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Big Tech and the Challenge of Self-Government

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Many feel that they must pass through the portals that platform firms such as Google, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter) have established to conduct the business of life and participate in the common life of the nation. We are faced with an apparent paradox. We suppose that the history of technology is a record of man expanding his powers over nature, and there are technologies that do just that. But in a society that grants a reflexive deference to whoever claims the mantle of technological progress, we find man himself reduced to something fairly unimpressive, living under the "immense tutelary power" against which Tocqueville warned us. This is the power that would save us the trouble of living.

Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder and CEO of Facebook, has said frankly that "[i]n a lot of ways Facebook is more like a government than a traditional company."[1] Taking the man at his word would seem to raise the question: Can the United States government tolerate the existence of a rival government within its territory?

The state is something against which we need to be vigilant; this is the libertarian intuition. But what is "the state," the thing that governs us, in the year 2024? Where is it located? Depending on how you answer this question, libertarian prickliness may need to be redirected, based on an updated understanding of where the threats to liberty lie.

The platform firms such as Google, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter) order everyday life in far-reaching ways. Many feel that they have to pass through the portals that these firms have established to conduct the business of life and participate in the common life of the nation. Sitting atop the bottlenecks of communication that are a natural consequence of "network effects," their competitive advantage over rivals is positional, much like a classic infrastructure monopoly (think Ma Bell or a toll road). They are positioned to collect rents from many forms of social intercourse. We pay the rents in the currency of our attention.

The Attention Problem

Shoshana Zuboff, in her landmark book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*,[2] shows how the attention economy is intimately connected to the data market. The behavioral data that you generate throughout the day—not just your Internet browsing but your movements through the physical world, your shifting web of contacts, the content of your social media posts and uploaded photos, the emotional register of your voice—are used by the platform firms to create predictions. These predictions are then sold on a behavioral futures market (often in real-time auctions even as your behavior is taking place), to be purchased by any party that has an interest in knowing your established proclivities and current receptivities on various fronts.

The point of having such predictions and fine-grained characterizations is then to intervene and nudge your behavior into profitable channels. These interventions may remain beneath the threshold of your awareness (for example, in the selection and arrangement of banner ads on the webpage you are viewing), but even in such cases, the basic lever by which your behavior is modified is through the capture of your attention. Our minds are treated as a resource to be harvested at scale by mechanized means.

Attention is finite and, arguably, the most valuable resource that a person has. It determines the contents of our minds, the disposition of our time, and the basic character of our experience. The question of what to attend to is, ultimately, the question of what to value. Because the economy of industrialized attention-harvesting reaches so deep into the human person, the usual categories of economics may not be adequate to parse what is going on—and what our response to it should be.

What are we to make of the fact that so many people who use X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube also complain bitterly about their own habit of spending too much time on these things? Nobody is forcing anyone to do

anything, yet people report that they feel somehow unfree. If we are divided against ourselves, it seems we need to revisit the basic anthropology that underlies the free-market faith.

The view of human beings that prevailed in economics and public policy in the 20th century held that we are rational beings who gather all the information pertinent to our situation, calculate the best means to given ends, and then go about optimizing our goal-oriented behavior accordingly. But this "rational optimizer" view leaves much out of account, especially the power of habit. (See, above all, William James's discussion in *The Principles of Psychology*.[3]) Unlike animals who are adapted by evolution to a fixed ecological niche with behavioral scripts that are rigidly encoded in instinct, humans are flexibly adaptable, and the paradox is that this makes us susceptible to a peculiarly human form of unfreedom. Precisely because our brains are so plastic and formable, the grooves that we wear into them through repeated behavior may become deep enough that they function like walls.

In principle, we are free to form whatever habits we choose, but this moment of choice usually occurred long ago and passed without our noticing it. You just wake up one day and find that the patterns of your life are perhaps not ones that you would affirm as choice-worthy in a moment of reflection. Can one understand the compulsive behavior of an addict simply as "preference satisfaction"? Classical economics recognizes external coercion but has no ground on which to distinguish freedom from internal compulsion.

Another fact about human beings, which can probably also be attributed to evolution, is that we are layered. We still have that old lizard brain with its animal appetites, and we have higher capacities that are cultivated only with effort. These layers correspond to a rank order of pleasures. The pleasures of mathematics, for example, or of playing the guitar become available to one only with sustained effort. The learning process is initially unpleasant. To attend to anything in a sustained way requires actively excluding all the other things that grab our attention. It requires a capacity for self-regulation—what psychologists call the "executive function" of the brain. Self-regulation is like a muscle: The more you use it, the stronger it becomes. But you can't use it continuously all day long. Like attention, it is a finite resource. In light of these facts, it would seem significant that, for example, pornography is available 24 hours a day on a device that one carries around in one's pocket. The absence of regulation by the state increases our burden of self-regulation, and this comes with a cost that is "off the books" of economistic thinking.

