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Humility, Hubris, and the Pursuit of Happiness

JANICE ROGERS BROWN

A translucent decal on the window of a muscular truck in the parking lot of a rural community center looks like a humble homage to the Constitution. Not quite. Though it begins by proclaiming, in the beautiful familiar script, “We the People,” it concludes with a combative three-word coda: “have had enough.”

It is a motto that could speak for a lot of Americans in our time, who have come to the view that what they want and take to be good is not what the people in charge of our civilization are after. Many Americans are not just unhappy; they are frustrated, angry, maddened, and fearful of the lumbering Leviathan that seems to control every aspect of their lives. They long ago lost their polite, fair-minded, always-for-the-underdog naivete. A sizable majority can relate to Fannie Lou Hamer’s poignant riff about trying to live under the South’s Jim Crow laws: “Tired,” she said. “Sick and tired. . . . And sick and tired of being sick and tired.”¹ They are no longer innocent. They understand how the rule of a self-righteous elite rubs the heart raw, how easily political compassion’s shreds and patches allow the scarifications of contempt to show through. They increasingly have the sense that what governing elites around the world mean by happiness is nothing the American founders would deem worthy of pursuit.

William Blackstone contended that God had “so inseparably interwoven the laws of eternal justice with the happiness of each individual” that “obedience to this on one paternal precept, ‘that man should pursue his own true and substantial happiness,’” is “the foundation of what we call ethics, or natural law.”² The members of the founding generation had in mind a very specific notion of the pursuit of happiness—one that was

inseparable from virtue. Their view was a unique synthesis of classical political philosophy, the Christian natural law tradition, the English common law, the republican natural rights tradition, and the insights of the commonsense philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Thus, they defined happiness as the pursuit of virtue—as *being* good, rather than *feeling* good.³

An abundance of evidence makes clear that the American founders sought to establish a nation that relied on these essential concepts. Without their revival, the revival of our national civic project is unimaginable.

Self-Evident Truth

America is an exceptional nation. It found the sweet spot: that space equidistant from *Homo sapiens* and *homo deus*. Kermit the Frog used to tell us, with a wry crimp of his fabric lips, “It’s not easy being green.” We understood his need to flourish in his frogginess. We could have added our own baleful note to that chorus. It is not easy being human. Our deepest vulnerability is our vanity. The longest distance between two places may be time, but the longest distance between civilization and barbarity, between freedom and tyranny, between human flourishing and human failure, is hubris.

Americans were reminded from the pulpit that “liberty was an inalienable right according to the Natural Law of Creation.”⁴ These ideas constituted our constitutional premises. Consistent with these natural law premises, the founders “believed that certain aspects of human nature were immutable and that they tightly constrain what is politically and culturally possible.”⁵ The Declaration of Independence contains what philosopher Leszek Kolakowski described as “the most famous single sentence ever written in the Western Hemisphere.”⁶ It starts with us and ends with happiness: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit

of Happiness.” The founders really believed that most famous statement about human beings being equal in the eyes of God and before the law. Kolakowski acknowledges that most of the writers and thinkers—ancient and modern—who have shaped the political imagination of the West reject this notion of equality.⁷ And, on the eve of the nation’s 250th birthday, what the founding documents meant by equality remains a hotly contested issue.

It should not be. Human equality is the plumb line of the American regime. For American statesmen of the founding era, “the fundamental nature of human beings as free and equal rights-bearers” was *the* organizing principle of politics.⁸ Governments existed to secure natural rights and had to be judged by how well they secured them.

And those natural rights are the rights that ineluctably follow from the plain fact of our creation as unique individuals, each naturally striving to live and to fulfill one’s innate potential. They are the rights of personal autonomy, self-improvement, self-expression, voluntary association, enjoyment of the product of one’s labor, and voluntary exchange. And, as rights equal to all, they necessarily exclude any so-called “right” that advantages one person, or one class of persons, at the expense of another.

