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Imago DEI: Human Nature, Technology, and the Progress Dilemma

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Especially as they come unmoored from the Christian framework, left-wing movements tend to move beyond efforts to redress new asymmetries toward waging war on natural difference. A new bioegalitarianism is emerging that seeks to replace human nature with a formless equality even at the expense of our humanity itself, replacing imago dei *(the Christian view of mankind as created in the image of God) with* imago DEI *(a protean plurality governed only by its willingness to see the dissolution of all difference as a good in its own right). But a tech-curious Right can walk this path in continued reference to human excellence, ordered always to an acknowledgement, valorization, and defense of the durability, sanctity, and indispensability of* imago dei.

> The ultimate result, as gender acceleration and acceleration as a whole reaches its ultimate intensity, is a return back to the ocean, back to a sexless, genderless slime swarmachine.
>
> —nlx, "Gender Acceleration: A Blackpaper"[1]

Introduction

"Human" as a concept is fuzzy by definition: a Gestalt template sensed and inferred rather than sharply defined and the ontology of which has galvanized philosophical debate for millennia. Does this exist as a template in some higher dimension, as Platonism suggests, or in the mind of God as the Thomists proposed? Does it exist at all? Such questions may seem abstract or merely old-fashioned, but dispute over the nature and ontology of "the human" is alive and well and forms the unacknowledged backdrop to one of today's most intractable political problems for conservatives: what Heidegger called the question concerning technology.

The groundwork for this question was first laid by one of the great scholastic debates of the Middle Ages, a debate on the nature of "Nature" and its relation to the divine. In that argument, the philosopher William of Ockham problematized two classical claims, later Christianized by Thomas Aquinas: the idea that things have a nature and the idea that the world has meaning. Ockham's challenge set the stage for the scientific revolution, which in turn galvanized the great social movements gathered under the broad heading "the Left."[2]

It would be an oversimplification to claim that the Left is simply Christianity without the transcendental bits. The moral intuitions that drive the Left's pursuit of egalitarian social goals are profoundly rooted in the West's Christian history, but leftism is distinct from Christianity in its focus on social and moral change within history in terms that do not presuppose any spiritual content to human existence. The egalitarian values that order such efforts at change have their origins in a long, albeit now usually secularized, Christian moral legacy. As we shall see, however, the most characteristic feature of leftism is an effort to apply these values in mitigating social changes arising from the technological transformations that characterize modernity, beginning with the upheavals caused by industrialization.

Conservatism generally frames its political project in opposition to the homogenizing and often anti-human egalitarianism of this Left, but the battle to conserve has in fact been fought on two fronts: not just against the Left, but also ambivalently against technology, the driving force of modernity itself. Conservatives may celebrate the triumphs of science and innovation, but "conservative" as a disposition is difficult to separate from the two metaphysical intuitions that modernity discarded in order to become modern as such: the "formal cause" and "final cause" first problematized by Ockham.

To be a conservative in the age of science and innovation has always meant something a little paradoxical. On the one hand, conservatives usually accept

technological innovation and often celebrate it, but on the other, doing so requires at least qualified acceptance of a political, economic, and technological paradigm that is fundamentally predicated on downplaying and eventually disavowing both given-ness and meaning: two core conditions without which it cannot easily be said that there even *is* anything to "conserve" as such. Historically, the aggregate effect of this stance has amounted to an ambivalent and often tragic rearguard defense of the natural order.

As the age of innovation accelerated from the 18th century forward, this uneasy sacrifice was patched over by variations on the Burkean compromise. Those who intuited that things are the way they are for deeper reasons than mere value-free contingency resolved the conflict between this disposition and the disruptive demands of modernity by sidestepping the question of form and meaning altogether with an argument, as it were, from habit. Very crudely: traditions are good and worth preserving because they are traditions. And, more quietly: this is true except when it isn't, which is generally when innovation or economic expediency requires the disruption of tradition. Over time, this has added up to a conservatism that tacitly accepts its own ongoing defeat and seeks mainly to slow this down.

Here it is important to distinguish between the British and American conservative traditions. The historic impact of modernity in the Old World began in the 17th century, disrupting settled ways of life within a landscape continuously inhabited by broadly the same peoples for millennia. By contrast, the settlement of America is itself a byproduct of that Old World disruption, and the early American settlers were engaged at scale in projects of transformation and innovation, sometimes in conflict with Native American populations. The Founding represents a moment of radical innovation and rupture as much as a crystallization of the Founders' extant cultural and religious heritage. America's own industrialization then swiftly followed independence and, as a consequence of that momentous change and over the 19th century, transformed the nation from a predominantly agrarian one to an increasingly urban one.

This divergent path has given rise to a distinct body of conservative thought within the American tradition, rooted more explicitly in the Constitution and natural law as opposed to the Old World's cumulative weight of established tradition. But over time, the same ambivalent relation between technology and established ways of life has also developed within American conservatism. Here, however, the terrain being contested is more usually the social fabric – and, increasingly, the human body itself rather than (as in England's Industrial Revolution) larger-scale changes across the landscape and political economy.

