



STUCK WITH VIRTUE





RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Series Editor

PETER AUGUSTINE LAWLER





STUCK WITH VIRTUE

The American Individual and Our
Biotechnological Future

PETER AUGUSTINE LAWLER

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PREFACE

The two subjects of this book are the American individual and biotechnology. The other principle of unity is that each of these chapters was prepared as a lecture or presentation for a diverse group of intelligent, educated, and active citizens and students of American moral and political life. Each chapter has a wide scope, comes to controversial conclusions, and is meant to influence opinion—and not just scholarly opinion. I hope that these chapters reach a much, much larger and wider audience through their publication together. The introduction and the first two chapters offer overviews of our present situation as modern individuals and function here as something like orientation sessions. I have made them as informal as possible, even dispensing with distracting notes and all that. Some of the later chapters are a bit more technical, but that only means you might want to read them a bit more slowly.

Each chapter is meant to stand on its own, so there is some unavoidable redundancy. It also means that if you don't like one, you can move on to the next, or even just skip around without missing anything essential to your reading pleasure. I've not tried to impose a uniform style upon the chapters just for consistency's sake.



Most of them appeared in print somewhere else first, and I appreciate the generosity of *Society*, *Modern Age*, the *New Atlantis*, the *Intercollegiate Review*, *Perspectives on Political Science*, and Lexington Books in allowing me to use them, with some revision, again here.

I want to thank Jeremy Beer for being a skillful and encouraging editor, and for allowing my own book to introduce this series on religion and contemporary culture. Eric Cohen, editor of the *New Atlantis*, did a fine job of tightening and clarifying two of the chapters, especially the one on caregiving. Several Berry College students, especially Elizabeth Amato, Kelly Walsh, and Keri Libby, did some expert proofreading. Diane Land, as usual, lavished her incomparable attention to detail on every word. If this book isn't perfect, it's because something changed when Diane wasn't looking. If I really thought this was the last book I would do with Diane, I would dedicate it to her with a sappy and sincere testimonial.

This book talks up friendship here and there, so let me mention some of my best writer/professor friends. Dan Mahoney, Paul Seaton, Marc Guerra, Mark Henrie, and Ralph Hancock each read and talked me through much of what's written here, not to mention all sorts of other controversial issues and perennial questions. If I added just a few more names—such as my friends Bob Kraynak and Joe Alulis—I could cover the whole “crowd” of American faith-based, non-libertarian, Strauss-influenced thinkers. We're not yet famous enough to merit Ann Norton's or Shadia Drury's critical attention, but watch out! I have to add—and not just because this paragraph might leave you with the impression that I don't have any women friends—that I wouldn't know anything at all without the orientation Delba Winthrop gave me more than a few years ago.

I've also learned a lot from and enjoyed my time with an unusually fine group of students who have been enrolled in my

seminars over the last few years. Here I should start a list, but it would simply be too long. And my apparently legendary inability to remember names when I need them might accidentally cause me to slight some of my friends.

This book also talks up love, which may be for suckers, but is certainly not only for them. Let me give the place of honor to Rita, Catherine, and my parents.

A final word of thanks belongs to the Earhart Foundation. Without Earhart's generous support I never would have found time to finish this book.





INTRODUCTION

THE AMERICAN INDIVIDUAL TODAY

The guiding premise of this book is that we tend to think of ourselves today as *individuals*—as opposed to parents, children, friends, citizens, or creatures. I have a very particular definition of the individual in mind: To think of oneself as an individual is to think in the first person, or to think that everything exists for me. To be an individual is to be a free agent, unencumbered by church, country, family, friendship, love, or any other form of social or communal duty. The individual—as individual—is the center of the universe. Nothing existed before me, and when I am gone, all is gone. Every moment of my life should be determined by calculation concerning what is best for me, and so all my human connections should be the product of conscious and selfish consent. I surrender my freedom as soon as I think of myself as part of a whole greater than myself or lose my mind in love with someone else.

We individuals believe, in fact, that we live freely and truthfully only when we live in the first person. That's why as our famous French observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, says in *Democracy in America*, “Americans are pleased to explain almost all the actions of their life with the aid of self-interest rightly understood” (volume 2, part 2,



chapters 8–9). A free and enlightened individual, we take pleasure in bragging, “resists instinct in all encounters and reasons coldly about all the acts of his life.” Rather than “blindly yielding” to love or any other passionate enthusiasm, the individual as individual has the habitual capacity for “sacrificing without effort the pleasure of the moment to the permanent interests of his whole life.” Individual sacrifices of momentary passion or enjoyment are not really blind, because they are not really sacrifices at all: They only defer gratification with the intention of maximizing and prolonging it. Genuine sacrifice is for suckers, for bees, ants, ignorant and superstitious monks, and the other mindlessly communal animals.

The individual, the product of theorizing by liberal philosophers such as John Locke, is an abstract being without many of the natural social qualities characteristic of real human beings. When he or she boasts, Tocqueville notes, the individual exaggerates the freedom or ability to govern himself or herself (that is, not to be governed by other human beings, nature, or God) with his or her individualistic “philosophy.” And our Constitution is largely based on this individualistic, Lockean philosophy of self-government. We Americans consent to be governed as *individuals*. Sovereign individuals, from this view, are like sovereign states, and therefore government is nothing more than a treaty or compact among sovereigns. Just as sovereign states, in fact, can withdraw from treaties without being invaded, sovereign individuals can withdraw from any or all of the social ties to which they have consented to be bound when those ties no longer serve their self-interest.