The founders exhibited a surprising degree of faith in the capacity of ordinary Americans to exercise the Declaration’s principles of liberty. They incorporated that principle in the Constitution “to give the common man a voice, a veto, elbow room, a refuge from the raging presumptions of his ‘betters,’” writes Thomas Sowell.⁹ They recognized that no single class had a monopoly on intelligence or virtue. As Charles Murray put it, “The nobility of the American experiment lay in its allegiance to the proposition that everyone may equally aspire to happiness.”¹⁰

Federalists and Anti-Federalists disagreed strenuously about the Constitution, arguing over the structure of government, the need for a Bill of Rights, slavery, the accountability of the judiciary, and a host of other issues. “Yet one thing still united them—the understanding that whatever form of government was to be adopted, its goal should be the happiness of the people.”¹¹

The founders believed the quest for happiness involved a daily practice, the daily cultivation of virtue, requiring mental and spiritual self-discipline, a lifelong endeavor to improve one's character. This stern commitment to *self-improvement* was the governing zeitgeist of America's political theology at least through the Civil War. Frederick Douglass seemed to echo the founders when he insisted virtuous habits were key to the pursuit of happiness.¹² He noted: "There can be no independence without a large share of self-dependence, and this virtue cannot be bestowed. It must be developed from within."¹³

That view of governance and its connection to happiness has largely suffused the American psyche even into the 21st century. Abraham Lincoln praised Thomas Jefferson for incorporating into the Declaration "an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times."¹⁴ In a 1926 speech celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Declaration, Calvin Coolidge warned that the equality of human beings and their endowment with inalienable rights was a "final" insight. Anyone who sought to deny the "truth or soundness" of that proposition would be moving "not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people."¹⁵

President Coolidge ended his speech by declaring that "the things of the spirit come first" and warning that the failure to understand this aspect of the founding would cause the American project to fail.¹⁶ This admonition was not a final rhetorical flourish. It is the key to understanding the pursuit of happiness and its connection to human flourishing.

The Denial of Truth

Rather than hold close to the Declaration's truths, however, modernity too often has followed David Hume's command at the end of his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: If any source purports truth in matters that are not mathematical or sensory, "commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."¹⁷

Hume's radical empiricism has spawned a cult of quantitative method known as scientism (or reductionism), which dissolves the distinction between persons and things. Thus, man has a value no greater than "a camel or a stone or any other part of nature."¹⁸ Yet we know, with the same "profound intuition" as the metaphysical writers and poets, like John Milton, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift, that *Homo sapiens* must simultaneously inhabit two worlds, the physical and the metaphysical.¹⁹ *Homo sapiens*—what Pope describes as "the glory, jest, and riddle of the world"—is infinitely more than merely a "part of nature."²⁰

"Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world," wrote Thomas Nagel.²¹ Actually, as Edward Feser observes, the idea that science eliminates purpose, meaning, and design predates Charles Darwin by several hundred years and may owe more to modern secularist philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and Hume and anti-medieval philosophers like René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke than to science.

To acknowledge that the origin of life is a mystery might unseat materialism as the religion of our time. It is only when materialistic assumptions are taken for granted and the classical alternative is neglected that philosophical arguments for the traditional religious worldview (e.g., for the existence of God and the natural law conception of morality) can be made to seem problematic.²² As G. K. Chesterton described the fatal sequence, we have been victimized by the "disputed system of thought which began with Evolution and . . . ended in Eugenics."²³

Just as many religious, philosophical, and intellectual streams converged to bring about the moment when the American regime could come into being, many pseudo religions, philosophical errors, scientific superstitions, and just-so stories converged to threaten its dissolution. Darwinism facilitated the rise of scientific materialism, and happily for the progressives, it jibed with their desire to make man's mind man's fate. Scientific materialism was the God of the progressive age.

Dethroning the “Great I Am” of divine sovereignty sets the stage for the abolition of man. Not only is there no self-evident truth; there is no truth at all. Subjection to “the grand sez who?” of moral relativism not only means that there can be no normative grounding for any ethical system; it means there can be no rule of law, no truth, and no freedom. As C. S. Lewis explained, “A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.”²⁴

The sovereign myth in the old dark age was that “everything means everything.”²⁵ The sovereign myth in our more enlightened times is that “nothing means anything.”²⁶ It took the “anointed”—the self-righteous elite whose cosmic vision compels them to lord over the rest of humanity—roughly 200 years to pollute the wellspring of all the religious, philosophical, and intellectual streams that converged to bring about the American project. They subtracted God from the equation, and with God missing, the right to actualize one’s unique God-given purpose through self-improvement and hard work devolved into a right to indulge appetites and material desires. With God missing, a government that had existed to guarantee freedom devolved into a government that existed to guarantee free stuff.

