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# *Sex, Drugs, Politics, Love, and Death: The Political, Teaching of Walker Percy's Thanatos Syndrome*

*The Thanatos Syndrome* by Walker Percy (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987). All page references in the text are to this book.

Walker Percy's last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, presents **W**and criticizes the pragmatic project he finds at the core of modern science and scientists. Their aim into eradicate human self-consciousness, including self-conscious mortality. In uncovering this aim, Percy partly agrees with the greatest Hegelian of our century, Alexandre Kojève, who says that history has come to an end, the human project has been completed, because human beings are no longer animated by what distinguishes them, their awareness of their mortality. Percy also partly agrees with Kojève's most penetrating student, Allan Bloom, who wrote *1* best-seller saying that contemporary America, the product of philosophic or scientific thought, is in the process of putting death to death. Richard Rorty, *the* contemporary American defender of pragmatism, cheerfully accepts and writes to perfect the America Bloom calls antiphilosophic or inhuman. We do well, Rorty says, to regard the experience of self-conscious mortality as not useful and so not true.<sup>1</sup> Percy disagrees with Kojève, Bloom, and Rorty by having reason to believe that this scientific, pragmatic project cannot succeed completely.

Percy calls American pragmatism pop Cartesianism. He says that he merely echoes what that "amazing fellow," Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote 160 years ago: "All the Americans I know are Cartesians without having read a word of Descartes."<sup>2</sup> They believe, or are told to believe by the various sorts of enlightened, scientific

experts who shape public opinion, that everything has a scientific, materialistic explanation, or "can be reduced to the causes and effects of electron, neuron, and so forth."<sup>3</sup> They are told to believe that human beings, like all other animals, will be content in good environments, and miserable in bad or materially impoverished ones.

The pop Cartesian experts-therapists, counselors, Phil Donahue, Carl Sagan (to use Percy's examples), and so forth-say that human beings should dismiss as misery-producing illusions any experience that makes them miserable in the midst of good fortune. The expert's intention is therapeutic. As Rorty explains, the aim is to correct through redescription the perception that produces the uncomfortable and unproductive mood.

Tocqueville with greater precision than Percy explains how such therapeutic expertise comes to dominate modern democracy. He says that democratic social conditions-largely created by a dogmatic distrust of all authoritative belief as arbitrarily inegalitarian-make the individual feel too weak intellectually, too uncertain and disoriented, to find a standpoint with which to resist public opinion. Domination by public opinion seems not to be undemocratic, because it seems to be the rule of no one in particular. But democratic public opinion, in turn, is shaped by its growing tendency to be expressed in the language of impersonal or deterministic science. In democratic language, in Tocqueville's words, "metaphysics and theology...slowly lose ground."<sup>4</sup> Democratic language tends to be formulated by the pop Cartesian experts, who claim authority not on the basis of their own judgments, but on the impersonal or objective authority of science. The expert determination of public opinion, perhaps easier now than ever through the use of the electronic media, also appears to be the rule of no one in particular.

But what the Americans believe, insofar as they defer to the opinion of scientific experts, is contradicted by their personal experiences. *They* can only be pop Cartesians by surrendering their personal sovereignty, by denying what they really know about themselves. Often to their confused dismay, they find complete self-

denial to be impossible. Americans today cannot help but follow the Cartesian scientist's own example by exempting their own minds and action, explicitly or implicitly, from their science. The Cartesian scientist cannot explain why human beings alone among the animals can know the truth, nor can he explain why they desire to do so. He also cannot tell ordinary Americans why they remain or become more restless and anxious in good environments or fortunate material circumstances. The American may say he is but often does not think or act as if he were simply a body in motion.

So Percy describes the Americans today much as Tocqueville did in the 1830s: "The contemporary state of a young man or woman is that he or she has more of the world's affluence than any other people on this earth, and yet is more dissatisfied, more restless. He experiences some sense of loss he cannot understand." Part of what is lost is some way of accounting for or even articulating his restless dissatisfaction, the truth about his experience of self or soul. He is deprived of some way of explaining why he experiences himself as more than an animal adjusting well or badly to his environment. One consequence of that impoverishment of language is "a radical impoverishment of human relations."<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Thomas More, the old-fashioned or dialectical practitioner of "psyche-iatry" who is the political hero of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, explains that what terrifies people most is not sex or crime or poverty. They have trouble "knowing who they are or what to do with themselves." Their perplexity increases when they are not doing what "They, the experts" say they should be doing. *They* cannot explain why wealthy, intelligent, and attractive people should be miserably unproductive "for no apparent reason" (67, 74-76, 88). The experts, More suggests, are the *they* the philosopher Heidegger describes: "*The 'they' do not permit us anxiety in the face of death.*"<sup>7</sup> Their expertise means to keep the individual from being touched by the awareness of his own mortality. Their judgment is that such experience is not good for human beings. They aim not to permit the individual the experience that opens one, courageously, to the truth about oneself.

For the experts, anxiety "is a symptom to be gotten rid of." For

Hēidegger, "it may be a summons to human existence, to be heeded at any cost." For Percy, "it is a matter of some importance to know which it is."<sup>8</sup> But Percy's view of Heidegger's "summons" may not be Heidegger's own. As Lewis Lawson has shown, *the* book that shaped *The Thanatos Syndrome* is the philosopher-theologian-priest Romano Guardini's *The End of the Modern World*. According to Guardini, anxiety in the face of "great crises" of human life, "conception, birth, sickness, death...reveal truths which cannot be mastered by modern techniques," those truths that constitute the mysterious misery and goodness of human existence. The ultimately futile but life-destructive project of modern science, especially "medical science," is "the rational conquest of sickness and death," or the obliteration of human mystery, which includes the mysterious human perception of the truth.<sup>9</sup>

### Psychotherapy

The *Thanatos Syndrome's* "only message," Percy says, is "Better to be a dislocated human than a happy chimp." "Beginning perhaps with Descartes and certainly with Rousseau, modern thinkers have tended to choose the chimp." Their political project became reducing "a stressful human existence to a peaceable animal existence" (180). The effort to eradicate stress completely, to purge human existence of consciousness of death, Percy explains, has produced a century of death, an unprecedented amount of ideologically motivated killing. He connects the apparently benign and compassionate projects of scientists today to reduce suffering and improve the quality of life with those of the Weimar scientists who eventually assisted in the killing of the Jews.

Pop Cartesian, pro-chimp therapy has failed so far. Rorty's pragmatic, linguistic therapy denies the truth that human experiences of self and so human language have a natural foundation. They cannot really be described out of existence. But according to Percy, the dominant tendency in psychotherapy today is actually the use of drugs and chemicals to suppress the moods of anxiety and depression.<sup>12</sup> This method, by altering one's natural functioning, seems to succeed where Rorty fails.

The chemotherapeutic scientist agrees with the pop Cartesian philosopher that anxiety and depression are treatable symptoms of a disease to be cured in the name of an orderly, stress-free, nice, reasonable life. Why should human beings be unnecessarily miserable, especially when that misery is the source of so much socially undesirable behavior? The old-fashioned answer is that such experiences of self or soul point one in the direction of the truth, and are integral to human nature or the human condition. But the scientist's reasonable response is that when the experience is eradicated, by whatever means, the alleged reality to which it points—the soul or self—also disappears.

The disease of which anxiety and depression are symptoms is self-conscious mortality. Human health, both mental and physical, are greatly improved, not by futilely denying, but by actually destroying what separates human beings from the other animals. As Rousseau first explained, unself-conscious man, whom he too simply called natural man, is a model of mental and physical health.

*The Thanatos Syndrome* presents an ambitious, illegal experiment, a pilot project with national potential, of government-funded physicians and scientists to treat the water supply of a large section of Louisiana with a self-suppressing chemical, heavy sodium. The scientific hypothesis of these chemotherapists "is that at least a segment of the human neocortex and of consciousness itself is not only an aberration of evolution but is also the scourge and curse of life on earth, the source of wars, insanities, and perversions—in short, those very pathologies which are peculiar to *Homo sapiens*." Translated into nonscientific language by the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, the hypothesis is that "the only trouble with *Homo sapiens* is that parts of our brains are too fucking big" (195). It is Rousseau's hypothesis, with one difference.

Rousseau distinguished between animal nature and human history. Natural man, considered precisely, is an oxymoron. The chemotherapists observe that human beings are actually naturally different from the other animals. That natural foundation is the source of all the pathologies peculiar to human history. Human distinctiveness is a natural aberration, to be corrected on behalf of

evolution's general intention.

Human beings function better when the functioning of the part of the brain that produces self-consciousness is suppressed. They actually become what Rorty describes them to be, extremely clever animals and no more. Contrary to Rousseau's view that unself-conscious human beings must be stupid, chemical treatment actually makes them much more clever. Their brains, no longer impeded by self-deceptive moodiness, calculate and remember far better. Their language, no longer bloated by the poetic, dialogical articulations of the self, moves toward the powerful binary language of the computer (68-69, 192-96).

Human sexual desire becomes healthy or completely uninflamed and unperverted by the longings of the self. Sex becomes merely mechanical rutting for the purposes of procreation and the satisfaction of bodily desire and no more. So, it becomes open and casual, undistorted by vain self-deception, lies, and guilt. It is no longer perverted by the longing of one self for another. It is simply the presentation of one's body, or one's sexual parts, to another. So human sex becomes like chimp sex, no longer face-to-face. Human beings no longer act perversely to negate their instincts for self-preservation and enjoyment when freed from consciousness of self (20-21, 68-69).

Human beings also become more energetic and self-confident. The chemical treatment also has the effect of increasing the body's production of endorphins, a "natural high." So there are no more "hang ups" or inhibitions. People are "always psyched up but never psyched out." Without the disorders not found among the other animals, human possibilities, because of the species' singular cleverness, become unlimited (192-96).

The scientist-physicians add that chemical treatment has become a social imperative today. We live in a time of extreme social disorder, because we live in a time of very disordered selves. Society is infected with a new form of the "plague," this time a more moral or psychological than physiological one. Surely society "has the right to defend itself against the consequences of the family's decline, the underclass's demoralization, drug abuse, and so forth (218). It

appears, as Rousseau said, that the effects of the aberration of evolution grow over time.

But social decay can be replaced with progress with the self's eradication. Human beings really can flourish in contentment in the midst of abundance. The chemotherapists assert, against Rousseau, that human health or perfection is compatible with high civilization. Civilization and technology originally may have come into existence and depended upon experiences of self, but their future can be secured by clever animals with computer-brains.

The eradication of the self, perhaps most fundamentally, is required for human beings not to become progressively more dissatisfied with modern science's apparent failure, which is perhaps the primary cause of the disorder of our time. "The trouble is," as Percy explains, "the sciences for the last 200 years have been spectacularly successful in dealing with subhuman reality...with extraordinary progress in learning about the cosmos, but also extraordinary lack of success in dealing with humanity as humanity."<sup>13</sup> So the progress of science has actually made human beings more aware of the elusiveness of what distinguishes them, their selves. They feel more dislocated than ever, because there is more evidence than ever that the self is some sort of leftover in the cosmos. "Western man's sense of homelessness and loss of community is in part due to the fact that he feels himself a stranger to the method and data of his sciences."<sup>14</sup>

Scientists stubbornly and expertly deny the reality of the self or soul, and so they deny the reality of the feeling of dislocation. The cosmos, they say, really is a cosmos. There cannot be any leftovers. But the genuine failure of modern science can become success if science really eradicates, not just futilely denies, what it cannot explain. So chemical treatment "zaps" what scientists otherwise might have to acknowledge to be inexplicable deviancy or error. It serves the truth, paradoxically, by depriving human beings of the experience of the wondrous search for the truth about oneself. It deprives them, in the name of the truth, of knowledge of the truth about their own contingency and mortality.