As the unionist Orestes Brownson complained in *The American Republic* (1865), Lockean theory could provide no argument against the Southern states’ assertion of “the right of secession” that was the cause of the Civil War—and the Lockean argument used by

the Confederate states was destructive not only of government but of all social life. The theory of the individual, in fact, has no argument against the individual's assertion of a "right of secession" from whatever binds him to other human beings or to God. Brownson, almost a century and a half ago, saw clearly what Lockean theory could do to marriage, the family, friendship, and churches, not to mention nations and citizens. He saw that the theory of the individual gives no adequate account of the citizen's loyalty to his country, no adequate account of human loyalty or responsibility at all. That is why Brownson attempted to explain why the Lockean theory of our framers could not really account adequately for the enduring Constitution they had created. They must have built better than they knew, or thought they knew. In truth, of course, our founders were more than Lockean theorists, and more than sovereign individuals.

Nobody, or almost nobody, really believes that Locke teaches the whole truth any more. Few really believe that Locke was right when he said that human beings exist freely and rationally in some state of nature, and that government, the family, in fact, all social life are merely products of our rational, self-interested consent. The partial truth taught by contemporary Darwinism lies in its recovery of the Aristotelian insight that we are by nature gregarious, social animals. That is why our efforts to replace the natural world with one consciously constructed with individuals in mind tends to make us happier in some ways and more miserable in others. An account of the whole truth about human beings would incorporate both the partial truth about our freedom that we see reflected in the theory of the individual and the partial truth about our sociality we see reflected in the extremely clever chimp described by the sociobiologists. It would also include our common experi-

ences of loving openness to the truth about all things, including ourselves, and our incurable longing for God.

But as Brownson and John Courtney Murray in *We Hold These Truths* (1960)—the best American Catholic or Thomistic political thinkers we have had—both noted, the paradox is that the history of America is, in large part, the gradual but real infusion of seemingly untrue Lockean principles and self-understandings into all areas of our lives. All of our experiences, it sometimes seems, are being reconfigured in terms of calculation and consent. Lockean theory, allegedly refuted time and again by Marxism, Freudianism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, neuroscience, and so forth, seemingly explains more human behavior than ever. Perhaps our progress toward individualism is simply in accord with Locke's comprehensive intention. His description of the human individual was less an account of what we are really like by nature than a project to free us from our natural and social limitations. Locke aimed to *make* his view of the human individual true, to reconstruct all of human life with the individual in mind. Locke understood, Pierre Manent reminds us in *The City of Man* (1998, in English), that *the* distinctively human faculty is the power of abstraction, and that the greatest evidence of our freedom is our capacity to make our abstractions real. He knew that his description of the free individual expressed only part of the truth about being human, but he also knew that it was possible that it would express more of that truth all the time.

The sense that we live in a theoretical time is strange; it is more unclear than ever whether the sovereign individual with individual rights is a natural fact or a historical construction. It surely is more clear than ever that we might have indefinite power to free ourselves from all that we have been given by nature. It seems that

the more sovereign we become, the less natural we are. And we attempt to free ourselves from nature partly because we see ever more clearly how hostile nature is to individual aberrations from her reasonable, impersonal laws. In other words, the more we war against nature, the more obvious we think it becomes that nature is at war with us.

We are the only species that acts to privilege the good of particular individuals over the species as a whole. Sociobiologists can lament the way in which increasingly child-free Europeans are choosing for themselves and against the species, choosing not to produce the replacements nature intends them to produce. But sociobiologists can praise and blame only because we are not really governed—not completely, anyway—by the evolutionary process the sociobiologists describe. Human beings have never been species survivalists. When Carl Sagan told us to populate other planets to maximize the probability of species survival (because an asteroid might pulverize any particular planet), most of us just shrugged. Why should we care how long the species lasts after we're gone? Christians, for example, have never thought that the human species is or should be immortal; when it comes to long-term survival, each of us should trust in God. In fact, it might be said that any animal smart enough to think in terms of species serves its species less well than those too stupid to have such thoughts. When the history of our planet is written by some brilliant extraterrestrial, the beginning of the end of our species may well be identified with the emergence of the individual—the self-conscious mortal.

OUR LIBERTARIAN SOCIOBIOLOGY

The power of individuals today to choose not to be citizens or parents or creatures is remarkable and certainly unprecedented. But

thinking of ourselves as free individuals and nothing more surely is bad even for the preservation of individuals, not to mention nations or species, over time. Yet that sociobiological criticism of our perverse individualism carries little weight with us. The truth about nature allegedly discovered by the sociobiologists can only increase our obsessive individualism.

The Americans who have the most stable families and the most children—who live as nature intends—are those least likely to believe that sociobiology teaches the truth, or the whole truth, about human existence. They are our most observant religious believers. A study could easily show that the Americans who say they believe in Darwin and not the Bible are no more fecund than the French, who share the chance-and-necessity premises—the hopelessly dogmatic atheism—of our evolutionary theorists. Sovereign individuals have always known that what Darwin teaches is right about everything but individuals, and that it is the job of individuals to prove him wrong about them. But the most sociobiologically sound Americans—orthodox religious believers—think that neither Locke nor Darwin understood the deepest truth about human existence. They reject the notions that they are either deeply autonomous individuals or clever chimps.

At first glance, then, we have every reason to affirm Tocqueville's praise of our religion as a reasonably effective antidote to our individualistic excesses. Religion helps to ease our self-obsession, gets us to take our souls seriously, acts to protect women and children from exploitation, and inspires acts of relatively disinterested virtue. Tocqueville certainly would not have been surprised to see that the progress of individualism in our time had generated an impressive countercultural response. "Man," he explains, "did not give himself the taste for the infinite and love of what is immortal. These

sublime instincts are not born of a caprice of his will; they have their immutable foundation in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them” (volume 2, part 2, chapter 12). Even the allegedly autonomous individual cannot really legislate the soul into or out of being, and he or she has no choice but to address its needs somehow.

