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Biotechnology and the Spirit of Capitalism

Eric Cohen

The spirit of modern capitalism is as varied as the souls of modern men. Virtually every type of morality is "for sale," and virtually every human type finds his place in the modern economy. The cosmetic surgeon specializing in breast implants. The observant Jew rushing to finish work before sundown. Sex stories on MTV and salvation stories at the movies. Oil-drilling corporations and embryo-destroying start-ups. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and NASCAR racing.

Watching commercials on television, trolling the Internet, going to work, it is clear that commerce captures the many possibilities of human life, both for better and for worse. It mostly involves decent men and women working hard to better themselves and provide for their families. But commerce sometimes goes deep into the human gutter—the multi-billion-dollar child-pornography industry is perhaps the grossest example—dragging many ordinary people down with it. The modern economy relies largely on average people doing average work, competently if not brilliantly. But it also nourishes and depends upon more-than-average individuals—including those who remake the world with their talents and visions, often with technologies that aim to satisfy every human desire.

Perhaps the most striking dimension of the modern economy is the commerce of the body, including an impressive array of new biotechnologies and biological procedures that promise to improve, control, or manipulate our native biology. In myriad ways, the better body is for sale—from anti-impotence drugs to anti-depressants, from cosmetic surgery to low-carb diets, from baby-making clinics promising you a healthy child to the current push to legalize the buying and selling of human organs. And if one looks ahead to the biotechnologies of the future—improved mood- and memory-altering drugs, stem-cell-based medicine, genetic muscle enhancements, new techniques for controlling the genomes of one's

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offspring—it is clear that the commerce of the body will only become more ambitious, selling bodily perfection to anyone with enough disposable income.

This leaves us to wonder: Is "bio-capitalism" something novel, bringing with it a new spirit and new dilemmas? Or is it simply the continuation of modern capitalism's promise to "better our condition" indefinitely? No doubt the answer is some combination of continuity and novelty. The interesting question is whether the novel dimensions of bio-capitalism are so fundamental that we need to rethink our moral intuitions about capitalism itself. In a word: Does the new commerce of the body portend a moral crisis for modern capitalism?

As always, to understand where we are heading, we need to revisit where we came from. From the beginning, the idea of modern capitalism was connected to various notions of the good life, or different assessments of the best life possible for limited, selfish, and imperfect human beings. Morality and modern commerce were always inseparable, and the defense of commerce (like the lament) was originally made in moral terms.

By morality, I mean living well (both as individuals and as a society) with the permanent questions of being human, including the questions that arise because we are bodily beings with bodies that fail or fail to satisfy: How do I face suffering and death? What are my obligations to my parents and children? Do the religious traditions of my birth still bind me, and how do I regard the piety or impiety of others? What are my obligations to the weak, poor, nasty, and insane? What is the meaning of my sexual desires and erotic longings? Does the noble end I seek—saving a soul, freeing the oppressed, curing the sick—justify a given means to try to achieve it?

Modern capitalism, at its origins, addressed these moral and existential questions—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. It did not spring from a single idea of the human condition or embody a single answer to man's great questions, but at least three different attitudes toward life and commerce. One is the spirit of *God-seeking enterprise* embodied in early Protestantism; the second is the *irreverent self-love* embodied in the likes of Voltaire; and the third is the *worldly moderation* best articulated by Adam Smith. To be sure, typologies such as this one often distort as much as they clarify; history is messy and complex, and the history of capitalism is winding and tumultuous, with passionate defenders, savage critics, and many unexpected turns. Still, the presence of these three different spirits of capitalism is undeniable, and undeniably important.

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Capitalism's Three Spirits

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber describes how a new idea of salvation—a new creed about the relationship between man and God, worldly life and other-worldly grace—unexpectedly initiated the age of modern capitalism. It would be a vast oversimplification to say that there was a single Protestant Reformation; for there were many cross-currents, as Weber describes. But two ideas in particular—Luther's idea of "calling" and Calvin's idea of "predestination"—fundamentally altered the behavior of believing Christians and the trajectory of the West. Worldly work could now be understood in vocational terms. "The fulfillment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God," describes Weber. "It and it alone is the will of God, and hence every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God."

