

Time for an all-in wager on Man, our greatest hazard and only hope.

It doesn't take an anthropologist or learned historian to confirm the libertarian project has run off the rails. Post-Christian Man, as with the earlier edition, has clearly not overcome himself, become a rope – à la Nietzsche – or learnt to fly – à la Foo Fighters – across the abyss of meaninglessness laid bare by modernity. And an uptight, skittish establishment makes it harder with each passing day.

There was ample rhetoric extolling the virtues of the human heart during the bloody conflicts of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The most important law of all is not engraved on marble or brass, but in the hearts of the citizens. It preserves a people in the spirit of their founding, and it imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for that of authority. I am speaking of mores and customs, and above all of opinion, a subject which is unknown to our political theorists, but on which the success of all the other laws depends.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau may have inspired but the theorists prevailed (and he caved in, anyway). To help rout Christian fundamentalism and build a modern world of prosperity and opportunity for all, the revolutionary vanguard needed a grand political ideology to counter the old certainties of the Monotheistic worldview. The emphasis was secular and intellectual. A leap-of-faith bet was made, but it was on reason as the West's preferred and only real chance of comprehending Life, the Universe and Everything.

With its polarizing bias triggered, the culture soon bought into an overly serious, literalistic rendition of the Secular worldview that promoted an unbalanced, head-before-heart perspective on reality. All Man, no God. No interior life to support discriminating personal judgements, as the truth can be reified with sufficient evidence and a knock-down argument. If science can't quantify it, if it can't been seen, touched or controlled, then it's likely irrelevant. Lip service paid to the more-real-than-real. And, of course, choice is king. Choice, choice and more choice. No place for destiny and fate.

The West is justly criticized for its corrosive and uncaring individualism. It's all about me, my own wants, indulgences and gratifications. There's scant willingness to sacrifice or put a sense of community before competitive self-interests. Yet why are we so often surprised by this, shocked by the loss of moral responsibility, real human engagement and a sense of belonging? To believe *Homo sapiens* are more than a fortunate accident, that we are special and each accountable for contributing towards a Hollywood Ending, is to invite public ridicule as a deplorable half-wit the nation could do without. Of course an industrialized culture is going to shred established social bonds and traditions, and cultivate selfishness and mediocrity. It's a rational response – the only type allowed – to the official memo: people are DNA-driven commodities, perfectibility concerns the body and intellect, and freedom equates to utter domination of the phenomenal world, which includes human nature. Sanctioned debauchery of instrumental reason and Godlike power has left society disenchanted,

lacking the spiritual ballast and wherewithal to fathom the truth, condemned, as Charles Taylor explains in *A Secular Age*, to “live in our heads, trusting disengaged understandings of experience.” John Paul II warned of the perils of subordinating our lives to reason in *Fides et Ratio*:

The positive results achieved [from greater knowledge] must not obscure the fact that reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them. Sundered from the truth, individuals are at the mercy of caprice, and their state as a person ends up being judged by pragmatic criteria based on essentially experimental data, in the mistaken belief that technology must dominate all. It has happened therefore that reason, rather than voicing the human orientation towards truth, has wilted under the weight of so much knowledge and little by little has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being.

Covert efforts by the liberal-democratic regime to correct its dehumanizing extremism are highly problematic. And not just because cherry-picking and mixing and matching worldviews is thoroughly hypocritical. Any “rebalance” is conducted under the gaze of the same pathological life-as-a-noun mindset and its Faustian contract, something highlighted by Yuval Noah Harari in his most recent book, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*:

[M]odernity is a surprisingly simple bargain. The entire contract can be summarized in a single phrase: humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power.

Complete control of the apparent world and our own destinies is still the main game. Remember: reason never despairs of its inadequacies – nor checks its blind spots. The fetters of fate, therefore, remain a formless enemy. Rather than deem uncertainty an occasion to build character, to encourage the individual to make his or her life their own, risk, interpersonal conflict and adversity are progressively socialized, with the state promising to do “whatever it takes” to ensure this-or-that hardship “never happens again.” Don’t be taken in by the emancipatory rhetoric, the secularized West continues its lustful quest for a Single Mind, the expected payback from its long-standing wager. And until the unattainable final victory arrives, those who refuse to think and respond in the prescribed manner will be infantilized and denounced as anti-science, anti-liberal cretins and bigots. Policing thought and speech in the public square is also permitted should dissent threaten the we’re-all-soooooo-much-better-off propaganda used to mask the banal superficiality of modern life.

