INTRODUCTION

Where Are We Headed?

This book attempts to work out a philosophical response to two general preoccupations that, I believe, characterize our time. These preoccupations can be felt more as nagging feelings than as explicitly articulated thoughts. One of the reasons for writing this work is to give articulation to such feelings, which I share with my contemporaries. I believe that this is a principal professional task of those of us who do philosophy. (Like most of us who "do philosophy" professionally, I am a professor at a university, a faculty member of a philosophy department.)

The first preoccupation, I think, can be expressed most clearly in the form of a question, which for the moment I shall express as generally as possible. The question asks: where are we headed? It is a question we ask, or a feeling that nags at us, when, for example, we watch the news and are made to follow "developments" that are clearly working themselves out, but whose goals and outcomes are far from clear. The most prominent example that comes to mind as I write this is the occupation of Iraq. Other examples might include the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, global warming, the consolidation of the European Union, the threat of an avian-flu pandemic and biotechnological developments, but the list could be continued indefinitely. The point I wish to make is that when we are made to think about the "world" —the "state of the world," as it were—we are confronted with various developments, situations that are evolving and changing as we confront them and try to make sense of them. Confronting these various developments considered as a whole can give rise to
a distinct feeling of discomfort, a nagging feeling that demands attention and
that I am suggesting should be articulated in the form of the question: where,
given all of these developments that confront us, are we headed?

This is a very general question and, in this age of specialized knowledge, it
is hard for most of us to see how one might go about answering it. The first
thing I need to do is to argue for the legitimacy of general questions even when
no answers are immediately forthcoming. I say this to forestall what might be
a typical response to the question as I have articulated it: to turn away from
it because of its generality. All the developments that confront us arise out of
complex conditions that can be, and indeed are, analyzed and thoughtfully
considered by many knowledgeable persons, whose opinions are sometimes
canvassed within the presentation of those developments. They may not be able
to answer the general question of “where we are headed,” but they can and do
answer specific questions about what is happening right now and what is likely
to happen next: a timetable for the withdrawal of Coalition troops from Iraq,
or an increase in their numbers; measures taken to prepare for the spread of the
avian-flu virus, which include developing vaccination programs; interpretations
of what the Kyoto Protocol demands of its signatories. However, the point I wish
to make is that these specific and specialized answers to specific questions do not
replace the more general question of “where we are headed,” which articulates
the very real feeling of discomfort that arises when these developments are
considered as a whole.

Now, it might be argued by those dispensing specialized responses to
specialized questions that my more general question is not a real question. It
may, or may not, address what I have been calling a “nagging feeling” about
the “state of the world” in its various developments, but it does not actually
articulate a real question, precisely because the question as posed does not
admit of an answer. Or rather, the response to a question such as “where are we
headed?” can only be an emphatic: we do not know.

I think this is an appropriate thing to say. Indeed, we do not know where
we are headed and, if anyone claims to know where we are headed, they are
mistaken. No one has available to him or her any general knowledge of what
will happen in the future. Of course, this lack of knowledge does not prevent us
from predicting, from our experience of the past, what is likely to happen, given
present conditions. However, the accuracy of those predictions will depend on
how well we understand our past experiences and our present conditions. All
of which seems to be an argument for turning to those specialized responses to
specialized questions about past experiences and present conditions in order to
understand the developments that confront us, as opposed to wasting our time
asking questions that cannot be answered.
Many readers will no doubt have noticed that I have insisted on the term "developments." I have done this to draw attention to the typical way the "world" is presented to us (think of the news on television). It is presented, not as a static state of affairs, but as a dynamic whole that is unfolding in certain determinate ways. That the world is treated as a developing whole that unfolds reflects an assumption we make about the world. The assumption that the world is dynamic and unfolding reveals itself in the way we think that the decisions and actions that are undertaken today will impact in specific if only relatively predictable ways on what happens tomorrow. The assumption that the world is a whole reveals itself in our insistence on presenting things happening at great distances from each other as being relevant to one another.

The reason I point this out is that both the "nagging feeling" and the question of where we are headed address themselves less to the (in this case relative lack of) knowledge we have about the world, than to the assumptions we make about it, as these are revealed in the way we present it to ourselves. In particular, it addresses the assumption we make about the world as being a developmental whole.