But only by combining the idea of "calling" with the theology of "predestination"—that is, the belief in salvation by God's unfathomable grace alone, breathed into us at birth—did the spirit of capitalism find its paradoxical roots. For men could not live in practice or for long with a grace so mysterious, or with the state of their eternal souls so uncertain. They wanted "proof"—proof to themselves, proof before others, and proof before God that "I" am indeed saved. This desire for proof gave believing Protestants an "irrational" will to work with little interest in savoring the worldly fruits of their labors. The individual toiled instead as a sign of other-worldly salvation, and in accordance (as he saw it) with a divinely chosen calling. Every detail of life was rationalized and perfected; even the smallest sign of waywardness might be a sign of one's un-chosenness. Practical science was welcomed and mystical speculation discouraged.

The result of such an ethic, according to Weber, was a magnificent increase in material wealth, due largely to the accumulation of capital that came from producing so much and enjoying so little, from the combination of restless toil and ascetic self-denial. But the wealth produced as the outward fruit of man's piety threatened to undermine the inner commitment to God. As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, declared:

> I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion.... [T]he Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionally increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there no way to prevent this—this continual decay of pure religion? We ought not to prevent people from being diligent

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> and frugal; we *must* exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich. What way, then, can we take, that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who *gain* all they can, and *save* all they can, will likewise *give* all they can, then the more they gain the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.

Whether Weber is quite correct about the historical connection between the Protestant ethic and the birth of capitalism is a complicated and much disputed question. What seems clear is that God-seeking Protestants were central to the first flourishing of modern commerce, and that over time the fruits of such enterprise came to seem more desirable in themselves. As Weber put it: "The intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue; the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness." In this way, the formula was reversed—not material success as proof of salvation, but salvation via our material success.

Through Protestantism, commerce was made a realm of "grace." But over time, it was not God's grace alone, or at all, that men sought, but the grace of being a "self-made man"—the grace that was formed by one's own labors or secured by one's own ingenuity, not bestowed as a divine gift and obligation. Before Protestantism, salvation was largely set apart from (or above) the realm of commerce—in the sacraments, the monastery, or the Sabbath. Protestantism weakened this separation—directing men, if somewhat unintentionally, to see the labors of life as proof of salvation, and eventually as its very source. But sooner or later, the self-made man confronts the limits of his own self-made grace. He is struck by misfortune, or boredom, or mortality. His grace is haunted and incomplete. The "religious roots" of commerce continue to lurk as ghosts within the modern economy. To this day, we are still haunted by the salvation that modern commerce once promised, and still hunting after the kinds of salvation it might yet give us—not in heaven, but in the flesh.

For Voltaire, the delights of the flesh were worth celebrating, and he admired commerce precisely for its capacity to promote worldly goods (including bodily pleasures) through freedom and exchange. Where the Protestant ethic prized self-denial, Voltaire celebrated self-love; and where the Protestant believer labored out of devotion to a saving God, Voltaire celebrated commerce for making such pious devotions irrelevant. "Religionists may rail in vain," he wrote. "I own, I like this age profane." He liked its physical comforts and the room it afforded for his playful, "worldly mind." He

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led a life of wild speculation—filled with financial schemes that would have made the managers of Enron proud—and he praised the London Exchange as a place where the only "infidels" were those who went "bankrupt."

As Jerry Muller describes in his superb book *The Mind and the Market*, the real enemy for Voltaire was religious enthusiasm, which led men to slit each other's throats over archaic and trivial superstitions. "Here Voltaire is the prophet of the profit motive," Muller describes. "Compared to the competitive quest for salvation, the quest for wealth is more likely to make men 'peaceful' and 'content.' Compared to the altruistic crusade of forcibly saving one's neighbor's soul, even if it leaves his body in ruins, the pursuit of wealth is a potentially more peaceable pursuit, and one that leaves one's neighbor content."

But it was not just religious conflict that Voltaire abhorred, but the pious man's devotion to a false salvation, his idealization of a wretched past at the cost of making a better future. In a poem with the fitting title "The Worldling," Voltaire pays tribute to the wonders of his age—the "needful superfluous things," the "luxury and pleasures." He mocks Adam and Eve for the wretchedness of their flesh, the dirty ground they slept in, the tasteless food they ate.