A solid minority of Americans are more thoroughly dedicated in their religious devotion today than the conflicted American Christians Tocqueville described. But another difference between Tocqueville’s time and our own may be more telling: In the America he described, Christian religious belief and moral doctrine commanded almost universal respect; dissenters kept quiet for fear of suffering all the consequences of moral isolation. But our countercultural Christians are today openly viewed with some combination of contempt and condescension by most of our sophisticates—including our mainstream media and many of our rather conservative intellectuals, such as Mark Lilla (the darling of the *New York Times*).

According to Lilla, “The leading thinkers of the British and American Enlightenments hoped that life in a modern democratic world would shift the focus of Christianity from a faith-based reality to a reality-based faith.” But, Lilla complains, “American religion is moving in the opposite direction today, back toward the ecstatic, literalist, and credulous spirit of the Great Awakenings.” He adds ominously, “Nobody can know how long this dumbing down of American religion will persist” or what its antiliberal or anti-individualistic consequences might be. Certainly, “citizens should probably be more vigilant about policing the public square, not less so” (“Church Meets State,” *New York Times Book Review*, May 15, 2005).

The opinion in Tocqueville's day was that our religion served our political liberalism by showing us that the individual's pursuit of happiness might culminate in happiness itself, that liberal politics and economics plus a belief in a personal God and the immortality of the soul might combine to produce a realistic or comprehensive view of human goods. Now we're told that religion has become too dumb and fantastic to do us any good, and so we must privatize and isolate belief as much as possible. The solution to dumb, anti-individualistic religion is an aggressive extension of the spirit of individualism to religion.

This dumbing down of religious believers is partly reflected, of course, in their "ignorance of basic science," or in their refusal to recognize the fact that Mr. Darwin teaches the whole truth about our origin and destiny. Lilla, along with most of our intellectuals, disagrees with Tocqueville about whether our religion should keep us from obsessing over the consequences of what scientists tell us is a reality-based view of our place in nature. He also disagrees with Tocqueville about whether our preachers know something about the soul, about the reality of being human, that our scientists do not. For Lilla, the fact that our evangelicals present a view of reality counter to the dominant secular or "Enlightenment" individualism—which has morphed into a sort of libertarian sociobiology—is decisive evidence against them. But at first glance, "libertarian sociobiology" would seem not to be reality based at all, but rather a ridiculous oxymoron, presenting us with something like an autonomous chimp. It would seem to be evidence, as our evangelical and orthodox thinkers say, that neither libertarianism nor sociobiology expresses the deepest truth about being human. Especially untrue and obnoxious is Lilla's implication that today's "secular humanists" live more "reality-based" lives than our religious believers.

To give Lilla his due, evangelical Christians do not tend to give reality-based arguments to defend their relatively reality-based lives. They tend to think in terms of opposing “worldviews,” biblical and secular. And they often claim that if it were not for the absolute truth of biblical revelation, relativistic individualism would be the truth we would all share in common. Our evangelicals lack the confidence to say that what we can see with our own eyes about nature and human nature supports their dissent from the individualistic excesses of our time. They concede too much to the individualism they criticize, and the result is that they do not really engage in dialogue with their fellow citizens, such as Lilla, about the human goods we all—believers and nonbelievers alike—share in common. Lilla is right to criticize them for their faith-based secession from the intellectual life of our country. But that does not mean that our evangelicals have nothing real and valuable to offer that life.

According to the astute British observers Adrian Wooldridge and John Micklethwait, America, largely because of the influence of religion, is the only reality-based nation in the enlightened world. They write in *The Right Nation* (2003) that Europeans tend to live in a postreligious, postfamilial, and postpolitical fantasy, and that they do not think clearly with their futures in mind. By contrast, we relatively conservative Americans think of ourselves as parents, creatures, and citizens, as well as free and productive individuals. So we refuse to reduce all moral questions to merely technical ones, and we take responsibility for our futures as real human beings. The evangelicals’ dissent from the dominant libertarian sociobiology of the intellectuals is actually connected to the truth about the way people really are.

Neither libertarianism nor sociobiology is completely reality based, and the one incomplete and superficial understanding of

reality generates the other. Nature, the sociobiologists teach us, is blind and pitiless, and the self-conscious individual is a cosmic accident who ought not exist. Finding ourselves homeless in the cosmos described by the biologists or the physicists, we individuals also find ourselves free to transform nature to make ourselves more at home. Our job, it appears, is to replace natural evolution—which uses individuals (denying, in effect, their dignity or real existence) to benefit the species—with conscious and volitional evolution—the result of our free efforts to impose our will on nature for the benefit of individuals. The dignity of the individual, from one view, resides in his unconstrained assertion of himself against natural indifference.

We generally call the effort to transform nonhuman nature for the good of individuals *technology*, and the newly emerging effort to transform our own human nature *biotechnology*. Increasingly, we define ourselves by our technological and biotechnological efforts to replace inhospitable natural reality with a world made by and for free individuals. We might say that we middle-class Americans work to create a middle-class world, one not appropriate for the other animals or gods but for the free beings with bodily needs stuck between those two extremes.

One consequence of this way of approaching the world is that the individual—as individual—is ungrateful, because he too readily believes there is nothing for which to *be* grateful. God and nature have given us nothing good, except for the mysterious capacity to work effectively to free ourselves from their domination. And the more successful we are in securing our freedom, the more ungrateful we become. As Gregg Easterbrook explains in *The Progress Paradox* (2003), a time traveler from a past century would surely find it strange that we whine so much about remarkably little. Our anxi-

ety, paranoia, and other forms of neurotic unhappiness have less material foundation all the time. It's not the case that people used to be happy because they enjoyed the various forms of pain, poverty, and tyranny that technological progress and good government have alleviated or eradicated. Not only is there no going back to more low-tech times, very few of us would really want to go back. We shouldn't forget all the good that thinking of ourselves as individuals has done for us.