This book is primarily concerned with that assumption and how examining it can help relieve the "nagging feeling" that accompanies it. In response to the question "where are we headed?" will propose less an answer than a way of thinking through or making sense of the question itself. In other words, it will provide a philosophical response to the question, which is something different from a specialized answer to a specialized question.

I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction two general preoccupations that motivated this philosophical investigation. The first preoccupation I have described as our preoccupation with how we are to situate ourselves within the world seen as a developing whole. The second preoccupation I shall articulate, not in terms of a question, but rather in terms of a twin set of observations about the world that many people make, or to which many people are prepared to agree. Those observations are that the world "is increasingly becoming multicultural" and "the world is increasingly becoming one world." As with the question "where are we headed?" my aim is to deal with these observations philosophically. That is, I am not here concerned with what might be called the empirical validity of the observation that the world is becoming increasingly multicultural, which would involve developing ways to measure whether or not the world is indeed becoming more "multicultural," perhaps by means of statistical data concerning immigration, patterns of settlement and resettlement, and retention of distinct cultural practices. Rather, my concern is to examine the way in which these observations reveal certain assumptions we make about the world, and how these assumptions contribute to shaping the world in particular ways. My argument will be that examining the assumptions revealed...
by these observations will help us make better sense of the question of where we are headed, which I believe is an important question to which we not only can respond, but are indeed responding, in ways that can be made more explicit.

This can be illustrated if we look more carefully at the twin set of observations that the world is becoming increasingly multicultural and that the world is becoming increasingly one world. On the surface, these two observations appear to be in conflict. An increasingly multicultural world is, presumably, one that manifests increasing diversity. But then in what sense is the world becoming increasingly one?

One way to deal with the apparent conflict is to recognize that we are dealing with very general observations taken from different vantage points: a view from the ground, as it were, and a view from above. On the ground, diversity is manifest. All around us there are different cultures, different ways of going about one’s way, different ways of making sense of things. From above, however, what one observes is the shared space of a single world. Things may be unequally distributed within that shared space, but it nevertheless remains shared: a blue planet harbouring, and threatening, many forms of life.

Although these two vantage points offer very different perspectives, it should be noted that the expression “our multicultural world” seems to want to hold on to both at the same time. Our (one) world is a multicultural (one). To say that our world is multicultural is already to say that it is not “one” in any simple, straightforward sense, but, at the same time, to say that ours is a multicultural world is to give a kind of unified sense to that diversity.

On the ground, then, what we might be said to observe is increasing diversity. By “observe” I mean the rather involved activity of thinking that involves seeing things against a background of other things, understanding how those things relate to each other and to my observing them, and the expectations that follow from such understanding, among other things. That is, to observe something is already to place it within a pre-existing framework of reference constructed out of patterns of inference and modes of assertion (as Robert B. Brandom explains in his Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment). To say that what one observes is an increasing diversity is to say that the assertions that one makes, the inferences that one draws, and the references that one appeals to all contain elements of the unfamiliar along with the more regular familiarities of one’s thinking.

Let me develop the following example to illustrate how the recognition of diversity in terms of relative familiarities impacts on how one thinks about one’s world. It is not uncommon today to encounter in one’s daily activities persons speaking a language that one does not understand. One may be familiar enough with features of the language to identify it as, say, Spanish, Urdu or Swahili without, however, understanding what is being said. Now, what I want
to suggest and consider is that such an encounter, say, on the bus on the way home from work, within the context or logical space—the context within which we refer, infer and assert features of the world around us—recognized as that of an “increasingly multicultural world,” has distinctive features. For one, the speakers of the uncomprehended language, which may perhaps be not altogether unfamiliar, in the sense that one may indeed be able to identify the language itself, are not necessarily considered by the listener who does not understand the language to be foreigners, or not, that is, by the listener who has observed and accepts that we live in an “increasingly multicultural world,” though he or she might assert that the speakers are speaking a foreign language.

Now, the point I wish to draw attention to is that this willingness to distinguish the speaker from the speech is quite remarkable, when one thinks about it as it arises from a specifically constructed social situation. Because our use of language is so connected to our identities, it is not surprising that, for a very long time, identifying one’s speech was at the same time identifying the speaker. However, what our “increasingly multicultural world” is revealing is that the relation between speaker and speech is much more involved and layered than this ready identification implies. Of course, persons who regularly speak more than one language have always been aware of this complexity, which can be the cause of considerable existential angst, as the French-speaking, English-writing author of this book can testify. In fact, what our “increasingly multicultural world” in part signifies is the increasingly widespread acknowledgement of the constructed and revisable character of the identification of speaker and speech, largely because more and more people go through their lives speaking more than one language on a regular basis.