> My fruit-eating first father, say,
> In Eden how rolled time away?
> Did you work for the human race,
> And clasp dame Eve with close embrace!
> Own that your nails you could not pare,
> And that you wore disordered hair,
> That you were swarthy in complexion,
> And that your amorous affection
> Had very little better in't
> Than downright animal instinct.
> Both weary of the marriage yoke
> You supped each night beneath an oak
> On millet, water, and on mast,
> And having finished your repast,
> On the ground you were forced to lie,
> Exposed to the inclement sky:
> Such in the state of simple nature
> Is man, a helpless, wretched creature.

Eve, in other words, could use a trip to the perfume counter and the salon. To embrace such a "wretched creature" is to be nothing more than an animal. Beyond the flesh, Voltaire praises the artists and the architects—the

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real makers of "grace." He delights in what is visible to the eye inside "rich golden frames," not what is knowable to the soul oriented toward heaven. The poem ends with Voltaire's fitting words of self-praise: "Terrestrial paradise is where I am." He is a "worldling" and nothing else, living in a paradise of "self-love" and "happy commerce," one that he desperately hopes to sustain—decaying flesh be damned.

Adam Smith, you might say, offered a moderate vision—between the Protestant quest for other-worldly salvation and Voltaire's irreverent delight in the luxuries of the flesh. With Voltaire, he believed that an alternative needed to be found to the wars of religious piety, and that state-regulated salvation was a recipe for tyranny and slaughter. And yet, he did not see religion itself as an enemy, and he took for granted, as Irving Kristol and others have argued, the habit-forming effects of traditional institutions like church and family. Without the Puritan work ethic, it is unlikely that Smith's practical vision would have gotten off the ground. But Smith did not offer a commerce of salvation—worldly or other-worldly—but a commerce of progress, one that expanded man's liberty and gradually improved his condition. It was a sober and practical vision for sober and practical men. He was interested in building a decent society, by taking seriously both man's rational self-interest and his capacity for self-restraint, both his natural acquisitiveness and his latent civility. And he sought a society that improved the condition of all willing individuals, not simply a society where the strong triumphed over the weak, or where the wealthy pursued life's niceties while the poor remained in a condition of permanent desperation.

Smith, in other words, sought to build a future that "worked"—and by most accounts, he succeeded tremendously. We live in the world he built, with souls still shaped in large measure by his vision, and a politics still informed by his realism about the limits of radically remaking the human condition by conscious design. Smith's "system of natural liberty" worked in two basic ways: First, it explained how the natural desire for self-improvement and the range of natural human capacities could cohere to produce a prosperous economic system—one in which individuals responded to the changing needs of the market and the changing possibilities of production, and lived with the freedom to "better their condition" according to their own lights. In this way, the desire for private profit could serve the public interest, and the largely free market could produce an organic order from below, one impossible to create from above. Second, Smith showed how commercial life could have a civilizing effect on acquisitive individuals, who needed to work hard and tolerate others in

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order to prosper. The commercial society does not stamp out selfishness or spread the gospel of brotherly love. But it does channel self-interest and promote civil society among individuals with different backgrounds and tastes. And it creates the wealth necessary for somewhat higher aspirations, if not necessarily the desire to pursue them.

Smith believed an economic system should be judged in moral terms—judged for the kind of people it produces and the way of life it allows to flourish. And he was not blind to capitalism's moral shortcomings—including the rise of scheming businessmen moved only by greed and devoid of conscience, and the existence of laborers made dull and brutish by performing a few simple functions without end. But the problems of greed, nastiness, and stupidity were hardly unique to modern capitalist life, and in many ways they were much worse in pre-capitalist societies. The problem, of course, was and remains the limits of human nature itself; a social system, at best, could promote virtues and curb vices—not make average men into philosophers or saints.

