

Technocracy and Populism

Ivan Kenneally

By now, the professional pundits are largely done investigating the causes of Barack Obama's presidential election victory and are satisfied with the results of the many and competing autopsies performed on John McCain's failed campaign. Setting aside the obvious circumstantial reasons that account for the preference of the American public, including weariness from an unpopular war and impatience with an even more unpopular incumbent, the choice of Obama over McCain signified a striking prioritization of competence and populist rhetoric over political experience and military honor. In this sense, the most significant shift in the election was from a focus on the prosecution of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the management of the economy; candidate Obama successfully persuaded the American people that what they needed most was not a battle-hardened soldier but an optimistic administrator.

Obama convinced a majority of voters that he was the most qualified to steward them through turbulent economic times—and also the most likely, since he most sincerely *felt* the voters' pain. Senator McCain could not pull off the role of economic policy wonk; his patriotic platform of national greatness seemed diminished whenever he was forced to delve into discussions of technical minutiae. Voters might accept McCain as a thoughtful and reflective statesman but not as a number-crunching social scientist. Likewise, he was always disadvantaged when it came to the populist politics of compassion—it's too theatrically challenging for a former POW to artfully affect empathy over home foreclosures and dwindling capital gains. In short, the technocratic therapist triumphed over the honor-loving soldier.

To some extent, the contest between honor and therapeutic statism necessarily turns on the prevailing winds of the political climate. During a time of economic anxiety, the bureaucratic supervision of competing interests is bound to present itself as the central task of executive statesmanship, just as periods of war diminish the significance of our material pursuits by highlighting the security they presuppose and the sense of mortality they distract us from. The stark brutality of war makes a mockery of the superficial comfort that comes from any mawkishly

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demagogic displays of empathy, and the unpredictability of conflict repudiates the techno-political pretense that human affairs can be scientifically managed. War reminds us of the intractability of our deepest political problems, but economic depression strikes us as a technical difficulty that demands an administrative solution—as a puzzle to be solved rather than a reminder of the permanent imperfection of human affairs. Barack Obama appealed to an electorate that was more anxious than fearful, and therefore more responsive to a therapeutic campaign than a bellicose one. His message resonated with a public more motivated by a Lockean desire for comfortable preservation than a Hobbesian aversion to violent death.

Ironically, the extraordinary success of the military surge in Iraq made Obama's victory possible. For all his talk of revolutionary change, his electoral win depended upon some assurances of a return to political normality, the welcome expectation that the typical news cycle would once again be dominated by chatter about health care and retirement rather than terrorists and torture. Candidate Obama's rousing (and even romantic) promises of hope and change belie how anticlimactic that change really is—his revolution culminates in the peaceful, administrative regulation of quotidian life. In a time of war and insecurity, paradigm-shifting change results in a happy resurgence of political banality. From the perspective of foreign policy, this translates into the substitution of diplomatic rapprochement for a clash of civilizations and military struggle. In the theater of domestic politics, Obama repeatedly promised the replacement of partisan intramural disputes with a spirit of collaborative synergy. In either case, the intense conflict that typically attaches to genuine political rivalry is discarded for bipartisan cooperation. Since genuine political life presupposes profound disagreement of the kind not susceptible to technocratic management, the desire for a recovery of the ordinary, or the exchange of harmony for conflict, is based upon a deep-seated suspicion of politics itself. This managerial techno-politics really isn't a politics at all in the classic sense. It is instead the latest incarnation of the Marxist End of History with one notable exception: in place of the liberation of the working class from economic exploitation we get the deliverance of social scientists from the messiness of genuine public deliberation.

Obama, Technocrat

The key ingredients of President Obama's victory—technocratic competence and therapeutic populism—may help illuminate the general orientation of his administration. Nevertheless, it's not at all clear that the

undergirding premises of each are theoretically compatible. Obama's populism is based on the hypertrophic satisfaction of the will of the people—he decries, however sincerely or consistently, the undermining of general consent by the overrepresentation of special interests or of the wealthy. In other words, President Obama's populism is about the protection of the ordinary man's participation in civic life against the extraordinary advantages of minority factions armed with superior material and political resources. However, Obama's conception of techno-politics is based on the embrace of a kind of techno-aristocracy—hyper-educated elites with specialized politico-scientific expertise are singled out to manage the benighted rest of us. The conspicuous contradiction embedded within Obama's political program is between his populist lionization of consent and his technocratic diminution of it: the former presumes the prudence of ordinary common sense and the latter rejects the same common sense as radically unscientific.