In any case, some form of this Burkean compromise served well enough in the Old World and (in modified form) in the New over the industrial era: that is to say, roughly from the 18th century to the middle of the 20th. Since the 1960s, though, and at an accelerating pace since the digital revolution, we have embraced a new order: one I have elsewhere called the "cyborg" era for its characteristic turn inward from industrialization of the natural world to industrialization of ourselves. Now we find that the same ambivalence that confronted English conservatives from the enclosure of the commons onward[3] has begun to haunt American conservatives as well. For questions of human nature and technological progress become more vexed and more urgent when the frontier is no longer a geographic matter but an intimate one: that is, when science appears to hold out the imminent promise of enabling us to re-engineer ourselves, perhaps into something entirely new. Now the familiar, two-front conservative battle is uncomfortably close to home.

Where efforts to use human ingenuity to improve on human physiology have been resisted, this has tended to come from the Right, often rooted in *imago dei*, the Christian view of mankind as created in the image of God. This makes some sense in that *imago dei* is most visibly under assault from the Left, but examples from feminism and the labor movement show how the Left is historically ambivalent in this sense too, in that it represents a response to the technological dissolution of previously immutable-seeming givens in the name of egalitarian moral intuitions.

Especially as they come unmoored from the Christian framework, left-wing movements tend also to move beyond efforts to redress new asymmetries toward waging war on natural difference. To the extent that technology is now turned against human nature, we will see—indeed, are already seeing—the emergence of a new bioegalitarianism that seeks to replace human nature with a formless, protean equality and is willing to pursue this project even at the expense of our humanity itself, replacing *imago dei* with *imago DEI*: a protean plurality governed only by its willingness to see the dissolution of all difference as a good in its own right.

There is familiar conservative cultural capital to be made in opposing *imago DEI*. But the Promethean noises are also coming from inside the right-wing house. This broad current, which we might characterize as Right-modernism, is more of a sensibility than a coherent program. But projects associated with this caucus include the search for artificial general intelligence, experimental fertility technology, gene-editing for intelligence, a revival of interest in "human biodiversity," and even cheating death itself: all projects that potentially problematize, if not mount outright assault

upon, *imago dei*. Such Right-modernists often make common cause with the traditionalist Right in opposing the bioegalitarian Left of *imago DEI*, while also seeking, elsewhere, to sweep aside the conservatism of tradition, embodiment, religious faith, and limits in favor of growth, innovation, and mastery of nature—including our own nature as human beings.

In what follows, I will draw on the first half-century of the transhumanist era—an era that began with the contraceptive pill—to show that much of the contemporary confusion within the Right concerning technology, and especially biotechnology, stems from the coexistence within the conservative coalition of two mutually incompatible metaphysical paradigms for the "human": one that assumes humans have a stable nature and another in which no such nature need be assumed. I will sketch an intellectual history of the two-front conservative question concerning technology, along with its relation to the war on natural difference by legal and technological means that travels under the broad banner of "leftism." I will argue that any Right-modernism that takes direct aim at *imago dei*, regardless of its stated aims, will inevitably degrade into the formless bioegalitarianism of *imago DEI*. Finally, I will draw some inferences on how conservatives might expand the program of shared interest between implicitly or explicitly Christian Right-traditionalism and individualist, progressive Right-modernism beyond the thin and fragile project of opposition to *imago DEI*.

Formal and Final Cause

The origin-story of modern science and technology, and with it of conservatism's transhumanist dilemma, was a 13th-century metaphysical dispute over the nature of Nature itself. Here, theologians grappled with the questions of how to understand God's relation to His creation, and Christianity's relation to Greek philosophy.

Central to this was the Christianization by Thomas Aquinas of Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes: that is, four types of answer to the question "why?" For Aristotle, both the stuff of which something is made and the agent or force that brings it into existence were types of "cause": respectively, "material cause" and "efficient cause." But for Aristotle, the shape a thing takes is also a type of "cause" (*eidos* or "formal cause"), and so is its purpose (*telos* or "final cause").

These latter two types of "cause" appear abstract from our vantage point today because the metaphysical shift that enabled our modern world to come into being required that they be discarded. *Eidos* refers to the idea, familiar from the ancient world until the medieval era, that the form of a

thing exists prior to and, in a sense, ontologically distinct from its physical manifestation. The form "cat," for example, is held to "cause" the furry quadruped purring on my lap to develop according to its distinct form rather than some other one. Kittens never grow up to be dogs. For the ancients, this trajectory was understood to be "caused" by the "form" of "cat."

Telos, meanwhile, refers to the purpose or "end" of that developmental process: The final "cause" or *telos* of a kitten is to become a cat. To moderns accustomed to viewing the natural and physical worlds as meaningless chains of contingency, it can feel as though this unacceptably reverses the chain of causality, framing contingent end results as having "caused" their own emergence. But for the ancients, purposefulness was not restricted to human action, but rather extended throughout the perceptible world.