Chemotherapy promises to *make* modern science wholly true.

That science, when examining human beings, became progressively less empirical over time. It abstracted from the truth about the self or soul. By so doing, it became less scientific description and more an ideal for human transformation. The ideal is to perfect human beings by freeing them from their flaws, their malformation. That ideal cannot be realized through linguistic therapy or propaganda, as Rorty believes, or through political revolution, as the Marxists believed. In both cases, the natural foundation of the self resists merely ideological efforts at destruction. But because the self does have a natural foundation-it is not the arbitrary political or poetic creation of human beings-it perhaps cannot resist chemicals that alter its natural functioning. Why cannot science change human nature?

#### Psyche-iatry

Dr. More dissents from the dominant therapeutic method, the treatment of symptoms with chemicals. That dissent seems; at first glance, to be the foundation of his dissent from the scientists' political project. His resolute action thwarts their experiment, defending effectively the rule of law and the protection of rights. But as a man of science, a physician dedicated to the alleviation of human misery; he could not help but be attracted to the project's proclaimed scientific, compassionate purpose and initial success. He had to learn what was wrong with the experiment through his experience with its results (328).

More calls himself "a psyche-iatrist, an old-fashioned physician of the soul" (16). He practices "one-on-one therapy with depressed and terrified people" (366). His method is dialectical; we might say Socratic. He talks with and listens to his patients, but mainly listens, as they "plumb the depths of their depression." He encourages them "to believe that their anxiety and depression might be telling them something of value" (67).

More believes his method is empirical. It is distinguished by its attentiveness to the details of the way human speech articulates human experience. The truth is that human beings are anxious because they experience themselves as dislocated. Coming to terms

with such strange, terrible experiences, and wondering about them, is what makes life "more tolerable" (6). In More's view, wondering about the terror of the self's dislocation is an inescapable part of the human condition.

The "best thing" the "shrink" can do is help each patient "render the unspeakable speakable." The unspeakable, the source of human speech, is the self. The deepest cause of "free floating anxiety" is the "unnamed longing" somehow at the core of the self. But human beings are also mysteriously given the capacity to live well enough with the self's consciousness of its dislocation and finitude, of time and death. More's amazing, finally inexplicable, experience is that human beings can feel better without chemicals by talking about what eludes their complete comprehension and control. His "psychiatric faith" in the ability of the self to come to terms with what it really knows through dialectical investigation comes from what he has seen for himself (6, 13-18, 67).

What the patient needs to know to begin to live well is that the Cartesian experts who deny the reality of the self do not speak the truth, or the whole truth. He needs to know that it is perfectly reasonable for a self-conscious mortal to be restless and miserable in fortunate material circumstances. He needs to articulate what he really experiences about the mystery of his own being. He needs to know that failure, far more than success, is characteristic of the human condition, and how "even [to] take pleasure in the general fecklessness of life." Nothing opposes the pragmatic core of modern science more than the truth that one can be a happy failure (77). Happiness, in truth, comes most readily when one does not pursue it, when one does not imagine that it is a state of being somehow within one's control (89).

More's psycho-iatric method, getting at "the root of the trouble, the soul's own secret, by venturing into the heart of darkness," takes months or years of talking and listening (13). *His* view is that each soul or self is particularly worthy of thought. It presents haunting questions which make one miserable, can occupy one's whole life, and never adequately be answered. The success More's method achieves is through illuminating what the questions are and why one

is haunted by them. It cannot turn anxiety into pleasure. But there is a compensatory pleasure in self-understanding, in the amazed wonder that comes with seeing how strange human beings; beginning with oneself, really are.

For Percy, More "is a closet Jew or Christian whether he likes it or not," because his psycho-iatric view of the individual's life as "find[ing] himself in a predicament which is a profound mystery to which he devotes his whole life to unraveling" is based on Christian anthropology.<sup>15</sup> But Percy also knows that this Christian view of the self's mysterious dislocation could be true even if Christian God does not exist, as the existentialists thought. It is a view that one can discover to be true through one's own observation of others and self-exploration, even if one does not believe in God. Joseph Cropsey has recently discovered that experience of "human loneliness in the cosmos, which pervades our being," may first have been articulated, if rather covertly, by Plato.

Cropsey's Plato is quite the atheist, even a dogmatic atheist. But, as Christopher Bruell complains, if existence or "the whole" is fundamentally mysterious, how do we know that God does not exist, that, as Percy would put it, the fundamental news is so bad?<sup>17</sup> Psychiatry, properly understood, is also Christian in the sense that its anthropology must be open to the possibility that the news is good, that we are created by a provident God. Percy calls that "exploration" of that human openness "a different story" from the genuinely scientific articulation of anthropology or what we can really know about the human self and its situation.<sup>18</sup> It is one he does not tell in his philosophical or scientific writing and only calls attention to in his novels.

More had been a Cartesian scientist. He believed he had discovered the technique with which to diagnose and treat the world's madness. He was as "grandiose, even Faustian" as the chemotherapists. Concluding that he, far more than the world, had gone mad, he prescribed prison for himself (67, 103). The treatment worked fairly well in moderating his selfish disorder, and it made him a better psychiatrist. He says it cured him of his "vanity," or "the secret sardonic derisiveness of doctors in general." He thought

prison "restored my humanity." So he learned to speak with his patients "as fellow flawed humans." He came to acknowledge that he was not free from their selfish disorder and suffering by virtue of his scientific knowledge. He believed he no longer viewed their merely human flaws and troubles with contempt (81).

Prison helped More become a physician of the soul, a genuine empiricist (43). He started to see with amazement how strange—both troubled and brave—people really are. He became curious about them. He distinguished himself from his fellow scientist-physicians by giving particular human beings "considerable thought" (81). He worried no longer about "modern man" or "the human condition" or God, grandiose abstractions, but about particular individuals. His horizon became more empirical as it became more modest or small scale (67).

Scientific detachment is ordinarily really from the dreariness of ordinary human life, including the ordinariness of one's own life when one is not engaged in scientific inquiry. More's detachment is from the characteristic and false pretension of science, that ordinary life is not worthy of thought. The scientist, through his inquiry, characteristically to some extent diverts himself from his own experiences of self, from what he shares with all other self-conscious mortals.

More's attention to the way human speech reveals human reality, the depth of the self, makes him a dialectical, not a Cartesian, scientist. He agrees with the physician-novelist Percy that the "'sentences' of art, poetry, and the novel ought to be taken very seriously indeed since these are cognitive, scientific, if you will, statements that we have about what it is to be human." But even More's involvement in the troubled self-exploration of others is, to some extent, a diversion from his personal disorder. He is slow to connect what he learns from sharing in the self-exploration of his patients to himself, his family, political life, and his longing for God. It is not until near the novel's end that More really completely stops thinking of himself as a scientific "genius," as somehow exempted from ordinary human troubles and longings.<sup>o</sup> Only then does he fully become what he believed himself to be as a psyche-iatrist, "a

flawed human being caring for another through language." <sup>21</sup> He finally learns how radically he must distinguish himself from the Cartesian chemotherapists.

More makes claims for the scientific superiority and human worthiness of his psyche-iatry. But he is unpretentious enough to suspect that his preference for the old-fashioned method might be pretentious. His approach might be scientific in the sense of being based on an accurate description of human self-consciousness. But as a way of alleviating human misery, it is inefficient, uncertain, and at best partly successful. Its time-consuming focus on the individual seems to make it irrelevant in the struggle against social disorder. More acknowledges that the chemotherapists might deserve to have carried the day because they get results: "If one can prescribe a chemical and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, why take on such a quixotic question as pursuing the secret of one's very self' (13)?

Would not science progress rapidly, discovering certain answers to fundamental questions, if the soul, with its mysterious disorder, were simply eradicated? Then Cartesian or materialistic science would really become science, a complete account of all bodies and so all that exists. The quest for self-knowledge becomes more than "quixotic" only when the self disappears altogether. But who would undertake the quest if there were no selves? Who would desire and so come to know the answers to the fundamental questions?

### The Illegal Experiment with Chemicals

More, the physician, is devoted to human well-being. He identifies well-being with health and freedom from suffering, mental and physical. But he also identifies it with what is integral to the human condition, personal or dialectical responses to the anxious experience of dislocation. His individual approach to psyche-iatry makes him a defender of personal sovereignty against scientific expertise.

More's two views of human well-being are in tension. As long as one has experiences of self, one will be somewhat miserable and less healthy than one might otherwise be. The surrender of personal sovereignty seems to be what is required to produce a well-ordered

life, freed from cruel suffering. The exercise of personal sovereignty or liberty brings into existence a world with love and wonder, but also one with anxiety, anger, fear, hatred, perversion, exploitation, and war. More's experience with the consequences of the scientists' experiments forces him to reflect on the choice between stressful, troubled, and sometimes cruel human existence and peaceful, well ordered, and content animal existence.

When More begins to notice that his patients, for a reason not yet discovered, have lost their experiences of self, he cannot decide whether they are better or worse off. They are more physically healthy, and in every way less disordered. They are free from terror, rage, and guilt (21). They are, from the physician's or psychiatrist's perspective, seemingly cured. They neither desire nor seem in need of treatment. But More adds that they are somehow "diminished" (86), and he calls their psychological and physiological changes in the direction of contentment "regression" (85). They have lost their sovereignty, liberty, distinctiveness, or greatness.

The scientific argument for social responsibility initially attracts More, and he accepts the "impressive evidence of social betterment." In one sense, "society is like an organism," and the eradication of the personal cause of social disorder can be justified in terms of society's self-preservation (234-35). More tends to agree that, a plague-like crisis can justify the temporary suspension of rights. After all, what is good for society's self-preservation as an "organism" is also good for the individual's preservation as an organism. All that is lost is the self, that which seems to oppose itself perversely to the organism's self-preservation, both individual and social.

We can say that this argument for self-preservation seems Hobbesian. But the individually-oriented psyche-iatrist puts forward, although tentatively, two related Hobbesian rejoinders. More wonders about the experiment's illegality, about its usurpation of the authority of democratic political sovereignty. When he is encouraged to be the "devil's advocate," or speak from his "own expertise" or not in his own name, More also ironically calls attention to "the technicality of civil rights." The experimenters are "assaulting the cortex of the individual without the knowledge and consent of the

assaultees" (209). For Hobbes, the foundation of the sovereign's power, and so the rule of law, is the individual's reasonable consent. One's natural, personal sovereignty is the source of political authority. More cannot help but wonder whether the doctors can be trusted with the unaccountable power over individuals they have assumed. They are treating their very large number of patients not as beings with rights but as animals to be controlled.

More, alone among the scientist and physicians, is capable of raising the question of rights. His political dissent comes from his knowledge of the self. He knows that human beings are capable of living well with their personal sovereignty. They have, as even Hobbes says, the capacity to tell the truth to themselves about themselves. They do not need to-and in fact cannot consistently without chemical treatment-defer to expert control of their experiences for their own good.

More differs from Hobbes concerning the foundation of rights. In so doing, he shows that Hobbes' foundation is inadequate, that by beginning with fearful avoidance of death one ends up with the rule of experts. For Hobbes, human beings by nature are both miserably afraid of death and free to do what they can to preserve themselves, to act methodically in response to their fear. Their goal is safety or peace. But they never really achieve their goal, because their best efforts cannot free them from the fear that comes with self-conscious mortality. Perhaps the more safe they really are, the more afraid they feel, which is why Hobbes says human beings become particularly troublesome in times of peace, prosperity, and good government. Freed somewhat from their struggle against necessity, they cannot avoid reflection on their inevitable failure.

