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DOES HUMAN NATURE HAVE A FUTURE?

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Does human nature have a future? The question, to tell the truth, is full of ambiguities.

First off, the phrase "human nature" assumes that human reality is natural. But philosophers from the time of Rousseau have distinguished between subhuman nature and human freedom. What is natural is not human. And what is human is not natural.

According to this view, there is no such thing as distinctively human nature. We human beings have bodies and to some extent are governed by instinct. Birds do it, bees do it, and we do it. But even human sex is different from bird sex because it is mixed up with human freedom. Human beings perversely negate nature even when they are doing what seems to come naturally. Human sex is much more dissociated from the necessities of reproduction than that of the other animals. We are, from nature's view, kinky, even very kinky. We can, for example, practice safe sex, showing our distinctive humanity. No other animal uses condoms. And condoms, if you think about it, are very kinky. The self-conscious obsessions of a free being cause us to plan for sex by dressing up vegetables. In our freedom, we can think up all kinds of ways to satisfy our perverse desire to rut without reproducing. Surely no one would say that the separation of the bare act from begetting is natural.

So our anthropologists and sociologists and postmodernists and so forth say that there is no such thing as human sex. They speak not of sex, but of gender. Sexual distinctions are humanly insignificant. What's human is our free, social construction of gender. Once we realize that gender is in our control and is barely limited by nature, then we can change it however we please. Classes in gender studies are all about freeing women and gays not from nature but from the willful oppression of heterosexual men. All that we have wrongly called "natural," we are taught, has really been constructed by men or heterosexuals. Because no human sexual activity is really natural, everything we do should be regarded as an equally free assertion of human freedom. This project of recognizing all that is implied in the fact that human reality is free from natural reality, that human beings really create themselves however they please, is the core of most education in the social sciences and the humanities.

But the idea of nature is also making a comeback among many of our thinkers. And according to philosophers such as Marx and Hegel, it is inevitable that that happen. Rousseau noticed - and almost all his successors agreed - that human freedom is historical. What that means is complicated. First off, our species used to be no different from the others, bound by the laws of nature or instinct. Then by some accident, we

began to transform ourselves, making ourselves progressively more free and progressively more discontent. As unique or unnatural beings who are increasingly governed by time or past and future and so awareness of death, we make history.

But if history had a beginning, it must have an end. It ends because finally human beings have satisfied their distinctively human desires through their distinctively human work. And some say that the end of history is now here. It is here, in part, because the principle at least of liberal democracy has triumphed; all human beings are now recognized as free and equal beings by those in the know everywhere in the world. And it is here, in part, because more and more human beings live contentedly in freedom while doing very little work. There appears to be nothing really new for human beings to do. And even our Islamic enemies—who can and will use our technological success against us to cause much death and destruction—have no real chance of derailing our fundamental accomplishments.

If human beings are historical beings, and history has ended, it makes sense to say we have become just like all the other animals again. Allan Bloom claimed he noticed that the most sophisticated Americans are no longer moved by love and death. And many others have noticed that Americans now prefer comfort to truth. Feel good therapy has replaced the desire to really know oneself. James Davison Hunter has noticed that the view that it is easier and so better to feel good without being good has infused itself in almost all of our religious thought. And the new model Americans, the bourgeois bohemians (Bobos) David Brooks described, claim to have completely reconciled the modern conflict between bohemian self-expression and bourgeois productivity. They manage both to work hard and have countercultural tastes—such as Shaker furniture—without being in any way alienated from their social or political world or yearning for a life better than the one they now have. There is nothing in Bobos' souls that keeps them from being comfortable and productive. They seem not at all disordered by the human passions connected with love and death. Brooks's Bobos seem to be clever and tasteful animals and little more. They surely have retained some human distinctiveness - no other animal goes to Starbucks - but perhaps far less than first meets the eye.