In some ways, President Obama's combination of techno-aristocracy and therapeutic populism is a reflection of a similar tension within the Enlightenment between the march of democratic equality and the transformation of political life into an appropriate object of scientific inquiry. Science recommends human equality, but only by doing away with our irreplaceable uniqueness—denying our personal, individual importance means we are all equally insignificant—and it provides no moral principle of its own to temper the disparity between us in the physical power it correctly recognizes. If the motivating principle of science is rational control—or, following Descartes, the mastery and possession of nature—there is no reason on purely scientific grounds to forestall the mastery of some and the servitude of others. At least in part, science was originally conceived as a repudiation of unjust hierarchy with the substitution of reason for tradition; it was meant, *pace* Jefferson, to deconstruct nobility based on “wealth and birth” and fill its absence with a “natural aristocracy” grounded on “virtue and talents.” Problematically, this meritocratic revolution potentially creates yet another even more austere aristocracy tempered by neither moral obligation, divine law, nor custom. Tocqueville might be right that while democracy “loosens social bonds...it tightens natural bonds,” but technocratic governance denies the goodness of nature, demoting it to mere fodder for manipulation by productive labor. The more civilized version of this technocratic will to power is not a physical but an epistemological despotism in which our most pressing issues, our great opportunities for public deliberation, are fashioned into compartments of specialized, even esoteric expertise. Social scientists have become

a new nobility by monopolizing the territory of public debate—the goods produced by science for the many depend upon the private activity of the elite few who can claim rational legitimacy.

It's worth beginning with President Obama's inaugural address to plumb the meaning of the new technocracy. One of the most telling but least commented upon lines in the speech was his promise to "restore science to its proper place." Since he doesn't expand upon this restoration in the remainder of the address, it's not immediately obvious what this amounts to. At the very least, this assumes that science has been unjustly abused or neglected by the previous administration, repeating the familiar charge that during the Bush years it was "open season on open inquiry," as Hillary Clinton once put it.

Less than two months after his inauguration, in his March 9, 2009 "Executive Order Removing Barriers to Responsible Scientific Research Involving Human Stem Cells," President Obama equated President Bush's restrictions on federal funding for stem cell experimentation to "limitations on scientific inquiry itself." Similarly, in the remarks Obama delivered to the press announcing the executive order, he described his revision of his predecessor's position as a means for "protecting free and open inquiry"—implying that Bush's approach, and indeed any political regulation of science, is tantamount to a wholesale rejection of the quest for truth.

While Obama never makes it unambiguously clear how precisely Bush undermined not only the progress of science but reason itself, this hollow meme is widely accepted as a matter of established historical fact: Either in the service of religious superstition or anachronistic tradition, Bush perverted otherwise objective scientific theory and retarded biomedical advances that would inevitably cure disease and relieve human suffering. As John Edwards remarked during John Kerry's 2004 bid for the presidency in one of the most hyperventilated distortions of scientific fact on recent record, "When John Kerry is president, people like Christopher Reeve are going to walk. Get up out of that wheelchair and walk again." Obama is more rhetorically cautious than Edwards, taking pains to acknowledge that the "full promise of stem cell research remains unknown" and that it "should not be overstated." This concession is made not in the executive order itself but in his remarks to the press, whom he reminds that "medical miracles" are the result of "painstaking and costly research" and a "government willing to support that work." In fact, President Obama's faith in the progress of science completely overtakes what could be understood as a reasonable (and scientifically-grounded) skepticism regarding what benefits we can hope will spring from technological advancement: if only we

would unshackle science from its restraints, we may realize “a day when words like ‘terminal’ and ‘incurable’ are finally retired from our vocabulary.” Instead of cautioning us against irrationally exuberant expectations from medical innovation, President Obama candidly envisions a time when we can definitively conquer death. His lengthy discussion of Christopher Reeve is more temperate than was Edwards’s, but the president still insinuates that Reeve was denied a full chance for a cure because of an inadequate “commitment to science.”