People now are freer than ever to do whatever they want; they are less chained to economic necessity and social repression than ever before. Things are also generally more just. We are constantly inching closer to the meritocracy for which Jefferson hoped, that natural aristocracy in which the best would rise to the top and everyone else would still do well enough. Nor has the expansion of freedom produced a corresponding increase in criminality or vice: divorce, drinking, and crime rates have recently been in decline. We are getting healthier. IQs are on the rise. And thanks to smarter technologies, the environment is getting cleaner without our having to curb our consumption. If you ignore the fecundity problem—which may be alleviated by regenerative medicine's promise of indefinite longevity for each individual—the individual, the species, and the environment, Easterbrook shows us, are all in surprisingly good shape. The more we become dependent on technology, of course, the more we worry about some crisis that would reveal our inability to control what we do not really understand. But there probably is not any such crisis on the horizon; even some acts of bio- or even nuclear terrorism probably would not alter much the progress we have come to take for granted.

OUR HAPPINESS PROBLEM

We're not as grateful as we should be for all this genuine progress because we're not as happy as we believe we should be. For one thing, we're more anxious than in the past because we high-tech individuals are more concerned than ever about controlling the future. "Anticipation-induced anxiety," as Easterbrook observes, is now commonplace. So the cliché that we "are shallow and live for the moment" is pretty much the exact opposite of the truth among middle-class Americans today. We may, in fact, mouth shallow phrases and platitudes, but our freedom shines forth in our obsession with our futures as individuals. The inability of the anxious individual to live anywhere but in the future (not in the past or present or eternity) is the foundation of David Brooks's poetic celebration, in *On Paradise Drive* (2004), of our driven and productive lives; it is our national greatness; it is what motivates us to dominate the whole world.

Our increasing individualistic obsession actually makes sense. The shape of one's future is, more than ever, the product of one's own choices. Our unprecedented medical knowledge—characterized by one breakthrough after another when it comes to diet, exercise, supplements, and so forth—means that we have an increasingly long list of things to do in order to fend off death as long as possible. Because we know so much, we must work harder than ever against death. In fact, sickness and death seem today to be shameful evidence of personal irresponsibility. After all, death might be avoided simply by attending with proper prudence to all the known risk factors.

The example of our health obsession—which, of course, is mostly good—shows how confused libertarian sociobiologists are. Are we trying to free ourselves from natural necessity—which the

sociobiologists say is impossible? Or are we trying to free ourselves from chance—from being utterly contingent, mysterious, and hopelessly vulnerable exceptions to the laws that govern the rest of nature, from being individuals? We individuals certainly have no interest in making sociobiology completely right! We want to free ourselves from the nature that might (or might not) strike us down with disease or death at any moment. In so doing, we make the mistake of identifying nature with chance, and bringing nature under our control with the overcoming of chance. But the non-technological animals do not, in truth, experience themselves as governed by chance. The theory of evolution might explain their development that way, but that is our theory, not theirs. The more we free ourselves from necessity, the more we subject ourselves to chance, and so the more anxious and contingent we control freaks become. Our obsessions tend to make us more obsessive; the harder we work in response to them, the more completely we become individuals.

We cannot transcend completely the realms of necessity and chance and become personal gods; in winning some victories against one, we in some ways enter more deeply into the other. And who can believe we'll really get more happy and more virtuous if disease and death are no longer experienced as necessary—but still as always possible—outcomes for us individuals? So becoming more healthy doesn't necessarily make us more happy, which is not a problem that can be solved by obsessively deciding to eat, drink, smoke, take recreational drugs, and be merry, not to mention deciding, as some do, barely to eat at all.

Eric Cohen defends the more subtle view that we see nature “as both *orderly* and *absurd*.” Nature, we know, is governed by impersonal necessity. And we're happier when we admit that, sooner or later, we individuals will have to surrender our particular exist-

ences to that necessity. From one non-individualistic view, the best way to live happily is by acknowledging that all our victories over death and disease are temporary, whereas all our losses, as Cohen adds, are inevitably “final” (“The Tragedy of Equality,” *The New Atlantis*, Winter 2005). Still, it strikes us as absurd and worthy of our correction that death and disease seem to strike capriciously; good children often die miserable, lingering deaths, and everyone knows bad, healthy, old people. Nature doesn’t *care* about any of us; it strikes blindly or at random against some but not others (for a long while). But it remains the case that all our victories over nature are contingent and provisional.

We work, most of all, to bring less order and necessity into the world through our technological interventions. Our view of nature as amoral or immoral or cruelly disordered depends upon our individual perspective; nature does not intend and can only to a very limited extent be made to serve individuals. Anything, of course, that spares little children horrible deaths and gives them long lives is good, but those wonderful victories over nature both give us and rob us of happiness. We let them undermine the natural capacity given to our species alone to love contingent and mortal beings in this world. It would be best, of course, to encourage and embrace the victories of modern medical science in full awareness of their limitations, but that requires being grateful both for what we can do for ourselves and for the invincible necessity that seems to make each of our lives so contingent and temporary. We would have to care for individuals, but not too much, which, I think, requires seeing human beings as more than individuals.

As the debate over the Terri Schiavo case reminded us, defending the individual’s autonomy at the expense of other human considerations can actually end up justifying the killing of particu-

lar human beings. We cannot bring death under our control by annihilating it; no matter what we do, we must die. But through annihilating ourselves, we can, in a way, bring annihilation under our control. We can choose not to be dependent or irrational or to suffer; we can brag that we would rather be dead than endure those miserable indignities. And we can say that no individual should be made or even allowed to live without a certain degree of autonomy. Thinking of human beings as individuals and nothing more, as Paul McHugh observes, is the source of “our own, homegrown culture of death, whose face is legal and moral and benignly individualistic rather than authoritarian or pseudo-scientific.” In our increasingly individualistic time the authority of the prudential judgment of the physician is being displaced by the bioethicist—the expert at maximizing individual autonomy. “To most doctors and nurses,” McHugh adds, “the idea that one can control the manner and pace of one’s own death is largely a fantasy”; their “training and experience” keeps them from privileging autonomy over other ways of understanding what a human being is (“Annihilating Terri Schiavo,” *Commentary*, June 2005).

