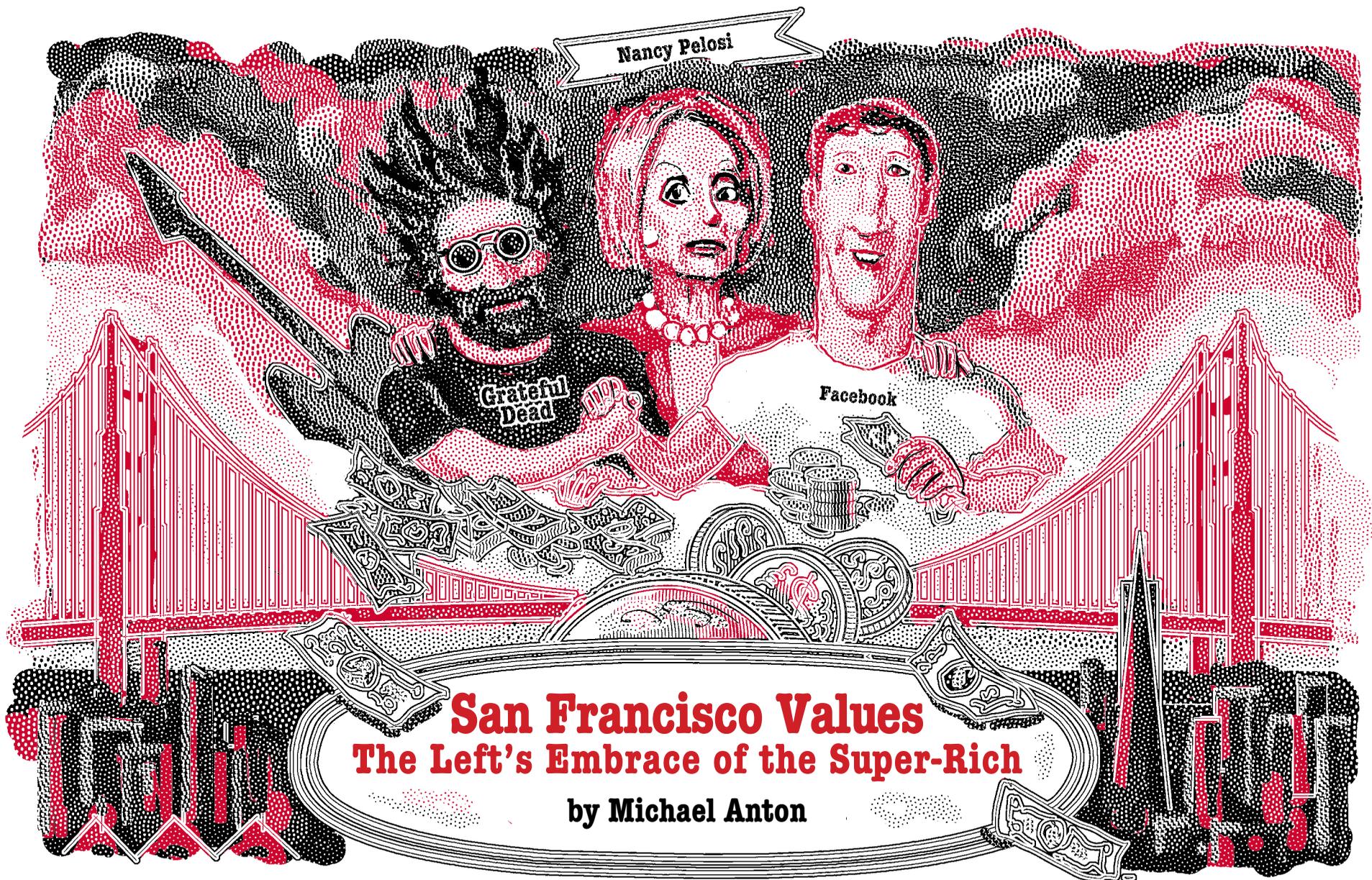


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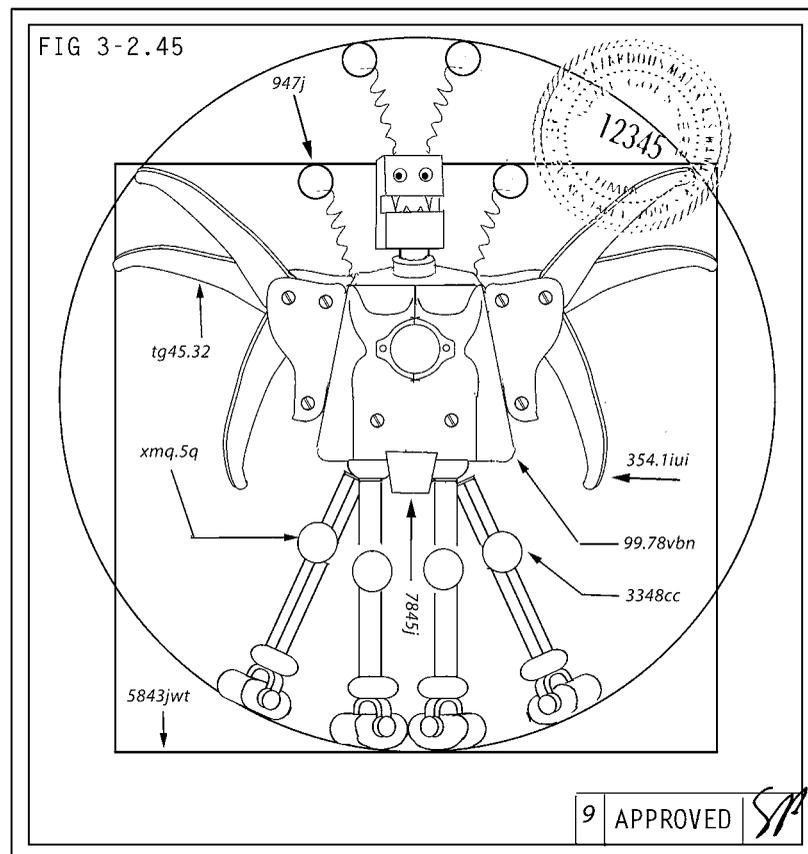
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Book Review by Mark Blitz

## FUTURE SELVES

*Eclipse of Man: Human Extinction and the Meaning of Progress*, by Charles T. Rubin.  
Encounter Books, 224 pages, \$23.99



WHAT CONCERNS CHARLES RUBIN in *Eclipse of Man* is well conveyed by his title. Human beings stand on the threshold of a world in which our lives and practices may be radically altered, and our dominance no longer assured. What began a half-millennium ago as a project to reduce our burdens threatens to conclude in a realm in which we no longer prevail. The original human subject who was convinced to receive technology's benefits becomes unrecognizable once he accepts the benefits, as if birds were persuaded to become airplanes. What would remain of the original birds? Indeed, we may be eclipsed altogether by species we have generated but which are so unlike us that "we" do not exist at all—or persist only as inferior relics, stuffed for museums. What starts as Enlightenment ends in permanent night.

Rubin, who is an associate professor of political science at Duquesne University, does not predict the direction of science or the precise likelihood or degree of the changes—the possible extreme result of which I have just outlined—but examines instead the moral implications of the future that technology might

create. To do this he examines various works of fact and fiction that consider or display the idea "that human progress points toward human extinction." He begins with the French *philosophe* Condorcet and then considers figures who range from the vaguely familiar to the largely obscure: Winwood Reade, Fedorov, Flammarion, Haldane, Bernal, various searchers for extraterrestrial intelligence, Arthur C. Clarke, Eric Drexler, Neal Stephenson, Edward Bellamy, and several roboticists and "singulartarians" such as Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil. Rubin's major concern is with the contemporary *transhumanists* (the term he chooses to cover a variety of what from his standpoint are similar positions) who both predict and encourage the overcoming of man.