Peculiarly, the one thing that pious Protestantism and Voltairean atheism agreed upon was that commerce was a good thing. Traditional (Catholic and Orthodox) Christianity had thought otherwise, and modern radical progressivism thinks otherwise, too. But in that moment, two key combatants on the battlefield of the early modern age agreed about the virtues of enterprise. Adam Smith, in turn, sought to assuage the struggle between them by focusing on this point of agreement, and so we now think of this great moral philosopher as an economist, but only because he saw that commerce was the way to peace in modern times. This age was almost bound to be defined by commerce, because those who fought to shape the age agreed almost only in their veneration of trade. But trade, alas, is not the most venerable thing, because what men buy and sell cannot address man's deepest longings, even if the culture of the marketplace sometimes curbs his worst excesses.

Biotechnology and the Counterculture

In 1991, with the last vestiges of communism crumbling and the Cold War ending, Irving Kristol warned that the greatest threats to a capitalist future were spiritual and cultural. "In a sense," he said, "it is all Adam Smith's fault. That amiable, decent genius simply could not imagine a world where traditional moral certainties could be effectively challenged and repudiated. Bourgeois society is his legacy, for good and ill. For good, in that it has produced, through the market economy, a world prosperous

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beyond all previous imaginings—including socialist imaginings. For ill, in that this world, with every passing decade, has become ever more spiritually impoverished."

In the end, Smith's error was his lack of "eschatological realism." Man is not simply an average being who seeks to improve in material ways. He is also an imperfect being who yearns for perfection, a mortal being who yearns for immortality, and an ambitious being who sometimes believes that he can make others more perfect or less mortal through his own mastery of nature. And so Adam Smith's world of practical commerce—a great success—is still haunted by the Protestant desire for other-worldly grace and by Voltaire's desire for "terrestrial paradise." We demand that material progress offer salvation—which is exactly what socialism once promised and what biotechnology may promise in the future. Or we demand that material progress be abandoned in the name of salvation—soberly, by those who seek to preserve sacred retreats in a profane world, or radically, by extremists who seek to dismantle modern life altogether.

This quest for salvation can either go "with the grain" or "against the grain" of modern commercial society. Modern science—especially modern biological science—has long gone with the grain: seeking useful inventions, practical advances, and the "relief of man's estate" through a growing mastery of nature's laws and human biology. Technology has long been the art of self-improvement, and commercial society has long been inseparable from the creation and dissemination of new technologies. The implementation of Francis Bacon's vision has rarely shocked the Smithian mind, and mostly pleased it.

By contrast, modernist culture—art, literature, mores, and manners—has largely gone against the grain of modern commercial society. It saw the bourgeois world as boring, repressed, and unsatisfying—a world of "one-dimensional men," hungry for property, ruled by old-fashioned values left-over from outdated religions. Modernism sought a life of the spirit in a life of *immodesty*—a life without limits, sexual or otherwise. It saw the mass of men as automatons, and it saw mass society as guilty of the degradation of both nature and culture. And yet it also imagined that man himself was a creature without shame, a being beyond sin. It believed that alienation was a problem of history, not a condition of our nature. This attitude was epitomized in the counterculture of the 1960s—with its liberation of the body from old taboos, and its childish illusions about the remaking of man.

Back then, it seemed as though the culture of technology and the counterculture were mortal enemies. The machine vs. the spirit. Dionysian feeling vs. rational investigation. Gradual progress vs. spontaneous lib-

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eration. And of course, in some ways, they were and still remain bitter enemies. But perhaps not in the most important ways. For it may be that the peculiarities of our own recent history mask a deeper connection between the counterculture and the culture of modern technology—a connection grounded in the belief that human limits should be overcome, taboos are anathema, and human shame is an illusion. Both cultures believe that no knowledge or no experience should be off limits, and that death is an unfair or unnecessary sentence—to be overcome by technology or mocked artistically into submission. Both are willing to go where modest men never went before, at least not in public.

Let me make this point with a rather unpleasant example. Within a few days of one another I recently came upon the following two stories: Story #1, in *The New Yorker*, was about new works of art. It included a picture of a grotesque sculpture, consisting of a number of naked children, connected to one another in the flesh, with penises as noses. Story #2 was about a promising new technique of assisted reproduction, which allows women to remove a piece of their ovaries, freeze it indefinitely, and implant it into their arm or abdomen as a source of eggs whenever they decide to have children.