Let us return to the example of the bus ride. A group of people are speaking a language that I acknowledge is foreign to me, but obviously not to them, which means, in an “increasingly multicultural world,” that I am prepared to restrict my ascription of “foreignness” to the language and not to the speakers themselves. Of course, the speakers may actually be foreigners, that is, tourists visiting the city and riding on public transportation. This might be made evident in a number of ways: they might be looking with some animation out the window, and pointing to persons and things; cameras may be strung around their necks and guides to the city may be sticking out of their pockets. My point, however, is that, absent these additional markers, in an “increasingly multicultural world” we would not be justified in ascribing the status of foreigners to speakers of a foreign language whom one encounters on the bus. Indeed, this would be a kind of mistake, a kind of failure on our part to acknowledge the true character of our surrounding circumstances, something like a “hasty generalization” as identified by the canons of informal logic. I mean this reference to a logical mistake in a
strong sense. In a social space that is openly and "increasingly" understood to be multicultural, to fail to distinguish between speaker and speech is to fail to understand the normative and logical parameters of that space.

This, of course, is merely an example of the kinds of considerations that can arise if we accept the assertion that the world is "increasingly becoming multicultural." Many more of these considerations will be discussed in due course. The general introductory point I would like to emphasize is that asserting or affirming that the world is "becoming increasingly multicultural" is asserting or affirming that the world is in fact changing, and that making sense of the world must take this fact into consideration. It is by attending to the fact of a changing world that we can better understand how the assertion that the world is "becoming increasingly multicultural" links up with the question of "where we are headed."

In order to see this more clearly, I would like to refine the question of "where we are headed" by adding a prefatory clause: "given the way the world presents itself to us, where are we headed?" No doubt the reader can see where I am going with this clause: namely, that the world presents itself as "increasingly multicultural." However, to get the full sense of what is involved here, these preliminary and more general considerations are required.

There are two components to this question that need to be clarified straight off. The first concerns the notion that the world is something that presents itself to us. The second concerns the reference to a "we."

The way I understand the two components is that the first articulates the philosophical generality of the question, whereas the second seeks to ground this generality in a specific context (where "we" are headed). The point I wish to make by posing the question in this way is to show that attention to the different "ways in which the world presents itself to us" actually shows how we are indeed always headed somewhere within it. In fact, that is what it means to say that the world presents itself to us in a particular way.

Let me give an example. When you wake up, you wake up to a particular world. The world presents itself to you in a particular way, perhaps at first as a beeping alarm clock, or sunlight on your face, or a small child tugging on your sleeve, or the kneading of a cat's paws, or a kiss from a partner's mouth. Whatever the case may be, the way the world presents itself to you is at the same time descriptive of your orientation within it. That is, as it presents itself to you, you also make your way through and within it. Your hand strikes the alarm clock, landing on the snooze button with remarkable precision, and your eyes verify the time displayed, confirming that you need not get out of bed immediately, though soon enough. The warm sun on your face lets you wake up more slowly, perhaps contemplating the leisurely day ahead or, less fortunately, you sit bolt upright and turn with panic to the traitorous alarm clock, curses...
bursting out of you as you scramble out of bed. Waking up to the world every morning is also being directed within it, which means, for those likely to be reading these lines, probably first to a washroom, then some breakfast, then work or leisure.

Simply pointing this out, however, and with fairly little effort, one can imagine very different worlds, implying very different orientations upon awakening: dangerous worlds, perhaps, unrecognized worlds, worlds with no immediate prospect of nourishment or employment, worlds with little choice, worlds with too much choice. I leave it to the reader’s imagination to work out the details (a useful exercise), but I would point out that, whatever the world, it is one in which one’s bearings are taken and that one either heads into or hides from.

It is within this very general understanding of the ways in which the world presents itself to us that I ask the more specific question of where we are headed. Where are we headed in the world, given the ways in which it presents itself to us? That is my question.

Note that I have now pluralized the "ways" in which the world presents itself to us. This is because we are getting more specific, more concrete. There will be different and competing ways of specifying the general point.

