

Against Edenism

The future will look very different from the past. The Garden of Paradise will culminate in the City of God—"the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . . The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. . . . The city does not need the sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light" (Rev. 21:10–24). The river of life will flow down the middle of the great street of the city, and the tree of life will mean that the curse of death is lifted (Rev. 22:1–3). There is continuity with Genesis, but to Eden there will be no returning.

We do not need the Bible to know that such a return is not possible. This planet could sustain 10 million people with a comfortable pastoral or agrarian existence in Neolithic times. By contrast, the necessary precondition for the planetary civilization of 10 billion people that will be Earth in the twenty-second century is a highly advanced level of science and technology. We cannot change this reality, although we are free to pretend otherwise.

It is too easy for us to make fun of Faust, even in his noblest incarnation in the time of Goethe, when Enlightenment hopes for science and technology were so much greater than today. Admittedly, it does seem slightly ludicrous to forget about one's immortal soul and instead busy oneself, as Faust does, with the project of reclaiming land from the sea. But why are these options mutually exclusive? Can we not do both? We should acknowledge that there are many perils with the scientific and technological trajectory on which we find ourselves. But we should never forget that the alternatives to technological acceleration are far from ethically or politically neutral.

Technology means doing more with less. In the absence of technological progress, we end up with a zero-sum world, in which there must be a loser for every winner. It is not clear whether a capitalistic economic system could function without growth; and it is unlikely that a representative democracy, which requires the give-and-take of win-win compromise, would continue to function. In the - Malthusian end state, resource constraints would reduce marginal human existence to eking out bare survival. Even an anti-Malthusian thinker like Julian Simon acknowledged as much, when he argued that more people would be a great good, but only because he optimistically believed that they would invent many new things and thereby increase living standards for everybody.

We are much further from this technological cornucopia than we would like to believe. Six billion people live in the emerging world and are daily beset by resource and pollution constraints. The Green Revolution in food production has decelerated tremendously since 1980, and so the average calorie consumption in rural India is lower today than it was in 1970. China has increased industrial output, but the failure of clean-energy technologies has meant massive environmental devastation. And even the United States finds itself at a strange crossroads, as the rate of technological progress has been insufficient to guarantee higher living standards. For the first time ever, the younger generation has reduced expectations and hopes for the future—there are just not enough well-paying

jobs for the many college graduates, to say nothing of everybody else. Large numbers of people cannot afford healthy food and are nutritionally starved, though this hidden Malthusianism perversely manifests as an obesity epidemic. More locally, in Manhattan the scarcity of affordable housing (or equivalently, the failure of technological innovation in skyscraper construction and transportation) means that rent increases far outpace wage increases. Urban slumlords benefit at the expense of everyone else, even though this scarcity gets dressed up with aesthetic sentiments.

If a scientific and technological utopia was the hallmark of the Enlightenment, then perhaps the distrust of that utopia is the hallmark of the post-Enlightenment, postmodern West. The widespread nature of that distrust is a good measure of the degree to which postmodernity has displaced modernity. It is a point of broad agreement between the so-called Christian right and the Hollywood left and just about everyone in between, with only minor differences in the exact details of what is to be disliked, whether it be stem-cell research or fracking technology, or perhaps radical life extension as contrary to God's will or bad for the environment.

Just about every science-fiction movie of the past quarter century portrays science and technology as a trap that humanity is building for itself. One may choose from a menu of dystopias, from *The Terminator* to *The Matrix* to *Elysium* to *Avatar*. A film in which a Luddite, an environmental extremist, or an FDA regulator is the arch-villain does not get made; as it so often does, Hollywood both creates and reflects the broader cultural consensus.

The history of the twentieth century is a history of this loss of hope in the future. With the benefit of hindsight, the dawn of the nuclear age and the Manhattan Project may appear to have been a key turning point, a great achievement that led to tremendous disillusionment. This disillusionment hit with full force in the 1970s, when the successor Apollo program collapsed and the baby boomers redirected their energies toward interminable cultural wars. Whether by chance or design, scientists were placed on a short leash and made to spend their time writing grant applications for modest extensions of existing paradigms. The reign of science foretold in *New Atlantis* culminated and terminated at Los Alamos.

The optimism of Bacon and Hobbes belongs to a bygone era. And perhaps there always was something profoundly contradictory in optimism and atheistic materialism. In the nineteenth century, Engels could still finesse matters by noting the apparent discrepancy between the never-ending progress of dialectical materialism and the heat death foretold by the second law of thermodynamics, but then reassure his readers that such a decline was far in the future and could therefore be ignored! If atheist optimism meant an escape from nature, then today's atheist pessimism means an acceptance of nature, and of the many gruesome accidents and the terrible rule of chance that that entails. The physical theories of our age resemble the Epicurean accounts of the atoms randomly moving through the void, and it should be no wonder that quasi-Epicurean physics naturally lead to Stoicism and Epicurean hedonism. I badly miss the misguided optimism of a Faust—at least he was motivated to try to do something about everything that was wrong with the world. Faust seems morally superior to Nietzsche, that first environmental philosopher, who opposed both

Christianity and the techno-scientific utopia in willing a return to Nature, a counterfeit Eden bared red in tooth and claw.

Judeo-Western optimism differs from the atheist optimism of the Enlightenment in the extreme degree to which it believes that the forces of chaos and nature can and will be mastered. The tyranny of Chance will give way to the providence of God. This movement from chaos to order begins in Genesis: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. . . . And God said, ‘Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear’: and it was so” (Gen. 1:2, 9). We are to store up “treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matt. 6:20)—a place where chaos and chance have no dominion. More important, perhaps, it is a necessary condition for personal immortality that one can exist in a place where no accidents can happen. Such a place did not exist for Lucretius or Epicurus, and the early moderns like Bacon and Hobbes elided this question. But with God all things are possible.

Science and technology are natural allies to this Judeo-Western optimism, especially if we remain open to an eschatological frame in which God works through us in building the kingdom of heaven today, here on Earth—in which the kingdom of heaven is both a future reality and something partially achievable in the present. Given a choice, it makes more sense to ally with atheist optimism than with atheist pessimism—and we should remain open to the idea that even Faust’s land-reclamation project is a part of God’s larger plan. After all, in the Bible, the sea is the place where the demon Leviathan lives, and it symbolizes the chaos that must be rolled back. And chaos will be rolled back all the way: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1, emphasis added).

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