

notes that Eric Voegelin characterized the modern project as “a resurgence of Gnosticism,” but he also observes that Voegelin rarely discussed the Gnostics themselves, of whom Marcion is a prime representative. Voegelin tended to focus on the changed relationship to the future in what he famously called the “immanentization of the eschaton.” Brague emphasizes that central to Gnosticism is a fundamental break with the past. Thus, he might well agree with the celebrated European philosopher Jurgen Habermas that the defining characteristic of modernity is its intention to found itself wholly out of itself. But whereas Habermas endorses and abets this project, Brague recognizes in it a rejection of cultural secondarity that can hardly fail to issue in a capitulation to self-satisfied barbarism.

Finally, though Brague lauds Leo Strauss for his defense of the Athens-Jerusalem conflict, he also shows implicitly why this framework can never be adequate for understanding Christianity and its legacy. For Strauss, the principles that are here in conflict, namely reason and revelation, are irreconcilably opposed. This is because they provide divergent solutions to the problem of the best life. Biblical religion solves the problem by providing an answer in the form of divine law communicated by a personal and mysterious God in a revealed text. Philosophy, on the other hand, considers all answers subject to question, and requires a complete account of human nature and of the whole; lacking such a completed metaphysics, the best life can only be a life spent pursuing an understanding of the fundamental questions. But, Brague points out, for (non-fundamentalist) Christians the revealed object is not a text but rather the person of Christ himself. As God become Man, Christ is the complete revelation of human nature; as the fulfillment of creation, Christ is the revelation of a complete metaphysics.

Since this revelation surpasses the capacity of any individual intellectual power, it is an object of interminable wonder. Since Christ perfects the law in a way that surpasses any human ability, what is revealed is something more than a law. Christ is the *way*, and only as such can Christ be the *truth* and the *life*.

The French title of Brague’s book is *Europe: La Voie Romaine (Europe: The Roman Way)*. It is the essence of Rome to be a way, an aqueduct. Perhaps herein lies the source of a fundamental harmony between Romanity and Christianity.

Enhancement Technologies

Peter Augustine Lawler

Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream, by Carl Elliott, *New York: W.W. Norton, 2003*.

VARIOUS ENHANCEMENT TECHNOLOGIES now promise to make us “better than well.” Not only is American medicine responsible for the healthiest society in history, but sophisticated and prosperous Americans are employing and will continue to employ medical enhancement technologies not merely to perfect but to improve upon their natures. Until now, the modern conquest of nature was limited by the intractability of human nature. The most radical program for historical human transformation we have hitherto known—communism—was easily defeated by the limits we have been given by nature. To a

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growing extent we will now be able to give orders to our nature, to add willfully to what we have been given biologically. The dream of communism for a “New Man” may now be fulfilled by biotechnology. How will our use of biotechnology, Carl Elliott asks, be conditioned by and perhaps transform “the American dream?”

The American dream, from this point of view, is the imagined outcome of our “pursuit of happiness.” Our hope has been that the progress of good government, economic prosperity, and technology will lead to happiness. But as Gregg Easterbrook recently noticed in *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better When People Feel Worse* (0000), the progress that has produced the longest, most secure, and freest lives in history has, if anything, made us somewhat more unhappy. Serious students of Rousseau, or of Tocqueville, or especially of Locke should be not nearly as surprised as Easterbrook was by the results of his study.

In Locke’s understanding, to be human—is to *pursue* happiness, but not actually to *enjoy* happiness. Insofar as we human beings uneasily organize our lives around that pursuit we are free. Insofar as we enjoy happiness, however, we are either deluded by our imaginations or we are as unfree as the other animals. Locke reached this conclusion because he understood the human being as a sovereign individual who organizes his whole life warily around calculation and consent. We can say that one reason modern human beings are not so happy is that we are now more Lockean than ever; we view more and more of our lives from such an individualistic perspective.

We might say that, since we are individuals, we produce with great effectiveness the means for being happy. But because we are not sovereign individuals—that is, because we are, instead, friends, parents, children, citizens, or creatures—we can really enjoy those acquisitions or

be happy. Locke’s understanding of being human expressed some but far from all of the truth about our natures. Our mistake today—which was not the mistake of our Founders—is in taking Locke too seriously.