The "we" at this point needs to be understood as inclusively as possible, referring to all who are indeed headed somewhere within the world presented to them, which, I suggest, means all those who depend on a sense of this orientation within the world. Ultimately, however, “we” means all of us, everyone, all human beings, and, interestingly, not only those presently alive, but all human beings, past, present, and future, so long as there is a world presenting itself. Such a “we” is, of course, difficult to think about clearly, or concretely, but actually it is not as difficult as one may initially assume. The trick is not to fly off too quickly into a generalized “we,” such as “humanity,” or even “human beings,” because these latter categories tend to take on a life of their own and replace the concrete “we” at issue. We would do better to stick closer to the ground and think about how “we” spread ourselves over space and time.

First time. I often ask my students if they know their grandmother’s maiden name. Many do. When it comes to her mother’s maiden name, however, they are utterly at a loss, and often not because they are unable to recall it, but because they were never introduced to it. That generation of their families has never been presented to them, though the very mention of one’s grandmother’s mother makes her now appear, however nebulously. This, by the way, is where budding historians can be identified: the nebulous appearance of figures of the past is intriguing to some people, provoking a desire to investigate how to render these figures more real, which can be as simple as asking simple questions of one’s grandmother about her mother, which of course can lead to other
evocations of the past, so that all of a sudden the world takes on a different hue. Even for those who are not historians, such genealogical links are of course a way of linking ourselves in the present to our past.

However, we do not merely want to stay within the familial sphere; after all, families develop and renew themselves through their encounters with extra-familial others (as we shall discuss later). Even if we do restrict ourselves to that sphere, it is not long before we move beyond those genealogical linkages that connect us “directly” to those nebulous, though named, figures of the past. We want to look out also to the world that sustained and, perhaps, mangled those lives linked to our own. What did the world look like to them? How did it present itself to them when they opened their eyes in the morning?

My own grandparents were born in the 1890s, at about the same time as the automobile, though none of them traveled in one until they were adults. I mention this because my ten-year-old son is fascinated with cars, which of course are all around him. He was both amused and puzzled by the provenance of the term “horsepower.” It is hard to imagine and understand how a wagon pulled by 265 horses is meant to represent the power and performance of the vehicle that (he wishes) his father drove. Of course, the notion of a horse’s strength was much more familiar to his great-grandfather, who used both horses and tractors in his lifetime. The world has changed a great deal over the past one hundred years. Indeed, consideration of these changes, and of the speed with which things continue to change, is a prime motivation for considering our question: where are we headed?

In order to think about these changes and the different directions they allow or forestall, we shall need to make use of a number of concepts. Right now we are trying to make sense of the concept of “we.” We have noticed that it does not take long to realize that a “we” that rather straightforwardly includes members of our families (grandparents and their parents) involves us in the task of thinking very different worlds, such as, in the example given above, a world in which the concept of horsepower is introduced to one where its etymology needs to be explained.

Making sense of these different worlds involves making use of the concepts of the past, the present, and the future. We use the past, and what we know of the past, to make sense of the concept of “horsepower” as it presents itself to us in the present, as one of the specifications that entice us to purchase this or that particular model of automobile; and at the same time points to the future. Increased horsepower involves the consumption of increased amounts of fuel, which, for the time being, is produced from non-renewable resources available only under certain kinds of highly complex organized conditions.

We have seen that the world presents itself to us in such a way that we orient ourselves within it. We have also seen that that presentation has a temporal
dimension, that is, it involves the past, the present, and the future. When we talk about the world in terms of the fact that it has a past, a present, and a future, we are talking about an historical world. In more technical language, we are talking about the historicity of the world. The world presents itself to us in such a way that it includes and involves a reference to the past, the present, and the future. I shall attempt to keep this discussion as free of technical language as possible, not because there is something wrong with technical language (it is often required in order to get certain kinds of job done), but because I am not asking a technical question. I am asking a philosophical question about what we might be able to think and say about where we are headed, given the way that the world presents itself to us. We haven’t gotten too far yet, but we are moving forward.

If the world presents itself to us historically, that is, involves us in considerations of the past, the present, and the future, we need to work out how we should understand how these different tenses relate to each other. We begin with the past.