To subsume such distinctions as that between the pleasures of porn and those of mathematics, or between practicing the guitar and watching cat videos, under the generic category of "preference-satisfying behavior" is to collapse the vertical dimension of life—the hierarchy of ends. A determination not to be "paternalistic" about the way people choose to spend their lives expresses an admirable modesty rooted in good old-fashioned liberal agnosticism about the human good, but if we are too dogmatic about this, the effect is to arrest criticism of powerful commercial entities that operate in terrain that is not yet defended by law in ways that already have consequentially altered the human landscape. The opposed categories "private sector" and "government" would appear to have little utility for understanding the present; we may need to put down our Milton Friedman and pick up our George Orwell.

Big Tech firms speak the dialect of autonomy and market choice with expert fluency in their public-facing pronouncements even while building systems predicated on a very different, more realistic picture of human agency in which habit is king. The innovators of Silicon Valley were faced with competitive economic pressure to increase their share of users' finite attention, and this translated into a behavioral engineering challenge with its own internal logic, pursued without consideration of how it might impinge on the common good. They created something that, like a virus, has taken on a life of its own.

Consider the discovery that when users contribute their own content on a platform, this increases their "engagement." Facebook famously conducted large-scale experiments on its users and found that it could induce "emotional contagion." If one curates users' news feeds to show items likely to enrage them, this captures their attention. They get angry and spend more time on the platform. They become more active disseminators of Facebook links to others and more active generators of further content. Users organize themselves into self-radicalizing rage-tribes; our politics have become channeled into divisions that are, to a significant extent, artifacts of the engagement algorithms by which social media platforms have expanded their footprint in American life.

This has been compared to "gain of function" research in virology, in which the natural features of a virus are manipulated to make it more virulent in a laboratory setting. Social media are initially appealing to us because of our natural sociability, which evolved in face-to-face societies, but like an engineered virus that escapes the lab, they have taken on a life of their own.

The engagement algorithms of social media achieve "operant conditioning," a powerful means of behavior modification first identified by B.

F. Skinner. This is an explicitly avowed business model, the foundation of what is called "persuasive design" in Silicon Valley, much of it incubated at Stanford's Persuasive Design Lab. Some tricks of the trade have been developed in concert with the machine gambling industry (slot machines and video poker terminals). They share an ambition to engineer addiction[4]—and indeed, some of the key players have overlapping CVs. The plasticity of our neural pathways is such that repetition combined with random reinforcement can be used to induce compulsions that are no less real in physiological and behavioral terms than the compulsions of substance abuse.[5] The reinforcement here consists of "likes" and retweets and positive comments, each of which gives your brain a little micro-shot of dopamine. What is genuinely novel is the potency and scale that behaviorist conditioning may achieve through machine learning. At some point, the libertarian risks becoming an antiquarian stuck in 1776, or 1980, if he hasn't updated his assessment of the field of forces.

So perhaps the political calculus must change. As a prudential matter, I may decide that I want the de jure, elected government to fight the de facto, unelected government on my behalf by regulating the attention economy. I have little faith in the wise benevolence of those who staff the permanent bureaucracy, but we now have enough accumulated experience to say *also* that the business model driving Silicon Valley's efforts to monetize every bit of private headspace has had some serious ill effects.

The Accountability Problem

In 2021, I was asked to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Antitrust. The topic up for discussion was "smart home" technology.

The Sleep Number bed is typical of smart home devices. It comes with an app, of course, which you will have to install to get the full benefits. Benefits for whom? To know that, you would need to spend some time with the 16-page privacy policy that comes with the bed.[6] There you will read about third-party sharing, analytics partners, targeted advertising, and much else. Meanwhile, the user agreement specifies that the company can share or exploit your personal information even "after you deactivate or cancel" your Sleep Number account.[7] You are unilaterally informed that the firm does not honor "Do Not Track" notifications. By the way, its privacy policy once stated that the bed would also transmit "audio in your room."[8]

The business rationale for the smart home is to bring the intimate patterns of life into the fold of the surveillance economy, which has a one-way

mirror quality. Increasingly, every aspect of our lives—our voices, our facial expressions, our political affiliations and intellectual predilections—is laid bare as data to be collected by companies that, for their own part, guard with military-grade secrecy the algorithms by which they use this information to determine the world that is presented to us, for example, when we enter a search term or in our news feeds. They are also in a position to determine our standing in the reputational economy. The credit rating agencies and insurance companies would like to know us more intimately; I suppose Alexa can help with that.