The American individual, Elliott explains, is above all anxious. Separated too much from any definite social context, he cannot find his place in the world; he suffers both from the anxiety of not fitting in and the anxiety of fitting in too well. Since he cannot fit in, he will be a lonely failure. If he fits in too well, then he will lose any sense of being an individual at all. He knows, Elliott explains, that as an individual he ought to be “true to himself,” and accordingly he has “a hard time resisting anything that can be phrased in terms of self-determination.” Yet happiness may depend on both having one’s own identity and really being connected with others, and the modern individual cannot seem to find his way to this middle or appropriately human position.

One of the strengths of Elliott’s book is his fruitful use of Tocqueville. That great observer may have been the first to notice that the typical American is both an anti-social rebel and a social conformist, both James Dean *and* the man in the gray flannel suit. Both extreme positions arise from an excessive concern with the opinions of others, from a lack of a real perspective from which to judge the opinions of others. The American individual, from one perspective, thinks he is only free if he relies wholly on his own judgment, rejecting the repressions of authority, ancestors, tradition, nature, God. But it is much more clear what a radically free judgment is *not* than what one *is*. As Tocqueville says, the human mind is 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 human action impossible.

The American “aspiration to self-sufficiency,” Elliott observes, “easily slides into social conformity.” The free individual can look up to no authority by which he can resist public opinion, and therefore he has no reason not to defer to the judgment of his peers. His only escape from anxious dislocation is to follow fashion and listen to the reigning experts. Consequently, the not-so-secret rulers of an individualistic country are the impersonal authorities of public opinion and popularized science. The modern individual is certain that he cannot be free if he is ruled by some particular person—even God. But it is less clearly an offense against freedom for individuals readily to defer to the authority of no one in particular: to those who seek to persuade by saying “studies show” rather than “I think.” But the modern individual still feels anxious and guilty when his conformity is called to his attention; he frets about the stifling homogeneity of bourgeois or mass society, and compensates by celebrating diversity.

It is with this modern individual or the modern “self” in mind that Elliott explains why Americans are both so uneasy about and yet embrace so readily various enhancement technologies. We worry that by using technology to change our bodies and even our souls (our moods) we might inauthentically change our very identities. But we also believe we have a duty to pursue happiness by perfecting ourselves according to the latest studies and technological advances. From its inception the idea of the American individual has been rooted to some extent in concern with the future of one’s own body, yet only recently have sophisticated Americans connected self-fulfillment or self-perfection with bodily obsession. Tocqueville’s analysis is much truer now than when he wrote it.

Elliott calls attention to one study describing how 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 self-obsession as vain and undignified, and they would resolve to think more of others. Today, a girl bent on self-improvement or becoming a better person focuses her private thoughts on diet, exercise, and other ways to improve her physical appearance. She really believes that she can *change* herself by losing thirty pounds. More than ever, a girl thinks that how she looks to others is who she is; she has less of an authentically inward or virtuous life than ever.

Our libertarians—such as Virginia Postrel in *The Substance of Style* (0000)—say that enhancement technologies allow us to re-create our outward selves to correspond to our inward identities. Enhancement is not thoughtless social conformism but a way of being authentic, of being “special.” If a generously endowed girl thinks of herself as a small-breasted person, for example, she now is able to become one, and soon enough those who think of themselves as tall will no longer have to be short. And we already know of the celebrated if quite rare stories of men who think of themselves as women using the latest technology to become women. More Americans than ever say being “born in the wrong body” is, in effect, being “deprived of an identity.” We increasingly identify ourselves with our bodies, but not with the bodies we actually have right now.

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*. Gender choice is not made by a wholly self-sufficient individual. In most cases people are now inwardly dissatisfied because their outward appearance has isolated them socially. As Tocqueville asks, where does the inwardness come from that allows the allegedly self-sufficient individual to choose

against what is generally regarded as being pleasing to others? The individual too readily identifies authenticity with emptiness and isolation and will use every means available to avoid it. The downside of living in a progressively more individualistic or meritocratic society is that nobody has to like or even notice you; people have to work harder than ever simply not to be alone. It seems inevitable that biotechnological enhancement will be used to allow or even to compel us to surrender our physical and psychological differences.

Elliott sees the paradox that the disappearance of genuine inwardness—of the authentically moral or virtuous point of view—is the product of the individualistic focus on turning inward, on self-discovery, on getting in touch with one's feelings. "Finding yourself," Elliott observes, "has replaced finding God." We even identify finding ourselves with finding God. We are told that we will find God by looking within, and when we discover our true selves we will also have found God. But, of course, that self-obsessive search will yield nothing, and then self-discovery must become self-invention. We end up thinking that we must make ourselves as God made the world—*ex nihilo*. But even with the most spectacular biotechnological means, we have no idea how to do *that*. Even or especially self-inventing artists cannot escape the dominant ideology or popular dogma.

