We lost something when we hurled utopian thinking into the dustbin of history. And hurled it we have. Too bad! For utopian thinking had its moments. To the extent that various utopias, from Plato’s *Republic* to the works of Thomas More and Samuel Butler, allowed their readers to lift their sights from a miserable present toward a better future, to just that extent those utopian fantasies provided hope.

When Ernst Bloch wrote the three volumes of *The Principle of Hope* he was opening an imaginative space for fantasy, clearing the ground for imagination and creativity. His *Spirit of Utopia* wasn’t handing down a recipe for perfecting humanity in perfect dwellings in perfect cities. When Barack Obama advertises the *Audacity of Hope*, he isn’t pressing for the perfection of human nature.

In this essay I want to hold on to the aspirational aspect of utopian thinking by liberating it from the debilitating stain of perfection. I want to lay out a case for optimism by linking it, paradoxically, to pessimism. Precisely by paying attention to prospects for disaster—nuclear, biological, or environmental—I want to clear a space for a *scenaric stance* that holds best case and worst case scenarios in mind at once. This is the way to face our unpredictable future responsibly. This is the way to grapple with uncertainty and act nonetheless. This is the way to deal with the passage of time.

Once upon a time, there was no truly historical time. The ancient Greeks thought that time moved in a circle, cyclically like the seasons. Call that first chapter the time of *tradition*. Then came chapter two, the time of *modernity* with its optimistic faith in progress. Then came chapter three, postmodernism with its pessimistic doubts regarding progress, and the eclipse of utopia. But this won’t do. As it is written in Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Likewise with hope. We need it. So now it’s time to move beyond postmodern time. Now it is time to take up a new stance toward time, a scenaric stance. Let’s call it *facing the fold*. 
Let’s trace the history of utopian thinking through its first three chapters, the better to get a running jump across the chasm of pessimism that postmodernism bequeaths us. And let’s not burden ourselves with a title so bulky as post-postmodernism. Let’s look ahead, and not backwards toward a backward looking postmodernism that has run out of steam.

Chapter One: The Cyclical Time of Tradition

Once upon a time there was the time of no history, the time of the ancients and the traditionalists in which the basic features of reality were understood to be unchanging and eternal. More than two millennia before Darwin, Aristotle taught that the number of species is fixed, not evolving. For Plato, time was “the moving image of eternity.” Plato’s ideal Forms don’t change. They are eternal.

The forms of everyday life that were consistent with this image of time followed tradition, as they still do in some, but ever fewer, parts of the world. Daughters expected to live lives very much like their mothers’, and sons expected to live lives very much like their fathers’. Identities and aspirations were reflected in last names like Jackson, Johnson and Clarkson.

In Homeric times, if you wanted to know how to build a boat, you recited to yourself those lines in the *Iliad* that described the building of boats. You didn’t try to design a better boat. The very idea of progress—as J.M. Bury’s classic, *The Idea of Progress* makes clear—is a modern invention.

Yes, there was a distinction between better and worse, and there were aspirations to gain access to the idea of the good. But those aspirations were not so much toward the good yet to come. The love of wisdom, philosophy, was an upward quest toward eternal ideals, toward a kind of great blueprint in the sky that did not change.

Chapter Two: Modernity and Progress

Following the first “chapter” during which philosophy was an attempt to grasp eternal truths, when time was regarded as “the moving image of eternity,” there came the time of progressive history and evolution. Starting with hints in the works of Vico and Herder in the 18th Century, then gaining full articulation in the works of Hegel and Darwin in the 19th Century, this sense of progressive history came to define the very spine of modernity. From getting better every
day in every way to “Better living through chemistry,” the march of progress through advances in science gained a firm foothold in western culture.

During this second chapter in the history of utopia, the quest for the good no longer followed an upward path toward eternal truths. Instead a more worldly path lay in the direction of a better future. Invention flourished. People imagined better boats, and built them. In some of the earlier utopian literature you find an amazing amount of space devoted to things like drainage systems. Sewers were a big deal, as they needed to be given important discoveries relating public health to good hygiene. But just as people were inventing better boats, so they invented better utopias. The very nature of utopian thinking underwent its own form of progress.

When you look at the history of 19th century utopian thinking you see an evolution away from the physical particulars of cities and towards the more ethereal aspects of the human spirit. Utopian thinking passed through a period during which it shifted from architecture, city planning and drainage systems to psychology, philosophy and states of mind. So by the time Karl Mannheim published his Ideology and Utopia a century later, he wasn’t concerned with city planning; he was almost entirely focused on the chains that bind men’s and women’s minds.