If the human goal really is safety or peace, then the chemotherapists might really deserve our consent. They claim to have secured for human beings what they could not secure reliably for themselves. They have freed them from fear and anxiety about death. As a result of the treatment, people actually feel safe and secure. For More, personal sovereignty does not come from one's freedom to attempt to defeat death. It comes with one's capability to live well with one's own fear and anxiety, by coming to terms with the inevitability of

death, with genuinely self-conscious mortality. For More, the person Hobbes describes, working incessantly to avoid the inevitable, is self-deceptive. The person Hobbes describes does not really tell the truth to himself about himself at all.

More's ambivalence about and initial reluctance to push the issue of the defense of rights comes in part from his awareness that perhaps most or all human beings would consent to the chemical suppression of their self-consciousness if they actually could experience a before and after comparison. His immobilizing thought is that Hobbes or, better, Rousseau might be in a deep sense right. More has the chemotherapist Dr. John Van Dorn take an extremely potent dose of heavy sodium as part of his plan to foil the experiment. More actually wins Van Dorn's consent by telling him honestly that the chemicals will produce no effects in him that he would not want (344).

More's decisive action against the experiment is not based primarily on his judgment about the treatment's evil effects on individuals. It has to do with the requirements of their self-defense against other selves. The trouble with the experiment is the scientists' vain, tyrannical decision to exempt themselves from its consequences. In Hobbes' terms, they aimed, as all tyrants do, to bring the natural equality of human beings to an end by turning themselves into masters and others into slaves. That desire for mastery, Hobbes says, is natural. Percy agrees, adding the explanation that its source is the naturalness of the anxious self.

That desire for mastery exists in us all to some extent, although most of us aim mainly at self-mastery or self-defense. Those aiming at the mastery of others must prevent that desire from manifesting itself effectively in others. Hobbes recommends the use of fear, calling attention to its reliability. But the chemotherapists say, quite rightly, that fear is not nearly reliable enough, and it is unnecessarily cruel. They claim to replace fear with compassion, with a project to eliminate all cruelty and so the need for lawful or political order from the world.

### Anger

In addition to the sexual and linguistic regression, More notices the absence of anger and partisanship in his patients. He detects "a certain curious disinterest....No arguments, no fright, no rage, no cursing the Communists, no blaming the networks, no interests," no clash of ideologies (85). He was less inclined, in one sense, to view the absence of this quality as regression.

While in prison, surrounded by angry, ideological, passionate men, More wondered about the source of such "rage." He lost interest in the actual content of arguments, and he became extremely reluctant to engage in argument himself. He concluded that those who argue are really afraid of the "abyss." They take pleasant refuge in argument from what they really know. Passionate liberals and passionate conservatives, More notices, need each other like lovers do. Anything, even "violent disagreement, even war," is better than nothing (35, 87).

More's view of the world combines a perception that responsible, credible political and religious conviction is impossible in our time with his faith based on experience in the ability of individuals to live well in light of death. This incoherence explains why he is much more attentive to individual cases than to political life or God, and perhaps why he too easily accepts the inadequate view that society is like an organism. The cause of this incoherence seems to be More's own unacknowledged, anguished or angry atheism. He says one reason he has focused his curiosity on particular individuals is he does not "know what to make of God." He claims not to give "Him, Her, It, a second thought" (67), but he really diverts himself from what he thinks he knows. Not having acknowledged or come to terms with his anger, More is unable to live as well without God as some of his patients. He cannot really undertake his own "interior quest" as long as he denies his interest in and longing for God.<sup>22</sup>

More sometimes muses that ours has been an angry, ideological, murderous century because it has been a self-consciously atheistic one. Human beings kill for empty abstractions in response to their miserable disorientation in the absence of God (87, 330). Chemical

treatment, of course, quickly removes one's perception of the abyss. Overnight, it seems at first, it has changed our century's character by removing the cause of gratuitous killing and war.

More distinguishes between the talking and listening of his dialectical method and polemical argument. The former, genuinely Socratic, aims at truth or self-knowledge. The latter, although it may actually be more often called Socratic, angrily and anxiously covers the truth over, and it opposes itself to listening (34). The "passionate arguer," in fact, has no interest in individuals and individuality. The racially-enlightened liberal, for instance, has "no use for individual blacks," whereas the less angry or displaced Southerner who has little use for ideology and is sometimes unjust actually knows and likes particular black individuals (35). Argument opposes itself to self-understanding in all its forms.

More makes this distinction between dialectic and polemic too radically or apolitically. He is far too reluctant to argue even on behalf of personal sovereignty or individual rights. A chemotherapeutic physician says after the experiment failed that More actually had no argument against its "ultimate goals." It is clear that, by then, More knows there is such an argument, but he still does not make it in his own name (346-47).

But More also becomes somewhat aware that his detachment from argument is a form of self-denial. He is told, correctly, that he is personally involved with his patients, but detached from his own family and his own concerns. He admits that his "parenting skills" are poor (205), and he refuses to acknowledge his anger even when he discovers that his wife had a sexual relationship with Dr. Van Dorn. His political action is, in large measure, a result of that unacknowledged anger, a passionate defense of his own wife and children from those who would abuse them. "There is a great difference," More says in reflecting upon one of his patient's troubles, "between being angry and knowing that you are angry," and one result of psycho-iatry is discovering that and why one is angry (13).

Anger, More shows us, does not just cover up the abyss. It is a defense of what one loves, a natural consequence of the experience of the goodness of human life. Genuine self-exploration would

reveal it to be sometimes a Socratic quality. Not all anger, as More sometimes believes, is simply a rebellion against the inevitability of one's death.

The chemotherapists, by eradicating anger, also eradicate the spirit of resistance to their illegal, tyrannical project. They destroy what leads oneself to resist destruction by another. Anger, a manifestation of self or soul, leads human beings to perform acts of gratuitous cruelty and even to commit suicide. But for human beings the angry protection of self or soul is required to protect even one's body from the disorder of other selves. Only in a world without selves at all could human beings defend themselves adequately without anger. So we do not do well to say that society is like an organism, because its components-human individuals-are not simply organisms.

More, in another sense, connects the absence of anger with regression. Disinterest, or the absence of partisanship, also manifests itself in More's patients as a curious lack of curiosity, which begins with interest in or curiosity about oneself (79). Without such self-interest, everything interesting strange or diverse about human beings disappears. What remains is a "sameness...a flatness of affect" (85). Individuals lose their context as "encultured creatures," because culture originates in self-exploration and self-expression (69). They also lose their capacity to tell jokes, which are really a way of venting anger (76). Not only do they stop lying, but there is no longer any space for their ironic detachment (82).

### Sexual Liberation as Sexual Regression

The chemical treatment produces among Louisianians what Allan Bloom claimed to find among America's students, flatness of soul. Human beings are no longer touched or moved by death. Without *thanatos*, as Freud says, there is no *eros*. Without love, or passionate longing and attachment to one's own, there is no anger or hatred.

More soon discovers that the mode of liberated human relations praised by pop Cartesian experts has actually come into existence. Freed from the twinship of love and death, human beings finally really enjoy sexual liberation, the unencumbered openness of the

"encounter group." Before chemical treatment, those who preached easygoing openness and relativistic permissiveness were actually "quarrelsome and ideological" themselves. Their propaganda did nothing to ease their own troubled souls, much less have the effect they intended on those they attempted to influence. After chemotherapy, More really does discover an "open community" with "creative relationships across stereotypical bonding," or casual promiscuity. Human beings live more content than happy in what is "less like a couple's retreat than a chimp colony" (84-85). Only in a colony of selfless chimps could one find the simple, honest openness that is the alleged goal of the "sexual revolution."

The goal of the centuries-long pop Cartesian moral revolution has always been liberation from the repressive, guilt-ridden effects of Platonism and Christianity, from the moralism which has distorted Western civilization. It has always pointed toward a return to "the old nature religion, a nonsexist, pre-Judeo-Christian belief, nothing less than becoming one with nature and with yourself" (81). Radically modern religion, as Tocqueville, for one, noticed, is pantheism, a radical rejection of the anxious, disorienting experience of individuality.<sup>23</sup> It is the religion compatible with the modern, Cartesian view of the cosmos.

Pantheistic oneness, in Percy's view, is really the spiritual form of Cartesian self-denial, a denial of the experiences that separate the self from the rest of nature or the cosmos. Compared with Christianity, it is obviously a regression in the direction of illusion. But neither the sexual revolution nor nature religion can prevail in the Christian or post-Christian world through linguistic therapy or political reform; human beings cannot help but experience their claims as untrue. But they both can actually express the truth as the result of chemotherapy. Before seeing these effects of the treatment, More reacted derisively when he heard obviously untrue pop Cartesian propaganda, but after seeing their effects he had to acknowledge that perhaps the distinction between human and chimp reality had actually disappeared. He had to consider the possibility that science could make pantheism true. But pantheism or pre-Christian, New Age nature religion could never become true. If its description of

reality were completely true, there would be no selves with the need or capacity to be religious. Both systematic religion or pantheism and the systematic scientific hypothesis of the chemotherapist abstract unrealistically from the soul or self of the believer and scientist. .

### The Scientists

More's initial judgment concerning the scientists' experiment was ambivalent because he did not appreciate the role of the scientists themselves in the experiment. In their absence, he saw both good and bad in the effects he observed and in the experiment's proclaimed goals. But because of the scientists' presence, the effects of the experiment turned out to be different and more complex than More had thought. He finally did not decisively oppose science, but the scientists, who irresponsibly exempted themselves from the treatment they prescribed for others. The experiment was foiled, and was destined for failure anyway, because it was less a product of detached, scientific objectivity than a projection of the scientists' own unexamined, troubled selves. The scientists, not science, were responsible for the key decisions that constitute the experiment (326).

The physicians and scientists came close to imagining that by brutalizing others, they would divinize or angelize themselves. Their imaginations, in Percy's terms, tended to be Cartesian. Their science can account for the well-ordered existences of angels and animals, but not for the human self. By freeing others from their disorder, they imagined they would also free themselves. The scientists imagined themselves operating outside political life or the law, creating a world in which its restraints would be obsolete. They viewed themselves, by virtue of their scientific knowledge, as having no need for legal or conscientious restraint, and those they treated would act in an orderly fashion without conscience or the law. Law and conscience are unreliable means of restraining troubled, flawed mortal selves, and there would no longer be any of them, nothing imperfect or malformed, left in the world.

But the physicians and scientists did not *quite* mean to divinize themselves or brutalize others. They imagined themselves and

others retaining some but not all human qualities. They meant not to control thoughtless automatons, but to rule, if tyrannically, human beings. They, quite romantically, also believed that through the experiment's success they themselves would be freed from their personal misery while remaining human.

For Percy, a romantic imagination is one that frees itself from the rigor of empirical, including self-, investigation. It comes from the scientists' Cartesian premise that the self or soul does not really exist, which really means they have put their personal experiences outside the scope of science. The "scientifically minded person become[s] a romantic because he is a left-over from his own science." By not engaging in dialectical psyche-iatry, scientists divert themselves from or refuse to acknowledge the fact that all distinctively human qualities flow from self-consciousness, and one cannot experience curiosity, wonder, or love without experiencing anxiety and dislocation in view of one's contingency and mortality.