Allow me to offer a point of reference that comes from outside the tech debates but which can be brought to bear on them. Conservative legal scholars have long criticized a shift of power from Congress to the administrative state, which seeks to bypass legislation and rule by executive fiat through administrative rulings. The appeal of this move is that it saves one the effort of persuading others, that is, the inconvenience of democratic politics.

All of the arguments that conservatives make about the administrative state apply as well to this new thing—call it algorithmic governance—that operates in the private sector. It too is a form of power that is not required to give an account of itself and is therefore insulated from democratic pressures. Algorithmic governance predates the mass commercial adoption of AI that is now underway (and has been since the launch of ChatGPT), but the same basic issues are in play. As AI gets woven into every domain of life, the erosion of republican principles will only accelerate.

In machine learning, an array of variables is fed into deeply layered "neural nets" that simulate the binary, fire/don't-fire synaptic connections of an animal brain. Vast amounts of data are used in a massively iterated (and, in some versions, unsupervised) training regimen. Because the strength of connections between logical nodes is highly plastic, just like neural pathways, the machine gets trained by trial and error and is able to arrive at something resembling knowledge of the world. The logic by which an AI reaches its conclusions is impossible to reconstruct even for those who built the underlying algorithms. We need to consider the significance of this in light of our political traditions.

When a court issues a decision, the judge writes an opinion in which he explains his reasoning. He grounds the decision in law, precedent, common sense, and principles that he feels obliged to articulate and defend. This is what transforms the decision from mere fiat into something that is politically legitimate: capable of securing the assent of a free people. It represents the difference between simple power and authority. One distinguishing feature of a modern liberal society is that authority is supposed to have this

rational quality to it rather than appealing to, say, a special talent for priestly divination. This is our Enlightenment inheritance, and it appears to be in a fragile state. With the inscrutable arcana of data science, a new priesthood peers into a hidden layer of reality that is revealed only by a self-taught AI program the logic of which is beyond human knowing.

The feeling that one is ruled by a class of experts who cannot be addressed and held to account has surely contributed to populist anger, however ill-focused it may be. The anger is justified, and the absence of a clear object for its focus is telling. Hannah Arendt put her finger on why bureaucracy presents a unique affront to human dignity: She called it "rule by Nobody."[9] AI promises to be a Nobody that straddles the globe—the anonymous, "immense tutelary power" that Tocqueville foresaw.

If the unprecedented rents collected by the platform firms measure anything at all, it is the reach of a grid of surveillance that continues to spread and deepen. It is this grid's basic lack of intelligibility that renders it politically unaccountable, yet accountability is the very essence of representative government.

The Backdoor Problem

As Americans learned with the release of the Twitter Files, the conceit that everything is in the hands of neutral, apolitical algorithms is a mystification that serves to obscure the fact that Big Tech has essentially been co-opted to become the narrative-enforcement arm of the Democratic Party. The alliance is a natural one: For over a hundred years, the progressive wing of American politics has obscured the deeply political nature of its agenda by speaking in the idiom of technocracy.

This past winter, Google's Gemini AI image generator was in the news for generating images only of non-white people in response to prompts such as "American Founders" or "Great Scientists." Was this a glitch? Or did it pull back the curtain on the Wizard of Oz? Given how central "anti-racism" is to the Democratic Party's platform (in his inaugural address, Joe Biden announced that it would be the organizing principle of all federal programs), one could be forgiven for suspecting that the wildly counterfactual results returned by Google's software indicate that *reality* is not the standard to which AI will be held.

The embarrassing Gemini results have been widely interpreted as an unanticipated artifact of the underlying machine learning, a hiccup of the sort to be expected as an immature technology finds its legs. "We need to do better" was Google's PR response. But years before the advent of AI image

generators, Google was returning image search results (for actual human beings) that had the same wild bias. In response to a search for "famous American inventors," for example, one could find somewhere far down in the results a picture of Thomas Edison, but for the most part, the images were of black people and women about whom most people have never heard. It would be hard to imagine an algorithmic thumb on the scale better calibrated to stoke right-wing fears about a "genocide by substitution" or to evoke the perennial need of totalitarian regimes to rewrite history.