These two assumptions—that every distinct thing in the world is "caused" by the form it is to take, each of which is purposeful in its own right—play a central role in Western thought concerning what the world *is*, from Plato to the medieval era, alongside the "material" and "efficient" causes more familiar to the modern world. Within this fourfold frame, the world is not mere matter acted upon by chains of contingency; it is ordered by its own internal logic and by templates that exist in their own right, independent of our perception of them. Plato, Aristotle's teacher, saw the forms that "cause" entities in our world as higher and truer than the entities they "cause." In its Christianized version, the forms governing the natural world existed independent of human perception, along with the ends to which they were ordered, as "eternal ideas in the mind of God."[4]

For the 13th-century philosopher William of Ockham, however, these postulated "formal" and "final causes" were logically incoherent. It was, he argued, not possible rationally to be sure of their existence, and we ought not to make speculative claims: "For nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is self-evident (*literally*, known, through itself) or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture."[5]

Worse still, their postulated existence, if true, would serve to constrain God's freedom to act in history. If the natural world and everything in it is shaped in accordance with pre-existing, rational forms in God's mind, does it not follow that God's own freedom is then constrained by His own creation? Ockham therefore challenged the idea that universal concepts had any reality outside human minds. The same logic also threw into question the idea that God might ascribe each thing a "final cause;" it certainly made such a cause, even if it obtains, unknowable.

Ockham thus set in motion a train of metaphysical thought that over time would reduce those of Aristotle's "causes" in good philosophical standing

from four to two. *Eidos* constrained God's freedom, and *telos* implied a level of intentionality throughout Creation that likewise threatened the sovereignty of God in history. This left two causes: the "material" (the substance of which something is made) and the "efficient" (the forces that act upon it).

Over the centuries that followed, formal and final cause would be taken off the metaphysical table ever more completely. In turn, this legitimized a new type of inquiry into the natural world, which could now be disassembled, objectified, or otherwise—as Francis Bacon put it in his groundbreaking *Novum Organum* (1620)—put "to the question" and compelled to give up its secrets. If there is no self-evidently divine aspect to the forms in the natural order or to the ends any given thing serves in that order, those things may legitimately be dismantled, reshaped, or instrumentalized by humans for our own ends.

This fundamental shift was a precondition for the era of innovation and growth that began gradually after Ockham and then snowballed after Bacon in the 17th century with the Industrial Revolution. It was also a precondition for the withdrawal of any shared sense of God's presence in the world around us that accompanied the advance of science and innovation: what the theologian Charles Taylor calls the "disenchantment" of the world.[6] The same process is characterized less critically by the writer Yuval Noah Harari, who views modernity as a "deal" in which "humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power."[7]

Conservation and Progress

If this "deal" resulted in God's first receding from the world to become the "divine clockmaker" before disappearing altogether in the "secular" age, this does not mean that religiosity disappeared. Nor did Christian habits of thought. As Christopher Lasch has argued, the concept of "progress" is really Christian eschatology with the religious bits sanded down.[8] It retains the Christian account of history as linear, rather than cyclical, and culminating in transcendental fulfilment. Here the drama simply moves from the spiritual to the material realm. Commitment to never-ending progress thus represents, as William F. Buckley once put it, an effort to "immanentize the eschaton,"[9] a structure of thought that is inextricable from the West's Christian legacy and that I have characterized elsewhere as "Progress Theology."[10]

The German jurist Carl Schmitt characterizes the development of this faith in "progress" as having passed through distinct phases in which the term was understood to refer to different domains of human endeavor. This development, he argues, began with the 17th-century transition from

Christian theology to "natural" science and then, in the 18th century, with the removal of God from the equation altogether. "In the metaphysics of eighteenth century deism," Schmitt writes, "God himself was removed from the world and reduced to a neutral instance.... [H]e became a concept and ceased to be an essence."[11]

Schmitt argues that the meaning of "progress" has evolved over that time. Whereas in the 18th century it generally referred to moral improvements, "progress" in the 19th was understood to refer to economic advancements. In his view, from the 20th century onward, the field in which "progress" takes place is technological. But far from representing a net increase in rationality, he argues, this development has simply transferred the weight of eschatological faith to the domain of technology: "the age not only of technology but of a religious belief in technology."[12]

Much of the right-wing sensibility that has emerged in the modern era responds to the loss of meaning required by this "deal." The 20th-century Anglophone Right on both sides of the Atlantic has acted largely as though the battlefield was one of values: that is, of meaning. The "fusionist" pact brought together enthusiasts of free-market economics with adherents to conservative social values, in the hope that the result would be beneficial growth contained and properly directed by moral values anchored in tradition, in opposition to a Left focused on promoting economic redistribution and undermining sexual mores.