Perhaps the foremost modern proponent of nothingness is Yuval Noah Harari. Harari is an Israeli historian whose penchant for big history has produced a couple of bestsellers. His first book, *Sapiens*, is a sprawling narrative of the whole history of earth, containing—as John Sexton relates—little “actual history,” much “speculative reconstruction of human evolution,” and some bold prognostications about the future of humankind.²⁷ Harari seems oblivious to the fact that he is participating in a debate that has “raged for centuries between those who assert the primacy of metaphysical knowledge and those who argue for the priority of physical reality.”²⁸ The powerful appeal of the material world’s exclusive claim to reality is born, Lewis suggested, of the hatred of death, the fear of true immortality, and the hope for a man-created eternal life—what Lewis called “the sweet poison of the false infinite.”²⁹

According to Harari, humans are an animal of no consequence that would have remained a “middle-of-the-road, middle-of-the-food-chain species”³⁰ had we not started making things up—imagining things like gods, laws, rights, ethical principles, and limited liability corporations. Harari insists that science, particularly biology, is the answer to every question and precludes any hint of transcendence. Thus, there are no gods, no human rights, no souls, no laws beyond the common imagination of human beings, and no universal and immutable principles such as equality or justice. These imagined realities may be “vital, significant, and world changing,” but they are not real.³¹

Happiness as Narcotic

Back in the fabled year 1989 (when history was said to have ended), Australian philosopher David Stove wrote a book that began with Homer’s observation that “humans are the unhappiest of all creatures.”³² Stove identified the “enlarged benevolence” of the English Enlightenment as a significant source of modern discontent.³³ The main teachings of this particular branch of the Enlightenment were secularism, egalitarianism, and the utilitarian axiom that the test of morality is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Thus, beginning in the 18th century, benevolence became the highest virtue, eclipsing both the monastic virtues—humility, chastity, and obedience—and the warrior virtues—courage, loyalty, patriotism, and justice. The conception of happiness was thus dramatically changed.

While the Stoics and “moral sense” philosophers saw the pursuit of happiness as a quest rather than a destination, a practice including responsibilities as well as rights (and especially the responsibility to limit, master, and restrain selfish instincts), proto-utilitarians met their quota of virtue through benevolence—even if they did so with other people’s property. And there was an irresistible bonus. They could applaud their own magnanimity as they promoted the happiness of the beneficiaries

of their largesse. Happiness in this context was not about character, self-improvement, or sustained effort. It was all about stuff—*free* stuff, if you could get it.

Stove and Robert Nozick propose similar thought experiments. Suppose, Stove says, medical technology advances to the point that

the way for a human being to be happiest is to be kept permanently in a hospital bottle, with the brain suitably stimulated by chemical or electrical means. All the pleasures of normal life, and none of the pains, might be experienced in this way, even though the “life” being led is entirely hallucinatory.³⁴

Nozick likewise invited readers to suppose the existence of “an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired.”³⁵ “Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel” (or reading one), transforming you into whatever sort of person you would like to be. Would plugging into such a machine be a kind of suicide, or would it limit us to a man-made reality when we would prefer to be open to a deeper significance? Whether we have an experience machine, a transformation machine, or a result machine, Nozick suggests that “perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves, in contact with reality.”³⁶ And the answers, if we can find them, will relate to free will and the nature of consciousness.

Stove’s and Nozick’s thought experiments anticipated the iconic 1999 movie *The Matrix*. In that film, it is 2199, and in an AI push gone awry, the machines have conquered humanity. The only use the machines have for humankind is as a sort of bio-battery. To keep the fuel cells operating optimally, they let people live full lives, complete with work, challenges, and triumphs, all virtual. Human beings have no choice about what they think or dream. But they are happy, in a way.