One reason why algorithms have become attractive to elites is that they can be used to install the automated enforcement of cutting-edge social norms. As far back as 2019, Zuckerberg assured Congress that Facebook was developing AI that would detect and delete what progressives like to call "hate speech." You don't have to be a free speech absolutist to recognize how tendentiously that label is often applied and be concerned accordingly. Around the same time, *The New York Times* ran a story about "new screenplay software that can automatically tell whether a [Hollywood] script is equitable for men and women."[10] At the June 2024 AI Hackathon held at U.C. Berkeley, winners included a Grammarly-like AI for redlining "bias" in textbooks (for example, too many white males represented in the history of science).[11]

Locating the authority of evolving social norms in a computer will serve to provide a sheen of objectivity such that any reluctance to embrace newly announced norms appears not as dissent, but as something irrational—perhaps as a psychological defect that requires some kind of therapeutic intervention. So the effect will be to gather yet more power to what Michel Foucault called "the minor civil servants of moral orthopaedics."[12] And there will be no satisfying this beast, because it is not, in fact, "social norms" (a term that suggests something settled and agreed-upon) that will be enforced; rather, it will be a state of permanent revolution in social norms. Whatever else it is, wokeness is a competitive status game played in the institutions that serve as gatekeepers of the meritocracy. The flanking maneuvers of institutional actors against one another and the competition among victim groups for relative standing on the intersectional totem pole make the bounds of acceptable opinion highly unstable. This very unsettledness, quite apart from the specific content of the norm of the month, makes for pliable subjects of power: One is not allowed to develop confidence in the rightness of one's own judgments.

To be always off-balance in this way is to be more administrable. It seems clear that there is a symbiotic relationship between administration and what we have come to call wokeness, yet it is difficult to say which is the senior partner in the alliance. The bloated and ever-growing layer

of administrators—the deans of inclusion, providers of workshops for student orientation, diversity officers, and whatnot—feeds on conflict, using episodes of trouble to start new initiatives.

What does any of this have to do with the appeal of algorithms to managers and administrators? If we follow through on the suspicion that in its black-box quality, "technology" is simply administration by other means, a few observations can be made.

First, in the spirit of Eastern Bloc dissidents under the old Soviet regime, such as Václav Havel, we might entertain the idea that the institutional workings of political correctness need to be shrouded in peremptory and opaque administrative mechanisms because its power lies precisely in the gap between what people actually think and what one is expected to say. It is in this gap that one has the experience of humiliation, of staying silent, and that is how power is exercised.

But if we put it this way, what we are really saying is not that wokeness needs administrative enforcement, but rather the reverse: The expanding empire of bureaucrats needs wokeness. The conflicts created by identity politics become occasions to extend administrative authority into previously autonomous domains of activity. This would be to take a more Marxian line, treating wokeness as ideological "superstructure" that adds a moralistic sheen to the class interests of managers and administrators.[13]

The incentive to technologize the whole drama enters thus: Managers are answerable (sometimes legally) for the conflict on which they also feed. Especially in a corporate setting, some kind of "CYA" becomes necessary. Judgments made by an algorithm (ideally one supplied by a third-party vendor) are ones for which nobody has to take responsibility. The more contentious the social and political landscape is, the bigger the institutional taste for automated decision-making is likely to be.

Political correctness is a regime of institutionalized insecurity, both moral and material. Seemingly solid careers are subject to sudden reversal along with one's status as a decent person. Contrast such a feeling of being precarious with the educative effect of voluntary associations and collaborative rule-making as marveled at by Tocqueville. Americans' practice of self-government once gave rise to a legitimate pride—the pride of being a grown-up in a free society. Being a grown-up means many things, one of which is that you are willing to subordinate your own interests to the common good at crucial junctures. The embrace of AI by institutions as a way to manage social conflict is likely to further erode that adult spirit of self-government, heighten the

sense of being ruled by Nobody, and contribute to the festering sense that our institutions are illegitimate.

The Temptations of Deep Nudging

Of all the platform firms, Google is singular. Its near-monopoly on search (around 90 percent) puts it in a position to steer thought, and it increasingly avows that the steering of thought is its unique responsibility. Famously founded on the principle "Don't be evil" (a sort of libertarian moral minimalism), it has since taken up the mission of actively doing good according to its own lights.