Recent critics of this pact have pointed out its self-limiting nature, as the solvent effect of the free market supported by these conservatives methodically undermined the social values upon which conservatism was believed to rest.[13] Political scientist Jon Askonas has argued that the still deeper reason this conservatism has failed to conserve anything is that all along, the force dissolving meaning and *telos* under the feet of conservatives was not the Left and its ideologies but technology. As new technologies enter society, Askonas argues:

> [T]hey disrupt the connections between institutions, practices, virtues, and rewards. They can render traditions purposeless, destroy the distinction between virtuous and vicious behavior, make customary ways of life obsolete, or render their rewards meaningless or paltry. If the institutions that shepherd traditions aren't regenerated, and if no one adopts their practices, traditions will fade into nothingness.[14]

Throughout modernity, conservatives have tended to advocate a Burkean adherence to the "empty concept" of "tradition" without grasping the

central insight of Karl Marx: namely, that the bourgeoisie pursues its interests by "constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."[15] Thus, it does not matter how persistently conservatives assert the need to leave G.K. Chesterton's fence where it is: As long as they continue to embrace the technologies that are busy dissolving such fences wherever they are found, the ongoing assault on all that is solid will continue.

As Askonas notes, 20th-century conservatives largely viewed the technology-enabled dissolution of norms and traditions as a consequence of left-wing ideology. And there certainly is a link between the Left and this dissolution, in that the Left emerged in response to disruptive technological changes with the aim of tempering their effects in the interests of the wider population. In England, for example, industrialization drove widespread social upheaval as populations urbanized, dissolving settled communities and transforming long-standing lifeways. As contemporary observers such as George Gissing[16] and Jack London[17] documented, in addition to growth and dynamism, the aggregate result for the working class was often also widespread squalor, disease, and misery. In turn, the great English social reform movements of the 19th century, including the labor movement and those institutions that later were nationalized as state welfare, emerged initially as collective efforts to mitigate these unevenly distributed negative side effects of such disruption.

These movements represent, at least within the English tradition, the origin-story for the modern Left. While these movements have subsequently come to view their own achievements through the lens of "progress," though, they are better understood as the mobilization of secularized Christian impulses in response to the solvent power of technology. The 19th-century labor movement represents a response from within the industrial workforce both to the stark imbalance of power between labor and capital, and to the new proliferation of urban squalor and poverty that accompanied the transition from rural to manufacturing life. The moral tone was shaped by long-standing Christian principles concerning social justice, the equal dignity of souls, and the obligation to help the poor. For example, although later incarnations of socialism in the Marxist tradition were at least overtly atheistic, the first organized movement on behalf of the working class in Britain was led by Christian socialist Charles Kingsley.[18] Similarly, the women's movement first emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries in response to urbanization's disruptive impacts on family life and the draining of productive work from the home, a development with far-reaching consequences for women.[19]

Over time, these movements tended to shed their explicitly Christian character. Then, with the Christian link gone, those Christian-legacy moral intuitions mutated. The explicitly atheistic Marxist movements, for example, retained a Christian-style linear and eschatological history but transferred their field of operation from the spiritual to the material. Now, the realization of "Communism" represented the life of the world to come, and the Christian assertion of the equal dignity of human souls became a demand for material equality among human bodies.

In keeping with this secularized Christian legacy, these movements have tended to mark their own homework, characterizing social, economic, and political achievements in line with the pursuit of secular egalitarianism simply as "progress." Dig a little deeper, though, and their common characteristic comes into view as a kind of bargaining with the power of technology. In the early history of the Left, for example, we see the labor movement addressing the negative externalities resulting from industrialization's dissolution of older social forms, such as the poverty, squalor, and moral degradation that resulted when Britain's rural workforce was "liberated" from its tie to the land.[20] In response to these changes, the Left sought not to reverse the dissolution, but to mitigate its disruptive effects through regulatory or other forms of redress, with the aim of leveling its starkest asymmetries in the name of greater egalitarianism. In England, for example, such movements called for national poor relief in lieu of the subsistence peasant's lost capacity for independent food production.

Elsewhere, the women's movement also responded to the industrial-era transformation of family life, and the new economic and social challenges this transformation presented to women. Again, however, the emphasis was less on reversing the transformations and returning family life to the premodern "productive household" model than it was on challenging holdovers from that order, such as coverture marriage, that disproportionately disadvantaged women in the new market society. As Erika Bachiochi has argued, early feminist arguments for women's right to equal legal and political standing with men followed a similar trajectory from origins in Christian faith, to a gradual unmooring from that faith, and eventually to the explicit opposition to Christian precepts now commonly seen in contemporary feminist thinking.[21]

It is in this context that the distinctive character of the modern Left comes clearly into view. To the extent that the Left achieves a *modus vivendi* with technological disruption in the name of "equality," this is conventionally framed as "progress." The relation of "progress" to technology itself is both ambivalent and symbiotic, often protesting new inequalities

introduced by technology (such as labor/capital asymmetry) while also hailing the egalitarian potential for mass comfort and abundance produced by industrial market society. The aggregate result is a version of "progress" understood in Christian-origin terms as the pursuit of individual freedom and egalitarianism, in which the power of technology to create new asymmetries should be limited and technology should be ordered toward the pursuit of equality and freedom. What makes the modern Left distinct is that it first strips the wider Christian frame from that egalitarian intuition, and then extends its liberatory technological trajectory into human bodies and souls: a process that began in 1960 with the Food and Drug Administration's legalization of the contraceptive pill.

