

## Restless Souls

*Peter A. Lawler*

It makes good sense for the Council to turn its attention to the prospect of happy souls right after considering the prospect of ageless bodies. After all, we want ageless bodies not for their own sake but to be happy; not to live forever as the restless selves we are now but to live long enough to become fully satisfied or fully whole.

According to John Locke, the key philosopher for understanding America, what distinguishes human beings from chimps and dolphins is not happiness itself but our pursuit of happiness. We might even say that Locke makes the strange suggestion that the happy soul is an oxymoron.

Ageless or fairly ageless bodies will not make us happy because biotechnology will never be able to eradicate the possibility of accidental death. Those blown up in an explosion or flattened by an asteroid will be gone forever. Seemingly liberated from the necessity of natural death, but still having to face the prospect of accidental death, we will perceive our lives as being more accidental and contingent than ever. Anxiety will continue to grow even as our bodies become more “ageless.”

Indeed, we already see that as high technology increasingly makes our lives longer and more secure we become in many ways more anxious and risk-averse than ever. We live in a time when well-educated and prosperous Americans are nonjudgmental about everything but health and safety—about these we are increasingly paranoid, prohibitionist, and puritanical.

If perfect or more perfect bodies will not make us happy, we might as well try to perfect our souls. According to Aristotle, we do that through the practice of moral virtue. But one of the downsides of living in an increasingly high-tech society is that both virtue and opportunities to act virtuously seem to be in short supply. So, for us, perfecting our soul has come to mean employing psychotherapy of various kinds to feel good without having to be good. We can now hope to

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use biotechnology to bring our memories and moods under our conscious control. And mood control is more fundamental than memory control: we need not fear our memories if we can keep them from making us feel bad.

The main fear of *Beyond Therapy's* chapter on “happy souls” is that some kind of super-Prozac might rob us of our distinctive humanity, that we might end up living relatively content in the present—unmoved by past and future, love and shame, grief and death. Such solitary contentment is far inferior to the social flourishing rightly called human happiness.

But this report also shows that intense human happiness is inseparable from intense human misery. We human beings seem to lack the equanimity that the other animals naturally enjoy. So we can't help but ask why we shouldn't use biotechnology to make ourselves as at home in the world as our fellow animals naturally are. This report, in fact, makes the case for biotechnological mood control seem pretty powerful. Let me make that case as strongly as I can.

We human beings will be better off using biotechnology to change the perverse features of our natures to achieve a shallower, but more pure, form of happiness. The cost in soaring greatness will be worth the gain in ordinary happiness. We won't need to be as great—because we won't need to be as miserable—any more.

Thinkers such as Walker Percy say that we have good reasons to be anxious and depressed. We really do live in a crazy society and we really are mysteriously displaced or lost in the cosmos. But today such social and existential accounts of anxiety and depression are called into question by the possibility of their chemical cure. Moods, we are now told, are really nothing more than the result of certain chemical reactions. And who's to say which mix of chemicals tells us the truth about ourselves? We seem to have no reason not to prefer comfort and productivity to the truth, no reason not to follow Richard Rorty's pragmatic advice and call true whatever mood makes us comfortable.

But if our moods got too good, our demand for biotechnological advances that really would improve our bodies would wither away. Without the fear of death, the urgency of medical progress would decline. And because we would be too self-satisfied to worry about terrorism, the terrorists would surely win. We would lose both the motivation and the courage to face our enemies. So the soundest judgment is that our anxious, obsessive, self-conscious individualism needs to be curbed somewhat but not eliminated altogether.

Fortunately, our drugs seem ready to deliver exactly this result. Those who take selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as Prozac or Paxil remain moved to some extent by anxiety, melancholy, and so forth, but not to the point of brooding over them or being overwhelmed by crippling social inhibitions. For readers of deep books, the result can be a more cerebral and less emotional appreciation of writers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

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This sort of “designer” mood-brightening or mood-balancing will certainly become more precise and effective. It will assist the “bourgeois bohemian” project of sophisticated Americans, who seek to reconcile a meritocratic work ethic with a life of easygoing enjoyment. To be too bourgeois or too bohemian—to be all work or all play—is self-destructive. So what we need to flourish in our time—and SSRIs might deliver—is a moderate or fairly calm form of uneasiness or restlessness. We need just the right mixture of the pursuit of happiness and the enjoyment of happiness.

Upon closer examination, however, the case for conscious, biotechnological mood control only makes sense to those who really believe that we do or will be able to completely understand human consciousness or the human soul. So it doesn’t make much sense to me. And I think this penetrating report would be even more powerful if it were more consistently confident that the mood control project is finally mission impossible—in fact, finally nuts.

Every modern or technological attempt to make us more at home in this world has had the main effect of making us more homeless. This one will be no different. I don’t think that there’s any reason to fear that we are capable of producing Nietzsche’s flat-souled last man or Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Carl Elliott observes that “as much as we like the *Brave New World* story, as many times as we read it and repeat it and write high school essays about it, somehow it never seems to apply to us.”

We may soon enough believe that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves happy except pop the right mix of pills. This new and quite fundamental dependence on technological manipulation will make our existences more contingent than ever, and just beneath the surface of our new good feelings will be a new form of anxiety, a really bad mood. Our pursuit of happiness will be more fanatical and more futile than ever. We will become progressively more self-conscious about how miserable we are without powerful chemical alleviation. But the good news is that, in some ways, there will be more evidence that we have souls. Being unhappy on mood-brighteners might show us that happiness is more than a chemical problem.