The scientists quite unscientifically imagine that a perfectly well-ordered world could be a human one. Because they are neither perfectly wise nor really detached from the troubled concerns of flawed mortals, their imaginations are distorted or humanized. They repeated the error of Marx, who said, quite incoherently, that human beings could somehow remain human at history's end.

The designers of the chemical experiment did not intend to produce superchimps. Both the physician Dr. Bob Comeaux and the scientist Dr. John Van Dorn thought in terms of a beautiful human perfection. Comeaux aimed at perfect human innocence, while Van Dorn sought an unprecedented, unencumbered human excellence. Comeaux's thought was distorted by his reactionary, racist anger, Van Dorn's by his sexual perversion.

Comeaux began by creating imaginatively for himself the identity and life of a cultivated Louisiana aristocrat. He was actually "Bob Como of Long Island City." As a white, urban ethnic, his fearful anger was directed against the young black "punks" who roam unsocialized and outside the law (198-99). He wanted those criminals to behave (347). But Como was not simply a fearful racist. He was, quite understandably, repulsed by the "monuments of bare

ugliness" that characterize modern, urban, democratic life generally (198). He moved South, where he had heard and read that life was once beautiful and blacks were a docile part of that life. He convinced himself that "There is still grace, style, beauty, manners, and civility left in the world. It's not all gone with the wind." His scientific efforts were directed toward making this conviction progressively more true.

Comeaux aimed to "restore the best of the Southern way of life" (213), believing that living that life will free him from personal disorder, his fear and anger, and for the pure perception of ordered beauty. His admittedly "corny" or abstract view of that life did not come from experience. More musings to himself: "If there is such a thing as a Southern way of life, part of it has to do with not speaking of it" (60). The beautiful South of Comeaux's imagination comes in large part from the Hollywood version of *Gone with the Wind*. He aims to restore a world that never did exist anywhere but in a romance.

In Comeaux's world, blacks are docile, but without the cruelty of the master and his overseer, and without the degraded, feigned slavishness of "Uncle Tom." Like any Northerner, he knows the way the masters treated their "niggers" was cruelly unjust. He replaced the relationship that did actually once exist between master and slave with that of "Uncle Tom Jefferson and his yeoman farmers and yeoman craftsmen," a relationship formed largely by Jefferson's imagination (198). Comeaux's ideal is a combination of Hollywood and Jeffersonian romanticism. He imagines himself the new and perfected Uncle Tom Jefferson, paternalistically and benevolently caring for well-behaved, industrious, and genuinely contented blacks.

This South, to emphasize the obvious, is no restoration. It could only become possible through the chemical "zapping" of black selves, the source of their resistance to and discontent with white benevolence. With the treatment, the world in Comeaux's part of Louisiana does come to correspond largely to his ideal. Young punks are transformed into intelligent, industrious apprentices. The "darkies" are once again singing in the field, and without the legal reinstitution of slavery (266, 327). The black farmers and laborers

have lost their desire for freedom. They have been freed from the distinctively human cruelty of longing for what one does not have.

Percy clearly means to criticize Jefferson's own romantic tendencies, which characterized Southern agrarianism from his time onward. Jefferson obscured even from himself his ideal's dependence on the rights-denying injustice of slavery. Both Jefferson and Comeaux were scientists and masters. The pride of the master, who exempts himself from his science, as Jefferson certainly understood in principle, always distorts his political vision.

Comeaux refuses to acknowledge that the newly docile blacks are, despite their intelligence, really subhuman. Their art and music he accepts-on the authority of an anthropologist-as evidence of the return to primitive-but still human-innocence (198-99). For More (and Percy), anthropology is an incoherent, unempirical science, infused at its core with Rousseau's romanticism. Those such as Margaret Mead who claim to have uncovered *human* innocence are obvious frauds. Wherever one finds human beings, one finds disorder and trouble. In Percy's pointed words, Mead's Samoans, we now know, were not "an innocent, happy, Edenic people until they were corrupted by missionaries and technology," examples of natural perfection first described by Rousseau. They "appear to have been at least as neurotic as New Yorkers."<sup>25</sup> Anthropology, Percy explains, is part of the Cartesian-Rousseauian dogma of contemporary science that human beings are in no way flawed or troubled by nature: "Thou shalt not suggest that there is a unique and fatal flaw in *Homo sapiens* or indeed any perverse trait that cannot be laid to the influence of Western civilization."<sup>26</sup>

Comeaux is attracted to anthropology because he accepts, although with a crucial alteration, its Rousseauian imperative. Human beings, according to Rousseau, have made themselves miserably restless. Once they know their misery is self-created, perhaps they can uncreate it. Comeaux knows that restless human misery is natural, and so he really knows he is not quite restoring primitive innocence. He believes that human beings can-with scientific knowledge in the service of imaginative idealism-alter nature to create human innocence. But his correction to Rousseau

is only sound in part. Rousseau was right to say that an innocent, untroubled, docile being could not be a human one.

Comeaux does not imagine that the suppression of the self-the source of human disorder or misbehavior-would eradicate all distinctively human qualities. He really aims to create the well-ordered soul and society imagined by aristocrats, but without their sometimes cruel and unjust use of legal coercion. But in his pursuit of his angry, political goal, he could not avoid depriving those whom he desired to control of their freedom. His anger is really directed against the very existence of the self or soul, of what disturbs the beautiful order or harmony of nature, but what is also the source of all distinctively human beauty.

Comeaux's angry opposition to human freedom is clear in his praise of the benefits of physiological regression in women. The chemical treatment has replaced the menstrual cycle with estrus. Women used to be in heat most of the time, and so they could not help but be trouble for men and themselves. After the treatment, they are rarely interested in or capable of doing what leads to reproduction. The result is no more "useless" sex, no more promiscuity, and "natural population control." The troublesome and ineffectual techniques of birth control and abortion are no longer needed (196). Chemotherapy, for Comeaux, is the effective way of achieving his goal of castrating all perverts. There is no more sexual deviancy because there is no more sexual freedom. Comeaux, the moralist, creates a world, not of sexual liberation, but of liberation from sex.

There is, more exactly, no more human *ergs*. Without experiences of self, human sexual response contracts, because it is no longer inflamed by distinctively human longings. Sexual or erotic freedom, understood as the product of that mixture, is at the core of human freedom. It really would have to disappear for the world to become well-ordered. The moralistic use of science crates a world without the need for personal restraint and so morality.

Comeaux does have some anxiety about his project. He often attempts to engage the skeptical More with "Socratic questions" or "dialoging" about it (34, 190, 194, 201, 346-47). Reminding us of

Rorty's pragmatism, he asserts that his scientific inquiry has left the great controversies and intellectual quarrels of human history behind. They have not been dialectically resolved, but rendered irrelevant (196). He mocks More's prudish recitation of the facts about sexual regression and abuse by saying that More is accusing him, in effect, of "corrupting the youth of Athens" (329). He wants More to acknowledge the force of the evidence that he has eradicated human suffering and improved the quality of life (190), and that More's opposition to Comeaux's project is simply a matter of "style" or snobbery (347). But More says Comeaux reminds him of prisoners, who use anger to hide emptiness (34). The problem with Comeaux's identification of himself with Socrates is that he actually works to suppress the natural corruption or complex and perverse longings that might lead the youth to Socrates.

At the core of Comeaux's project is the perception that human life as it actually exists is no good. He sees no beauty in and so has no love for its flawed, mortal freedom. His is the experience of an extremely disordered, desperate, unscientific, death-denying self, and his experiment based on his romanticism is really incompletely successful self-deception. Comeaux ends up admitting his efforts at personal recreation have failed; he still does not know "how to act" (347). Because he does not know how to die, a true Socratic would say, he does not know how to live.

#### Sexual Liberation and Human Excellence

Dr. John Van Dorn, the other director of the chemical experiment, knows all too well that human flourishing depends upon sexual freedom (218). He is contemptuous of the "castrating" moralism of the "ham-fisted social engineer[ing]" of Comeaux and his kind. Van Dorn's own, more finely tuned, goal is to zap only some of the self. His goal is to liberate the creative energy of *eros* from being impeded by repressive moralism or guilt. The social engineer has only the "short term" goal of controlling misbehavior. Because he has "no ultimate goals," he does not see that the patient must remain "human enough" to achieve them. "Excellence," of course, is that end of being human, meaning artistic and scientific excellence (219).

Van Dorn believes he can alter human nature slightly to combine different forms of excellence-"the high sexuality of the Don [Giovanni] and Einstein without the frivolity of the Don or the repressed Jewish sexuality of Einstein"-in single human beings (220). Chemotherapy is the means to achieve such an unprecedented combination, to actualize, we might say, the ideal represented by Socrates. The new genius, once created, will have no need for chemicals. His brain and *eros* will combine for self-sufficient, untroubled, philosophical liberation.

Van Dorn, "the Renaissance Man" (200) dedicated to excellence in all its forms, is the founder of a private school for young children, dedicated to "Greek ideals of virtue" (252). The Greeks defined virtue as excellence, and that definition has, in Van Dorn's eyes, nothing to do with moderation or self-restraint. He has, as did the Greeks, a "theory of the nature of man," which is that the "highest achievements...derive from sexual energy" (219).

So excellence has been thwarted by the tradition of moral repression that has held the West back "since St. Paul" (200). Because the chemical treatment does not free human beings from tradition or convention for a life according to nature, but actually alters their natures, it would appear the excellence really has been thwarted more by the self than by the West. But Van Dorn is clear that the antierotic or moralistic, including Comeaux's, view of virtue is Christian, not Greek. Van Dorn believes he has stated in modern or more scientific terms the Greek connection between erotic longing and intellectual excellence. He is part of the intellectual movement that rejects Christianity and Christian Platonism by recovering the true spirit of the Greeks at the origin of high civilization and scientific liberation.

Van Dorn, "Dr. Ruth of the bayous" (200), believes that Freud stated scientifically what the Greeks understood imperfectly. All forms of human energy or *eros* are actually derived from sexual *eros*. The soul or self is really a reflection of the body and its needs. This theory, for More and Percy, is really a form of Cartesian self-denial. It is also a denial of the qualitative distinctions that separate the various forms of human excellence.

Van Dorn's Greek-Freudian (Nietzschean?) theory is really a particularly incoherent form of Cartesianism. He acknowledges that human beings must be sexually free-or have intense, complex, and perverse sexual drives-in order to pursue human excellence. So he concedes implicitly that human *eros is* qualitatively different from that of chimps. But he does not reflect on what that difference is. He is too self-satisfied, too vain, to engage in self-reflection. His evidence for the relationship between the chemical treatment and unprecedented excellence is the increase in SAT scores of the treated students (219). But he seems not to have noticed or acknowledged that they have lost the curiosity, beginning with self-curiosity or self-consciousness, that actually impels one to pursue intellectual or artistic greatness.

But More also knows that Van Dorn's use of Freud is based on a misinterpretation of at least his mature thought. His incorrect view is that one's anxiety is caused by a lack of sexual satisfaction. Those like Van Dorn with particularly strong sexual drives can easily become extremely anxious, so anxious they can't cope with daily life (73-74). Anxious frustration impedes human flourishing. A strong sexual drive is evidence that one is destined for greatness, if only that energy can be liberated or discharged. (According to Percy, the mature Freud was actually more incoherent. He did not attempt to reduce his own curiosity and scientific knowledge to his sexuality; he simply "exempt[ed] himself and his truth-telling from the sexual dynamics of other human psyches." <sup>27</sup>)

Van Dorn's misinterpretation of Freud is really a misunderstanding of his own anxiety and sexual desire. He deceives himself about his attraction to the young. His academy prides itself in the development of minds with "the tough old European Gymnasium-Hochschule treatment." Van Dorn immediately rephrases, "We work their little asses" (219). He and his staff claim, to themselves and others, to be interested in both the children's bodies and minds, and they explain to themselves that what they do to their bodies will contribute to their mental development.

