

## Liberating the Future from the Past? Liberating the Past from the Future?

[The title is a question put to entrants in a 1998 essay contest sponsored by Weimar, Germany, “the European Cultural Capital in 1999,” and the literary journal *Lettre Internationale*. The contest organizers initially chose “Liberating the Future from the Past?” from among a slew of proposals, but then supplemented it by posing the question in reverse, in the hope that the resulting compound question would “prove sufficiently ambivalent in embracing associations ranging from Nietzsche’s ‘untimely’ critique of historical formation to the surrealistic disassembly of the continuous universe.” ]

*He has two antagonists: the first pushes him from behind, from his origin. The second blocks his road ahead. He struggles with both. Actually the first supports him in his struggle with the second, for the first wants to push him forward; and in the same way the second supports him in his struggle with the first, for the second of course forces him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two protagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions?*

—Franz Kafka, “He”

### I. Liberty and Imagination

Liberation is an idea dear to us all. Who would deny the blessings of liberty to whoever or whatever might be proposed to receive them? Never mind that the recipient is, in the present case, an abstraction, a mere temporal modality, rather than a being of flesh and blood. Never mind what the future and the past might make of their liberty, let them both be liberated—but from what? Why, each from the other! Let us liberate the future from the past *and* the past from the future—each, presumably, holding the other presently in thrall. (And what of the present—is *its* liberation assured, or of lesser concern?)

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But how, precisely, does the past impair the liberty of the future? Surely, what has passed determines what is to pass. Due allowance must be made for the liberty of the human will, the unpredictability of chaotic systems, and the uncertainty of physical events at the quantum level. Even so, past is undeniably prologue and prologue constrains epilogue. Human ingenuity has nibbled away at some of the boundaries of the given, but only at the margins of an enormous page, most of whose contents will ever be, as they ever have been, beyond human amendment. So the future will never be liberated from the past, if what we mean by that is the casting loose of the reins of causation.

In another sense, though, the past further constrains the future by an intermediate process of constraining what we can imagine the future to hold, or to be capable of holding. We take a diminished view of our capacities for future accomplishment—however narrow those may already be—by dint of lessons from the past, which suggest that they are narrower still, or are too dangerous to employ. Ours has been a century obsessed with the discovery of the limits by which we are constrained; Gödel's proof that mathematical truth can never fully be captured within a formal system; Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, expressing the impossibility of our knowing all there is to know about the lowly electron; or, on another note, the failure of Soviet Communism as disproof of human perfectability by political effort.

But—to clarify the second question—how has the future impaired (how shall it impair) the liberty of the past? Ostensibly, the past has no liberty. Whatever capacity for liberty it may have possessed before it came to be, it spent in the very moment of its becoming. Once the past is set, it is ever so, and would be so whether or not there were a future still possessed of a liberty to be and to be otherwise. The future does not shackle the past; the past is shackled by its very pastness.

Yet, in a less literal sense, the future can constrain the past. It can do so because the past has vanished and what vitality it keeps depends on what traces it has left and what we now and tomorrow will make of them. Whatever constrains our interpretation of the ambiguous traces of the

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past—the artifacts, the journals, the histories—constrains also the liberty of the past itself, insofar as that liberty can only consist in the past's ability to make itself, rather than a later generation's biased version of it, heeded and heard. When a generation becomes obsessed with the future, as ours is, the past loses all interest except as prologue to what we reckon to be coming. Neophilia begets neomorphism, the tendency to see everything in terms of the future. The past is retrofitted to suit it to serve as prologue not to what will come, but to what we have decided must come.

There is a yet more poignant sense in which we might ask how, and whether, to liberate the past from the future. We are soon to be occupants of the past, rather than the present or the future. This is not to say that we have do not have interests that will survive us, for we emphatically do. If humanity and its achievements fall into untimely oblivion, we are all diminished, whether we are sensible of the loss or not. The liberty of the past we are soon to inhabit is impaired by the future's likely indifference to us—if thought of at all, we will be imagined rather than remembered.

True enough, our oblivion is already assured; humanity's ultimate fate had already been sealed long before history began. The universe began with a bang; the debris is everything that there is, but there is not enough of it to prevent its dispersing endlessly. Our sun is an ordinary star, too small to explode but too large not to bulge as it consumes itself. In a billion years, its luminosity will have become so intense that Earth's surface will be uninhabitable. Over the next six billion years, the sun will swell to the size of Earth's present orbit, glazing its crust. It makes little difference whether we stay and incinerate, or escape, because the "stelliferous era"—as astronomers Fred Adams and Gregory Laughlin have called it—will close only  $10^{14}$  years after it began. This means that normal star formation will have ceased even as all remaining stars age and die, and massive black holes sweep up their remains. Chance collisions of brown dwarves and other degenerate stellar objects will occasionally cause short-lived stellar masses to flare into being; but about  $10^{30}$  years from now, there will be no more stars shining anywhere.