Still, even if one concedes this caricature, it still doesn’t settle the much thornier issue of how precisely we should understand the relation between science and politics. It has been clear, though, that at least rhetorically Obama is taking his cues from the likes of Al Gore, spinning any objections to his policies as an “assault on reason” (the title of Gore’s last book). Sure, his detractors are entitled to their views, but the unambiguous authority of science itself will be the final arbiter of all political disputes. In fact, it is not merely the function of “science and the scientific process” to “inform and guide” Obama’s administration on virtually every issue from health care to national security, as he puts it in his “Memorandum on Scientific Integrity” (issued along with the executive order). Our new president boasts that his administration will “base” its “public policies on the soundest science,” indicating that the proper relation between politics and science completely subordinates the former to the latter. The real danger identified in the memorandum is not a science liberated from moral or political guidance, but rather the suppression or politicization of unambiguous scientific fact. For all the fanfare surrounding the document, much of it is devoted to high-handed promises to create apolitical rules for the “selection and retention of candidates for the science and technology positions in the executive branch.” Apparently, we can devise technocratic rules for the identification of integrity in future technocrats. It is a curious reversal: Instead of science needing ministerial guidance from political quarters, the moral rectitude of political affairs is safeguarded by the scientific method.

The Stubbornness of Party

It’s instructive to consider President Obama’s defense of science in light of his more developed attack on the enervating effects of partisan politics. He promises to transcend the political differences between us for the sake of realizing a previously elusive common good. He has consistently advocated a kind of post-political brand of governance that assumes

partisan conflicts are always the spurious result of miscommunication or ideological dogmatism rather than reflections of competing worldviews held with deep, thoughtful conviction. Of course, this means they are never resistant to facile revision. In other words, if politics is reducible to technocratic competence then there is something peculiarly unenlightened about a clash of interests—our unshared interests seem to be little more than idiosyncratic expressions of rationally indefensible attachments. We all have rational interests, and political science can unambiguously distinguish these from our irrational demands—a “special” interest is one that cannot be justified before the tribunal of scientific reason.

President Obama’s populism is presented as Madisonian: he doesn’t reject all factions, only those that, to use the language of Federalist 10, are adverse “to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” The president’s impoverished view of political dispute, though, is quite a departure from Madison: Obama blithely assumes an easily won harmony of interests since their rationality makes for easily identifiable common ground. In a world of homogenous beings with purely rational desires, political gridlock between adversaries is an abrogation of practical logic. Radically autonomous beings animated by nothing other than rational interest can live like socially gregarious and dependent beings if their highly particular and erotic longings are replaced by highly uniform and domesticated wants. At least from the perspective of consent and a share in governance, Obama’s own favored special interest is the one that effectively monopolizes the market of reason—namely, the technocratic class.

For our new president, the “proper place” of science is beyond the murky waters of political compromise. Science must be unfettered from political restraints and old-fashioned moral strictures. Just as he denies that there are any potential tensions between our ideals and the practical demands of ensuring our security in an often less-than-ideal world, he simply rejects that there are any moral or political complexities born out of technological innovation that might justify some measure of political prudence, or even the admonishment of science. President Obama’s view is not merely an oversimplification of the relation between science and politics, and consequently of science’s “proper place,” but a willful ignorance of the lessons regarding the dangers of a science divorced from prudence the twentieth century has provided. For Obama, scientific and moral progress are so inexorably linked that the success of the former couldn’t possibly obstruct the virtue of the latter—the march towards our scientific liberation from the cumbersome bonds of nature is virtue itself.

A Study in Contrasts

The differences between President Bush's 2007 "Executive Order Expanding Approved Stem Cell Lines" and President Obama's executive order overturning it are striking especially given the popular mischaracterization of both. Despite its demonization as a right-wing Christian rejection of modern science—if not of modernity as a whole—the language of Bush's order manages to acknowledge the serious and profound ethical dilemmas that surround embryonic stem cell research and to clearly articulate both the scientific and moral principles that ground its conclusions. Thus, the order recognizes the great promise of biomedical innovation but also its potential conflict with "human life and human dignity," making it "critical to establish moral and ethical boundaries to allow the Nation to move forward vigorously with medical research." In fact, the entire document is a model of transparent political argument meant to broker some measure of civic compromise without sacrificing either clarity or conviction regarding moral principle. It even draws attention to the unique difficulties that present themselves to the federal government as a democratic body representing a constituency with diverse moral worldviews and therefore having a "duty to exercise responsible stewardship of taxpayer funds."