The law says that Van Dorn wants to abuse children, and that his strong, perverse sexual desire is a threat to others unless restrained.

Van Dorn claims that his natural excellence, his scientific knowledge and sexual drive, places him above the law, which originated in moralistic hostility to excellence. He acts well in using whatever means necessary to liberate bodies and minds from the tradition of repression the law embodies. But the law, of course, is especially necessarily to protect others from extremely disordered and clever selves, those who use their minds to find arguments and techniques to impose themselves on others. More's political intention becomes to employ the law to hold Van Dorn and his staff humanly responsible. He does not hesitate to mislead the law enforcers to achieve the law's intention (338).

Percy's view is that Van Dorn's vain, anxious self has somehow distorted his *eros* in a way which distances it from its proper or lawful purpose. Van Dorn's project is the effectual truth of all projects for sexual liberation. They are conceived by the perverse to free perversion and exploitation from legal restraint. Contrary to the propaganda of the perverse and clever, human sexual activity ends up further than before from ready, honest satisfaction. Van Dorn's genuine, self-suppressed theory of life was "the jaybird wisdom" of the behaviorist B.F. Skinner: Once one denies the existence of the self, the honest conclusion is "The object of life is to gratify yourself without being arrested." The best way to become a successful jaybird, Van Dorn discovered, is to turn everyone else into a chicken (90).

Van Dorn was troubled enough to seem more in need of chemical treatment than his students. The huge dose More finally induced him to take, in fact, is what freed him from his unlawful and irresponsible inclinations. As a human being, he was especially in need of and vainly uninterested in old-fashioned psyche-iatry. So he aimed to cure others, not himself. His science and idealism were rooted not primarily in care for others or passion for the truth, but in anxious self-deception and an unlawful desire to molest children.

Contrary to his intention, Van Dorn's experiment, like Comeaux's, ends up depriving those treated of their sexual freedom. The dose given to the children in the academy was large enough to deprive them of all experiences of self, of anything that would cause them to

resist the staff's sexual advances. More has to admit that the selfless children exhibit no psychological signs of suffering or abuse. But they are also free from passion, guilt, anger, and curiosity. Their acquiescence in various forms of molestation seems quit uncoerced or unafraid (330). But abuse still occurs because the molesters intend to molest, depriving those they abuse of their freedom and dignity in order to do so.

Van Dorn, when pressed by More, drops excellence as the experiment's justification. He turns instead to love and "caring," which become possible with the removal of "the mental roadblocks" from "human relationships." He claims to have created a world without cruelty or hate (303). The Greek ideal of virtue reduces itself to the easygoing promiscuity of the chimp colony. Van Dorn really has removed the children's mental roadblocks, but not his own. The children have become too simple, and he is too perverse, for there to be a genuinely human relationship between them. Van Dorn is not their teacher, and they are not his students. There is nothing open or honest or loving about his approach to them.

The source of Van Dorn's desire to molest children is his desire to escape from the disorder of the human self. He longs to free sexual satisfaction from the mystery of human love, from the mixture of flesh and spirit that is the relationship between a mature, individualized, and flawed man and woman. He longs to reduce human sex to a mechanical act, to achieve full satisfaction by controlling and so really knowing his sexual object. Even in the most intimate human communion, one self eludes another to some extent. Free human selves can neither wholly know nor wholly control each other.<sup>28</sup>

Van Dorn does come close, at least, to reducing the children to the bestial innocence of Rousseau's state of nature. But he has not purged the sexual act of its perversions by the self. He himself is not innocent. His desire to dominate—to lord it over those he controls—and his identification of *eros* with conquest are peculiarly human and theoretically Cartesian.

Van Dorn is not only a molester but a pornographer. His photos and films portray "demure, even prissy" children engaged in every act imaginable with each other, his staff, and himself. More reports

that "what sticks in the mind about the photos is not the impropriety but the propriety" (291). The selfless or almost selfless children experience themselves as doing nothing wrong. Van Dorn seems to enjoy gazing upon what appear to be well-ordered natures.

This pornography comes from the mixing of science with romanticism or sentimentality. Flannery O'Connor, doubtlessly Percy's source for this thought, explains that "Pornography...is essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its hard purposes, and so far disconnects it from its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake." The theory of pornography is that sexual satisfaction can be separated from the joys and miseries of self-conscious mortality, from the responsibilities of human life.

According to O'Connor, "sentimentality is an excess...in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence....We lose our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption.... Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence." Sentimentality, finally, is the thought that human beings can redeem themselves from themselves. It is the Rousseauian thought that their disorder can be overcome through human effort. The mock innocence of sentimentality, O'Connor goes on "strongly suggests its opposite," or tyranny and violence.<sup>29</sup> The one who longs for innocence, the problem is, is not innocent at all, and he must work to destroy human nature, the truth about human deformity or Fallenness, to achieve his objective. He must employ any means necessary to achieve the impossible, tyrannical, escapist goal of bringing human history to an end. He works to do what only God can do, to return human beings to innocence by freeing them from the consequences of sin.

This longing for innocence Percy presents as an inescapable part of human nature. In a general sense, it is rightly called a longing for the Garden of Eden, for man's original, un sinful existence. But it is also a longing for one's own preconscious existence, for each person's original unity with his or her mother. As Lewis Lawson notices, all of Percy's protagonists have a "personal yearning for a restoration to the lost mother figure."<sup>30</sup> All human beings experience

themselves somehow as alienated from this original unity, suffering from the inescapable loss that is the birth of self-consciousness through the acquisition of language. The child's awareness of his or her separation from his or her mother is the result of the mother's gift of language to the child, a gift that makes possible both love and awareness of time and death.

Dr. More's attempt to escape from self-consciousness, and so from time and human responsibility, is his confused, drunken period with the mothering Lucy Lipscomb at the plantation Panterburn, which came immediately after his discovery of his wife's infidelity. There he experienced disjointed "memories or solitary reveries and regressions into a romanticized childhood and the plantation's mythic past that dissociated him from the real world of time. He also succumbed briefly to the surrender of his sovereignty to a woman who seemed to combine sexual and mother love for him (104, 161-66). More had to escape from Lucy's influence to act responsibly and to experience the ordinary joys of this world without melancholy or paranoia (348), the latter the result of the ultimate futility of all escapist diversions.<sup>32</sup> Drinking, especially, "frees one from the necessities of time," but not completely or permanently. The permanent solution to the despair of regression is suicide (173, 348).

Comeaux's partly conscious goal is the sexual regression of the whole species—a reversal of the process of evolution that brought human self-consciousness, the language being, into existence. Van Dorn's unacknowledged goal is personal regression, a reversal of the process of separation or acquisition of language that made him a human individual. They both aim at a world without distinctively human eros, that mixture of the experiences of self with bodily desire.

Comeaux rightly sees Van Donn's pornography and pedophilia as perversion. Van Dorn rightly sees Comeaux's castrating moralism as opposing human excellence. But what Comeaux does to the darlde Van Dorn does to the children. Their desire for regression, mixed with science, becomes a desire for control. They aim at knowledge through power, the eradication human mystery and

alienation through domination. Their desire to eradicate that mystery is finally as impossibly romantic as the longing to become unconscious. The scientists, like all human beings, long to become either animals or angels, to escape the anxious misery and hard responsibilities of being human.

The longing for regression is misanthropic, for the destruction of all distinctively human experience. It is a longing for the impossible that usually produces romantic impotence. But when joined with science it produces projects for human destruction. For More and Percy, one antidote for regressive longing is love for other alienated selves, a mysterious, joyful compensation for human misery. But that longing, which has two parts, the "genital need for penetration" and the "psychic need for merger,"<sup>33</sup> is never perfectly satisfied. The longing for unity or wholeness remains because the self is elusive. Percy agrees with Pascal that the longing for wholeness or to be free from the consequences of sinful separation can only be completely satisfied for conscious selves by union with God.

Another antidote for regressive longing is the natural pleasure that comes when the child begins to name and so know the world. The beginning of consciousness and speech is also a social experience of communication with other alienated selves. Anxious experiences of dislocation are painful, but even that pain can be ameliorated by pleasure when one attempts to speak or write about them for others. Percy takes pleasure in "naming" human alienation as "the Judeo-Christian view of man in trouble" and "the way man is" by nature.<sup>34</sup>

### Modern Utopianism

Van Dorn like Comeaux, really could argue that he cured the children of their human suffering, of the alienation of self-consciousness. But he did not do so out of loving or caring. He might, in fact, do anything to them in his selfish, futile effort to alleviate his own anxiety. His concern is not their suffering, but his own.

The differences between the moralistic, antierotic Comeaux and the libertarian Van Dorn turn out not to be very great. They both aimed to bring into existence a world where they could control

others without resistance, and where the ideas of the rule of law and personal rights or sovereignty would be obsolete. They thought their combination of scientific knowledge and idealistic imagination put them above the law and conscience, in the realm of the angels (180). They both drew upon their personal disorders to construct imaginary, romantically incoherent projects for human perfection. Instead of achieving human perfection, both ended up depriving those they treated of their distinctively human qualities. They deprived them of both *eros* and *thanatos*, of the capacity to be moved either by death or love.

The rule of law is needed to protect flawed, self-conscious mortals from each other. Law is for responsible beings capable of choosing irresponsibly in response to selfish experiences of hate, anger, vanity, love, and sexual perversity. The rule of law means to protect beings with rights or the capacity to exercise personal sovereignty, who know or ought to know better than to trust one another too much. The simple political message of the novel is a defense of constitutional democracy against the tyrannical aspirations of experts.

Hard-headed scientists become incurable romantics when considering the world's political future. Their science abstracts from the truth about the self or soul. Modern utopianism is irrational, because it begins by putting the self and its experiences—which are even the source of science—beyond the scope of science. The scientists too readily imagine a scientific escape from the constraints of ordinary human experience, the law, and personal anxiety (64).

Because of their origination in the desire to escape merely human constraints, projects to transform the world in the name of alleviating human misery or perfecting the quality of life are especially to be distrusted. They are actually rebellions against human existence as such. The scientists, finally, are in rebellion against the anxiety and terror that come with the experience of the truth about one's own death. The other, more ineffectual antagonist of the chemotherapists in the novel, Father Rinaldo Smith, finds the scientists' romantic refusal to face and live well with one's own death contemptible. He calls the chemotherapists; "the Louisiana Weimar

psychiatrists" (232). He does not mean to call them Nazis or proto-Nazis, although Nazism is perhaps some mixture of angry racism and an incoherent effort to find a material foundation for human excellence. Their death- or self-denying use of science in the service of romantic imaginings is readily exploited by Nazis. Father Smith actually admired the SS members, who, unlike the Weimar doctors, lived resolutely in the face of death. They realized that devotion to an ideal required the risk or sacrifice of life, and so they lived more admirably, or closer to the truth, than the science and scientists they led to serve their ends.