Evidence of the past is everywhere around us, of course. Just think of historical buildings that, by their architectural distinctiveness, call up different ways of conceiving both lived space and what the eye should see. The simple point I would like to make here is that our involvement in and with the past, both in terms of what we remember of the past and of what we have forgotten, is precisely that of relating to the world as it presents itself, as evidence of what is in the world, indeed of what the world is both in terms of what it offers us to understand, and what it allows us to do with that understanding. Another way of saying this is that, whatever evidence we consider in the present (or better: at present) actually comes from the past. The evidence we consider, although we do so in the present, does not come from the present, is not produced by the present, but literally comes from something other than the present: it comes from the past. What I want to insist on is this: what the past is: it is the evidence of the world that the present considers. If I relate this consideration to our initial question, then it tells us that, when we are contemplating where we are headed, given the way the world presents itself to us, any appeal to the evidence that the world provides is an appeal to the past.

I am even prepared to go further and suggest that, whenever, in our response to our initial question, we make use of the notion of knowledge, we are making use of the past, of the pastness of the world, if you like, as it presents itself. This sounds a lot like playing with words, but it is not. The world considered as evidence is the relational contribution of the past to our experience of it. The pastness of the world is the world presenting itself to us as evidence of itself.

Of course, this sounds very abstract, but that is because we are considering matters very generally. That is why it is important not to forget the initial
question that remains our guide. To be able to respond to the question of where we are headed, we need to orient ourselves within the world that presents itself to us in specific ways. Right now we are considering how it presents itself to us as evidence. It does so by showing how the world arises out of the past.

Here is an example. I hear a sound I don’t immediately recognize. I ask myself what the sound is, which is in fact remembering what the sound might have been, by placing it in a context in which the sound makes sense. I do this by looking around me, at the world as it presents itself to me. I am in bed, but it is not my bed. In fact, I am not in a familiar room. There is a mirror and the curtains are strange, and there is the sound. Then I remember: I am in a hotel room. The shrieking sound is the alarm I set, which I found, bizarrely, forming part of the television. I crawl out of bed and fumble with the various buttons until the alarm is turned off, or at least I think it is turned off, only to hear the shrieking sound start up again when I am in the shower. Apparently, I hit the snooze button.

The point of the example, of course, is to demonstrate that the world presents itself, in part, as evidence of past organizations/actions. The fact that it presents such evidence is a function of its having been so organized in the past.

Now the point I want to draw from this is that the past is only part of an overall picture, the other two parts being the present and the future, but it is a part with a specific role. The past is that part of the world that reveals itself as evidence and therefore can yield knowledge. Permit me to insist here too, because the idea expressed here contrasts with a view that would want to situate knowledge in the present, in contact with present reality. However, it is more accurate to say that confirmation is what takes place in contact with present reality, confirmation of knowledge structured and organized in the past. The night before: oh, there’s the alarm clock! Why is it part of the television? The following morning: what is that horrible sound? Oh, it’s the alarm clock. Thus our knowledge, gained from consideration of the past, is confirmed, or disconfirmed, in our contact with the world in the present. Indeed, this is precisely how I want to characterize the present’s contribution to the overall picture I am attempting to paint: the present describes the line of contact with the reality of the world.

This notion of contact, I think, helps us make sense of the strangeness of the present, when you stop and think about it. The present never seems to stand still, never seems simply to be. It is always pointing to the future, as well as perpetually becoming past. Though we are often told to live for “today,” for the “now,” we can’t, because there doesn’t seem to be a stable, enduring now we could get a hold of. Are we talking about now, or now? Perhaps now. No, now.
Now! NOW! Always the present yields to the past, but, strangely, by pointing to the future. Having said that, in another sense all we ever really have is the present, in the sense that the past is no longer and the future is not yet.

In the context of the question we are asking, we can see the present as playing a very specific role: it describes our connection or contact with the world as it presents itself to us. It presents itself in highly organized ways, thanks to the past, but always through contact, as present. That contact can lead us to question the past, organized world for any number of reasons. What is that sound?

The picture we have so far is that the world presents itself to us through organized and structured (via the past) contact (via the present). However, we should recall that our question does not concern merely the world as it presents itself, as though it were presenting itself to no one in particular. If that were the case, then there would be no point in saying that it presents itself, would there? The question also concerns the world as it presents itself to us, such that we effectively take our bearings within it, move within it, make our way through it.

This requires that we think that our structured contact with the world is not a fixed contact but one that admits of change. What we know from the past and confirm in present contact does not tell the whole story of our experience of the world. We need to acknowledge that our structured contact with the world does not exhaust the way the world presents itself to us. There is always more to it than our structured contact can handle. Sometimes we ignore that something more, but more often we anticipate it. This anticipation of what else there is to the world besides our structured contact with the ways it presents itself to us can be given a simple and straightforward name: it is the future. We don't know the future, for knowledge comes from the past. We don't live in the future, for we exist in the present. We anticipate the continued presentation of the world, the future. The future, then, is the world as we do not know it and do not live it.