It is hard to escape the sense that this is what a lot of Western elites have in mind for their fellow citizens. Of course, our captivity won’t be as sophisticated as the matrix, and our pleasures not quite so seamless,

but with pharmacological mood enhancement and dazzling digital entertainment, we will never guess that life could be different, or better, or *real*—and, of course, we would be sure to vote as we have been told to vote, imagining that we live in a free democracy.

According to Harari's version of the life sciences, "Happiness and suffering are nothing but different balances of bodily sensations."³⁷ "People," he says, "are made happy by one thing and one thing only—pleasant sensations in their bodies."³⁸ And as Sexton relates, Harari claims that—despite the abundance of our creature comforts—we modern people are no happier than premodern people. But Sexton also points out that Harari does not reach this conclusion by contrasting the modern way of life with the classical understanding of happiness as a state achieved by those who live good lives in accord with their nature. Instead, Harari relies on opinion surveys and the findings of the new science of happiness.³⁹

A total eclipse of the human person is central to Harari's thesis. But without an endgame, his arguments seem not only inchoate but incoherent. Even Harari admits the comforting illusions he so blithely dismisses are necessary to allow liberal democratic societies to flourish. But as Harari explains in *Homo Deus*, the lack of rights will not matter, since humanity reimagined and reengineered will be upgraded into gods—albeit gods without goodness, without grace, without purity, possessed of superhuman bodily and mental faculties but far from the God Who is the alpha and omega; Who was, is, and always will be; Who created the cosmos and has a plan for the world and a purpose for mankind. No. "At the end of the theological road laid out by would-be priests" like Harari, "there is no more American civilization, Western civilization, or human civilization."⁴⁰

Putting Transcendence Back into the Equation

In his last essay, Lewis declared, "We have no right to happiness." He was not, as Justin Dyer explains, taking issue with the American founders. The Declaration of Independence posited that "all men had an equal right to

pursue happiness within the bounds of the moral law.”⁴¹ Thus, natural law confers the right to *pursue* happiness, not the right to have it unearned. The moral philosophy of the founding affirmed “that natural law has a lawgiver,” a creator separate and distinct from creation, and that creator imbued his creation with reason capable of grasping “moral goods that are real rather than nominal or subjective.”⁴² Natural law can never be interpreted to confer the “moral right simply to take what we want to satisfy our desires, whatever those desires happen to be.”⁴³ The old idea that might makes right, that the strong do what they will and the weak endure, was precisely what the revolutionary generation repudiated.

The result has been a profound misunderstanding of the pursuit of happiness. Instead of a spiritual quest for self-expression, self-perfection, and self-mastery, the pursuit of happiness has been transformed into a justification for the permissive cornucopia of the welfare state and rhetorical support for every conceivable hedonistic excess.

The founders pursued happiness in a way that modeled the self-restraint necessary for true freedom. Only a community of people capable of self-discipline is fit for self-government. To the founders, freedom was never a license for mere indulgence. Liberty could never be allowed to tip into licentiousness. Rather, the founding generation articulated and accepted moral boundaries, and the community had a right, indeed an obligation, to curb destructive conduct. As John Adams wrote, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”⁴⁴ For the founders, true happiness was achieved in rational creativity, not in the satiation of passionate desire; happiness was eudaemonic, not hedonic.

The American Revolution and the French Revolution are sometimes described as comparable. Although they seem to be products of the same historical moment, they actually lie on opposite sides of a great divide. Jacques Barzun divides modern history—the past 500 years—this way: The years 1500–1660 were dominated by the issue of what to believe regarding God and religion, the years 1661–1789 by what to do about the status of the individual and the mode of government, and the years

1790–1920 by the question of how social and economic equality should be achieved.⁴⁵ The American Revolution is on one side of the latter great divide; the French Revolution is on the other. The American Revolution represented the culmination of religious consciousness applied to the design of government; the French Revolution heralded the beginning of the secular age. And this profound discontinuity in worldview has made all the difference.