In the YouTube recital for the British Humanist Association, Stephen Fry goes on to say:

And although this vast and incredibly old universe was not created for us, all of us are connected to something bigger than ourselves, whether it is family and community, a tradition stretching into the past, an idea or cause looking forward

to the future, or the beautiful, wider natural world in which we were born and our species evolved.

A reasoned analysis brings to light a few inconvenient questions. What value can a cause looking to the future have when all that awaits us is cosmic oblivion? Politics needs a transcendent aim to be unifying. Absent a master Plan that can make them whole all sub-plans, projects and institutions, well intended though they may be, are innately deficient and prone to bloodless managerialism and bureaucratic morass. As for “something bigger than ourselves” – it looks and smells remarkably theological and teleological, inhered with purpose and direction. These properties are not permissible under the Secular worldview, as advertised. Everything is brutally Darwinian, the product of randomness, with no prospect of an enchanted Hollywood Ending. Any glitch in a local public transport system or broken vase attributable to Fry’s demigod would be impersonal and thus inconsequential in terms of making sense of life or discovering one’s destiny and place in the world. It offers no hope of connecting our True Self – and its sense of unconditional love, truth, justice, beauty and Home – to what lies beyond.

A muddled penchant to have it both ways runs deep within popular culture.

Fry’s countryman and fellow atheist Ricky Gervais is known for his political activism, often campaigning for fox hunting and bullfighting bans. The comedian has also appeared in movies with theological scripts. In *Ghost Town*, he plays a drab, obnoxious dentist who sees dead people, spirits in limbo seeking redemption so they can pass fully into the after-life. By assisting with their unfinished business, Bertram Pincus opens his “little Grinch heart” and falls in love with Téa Leoni. Co-written and co-directed by Gervais, *The Invention of Lying* is set in a world where everyone tells the truth, plain and simple. His character, Mark, achieves prophet status when he dreams up a consoling story about heaven for his dying mother.

Martha: I’m so scared, Mark. People don’t talk about it, but death is a horrible thing. One minute, you’re alive, and then just like that, it’s all gone. This is it, Mark. Few more hours like this and then an eternity of nothingness. I’m so ... I’m so frightened.

Mark: Oh, Mum. Mum, listen to me. Listen carefully. You’re wrong about what happens after you die. It’s not an eternity of nothingness.

Martha: Huh?

As far as I know, Gervais hasn’t provided a rational justification for his hectoring and righteous thou shall nots. Do his rather specific moral demands relating to animals reflect a single meaning of life relevant to all? If so, perhaps he could share it around, along with what precisely he intends to Put Right and for whom? If not, shouldn’t he, as an authentic atheist, be taking pluralism seriously? Aren’t we all unique ends not means, given the subjectiveness of our experiences? With no higher realm operating as a common reference point, individuals are the sole authority of meaning, truth and

value. Yes, the views of Gervais, Fry and I might align. Fabulous golf shot. Murder is bad. Compassion is good. Love can save the day. But it's tacit, like knowing Neo or that girl you have been too scared to phone are the One (though in different ways). Relating its incommunicable truth requires sincerity and openness.

And how does Gervais explain his playing Pincus? Was he being a provocateur or just ironic (as an actor or an atheist)? *The Invention of Lying* is clever in its portrayal of how organized religion exploits human credulity. But this is very old and tired news that will only perpetuate culture war hostilities. What of the abyss? Could it serve a sacred cause or be a source of dignity? Isn't the desire to believe, to grow wings and take flight, more profound than the lies we tell ourselves and others? And what of fiction? Story, while open to manipulation, always surpasses literal expressions of the truth. Without it, science would be nothing more than a collection of unalloyed facts.