Now I suspect many bourgeois scientists would find the penis-faced statue appalling, though they might defend the right to produce it as freedom of expression, akin to their own freedom of research. But the artists, I suspect, would actually admire the scientist's biological "transgression," the splicing of reproductive organs out of their "normal" context, the making public of once private parts. And even if the scientists reject such works of art as absurdities, modern biotechnology—and much else about modern commerce—has benefited greatly from the triumph of postmodern culture. For it was the radicals of the 1960s that cleared away the very taboos surrounding the body that would have inhibited the newest possibilities of modern biotechnology. Can we imagine the commerce of the body today—or even the science that underlies it—without the prior triumph of the culture of immodesty? Would there have been terrain upon which scientists—and their investors—feared to tread if the counterculture had not tread there first? Could it be that scientific rationalism and post-modern irrationality have more in common than it once seemed?

The genius of commerce is that it tames remarkable things; it makes past transgressions seem normal. What shocks the parents bores the children—both in culture and in science. Living together before marriage, test-tube babies—that's yesterday's news. We can already imagine a future where cosmetic surgery is as common as orthodontics; where mood-altering drugs are a mass phenomenon, like vitamins (or painkillers) for

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the soul; where people sell their deceased loved one's organs; where 10 to 15 percent of women reproduce using in vitro fertilization, screening their embryos for sex, height, and other desirable genetic predispositions; and where sick patients harvest embryonic clones of themselves as a source of life-saving stem cells. And we are left to wonder: What will it be like to live in such a world, to raise a family in such a world, to work in such a world, to invest money in such a world? What will be the relationship between biotechnology, morality, and commerce?

The New Commerce of the Body

Of course, most biotechnology is admirable; it is a continuation of bourgeois progress as we have long known it, whose only negative effect is raising expectations, and thus raising the stakes of potential calamity. But there are also reasons to believe that the new commerce of the body is growing increasingly removed from Smith's sober vision. It promises perfection, not progress; and it heeds no limits, treating the sacred and the profane as indistinguishable objects for sale, ruled only by the amoral law of supply and demand. Lest this all seem too abstract, consider a few everyday examples.

Example 1. The Betrayal of the Child.

By now, the idea of selling one's eggs or sperm to others who wish to produce a child is commonplace. One need only look in any elite college's newspaper to find advertisements offering substantial sums of money—$25,000 or $50,000—for egg donors with perfect figures and high SAT scores. There are numerous companies that specialize in brokering eggs, often catering to very particular tastes. Recently, a law-student friend of mine received a solicitation in the mail:

> Dear Potential Egg Donor: The Genetics and IVF Institute is looking for healthy, college educated, ethnically diverse women between the ages of 21 and 32 to assist infertile couples by becoming an anonymous egg donor.... You will be adequately compensated for each cycle you complete...beginning at $5,000 [and going] up to $45,000.... Help an infertile couple experience the joy and fulfillment of parenthood.

Now in market terms, this potential transaction makes perfect sense—matching a willing seller and a willing buyer. Both parties get what they need—tuition money, the seeds of a new child—and no one is coerced into anything. But what is the human meaning of what is happening? One couple desperately seeks a child of their own, a child biologically related to

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the father genetically and the mother by pregnancy. This is why IVF came into existence in the first place—because the infertile seek not just a child to raise, but a child who is flesh of their flesh. But to make this possible, in some cases, they need a seller who is willing to abandon his or her own biological child; willing to be an anonymous donor; willing never to set eyes upon the child that is flesh of their flesh. The buyers who desperately want a biological child need a seller who sees having a biological child as no big deal. In market terms, again, this makes sense: a case of two parties valuing different commodities differently. But in human terms, it means finding a seller who denies the very human longing that the buyer wishes to act upon. It requires a seller who is willing to betray his or her own flesh and blood offspring—not out of desperation, but for a price.

Example 2. The Shaming of the Father.

By now, ads for anti-impotence drugs are common fare in magazines and on television. One of the most memorable campaigns starred the former Chicago Bears coach "Iron" Mike Ditka—once the consummate tough guy, who takes the "Levitra challenge" to "stay in the game." Coach Ditka is apparently comfortable discussing his erectile dysfunction, and perhaps proud of his continued desire for virility. He flaunts his nakedness—the loss of his powers, the hunger for his powers—for all the world to see, including his children.