Consider what thinking of ourselves as individuals has done to marriage. Today a woman who chooses the wrong spouse can only blame herself, whereas someone stuck in an arranged marriage can direct her anger in a cathartic way toward others. Knowing that I’m not stuck in my unhappy marriage—that I have the freedom or the chance to correct my bad choices—only makes matters even worse. I, the individual, must show my courage by accepting the burden of choosing against my most intimate social bonds and for my personal happiness. People might be happier when they accept that marriage has a lot to do with both necessity and chance, neither of which can be completely replaced by choice.

We might even be grateful for having to live well with what we have been given, but for our choices we are rather unreasonably stuck with blaming ourselves completely. The truth is that the attempt to free marriage from necessity has subjected it more to *both* choice and chance. What is more whimsical and uncertain than basing a merely human institution on love and convenience alone, especially in a time when our individualistic experts tell us that love is an illusion? More people than ever deny today that marriage is a necessary institution with a secure human future.

One result of the deterioration or individualistic reconstruction of key social institutions in today's meritocratic world of choice is that rejection is more personal than ever. Those who are slighted or ignored can't blame social prejudices or "the system." It is devastating to know that I am just not that interesting or attractive or useful to others. The downside of a meritocracy—a classless society—is that nobody has to like me. Fewer thoughts produce more anxiety than knowing I live in a world where people have to work harder than ever just not to be alone. Libertarian Virginia Postrel, in *The Substance of Style* (2002), celebrates the contemporary world, in which we have more ways than ever to choose to be "smart and pretty." But we had better choose well, because it's more hellish than ever not to be smart and not to be pretty.

The individual, of course, is free to choose to pursue happiness, and he is free to define happiness for himself. Individual opinions on happiness, as Locke explained, are quite variable and subjective. So any public attempt to define happiness is repressive. But Locke actually privileged freedom over happiness; the free being is always in an ever elusive pursuit. Happiness itself, Locke suggests, is not characteristically the experience of a free individual. He knew that we are not completely in the dark about what happiness is, and

it generally requires being more than a free individual. The sociobiologists teach us that for most people most of the time happiness is something like the opposite of loneliness. A few people—the most rugged of individuals—really do want to be left alone. But in general married people are happier than single people, people from larger families happier than people from smaller ones, and so forth. There is something inescapably unrealistic and elitist about Locke's privileging of personal freedom over social and familial happiness.

Thomas Jefferson, our intellectual founder, seemed to part from Locke on the happiness issue. He said in his letters that the Epicurean philosopher who lives beyond hope and fear does not only pursue happiness. He is actually happy. And Jefferson also thought that we find happiness, as the sociobiologists explain, by acting in accord with our unconscious social instincts. But that didn't mean that Jefferson had the solution to the problem of happiness in America. Epicurean happiness, he readily admitted, is both very rare and very selfish, and our social instincts weaken as we become more sophisticated and self-conscious, which is why Jefferson periodically engaged in the impossible mission of keeping most Americans down on the farm. We are tempted to conclude that the Jeffersonian history of America is the weakening of social instinct in most people without any compensatory growth in Epicurean or philosophic happiness. The obvious problem with Jefferson's twin peaks of human happiness theory is that one—the Epicurean's—is above and the other—natural instinct—is below most of the experiences of the self-conscious mortal. Jefferson did not really explain how middle-class Americans—those beings who cannot help but hope, fear, and love—might find happiness. He finally seems to agree with Locke that happiness is not for the being who exists somewhere between the serene philosopher and the unconscious animal.

But Jefferson might add that our unhappiness is partly caused by the hypocritical laxity of middle-class aspiration. What we want, of course, is to be able to choose all the benefits but none of the burdens of being individuals. We individuals want to live long, healthy, and free lives without being anxious and lonely. We all want all the warmth and emotional security of “community” without any of its suffocating demands or constraints. We want all the love and sense of belonging that comes with family, faith, patriotism, and so forth without really thinking of ourselves fundamentally as parents or creatures or citizens. We do not want to be alone, but we do not want love to turn us into suckers. Our ambivalence reflects the complexity of our free human natures.

Guided by our insipid communitarian and therapeutic writers, we indulgently allow ourselves to imagine the coming of an anxiety-free world that would justify and reward all our work. But at the same time we find that we cannot not know that such a world exists only in the realm of fantasy. We’re far too aware that it would be bad for us to feel *too* warm and secure. Our anxiety does us the favor of reminding us of the truths that other people are unreliable and that nature does not care about us as individuals at all. (According to Easterbrook, studies have even shown that people who are somewhat depressed predict the future better than those who are not because they are more realistic in their expectations.) People who are happy and well adjusted, we fear, are not concerned enough about controlling themselves and their environment. Those who nostalgically long for low-tech nobility and contentment—for the agrarian simple life, Native American wisdom, and so forth—are basically losers. We can never really fool ourselves into ignoring the fact that without real work and its attendant anxieties, life would be hell for us individuals.