The genuine devotion of science, as expressed by the Hippocratic Oath (127), is to the goodness of the life of the individual, which is really the goodness of the self or soul living in search of the truth about oneself. That devotion to the truth about the uniqueness and worth of human individuality stands in criticism of Cartesian science, which tries to lose the self in the some materialistic account of the world. The Nazi SS tried to lose the self in some "organic" conception of the nation, race, or people. But once the truthful devotion of science was abandoned, the open affirmation of death became preferable to and easily prevailed over romantic self-avoidance (241-56). The novel's lesson is partly about the contemptible moral weakness of the scientists and so of their projects, so easily foiled by More, and the strength of projects that might follow in the wake of that weakness. Percy's thought about the moral weakness of science and scientists seems to Pascal's: "Pascal...spoke of the man who comes into this world knowing not whence he came nor whither he will go when he dies but only that he will for certain die, and who spends his life as though he were not the center of the supreme mystery but rather diverting himself (and, we might add, adjusting himself). Such a man, says Pascal, is worse than a fool."<sup>35</sup>

#### Euthanasia

More also had to learn the connection between the scientists and physicians' ambitious, illegal project and the judgments they made within the law. They are "Qualitarians." They aim to use science to improve the quality of life by alleviating human suffering, curing all

human infirmities, and promoting human dignity. They operate "Qualitarian Centers," which are not only legal but generously supported by government funding. These centers engage in "pedeuthanasia" and "gereuthanasia." More, the nonexpert, notes those terms are euphemisms for "disposing of infants and old-people" (199).

These practices had the support of a "consensus of child psychiatrists," the American Psychological Association, and the Supreme Court. All the experts agree. The Supreme Court had promulgated a "Right to Death." That right encompasses both "the right of the unwanted child not to have to suffer a life of suffering and abuse, [and] the right of the unwanted aged to a life with dignity and death with dignity" (199). The right to death corresponds with the right not to be unwanted. They seem to replace the right to life, which is ineffectual without the right to be wanted.

The "unwanted child" is actually not called a child at all. It has been redefined as a "neonate" by the psychologists. They judge it "does not attain its individuality until the acquisition of language." The Supreme Court in *Doe v. Dade*, drawing upon scientific expertise, decided that the child "does not acquire its legal rights until the age of eighteen months-an arbitrary age to be sure, but one which...is a good ballpark figure" (199-200). The child's right to death really is an euphemism for the denial of the right to life.

Ridiculous arguments about the right not to be unwanted are smokescreens. The scientists make judgments about the, quality of life. They say that those whose physical deformities or mental limitations place them below a level of "acceptable quality" are to be killed. These judgments have little or nothing to do with the child's perspective, which is admittedly unknown. The family and the state have the right to be freed from excessive struggle and expense, and the right to protect the quality of society or the species from the malformed only if the child has no rights. The Nazis readily appropriated this Qualitarian argument for their pursuit of racist, nationalistic purity, and they honestly abandoned euphemisms about rights and compassion.

This sort of reasoning which abolishes the distinction between

abortion and infanticide is not at all farfetched. It is a small extension of the logic of actual Supreme Court decisions and much of the scientific establishment in America today. Justice Blackmun's opinion for the Court in *Roe v. Wade* defers explicitly to the expertise of the medical community, and it barely hides its arbitrariness with its elegant and seemingly scientific division of the pregnancy into three trimesters for the purpose of constitutional measurement. Blackmun's opinion is actually a clever argument for all or almost all prenatal abortion. The Court was most arbitrary in distinguishing between prenatal and postnatal life. There is no reason recognized by scientists for saying that human life begins at birth.

Percy's own view is that *Roe v. Wade* was part of an effort to "suppress an embarrassing scientific fact." It is another example of experts attempting to deny one's personal sovereignty, or the capacity to acknowledge and act upon what one really knows. The Court, in effect, tells "the high-school biology teacher" that his view "that the fertilized human ovum is an individual human life" is merely "his personal opinion" and he has no right to teach it as true. The teacher "Like Galileo...caves in, submits, but in turning away is heard to murmur, *"But it's still alive!"*<sup>36</sup> Percy is emphatic that what he knows about "the onset of individual life is not a dogma of the Church but a fact of science."<sup>37</sup>

But the Court in *Doe v. Dade* actually seems to share More's view about what distinguishes human beings and the source of human liberty. More says that self-consciousness and so personal sovereignty or rights depend upon the human capacity for language, which really does not develop until around the eighteenth month. So one could say that until that point children have no rights. More's argument against abortion and pedeuthanasia, to the extent it remains uninformed by religion, depends upon his reasonable distrust of scientific judgments about the rights of others. That secular argument, we can say, is good enough for opposing those who would make Qualitarian or compassionate exceptions to the right to life. In Percy's words, "once the principle gains acceptance-juridically, medically, socially-[that] innocent human life can be destroyed for any reason-then it does not take a prophet to

predict what will happen next."<sup>38</sup> The Court in *Doe v. Dade* (and *Roe v. Wade*) stands accused primarily of naivete. The Court thought it was permitting the woman's choice of abortion in certain circumstances, but the scientist-physicians interpreted its decision as giving them a right to kill (334).

Pedeuthanasia does quite effectively free a child from suffering a low quality of life. But all children suffer and are otherwise flawed or to some extent malformed. So a consistent, nonarbitrary application of the right to die rather than suffer would kill them all. But, no one with a view of the human future would make that choice. Scientific judgments about life and death, More had to learn, reflect the doctors' distorted views about the species' order and excellence. They want to free us all from all that is malformed and misbegotten. But as Rousseau explains, human beings were well-ordered according to nature only before they learned about the inevitability of one's own death. What Rousseau says about the state of nature, Percy, if not More, would say about the Garden of Eden.

The connection between abortion and pedeuthanasia and gereuthanasia is clear in recent Courts of Appeals decisions, which have used the Supreme Court's arguments in favor of abortion to abolish the distinction between withdrawing medical treatment from those who are undoubtedly near death and physician-assisted suicide, which is really killing by doctors. For now, the Courts say a doctor needs the consent of the patient before he can kill. But, as Leon Kass observes, there is nothing to prevent him from using various techniques to induce incurable people to "experience a right to choose death *as their duty* to do so."

Kass goes on to say that we can expect that right to a humane death with dignity to be extended to the mentally incompetent, the retarded, deformed infants, Alzheimer's victims, and so forth. What will soon disappear is "the distinction between the right to choose one's own death and the right to request someone else's." With the eradication of the Hippocratic "taboo" against physicians killing for any reason, "medicine ceases to be a trustworthy and ethical profession," and "It should surprise no one if physicians, once they are exempted from the [legal] ban on the private use of lethal force, wind

up killing without restraint."

As Percy shows, physicians, just like the rest of us, cannot be trusted to operate outside the law, which exists or ought to exist primarily to protect human lives from the selfish exploitation of others. The Court once again stands accused of naivete in justifying exceptions to the right to life in the names of compassion and quality of life. More deeply, this humanly destructive development in thought and action, Kass, echoing Percy, concludes, is the result of our inability "to act humanly in the presence of finitude," and the only antidote for it is to learn how to accept and love the dying, who most of all "need our presence and encouragement."<sup>39</sup>

But the Qualitarian scientists, particularly Comeaux, did think about those they killed, and he really did want to reduce the amount of suffering in the world (346-47). The chemotherapeutic approach to curing the disease of human self-consciousness began in the Qualitarian centers. The neonates were peacefully put to sleep, Comeaux says with no awareness of irony, "like the babies they are." The adults were given a "state of the art" mixture of secobarbital and THC, "the active constituent of marijuana." The result, Comeaux reports, is eu-thanasia in the precise sense, a serene and joyous acceptance of death without suffering (351). The right mixture of drugs eradicates human misery, which is not primarily physical suffering. Death can come without fear, anxiety, and angry resistance. Human beings are no longer touched by it. So they have the serenity that the philosophers and the joy the theologians praised but perhaps themselves never fully experienced.

Comeaux's last, "simpleminded" thought is that "good is better than bad, serenity is better than suffering" (351). That way of evaluation is strangely simple for a scientist because it abstracts from or denies the goodness of the human capacity to desire and know the truth. But a simple thought might be true, and the truth might be self-destructive or misanthropic. Perhaps all we can say for certain is the self-surrender required for the abolition of suffering is impossible. So Percy once said that *The Thanatos Syndrome's* "idea" is "that no technology, however designed, however advanced, can

aid one in the search that I find is integral to the human condition. "40

There is plenty of evidence in our time that human beings have come to accept the pop Cartesian view that they are better off if they are unmoved by death. The misanthropy of this thought is that euthanasia, or a good death, is impossible for self-conscious mortals. By removing the dying to centers, preventing them with chemicals of being affected by death's nearness, determining for them the moment of death, and masking with euphemisms with surprising effectiveness what they are really doing, our experts aim to remove the fact of death from human experience. They hope to take control of life and death. But despite their best efforts, they cannot eradicate the fact of their own deaths. The expert's inability to keep himself from being touched by death through political-technological means is a certain limit to Cartesian pragmatism.

#### The Hospice and Psyche-iatry

Having foiled their illegal project, More insisted the Qualitarians' government-funded center be closed and all the patients be turned over to Father Smith in a reactivated hospice. (The priest's hospice had been defunded and depopulated by the government.) The doctors reluctantly surrender what they regard as their legal right to kill to avoid More's exposure of their illegal activities.

More has no idea whether the bizarre and seemingly ineffectual priest can handle this responsibility. He could not, in fact, do so for long. More certainly has not abandoned science in favor of religion, but he now regards the priest as his ally. Whatever his practical shortcomings, he is much more trustworthy than the doctors. The hospice approach is an alternative to chemically-induced euthanasia. It allows the dying to retain their personal sovereignty. Its premise is that self-consciousness and euthanasia are not incompatible. Human beings, as More discovered, have the capacity to live well, really better, with the fact of their impending death.

The priest knows that judgments about the quality of life do not depend upon the presence or absence of suffering. Dying human beings have selves or souls, something of value, which allows them to discover and accept human compensations for suffering. The

priest finds himself at home only among those who know they are dying, and he has no desire to redeem them from themselves. He speaks with them about religion only at their initiative. For the psyche-iatrist, Father Smith's approach to death is more scientific than that of the doctors, more in accord with and open to the truth about human beings.

The priest says the dying are "his kind," because they do not lie. He adds: "Everyone else lies. Everyone else is dying too and spend their entire lives lying to themselves." The dying are happy, "happy to tell the truth after a lifetime of lying," and no one else is (244). Most people actually make themselves miserable in their self-deception, in their futile attempt to avoid human misery. They erroneously believe that genuine self-examination would make them more miserable. Not only is euthanasia possible without drugs, only the dying live well in light of the truth. Comeaux and Van Dorn live badly, finally, because they refuse to count themselves among the dying. The hospice provides an authentically human education, learning how to die.

Father Smith's connections among death, truth, and human happiness are More's and Percy's. The happiness available to human beings depends upon telling the truth to oneself about oneself. But most human beings avoid that truth, what they really know, by refusing to live in the present. For the most part, to be human, to have a self, is largely to perceive and to be unable to live well with time. To begin to take human life seriously, Percy holds is to begin to "think about the nature of time," or to stop diverting oneself from such thought.<sup>41</sup>

More notices that patients in a doctor's waiting room are bored, full of "page-flipping anxiety, the frowning sense of time building up." Only after their selves are zapped are such patients able to lounge in the 'present, "out of time, as relaxed as the lions on the Serengetti Plain" (310). More also notices the strange fact that most people, including himself most of the time, both love and "can't stand" their children. They are rarely with them "in love" in the present. Instead, they regret the ways they have failed them in the past and worry and plan for their futures (46-47). So only beings

without selves, lions and chimps, and the dying who tell the truth can live without boredom and anxiety in the present. Only they can really enjoy life. Only the dying, as Percy says, "become aware of what is real."<sup>42</sup>

Father Smith also observed that the dying know that the nearness of their death has made them repulsive to their loved ones. So they usually grow to hate them. But he adds, almost in spite of himself, that "The best thing I ever did for the living was, in a few cases, to make it possible for them to speak with truth and love to their dying mother and father-which of course no one ever does" (244). His own experience contradicts his extreme conclusion that only those who are about to die tell the truth. Others can do so by finding the dying, self-conscious mortals, lovable. They do what human beings rarely do. They become conscious of what makes a particular human being lovable.