In fact, the entire order is premised upon two forcefully stated moral principles and two empirically defensible definitions. President Bush objects to embryonic stem cell research on two grounds: first, that "the destruction of nascent life for research violates the principle that no life should be used as a mere means for achieving the medical benefit of another," and second, that "human embryos and fetuses, as living members of the human species, are not raw materials to be exploited or commodities to be bought and sold." One could argue that the former principle is characteristically Kantian and the latter Christian, but Bush also marshals scientific support for the classifications his moral principles rest upon. He provides a clear and scientifically defensible definition of the term "human embryo" and explains in plain prose what counts as "subjecting to harm a human embryo." One can certainly take philosophical issue with the substance of the argument, but there can be no doubt that an articulate argument is proffered, that it carefully balances the benefits of science against its moral risks, and that the argument is premised upon scientifically defensible categorizations of human life. President Obama's executive order never attempts to reject the interpretation of human life offered in the Bush order it overturns, assuming instead that its celebration of science is evidence enough of its scientific superiority.

Furthermore, President Bush's order is a legitimately *political* one in two important ways. First, it resigns itself to an irresolvable contest of interests instead of attempting a merely cosmetic harmony through demagoguery. The position espoused in his executive order is meant to be a respectful and equitable compromise between opposed constituencies, and it recognizes the real limitations placed upon the federal government as an arbiter of a moral dispute between such profoundly divergent convictions. Secondly, a democratic and representative deference to a split in the will of the people doesn't necessarily justify the abdication of any and all moral principle or require a comprehensive moral skepticism; Bush's political compromise regarding the federal funding of stem cell research still draws an unequivocal moral line in the sand—there are certain kinds of research he won't prohibit but refuses to assist, and then some (human cloning, for example) he simply will not countenance. The great virtue of Bush's 2007 executive order is that it is appropriately political without being *merely* political; he captures the need for compromise but also eludes the danger of brokering merely an amoral compromise. It is correct to say, then, that Bush's approach is Christian but not in the sense usually (and malignantly) understood—it is Christian in the sense that it espouses some universal moral truths, like the unique dignity of each human life, but also accepts that such recognition does not undercut the need for prudence in applying these truths to the theater of real political experience. In other words, it is Thomistic in a way philosophically consonant with the principles of the American founding and the tradition those principles subsequently birthed.

President Obama's executive order, by way of contrast, makes no mention of any controversy at all but rather prefers to tout the "broad agreement in the scientific community that the research should be supported by federal funds," ignoring the more pressing question of whether this is essentially a question of scientific expertise in the first place. He does note that his order removes "barriers to responsible scientific research," thereby indicating a distinction between that and the irresponsible variety; however, there is no attempt to address what counts as either. Obama never articulates any moral principle other than the absolute sovereignty of scientific activity. He makes it unambiguously clear in his memorandum on scientific integrity that the real issue is that the "public must be able to trust the science and scientific process informing public policy decisions." Obama fails not only to identify a genuine moral predicament worth mentioning but also any real participatory role for the public to exercise its consent. As he sees it, the public's job is to accept passively the wisdom of technocratic experts.

In his remarks delivered to the press, President Obama does discuss the moral “concerns” of many “thoughtful and decent people” and the corresponding need to maintain the kind of “difficult and delicate balance” such concerns warrant. Yet despite the directive to “respect their point of view,” he marginalizes such dissent by claiming that the “majority of Americans...have come to a consensus” and that the “proper course has become clear”—a polite way of saying that these “thoughtful” dissenters are simply wrong and nearly everyone knows it. In fact, Obama implies less than subtly that the time for “discussion, debate, and reflection” has really passed and that there is nothing left but “a false choice between sound science and moral values.” For those who still cling to their now fully discredited religious reservations, Obama assures them that he offers this dismissal of their views as a “person of faith” himself. Likewise, for those who still insist there is any moral uncertainty, he comforts them with the simplistic platitude that the only relevant moral imperative is our “work to ease human suffering.” Obama’s rhetorical gestures towards the opposition are transparently perfunctory: he is so insistent on avoiding any political compromise whatsoever that he actually neglects even to mention that the research progress encouraged by his predecessor may have made it possible to sidestep the moral controversy. While much of President Bush’s 2007 order was devoted to the exciting discoveries being made for “less morally problematic alternatives” to embryos as a source of stem cells, Obama fails to mention these alternatives, or to mention that his new executive order also revokes Bush’s encouragement for exploring them, opting instead to support “promising research of all kinds,” problematic and otherwise.