Our world remains full of therapeutic happy talk about how to reconcile autonomy with community. To listen to us talk it is even easy to believe that the therapeutic view of the world has triumphed. Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, authors of *One Nation Under Therapy* (2005), conclude that our experts' "therapism" is at odds with "the American Creed," which is marked by the "values" of "self-reliance, stoicism, courage in the face of adversity, and valorization of excellence." They worry that our nation "will . . . continue to slide into therapeutic self-absorption and moral debility." But Hoff Sommers and Satel do not see that our therapeutic language doesn't correspond to our actions; despite what we say, we're not really sliding down the slippery slope to serfdom or soft despotism. Our individualistic lives are in some way harder than ever, in part, because our "self-absorption" is less in some therapeutic reverie than both survivalist and competitive or meritocratic self-obsession. Nobody with eyes to see can say that our American virtues such as courage and stoic self-reliance have to become obsolete to live well, although the therapists may actually have a point that, by themselves, they are not nearly enough for happiness in most cases. Perhaps the therapists should be blamed most for attempting to deprive us of the pride we should take in the virtues that make life worth living.

PARANOID PARENTING

Nobody really believes, for example, that the therapism of the experts has made parenting any easier. Sophisticated Americans are having fewer children than ever, but our individualistic reluctance to think of ourselves as parents is only part of the reason. In fact, being more consistently individuals has given us a new incentive to want children. Adult experiences of passion and love, as Frank

Furedi observes in *Paranoid Parenting* (2002), have become “particularly short-term and insecure,” and all the “emotions that adults invest in one another are tempered by expectations of impermanence.” As the ideas of *man* and *woman* have been displaced and distorted by the ideal of the genderless individual, we have found it more difficult to speak or act with confidence as either a man or woman. Because we have so little respect for what comes naturally, even “love between man and woman is often treated in a calculating and pragmatic fashion.” At the same time, we still desire to be recognized and loved as more than individuals, as men and women. The result is that “the validation of self through one’s child assumes a new importance.” The child, “one of a few permanent facts in one’s life,” increasingly becomes “a unique emotional partner.” An individual—or a pair of individuals—can escape some of the disorienting pain of modern isolation by focusing on his child (or perhaps children), who is stuck with his parents and cannot help but love them. In a sense, the child acts as an involuntary therapist, but not one who makes life easy.

Maybe the main reason that sophisticated parents have so few children today is that they perceive parenthood as harder than ever before. The reasons, according to David Anderregg in *Worried All the Time: Overparenting in an Age of Anxiety and How to Stop It* (2003), that parents give for that perception “are that the world is so much more *competitive* today, so much more *unsafe* today, and so much more *confusing* today.” All the social policies and safety regulations designed to make children more safe have had virtually no effect on parental worry. Much more effort than ever before must be devoted to preparing children for the hard and disorienting world of American individuals. Most sophisticated parents choose to have small families not to spoil their children but to be

able to prepare each of them to flourish in a particularly tough world. Parents think they have to be more responsible than ever.

The decision to have just one or two children both originates out of worry and produces more worry still. We know that parents have always been most anxious about their firstborn children, and then eased up and chilled out when it came to subsequent arrivals. So in a world full of families with nothing but firstborns, parental worrying would rise to its highest possible level. That conclusion even makes sense according to the evolutionary theory of sociobiology: The natural job of parents is to produce offspring that survive, and so their goal would seem always to be to get as many genes as possible into the next generation. That goal, as the sociobiologists (and even St. Thomas Aquinas) say, is the same for all animals. The one-kid strategy of perpetuating one's genes is too high risk a strategy to have much natural support.

“Evolutionary psychologists,” Anderegg concludes, “are murky, at best, when trying to explain the current trend toward smaller families.” There are some plausible hypotheses: Smaller families make more resources available for each child, making survival and success more likely in each case. Modern medicine makes it more likely that even sickly “runts” will turn out well. Certainly each child is more likely to become a healthy and fertile adult than ever before. But each child is still subject to death by accident, and so from another view parents have left their gene spreading—not to mention the emotional satisfactions of being parents—more to chance than ever before. In the final analysis, “evolutionary psychology . . . has only one prescription for parents worrying, and that is to have more children.” Much parental anxiety is an unnatural product of individual choices; that doesn't mean we can or should actually relax enough to follow the psychologists' advice. But most of us still long to

love or fear loneliness enough to resist the obvious individualistic solution to the problem of parental anxiety: Be an individual, not a parent, all the time. We parents remain more than individuals.

THE END OF THE ENDURING SELF?

One result of us incomplete individuals rejecting that sociobiological advice is the overprotection or overregulation of each particular child. That is bad, of course, for the development in children of some of the virtues, at least, they will need to flourish as happy and responsible adults. As Anderregg explains, “goals like developing courage, which are thought to flow from letting children take risks, are meaningless when the literal survival of the sole offspring is at stake.” So our sophisticated parenthood, we can expect, will increasingly privilege individual survival over virtue or reduce virtue to those emotionally tough qualities required for individual success. It will tend to produce what David Brooks complains he found at Princeton—constantly calculating careerists who tend to reduce friendship to networking and amusement and sex to stress release.

We also cannot be surprised that our parenthood plays a part in turning college life itself into the emotionally sterile state of nature described by Tom Wolfe in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), where each individual is left alone with nothing but his or her wits to fend for him- or herself. The pleasures of conquest connected with hooking up go to the strong; the weak are condemned to “sexile,” and nobody, especially not the professors, talks about the character required to live an admirable and authentic life, to be what Wolfe calls “a man in full,” a real stoic, an outstanding example of courageous human individuality under difficult circumstances. One of Wolfe’s big points seems to be that the contemporary elite campus is tougher on the soul than prison. Even a brilliant girl raised

well in “Sparta” by her admirable—or simple and virtuous—parents does not have enough virtue to maintain her identity in the world shaped by what passes for Athenian enlightenment in America today, an enlightenment that began for her with the vulgar Nietzscheanism of her well read high school teacher and continued with the combination of radically politically correct nonjudgmentalism and soulless neuroscience of her college administrators and professors.