The idea that history has ended was reinforced by the American victory in the Cold War. The anticommunist dissidents like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Václav Havel claimed that the victory of communism was really a victory of distinctively human nature—a victory of the being who wants to live responsibly in light of the truth—over historical manipulation. But the fall of communism has not brought the hoped-for revival of truth and responsibility. Havel's Czech Republic, for example, has become more mindlessly decadent than America. And Americans themselves were surely more devoted to truth and responsibility during the Cold War than they are now. (So, as we shall see, there is even something good in the possibility that the war against Islamic terrorism might really be a new form of Cold War.)

The fall of communism has also fueled talk about a return to nature, but maybe not really human nature. The most sophisticated and avant-garde view today is not social constructionism or postmodernism, but evolutionary biology or sociobiology. We now know, we think, that the idea of human freedom from nature is an illusion. Our hopes and our happiness are largely determined by our genes. We turn out to be the most clever of animals, with really big brains or calculating machines, but not really quantitatively different from the rest of nature. So our return to nature is our new realization of what is required for us to live comfortably and productively as a certain kind of social animal. The family is back; it's good for the species for children to be raised well. And religion is back; it's a great source of comfort and socialization for social beings. But love turns out to be at least mostly an illusion, as are the experiences of anxiety and homelessness that come with self-consciousness or individuality. Obsessing like an existentialist about one's own existence is not a

natural concern; we see the truth by focusing on what's best for the species. And of course there's no evidence for either God's existence or that the human desire to know Him is a natural need.

Francis Fukuyama has been the best American publicist on *both* the end of history and the return of nature. (And he really is still defending the view that history has ended after September 11.) That's not surprising: The truncated view of human nature he presents in *The Great Disruption* might well be understood as not very distinctively human at all. The goals of the end of history argument and sociobiology seem to be the same: To allow human beings to experience themselves as fully at home in this natural world. A world in which the teaching of evolutionary biology or sociobiology would be really true would also be the end of history.

But I still say that Allan Bloom was surely wrong to even suggest that love and death have about faded away. We might plausibly be able to say, at least at first glance, that philosophy and the anxious or obsessively personal sort of religion has disappeared among sophisticated Americans. But it is certainly true that death has not faded away. Sure, our bourgeois bohemians claim not to be obsessed with it. They say that they have achieved spiritual solace without thinking or talking much about their finitude or possible immortality. They seem, at first, to be following our pragmatic professor of philosophy Richard Rorty's advice by putting death to death by not talking about it. But they've also discovered that Rorty's solution doesn't really work. Not talking about death is not enough. A real pragmatist must work hard against it. He mouths Rorty's therapeutic platitudes while on the treadmill and conspicuously and faithfully abstaining from carbohydrates. The Bobo's regimen of exercise is his one activity that he does not even pretend is fun. Health is no hobby; it's a necessity. So it must be cultivated in the most scientific and disciplined way.

The Bobos reject the repressive morality of traditional religion. As Bloom would have expected, they are relativists or nonjudgmentalists on almost everything. But that observation must be put more precisely: When it comes to the soul, they are laissez faire, but when it comes to the body, they are toughly intolerant moralists. They are pro-choice on abortion. But when it comes to seatbelts and smoking, there ought to be a law. It is unrealistic, they say, for our young people to practice chastity. But they should just say no to drunkenness and obesity. Getting fat will kill you, but safe sex, had with anyone and in any way, won't.

Another way to appreciate the unprecedented premium the Bobos place on health and safety is to compare them with the old WASP establishment of the fifties and early sixties. Those men were public spirited, willingly fought in wars, drank martinis at both lunch and dinner, rarely exercised unless they enjoyed it, and were hardly ever without a cigarette. And when they fooled around, they really were living rather dangerously. Compared with the Bobos, they spent their lives laughing in the face of death. Because they took their souls or duties more seriously, they were less obsessed with their bodies. They were far less bourgeois than our Bobos.

If the Bobos, as I believe, are really the most bourgeois or Hobbesian Americans of all time, then at least we can say for sure that they are distinctively human. They are defined, above all, by their rebellion against death. And life is far harder for them than it is for any other animal. Are their distinctive qualities evidence of their freedom from nature or their human nature? The being who rebels futilely against death is hard to call free. And Bobo behavior is far more predictable or unbohemian than they would like to believe. So we should conclude that their lives are defined by their natures in a distinctively human way.