Expansion continues, of course. Black holes will gradually

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evaporate, fizzling off “Hawking” radiation for as long as  $10^{100}$  years—giving off the only warmth to be felt anywhere in the universe. In the meantime, proton decay will have been at work, and, no sooner than  $10^{31}$  years from now, matter as we know it will begin to disappear. As time stretches on, each lonely, degraded or fantastically enlarged particle can only recede endlessly from every other in a vast, endless, placeless void, not even black, dwindling forever and ever. “L’*éternité est très longue,*” as a French wit once quipped, “*surtout à la fin.*”

This chilling news has arrived piecemeal over the century and a half since Helmholtz foretold the “heat death” of the cosmos. Its power to paralyze our imaginations can hardly be overstated. Here is a sense in which the future unquestionably can shackle the past, that is, the present and near future, which are destined to be the past for the more remote future. To conceive the future *sub specie aeternitatis* is to risk beggaring the imagination altogether. But how ridiculous, really, to remain immobilized in our armchairs, bemused by thought of what will happen a billion years hence! Especially when we are exposed to numberless other hazards (asteroid impacts, gamma-ray bursts, plagues, and so forth) that by collective, which is to say political, action we might mitigate or avoid.

The idea that the fate of humanity is both precarious and in human hands has been rather late in coming. Until Leo Szilard discovered how we could blow it up, and Rachel Carson exposed how we were gumming it up, the temporal world was taken to be an eternal stage where each generation would routinely have its turn to strut and pace. Most religions are built around a story in which humanity’s end, as much as its origin, is supernaturally fixed. Armageddon had, until recently, meant only that the spiritual world would eventually subsume the temporal—rather than that the temporal would bang or fizzle itself out all on its own. Save in the remaining refuges of religious belief, all that is gone.

The aftermath of the Enlightenment has taken two broadly distinct paths. One, the deistic, curtails divine influence in temporal affairs while leaving it full rein in matters of eschatology. The other, the atheistic, dispenses with the divine hypothesis altogether but, in its Marxist varieties,

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has sanguinely assumed that utopia is the assured if distant end of human history. At the end of history, the class struggle will declare the foreordained winner, and our posterity shall be living in the best of all possible worlds. But leave God and socialism out of it, and the future will be whatever future consumers are willing to pay for it to be—the odd catastrophe and market failure aside. Considering the bleakness of the strictly secular forecast, it is little wonder that the vast bulk of humanity continues to imagine what religious doctrine prompts it to imagine with regard to final things.

The two liberties and their impairments involve a single limiting medium: the imagination. The past shackles the future by limiting where we can imagine being able to go; the future shackles the past by limiting what we can imagine the past to have told us about where we may yet go, and by threatening to frustrate the past's surviving interest in being fulfilled. The liberty at stake is not, strictly speaking, that of the past or future at all, but of ourselves. And the hindrances are not, strictly speaking, posed by past or future at all, but by our imaginations, which is to say, by ourselves. Whereas future and past are, as Kant put it, merely modes of representation rather than things in themselves, our liberty, to follow out Kant's line, is absolute. Our liberty is absolute but our power to enjoy it is constrained by the obstacles and opportunities we imagine, as much as by those that exist.

### II. Imagination and Politics

The imagination itself is a social achievement, rather than an innate faculty, so Rousseau believed; presocial, "natural" man had none. Strip away all of our supernatural and historical attributes to find the natural man, and the savage revealed, being so sunk "in the single feeling of his own present existence," will be seen to have no imagination. Liberating the imagination cannot, therefore, be a matter of disencumbering ourselves of history and culture altogether, although it may very well involve our jettisoning this or that item of historical baggage. And it is fair to say that at the end of this century, there is a near-consensus (among the secularly minded, at least)

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about what we have carried along with us that now must go. What must go is the very idea of a collective *τελος*. There is no end at which humanity (or its future history) aims; there are only ends that humans severally pursue. Humans pursue their several ends not necessarily alone (for they may find it useful to associate for these purposes) but not necessarily in conjunction with anybody else, either. Politics has no role here except to secure to each the space and, perhaps, the minimum means needed to customize our several happinesses.

Along with any notion of a collective teleology, the consensus would also have us jettison any authority deriving therefrom. Church, state, family, the professions, have to be reconceived as possessing whatever authority they have solely in virtue of the service they render to the sovereign individual in pursuit of this or that individual ideal. To the extent that traditional authorities cannot be reconstructed on this basis, and instead rest on a bare appeal to an end beyond the individual's choosing, they stand discredited.

It would be a mistake to think that the imagination, so liberated from teleology and authority, and so given over to chance and individual choice, now might freely envisage all possible futures. At millennium's end, we face a single, dominant picture of what is in store for us. Michael Ignatieff writes: "Whenever I try to imagine a future other than the one towards which we seem to be hurtling, I find myself dreaming a dream of the past." What is this future "towards which we seem to be hurtling?" It is a future that is unencumbered by the dreams of the past; it is technological, "digital," electronic, transnational, global, instantaneous, commercial, capitalistic, apolitical, and endlessly pluralistic and endlessly acquisitive.

The future, the "one...towards which we seem to be hurtling," is an imagined one as much as the alternatives which we more readily discount as imaginary, and which we find, on inspection, to be one or another "dream of the past." The "one" future toward which we hurtle even as we dream it, and which we wrongly suppose to be more straightforwardly real, not dreamt, not projected, is one that in fact we have collectively decided

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to allow. We “hurtle” toward it, rather than embrace it, because we have entrusted the future to invisible forces—an invisible hand or hands—that foreclose any effort to impose continuity or even intelligibility. They foreclose, moreover, any effort to impose fraternity or solidarity, even now, and far more so across generations.