Let’s call it the sublimation of utopia. In modern and postmodern times, the terms ‘utopia’ and ‘utopian’ have come to connote more about minds than about bricks and mortar.

Chapter Three: Post-modernism and the eclipse of utopia

The march of progress hit some speed-bumps in the 20th Century: senseless deaths in the muddy trenches of the First World War, the Holocaust, the advent of nuclear weaponry and humanity’s ability to extinguish itself by our own technologically enhanced hands. Just as Hegel served as the philosopher who could render (more or less) articulate the world-historical actions of Napoleon and thereby induce a broad self-consciousness regarding the promise of modernity, so the French heirs of Hegel—Alexandre Kojève, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—rendered (more or less) articulate these world-historical atrocities and thereby induced a broad awareness of the threats of post-modernity.

Socio-political utopianism in the 20th century foundered on the shoals of failed revolutions. The improvers of mankind had their chances and each, one after the other, ended in their own respective versions of a reign of terror. The American
The American experiment succeeded, but it was based not on some grand vision of a social order that would improve men’s and women’s souls, but quite the opposite: on a more modest belief that people left to their own devices would get on with their lives best if you let them make up their own minds about how to make a living, how to raise their children, how to relate to their immediate neighbors, and how to pray. In short, the American experiment was based on the idea of individual liberty. Unlike the French and Russian and Chinese revolutions, each of which turned oppressive, the American Revolution was fought by people who were not motivated by some shining ideal of a life very different after the revolution. They just wanted to get the Brits off their backs and get on with living life their way.

The founding fathers were very clear about wanting to leave everyday life pretty much as it was. Let the butcher continue to be a butcher and the baker continue to bake. Let people raise their children as they wished and worship as they pleased. There was no moving rhetoric about a new and better humanity, no strategic vision with goals and objectives very different from life in rural New England or urban Philadelphia. Just a commitment to the preservation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

For all the faith in individual progress that the American Dream allowed, there was very little by way of collective dreaming—for the race, for the species, for the human condition. But here lies the rub: After the sublimation of utopia, the eclipse of utopia means flushing out the baby of a better humanity with the bathwater of utopian living arrangements.

God knows the bathwater of utopian politics was dirty. “The final solution,” seventy years of Soviet communism, China’s cultural revolution—these were political, ideological fantasies that caused so much misery that most rational survivors of the 20th century look back and say, never again. We now know better than to listen to tyrants and philosopher kings with their bright ideas about classless society or a thousand year Reich.

But what about the baby? Can’t we hope for a better humanity? Haven’t we seen progress with respect to slavery, racism and sexism? Granted, a partial eclipse of utopia might save us from crackpot schemes for the radical reform of human nature by Jacobin revolutionaries. But the total eclipse of utopia shuts out the light of hope for even a fairly gradual, evolutionary rather than revolutionary, improvement.

Call this third chapter the time of decline, the time of postmodernism. Every day in every way we’re getting worse and worse, from the pollution of the atmosphere to the extinction of species to the threat of terrorism, and on, and
Reading Sir Martin Rees and his doomsday scenarios in *Our Final Hour*, we’re told that the human species has no better than a 50/50 chance of surviving the 21st century. The so-called march of progress is by no means assured by advances in science. To the contrary, advances in science may be our undoing. Even though less apocalyptic than nuclear holocaust, we are made increasingly aware of several more insidious threats: CFCs and the ozone hole, CO₂ and global warming, the relentless withering of biodiversity. . .

This declinism is tired, tiresome, and tiring. Such pessimism gets us nowhere, but it enjoys a certain intellectual respectability just because it is so dark. The lowered brow of the pessimist cannot possibly be taken as naïve. The pessimist has looked into the abyss and, by god, he has not flinched. Such courage! No sugar coatings for him! No rose-tinted glasses!

*The fourth turning: A Tragi-comic Future*

Now time itself is taking yet another turn, a fourth turning. We no longer live in the ahistorical or circular time of the ancients. Nor do we enjoy the optimistic, progressive time of the moderns. Nor, hopefully, the apocalyptic closing time of the postmodernists. Now we live in the tragi-comic time of multiple scenarios. Now the future is flying at us both faster and less predictably than ever. Surprise is its middle name. There’s promise to be sure, but risk just as surely. Our research labs are churning out discoveries at an unprecedented rate. The life expectancy of individuals is increasing even as the life-expectancy of the species, according to Sir Martin Rees, is not.