The deepest question Wolfe raises about the modern individual concerns where he or she is supposed to get the point of view, the character or virtue, the inward life or conscience to resist degrading social conformity. It turns out that the words “I am Charlotte Simmons” had no enduring meaning at all. The characteristic American, our critics have always said, is both an anti-social rebel and a social conformist, both James Dean and the man in the gray flannel suit (to use the relatively tame images from the fifties). Both extreme positions seem to come from excessive concern with the opinion of others, from a lack of a point of view by which to stand apart from and judge public opinion or fashion or “peer pressure.”

The American individual, as Tocqueville explains, thinks he or she is free only if he or she relies solely on his or her own judgment, rejecting the authoritarian repression of authority, parents, tradition, nature, God, and so forth. It is much more clear what a radically free judgment is *not* than what one *is*. Be yourself and be unique, we are told. But as Tocqueville explains, the individual human mind is anxious, disoriented, and paralyzed if it has to work all by itself. To be conscious, to think clearly and well, is to think with others. The solitude of radical freedom makes human thought and action impossible. And because the individual looks up to no authority, he’s stuck with looking around for some orientation from

fashion, from public opinion, from whatever the reigning experts are saying.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND BIOTECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENT

One theme of this book is the modern individual who worries incessantly about achieving personal authenticity and self-fulfillment yet is more anxious than ever about being alone. Another concerns the individual's relationship to the various technologies now becoming available to improve, if not perfect, our natures. On the one hand, we worry that by using technology to change our bodies and even our souls—our moods—we might change our very identities and so fail to achieve authenticity. On the other hand, we also believe that we have a duty to pursue happiness and enhance our security according to the latest studies and technological advances. As *Beyond Therapy* (a report of the President's Council on Bioethics, 2003) puts it, "Only a person utterly at peace with himself would be beyond temptation at the prospect of having his troubles effortlessly eased," and we must add that the individual as individual always chooses freedom and comfort over virtue.

Most of all, however, our main experience of technology and biotechnology has not and will not be the effortless easing of our troubles. Enhancement is and increasingly will be part of the "designer" work we'll have to do just not to be alone. It will be harder than ever for sovereign or self-sufficient individuals to choose against what's generally regarded as useful or effective. It is really hard to be yourself if you really believe or hope that the "self" is just a chemical reaction to be altered at will. You know of no way of keeping public opinion or social forces or politically correct experts from making a pharmacological determination of what you should be.

Consider the way in which the American individual increasingly identifies self-fulfillment with bodily obsession. Carl Elliott, in *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (2003), calls attention to a study chronicling the way the diaries of adolescent girls have changed over the last century. Before World War I, girls “rarely used the language of self-identity and improvement when they wrote about their bodies. In comparison to today, they were far less likely to mention their bodies at all.” They tended to regard obsessing about one’s physical appearance as vain and undignified, and they would resolve to think more of others. Today a girl bent on becoming a better person is likely to focus her private thoughts on diet, exercise, and various beauty enhancements. She really believes she can *change* herself by losing thirty pounds. That also means, of course, that a girl thinks that how she looks to others is who she is; gone is much of her authentically inward life.

Our perky libertarians—such as Virginia Postrel—say that enhancement technologies allow us to re-create our outward selves to correspond to our inward identities. Such enhancement does not reflect anxious social conformism but a way of being authentic or, as Postrel says, “special.” If a generously endowed girl nevertheless thinks of herself as a being with small breasts, for example, she can now become one. Soon enough, those who think of themselves as tall will no longer have to be short. Even men who think of themselves as women already can become women, and vice versa. More Americans than ever, Elliott reports, believe that being “born in the wrong body” is, in effect, tantamount to being “deprived of an identity.” We increasingly identify ourselves with our bodies—not so much the bodies we have now, but the bodies we would *like* to have.

The man who becomes a woman cannot be accused of social conformism. But even s/he wants to be recognized as a woman by

others. Being “inwardly” a woman is not enough because s/he is not a genuinely self-sufficient individual. In most cases, people are dissatisfied with their bodies because their physical appearance has socially isolated them. The individual, in truth, too readily identifies authenticity with emptiness and isolation and will use every means available to avoid it. For the most part, biotechnological enhancement will be used to allow and often compel us to surrender our stigmatizing physical or psychological differences. The choice for a new body—or even a new soul—will not be so “special” at all. Biotechnology may well most powerfully act to decrease genuine human diversity.

The paradox is that the disappearance of genuine inwardness is largely the result of the individualistic focus on the self, on getting in touch with one’s own feelings or needs. “Finding yourself,” Elliott observes, “has replaced finding God.” Or perhaps they are the same thing: We are told that we will find God by looking within; when we have discovered our true selves we will also have found God. But of course such a self-obsessive search really yields nothing, and the individual finds to his dismay that authenticity turns out to be emptiness. Self-discovery therefore must become self-invention. We must make ourselves as God made the whole world—out of nothing. But how does one do *that*? It is impossible. That is why even our self-inventing postmodern artist cannot escape fashion or public opinion or dominant ideologies.

The self-inventor is left with a guilty conscience. He wants to distinguish his self-constructed identity from the inauthentic shows most people put on for others. After all, nobody wants to believe that self-construction is nothing but a flight from the truth into social conformism. The so-called postmodern theorists from Erving Goffman to Richard Rorty claim to have solved this problem by

eliminating the distinction that was the basis of this conscientious objection. They say that there is no true self that stands apart from the social roles one plays. We are all performers and nothing more, and successful people consciously develop multiple, flexible identities without giving a moment's thought to which is true and which is false. In this way, the theory of the individual culminates in the denial of the possibility of the sovereign individual, even while it continues to assume that success and failure is by individuals. So it seems there can be no real objection to the biotechnological reconstruction or transformation of one's identity, as long as individual success and the pursuit of happiness are our only goals.