That conclusion stands even without my introduction of more subtle and controversial evidence for the

Bobo's human nature: In my view, their inability to speak of their love for other human beings and God does not really show that they do not have such longings. Their ridiculous religion and pseudo-bohemian pretensions are not really satisfying; they are, as Walker Percy explains, pathetic diversions. The Bobos restlessly over-organize their own and their children's lives to keep themselves from having time to think about how empty their lives really are. They constantly plan for their children's future because they can't figure out how to be in love with them in the present. The Bobos are perhaps equally afraid of death and of the truth that whatever they do they cannot fend death off. And they seem not to be able to come to terms with the ineradicable vulnerability and mortality of those they really love.

The bad news is that the Bobos, despite what they say, are really screwed up. The good news is that they screwed up in a humanly distinctive way. They do not really experience themselves as all that at home in this world. They, in truth, provide us with little evidence that human nature has no future. We don't know yet whether they have what it takes to resist the present Islamic threat to our liberty. Bobos do not have the virtues associated with war, and they can't imagine their own lives without easily acquired wealth and liberty. But maybe the challenge of war will displace the Bobos as our ruling class. The most admired man in America is now George W. Bush, surely no Bobo. In his lack of taste, his born-again Christianity, and the almost hereditary character of his power, he is some sort of pre-Bobo throwback. We also admire the anti-Bobo candor, toughness, and courage of Rudy Guliani and his police and fire fighters. The Bobos cowered rather than complained when they booed the Hollywood Buddhist Richard Gere and the sensitive female Senator from New York.

Or maybe the war will cause the Bobos to confront the truth about their natures more clearly; maybe harsh necessity will make them more courageous. The renewed need to be responsible citizens may well make them both less bohemian and less bourgeois. The president has said we are all soldiers now. We cannot help but notice that talk about history's end or even our biological determination is almost gone now. We all now see a dark downside to globalization, and certainly no lover of liberty or even of American life wants the American state to wither away now. The security-obsessed Bobos cannot help but become statistics. It seems that man as a political and religious animal is back with a vengeance. In the unlikely event that our enemies win, we will not be able to say that that victory will be bad for human nature. We can say that war is good for human nature, or at least that wherever we find human beings, war will always be a possibility.

But in truth, we don't even know to what extent we are really at war yet. So far the only specific sacrifice the president has asked of American citizens is to be inconvenienced at airports. And as I write this, the Stock Market has returned to the September 10th level, and very few Bobos work in the troubled airline industry. It could be that the problem of terrorism will be contained quite well by a relatively small and expertly trained elite military force. The Bobos' children may well not be drafted, and few of them will volunteer. For a while, maybe a long while, the new Cold War will affect daily life here in America even less than the old one. Eventually, I think, we will suffer a genuine high tech catastrophe here at home from our enemies, but there's some chance it will be no time soon.

But we don't need war but only to look at the Bobos themselves to say that human nature has a future, unless human nature itself can be changed. It was not, in fact, changed by the various efforts to bring history to an end. But we still must consider the possibility that it might be changed by biotechnological progress. Many experts say that advances in biotechnology will add very soon at least a couple of decades to the average human life, with the not-so-remote possibility of doubling or tripling the average human lifespan. (This assumes our ability to contain the new terrorist threat against our "homeland," which is also the product of

technological progress.)

Why would the Bobos not welcome such remarkable progress? It is an extension of the progress they have already achieved through diet and exercise. But there are very good human reasons to choose against indefinite longevity. With the near disappearance of death must come the banning of birth. So sex really will come to have nothing to do with reproduction. Would human life really be worth living completely freed up from the hard and joyous responsibilities of birth, parenting, and so forth?

