VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2021

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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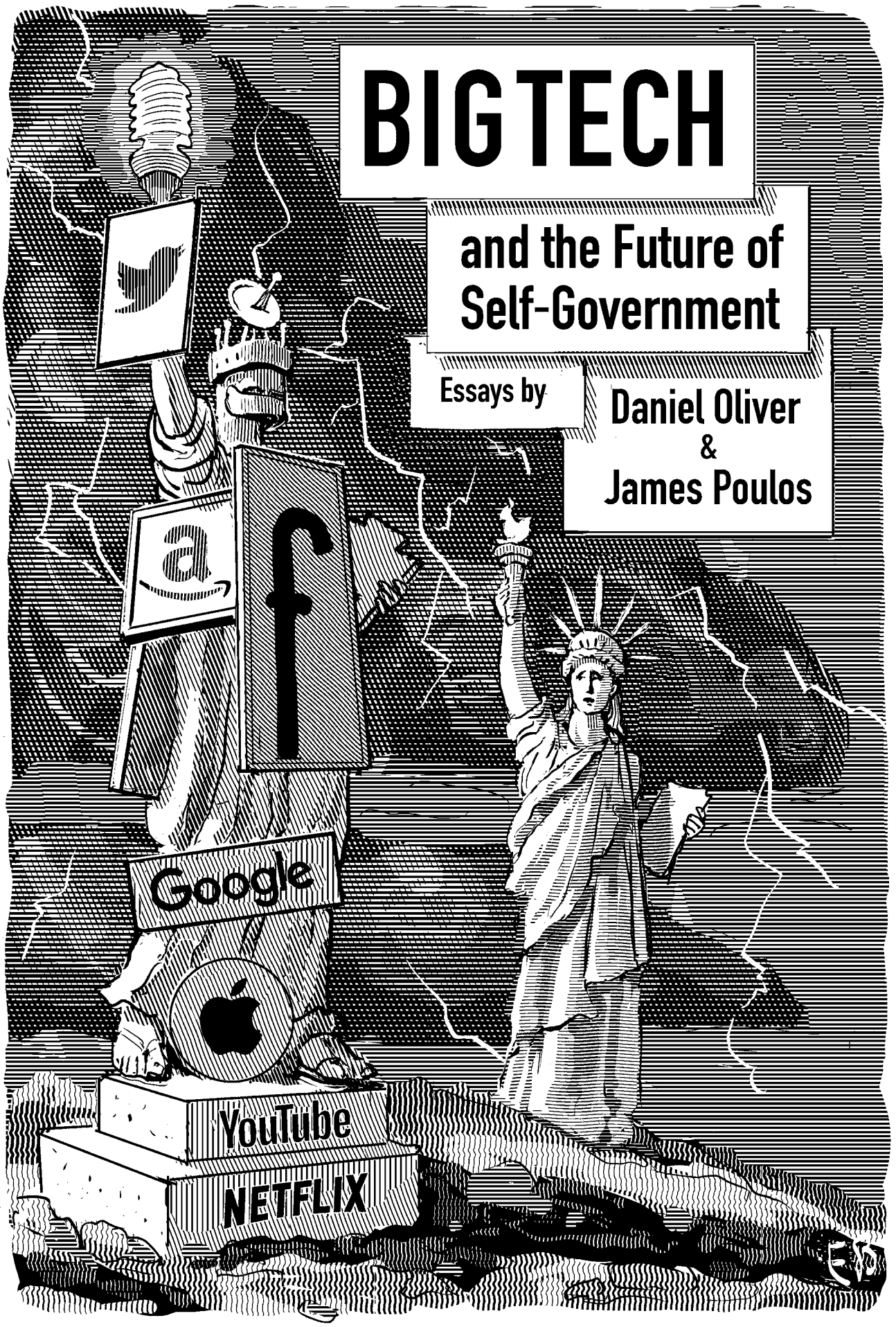

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A Publication of the Claremont Institute
PRICE: $6.95
IN CANADA: $9.50

Essay by James Poulos

God and Man at Google

Our technologies, ourselves.

In 1999, asked by the bbc whether the internet was "just a tool," rock star David Bowie responded: "No, it's an alien life form." Bowie saw that the advent of digital technology as our dominant communications medium would have "unimaginable" consequences. He was right: in the past several decades, the difference between humanity and machinery has come to define the debate over our identity as a species. Our ability to recover from this global shock will depend on whether we can regain a sense of what it means to be human, what sets us apart from machines. We will need to re-establish an understanding of our place in the world that is teleologically and spiritually satisfying. We are distinguished from the bots by our created bodies and souls, and the union between them that renders us in the image of our creator. These are sources of authority and power for which we do not depend on our digital machines. Our future as masters of those machines, rather than their slaves, depends on remembering these truths about ourselves. For that, only one resource will do: religion.