His fair, judicious, and critical summaries of the authors he discusses need to be read to savor the full flavor of their ambitions and dreams. The overall effect is both a tribute to the amazing human imagination and a warning about our equally amazing hubris. A brief list will enable us to glimpse what is worrisome about the hopes of transhumanists, and the hopes and fears of their

predecessors. Perhaps, some believe, we will all merge into one giant hive mind. Perhaps, think others, we will all be only patterns, capable of diverse embodiments. Perhaps we will be immortal. Or perhaps exponential population growth will outrun our ability "to spread rapidly enough to obtain the resources we need." Perhaps "active and competent evil" will not go away, and we will require defensive shields (yet another surprising proof of Ronald Reagan's wisdom!). Or, as a co-founder of the World Transhumanist Association puts it, it may be that,

Over the next thousand years or so, the biological substrates of suffering will be eradicated completely.... Malaise will be replaced by the biochemistry of bliss. Matter and energy will be sculpted into life-loving super-beings animated by gradients of well-being...all will share... a sublime and all-pervasive happiness.

Rubin's criticisms of the world to which these speculations point, and his criticisms of those content to eclipse man and eager to

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get on with it, center on issues that come to a head in his final chapter, “The Real Meaning of Progress,” in which he discusses three representations of the Icarus story, concentrating on Bruegel’s famous painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

When appealing to common sense, transhumanists promise a better world in humanly comprehensible terms. However, their own assumptions lead them to abandon those promises in favor of willful change toward incomprehensible outcomes. They promise that science and technology will provide us with more of whatever it is we want more of at any given moment.... The hitch is that people like us are not going to be around to enjoy it. Indeed, we are not even supposed to see our elimination as a cost at all, but as a great benefit.

Although transhumanists believe that they encourage progress, their ideas lack the “moral content” that would allow us to see if what they advocate is indeed progress or, rather, regress—or worse.