But we have not frivolously entrusted the human future to economic forces while liberating it from political ones—this bloody century has persuaded us (perhaps too readily) that political control tends inexorably to tyranny. Even if exercised along the most benevolently Rousseauvian lines, political control squelches liberty, and can function only quixotically, for the acquisitive urges of humanity can accept no stable constraints. The dilemma of fraternity and liberty has been decisively resolved in favor of liberty. The yearning for fraternity remains with us as a residue of alienation and nostalgia, and nothing on our present horizon seems capable of answering it—notwithstanding oxymoronic invocations of an imminent “global” or “electronic” community. Between the agora of Athens and the global holographic chat room lies a gulf that our nature as embodied beings has firmly fixed. Our imaginations—and thus also our intentions—wander distractedly between these poles, unable to recover the first or to embrace the latter.

### III. Spiraling into Dreamworld

Under the dictatorship of the invisible hand, new needs are invented as rapidly as existing ones are satisfied, and social inequality must grow, and grow without any internal limit. Even John Rawls’s modestly egalitarian “difference” principle tolerates a limitlessly increasing gap between the worse-off and the better, so long as the worst-off are made better off in absolute terms. It is imaginable that even the underclasses of the future will be fabulously better off than the well-off of today; and yet, due to the ineluctably relative nature of self-esteem, may display, even more acutely than now, the pathologies that afflict the underclass: a propensity to reproduce irresponsibly, to have shorter life-expectancies due to greater

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relative susceptibility to disease, and to commit suicide at a higher rate. Assume, further, the disappearance of social pressures against suicide, and one can imagine an underclass that reproduces and extinguishes itself at arbitrarily high rates. Or is there hope in the prospect of an affordable “genetic supermarket” where, as Jonathan Glover describes it, the worse-off can buy what they need to design offspring lacking their own competitive disadvantages? Sadly, no amount of eugenic provision will ever guarantee success for all, for one’s own success is too often dependent on its nonattainment by others; “it is not enough to succeed, others must fail” is not a gratuitous twist but an ironic tautology.

Does the essential exclusivity of status goods guarantee that there will forever be scarcity; that, in other words, Rawls’s “circumstances of justice” will, in this respect, forever be with us, as the poor themselves are said to be? To suppose so would be to underestimate the capacity of the market to define goods, as well as to distribute them. Only one person at a time can be the world’s best squash player, for example, but the *experience* of being that person is something that, if not now then soon, can be perfected, packaged, and marketed. And why would one want to be the world’s best squash player unless to enjoy the experience of it? As Robert Nozick points out, experience machines won’t satisfy us if what we want is really to be and do, as well as to experience being and doing. But if this preference is just that, and nothing else, it is one that can be shaped and manipulated just as any other. And if all that is missing is chance, effort, and involvement with others, then let there be what Glover calls the “dreamworld,” in which multiple players plug into linked experience machines that offer them, for example, the gratifying experience of cooperatively overcoming the hardships of Scott’s return from the pole, or of the Empire’s strike against the Rebellion, or of the old course at St. Andrew’s on a blustery day.

Experience will soon fall within our complete technological control, but reality will not. Science uncovers new natural threats as fast as it provides means to overcome those already known. Yet, far fewer resources have been spent, for example, on the project of preventing asteroid impacts

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(remember the dinosaurs?—each generation stands a one in nine-thousand chance of meeting a similar fate) than on the project of portraying their consequences on movie and video screens around the world. If this seems deplorable, remind yourself that the money spent in the theaters is spent voluntarily, but the money spent on prevention will have been coercively exacted in pursuit of some controversial ideal. Never mind that generations sunk in ever more persuasive simulations of space conquest may neglect the real thing. If the invisible hand directs that the luxurious and universally available simulation of human achievement shall be the ultimate human achievement, so be it. As long as we remain prosperous by our own measure and uncoerced, what ground can there be for complaint?

### IV. Luxury and Longevity

“Precisely what, then, is at issue in this question of luxury? To know whether it is more important for empires to be brilliant and fleeting, or virtuous and long-lasting.” Thus Rousseau, in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, his Dijon Academy prize essay, on the question, “Whether the restoration of the sciences and the arts contributed to the purification of morals” —to which he replied in the negative. (Also in the negative is Hannah Arendt’s answer to the question, Whether space travel enhanced the status of humanity). Rousseau had silently dismissed the possibility that an empire of endless consumption, caught up in what Ignatieff calls a “blind upward spiral of needs” for fetishised commodities and status goods incapable by their nature of general provision, might perpetuate itself indefinitely, eluding the limits of earthly resources by its protean aptitude for adjustment. The technologies of virtual reality promise (or threaten) to render experience itself, with all its luxuries, reproducible in a digital medium. If Las Vegas itself is unsustainable—due to the shortage of stubbornly undigitizable water in the desert in which it lies—virtual Las Vegas is not so limited.