Neither as optimistic as modernity nor as pessimistic as postmodernity, the sensibility appropriate to multiple scenarios is one of wide-eyed wonder at the nearness of Heaven and Hell both to us and to one another. The sheer proximity of best case and worst case scenarios induces a psychic shear factor between updrafts of hope and downdrafts of despair. Should one laugh or cry? Or master a capacity for both each and every day?

This fourth form of lived time—the first being the traditional, the second progressive, the third apocalyptic, and the fourth tragic-comic—has about it a certain intensity. The stakes are high. Choices matter. It would be half-right but also half-wrong to call it *existential*: Half-right in its sense of urgency and its call upon our sense of freedom and responsibility; but half-wrong to the extent that the existentialists themselves were poised between the moderns and the
postmoderns, and for the most part pretty gloomy about it—all that gazing into the abyss, Being-towards-Death, and European brooding.

The fourth attitude toward time peeks through the gloom with Woody Allen’s wry humor asking, “What Ate Zarathustra?” Or Ken Kesey’s question, “Whose movie is this?” Or Hunter Thompson’s gonzo sensibility; or R. Crumb’s Zippy the Pinhead asking, “Are we having fun yet?”

Martin Amis caught a piece of this new attitude toward time and history in his *London Fields*. “We’re all coterminous,” he writes, referring to the imminent ecological apocalypse that looms over his novel. “We used to live and die without any sense of the planet getting older, of mother earth getting older, living and dying. We used to live outside history. But now we’re all coterminous. We’re inside history now all right, on its leading edge, with the wind ripping past our ears. Hard to love, when you’re bracing yourself for impact.”

*Facing the Fold*

Adopting a perspective toward our tragi-comic future is like facing a landscape described by mathematician Rene Thom. Thom developed a series of mathematical models he called “catastrophes,” not because they are bad or disastrous, but rather because he wanted to call attention to their mapping of discontinuities. Thom’s “catastrophe theory” has a lot in common with what Nobel Prize winner, Ilya Prigogine, called “bifurcation theory.” Both were interested in the ways that nature branches from time to time, and often in ways that a calculus of continuity has difficulty describing.

Thom theorized seven different types of catastrophe. But the force and power of his analysis can be grasped from a brief description of just one of his seven different types, the “fold” catastrophe, and its application to modeling the “bifurcation” between fight and flight in the behavior of dogs.
Imagine the behavior of a dog as following a path on the upper behavior surface beginning at point C and moving, on a path of increasing rage, toward B. While launching an attack, the dog sees a man with a large stick. The dog’s behavior then moves from point B towards point A. The beauty of this mathematical model, the beauty of Thom’s catastrophe theory, lies in the way it models, on a continuous surface, the discontinuity in behavior we observe when we see the dog rapidly shift from fight to flight. Moving on the behavior surface from B to A, the dog will enter the intrinsically unstable area between the dark lines on the lower “control surface” labeled “bifurcation set.” Mapping this shift on the behavior surface, it’s easy to see where the path from B to A will “fall” discontinuously from the “attacking” plane of the behavior surface to the “retreating” plane.¹

Life in the fourth era of time is like standing at point C looking at a utopian point B even as one sees the distinct possibility of disaster at point A. Our hopes hide fears of disaster. Our fears eclipse the optimism of our hopes. The oscillation we experience as we toggle back and forth between brave optimism and knowing pessimism is enough to induce a sense of irony. Or at least a call for alternative scenarios if we need help in handling multiple futures at once.

¹ This application of Thom’s catastrophe theory is drawn from E.C. Zeeman’s article, “Catastrophe Theory,” *Scientific American*, April 1976.
Scenario Planning and the Scenaric Stance

When considering this line of argument—from the eclipse of utopia to the restoration of hope by way of the four eras of time—one can do a lot worse than pick up the tools and mental habits of scenario planning. Facing both positive and negative scenarios at once can be disconcerting in its complexity. Both optimism and pessimism share the advantage of simplicity. We need some tools to handle the uncertainty and complexity of an unpredictable future.

The optimism of the entrepreneur goes a long way toward providing clarity of vision. Nothing can stand in the way of a single-minded focus on success. But the optimist is easily dismissed as a simpleton, or as naïve, or as insensitive to the ills of the world and therefore shallow. Pessimism is somehow deeper, more knowing. But pessimism, too, is too simple. The pessimist gets dismissed as a Cassandra.

However correct the optimist or the pessimist proves to be over time, his or her optimism or pessimism by itself was too simple when it was originally held. Still, one can hold on to the content of both the optimistic and pessimistic visions while avoiding the sting of their critics’ comments by holding on to both the optimistic scenarios and the pessimistic scenarios at the same time in the capacious crucible of scenario thinking.