Like every other far-reaching technological innovation, the Pill brought both benefits and costs. Like every other technological advance, too, it was celebrated by the Left for its egalitarian powers and (more obliquely) decried for creating new asymmetries. For at least some women, this technology afforded control of perhaps the most centrally salient difference between men and women: the risk of pregnancy. In turn, this prompted a cascade of left-wing mitigatory responses to new asymmetries, ordered to recouping the power of this technology for egalitarianism. Following the sexual revolution, feminists leaned into the increased freedom to study and participate in the workforce that accompanied legal contraception—and also demanded legal remedies to mitigate the disruptive externalities of the social changes it prompted, such as changes in state welfare, provision of increased child care, and legalization of abortion.

Conservatives, meanwhile, have largely accepted the "progress" framing. The sexual revolution is generally treated as a left-wing phenomenon, with (as per Askonas's analysis) the antagonist generally identified as left-wing values rather than the solvent power of technology. With the exception of Catholic social critics such as Mary Eberstadt, who links the Pill directly to negative ramifications in America from individual identity crises to family breakdown, alienation, and street riots,[22] the American conservative mainstream today tends to stop short of directly denouncing the revolution's enabling technology itself. For example, Donald Trump's 2024 campaign distanced itself from explicit opposition to abortion, let alone any other aspect of what is now referred to as "reproductive rights," notwithstanding shrill warnings from his opponents of an oncoming conservative war on "reproductive rights" (really, technologies) more generally. Conservative critiques that focus on the technologies themselves remain relatively fringe.

This is nothing new. It stands, ironically, in the Burkean tradition of defending the importance of tradition while also embracing and benefiting

from the technologies dissolving them. But as a strategy for balancing the restless orientation toward the future of modernity against a desire to preserve the good, it has reached the end of the road. If the impact of the Pill on sociosexual norms was nothing short of revolutionary, its impact on the medical paradigm was every bit as transformative, in ways that directly implicated the grounds of conservatism itself even as it moved the core battleground of leftism from the political to the biological.

The Transhuman Turn

From Hippocrates onward, the first directive in medicine traditionally has been "do no harm." In this framing, "harm" can only be defined relative to a normative understanding of "health" that also forms the bedrock for medical training. A student doctor must acquire a detailed knowledge of healthy human physiology, as a precondition for understanding how different illnesses deviate from this standard and hence how to identify and treat them. In other words, "healing" as it is conventionally understood presupposes and refers to a normative understanding of health.

Here, however, as modern medical science has advanced, a paradox has slipped quietly into view. As we have seen, the scientific paradigm rests on the dismissal of *eidos* and *telos* from the metaphysical picture in favor of material and efficient causes. In the case of human medicine, though, it is not possible to assess "health" except in reference to *eidos*—and often, as in the case of reproductive functions, *telos*. For example, the phrase "normal reproductive function" makes no sense except in the context of a *gestalt* grasp of the template for human physiology and a grasp of what sex is *for*.

Eidos and *telos* have continued to govern the social practice of medicine long after they were expunged from other sciences. This reflects the widespread persistence of perhaps the most deep-rooted Judeo–Christian moral intuition of all: *imago dei*, the doctrine, recounted in the first book of Genesis, of mankind's creation in the image of God. Thousands of years after its attributed origin with Moses around 1400 BC, the legacy of *imago dei* not only endows the human template with a consistent "formal cause," but also accords this particular instance of formal cause a quality of holiness that has persisted even into the secular age. The widespread, instinctive, and visceral disgust that greets images of mutilated human bodies even today attests to the continued power of this intuition.

For doctors, this creates a tension. Even as the social practice of medicine historically has been conducted with reference to *eidos* (the normative template of health) valorized by the (implicitly sacred) ideal of human

psychophysical flourishing conveyed in *imago dei*, the pursuit of this end by scientific means implies the bracketing or even complete disavowal of *eidos* in favor of material and efficient cause. The longer-term restoration of unwell bodies to wellness, for example, can sometimes be achieved only by violating their sanctity, their *imago dei*—for example, in an invasive operation.

If it seems paradoxical that medical practice should rely on metaphysical categories disavowed by medical theory, this paradox was resolved by the Pill. Where previous medical interventions had been predicated on the restorative paradigm, with its implicit reference to formal cause, the Pill was the first mainstream medical intervention that rejected *eidos* altogether.

Legalizing the Pill meant rejecting any claim that because the capacity to become pregnant from sex is part of normal adult female health, it should not be interfered with medically. Much as Ockham's nominalism prioritized God's freedom over God's rationality back in the 13th century, the Pill prioritized women's individual freedom over the normative "rationality" of our organismic makeup in the 20th. In embracing "freedom" on this paradigm—a freedom inextricable from the technology that flattened reproductive differences between the sexes—women took their place at the vanguard of convergence between humans and our own technologies. In this sense, as I have argued, in embracing the contraceptive paradigm women were the first wave of "cyborgs."[23]

The half-century since that revolutionary moment has witnessed a cascade of further advances within this new, unbounded medical paradigm. For example, few anticipated in its utopian early days that one of the downstream consequences of this new technology would include so radical a rewriting of the concept of "gender equality" that court cases would be fought over the right of two men to claim insurance coverage for "curing" their entirely natural inability to conceive and gestate a baby. And yet, 64 years after the first licensing of the Pill, Corey Briskin and Nicholas Maggipinto brought a lawsuit against the State of New York, claiming an equal right to fertility treatments currently offered only to heterosexual couples.[24]