Again, we can either ignore the future or anticipate it, but anticipating it rather than ignoring it will better enable us to respond to our initial question. Indeed, it is a concern with the quality of our anticipation that has prompted me to ask and respond to the question posed.

Specifically, I am concerned about two forms of anticipation that have often been formulated, that implicitly respond to our question and that have been influential. However, I believe them to be inadequate to the world as it actually presents itself to us. I believe them to be inadequate because they do not fully appreciate the historicity of the world that they are attempting to elucidate. That is, their anticipation does not adequately appreciate the most important features of our contemporary structured contact with the world as it presents itself to us.

The first form formulates our anticipation in terms that suggest that we have reached some kind of destination, some kind of plateau or even summit, in
our journey as human beings. In a word, that, as far as where we are headed is concerned, we have indeed arrived. This is sometimes expressed by saying that we have reached “the end of history.” (Although this notion is usually attributed to Hegel, especially as read by Alexandre Kojève, it has been popularized by Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History and The Last Man.* Hegel will be discussed in the second part of this work, when we turn to the consideration of our world as “multicultural” and constituted through mutual recognition.)

What is meant by “the end of history” is not that time has ceased, or that things will forever remain the same, but rather that, as far as our structured contact with the world is concerned, there is nothing left to anticipate or expect to come out of that structured contact that we do not already anticipate or expect.

Before dismissing this formulation outright, as many of us may well want to do out of a healthy respect and understanding for the unknowability of the future, we need to consider more carefully what it being said, not because the formulation is true, but because it is more widespread than one might assume. For example, those who defend the basic definition of a liberal democratic regime—minimally, the free election by all adult voters of those who enact the laws that govern and regulate social relations under a broad conception of human rights—as the best possible regime may in fact do so by either assuming or arguing that it is the only regime that can actually anticipate the basic needs of human beings. Of course, we all recognize that any actually existing regime does not actually meet those basic human needs and is rightly criticized for failing to do so. However, the point here is not the practical point of actually meeting those needs—after all, one must realistically concede that the logistics involved in meeting the needs of so many people are pretty complicated and a lot can go wrong a lot of the time—but that of being able to anticipate them given our structured contact with the world. In other words, on this view, whatever we should anticipate as human beings, we already do, and that is because in liberal democratic regimes we recognize the equal dignity of all human beings. Liberal democratic regimes can certainly be improved in terms of their actual delivery of programs that intend to respect that equal dignity, and meet the basic needs that such dignity requires and demands. But no other regime has better identified that dignity and those needs. This kind of reasoning certainly does, or at least can be seen to, support the view that we have, as human beings, come to the “end of history.” We have succeeded in identifying its goal, that of respecting the dignity of all human beings and continuing to attempt to provide for their needs. Given that what will happen in the future is anybody’s guess (in the long run), that is, given that the point here is not to predict the future but to anticipate it, then one might be excused for thinking that, whatever actually happens, it will either bring us closer to actual equal respect as we anticipate it or it will encounter all kinds of difficulties, so many in fact that our anticipation
may grow more and more pessimistic, raising the possibility that we may lose our grip on our anticipation, "history" may indeed kick in again and we shall struggle again for a true appreciation of what it means to be human. Hopefully, however, conditions will allow us to notice once again that what it means to be human is to have one's basic needs met and one's dignity respected.

Is there anything wrong with this picture? I shall be arguing that there is, not so much with the picture itself, which I think is splendid and inspiring, but with the manner in which it is painted and exhibited. It is a picture that does not take history, considered as a whole, seriously enough. That is, it doesn't sufficiently appreciate how history as a whole needs to be understood as the past, the present, and the future taken together: what I am going to call the past-present-future complex, in order to distinguish the notion of history as a whole from the notion of history as the study of the past. As well, it does not sufficiently appreciate how we in effect situate ourselves within this past-present-future complex. Such an appreciation will require that we develop a more modally sophisticated account of how we relate to the past-present-future complex. By "modally sophisticated" I mean an account that takes into consideration the concepts of possibility, necessity, and contingency.