Despite its disconcerting complexity, there are advantages to facing the fold. First, one acquires an acute sense of freedom. Quite the opposite of living in a fatalistic rut, facing the fold heightens the sharpness of Kierkegaard’s existential imperative: Either/Or. You cannot do both. It is yours to choose. But at least you have a choice. As opposed to this sense of freedom, both optimism and pessimism appear as two sides of the same coin of fatalism.

Second, when one faces the fold, one is relieved of the intellectual dishonesty involved in holding either branch of the fold as a single-point forecast. One is relieved of the naiveté of callow optimism, even as one is spared the amoral defeatism of the all-knowing cynic. You’ve looked at the dark side; you’ve seen the very real risk; and still you’re able to move ahead constructively.

Third, having made a choice in full knowledge of the alternatives and the risks involved, you’ll act deliberately and resolutely, but not rashly or foolishly. You choose the high road, but you are always well aware of the off-ramps to the low road. You don’t kid yourself that success is guaranteed, as the Bushies did so foolishly as they marched into Iraq. And scenarios had been written and shared.
A team in the State Department under the direction of Thomas Warrick had created scenarios that detailed the prospect of an insurgency and the dangers of looting in the aftermath of a purely military “victory.” But Warrick was known as a prickly if brilliant fellow; second, he was at State, traditionally at odds with both the Bush White House and the hawks under Rumsfeld at the Pentagon; and third, those scenarios had been composed during Clinton’s tenure in the White House. So Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld were not about to let such lily-livered cautionary tales inhibit their march to Baghdad. They simply swept those negative scenarios into the waste basket.

The attitudinal aspect of facing the fold—retaining the ability to act resolutely even as you maintain an acute awareness of how things could go wrong—is hard to over-value. It’s the kind of thing that venture capitalists look for in lending money to people who have already suffered one or two failures. Hardly gun shy, they are nonetheless all too aware of the ways things could go wrong.

The tragi-comic aspect of the scenaric stance can turn abstract thoughts toward profound emotions. We’re talking about hopes and fears here. It could get scary. Or it could get hokey if only hopes and no fears are in play. Laughter and tears—are these not direct physiological responses to rapid reinterpretations? Do we not see a mixing of mind and body in laughter and tears? The fairly violent physiology of laughter and its absolute irrepressibility under certain circumstances—good jokes—is a function of a nervous system that has somewhere within it a toggle-switch twitching between the planes on a fold. Your nervous system is interpreting and re-interpreting the same signals first in one way and then another, back and forth, very rapidly. Likewise alternative scenarios give you a kind of stereoscopic vision that lends emotional depth to your experience.

In adopting the scenic stance, facing the fold in which multiple futures are held simultaneously and constantly in view, one achieves a kind of emotional and intellectual maturity that is not available to either the simple optimist or the simple pessimist. Yes, things could turn out badly. But, no, that is not in itself reason for inaction. Yes, things could turn out very well, but, no, that is not in itself reason for foolish bravado. By holding in mind several different futures at once, one is able to proceed deliberately yet flexibly; resolutely yet cautiously.

The scenic stance isn’t simply a tool to solve a problem, like a calculator, or double-entry bookkeeping. It’s a frame of mind. Its framework can be measured in three dimensions: First, you find a relentless curiosity, a willingness to learn, an eagerness to experience new frames of reference. The scenic stance is
curious not just for facts, though certainly you want plenty of those. A good scenario shows you a way of looking at the world that you hadn’t seen before. Call this the outside-in dimension. Second, you gain a capacity for commitment, a resoluteness toward action, and once having acted, a clarity of follow-through. Call this the inside-out dimension. Third, you achieve a capacity to balance these in-coming and out-going flows.

The scenario stance is subtle. If you emphasize the either/or of decisiveness too much, you risk cutting off the branches that constitute alternative scenarios once you have opted for one course of action. Likewise if you emphasize too much the both/and of maintaining multiple scenarios before the mind’s eye, you risk the indecisiveness of a wavering Hamlet: To be, or not to be, etc. So you have to climb up a level of abstraction and maintain both the both/and and the either/or even as you learn how to assume either the capaciousness of the both/and or the decisiveness of the either/or.

But, hey, welcome to the ways of the world and the inevitability of surprise. Further, the times demand it. He or she who sees no opportunities is blind. He or she who senses no threats is foolish. But he or she who sees both threats and opportunities shining forth in rich and vivid scenarios may just be able to make the choices and implement the plans that will take us to the high road and beyond.