But of course, there are many faiths. Already, institutions and nations around the world are locked in an as-yet largely unacknowledged struggle to determine what religions will reign in the digital age. Under the pressure of our technological predicament, many are rushing toward the creeds, doctrines, and orders of a new, woke religion. This new dogma is usually post-Christian in its self-image, yet marked by a theology of spiritual purity and corporeal stain dating back to medieval Gnosticism: the physical world is incorrigibly corrupted (by systemic racism, white supremacy, transphobia), so we must transcend it (through virtual reality) or place it under total control (through mass surveillance, or perhaps a perfectly moderated algorithm). Religious plurality has always been inescapable in the West, and religious war is the Western way of war. Our new digital era cannot help demanding a religious response. The battle over whose religion will rectify our relations with the bots is upon us.

America is ground zero in this new spiritual war. For Americans, unlike their cousins in Europe, the pre-digital electric age was one of ever-greater earthly rewards. Rather than religious collapse and cultural suicide, America in the era of electricity enjoyed explosive growth and self-confidence. Our "dream it, do it" ethos made Americans the wealthiest, most glamorous, and most powerful people in the world. When digital technology arrived, we set about building a globalized computer in that same spirit—the spirit of what the Disney company still calls "imagineering." But the results were the opposite of those expected: for much of the ruling class, life in the digital age has been one of mental confusion, psychological distress, cultural decay, and geopolitical eclipse.

The power of imagination, which dominated the pre-digital world of electricity and television, has faded in the digital era. America's prominence in the 20th century was increasingly burnished by a cult of make-believe: visionary artists like Disney and Gene Roddenberry, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg exported glossy narratives and fairy tales around the world in televisual form. Gradually these narratives—that America is the strongest nation in the world, that we can do anything and be anything—ceased to correspond to reality. We hit limits beyond imagining. At the same time digital technology began putting everything on record, dispelling the illusions we tried to construct for ourselves: disgraced governors caught out in scandalous defiance

of their own COVID lockdowns, cell phone footage of riotous city streets, proliferating images of a Capitol surrounded by razor wire—claims of America's strength were now undercut by innumerable records of missteps, shortcomings, and failures.

The TV-era supremacy of human fantasy has been replaced with a new era in which the memory of machines trumps all. In such a world, neither our confected imagineering nor our secular reason command the respect they once did. Our pride has been challenged existentially by our robots. This goes deeper than our national identities to our worth and nature as a species: the question digital life now presents is, why put up anymore with being human? So the big political and social factions are now bent on wringing answers to that question from existing systems of tradition and belief. Like everyone else, the intellectuals are late to the party. But they are racing faster than most to catch up—with decidedly mixed results. Most recent books on the subject attempt to wrestle some understanding of our predicament from the bots by showing that, if we do the right thing, we humans can still be good for *something* in a world suffused with machines.

Trust Issues

The main approaches adopted by today's tech critics fall generally into three categories. For some, the problem is fundamentally economic; for others, it is political; and for still others, it is cultural. Each diagnosis comes with a corresponding vision of how society will be structured, and humans fulfilled, in the digital age.

In the economic case, the villains of the story are the biggest Silicon Valley corporations. Those who present this account think that saving our humanity means putting checks on the rich and powerful. In *Facebook* (2020), an alternately breezy and polemical stab at the definitive story of co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's empire, *Wired* editor-at-large Steven Levy slams tech idealists for being so naïve that they allowed politically incorrect barbarians to storm the gates of the platform. Some of these marauders, Levy emphasizes, are more than trolls: they're the most evil people in the world. "Zuckerberg is right," concedes Levy, "that he or his company should not be the world's arbiter of speech. But by connecting the world," Levy concludes, Zuck "owns it." He bears responsibility for, among other things, the 2019 Christchurch massacre of worshippers in two New Zealand mosques by a self-described racist who was active online. To Levy, right-wing users who connect on the site became the Frankenstein's monster that proved Doctor Facebook morally culpable.