Now consider another story—the story of Noah in the book of Genesis, naked in his tent; and the story of his sons (Shem and Japheth), who so revere their father that they do not look upon him. They walk backward to him and cover him with their cloak. As Leon Kass describes: "They intuitively understand that, were they to see with their own eyes their father's nakedness, their family order would be permanently altered.... By protecting Noah's dignity and authority, they safeguard their own capacity to exercise paternal authority in the future.... They knowingly choose to live leaving some things in the dark, without pressing back to the naked truth about temporal beginnings or ultimate origins." Even in his old age, they see their father as a giant, the source of their own being.

Today, by contrast, we leave nothing in the dark and we strip down every giant. Both proper pride and proper shame are thrown to the wind. While Coach Ditka might seek such drugs in the name of his manliness, it is precisely his manliness that is compromised. By flaunting his desire to "stay in the game," he loses the reverence—the majesty—that a dignified old man should command of those beneath him. Instead, he lays out his nakedness for all the world to see, including the sons who now cannot

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help but shame him. In his quest for potency, he reveals his ultimate dependence, with no cloak to preserve any ennobling illusions.

Example 3. The Modern Birth-Mark.

Not long ago, the Fox network aired a "reality" show called *The Swan*, which took a score of average-looking women, sent them to a team of cosmetic surgeons who remade their bodies under the knife, and then put the refurbished ladies on stage to decide who is the most beautiful—to decide which ugly duckling is now the swan. Already, cosmetic surgery is no longer simply the province of actors in Hollywood and politicians in Washington. It is becoming—slowly but steadily—a mass phenomenon, and perhaps soon a middle-class phenomenon. Some parents now give their teenage daughters nose-jobs and breast implants as high school graduation presents.

As a consequence, physical beauty is no longer seen as nature's endowment but as man's creation. Aging is no longer accepted gracefully but fought back with the knife. Imperfection is increasingly intolerable. Like Georgiana in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark," we subject ourselves to technicians of the body in the hope of being loved, or in the hope of making bystanders into lustful worshippers of our flesh. And the question is: In so doing, what have we lost? After all, beauty is never an achievement but an undeserved gift of nature. Why does it matter whether the giver of the gift is God, the gods, or the master surgeon? What is lost in removing this year's imperfections? Perhaps nothing. The trouble, of course, is next year's imperfections. And the problem is that our new "look" will inevitably change all our pre-surgery relations: To our parents, perhaps it will be a partial indictment of their own sub-par appearance; to our spouse, perhaps it will be an admission that I was not beautiful enough then; to our children, perhaps it will teach them that they too might need cosmetic surgery someday, since the genes they inherit come from the pre-surgical self. Even as we remake the flesh in accordance with our will, we cannot escape the attachments of the flesh that we did not will—the attachments to our parents and our children. We have the swan's face and the ugly duckling's family.

Example 4. The Broken Soul.

Of course, it is not just the body we seek to fix but also the embodied mind. Commercials for mood-altering drugs are ubiquitous, and the use of such drugs has skyrocketed in the last decade, with distracted two-year-olds to the depressed elderly to everyone in between as part of the market. According to the dean of one Ivy League school, roughly 20 percent of the incoming class takes some kind of anti-depressant.

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The commercials for these drugs all work in the same way: a troubled child or employee—failing at work, failing at school, growing more distant from loved ones. Then a drug that promises, as one slogan puts it, to "reveal the real you." And then a sudden transformation, a new life of smiles, friends, and productivity. A thirty-second *commedia* with neurochemistry as the playwright. Without question, such drugs can help many individuals who suffer from terrible mental illness, rooted in chemical problems in the brain, that only medication can ameliorate. For such people—the truly sick—psychotropic drugs are a godsend. And no doubt the strategy of selling these drugs is the same as selling any other product: convincing people they are inadequate as they are, yet within reach of perfection; making people feel sick and desperate, only to discover that what they lack is some liberating product.