In contrast to his predecessor’s circumspect effort to strike the right balance between scientific progress and political restraint, President Obama attempts to render them mutually exclusive: he wants scientists to operate free of the “manipulation and coercion” that are constitutive of any “political agenda.” To ensure that “scientific data is never distorted” and that “scientific decisions are based on facts, not ideology,” Obama effectively denies that there are any political judgments that cannot be settled by scientific investigation. For Obama, “responsibly conducted science” means science unobstructed by political intrusion, free even from the democratic will of the people. Science trumps politics entirely, or, to be more precise, simply absorbs it; any reference to values or interests that cannot be legitimated by scientific analysis is branded as ideology, whether or not supported by popular consent. Obama goes as far as to suggest that the political aggrandizement of America as a nation is inseparable

from its stewardship of technological innovation. He not only wants to “advance the cause of science in America” but also hopes for “America to lead the world in the discoveries it may one day yield.” To update John Winthrop’s famous line, we shall be as a laboratory upon a hill.

Morality and Modernity

The real danger of Obama’s technocratic administration is the habit to tendentiously recast serious moral and political debates as misguided arguments about plainly observable scientific fact. Some of our most complex and tempestuous moral issues today are biotechnological; these not only live in the often dark interstices between science and morality but also demand serious reflection on human nature and human flourishing. Of course, such philosophical questions involve science and require the assistance of scientists to draw the line between what is and isn’t technologically feasible and medically safe. But questions regarding the limits of science and the limits of human nature are not themselves solely or even primarily scientific questions—in fact, science in general has proven remarkably deaf to the bioethical implications of its own innovation.

Still, it is generally accepted by both the left and the right that science *itself* is a morally neutral enterprise, since it merely creates the mechanisms of power that can be used for moral and immoral purposes alike. In a public speech a few years ago, President Bush expressed this commonly-held view, albeit within the context of a sober warning:

The powers of science are morally neutral—as easily used for bad purposes as good ones. In the excitement of discovery, we must never forget that mankind is defined not by intelligence alone, but by conscience. Even the most noble ends do not justify every means.

President Bush’s admonitory message overlooks the historical fact that modern science was born of a project with the particular moral end of “the relief of man’s estate,” as Francis Bacon put it. The need for relief is a consequence of the hostility of nature to human existence and the moral imperative for human beings to overcome nature’s tyranny through productive labor. The fundamental objective of modern science is the rational control of nature that necessitates the extension of man’s power for the expansion of his autonomous freedom. To the extent that traditional conceptions of morality require a recognition of some salutary dependence upon nature, or of insuperable limitations on human self-transformation, science must be understood as an outright rejection of them. Further, the

narrowly empirical prism through which science views the human condition has a tendency to prioritize the health of the body above all other competing goods. Descartes captures this inclination well when he argues the fundamental aim of science is “the conservation of health, which is without doubt the primary good and the foundation of all other goods in this life.” It is inconceivable to Descartes that the health of the body could be less important than, or even inconsistent with, some other interpretation of human flourishing. Obama’s elevation of bodily suffering above all other considerations is clearly an expression of this Cartesian legacy, of a modern science pregnant with moral attachments.

It might even be the case that the fundamental premises that animate science tend to obscure rather than illuminate the moral context within which science operates. While modern science is based on the rational control of nature and asymptotic progress, morality requires a humble recognition of human limitation and the stubborn persistence of pain and imperfection. The deepest motivation of science is to overcome our mortality; morality is based not just upon its acceptance but embrace. Mill often argued that both scientific and moral investigation share the centrality of dispassionate objectivity, but neither the pursuit of scientific truth nor lived moral experience is a dispassionate affair. Likewise, the technocrat is a partisan of truth, progress, and the worthlessness of nature—even if he is objective about the findings of science, he is considerably less so regarding the defense of science itself. Much of the problem regarding political and moral debate about science today is the insincere or unreflective posture that science is above political and moral commitment.