We won’t need Las Vegas, but we will need people (won’t we? Let’s assume that replacing ourselves with androids is not what we are

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about). It may be surprising that the standard types of normative ethical theory do not offer resources sufficient to guarantee (nonparadoxically anyway) the continuation of the species. Deontological views often constrain the exercise of sexual powers, but (Roman Catholicism aside) they do not enjoin procreation—it occurs at the option of individuals. Utilitarian and similar welfare-consequentialist views, if construed to enjoin that there be people, tend to enjoin what intuition tells us would be far too many people. Derek Parfit's "mere addition" paradox lays bare the problem: if our moral theory tells us to make sure there are people because it tells us to maximize something (like utility) that presupposes that there are people, then it seems also to tell us to make sure that there as many people as can be, so long as their lives are at least barely worth living. The "repugnant" conclusion toward which this type of view tends may turn the theorist in the direction of a "satisficing" rather than maximizing principle—satisficing meaning, enough, but not necessarily too much. But that leaves us no clue as to how much is enough and, if the invisible, apolitical hand, is left in charge, we may face extinction (because too few can be bothered to reproduce) or superabundance (because of the Thrasymachuses visiting the cloning clinics, busy building private armies of goons or code-writing microserfs).

A satisficing rather than maximizing approach to providing for the future makes Rousseau's "question of luxury" all the more pertinent. A satisficing approach enjoins us to bring about enough good, not necessarily all the good that is capable of being brought about. Luxury, in contrast, means more than enough than we need. Unfortunately, as Ignatieff has emphasized, need is not a stable concept. Due respect must mean more than the minimum that keeps the "poor, bare, forked animal" alive, but once we admit that need is a relative, not an absolute notion, we are forced to recognize its elasticity. Once relativized and, thus, elasticized, need will follow wherever the twin ingenuities of marketing and technology will drive it; which is to say, ...wherever.

The alternative is to take a qualitative and objective approach to the question of need and luxury. What we need of posterity is, simply, that the

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story that was begun by the ancestors whom we most admire, and that we have (in our way) continued, be carried on. If our needs burden posterity, so do our undoubted duties to them burden us. Any duty an earlier generation owes to a later one presupposes, as Avner de-Shalit has argued, that there is sufficient “moral similarity” between the two. Just as what we want is to achieve, rather than the mere experience of achieving, so also what we expect of posterity is achievement, not mere simulation. If the future generations we imagine are to be morally similar to our own, their worlds must involve—even be built around—accomplishments of at least the same order as those that we have inherited. But how is that possible? A legacy of global luxury will not accomplish that.

The market can never make adequate provision for the future for the simple but sufficient reason that prices can only reflect the demands of existing consumers. Those prices will reflect whatever taste for a future beyond their own that present consumers happen to have. It happens that there is a negative correlation between economic wealth and fertility—the more that people have, and the more productive they must be to have it, the less they can be bothered to cultivate their reproductive tastes, and in several European countries the current birth rate is well below the replacement level. Moreover, familiar problems of market failure are present here in an especially severe degree because only the nearest next generation(s) is likely to be accounted for among the tastes of the living. Only by political effort is it possible to constrain consumption to a degree we might think suitable to conserve worthwhile resources for a more distant posterity. But, if our only measure of what is worth conserving is what we expect posterity to thank us for having conserved, we have to ask, what can the basis of this expectation be, unless it is one that we have imposed, and imposed politically, on the shape of tastes to come?

Education was Adam Smith’s solution to the problem of rampant consumption; virtuous self-restraint was to be instilled in the young before they entered the marketplace. That was an easier answer when something close to a consensus of the learned existed around the proper content and aim of education. That is gone, and Smith also could not foresee the extent

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to which education would become but one “channel” among a multitude of others clamoring for the attention of the young, nor the extent to which education would itself be reshaped to condition them to enter Ignatieff’s “spiraling dialectic of need and human labor”—with the result that, as David Bromwich puts it, “young people now are taught to construct their self-images by personalized consumption, and to regard the world as an extension of desired or undesired self-imagery,” well in advance of any exposure to critical thought.

The market can bear the costs of dreamworld technology because the dreamworld is tailored to (even as it reciprocally tailors) the demands of presently existing consumers. The market cannot bear the costs of real achievements on the scale of the containment (much less the conquest) of outer space because those costs cannot be recovered quickly enough to satisfy the demands of presently existing investors. Big science exacts a big price; one that democracies are less-and-less willing to pay. It has been suggested that the miles-long subterranean ring dug in the Texas plain, which was to have housed the superconducting supercollider that the United States Congress was unwilling to pay to complete, will be regarded by future archaeologists as the high-water mark of our civilization—its great pyramids. It will mark the point at which a political decision was reached that it was better to leave wealth in the hands of consumers than to invest it in further pursuit of basic knowledge.

The political will presently manifested in the international space station project is fragile, and may well shatter under the pressure of costs—estimated at \$40 billion (and counting) to get the station up and another \$40 billion to run it for ten years. These figures do not reflect the probability of a major failure during the assembly phase—recently estimated three in four. (“Come back with your heat shields, or upon them”?) The project was conceived, along with the “Star Wars” anti-missile system, as a weapon in the cold war against the Soviet Union, whose chastened Russian successor state has now been included for public relations and humanitarian, as well as practical, reasons. Only a minor miracle will be able to save the project from the journalistic scorn that has

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been the reward of the heroic Mir endeavor. “Haven’t we more pressing needs on Earth?”—the question will be impossible to evade; and the “needs” at issue will be understood to be those of the present, not of the past or future.