The human longing to be free derives, perhaps, from a simple incantation: “Let there be light.”⁴⁶ This is the essence of the *imago dei*, the reason God is mindful of man who ranks, the apostle reminds us, only “a little lower than the angels.”⁴⁷ Michelangelo famously painted this scene—*The Creation of Adam*—on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. A recumbent deity stretches out a single finger toward a new creature. The artist depicts a quiet moment. This is not the God of thunder and lightning, volcanoes and tumult, and yet it seems that all creation awaits what will pass between them. A divine spark. What if God’s utterance was calling forth not just the creative properties of light but consciousness itself? Paul Davies expresses wonder that *Homo sapiens* carries the spark of rationality that unlocks the universe. Remarkably, “we, who are the children of the universe—animated stardust—can . . . reflect on the nature of that same universe, even to the extent of glimpsing the rules on which it runs.”⁴⁸ What if consciousness, not matter, is the ultimate foundation of the universe?

This idea seems at least as plausible as the multiverse. Despite the mutterings of the acolytes of scientism that the material world is all that exists,

the five cardinal mysteries of the nonmaterial mind remain unaccounted for: subjective awareness, free will, how memories are stored, the “higher” faculties of reason and imagination, and that unique sense of personal identity that changes and matures over time but remains resolutely the same.⁴⁹

As a youngster, George Washington laboriously copied a list of “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior” that he had found in a book. Most of the rules concerned manners and deportment, but the last rule reads, “Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.”⁵⁰ That definition of conscience—the “little spark of celestial fire”—still has resonance today. If you believe, as seems likely, that by a “little spark of celestial fire,” he meant a moral compass, an understanding of man’s limitations, and an innate sense of right and wrong, then it is that “little spark” that led Washington and others to establish a constitutional government based on equality under law, unalienable rights, and government by consent.

According to Barzun’s historical survey, which ends in 1920, scientists and philosophers spent roughly three centuries trying to organize society as if God did not exist and roughly two centuries seeking to reshape society through industrial development, social engineering, and various systems of wealth creation and redistribution. This process was supposed to bring forth the new man, an improved version of humanity. The 20th century was the culmination of that process. But alas, the new man failed to arrive.

If we were to extend Barzun’s survey of modern history to the present, we would have to describe 1920 to 2025 as the period in which the attempt to abolish man, not to improve him, became the avowed goal of the ruling class in Western democracies. The earlier claim that malleable human nature could be reengineered to bring about the longed-for utopia has been abandoned. Lincoln warned long ago that the thirst of some men for power and distinction would be satisfied one way or another, whether by freeing the enslaved or by enslaving the free.⁵¹ But in the 21st century, even power and distinction are not enough. The light of God must also be eclipsed. The hubris of the so-called scholars and intellectuals of today’s socialist democratic regimes ensured that a world once filled with God’s glory and governed by natural law became a world suffused with matter and governed by positive law. Thus, the coercive utopias of authoritarian regimes and the permissive cornucopias of socialist democracies are

revealed to be evil twins. The dark impulse of despotism and the demon in democracy are identical.

The solution to our global era of crisis is not paternalistic domination. Rather, it is something higher, deeper, greater. We already know what it is. As Samuel Johnson noted, “Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.”⁵² The real effect of secularism, and her handmaiden scientism, is to limit our imagination.

But contra Harari, our imagination remains more real than the flattened landscape of scientism. We bask in the starlight and thrive in the sun because the regularity and renewal of cosmic wonder conjures a metaphysical reality so vivid, awesome, and marvelous that reverence is the only rational response. The consensus gentium, the common sense of mankind, is the antidote to the corrosive skepticism of fastidious elites that could destroy the foundations of the moral order. “Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them.”⁵³ Michael E. Aeschliman declares that *sapientia* is an exalted form of common sense.⁵⁴ And this “integrative metaphysical-ethical vision is the irreducible, indispensable prerogative, privilege, and patrimony of human civilization itself” and a necessary prerequisite of any vision of true human happiness.⁵⁵

More importantly, the recovery and restoration of what we already know may not take centuries—though certainly it will be a generational task. We must revive our faith in God’s providence and creative power and in the central role that God assigned humanity. We must regain a proper sense of humility and recommit ourselves to the self-mastery, candor, fortitude, and selflessness requisite to self-government.

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