The logic is inexorable. Once formal cause (more colloquially, "normal health") is removed from medicine, the scope for innovation and intervention is potentially limitless. If it is licit to interrupt *eidos* to "cure" women's healthy but inconvenient fertility in the name of work or study, why should we not do so to "cure" the inconvenient inability of two men to gestate a baby? This in turn reveals the disastrous effect for conservatives of extending to humans the elimination of formal cause: We no longer have anywhere to stand when objecting to such measures on the basis that they violate nature. Once you accept the dissolution of human *eidos*—the claim that

we have a nature as such—there are no robust grounds left, conservative or otherwise, for objecting to Briskin and Maggipinto's claim that their "infertility" has equal standing with that of a heterosexual couple.

Imago DEI

Since the Pill, the tech-enabled dissolution of biological boundaries has proceeded apace, and has afforded fertile new ground for the modern, secularized left-wing pursuit of radical material equality. In particular, it has opened the possibility of extending this pursuit from equality *between* bodies, as in the early labor movement's call for a more equal distribution of the fruits of economic growth, to equality *within* bodies. Now differences of physiology itself—starting with but not limited to sex difference—come to be seen not as givens of the human condition, but as optional and hence as a form of injustice amenable to remedy.

This prospect of "remedying" even unwanted features of our physiology in turn powers a new bioegalitarianism, that mobilizes the power of technology to liberate humans from the perceived oppression of naturally occurring human difference. The ambivalent character of this bioegalitarianism is the same as that of earlier leftist movements. That is, it both embraces the liberatory power of new technologies and demands institutional, social, and political remedies for their negative externalities. For example, it demands that women's freedom and self-actualization be extended and leveled with that of men by flattening differences in male and female reproductive roles via contraception and abortion. It reframes secondary and even primary sex characteristics from givens to options on a menu to help the patient meet his or her "desired embodiment goals."[25] It extends the "right" to "build families" even to those with no natural ability to conceive or carry children,[26] mobilizing the full panoply of modern reproductive technologies in the name of equalizing the ability of any combination of would-be parents to obtain a child, irrespective of sex.

In its wake, a host of new movements have emerged that call for political and cultural power to be used to harness this technological liberation to egalitarian ends—and, relatedly, to stigmatize or even outlaw any reference to human *eidos*: a cultural program I have elsewhere characterized as "normophobia."[27] For example, some proponents say that any residual celebration of idealized human forms should be expunged from the public conversation, whether in advertising, in art, or even in the movement that insists (in the teeth of common sense and scientific evidence) that humans can be "Healthy at Every Size."[28]

Some take this militant anti-normativity still further. In one startling 2023 instance, British transgender activists argued in a National Health Service–funded research paper that a pregnant, trans-identified woman should not be discouraged from taking synthetic testosterone because of the potentially teratogenic effect of this substance on a baby *in utero*. This, they argued, represented an oppressive attachment to the human template that reflected "historical and ongoing social practices for creating 'ideal' and normative bodies."[29] For bioegalitarians, it is intrinsically oppressive to refer in any way to *eidos*, let alone *imago dei*.

What in this formulation replaces *imago dei* as the guiding template? By definition, it can have no form, for *form itself* is now the enemy. The epigraph to this paper offers one extreme, fantastical picture of this bioegalitarianism taken to its logical terminus in a kind of undifferentiated, protean biomass. In the words of the author, the pseudonymous trans activist Nyx Land: "a return back to the ocean, back to a sexless, genderless slime swarmachine."[30] We might characterize this war on form itself as a quest to replace a humanity created in the image of God with one whose only characteristic is infinite difference without distinction: a war on *imago dei* in the name of *imago DEI*. Taken together, and granted economic and increasingly coercive political force, the order of *imago DEI* extends even into the human organism what the philosopher René Girard called "the other totalitarianism,"[31] a kind of "hyper-Christianity" that secularizes and then parodies Christian-heritage egalitarian individualism, to promote a project of happiness through the limitless satiation of desire.

We already have a concrete real-world instance of what *imago DEI* looks like at scale: the drive for massification and deliberate stripping and flattening of difference identified by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Having been widely feted by the Left for earlier work exploring what he called a "biopolitics" that sought to strip humans of everything but "bare life," Agamben found himself abruptly cancelled when he identified this condition unambiguously with the treatment of humans during lockdown merely as units of existence and potential contagion.[32] For its part, the bioegalitarian Left broadly agreed with Agamben's assessment, differing only in seeing it as a good thing. For example, the urbanist Benjamin Bratton hailed the COVID-era mass digital management of "public health" as heralding a new "positive biopolitics" that turned away from the obsolete, reactionary politics of freedom and individual human agency toward new vistas for universal welfare and algorithmically managed care.[33]

Since the end of lockdown, the now widely evidenced[34] negative impact of lockdown measures on children and young people strongly suggests

that this policy fails signally to take into account important features of the human template, with the developmental needs of children being only one egregious example of this blind spot. As children's rights campaigner and Them Before Us founder Katy Faust has observed, this is hardly the only context in which bioegalitarianism finds itself waging war on the normative needs of children.[35] But this is to be expected: *Imago DEI* is at heart a war on *eidos*, and *eidos* includes every normative human trait, including our usual developmental pathway from conception onward. As children are by definition only at the beginning of that normative developmental journey, the will to dissolution that animates *imago DEI* is bound to bear most heavily on them.