But surely something deeper is at work here, when the inadequacy is the psyche itself, and the liberation involves, in part, a new identity altogether. The real questions about the rise of psychotropic drugs go beyond the present essay—questions about why so many people feel so depressed in the first place, why they believe only medication can help them, and who they really are once they start taking these mood-altering medications and start forming human relationships that depend on taking the drugs to sustain them. I can only note here the strangeness of this new marketing of dependence, and the significance of coming to believe that life's dilemmas are fundamentally problems of brain chemistry, only solvable by medication. Perhaps we will also come to believe the inverse: that life's best possibilities are likewise matters of chemistry, only achievable with medication.

In a certain sense, of course, this is all true: we live as given bodies, with drives that we do not fully control and cannot fully explain, and limits that come with our particular set of DNA. But we also live—or have long lived—with the belief that we are more than our chemicals, that our choices, joys, and miseries are more than inexplicable neuroactivity, that there is a difference between what is real and what is induced.

Perhaps the deepest problem with such drugs—taken by a widow to ease the pain of her mourning, or after a terrorist attack to calm one's sense of horror—is that they will confound, not restore, our sense of the world as it really is. To sleep easily amid carnage or rest easily after the death of a beloved spouse is to live in a world of fantasy. It is to seek salvation by no longer being fully human.

Example 5. The Embryo and the Coffee Grind.

My final example is somewhat more futuristic, but not entirely so. Depending on where the science takes us, it is not too far-fetched to

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imagine that human embryos will one day be valuable medical commodities—harvested routinely as a source stem cells. Embryo destruction for research purposes is now commonplace. Scientists are already exploring methods that would allow us to produce human eggs artificially, thus eliminating the only practical barrier to embryo production on an industrial scale. And no doubt such embryos will trade in the market like any other commodity—perhaps even on the "commodities exchange."

Perhaps I exaggerate, but it is an exaggeration with a point. What the market does is veil the meaning of what it uses so that everything can be used efficiently. It tames the remarkable and makes it seem normal—like everything else. It reduces each commodity to measurable data—where what matters is not the different things in themselves but the differential movements on the chart: coffee grinds up, embryos down; computer parts up, body parts down; Viagra up, Paxil down. Even the individual who is troubled by this prospect—who still asks whether a human embryo deserves more respect than a natural resource—will find it hard not to participate: Will he reject embryo therapies that might save his child? Will he leave his job at the insurance company that covers such therapies? Will he sell the mutual fund that buys shares in an embryo-production company?

We should not forget that the goal of embryo commerce would be humanitarian—the pursuit of health, the very good that modern societies most desire. But the means are, arguably, a form of cannibalism of the weak by the strong—if a cannibalism not obvious to the eye because embryos look so un-human, and thus without a visceral repugnance to awaken our conscience and guide our behavior. But the violation is no less real for being unobvious, and it is only possible because we now take for granted a truly remarkable thing—the power to initiate human life outside the body, the power to see and hold what was once left shrouded.

And this, I think, is what we should most fear about biotechnology's transformation of modern capitalism: that in the desire for worldly salvation—salvation of the flesh—we will profane the sacred, with the modern marketplace greasing the skids. We will come to believe that biocapitalism can sell us everything we desire, and thus come to accept that everything is for sale.

The Moral Limits of Capitalism

Such a critique is not meant as an act of ingratitude for our economic prosperity and freedom. Only a fool would belittle the genuine virtues of progress, and I can imagine no better way to organize a modern society

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than democratic capitalism. At the same time, however, we must face up to the fact that modern commerce is often a moral problem, the capitalism of the body most especially.

Perhaps ironically, it is the friends of commerce (conservatives) who will most likely see the profaning power of commerce. Critics on the left mostly attack capitalism because they want more of the very things that capitalism creates, but believe "big business" is keeping the fruits of progress from little America. But conservatives realize that the deeper problem with capitalism is that it creates many things we should not create in the first place, and may ask us to do many things we should not do at all.

Without turning our backs on the modern economy—a prospect as foolish as it is impossible—we need to reconsider the relationship between modern technology and modern commerce, in the hope that we can salvage Smith's moderation from Bacon's excesses, and perhaps salvage better answers to man's permanent questions than simply buying what the cosmetic surgeon and the neurochemist eagerly want to sell us.

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