The experts say that too many Americans suffer from a pharmacological Calvinism or Puritanism. We unreasonably distrust anything that makes us happy, especially without stern personal discipline and effort. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that restless Americans take a perverse pride in their misery. They pursue enjoyments but never really enjoy, and they sometimes agree with Locke that it is in this futile pursuit that they exhibit their liberty. To some extent, this report shares Tocqueville’s fear that technological success will cause us to surrender our liberty by actually achieving contentment. My view is that, perversely enough, there is nothing to fear. Americans will often embrace or suc-

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cumb reluctantly to pharmacological and many other forms of biotechnological enhancement despite their reservations, and they will not really find happiness as a result. We will have more reason than ever to take pride in our misery, more than ever misery of our own creation.

*Beyond Therapy* explores these matters of the soul with great seriousness. And yet the report is in some ways incoherent. It provides plenty of evidence that what it sometimes seems to fear—that we will manipulate our chemical make-ups to withdraw into private fantasies—could not really happen. We will still be stuck with all the tough demands of living in a very high-tech, very meritocratic, very competitive society. Because these new powers exist, we will be expected to brighten our moods to maximize our productivity and to be a source of constant pleasure to others. We will have to not only dress but feel for success. Being alienated, depressed, sad, shy, or just introspective will be regarded as problems that we have the duty to solve by a quick trip to the drug store. We will be more or less compelled to surrender part of what used to be called our character to develop a more pleasing personality. But in the end, these drugs will likely make us more restless, not less. They will leave our souls more fractured, not flat or whole.

Shyness, Carl Elliott reports, has already become “social phobia”; it has been “medicalized” into a disabling disorder that puts an unjust burden on society. Those who have this disorder, the experts tell us, have the duty to take an SSRI to become more outgoing and friendly. But according to Walker Percy, shy people are sometimes shy because they are particularly aware of the “unique unformulability” of the human self or soul. They are shy because they are particularly moved by part of the truth about being human. But because drugs are now available to help, they must chemically suppress their social anxiety to be socially effective.

This report is quite right to say that the intention of this sort of chemical compulsion is to produce “slavish” selves, but that doesn’t mean it will succeed all that well. Paxil’s slogan is “Relieve the anxiety, and reveal the person,” but nobody really believes that chemical manipulation can be a reliable source of natural revelation. All the pragmatic or postmodern propaganda in the world can’t really get us to believe that our celebrated process of self-invention can really obliterate the self or soul that is at the foundation of all the inventing.

Contrary to what the libertarians think, designer mood control will be an unprecedented constraint on individual freedom. As Percy feared, we will no longer have a right to our anxiety, but this new reality will make us more anxious and in some ways angrier than ever. Our anger will be directed, whether we know it or not, against an attempt to deprive us of part of the truth about being human. That sort of anger is already just beneath the surface in sophisticated, relativistic America: Our souls are disoriented or full of confusion because the

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therapeutic, nonjudgmental words given to us by experts don't correspond to the longings we have as beings with souls.

In the end, *Beyond Therapy* is strongest when it is clear that our pharmacological attempts at mood control will be yet another failed escapist solution to the problem of our obsessive individualism. Our biotechnological efforts will do nothing to solve the problems that come with denying the limits, aspirations, and anxieties imposed on us by nature. Despite their huge and undeniable benefits, our successes will actually tend to make us more unhappy by further exaggerating certain features of our existence as individuals. Our futile biotechnological pursuit of happy souls will erode still further our experiences of continuity, permanence, love, and friendship—our genuine connections with the world and the human beings around us—that really do moderate our genuinely human experiences of homelessness in this world. But perhaps, in this great failure, the biotechnology project will show us what kind of beings we truly are.

The biggest news this report gives us is that there is no substitute for the practice of virtue, for really being good. And so, if we really want to be as happy as we can be, we need to think about what sort of virtue will be required to live well in the strange new biotech world, one in which there will be widespread experimentation on and by ordinary, reasonably healthy people with pharmacological mood control.

The secret to enjoying real human happiness always lies in our willingness to renounce our right to be happy. It lies in fulfilling the demanding responsibilities given to us as self-conscious mortals in a dignified way.

Contrary to John Locke or even Pascal, I do not believe that “happy soul” is an oxymoron. We can be humanly happy—and so not perfectly happy—when we think and act with the dignity given only to beings with souls. All the evidence suggests that biotechnological progress will be driven by our desire to achieve comfort and security as individuals. But insofar as we are merely individuals, we pursue but do not find happiness.

This report encourages us—with happiness in mind—to think of ourselves as more than individuals. We are also parents, children, friends, lovers—including lovers of truth, neighbors, citizens, and creatures. What we achieve as individuals is good if we use it for our family, friends, country, and God, and there's every reason to believe that we are incapable of making ourselves into individuals and nothing more. The human soul—that nonmaterial principle of motivation and aspiration that distinguishes us by nature—transforms and shines forth in all our thoughts and activities, not just in our wonderful but finally futile efforts to free ourselves from nature and God.

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