Right-Prometheanism

The apostles of *imago DEI* are not the only group now descending on *imago dei* with scalpels and an avid expression. A great many of those now setting the solvent power of technology loose upon human nature itself see their own projects as ordered not toward greater equality, but toward other values such as growth, freedom, power, or the unchaining of human desire.

Tech investor Marc Andreessen, for example, endorsed Donald Trump on his *Little Tech* podcast[36] and has taken a clear stance against efforts by the Biden Administration to rein in innovation in the name of the masses. For Andreessen and the rest of the emerging "Tech Right" for whom he often acts as informal spokesman, it appears to be open season as regards *eidos*: "We believe in nature, but we also believe in overcoming nature."[37] In Andreessen's view, technology represents "the only perpetual source of growth" and can also resolve any subsequent problems that arise from its own externalities: "[T]here is no material problem—whether created by nature or by technology—that cannot be solved with more technology."

Right-modernists do not seem hostile to "human" as a concept, however fuzzily this may be employed. "[T]he techno-capital machine is not anti-human," asserts Andreessen. On the contrary, he and his fellow techno-optimists view its relentless inventiveness as radically *pro*-human, as the only possible way to satisfy the "infinite" potential scope of "human wants and needs," and assert firmly that "we believe in humanity—individually and collectively." What is less clear is whether "human" can persist as a stable concept when its normative features are themselves treated as technological frontiers to be conquered and overcome. Andreessen paraphrases the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, which heralded the power of technology to turn civilization away from a fretful,

stagnant fixation on the past in favor of an aggressive, militarist, vitalist sensibility that will destroy "moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice"[38] and replace them with the glory and excitement of will, ambition, and heavy machinery.

From the perspective of such a Right-modernist sensibility that valorizes aggression and ambition, one might argue that the problem with Briskin and Maggipinto's lawsuit lies not in the attack it mounts on *imago dei*, but rather in its prosecution in the name of *imago DEI*: that is, of a protean egalitarianism that seeks to abolish natural differences and hierarchies by fiat. Wealthy men are already able to procure babies through means other than heterosexual partnership, including surrogacy, as in the case of Elon Musk's (at the time of writing) 12 known biological children, variously by sperm donation and surrogacy as well as the "natural" method.[39] Such standout individuals have no need of lawsuits to bend the world (and nature) to their will. From a Right-futurist perspective that draws on Marinetti, the offense is not pushing the bounds of "nature." Rather, it is the capture of such innovation by middle-income individuals to effect an outcome they clearly lack the political or economic power to bring about unaided.

But would the pursuit of power, growth, and agency even into a direct assault on the human template yield the hoped-for dividend of human excellence and advancement? It is, of course, in the nature of the power asymmetries in question that exceptional individuals cannot be prevented from attempting to bend the world to their will. Even so, the likely outcome of even a Right-modernist assault on *eidos* would be the precise inverse of the hoped-for outcome. A project of pure power pursued via war on *imago dei* radically underestimates how completely every value that might order such a project to the good remains governed by the template it sets out to undermine.

For one thing, any such project would inexorably produce its own broader bio-leftist backlash. Specifically, were biotech to succeed in engineering a super-race, this tech-enabled speciation of humans would inevitably result in what Paul Virilio calls "super-racism,"[40] as the creation of supermen meant everyone else was downgraded to *Untermensch*. The inevitable response to such emergent asymmetries would be a mass reaction from the bioegalitarian Left, in the form of a correspondingly aggressive anti–super-racism: an egalitarian backlash more hell-bent than ever on stripping away difference. The logical endpoint of such a bio-antiracism would necessarily be a redoubling of the bioegalitarian commitment to our universal reduction into undifferentiated *homo sacer*: bare life, no longer human at all.

We can, of course, speculate that a putative engineered super-race would be so vastly elevated as to remain indifferent to the demands of bio-antiracism. Or, perhaps, that merely achieving their existence would so completely have rewritten the human template as to eliminate even the residual traces of Christian egalitarianism that currently animate Western leftism. Certainly, there are fringe Right-modernists who dream of something along these lines: a post-Christian neo-feudalism, perhaps, ordered to the inevitable superiority of a bioengineered *un*natural aristocracy. But reserving for elites the right to tinker with *eidos* does nothing to solve the metaphysical formlessness introduced by such tinkering.