Goal-orientated modernity, our de facto religion, has blithely normalized a schizophrenic state of existence, founded on an anthropocentric, chimerical interpretation of reality that engenders confusion, anomie and moral decline. Proud of their undeliverable progressive promises and intolerant of intellectual diversity, the custodians of contemporary culture have adopted many of the *ancien regime's* most dismal traits, wielding an authoritarian and dogmatic agenda, all the while claiming to be open-minded, charitable humanists. Political correctness mandates we casually deny, at any cost, a metaphysical hunger never to be satiated by the material world. It's feared acknowledging the uttermost of human needs, what money can't buy nor a military defend, might pave the way for a return to the bad old days. No matter our current days exhibit the worst of both worlds. Society has given up shared meaning for control, as Harari notes, yet failed to see the logical implications. A universe that is indifferent to human wellbeing has no rational purpose for worldly power to serve. And so it resorts to being self-serving. Godless despots, their noodle so baked they can no longer employ the very reason they blindly worship, lay down the law, in traditional form or via social media, based on what the mob determines to be important. Far from being unique ends in ourselves, we're treated as means to fashionable, Just Because political ends.

Meanwhile, the ghostly and blighted masses seek fulfilment in movies, music, books and TV content with distinctly supernatural and redemptive themes. Virtual video games give men a quasi-authentic chance to be brave and impassioned, to do what is just, vanquish evil and personally bring home the cosmic bacon. Stuart is momentarily uplifted by lyrics at odds with secular orthodoxy. *Bohemian Rhapsody* may have got him started, but he's now too beaten down to bother asking where Tom actually goes when he leaves this world for a while or if the nothing he free-falls out into is only "nothing" because the experience overpowers the mind. Doubtless, David Walsh and Stephen Fry, should they be Foo Fighter fans, wouldn't hesitate to sing about looking to the sky for salvation or criticizing our current revolution as a seductive lie. It's only music, for God's sake. The same zombie attitude is used to excuse living vicariously through Neo, Morpheus, a *Star Wars* hero or some vampire

from *The Twilight Saga*. Even Jerry “you complete me” Maguire. Glorifying cinematic examples of spirituality and moral wisdom doesn’t constitute heresy if the insight isn’t inculcated into everyday behavior. Society insists we eschew any leap of faith that would animate abstract thoughts. We must resist any gut feel conviction that might sustain the truth under real world conditions.

Man is expected to remain a gesturing bystander, a zealot for life-as-a-noun, the quintessential false promise. Modernity, with Woman as muse, cannot prevail upon him for anything of real consequence.

Jerry: What do you want from me? My soul?

Dorothy: Why not? I deserve that much.

World-weary and resentful, John Q. Citizen is hazy about what to do, other than turf out whomever is in power, hoping they feel just as homeless. Assailed by earnest bullshit from the Beltway to Upper Westside New York City to Silicon Valley, he readily conflates the turbulent currents of modernity – the triumphal march of you-will-be-made-to-care secular moralists, coercive state power and unending technological innovation – with worthwhile progress. Pressured to conform, all words, images and personal recollections that exalt life-as-a-verb must be treated as static concepts, with all associated *thumos* kept at a safe distance to ensure his True Self doesn’t stir, cut loose and finally put the intellect in its rightful place. Too bad the compartmentalization continues to eviscerate any inward capacity for belief and spiritual renewal. So ... he waits impatiently with Stuart and Ivan – and Vladimir, Estragon and many others. Perhaps it will be all sorted tomorrow, thus sparing everyone the emotional hard work of being in the Now, of needing to be, as philosopher Simon Critchley describes it, “open and attentive to what exceeds the finite situation in which we find ourselves.” Brooks closes out his leopard address to University of Pennsylvania graduates with a similar plea for a dignified but robust vulnerability:

Life in such moments is lived eyeball to eyeball, hand to hand and heart to heart. People in such moments are not thinking about how hard it is to keep promises. They are not thinking about themselves at all. The guards are down, the arms are open, and a leopard lies content, full and peaceful by their side.

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