In an important article titled "Google.gov," law professor Adam J. White has detailed both the personnel flows and the deep intellectual affinities between Google and the Obama White House. Hundreds of people switched jobs back and forth between this one firm and the Obama Administration over eight years. It was a uniquely close relationship, based on a common ethos, that began with Barack Obama's visit to Google's headquarters in 2004 and deepened during his presidential campaign in 2007. As White observes:

> Both view society's challenges today as social-engineering problems, whose resolutions depend mainly on facts and objective reasoning. Both view information as being at once ruthlessly value-free and yet, when properly grasped, a powerful force for ideological and social reform. And so both aspire to reshape Americans' informational context, ensuring that we make choices based only upon what they consider the right kind of facts—while denying that there could be any values or politics embedded in the effort.[14]

One of the central tenets of progressives' self-understanding is that they are pro-fact and pro-science, while their opponents (often the majority) are said to have an unaccountable aversion to these good things: They cling to fond illusions and irrational anxieties. It follows that good governance means giving people "informed" choices. This is not the same as giving people what they *think* they want according to their untutored preferences. Informed choices are the ones that make sense within a well-curated informational setting or context.

In its capacity as Directorate of Information, Google sees itself as "definer and defender of the public interest," as White writes. The trust people place in Google is based on its original mission of simply answering queries that reflect the extant priorities of a user when, in fact, the mission has crept toward a more tutelary role in shaping thought.

It takes a certain amount of narrative finesse to maintain a suitably "democratic" self-image while also embracing this tutelary role. This is the predicament of the tech firms, and it is the same one Obama had to manage for himself. In his 2007 remarks at Google immediately before launching his presidential campaign, Obama referred to the firm's origins in a college dorm room and drew parallels with his own trajectory and aspirations. "What we shared is a belief in changing the world from the bottom up, not the top down; that a bunch of ordinary people can do extraordinary things."[15] This is the language of a former community organizer, but it is a peculiar sort of "bottom up" that is meant here.

In the Founders' Letter that accompanied Google's 2004 initial public offering, Larry Page and Sergey Brin said their goal was "getting you exactly what you want, even when you aren't sure what you need." The perfect search engine would do this "with almost no effort" on the part of the user. In a 2013 update to the Founders' Letter, Page said that "the search engine of my dreams...provides information without you even having to ask."[16] Adam White glosses these statements:

> To say that the perfect search engine is one that minimizes the user's effort is effectively to say that it minimizes the user's active input. Google's aim is to provide perfect search results for what users "truly" want—even if the users themselves don't yet realize what that is. Put another way, the ultimate aspiration is not to answer the user's questions but the question Google believes she *should* have asked.[17]

As Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, told *The Wall Street Journal*, "[O]ne idea is that more and more searches are done on your behalf without you having to type.... *I actually think most people don't want Google to answer their questions.... They want Google to tell them what they should be doing next.*"[18]

The ideal being articulated in Mountain View (Google's headquarters) is that we will integrate Google's services into our lives so effortlessly, and the guiding presence of this beneficent entity in our lives will be so pervasive and unobtrusive, that the boundary between self and Google will blur. The firm will provide a kind of mental scaffold for us, guiding our intentions by shaping our informational context. This is to take the idea of trusteeship and install it in the infrastructure of thought.

Populism is the rejection of this. Whatever else it is, populism is a reassertion of the legitimacy of common sense, rooted in a due regard for the capacities of ordinary people. The hazards of populism are well known, but those hazards must be weighed against the current concentration of power in a priestly class.

The Agency Problem

In 2009, one of Google's self-driving cars came to an intersection with a four-way stop. It came to a halt and waited for other cars to do the same before proceeding through the intersection. Apparently, that is the rule it was taught—but, of course, that is not what people do. So the robot car got completely paralyzed, blocked the intersection, and had to be towed away. Tellingly, the Google engineer in charge said that what he had learned from this episode was that human beings need to be "less idiotic."

Think about that. If there is an ambiguous case of right-of-way, human drivers will often make eye contact. Maybe one waves the other through or indicates by the movements of the car itself a readiness to yield, and maybe not. It is not a stretch to say that there is a kind of body language of driving and a range of driving dispositions. We are endowed with social intelligence, through the exercise of which people work things out among themselves and usually manage to cooperate well enough. Tocqueville thought it was in small-bore practical activities demanding improvisation and cooperation that the habits of collective self-government were formed, and this is significant. There is something that can aptly be called the democratic personality, and it is cultivated not in civics class, but in the granular features of everyday life. But the social intelligence on display at that intersection was completely invisible to the Google guy. This too is significant. The premise behind the push for driverless cars is that human beings are terrible drivers. This is one instance of a wider pattern. There is a tacit picture of the human being that guides our institutions and provides a shared intellectual DNA for the governing classes. It has various elements, but the common thread is a low regard for human beings.