ONE REASON TO EXPECT UNFORTUNATE results is that the radical change the transhumanists champion would disrupt the “familiarity across time” of “lived human experience [that] provides the continuities that ground and shape human life.” It is these that enable us to judge when change is progress. “Even four millennia before Bruegel there was food to grow, there were animals to catch or tend, there were goods to trade, and there were disobedient children.” At the same time, “flaws and limits [also] make the human story what it is,” so “[a]nything we actually accomplish will be the product of limited and flawed creators,” which makes it likely “that our creations will...perpetuate those limits and imperfections.” Moreover, science and technology on their own give us only a “thin” understanding of life, and our contemporary culture also simplifies excessively: we can no longer today distinguish sensibly between freedom and willfulness. “A willingness to act on the basis of nearly complete moral ignorance relative to the central question of progress—the question of what would make for a better world—is really the only justification for the otherwise simplistic desire for the eclipse of man. Otherwise, we would surely want to adopt more *modest* expectations for a human future.” The advocates of this eclipse make “promises that will lead to the demise of the goods sought even as they are fulfilled.” We thus should not “abandon [human life] until we are certain we have understood it and appreciated it on its own terms.”

RUBIN APPROACHES HIS TOPIC WITH ADMIRABLE thoughtfulness and restraint, although one might have wished for a somewhat greater degree of systematic examination. Each alternative that he sketches, none of which is inevitable, depends on a view or guess about which human characteristics, in what form, will remain at any point on the way to extinction. The two major issues we will face are how those of us who remain will be treated along the way toward our replacement, and whether the change will be beneficial. If things do not happen in a flash, then, I might suggest, matters may not differ very much from what often happens now as one generation passes into another—a combination of respect for what has brought one here and occasional irritation with old ways. Even if things do happen more or less at once, then why would there not also be respect for the parents whose generation will soon enough die out? If it doesn’t die out it will itself be changed. Perhaps there will be special issues of transition, or questions about those who want to linger forever as the retrograde beings we presently are. But it is not clear why dealing with such issues need pose problems that would be both especially novel and especially widespread.

The deeper problem of the merits of any changes, including the extreme possibilities in which we become largely or completely unrecognizable, depends on several elements. Our ignorance of these factors, or of how to consider them thoughtfully, is one of Rubin’s concerns. One question involves the goods or perfections that our successors might seek or enjoy. Here, I might suggest that these goods cannot change as such, although our appreciation of them may. The allure of promises for the future is connected to the perfections of truth, beauty, and virtue that we currently desire. How could one today argue reasonably against the greater intelligence, expanded artistic talent, or improved health that might help us or those we love realize these goods? Who would now give up freedom, self-direction, and self-reflection?

By the same token, how could one argue against these for our successor-selves? One might say that fuller intelligence, greater talent, and more comfort will reduce effort. But one cannot reasonably separate the worth of an effort from the worth of its end. For the perfections for which we strive beg to be achieved. Would one wish to return to a daily struggle for life because security and plenty reduce human industry? New balances between effort and result might come to exist in the future, just as we see today that some results without sufficient effort are not worth having because they are not the real thing—unearned victories, say, or right opinion without understanding. In any event, what is good—or the

perfections to which we may properly orient ourselves—cannot in the last analysis be obliterated. For what other goods can there be? These limits do not tell us precisely how our future almost-selves will live, but they do clarify the guidelines. The important point will be to keep to an understanding of the excellent as opposed to the ordinary or harmful.

THERE ARE STILL OTHER LIMITS THAT no promise of transhuman change can overcome. These are not only, or primarily, mathematical regularities or apparent scientific laws; they involve inevitable scarcities or contradictions. Whatever happens “virtually,” there are only so many actual houses on actual beautiful beaches. Honesty differs from lying, the loyal and true differ from the fickle and untrustworthy, fame and power cannot belong both to one or a few and to everyone. These limits will set some of the direction for the distribution of goods and our attachment to them, either to restrain competition or to encourage it. They will thus also help to organize political life. Regulating differences of opinion, within appropriate freedom, and judging among the things we are able to choose will remain necessary.

Nonetheless, even if it is true that what we (or any rational being) may properly consider to be good is ultimately invariable, and even if the other limits I mentioned truly exist, our experience of such matters presumably will change as many good things become more available, and as we alter our experience of what is our own—birth, death, locality, and the body. Rubin is especially concerned with such matters, which have been central in the continuities he celebrates. Perhaps I might suggest that if one can expect greater equality in intelligence and talent among our successors than exists now, but also a reduced need for economic entrepreneurship because of greater plenty, then a genuine notion of human inviolability, or an honest appreciation of ethical integrity and equality, and an attachment to something like our liberal democracies, will and should prevail. To say the least, none of this is guaranteed. The overall teaching of Charles Rubin’s unusually serious book is that we must remember what is good and why, so that we do not fall prey to the absurdly trivial, to self-destruction, or to venal political authority.

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