

CORRESPONDENCE

Biocapitalism

At the end of his perceptive article, “Biotechnology and the Spirit of Capitalism” [Spring 2006], Eric Cohen wisely points out “the need to reconsider the relationship between modern technology and modern commerce.” I would push his argument a step further. Until recently it seemed that capitalism, with the support of a traditional cultural foundation that served as a corrective to its excesses, could keep its harms and benefits in a decent balance. But conservatives should now take seriously the possibility that the market side of the balance has radically come to dominate, eating away at the very foundations meant to keep it in check.

The market—as much an engine for the rankest moral relativism as for progress—is a far more powerful force than the supposed nefarious influence of liberal and radical thinkers. As part of our everyday life, the former has cleverly seduced us by hiding its harms behind undeniable benefits. We tolerate the one because we can’t give up the other. In recent decades the market has come to dominate athletics, health care, and (in their profit-driven technology offices) higher education. If it has been possible to commercialize those once market-resistant areas, it is hardly surprising that capitalism has targeted the body as perhaps the most tempting morsel of all.

The time has come for a serious dialogue between the business community and social conservatives (with a sprinkling of liberals thrown in) about the commercialization of the body. I nominate the American Enterprise Institute and the

pages of the *Wall Street Journal* as the perfect venues for such an encounter. It was the latter which, noting some moral objections to the Human Genome Project a few years ago, said that “political backing will be needed to damp down objections to this kind of progress.”

DANIEL CALLAHAN
The Hastings Center
Garrison, N.Y.

In “Biotechnology and the Spirit of Capitalism” Eric Cohen raises concerns in keeping with a distinguished history of critiques of “the profaning power of commerce.”

The economist Robert Fogel has coined a term that is useful in the present context: “techno-physio evolution.” By that Fogel means the myriad ways mankind has employed useful knowledge—in agriculture, medicine, biotechnology, engineering, and so on—that yielded significant effects on his physical and mental constitution, such as greater longevity.

In celebrating “our economic prosperity,” Cohen clearly views some technologies and commercial enterprises yielding more rapid techno-physio evolution in a kindly light. However, Cohen hopes that we will “salvage better answers to man’s permanent questions than simply buying what the cosmetic surgeon and the neurochemist eagerly want to sell us.” This suggests that the problems we face are not with technology or commerce *per se*; rather, they are with philosophy and habit of mind.

So let me offer a suggestion and raise a question. The “permanent questions”

Cohen mentions need to be stated explicitly whenever possible in the context of debates over biotechnology. This needs to be done because without stating them with some precision, it is difficult to know if those questions—and the answers to them—need to be recast and restated in response to the techno-physio evolution that seems to be accelerating in our age. After all, is it possible that the techno-physio evolution underway is of a categorical magnitude, one that renders some of those permanent questions no longer, well, permanent? It is on this question that the future of biotechnology may hinge.

NICK SCHULZ
TCS Daily
Silver Spring, Md.

ERIC COHEN responds: Daniel Callahan makes an important point, one many political conservatives frequently ignore: the market often serves the “rankest moral relativism,” and its creative destruction often undermines important cultural institutions like the family. If the only restraint on human activity is consent between adults, if selling what others will buy and buying what others will sell are seen as rights, then modern democracies are in moral trouble. This is only truer in the age of embryo research and cosmetic surgery and mood-altering drugs and assisted reproduction and (coming soon, perhaps) “organ vendors.”

But one should not dismiss entirely the virtues of commerce—in demanding an ethic of work and trust between parties, in creating the wealth necessary for parents to care for their children, in restraining political tyranny by putting wealth in the hands of citizens. And one should not forget the perverse moral consequences of many alternatives to the market, seen

in the extreme in the brutality of modern communism.

So what to do? In the end, we face a conundrum without an easy policy solution: nations thrive when they keep their markets free; markets often thrive while promoting and profiting off self-dehumanization. For the gravest offenses, government should restrict or regulate commerce for moral reasons. But in general, we need just the kind of dialogue between business leaders and social conservatives that Mr. Callahan recommends, so that business leaders can see their work as serving not only the interests of shareholders but the interests of all citizens.

Nick Schulz asks whether the advance of technology might alter—or even replace—the permanent questions and problems of being human. To which I say: yes and no, but mostly no. No doubt the problems of suffering and death were experienced quite differently in the age before modern medicine. When many mothers died in childbirth, or buried their young as infants, the fragility of life was perhaps more obvious, and the need for a kind of stoicism more apparent. That we have largely left such miseries behind is reason for gratitude and praise. Still, the problems of suffering and death will always remain, even with the miracles of modern medicine. But the contours do change—while we rarely bury our infant young, we will need to learn how to care for our graying old, through the long decline of dementia so rarely experienced in ages past.

Another example: In the age of modern birth control, the sex drive and the procreative drive have been severed. More than ever, we need a conscious human answer to a basic human question: Why have children? And more than ever, the most advanced nations (with America as a

CORRESPONDENCE

partial exception) do not have an answer, a reason for natality. They are not engaging in the most fundamental activity of animal life—creating the next generation, to carry life forward after we are gone. This is a new kind of problem for which we need some old guidance—about the family and the generations and what sets human

beings apart from the rest of nature. In the age of “the pill” and PGD and (coming soon) human cloning, we need Tolstoy and Shakespeare and even Genesis to help us use our growing scientific powers well, and to help us see what our technological aspirations are really for.