### V. Beneficence and Justice

Human beings are not disembodied, free-floating, abstract wraiths hovering just outside and above the world; nor are they normally capable of limitless concern about what happens elsewhere in the world. Commonsense morality is premised upon our individual situatedness and feebleness, and this is the basis of its distinction between doing and allowing, killing and letting die. I *do* injury to the man whom I strike with my fist; but I (merely) *allow* injury to those whose starvation I might, but don’t, prevent by a small gift to a relief organization.

But technology has destroyed the premiss. MacCaulay could well ask if a surgeon could rightly be demanded to go from Calcutta to Meerut to perform an operation; but could he now ask, with the same assurance of a negative response, whether a surgeon might be required to have an imperceptible fraction of his income diverted “through the capillaries of the state” (Ingnatieff’s wonderful phrase) to provide for the needy of India? Our predicament is that all former divisions of moral labor, and the authority they conveyed, have collapsed. Between the poles of solipsism and a strenuously cosmopolitan consequentialism (all the more strenuous if the circle of concern is expanded to include all sentient beings, or all animals, or—in the impossible extreme—all entities whatsoever), the ground has been leveled. Communitarian thinkers, appalled by the rigorous uniformity of the resulting plain, would break it into chunks of more manageable, “human” size by working up the remnants of family, tribe, sect and nation-state into familiar partitions. But these partitionings of concern are, all of them, unable to withstand the relentless gale of rational scrutiny. What can be morally special about *my* family, *my* sect, *my* nation, other than me! me! me!

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But mere egoism is not the conscious impulse motivating the reaction against the featureless rigor of consequentialism; there is rather this concern: *If I spend my efforts helping the families of strangers, and ruin my own, what is the gain?* No plausible duty of beneficence can tolerate an inequitable and onerous burden to fall on the conscientious few. No adequate theory of beneficence, therefore, can do without an authority that apportions duties and benefits and punishes free-riding. The technological revolution makes patent what Rousseau perceived to be the true “state of nature”: absent political authority, what humankind faces is not so much a war of all against all, as a neglect of all by all.

As Michael Walzer has pointed out, every age commits itself to distributing universally the basic means to what it most values—in medieval Europe, spiritual guidance; in modern Europe, health care; and (so we may suppose) in the Soviet Union, the means of production; and in fin-de-siècle America, laptop computers. Prosperity makes available expanded means to minister to the needs of the neglected; but it does nothing to promote the end of so ministering. Against the contrasting backdrop of growing prosperity, the needy stand out as “broken windows” signifying antiquated social pathologies. We complain of “empathy burnout,” and begin to see the needy as unfit slackers who must redouble their efforts to “join us”—the prospering—“or die.” The generations to come, on the other hand, are assumed to be so far better off than we, and so “differently” off, that contemplating what they will enjoy arouses a restlessly invidious curiosity that might as well be termed “future envy.” Who doesn’t yearn to hang on long enough to glimpse the wonders the future holds? And what props up this wish but an assumption that the good can only get better? Even the dystopias of science fiction tend to have neat stuff that makes today look really boring. And what can we be to them other than as boring and quaint as our stuff will be?

Were we to bequeath an expanded duty of beneficence to posterity we might hope to benefit by its laying the basis for a transgenerational community in which we might well not otherwise be included. There is an isomorphism, as Derek Parfit has shown, between the concern each of us

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has for his own future self—or, really, his own future *selves*—and the concern each has for the contemporary selves of others. By teaching ourselves to care about others we teach them to care about us, whether those others are our contemporaries or successor generations.

But what would it mean for a future generation to care about an earlier one? Isn't "caring" essentially prospective? One can care about the dead by seeing to it that the central projects of the dead are not carelessly frustrated. But this of course means that the dead must have had some project transcending their own temporal existence. If all that Caesar sought was contemporaneous glory, there is nothing that we now can do for him. But what claim could Caesar's quest for immortal glory make on us? Why should we care whether Caesar is forgotten? (Is there simply, as D.H. Lawrence claimed, "a deadly breach between actual living and...abstract caring?") Why should we care whether *we* are forgotten? But—if we do care—what project might we now pursue that could even begin to make a claim to the concern of later generations? What project could benefit them, in terms of what they will value?

"If political theory is to be converted into an applied science, what is needed is a single dominant model—like the doctor's model of a healthy body—accepted by the whole, or the greater part, of the society in question. The model will be its 'ideological foundation,'"—thus, Sir Isaiah Berlin. But haven't we just such a model in the idea of the perpetuation of the species? So we have, but if enduring political philosophies all rest upon "a vivid vision of permanent human attributes" (Berlin), what can we expect of a future we project to include nothing permanent, beyond perhaps sentience, and perhaps including not even appetites (or none that we now know), reproductive (as opposed to sexual) urges or needs, or even locomotive power as we conceive it?

