As Milan Kundera put it in *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*⁴⁷ [*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*] (1984): “The only truly serious questions are ones that even a child can formulate. Only the most naïve of questions are truly serious. They are the questions with no answers. A question with no answer is a barrier that cannot be breached. In other words, it is a question with no answers that set the limits of human possibilities, describe the boundaries of human existence.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The novel was first published in French translation as *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être*.

⁴⁸ Milan Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, transl. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1984), 139.

It is not hard to imagine Kundera in conversation with the other thinkers explored here. We can envision him and Krutch in firm agreement that ultimate questions help us to understand the borders of our shared humanity. We can imagine that Einstein might partly agree, noting that a “holy curiosity” can push at the boundaries of what is knowable and unknowable and might show us that there are indeed verifiable answers to some of our impossible questions. Or we might imagine Saint-Exupéry reformulating Kundera’s claim by saying that *only children* are willing to ask the serious questions, whereas adults forgot how to do so. As we eavesdrop on these imagined conversations, we can hear the specific conditions of their historical moment pressing their felt urgency into a distinct form and mode of expression. In this give-and-take, we can see how some of the most urgent existential questions of the twentieth century took their particular and often peculiar shape in response to crisis. For the earlier Krutch it was the crisis of “modernity,” for Saint-Exupéry it was the crisis of the Second World War, for the later Krutch it was the creeping environmental crisis in the United States, and a nation not yet awakened to its threat, and for Kundera, it was a response to the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring, his forced exile, or both.

Ultimate questions in the twenty-first century are similarly born of crisis. But unlike earlier iterations, one of the most urgent questions of our own time in fact has answers that are neither unknown nor unknowable but are right in front of us, with blazing clarity. Though we may still need a child to pose them. After all, it is the teenage Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg who is

Figure 7. Greta Thunberg posed the ultimate question of our day, pressing adults who had bequeathed their children a broken planet. “We deserve a safe future. And we demand a safe future. Is that too much to ask?”



49 Greta Thunberg, Speech at New York Climate Strike (September 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/video/2019/sep/21/we-will-make-them-hear-us-greta-thunbergs-speech-to-new-york-climate-strike-video>, accessed February 27, 2022.

challenging us with the ultimate of ultimate questions today. “We deserve a safe future. And we demand a safe future,” she maintained in 2019, fed up with adults who are passing onto her and the world’s children a devastated planet. “Is that too much to ask?”⁴⁹

Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen is the Merle Curti and Vilas-Borghesi Distinguished Achievement Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she focuses on U.S. intellectual and cultural history in transatlantic perspective. She is the author of *American Intellectual History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2021), *The Ideas that Made America: A Brief History* (Oxford, 2019), and *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago, 2012), which won several book awards. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Guardian*, *Time*, *Washington Post*, *American Scholar*, *LA Review of Books*, and *Dissent*, among others. She is currently working on a book on American notions of — and the quest for — wisdom, in transnational perspective.