Libertarians say that biotechnological progress will actually increase our choice. We will be able to accept or reject as individuals the new designer features it makes available to us. But for the Bobos, wouldn't choosing against the latest biotechnological breakthroughs be like choosing against health today? Who wouldn't choose the best available body and brain for his or her child? The brain, our biologists tell us, is as much as the rest of the body a mechanism for comfortable self-preservation. Can the law really allow perverse choices against what is best for any of our children? The Bobos are nonjudgmental on every issue but health and fashion, and so they cannot oppose self-preservation with some higher principle. They are not well positioned to consider what human beings lose as a result of what used to be regarded as the limits of their natures. The choice against, for example, indefinite longevity would have to be against self-preservation and for virtue, for love, birth, and death. The Bobos are too obsessed with the fear of death to realize that indefinite human longevity, without virtue, might indefinitely heighten that fear, that biotechnology might make life progressively more hellish. The more death seems accidental rather than necessary, the more we will go to extraordinary lengths—living in lead houses and never going outside—to avoid what no longer seems so inevitable. Rejection or even the direction of biotechnology seems to require a political will that the Bobos do not now have.

Even the argument that biotechnological progress will make us more death-obsessed is finally questionable. We have already great successes with neuropharmacology or drug theory. Ritalin and Prozac are powerful, widely used drugs that have fundamentally changed human experience and behavior. Who can deny that they helped those who are severely disruptive or depressed? But everyone also knows that Ritalin is now given to boys who used to be regarded merely as particularly spirited or aggressive. And Prozac calms women who used to be regarded as merely nervous. Drugs are taking the edge off being either a man or a woman, and they are leading us to the sort of androgyny that Marx, for example, thought we would have at the end of history. And drugs, we can expect, will do a progressively better job of taking the edge off just being human. We can conquer love and death by chemically managing our moods. As Walker Percy predicted in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, we may be able to free ourselves from all the stress of self-consciousness, becoming happy and productive animals never in a bad mood when in a good environment. We can make evolutionary or sociobiology true by eliminating the perverse features of human nature that have made it untrue so far.

Fukuyama himself has written that the return to human nature (that is, largely that of clever, gregarious chimps) he describes is for only a moment. Biotechnology will surely destroy human nature. The result will not really be a return to nature, but the human construction of an unalienated, egalitarian environment. The clever human chimp Fukuyama describes in *The Great Disruption* cannot help but have some freedom and self-consciousness, and he is somewhat alienated by the confusing distinctions that separate male and female by nature, and by aggressiveness and loneliness that can't quite be reduced to requirements for self-preservation. Biotechnology may well make us less self-conscious and more egalitarian, apathetic, and solitary than the chimp. Such biotechnological success ought to be the decisive evidence for and the final act

of human freedom: We will make ourselves into what we imagined natural perfection would be like; we will have what we imagined it would take to be fully at home in the world. We will make something like Rousseau's state of nature—a state which never did exist naturally—true.

Percy explains in *The Thanatos Syndrome* that the political objection to depriving human beings of the perversities connected with self-consciousness is that they will no longer be able to resist tyranny. And the tyrants will be the experts who exempt themselves from the treatment. We have a hard time seeing experts as tyrants, because they don't claim to rule through personal authority but on the basis of the impersonal results of scientific studies.

But we, thank God, still don't have trouble seeing our new Islamic enemies as tyrants, and we have been forcefully reminded that the aggressive qualities that men seem to have more than women by nature remain not only desirable but necessary. They are definitely not superfluous. Our enemies, in fact, believe they can defeat us because we are in the decadent thrall of the illusion that we can dispense with the virtue of men, but they have confused the theoretical chatter of our experts with the opinions of most of our citizens. And so September 11 had the virtue of reminding Americans that it is good that human beings are, at their best, spirited and responsible defenders of truth and liberty by their natures. It also reminded us that, despite our best efforts, religious and political distinctions have not withered away.

Maybe even our most sophisticated experts will now see how empty and unrealistic radically egalitarian idealism is, and that the idea that it was either good or possible that biotechnology destroy human nature was merely a fantasy that sprung up between wars. In the name of both truth and liberty, maybe they will be more ready to acknowledge that it is good that human beings will never be fully at home in this world, and that human life will always be demanding enough to require virtues we find disproportionately in men. We can ever hope our experts will now acknowledge that distinctively human life, with all its suffering and limitations, is good, because longing to love others and God is neither an illusion nor goes unsatisfied.