CHAPTER THREE
THE FUTURE TAMED

Introduction

In the previous chapter we focused on how we know the future. In this chapter we shift emphasis to know-how. All knowledge, we need to appreciate, is tied to action, hence our use of the concept ‘knowledge practice’*. However, if ‘how we know’ is to be found on the knowledge end of the spectrum of knowledge practices associated with the future, ‘know-how’ occupies the practice end. It concerns practical knowledge which tends not to be reflected upon and theorised about. It is knowing what to do and how to go on without necessarily being able to provide a worked-out explanation. In The Future Told we explored the most familiar futures territory which has been extensively studied and utilised in contemporary practices across the full range of public social domains. While crucially important to any wider understanding of the social relations of the future, how the future is known nevertheless forms only a very small component of those relations and approaches. In this and the next chapter we therefore investigate the less familiar terrain of know-how as expressed in response to some existential conditions of uncertainty created by change, mortality, human freedom and economic exchange.

To better understand our relationship to the future, we argue, requires that we delve back into pre-history and the beginnings of cultural existence since it is here that our earliest responses to what lies beyond experience have been formed. It is here that first attempts to tame the future have been recorded in myth and ritual, in sacred and profane activities. This chapter identifies some of these practices, considers their underlying assumptions and makes comparisons in order to better understand contemporary dilemmas that arise with an immensely increased capacity to create futures that is not matched by an equal ability to know outcomes.

The inevitability of change, be it of a cyclical or cumulative kind, has fostered an array of cultural practices in response to the problem of transience, uncertainty and indeterminacy. Change, which makes
the future unknowable, is not only due to the will of god(s) and the creativity of nature but, importantly, as we explain in the first section of this chapter, is also fundamentally rooted in human action and sociocultural existence. As embodied beings, moreover, humans are bounded by the cycles of life and death, growth and decay. In the wider scheme of nature and the cosmos, their individual lives are but a brief flicker of existence. They are of this earth, but through their reflective knowledge and freedom of action are also set apart from nature, other creatures and their earthbound existence. The existential challenges which arise with the inevitable uncertainty that accompanies this distancing are considered in the second section of the chapter and are followed by a brief investigation of approaches to mortality. Responses to change and transience, uncertainty and the inevitability of finitude rooted in mortality are therefore the focus here.

In all these challenges the path to transcendence has been one of knowledge. Knowledge, however, has not been a straight-forward blessing. In moving humans beyond their earthbound niche, it has often brought them dangerously close to the realms of their god(s). Ancient myths are replete with stories about this dual effect of knowledge: Prometheus having to endure the wrath of the gods for stealing fire to give to humans or Adam and Eve being banished from paradise after eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge are just two prominent examples. Again and again, ancient mythologies suggest that knowledge has changed the position of humans vis-à-vis their god(s) and nature.¹ With this shift in position came changes in social practice that are of central concern to us here as they help us understand the way the future has been tamed and pressed into human service. These are addressed in the last section of this chapter where we build bridges to modernity by considering the continuities and distinctions between faith in providence* and belief in progress*.

Change and transience, uncertainty and finitude each pose different problems for relations to the future. Nonetheless, these problems share one central feature: they all make it difficult to know what comes next and by implication how to act, how to go on, how to prepare and plan. Each one thus constitutes an existential challenge for knowledge practice. The first of these to be discussed relates to cycles of change.