Before we do that, there is another form of anticipation that is becoming more and more prevalent, though it gets expressed differently from both ends of the political spectrum. It holds that, if we maintain the kinds of structured contact with the world that we currently have, then we are headed towards disaster. For some, that means ecological disaster: we are ruining the very conditions that sustain our continued existence by depleting our resources, poisoning our atmosphere, initiating genetic mutations that cannot be controlled, and the result will be the collapse of our interrelated societies (much as described in, for example, Jared Diamond’s recent book, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed). Others argue that we are headed toward social and political disaster in the shape of conflicts and clashes, if not outright war, again because our current modes of structuring our contact do not adequately sustain the conditions for continued existence, or rather, because the conditions we are speaking of here are explicitly social and political, the conditions for our continued co-existence (one thinks here of Samuel P. Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order). These people point to all the unrest we see throughout the world, in the Middle East especially, but also in Africa or East Asia.

This approach is in many ways the mirror image of the "end of history" approach. While those arguing for the "end of history" display a basic optimism in their idea that human beings can look forward, given present circumstances (which include the ways in which those present circumstances are ordered and organized), to a future that will not betray their present anticipations, those arguing that the future will involve collapse or conflict are much more...
pessimistic. Interestingly, however, the pessimists, like the optimists, do not think, again given present circumstances, that the future will betray their present anticipations. It is merely the case that they describe that future in more negative terms. They paint a darker picture, as it were, using darker colours and more sombre figures.

While it is neither true nor helpful to think of all the optimists as "progressives" and all the pessimists as "conservatives," there is a sense in which the former emphasize that which, within our present circumstances, allows us to envisage progress in the realization of the ideals that can be found within them, while the latter tend to emphasize that which, within our present circumstances, needs to be conserved in the face of the destructive forces that threaten them. Both, however—and this is the point I wish to underline—envisage their future through their anticipations from an essentially fixed conception of the present, as it reads the past and relates to the future. The reason for this, as I shall attempt to show, is that they do not allow their anticipations to question the structured organization of their (position in the) present. That is, they both take their present, and the way it is structurally organized in its contact with reality, for granted and as in some way fixed, even if, indeed as, they think that this present can and, optimistically or pessimistically, will lead to that which their anticipations hope for or fear.

What both these positions do, then, is abstract the present, or their present understanding of what that present is, from the actual flow of history. From that abstracted position they project a particular future, ideally conceived. However, as I hope to show in this book, if we are going to try to think about how to respond philosophically to the question of where we are headed, which is largely a question about how the future relates to the present, which itself arises out of the past, then we would do well to put the categories of pessimism and optimism to one side. They only cloud the issue.

Instead, we need to try to develop a more modally sophisticated understanding of our relationship to the way in which our lives unfold within the past-present-future complex. We need to think of the world less as a "thing" that confronts us than as that which permits us to move about, to be oriented, an unfolding as it were. Nothing mysterious is meant by this. You open your eyes and, if there is sufficient light, you begin to see. Yes, you see things, but your seeing them is largely a matter of positioning them with regard to what you are doing. The world is that which allows this positioning to unfold.

We need to think of the world, and of our relating to that world, in modal terms, in terms of what it allows, forbids, promises, denies. In logical terms, we want to think of the world in terms of the possibilities that it contains, the necessities that it displays, the impossibilities that delimit it, and the contingencies that describe it.
Michel Serres, a French philosopher who worked for a long time at Stanford University, suggests (in his *Hominescence*, p. 191) that we consider these concepts as describing the "modal square" (*le carré des modalités*) that characterizes our existence, the world within which our lives unfold. Rather than think in ontological terms of our *being* in a world, we want to think our existences within this modal square, which Serres describes in the following way (my translation):

... subjected to necessity, gravity, cold, hunger, thirst... we choose among and undergo, without cease, a hundred hoped for or projected possibilities, filtered through as many impossibilities, a time, a future, a contingent existence. I might not have so lived, but cannot go back: from the present to the past, contingency turns into necessity, where things will no longer change. I do not know my future, in effect unexpected, upon which I press my hopes and preparations, without being lulled with unrealizable dreams—though, sometimes, by chance, a miracle... From the present to the future, the necessary turns into the possible; filtered by the impossible, it emerges as contingent.

What we want to focus on is the way in which the modal terms—possibility, necessity, and contingency—relate to each other in this unfolding of our lives, and thus help us make sense of that unfolding. I insist on it as an unfolding, each day unfolding over into the next and folding into it elements that we retain from the previous days: that is indeed how we live our lives.