The technological reduction of nature from a source of moral guidance to an obstacle to human freedom and mastery is complicated by the more poetic transformation of it into an object of reverential worship. The left’s sometimes ambiguous relationship to science is evidenced by this split. On one hand, the left generally adheres to the Lockean view that nature merely provides the clay for our refashioning of it into something more hospitable to the satisfaction of our desires. However, the left often also follows Rousseau in romantically depicting nature as the centerpiece of a pantheistic spirituality; this is especially conspicuous in certain strains of environmentalism. Nature is simultaneously deified and subdued—it is conserved against the threat of capitalistic excess but overcome when the antagonist is a conservative or moral caution.

Al Gore is the personification *par excellence* of this contradiction: the cerebral technocrat who interprets every human problem as an opportunity for a technical solution and a compassionate Green who extols the

beauty of Mother Nature and our obligations to steward her considerable gifts. It is at least paradoxical that Gore consistently recommends technological solutions to what he perceives to be our inadequate respect for nature's bounty. The left's ambivalence here, though, is less about science than it is about freedom: the left wants to liberate man from the twin tutelage of nature and God but not from statist hyper-regulation; a robust capitalism is far too democratic for its technocratic sensibilities. Once more, the left's view of nature is essentially Lockean but its notion of individual freedom as subordinate to the prerogatives of the state is an inheritance from Rousseau. In fact, one can detect the tension in the left's view of nature simply on Rousseauian grounds: nature is the seat of goodness but human beings are not constrained by it, characterized as they are by "infinite perfectibility," or the capacity for perpetual self-transformation beyond our natural condition. The great goal of science is freedom, but dominance of science over politics does not result in the general dispensation of freedom; the fruits of the Enlightenment are for all to enjoy but only for some to manage.

A Politics in Full

Despite its openly populist tendencies, the rise of technocracy is hostile to the prudence and good sense of the common man. Moreover, despite his incapacity to appreciate the greatness of the statesman, the technocrat is vulnerable to becoming intoxicated by his own superior wisdom, as capacitated by statistical science. Unlike in aristocracy, the technocrat's claim to rule is not based on questionable claims regarding excellence or tradition; the technocrat's superiority is instead evidenced by reason itself. It seems quite plausible that a degenerate variety of magnanimity, contemptuous of the people and quick to anger, would be the deformed progeny of technocratic leadership.

The technocrat is quick to advocate a science of administrative means but has no recourse to a comparable science of ends; the distinction between scientific fact and subjective value drains the meaningfulness of moral discourse from public life. Interestingly enough, the technocrat is even more immoderate and peculiarly self-righteous when discussing moral ends precisely because, in the absence of rational demonstration, frustration easily gives way to moral indignation. President Obama often mentions his opponents' dissenting views and acknowledges their right to hold them but also clearly marginalizes their disagreement by condescendingly pointing out their shocking irrationality.

The basic political premise of techno-politics is that the classic question regarding competing claims to rule has been decisively answered. Instead of Plato's philosopher king we get his emasculated modern descendant: the rational bureaucrat. The ascendancy of techno-politics also assumes that human behavior has been rendered docile—the victory of administrative science over practical statesmanship is based on an exaggerated version of Montesquieu's prediction that a turn to commercial pursuits would usher in a general "softening of mores." The turn to benign interests is a turn away from the messier and more obviously political questions that involve the identification of a controversial good and the contest among citizens vying for honor. The incoherence within the technocratic view of political life is that it simultaneously denies a politics based on the love of honor and showers honor upon those who claim a greater share of reason. In contradistinction to honor politics, the rule of management science presupposes men that are easily manageable, subject to domestication, and satisfied by the appropriate calculus of interests. If politics is nothing but the deliberative regulation of benign interest, then the simple rule of administrative competence might actually suffice.

However, there are also men who are driven by more than mere interest—they also want honor and a recognition of their individual importance, and ironically enough, this includes the technocrat. It would be impossible, for example, to describe the debate regarding abortion as a mere clash of interests—that would not account for the fierce, sometimes violent defense each side offers of its position and corresponding worldview. Human beings are spirited, or have what the ancient Greeks called *thumos*, that inclination to angrily demand the honor that is owed them and recognized in the political theater. Prudence and genuine public debate are politically necessary because politics is more than the pedestrian management of competing interests—it is the dangerous juggling of angry claims to be praised and blamed.