But that leaves the self-inventor with a very guilty conscience. He claims to be the most radical of rebels, and he wants to distinguish his authentic identity from the inauthentic displays most people put on for others. Postmodern theorists from Erving Goffman to Richard Rorty claim to have solved his problem by eradicating the distinction that was the basis of the self-inventor's conscientious objection. They say that there is no true self that stands apart from the social roles we play. We are all performers and nothing more.

Successful postmodern people consciously develop multiple and constantly changing identities, and they allegedly claim not even to consider which self is true and which is false. Postmodernism claims to clarify modernism by showing that the idea of authenticity is incompatible with the idea of self-invention. In that way postmodernists are Machiavellians; they write against the guilt that impedes social success and personal comfort. But in so doing, they cannot help but assume, like Machiavelli, that success and failure are still fundamentally individual.

Postmodern theory cannot really rid us of the idea that there must be a single, relatively stable personal identity from which all these other identities flow. Theorists cannot really keep us from distinguishing between masks and faces, the fake and the real. That distinction is part of self-consciousness itself, and consequently all of us self-conscious mortals continue naturally to assume its truth. We are stuck, as Elliott observes, with "the idea of the authentic self" and so "the idea of an essentialist self." What we individuals really long for is a stable experience of the *soul* to ease our anxious self-obsession; we long to be able to choose virtue and cultivate character. Our desire for authentic self-fulfillment, Elliott explains, is real, but too easily we think that the authentic self is the sovereign individual, one who is necessarily isolated and unfulfilled.

Thus we modern individuals are readily seduced by the view—which we find in Rorty, Marx, Freud, B.F. Skinner, and even in Locke and Machiavelli—that if we could only feel good we would not worry about being good. The most interesting and, in a way, promising forms of biotechnological enhancement actually aim to free us from our anxiety by transforming our identities or souls, to make our moods something other than those of individuals. The promoters of effective antidepressants such as Prozac and Paxil even claim that

I will discover my true self or identity once I chemically rid myself of my anxiety. The promise is that I was never really an anxious individual after all. But Elliott notices that we cannot help but be both enthusiastic *and* anxious consumers of such pharmacological remedies.

Our new good moods will tend to be spoiled by the really bad mood lurking beneath the surface: our natural existence as isolated individuals is so terrible that life is unendurable without pharmacological assistance. We can barely imagine how anxious we will become if we come to believe that even our moods must be the product of relentless technological intervention. Elliott's diagnosis is that enhancement technologies enhance—rather than solve—the greatness and the misery of being an American individual.

The good and bad news is that there will be no biotechnological substitute for virtue, for character, for the search for God and the good that exist beyond us and persist in attracting us despite our best efforts. The good news is that the *Brave New World* is not around the corner; we do not really know how to rid ourselves of our anxiety and live in sub-human contentment. Elliott astutely observes that “as much as we like the *Brave New World* story, as many times as we read it and write high school stories about it, somehow it never seems to apply to us.” The bad news, for now, is that because “most of us don't have Aristotle's confidence about the purpose of human life,” it is especially hard for us to even acknowledge our need to replace the empty distinction between rebellion and conformity with the solid distinction between character and mere personality.

Two of a Kind?

Milton Birnbaum

“Too Good To Be True”: The Life and Work of Leslie Fiedler, by Mark Royden Winchell, *Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. 368 pp.*

Aldous Huxley: A Biography, by Nicholas Murray, *New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. 496 pp.*

LOOKING AT THE DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS of Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003) and Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), one is tempted to conclude that these two men of letters have very little in common. Such a conclusion, however, would be, at best, only half true. Despite sharp differences in background, style of writing, and Huxley's greater inclusiveness of subject matter and literary genres, both Fiedler and Huxley tried to grapple with life's enduring axiological and teleological questions. But whereas Huxley eventually found inner peace, Fiedler's quest to attain an integrated identity remained elusive to the end.

The differences between Huxley and Fiedler seem quite startling when one examines their genetic inheritance, their education, their private lives, and their chief professional labors and commitments. Huxley's ancestors included Thomas H. Huxley (appropriately called “Darwin's bulldog”); Dr. Thomas Arnold, of Rugby fame; Matthew Arnold, that peerless cultural critic; and Mrs. Humphry Ward, the novelist. Both his parents were

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