The paradox is this: to the extent that the denizens of the future are unlike us, we cannot care about them; but to the extent that we imagine them to resemble us, we force them into the molds of our past. Furthermore, to assure that they will resemble us would require curtailments of liberty that we may not wish and may not have the will to

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carry out even if we did wish them. We resist the thought of such constraints because constraint has, as we imagine our past, conclusively demonstrated its propensity to evil. Auschwitz, the Gulag, the cultural revolution, and countless other enormities lesser only in size, will not and must not be forgotten; our bloody century has witnessed perhaps as many as one hundred million deaths caused, directly or indirectly, by politics, by political constraint, exercised in pursuit of ideals. Better, we think, to liberate the future from this past of politics. And if, in the process, all trace of us vanishes? We will soon be dead and irrelevant anyway.

### VI. Ends

“Which way to drive the human caravan?”—as Sir Isaiah, echoing St.-Simon, was wont to ask. The temptation is to try to specify a destination rather than a direction. Suppose we yield and specify some single ultimate destination; for example, that humanity take aim at an “Omega Point” (in the phrase of astrophysicists John Barrow and Frank Tipler) to be reached when, through the single-minded pursuit of knowledge and power, we have evolved powers sufficient to enable us to have gone *everywhere* in the universe and done *everything*, penetrating every mystery along the way, and in the process transforming the inert thingness of things into an active component of a living intelligence. This proposal is not to be dismissed as lacking audacity. But, as science journalist Ed Regis drily concludes:

when all this happened ... life would have brought the entire physical universe to a state of self-awareness. It would have transformed a dead cosmos into a living, thinking entity.

And that would be the end.

So much for the idea of an ultimate oasis—once attained, if attainable, *the* end means The End.

This is another way in which the future shackles the past, that is, shackles the history that might be written of us were we not enervated by

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the prospect of anticlimactic ennui on the far side of any successful “great hubristic adventure.” Even if consciousness could be perpetuated in the ever-dispersing dustcloud of eternity, as physicist Freeman Dyson has suggested, it is not easy to conceptualize this dustcloud as any more like us than an ordinary dustcloud. It is even harder to imagine how such a dustcloud, if conscious, would pass the time. But the emptiness of these imagined destinations does not warrant the conclusion that all directions are equally pointless. “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” is just as worthy an aim if we leave out the finding, and certainly worthier than merely imagining all of the above. At the end of the millennium, just as 250 years ago, the alternative we face is precisely what Rousseau defined: Spartan discipline and survival, so to be “virtuous and long-lasting,” though neither all-conquering nor immortal, or *laissez-faire* and early oblivion, the “brilliant and fleeting” future toward which we now hurtle.

### VII. Ranking Ends

“Brilliant and fleeting,” or “virtuous and long-lasting” —the implicit ranking is worth remarking on. “Long-lasting” surely is better than “fleeting”; but, then, there is no dilemma if “virtuous” is simply better than “brilliant.” Only if being fleeting is a price we pay for a more desirable brilliance can Rousseau be pointing out a difficulty. Only if brilliance and virtue are opposed in a way that presents the former as preferable to the latter, can we reduce Rousseau’s dilemma to this familiar pattern: better to serve in heaven or rule in hell? Better to be an unhappy Socrates or a happy pig? If we *could* be brilliant and long-lasting (rule in heaven, be a happy Socrates), then, by all means!

Let me try to put Rousseau’s dilemma differently, in terms of a pair of oppositions: between stronger and weaker ideas of the good, and between stronger and weaker ideas of equality—understanding the good not, for this purpose, to encompass equality (whether they are ultimately related is a question to which I will return). We can understand political organization as having any one of four different combinations of ends,

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which can be rendered graphically, thus:

Thick purpose, thick equality	Thick purpose, thin equality
Thin purpose, thick equality	Thin purpose, thin equality

Some explanation is necessary. By “thick purpose” I mean the pursuit, through politics, of what philosophers like Rawls call “comprehensive conceptions of the good,” and by “thin purpose” I mean whatever state purposes would be tolerated by Rawlsian or other liberal restrictions. The important difference is that a thin purpose is supposed to be acceptable, in some sense, to all reasonable people, however much they might otherwise disagree about philosophical, religious, and moral matters, while thick purposes are ones that reasonable people might reasonably reject.

By “thick equality” I mean any principle of distributive justice ready to enforce limits, direct or indirect, on the acceptable degree of divergence of people’s material fortunes. “Thin” equality tends, in contrast, to confine itself to equality of “negative” liberty, that is, to equal freedom from restraint by others, to invoke Sir Isaiah’s term. Thin equality embraces bare political equality but sternly rejects what Robert Nozick calls “patterned” views of material equality. If concerned at all with “positive” liberty (meaning, access to effective means, rather than mere freedom from restraint), the thin view of equality allows the state to function as, at most, a guarantor of some “social minimum” or safety net defined by a baseline that does not conceal any redistributive impulse.

For example, Rawls’s view is thin on purpose but thick on equality. Thick on equality but—designedly—only barely so. Rawls’s “difference principle” tolerates limitless degrees of material inequality, subject only to the condition that such degrees contribute in some measure (“trickle down”?) to the betterment of the worst-off. In absolute terms, the gulf has no limit. Rawls complicates his view by acknowledging that inequalities

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of wealth may impair the “fair value” of political liberties, whose equality is a “lexically prior” demand of justice. Whether this epicycle is enough to prevent Rawls from being drawn toward an even thicker equality is a nice question, to which I will return.