The sum result of the technocratic presumption that politics is nothing other than hyper-rational game theory is the stark de-politicization of human desire—the crucial importance of the ancient distinction between *thumos* and more pedestrian desire (*epithumia*) is discarded for the indiscriminately homogeneous "passions of the soul," as Descartes articulates it. From the perspective of classical philosophy, the satisfaction of human desire was always understood to be an inherently political enterprise, not only because of our natural sociability and mutual dependence, but also because human desire *itself* stubbornly, even angrily, resists being decisively tamed by any soothing, bureaucratic lullaby. If the whole human

person is always and necessarily a mix of *logos* and *eros*, and sometimes a volatile one, then any attempt to assimilate desire into *logos* will necessarily fail. The hallmark of modern science when applied to political life is the tyranny of technological reason over those aspects of human experience that defy it; in this way, Descartes flipped Cicero's famous dictum that it is "often the nature of politics to defeat reason" on its head. The dream of modern science is the absolute victory of human reason over an incomprehensible and indifferent cosmos, of which the chaos of human political life is an exemplary microcosm.

President Obama's therapeutic populism actually runs into similar difficulties. The problem already discussed is that the rejection of prudence coupled with the honor especially accorded to technocratic elites repudiates the insistent egalitarianism of his populist rhetoric. However, one thing Obama's populism has in common with his techno-politics is the view that political experience is reducible to the pursuit of tepid interests and that statesmanship consists in their polite superintendence. Instead of a robust conception of consent that includes searching public deliberation about the most enduring moral questions, Obama envisions a less proactive, more symbolic recognition on the part of the public that their interests are being adequately managed by the political class. When the question of competing worldviews is reduced to a collision of interests, the granting or withholding of consent becomes an innocuous affair largely carried on by thoroughly subdued beings; at the very least, this picture overlooks the fact that consent can be given lovingly or begrudgingly. If it turns out that we are more than rational beings with interests, and that we make claims (sometimes angrily) based on honor and the need for recognition, then consent and deliberation that ignores more poignant spurs to action than mere interest will often fall short. The therapeutic aspect of Obama's populism, especially his massaging of the people's economic unease without extending even gentle reproach for some complicity in their own misfortunes, is a consolation prize meant to soften the blow of an emergent "administrative despotism." In exchange for the dishonor of surrendering some considerable consent to a bevy of new expert czars, Obama offers the alternative honor of clearing us of any public blame for the demotion. We are both helpless and blameless.

The effectual truth of both technocratic governance and therapeutic populism is a denial of the place that genuine disagreement about the good and individual honor have in political life. At least in its original Lockean incarnation, the egalitarian logic of a politics based upon popular consent was meant to create the appearance of evenly distributed honor,

thereby tempering the hostility that often arises from the many rigorous and mutually exclusive claims to it. Today, we embrace the centrality of consent to political authority but characteristically neglect the obvious complications that attach to its exercise. Differently put, we enjoy the pride that comes with having an important say in political affairs but duck the concomitant responsibilities that would force us to mix that pride with some reasonable measure of humility. The pride we have in the importance of our consent is not without some vanity. One could say that the political priority assigned to consent was meant to signify a departure from a politics complicated by the centrality of honor, but the prideful way we insist on our consent is powerful evidence that honor still has its way.

President Obama's rhetorical alchemy has consistently presented this new technocratic ideology as a pragmatic rejection of ideology itself—his politics is presented as devoid of any moral or political commitments that invite controversy or public debate. However, this denial of a guiding worldview is a sleight of hand crafted to furtively import an ideology without the need to publicly articulate it. Political life could never be properly captured by a reduction to its merely rational components—such an abbreviation would inevitably discount the rivalry over the good that makes political commerce necessary in the first place. The technocratic denial of genuine moral ambiguity in political affairs is designed to pacify the competition for honor that such ambiguity begets—what remains should be competently managed interests and a lobotomized shadow of real consent. Given the many ways in which the breakneck pace of innovation, including biotechnological innovation, challenges our existing moral and political paradigms, a call to serious civic deliberation on this score has never been more needed. Disputation of this kind can be a tumultuous ride. But for those with the heart to brave it, there is much honor to be won.