Take, for example, the proposed commercial engineering of "designer babies."[41] The philosopher Nick Bostrom has suggested that superintelligent infants might be rapidly evolved via in-vitro gametogenesis,[42] a proposal that takes this tinkering considerably further than such broadly restorative practices as polygenic screening for health conditions. Bostrom's proposal that we optimize for intelligence itself implicitly acknowledges the persistent force of the template in that it assigns moral value based on specific natural differences between human individuals, a reality that has been understood to be part of *eidos* since classical times.

To the extent that such a project can succeed in pursuing human excellence, it can do so only with reference to the existing template. But it measures its own success in how effectively it is able to rewrite that template. Then, because the ground and reference for our values is inextricable from that template, success in that project implies a new set of moral values. Success thus invalidates its own original rationale. More plainly, there is no reason to assume that a hypothetical race of humans genetically modified for superintelligence would see the world as we do. Perhaps they would even conclude that their own superintelligence was not an improvement. Certainly, the well-established negative correlation between IQ and human fertility[43] suggests that optimizing humans for this specific trait might have unlooked-for side effects, whose appearance could be anticipated only via a more holistic grasp of the very human template whose persistence is treated by such engineering projects as the problem to be solved.

Taken together, then, human self-engineering in the name of excellence amounts to sawing off the branch upon which every possible rationale for such self-engineering could be argued to sit. This means that the only remaining grounds for the project end up being, as C.S. Lewis pointed out,[44] power and desire shorn of any ordering values or forms against which excellence might be measured—in other words, undifferentiated formlessness.

So the ultimate metric for success in dissolving *imago dei*, even in the name of excellence, would be its approximation to *imago DEI*.

Our Common Human Nature

With this in mind, it becomes clear that Right-conservatives and Right-modernists do share some common interests where biotech is concerned, beyond the opposition to "woke." It is clear that the Right must dismiss in Schmittian terms all those, including interests avowedly on the Right, whose scientific or political project seeks directly to undermine human *eidos*. This is an irreducibly leftist project. A lack of shared assumptions makes the debate over the moral status of the unborn difficult to resolve among the different segments of the Right. Even so, those conflicting segments can and must still make common cause in restoring *eidos* to the central place it must occupy for any political ideology that values order, form, and the persistence of difference. Such a restoration could provide a broader foundation for political unity while leaving ample—even greater—scope for a technologically enabled pursuit of human excellence.

From this perspective, for example, we might consider the interesting position occupied by the proposed Enhanced Games sporting competition in relation to how it approaches *eidos*. Announced in 2024 with funding from, among others, Right-modernist entrepreneurs Balaji Srinivasan and Peter Thiel, the Enhanced Games is explicitly pro-doping and seeks to push the envelope of human excellence in conjunction with advanced science and medicine. Does this constitute a quest for excellence in reference to the human template or an assault on that template? The answer likely depends on the specific interventions. The use of steroids arguably fits more or less into the former category, for example, while (hypothetically) grafting a robotic exoskeleton onto a sprinter is indisputably the latter. There is a world of difference between "curing" or tweaking in reference to a shared *eidos* and waging war on that *eidos*. Every potential biotech innovation must be evaluated and used in such terms if it is not to contribute to our drift toward the "slime swarmachine."

Competing strains of American thought are vying for predominance. From the first settlers, the Founding, and America's subsequent emergence as global hegemon, the Land of the Free has combined appeals to natural law and divine providence with an intensely practical spirit of radical innovation. It is reasonable to infer that these impulses are too deeply interwoven even with conservative accounts of America's national story for the tech-optimist streak to be rejected wholesale. Nonetheless, conservatives

on both Christian and modernist sides must seek common cause in disavowing any politics of technology that extends this legacy to repudiating an account of the human. The endpoint of such a repudiation will inevitably be the bio-leftism of *imago DEI*, whether attained accidentally through the self-inflicted degradation of our capacity to evaluate human excellence, a mass bioegalitarian backlash against "super-racism," or both.

A great deal of careful work remains to be done in retrieving an account of "human nature" for the 21st century. No movement from the current right-wing impasse concerning technology will be possible, though, without some acceptance in principle that whatever the specifics or ontology of human nature, it must be operationalized as an enabling premise in order for Right-modernism to have any reality in its own right save as preamble for the biopolitics of *homo sacer*.

There is no reason a tech-curious Right should not walk this straight and narrow path in continued reference to human excellence, perhaps even aided at times by the power of technology to augment that excellence. This path lies ahead – provided it holds faithfully to an explicit acknowledgement, valorization, and defense of the durability, sanctity, and indispensability of *imago dei*.

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Endnotes

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3. In feudal England, most land was not owned privately but rather was loaned by the Crown to important lords, who managed it according to complex systems of subsidiary rental. A large portion of land was "common," customarily shared by subsistence peasants who were granted specific rights to its usage: for example, to graze livestock. Britain's entry into modernity was precipitated by the privatization ("enclosure") of this "commons," which reached a peak during the 18th and 19th centuries and enabled significant improvements in agricultural efficiency while also displacing rural peasants from independent subsistence to wage labor, creating the workforce that would become the industrial proletariat. English conservatives of the period were often supportive of the innovations but ambivalent about the attendant shift away from "the landed interest." See, for example, Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York and Toronto: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944).
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