Rawls’s theory is “thin” on purpose but, again, only barely so. Choosers behind the “veil of ignorance” that defines his celebrated “original position” take no interest in each other’s interests and do not even know what comprehensive conception of the good they embrace. This sounds thin, but these choosers are also to be conceived of as “heads of households,” concerned to continue the human drama (or at least their genetic lines in it) by means of mutually beneficial cooperation. A bit thick? The reproduction of political society over time is, Rawls suggests, a thin purpose in that it can be justified by appeal to a “public reason” no one may reasonably reject. What one wants is an explanation why one might not reasonably reject (as many do) the role of head-of-household. One might suspect that that way lies the thick.

For the sake of comparison, note that Robert Nozick’s theory aspires to be thin both on purpose and equality, and this is typical of libertarian thinkers, and of the Austrian economists von Mises and Hayek, as well as the Chicago school of latter-day utilitarianism. Rousseau, in contrast, was thick on both purpose and equality—thick on equality *because* thick on purpose—and virtually alone in being so. Into the quadrant of those whose outlooks are thick on purpose and thin on equality fall the bulk of political thinkers in the West, from Plato and Aristotle to Augustine and Locke, and including most of those of a conservative cast—Burke, Strauss, Oakeshott, and so on. Finally, Marxists (and perhaps Marx) and socialists of several stripes have taken positions similar to Rawls’s in being thick on equality—*thicker*—but thin on purpose.

I want to argue that Rousseau was in the right ballpark, that is, he was right to be thick on both purpose and equality, and that practically everyone else has gone wrong. The perpetuation of the species is a thick good, one not realizable by the invisible hand. Rousseau was working in the right domain because only there is it possible to discover that endurance

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demands a thick degree of concern for our successors that is incompatible with any thinner a degree of concern for those removed from us not in time but in space, and that a concern for (beneficent attitude toward) others is necessitated by any purpose to perpetuate the human species. Moreover, a thick degree of concern for others is incompatible with a thin equality between them. In this sense, only the virtuous can be long-lasting. The constraints of virtue impair brilliance in the sense of luxurious fulfillment of our several wishes. But brilliance, where it luxuriates unchecked, leads to Ignatieff's endless spiral and is thus doomed to sterility. Thus, the dilemma forced by the question of luxury that Rousseau posed a quarter-millennium ago.

### VIII. Thickening Purpose

Thin purposes thicken under scrutiny. Wittingly or not, all political systems imply, as Paul Valéry put it, "a certain conception of humanity, and even an opinion about the destiny of the species, an entire metaphysic which embraces the crudest sensuality and the most daring mysticism." Voluntaristic accounts of justice, like Rawls's, inevitably impose purpose even as they proclaim that all is optional. Consider again the original position: why are the privileged choosers to be conceived as heads of households, and why endowed with a purpose to maximize not their own well-being but the well-being of their genetic lines? Perpetuating civil society may well be the necessary means to this end, but why this end? Reproductive labor is not only divided (currently, anyway) between male and female, but also between those interested in it and those who are not. Not every reasonable person chooses to have a child or to head a household; and surely there are other ways of exercising the moral powers with which Rawls endows the person, thinly conceived.

If we look to a truly thin Kantian contractualism or to an ever-so-thin utilitarianism for general guidance, all that matters is consent, on the one hand, and the surplus of pleasure over pain, on the other. Approached either way, the most commonplace tabus seem unstable; even the

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ubiquitous tabu against incest becomes problematic. These general approaches, as Piers Benn has pointed out, treat sex as nothing special—but this is hard to accept. It is even less plausible to say that reproduction, as well as sex, is not morally special, for that undercuts the stubborn intuition that the continuation of the species is a compelling end wholly apart from whether it happens to be desired or happens to yield a surplus of pleasure over pain.

Some moral labor is divisible, but not all. The forbearance of saints does not excuse the incontinence of sinners when it comes to refraining from taking life. Why should the fecundity of sinners excuse the abstinence of saints when it comes to creating it? As Henry Adams observed at the dawn of this century, by the dynamic of capitalism woman “must become sexless like the bees...inertia of sex could not be overcome without extinguishing the race, yet an immense force, doubling every few years, was working irresistibly to overcome it.” Aldous Huxley, writing a quarter-century later, recognized that we were at the threshold of being able to decouple sex and reproduction altogether. And why not? In another twenty-five years, Andy Warhol was baffled by the persistence of a kind of Luddite atavism: “When I look around today, the biggest anachronism I see is pregnancy. I just can’t believe people are still pregnant.” If making baby clothes oneself seems quaint, why not making babies itself? The compulsory orphanages that haunt the history of political philosophy are now joined by the spectre of automated gestatoria.