One has to think the obtuseness of the Google guy is due in part to the fact that tech people usually lack a humanistic education. Maybe he was a little bit "on the spectrum" as well and therefore had a hard time perceiving social phenomena, such as the way an intersection actually works. But he needn't have been. He need only have been steeped in the prevailing account of how the human mind works, which is called the computational theory of mind. The origins of this lie with cybernetics in the years immediately after World War II.[19] Mentation as computation continues to provide the intellectual foundation for the mainstream of cognitive science despite coming in for devastating critique from the more phenomenologically oriented dissidents within that discipline—such as Hubert Dreyfus, Andy Clark, and Alva Noë—who emphasize the embodied nature of human intelligence and the fact that it is socially bootstrapped. That is, our apprehension of the world is not something that takes place entirely within our heads like a brain in a vat.

But as a zombie metaphor that cannot be killed, mind-as-computer anchors the popular superstition and marketing hype according to which machines are said to have "artificial intelligence," a term of mystification that carries a tacit assertion that what a binary computer does is something very like human intelligence and, reciprocally, that what the human mind does (not very well, unsurprisingly) is compute.

Bad philosophy of mind tends to be the most well-capitalized because it is the most easily operationalized, and one should not underestimate the genius of capital, no less than the state, for remaking the world so that it will better fit some simplistic model and thereby make the model more adequate. As the Google guy said, human beings need to become less idiotic. That is, they need to be more like computers: more easily machine-readable so that they will be fully legible to systems of control and better adapted to the systems' need for clean inputs.

German philosopher Günther Anders spoke of "the rising cost of fitting man to the service of his tools," and British philosopher Iris Murdoch said that man is the animal who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the pictures.[20] Here is the real mischief done by conceiving human intelligence in the image of the computer: It carries an impoverished idea of what thinking is, but it is an idea that can be made adequate enough if only we can change the world to reduce the scope for the exercise of our full intelligence as embodied agents who do things.

A few years ago, there was a lot of breezy talk by tech journalists and well-capitalized futurists about banning human drivers from the road in view of the difficulties that arise when autonomous cars and human drivers have to interact (which has turned out to be a far greater engineering challenge than anticipated). Ideally, from a business perspective, we would become dependent on some proprietary and opaque system to do what we once did for ourselves, which in turn would result in what the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich called "radical monopoly."[21] As the space for intelligent human action gets colonized by machines, our own capacity for intelligent action atrophies, leading to calls for yet more automation. The demands of skill and competence give way to a promise of safety and convenience, leading us ever further into passivity.

Conclusion

We are faced with an apparent paradox. We suppose the history of technology to be a record of man expanding his powers over nature, and there are technologies that do just that. But in a society that grants a reflexive

deference to whoever claims the mantle of technological progress, we find man himself reduced to something fairly unimpressive, living under the "immense tutelary power" against which Tocqueville warned us. This is the power that would save us the trouble of living. It is "absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood."[22]

How are we to make sense of this trajectory?

At bottom, "technology" is a posture toward reality. It posits that there is no mystery in nature that can escape our comprehension and therefore that everything lies open to manipulation. Man himself is a natural object without any essence or purpose that must be respected. This is announced as the discovery that we are free to make ourselves what we will and celebrated under the banner of liberation. But it means that the human material is likewise open to manipulation according to the rationalist dreams of whoever holds power. C.S. Lewis writes that "the power of Man to make himself what he pleases really means...the power of some men to make other men what *they* please."[23]

Notice that the language of liberation—that of the unfettered, sovereign self, a kind of existential hero—serves to obscure the operation of power. We take up this language and make it our own. When we do so, it becomes difficult to see that the transformations underway tend toward tyranny, made possible by a diminished picture of the human being.

Lately, I have found it impossible to put up a clear principle for resisting this degradation of man without recourse to the Christian idea that we are created in God's image. We may regard the doctrine of the Incarnation—God becoming man—as an assertion of the dignity of man. It is an assertion that could serve to moderate the contempt of the powerful, but let us not count on that. What seems certain is that it is an idea that can only embolden the self-respect of the citizen. If taken to heart and numbers, it might lead a people to insist on reclaiming that status for themselves.

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Endnotes

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