The contingent kicks things off. I might not have existed, but I do. So much for being but how do I exist? By taking advantage of what is possible for me to do, which includes recognizing what is necessary (food, shelter, the fact that I cannot fly unassisted) and what is impossible (to live forever, to run faster than a speeding bullet, never to make a mistake). Note, further, the direction that describes how these concepts relate within our lives. Looking back from the present, what was contingent has become necessary, for you cannot change the past. Looking forward from the present, we enact possibilities against a backdrop of impossibilities. The necessities of the past as they enable us to move into the future show themselves to be contingent. *The story begins and ends with the notion that things could have been, or could be, different.* This progressive realization of contingency through necessity is filtered through our enactment of possibilities left open by the impossible.

These are the modal connections that we need to keep in mind as we continue to respond to our question concerning where we are headed in this increasingly multicultural world. How have the necessities of the past produced this contingent world? Which possibilities do its impossibilities allow? How are they to be realized?
The modal square within which we live out our lives needs to be thought within the past-present-future complex. If I say that our knowledge belongs to the past, it is because knowledge deals with the necessities that we come to recognize as structuring our world. We must remember, however, that those necessities are themselves contingently known by knowers in contact with a present reality. Any given knower might not have been and the knowledge might be lost. Thus, even the necessities that we know are not given to us once and for all, but rather inscribe themselves within a contingent present, which itself, as contingent, is structurally open to the possibilities of the future.

But, someone might ask at this point, is this focus on the past, the present, and the future really necessary? The past is past, it is gone. As for the future, while it is true that it depends to some extent on what we do today, and therefore is legitimately factored into our decision-making, it remains unknowable as such, and therefore our focus should be on the present. My response here is to remind us of the reasonableness of our question: where are we headed? When we attempt to think through the "we," we see how it cannot be isolated from the past-present-future complex. Our sense of "we" arises out of the past and moves forward into the future. In doing so, it determines the shape of our present, the world as it is lived in contact. What our question demands is that we widen the scope of that complex. This involves understanding how our sense of ourselves has arisen out of the past and how it is moving into the future such that it shapes our present in the particular ways that it does, enabling us to answer our question.

In response to the objection, our focus is on the present. It is just that the present is being understood, not in isolation, but within the context of what I am calling the past-present-future complex (history considered as a whole). The characterization of this complex is constructed by distinguishing the different roles of knowledge (the past), structured contact (the present), and anticipation (the future). A more complex version of our initial question thus becomes: how can what we know of how the past has structured our present, such that we anticipate what we do, help us understand where we are headed?

I suspect that many readers will shortly abandon me if I remain at this level of abstraction. However, what appears to be an abstract discussion is merely a general one. The reader can make it more concrete and particular at any time by looking up from the page and considering her surrounding world. It is that world that I am attempting to make sense of, with specific reference to its "increasingly multicultural" character, which means, minimally, that we recognize that referring to who "we" are and where "we" are headed, given "our" past, is a rather complex affair. That is, as soon as one leaves the confines of one's private surroundings as these have been shaped into one's particular
place in the world—one’s home, office or other personally managed space—one cannot help but acknowledge that the surrounding world is not completely structured around one’s familiarities.

Recall the example of the bus ride where different languages are spoken. Indeed, the same point can be made without leaving the confines of one’s home. One need only turn on the television and flip through the channels, or spend some time surfing the internet. Much will be familiar and reflective of one’s own perspective, but much will also be unfamiliar. Think again here of what news programs deem important enough to bring to your attention. My point is that one’s contact with the world—the present component in the past-present-future complex—is one that is structured in such a way that one’s familiarities are increasingly challenged by other familiarities, other ways of making sense of the world with which each of us is increasingly called upon to interact and recognize as describing our overall conditions of coexistence. This is the sense I am giving to the “multicultural” in the title of this book: our world is increasingly structured by the contact of different familiarities, different ways of making sense of the world. What such a world of contrasting familiarities demands of us, I shall try to argue, is a renewed attempt to articulate the conditions and possibilities that such a world offers.

This book should be read as a contribution to that rearticulation. What characterizes my particular contribution is that it will appeal to what has traditionally been called “speculative philosophy of history” because I think that it provides a very fruitful approach to answering the nagging question of “where we are headed” and is a way to make fuller sense of the observation that the world is “becoming increasingly multicultural.”