If it seems monstrous to suggest that gestational labor might legitimately be forced on anyone, consider that many believe that gestational labor, once begun, is permissible to require to be taken to a natural conclusion in birth; and it is nearly universally believed that, once gestation concludes in parturition, it is permissible to impose on parents a laborious duty of support. And, granted that the forced inception of labor must remain suspect, what of compulsory wealth-transfers through taxation to subsidize those who are willing to reproduce the “old-fashioned” way? And what of official propaganda intended to inculcate the desire to make babies the old-fashioned way? Nothing could be a clearer case of the past

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shackling the future, unless we begin to recognize that a thin conception of purpose severs any durable tie between us and a future we can care about.

IX. Thickening Equality

Thin equality also thickens under scrutiny. Equality is undoubtedly an unruly concept, ever thrusting toward Procrustean extremes. And, as a value, it is undeniably secondary to others. Surely, moderate material inequality between the well-off is preferable to perfect material equality between the destitute. Thus the impulse to divide equality into a formal, political component and a material, distributive one. The formal component guarantees equality before the law, universal suffrage, and basic rights of expression and participation. The material component encompasses distributive concerns, and is secondary to its “lexically prior” and more pellucid formal counterpart. Material equality is never to be gotten by sacrificing political equality—no more nomenklatura!

Equality is further thinned out in Rawls’s theory by distinguishing equality of material starting points and equality of material outcomes. In his theory, occupational chances are to be “fairly” distributed, which is to admit, not necessarily equally. As to the unequal material outcomes that can be expected to result, they may be left as they are (and are perhaps even permitted to be transmitted from one generation to the next), subject only to the proviso (the “difference principle”) that they redound to the absolute (not relative) benefit of the least-advantaged.

What, then, of the distortion that unequally, though justly, accumulated wealth may have upon political processes? If I have a right to the fruits of my labor and a right to express my views, have I not a right to express my views by expending as much of the fruits of my labor as I see fit? This irresistible logic has won over the United States Supreme Court, and why resist it? To liberate the future of politics from an acquisitive past?

Rawls objects that this would compromise the “fair value” of political equality. My one vote is not fairly equated to your one vote if your

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one vote has been amplified by huge spending to influence other votes in a way that I cannot, given my actual material circumstances, match. Bear in mind that the material inequality concerned here may be perfectly compatible with the difference principle; your wealth may indeed have lifted all boats, mine as well as that of the worst-off. Equality needs thickening if it is to justify Rawls's objection. But, now, what of the fair value of, say, my equal right freely to associate, if I cannot afford the rents in your neighborhood or the tuitions at your private schools? Is one to resist the analogous temptation to say that the fair value of my right freely to associate justifies restricting your right freely to spend to further your equal right of association? On what ground may we resist? On the ground that voting is more fundamental than association? Is there simply an upper limit to the "fair" divergence of political influence, and no such upper limit to the "fair" divergence of social influence? Why? The "lexical priority" of political equality over material threatens to unravel, and the plot thickens.

### X. Conclusion

Purpose thickens, and equality thickens. Is there a connection? Purpose thickens because we cannot leave posterity out of account. Equality thickens because we cannot leave the stragglers out of account. The first-comers, whether synchronically or diachronically, owe a debt to the later-to-arrive. The future, if you like, constrains the liberty of the past in the sense that those who have not arrived cannot justly be ignored by those who have. Likewise, the later-to-arrive cannot justly ignore those departed whose energies have made a tolerably serviceable world for them and given them an entrée to it. Thus, the past constrains the liberty of the future. The questions, What provision must be made, and Whether all provisions are to be made on an identical fundamental principle, remain.

Two points are all that I will hazard. The first is that there is indeed an identical fundamental principle that governs the provision that persons and classes of person owe one to another, whether these classes and persons

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exist contemporaneously or not. This is a principle of beneficence. It declares itself in favor of there being happy people, rather than merely in favor of happiness for whatever people there may happen to be, if any. And it is in favor of happiness as an objective engagement with the world, rather than happiness as subjectivity, however luxuriously brilliant. In this sense, the principle is thick with purpose.

The principle is also thick on equality, for it has this corollary: no-one should act so as to render another an utter stranger to oneself. For the living of each generation, this means an active concern for the well-being of the less fortunate then living and, where necessary, a mitigation of extremes of material inequality that undermine community. But there is a transgenerational implication as well. No generation should act without consulting the interests of other generations, whether past or to come. This entails that we not “neglect monuments of unageing intellect” not only to preserve them for the edification of later generations, but also to respect the persistent interest of the dead in escaping oblivion. This means cultivating a permanent sense of human history not only as a subject of amusement and curiosity, but also as a living and continuous project. Unless the living assure that generations to come are educated to continue the project of the human past, the living will have failed to do justice to either the past or the future.

The second point is that these are political questions to which political answers—intentionally so or not—are continually being offered up. Beneficence is a political matter because its burdens, as well as its benefits, must be fairly distributed and political authority is necessary to define and enforce that division. Reasonable people may reject beneficence in this wider sense, but that is not in itself a reason to reject it or to disallow political arrangements premised on it. It is true that politics means restraints, but we must remember that “the imagination must be given not wings but weights,” as Bacon said at the dawn of the scientific age, a half-millennium ago. The weights he spoke of were those of nature, not politics, but the point carries in either case. We must be very careful when we attach political weights because they can easily crush people. But, without

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them, the liberties of the future and of the past are, equally, weightless nothings.

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