Father Smith's general view is that his "fellow man, with a few exceptions" are "either victims or assholes" (243). If it were not for his experience at the hospice, he would come close to agreeing with the chemotherapists. Human life is miserable and contemptible, of lower quality than unconscious life. The priest is perfectly aware of how un-Christian and misanthropic this perception was. It caused him to prefer members of the SS, because they were so clearly "ready to die," to ordinary, romantic, self-deceptive, feckless, bourgeois individuals, including his own parents. He finally became a priest to choose life over death, but that choice did not clearly alter his opinion about most human lives (241-46, 257).

More's psyche-iatric view is that Father Smith's observations are too extreme, and the Christian view is actually more true than he thinks. Ordinary human life is flawed and feckless, but it not wholly irresponsible, uncourageous, and self-deceptive. People are stranger and more courageous than the priest says, and they are worthy of more than our pity and contempt. More is more attentive and thoughtful about the lives of particular human beings, and less angry about human mediocrity, than the priest. The psyche-iatric view is that most human beings experience terror and anxiety, or failures of self-deception. They have the capacity to live fairly well with them,

and to find some human compensations through dialectical self-exploration for their misery. The priest to some extent shared the scientists' unempirical misanthropy because he too was too detached from his fellow, flawed mortals. For him, the choice of life over death was too extreme.

### Tenderness and the Gas Chamber

My purpose here is to give Percy's argument for the goodness and ineradicability of the human self or soul. So I will not dwell on the perplexing speeches, action, and inaction of Father Smith, or the interplay between him and More. They clearly learn from each other. The priest's perspective is superior to More's both in his unwavering opposition to the chemotherapeutic project and in immediately understanding, based on his German experience, the broader political consequences of making any exceptions to the right to life. More is too attentive to the lives of particular human beings, and so too slow to make theoretical, political connections. He aims to divert himself from the political life, the senseless, ideological killing, that has dominated our century, as well as from God or His absence. His incoherent, unacknowledged anger prevents his personal observations from becoming the foundation of political philosophy or theology.

Father Smith presents a theological explanation that makes sense of our century's killing and gives hope that it may soon be over. We have been deprived of faith and left to our own resources, but he may have found a sign faith may soon return (365-66). But More's discovery is actually that individuals are not as deprived as the priest thinks they are, although he does not consider the political relevance of that discovery, which is the inevitable failure of the various ideological projects, the monstrous mixtures of science and romantic idealism. He might also have better evidence than the priest that Christianity might actually be true.

We cannot ignore Father Smith's most astounding political statement. He tells More that "tenderness always leads...[t]o the gas chamber." He seems to do so in response to a remark More made concerning the tenderheartedness of Charles Kuralt. The doctor

does not take the connection seriously. He knows that television journalists are not murderers in disguise.

But Father Smith goes on to give his "final word," which is more precise and plausible. The disguised murderers are the tender-hearted who combine love of and theorizing about "Mankind." Lovers of Mankind "in the abstract" like Walt Whitman are harmless, pleasure-giving poets. Rousseau or B.F. Skinner, theorists of mankind, are also harmless and actually present instructive, if incomplete or reductionistic, accounts of human behavior. But those who combine abstract love with reductionistic theorizing, "Robespierre or Stalin or Hitler," are humanly destructive. They terrorize and murder millions of particular human beings "for the good of Mankind" (129). They kill, as an act of love, to make abstract theory or poetry-scientific idealism-true. What separates those theorist-lovers from the Louisiana Weimar psychiatrists is their personal strength, their readiness to acknowledge and act upon the necessity to kill. Their idealistic visions may differ in scale or grandiosity, but perhaps not fundamentally in form.

By acting out of tenderness or compassion for mankind, those theorist-lovers seem to imitate Christ. They use their knowledge and imaginations actually to bring into the existence the world without suffering He promised. But Christ is no theorist; He has no need nor desire to think abstractly or love abstractions. He loves particular human individuals, and He does not destroy persons in response to His personal disorder or weakness. Mankind in the abstract is what is left without the individuality or diversity that flows from the self. But without the self there would no theory and no love. No amount of killing or terror can eradicate that contradiction, and so there is no limit to what theoretical lovers of mankind might attempt to do.

More views Father Smith's explanation as another example of grandiose theoretical madness. To be fair, the priest does not present much detail. But More still might have connected what he learned from his small scale psyche-iatric practice to the priest's large scale account of political manifestations of expert hostility to the truth about the self.

It is almost too easy for us to take Father Smith's astounding

words seriously. One reason is that it is obviously meant, to express Percy's intellectual debt to a brief, pointed essay on death, politics, and Christianity by Flannery O'Connor, the contemporary writer for whom Percy has the highest praise. Percy has quite unconvincingly denied that he had O'Connor's essay in mind when he wrote *The Thanatos Syndrome*. He admits novelists have reason to deceive,<sup>43</sup> and his books are full of nods to O'Connor.

The essay of O'Connor is her Introduction to *A Memoir for Mary Ann*. This remembrance, written by the Sisters who ran the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cancer Home, concerns a three-year-old girl who came to the home with death seemingly imminent. She confounded the doctors by living well with the Sisters until her death at age twelve. Mary Ann, to use Percy's terms, seemed extremely misbegotten and malformed, with a huge, disfiguring tumor on one side of her face and one of her eyes removed. From a Qualitarian perspective, her life was unacceptable. She had no productive future, and she endured much physical suffering. The Sisters wanted to convey the goodness of Mary Ann's life, lived "full of promise" with the presence of death always near.

O'Connor, despite her obvious embarrassment about the memoir's many literary flaws, pronounced that it had achieved its purpose. It got her thinking about "the mystery of Mary Ann." She "was an extraordinarily rich little girl," because she was taught by the Sisters and mysteriously found the personal capacity to do more than merely endure her condition, "but to build upon it." Her unobtrusive and enjoyable "education for death" was by "women...who love life so much that they spend their own lives making comfortable those who have been pronounced incurable."<sup>44</sup> The Sisters, of course, remind us of Father Smith, and Mary Ann of the dying in the hospice who live well enough to have no need of a cure. But the priest, a rather theoretical man, denies that his love of the dying has anything to do with the love of God, and he says that only the dying live well. It would not occur to the good Sisters, who love life so much, to say anything so extreme.

O'Connor goes on to become a bit theoretical herself. She reminds us that "Death is the theme of much modern literature,"

and we know that Percy made one of the clearest contributions to that literature. The failure of the scientific effort to conquer death, and the atheism that effort implies, have made us intensely aware of how inevitably death determines our lives.

The bishop who preached at Mary Ann's funeral, O'Connor reports, "said the world would ask why Mary Ann should die." She corrects him, saying that the question "everywhere" in our age is "why should she be born in the first place." That "popular pity" is everywhere in literature, "discredit[ing] the goodness of God" with "the suffering of children."<sup>45</sup> In light of the experience of the cruelty of human suffering, we cannot say why it is good that any human being be born. Human existence is a miserable accident, and if there is a God we have to blame Him for His capricious cruelty.

To discredit God's goodness in this way is really to affirm His death. If God is not good, He does not exist or He does us no good. If that is so, then it would appear that human suffering, all awareness of death more than death itself, is pitifully pointless. The central tendency of our age is, in the name of pity, to destroy the good which is human life. As O'Connor explains:

If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.<sup>46</sup>

People in ages of faith accept as given the realities of human suffering and death, believing that they are beyond human control. They have the reasonable faith that human life is nonetheless good, and they unsentimentally accept the responsibility, given by God, to live well. By feeling less, they see more. Even if we say there is no Christ, we have to say that they lived more in light of the truth than those governed by tenderness wrapped in theory. The pity the person, Christ, has for us does not point to the extinction of our

personal existences, but rather mysteriously, prophetically to their genuine perfection. Faith or hope in the pity of Christ is not self-pity, or the sentimental wish to be free from the experiences of self.

Tenderness wrapped in theory is really a claim to "govern," to dominate politically to eradicate the experiences of suffering and death. The theorist can find no theoretical reason why we were born to die, and so in the name of love he struggles to perfect his theory. That theory's "logical outcome" is the terrible efforts of the Communists and the Nazis to eradicate human individuality, the diverse mixtures of the good and the grotesque that constitute "human imperfection."<sup>47</sup> Such terror aims to make the world perfectly comprehensible to and so completely governed by pitying, really self-pitying, theorists. It wages war against the mystery at the core of human existence. So the theorist opposes *the* most truthful fundamental human experience. O'Connor says that "the basic experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation."<sup>48</sup> Like Percy and the psyche-iatrist, she notices that "The mystery of existence is always showing through the texture of...ordinary lives, and...this makes them irresistible to the novelist."<sup>49</sup>

Father Smith's emphasis is more single-minded than O'Connor. He says that the chemotherapeutic project will end up with the killing of Jews. The eradication of the Jews is at the core of the Cartesian project to do away with human distinctiveness or disorder. More never does figure out exactly why the priest is obsessed with Jews. But we can easily, with the help of Percy's other writing.

The priest is looking for some sign that God has not abandoned the world, and so that all the signs that point to His existence have not disappeared or been deprived of meaning. At one point he says all he can find is the Jews. They, he says, cannot be "subsumed," or "assimilated" into some general, impersonal theory (123-24). Actually all he can find are the Jews and the dying. Most human beings, he believes, have been deprived of faith, sin, and guilt, the signs of the self born to trouble. He presents himself, when not with the dying, as a solitary lunatic (359). He fears that all the scientists have to do is kill the Jews and deprive the dying of their self-consciousness, and nothing distinctively human, no sign of God in the world,

will remain.

Dr. More sees nothing singular about the Jews, but he sees signs of the self in the ordinary human experience of his patients. The psyche-iatrist, as psyche-iatrist, would not know to look for the Jews. Percy agrees with both psyche-iatrist and the priest, seeing further than either, and so he allows them to learn from each other. He says that the Jew and the self "are the only two signs in the post-modern age which cannot be encompassed by theory."

The self is "the portion of the person which cannot be encompassed by theory," the part "conspicuously without a place in the modern world." It is the part which experiences itself as an anxious leftover unexplained by the experts, the part which originates the dialectical search aided by the psyche-iatrist.

The Jews, Percy contends, also "cannot be subsumed under any social or political theory," which "is why they are hated by theorists like Hitler and Stalin." The Jews offend because they claim "that God entered into a covenant with a single tribe, and no other." But "Christianity is doubly offensive because it claims not only this but also God became one man, He and no other." Percy explains that "by 'the Jews' I mean not only Israel, the exclusive people of God, but the worldwide *ecclesia* instituted by one of them, God-become-man, a Jew."<sup>50</sup> The claims of Judeo-Christianity about the personal God and human particularity, and so about the truthful foundation of the experience of the self, are most offensive to modern scientists and theorists. The theoretical war against the Jews, the program for their extermination, is really against the truth about God and the self. Killing the Jews is an act of tenderness, an effort to free human beings from the human experience they signify.