The most promising form of biotechnological enhancement aims to free us from our anxiety by transforming our identities or souls, to make our moods—and so our beings—something other than those of individuals. The promoters of relatively effective antidepressants such as Prozac claim that I will discover my true self once my anxiety is gone. The premise is that I was never really an anxious individual after all, that all my greatness and misery is the result of a correctible chemical imbalance. We cannot help, Elliott concludes, but be both enthusiastic *and* anxious consumers of such psychopharmacological remedies. Paxil's slogan is "Relieve the anxiety, and reveal the person," but nobody really believes that chemical manipulation is a reliable source of revelation.

My argument in this book is that all of our efforts at mood control will, paradoxically, reveal our pursuit of happiness to be more futile than ever. It just might show us that happiness is more than a chemical problem that has a technological or biotechnological solution. Remember the contemporary American part of the problem that the novelist-philosopher Walker Percy emphasizes in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975): "One tires of the good life

and the best of all possible worlds one has designed for oneself. One feels anxious without knowing why. One is at home and yet feels homeless. One loves bad news and secretly longs for . . . catastrophes.” Catastrophes bring necessity to the forefront, and it becomes clear what we’re supposed to do, what virtue is. The anxiety connected with the illusion of infinite possibility—the illusion expressed extremely or ideologically by communism and the other forms of designer utopianism (including the ones described by our utopian poet David Brooks) of our time—makes virtue more necessary than ever to live well and far more difficult to acquire. The illusion is that it is possible or good to live wholly as an autonomous individual, or not as a creature, friend, citizen, parent, or child. But the truth is we will never live in a world without the reality of catastrophes, without sin, suffering, loneliness, profound disorientation, dementia, and death.

STUCK WITH VIRTUE

All in all, I don’t think that we need fear the advent of a posthuman future. We will not become so content, so happy, that virtue, love, friendship, and God are no longer necessary. I disagree with *Beyond Therapy* that “[w]hat’s to be particularly feared about the common and casual use of mind-altering drugs” is “that they will seduce us into resting content with a shallow and factitious happiness.” We are clearly not going to be either too shallow or too happy. We are going to remain stuck with the tough demands of living in a very high-tech, very meritocratic, very competitive society, and we will remain all too aware of what other people think about and expect from us. So here’s the good news—and the bad news: The Brave New World is not lurking around the corner. The human soul—that nonmaterial principle of motivation and aspiration—shines

forth in and transforms all our thought and action, including our wonderful but finally futile efforts to free ourselves from nature and God. Neither God nor the soul will die just because we who misunderstand ourselves as individuals and nothing more have forgotten for the moment how to talk about them.

Besides, I have exaggerated somewhat the predicament of today's American individual by neglecting the social or at least non-individualistic virtue of pride. It should go without saying that today's successful meritocrat takes pride in how he or she has distinguished him- or herself by living a tough and productive life. Pride in one's ingenuity and industry is more pronounced today than ever. And today's child of sophisticated parents is sometimes a remarkable work of art; such parents love to be recognized for what they have accomplished through their child. Because it is never easy, pride is always taken in the virtue of governing oneself and others. Lurking beneath the surface argument of this chapter has been Pascal's account of the misery of our mortality, but Pascal also says that pride counterbalances human misery. One of the toughest indictments of our excessive individualism is that it has even turned against proper pride.

There is also plenty of evidence that what Joseph Ratzinger has called, in *God and the World* (English translation, 2002), our "attempts to manufacture man's inner fulfillment, his happiness, as a kind of product" will fail. Perhaps, Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) goes on, "we are beginning to see again that freedom from work, that freedom which is a gift of God's service, stepping outside the mentality of mere achievement, is what we need."

That freedom from work—experienced by the first Benedictine monks—does not, of course, entail the abolition of the ennobling necessities of labor and achievement in this world. For Ratzinger

also reminds us, Christians, even before the Lockean, overcame “the ancient prejudice against manual labor, hitherto regarded as fit only for slaves,” and so abolished the distinction between “slave and free man.” Because we are all free beings who work, we are all called to cultivate or improve what we have been given with both the needs of our bodies and the needs of our souls in mind. None of us, in one sense, is free from work, but in another sense, we all are. Freedom from work means freedom from the illusion that we can or must make everything worthwhile for ourselves.

“The true God,” Gilbert Meilaender observes in *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (2004), “will . . . always disappoint our desire for independence and self-sufficiency.” Our trust in the “perfection and power of God is displayed in the acceptance of neediness, dependence, and suffering.” Certainly we have plenty of reason to be grateful for, and to acknowledge our dependence upon, what we have been given. Certainly the mysterious gift of Being and especially human being demands the reasonable response of wonder.

In this book I use the word *individual* in a very specific way. As Walker Percy says, the dilemma of the modern individual lies in constituting himself against the modern science that denies the reality and goodness of any particular human being’s particular experiences. The unlimited attempt to achieve autonomous, sovereign control over an indifferent nature is both impossible and self-destructive. But at the same time I write on behalf of the true dignity of the individual rightly understood: each of us is constituted by nature—through the capacity of language or speech—as a “way-farer,” a homeless, displaced being in search of the truth about his or her situation. We search with each other, but finally each of us must use his or her capabilities to be the judge of the truth of his experiences. Those judgments are not possible if we experience our-

selves as either too alone or as too much at home. Individuals, in the sense of dignified and particular human beings, cannot be at home with their homelessness by listening to our libertarians, who make us too homeless, or our sociobiologists, who make us too much at home.

I also agree with Walker Percy that there is a true and proper way to speak of the sovereign individual, the being who can tell the truth to himself about his strange or alienated experiences and act accordingly. But the sovereign—in the sense of autonomous—individual, as I have explained, characteristically defers to public opinion or impersonal authority rather than attempting the lonely and impossible task of self-invention. The genuinely sovereign individual—the being genuinely aware of his predicament as a particular human being—knows that words like autonomy, creativity, and self-fulfillment have no meaning without some foundation in the capabilities we have been given by nature or God.