Percy and O'Connor, contrary to our tenderhearted, pragmatic theorist Richard Rorty, say the mixture of theory and excessive sentimentality of secularized Christianity culminates in the unprecedented cruelty of our age. Too much feeling, one result of the absence of faith, causes one not to experience what is good about human life. That experience depends upon the acceptance of suffering, especially the acceptance of the awareness of death. When the person of Christ, Who recognizes all human beings as persons

or beings with souls or selves, is replaced by impersonal or abstract theory, we can no longer recognize the good in the face of a particular, brave, strange, deformed, dying girl. The pity the tender-hearted feel for her, to emphasize again the obvious, they really feel for themselves, despite their good health, personal prosperity, physical beauty, and scientific knowledge-their high quality of life.

O'Connor agrees with Percy (and Father Smith and Dr. More) that our mysterious capability for acceptance is made comprehensible and so easier by faith in Christ, but she may disagree with them by insisting that the unsentimentality of acceptance depends on faith. More's and even the priest's faith in the self, in the dying, is stronger than their faith in the actual existence of the personal God. It seems to me that Percy, a sort of Catholic Socratic-someone who sees what both the Jews and the self signify-did not think that acceptance-although its foundation is undoubtedly mysterious-depends necessarily on O'Connor's faith, a faith that he shared. The dying, who include some affected by psyche-iatry, can be happy enough in light of the truth without faith in the person of Christ.

The patients at Father's Smith hopice and Mary Ann at the Sisters' cancer home knew how to live because they were educated for death. They unflinchingly recognized the truth about the limitation of human life. So they saw the evil-or sinful, self-deceptive perversity and good -or free, courageous, truth acceptance-that characterize human life. The patients at the. Qualitarian center were denied the truth about death, and about good and evil. Even if acceptance is possible without faith, it is also its "necessary precondition. Unless one is really<sup>1</sup> conscious that one's life must end, one cannot hope for another.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps we can say that Percy and O'Connor agree that psyche-iatry, the Socratic way, cannot moderate effectively the extreme derangement or dislocation of our post-Christian, post-modern age. The treatment is too personal and uncertain. Large-scale acceptance, and so a political life devoted to the capacity for personal sovereignty, may depend on the truth of Father Smith's prediction of a return of faith. The return of genuine, dialogic self-examination among our theorists, the process required to toughen their hearts

and quell their romantic idealism, may require the replacement of the equation of Cartesian self-denial with intellectual enlightenment with the return of the intellectual credibility of something like Thomism, the view that revelation or faith completes and is not incompatible with what we know by reason or science.

Percy devoted the theoretical portion of his life to showing that the genuinely scientific knowledge available to us points both to a natural foundation for the self or soul and to the possibility that, as Biblical revelation says, the world and the self are created. He defends "the Scholastic view" that human beings are to be distinguished from angels and the other animals: They "share certain characteristics with the other creatures," but "they are capable of higher perfections peculiar to themselves." Percy aimed to restore "a standard of human existence wholly different from that which we judge the flora of Australia and the ape population of the Congo...a concept of human nature and what is proper to it."<sup>52</sup> He affirms the Scholastic realism of C.S. Peirce and Thomas Aquinas: "There is a real world and...it is possible in a degree to know it and talk about it and be understood."<sup>53</sup> That "strange capacity" to know, to long to know, and to take joy in knowing and sharing knowledge is uniquely human.<sup>54</sup>

The novel's affirmation of the truth of Thomistic natural law is Dr. More's coming to see something of the identity between the Catholic and the genuinely scientific or psyche-iatric understandings of the world. He acknowledges the possible value of that "connection," distinguishing between Catholic and Protestant or Cartesian-influenced Christianity. The Catholic sacrament is the real "mixing up of body and spirit" in the person of Christ. That reality of "the Eucharist" is what "horrified" More's Presbyterian wife (402, 384). The sacrament is a sign of the truth about the self, of a being in the world that is neither pure body nor pure spirit. So it is also a sign about the truth about human *er<sup>g</sup>s* or love, and so of the falsity of the Cartesian effort to eradicate all malformation from the world. More came back to the celebration of Eucharist although he did not yet actually have faith in the God who became man (395).

There is surely a connection between More's complete reentry

into ordinary life, enjoying simple human pleasures (such as recreational vehicles and Disney World) with his wife, children, and other feckless, troubled selves, and his concluding openness to the anthropology of the Catholic Church as signified by the sacraments. Percy explains that "the sacraments, especially the Eucharist...confer the higher significance to the ordinary things of the world, bread, wine, water, touch, breath, words, talking, listening."<sup>55</sup> More's psychiatry, by itself, allowed only his entry into the ordinary lives of his remarkable patients. It did not affect sufficiently his own life, because he partially exempted himself and his own from his theory. His theory remained distorted by a Cartesian residue, which perhaps only his resolute action combined with the words of the priest could remove.

The novel ends hopefully, if not quite prophetically. More had again become Father Smith's friend, and he listens to him more. He occasionally serves Mass for him, although he tells the priest honestly that he is too uncertain to be religious. Father Smith, formerly suspicious, now approves of More's psychiatry, and More even makes an ironic remark to his wife that suggests that he has begun to admit that he thinks about God (370-71). The doctor has certainly become less self-deceptive and more accepting. He is more able to enjoy the present in love with his wife and children, and his parenting skills have improved considerably. He has less need to drink to escape from the burden of time, largely because he is more able to talk to the woman he loves. But a psychiatrist still needs patients, "the lonely hearts, the solitary, aching consciousness," those More calls "my kind of people" (367). Because the chemical treatment was so slow to wear off completely, More became uncertain concerning whether this sort of person would ever return for his help.

Finally, one of his patients, Mickey La Faye, a woman who was before her chemical treatment and who is now again strangely terrified, now by a dream about some stranger, in the midst of good circumstances. She says "I think the stranger is part of myself," and when More asks her who the stranger might be, she says "the deepest part of me." The last two lines of the novel are: "She opens

sations with Walker Percy (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 232.

3. *More Conversations*; p. 232.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, volume 2, part 1, chapter 15 in the context of volume 2, part 1 as a whole:

5. *More Conversations*, p. 82.

6. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), p. 210.

7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 297-98.

8. *Signposts*, p. 259.

9. Guardini, quoted by Lewis Lawson, "Tom More: Walker Percy's Alienated Genius," *South Central Review* 10 (Winter, 1993), p. 50.

10. *More Conversations*, p. 202.

11. On Percy's early and enduring opposition to Rousseau, see the letter he received from Shelby Foote (19 November 1949), *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*, ed. J. Tolson (W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 20-21. The Rousseau discussed throughout my essay is that of *The Discourse on Inequality*.

12. *More Conversations*, p. 187.

13. *More Conversations*, p. 237.

14. *Signposts*, p. 252.

15. Percy, *Signposts*, p. 178.

16. Joseph Cropsey, *Plato's World: Man's Place in the Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 121.

17. Bruell, review of Cropsey, *American Political Science Review* 90 (March, 1996), p. 170.

18. *Signposts*, p. 278.

19. *Signposts*, p. 288.

20. See Lawson, "Tom More."

21. Lawson, p. 50.

22. *More Conversations*, p. 79.

23. Tocqueville, *Democracy*, volume 2, part 1, chapter 7.

24. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

25. *More Conversations*, p. 155.

26. *Signposts*, p. 395.
27. *Signposts*, p. 277.
28. John F. Desmond, *At the Crossroads: Ethical and Religious Themes in the Writings of Walker Percy* (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1997), pp. 66-71.
29. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1959), pp. 157-58. See Desmond, pp. 90-91.
30. Lewis A. Lawson. *Still Following Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 11.
31. Lawson, *Still Following*, pp. 159, 227.
32. See Desmond, pp. 114-15.
33. Lawson, *Still Following*, p. 148.
34. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, ed., *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), pp. 217- 18.
35. *Signposts*, p. 258.
36. *Signposts*, p. 342.
37. *Signposts*, p. 341.
38. *Signposts*, pp. 350-51.
39. Leon Kass, "Dehumanization Triumphant," *First Things* No. 65 (August/September, 1996), pp. 15-16.
40. *More Conversations*, p. 307.
41. *More Conversations*, p. 73.
42. *Conversations*, p. 41.
43. See *More Conversations*, pp. 194, 229.
44. O'Connor, *Mystery*, pp. 223-24.
45. O'Connor, *Mystery*, pp. 226-27.
46. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 227.
47. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 228.
48. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 131.
49. O'Connor, *Mystery*, p. 133.
50. *Signposts*, pp. 312-14.
51. John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 253.
52. *Signposts*, pp. 256-57.

53. *Signposts*, p. 278.

54. *Signposts*, p. 281.

55. *Signposts*, p. 369.

56. *More Conversations*, p. 59.

57. *Signposts*, p. 261.

58. *More Conversations*, p. 75.

The best secondary literature on this novel emphasizes more than I do its theological dimension. See in particular Lewis Lawson, "Tom More: Walker Percy's Alienated Genius." This article contains many wonderful insights and I recommend it be read as a necessary supplement to mine.

59. John Wauck, "Fables of Alienation," *The Human Life Review* (Spring, 1991), pp. 73-94. Wauck's witty account of Percy's message also should be read with mine. Consider especially his summary of Percy's refutation of every form of abstract or self-denying devotion to beauty (the diversions of theorists and artists): "... a particular man can very well do without the Ninth Symphony—the life of the individual, the life every person actually leads, will go on without it...One man's need for another person is utterly unlike mankind's need for Beethoven, and love is the expression of this unique need" (93).

60. *Signposts*, p. 388.

61. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Sickness unto Death* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1954), p. 163 with *Conversations*, p. 49. See Desmond *At the Crossroads* and Lewis Lawson, *Following Percy* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1988) for all sorts of insights into Percy indebtedness to Kierkegaard. But Percy's reading of Lawson's analysis of his debts caused him to recommend that the critic look less for Kierkegaard and more for Thomas and Thomism in his novels (Patrick Samway, *Walker Percy: A Life* [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997], pp. 250-51).

her mouth to speak. Well well well" (372). More has become certain that human well-being is talking about the strange depths of the self. The *thanatos* syndrome properly understood is integral to the human condition, and it is one not to be cured by human effort. From one view, as Percy says, the "'human condition'...is essentially a terminal illness."<sup>56</sup> The human efforts at such a cure, even through the killing of millions, are based on a mistaken view of the quality of human life. The novel ends with a certainty about the strangeness and goodness of the experience of dislocation of the languaged being, and only the possibility of faith in the person of Christ.

We may learn from More, or at least from his self-deception or unacknowledged anger, that whether or not there is a God, part of the strangeness and goodness of man is what Percy calls his "incurable God-directedness."<sup>57</sup> But if man is to find God, he must begin by "communicating" what he really knows about himself to others, and both self-knowledge and the "human connection" are good in themselves, whatever the ultimate results of the search.<sup>58</sup>

As John Wauck nicely sums things up, Percy says men need both God and women. The love of a woman, another embodied, mortal, strange, wonderful self, is the self's mysterious and perhaps more than ample compensation for its unique misery, even if one cannot believe in God.<sup>59</sup> Still, the "movement...toward God" is helpful even for loving women and all the other joys of this world.<sup>60</sup> Through that movement, Percy says, his characters "become themselves, not abstracted like scientists but fully incarnate beings in the world." The good that is one self's love for another is perfected is the experience of oneself fully transparent before God.<sup>61</sup>

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## NOTES

1. See my "Bloom's Ineffectual Response to Rorty: Pragmatism, Existentialism, and American Political Thought Today," *Community and Political Thought Today*, ed. P. Lawler and D. McConkey (Westport, CT: Praeger 1998).

2. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, eds., *More Conver-*