Facebook failed to see "that the compromises made in the last half dozen years—among them the disregard for privacy, the databartering with developers, the reckless international expansion, and the countless concessions it made to its hunger for growth—had planted the seeds for a series of explosions that would shake not only Facebook but the entire tech industry." In Levy's telling, "the first big bomb would go off on Election Day 2016," and Facebook has done no right ever since. Its offenses include creating the endlessly scrollable News Feed ("biased against journalism"), selling private data to the British political consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica ("shocking"), and allowing ex-Bushworld company executive Joel Kaplan to show up in support of then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh at his televised confirmation hearing. "One might think that the last thing Facebook's head of global policy might want to do was drag the company into the middle of the utterly radioactive controversy," Levy groans. For him, the Facebook story is simple: by allowing just anyone to organize and communicate, the company enabled society's worst villains to seize power over America. The moral is equally simple: someone—the federal government—must ensure the political Right cannot organize freely online.

Books discussed in this essay:

Facebook: The Inside Story, by Steven Levy. Blue Rider Press, 592 pages, $30 (cloth), $20 (paper)

Life After Google: The Fall of Big Data and the Rise of the Blockchain Economy, by George Gilder. Regnery Gateway, 256 pages, $29.99

Technocracy in America: Rise of the Info-State, by Parag Khanna. CreateSpace, 132 pages, $16.59

The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium, by Martin Gurri. Stripe Press, 445 pages, $20

The Autonomous Revolution: Reclaiming the Future We've Sold to Machines, by William H. Davidow and Michael S. Malone. Berrett-Koehler, 264 pages, $26.95

AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order, by Kai-Fu Lee. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 272 pages, $28 (cloth), $16.99 (paper)

What Tech Calls Thinking: An Inquiry into the Digital Bedrock of Silicon Valley, by Adrian Daub. FSG Originals, 160 pages, $15 (paper)

In *Life After Google* (2018), investor and information theorist George Gilder accuses a different corporation of exerting a different kind of pernicious market control. He insists that Alphabet, Google's parent company, isn't idealistic enough: it focuses on aggregating massive amounts of data, thus smothering the human creativity that must (and should) burst forth elsewhere. What Gilder calls Google's "system of the world" is a Faustian effort to achieve total knowledge through the total compilation of *everything* under one roof—Google's. "Homogenizing the globe's amorphous analogical tangle of surfaces, sounds, images, accounts, songs, speeches, roads, buildings, documents, messages, and narratives into a planetary digital utility," as Gilder puts it, "was a feat of immense monetary value." But why bother? Because, by Google's lights, there's no real human purpose beyond building knowledge-acquiring machines that are better at computation than the human brain. That can be done if "all the data in the world can be compiled in a single 'place', and algorithms sufficiently comprehensive to analyze them can be written." It's easy if you try.

The implication of this approach—that life can be modeled perfectly by that which is not alive—is what Gilder calls the "materialist superstition." Gilder, the author of a series of memorable books on, among other topics, gender and sex (*Sexual Suicide*, 1973; *Men and Marriage*, 1986), economics (*Wealth and Poverty*, 1981), and technology (*Microcosm: The Quantum Revolution in Economics and Technology*, 1989) is well prepared to tackle this superstition. In assuming that humans are machines who at most can build better machines, Google's fantasists mistakenly aspire to a "singularity" of complete knowledge—instead of building from the singularity of the universe, one born of "a higher consciousness echoed by human consciousness." The "disconnected probabilistic states" from which Google's black boxes produce false "intelligence" are hostile to memory, creativity, or human accomplishment. All this is convincing enough, but Gilder doesn't present a viable alternative. He is too

enthusiastic about virtual reality, and though he is right that blockchain currencies can "enable the real-life future by indelibly recording the past," the question remains who exactly will use those powerful tools to create what kind of culture with which sorts of values. Gilder leaves the answer shrouded in a potentially "heroic" future. Both he and Levy imagine that a more just and harmonious society can be attained if we just put somebody better in charge.

Digital Democracy

What if the answer is not economic but political? If so then the villain is not companies but interests, the ones large enough to define our regime. It follows that peace and stability depend on rescuing "our democracy" from collapse. Decorated policy theorist Parag Khanna makes the case in *Technocracy in America* (2017) that populists have prejudiced us against the practical benefits of technologized governance. Politics would be much simpler with bots to run our bureaucracy: Khanna thinks the experience of certain other countries shows that a digitized political system allows its leaders to drain away the people's passions, identify discreet challenges clearly, and solve for them efficiently. "Many of the functions that are necessary for a free, orderly and secure society require the kind of policy continuity that should put them beyond the scope of political manipulation," Khanna suggests—a commonsensical claim, it seems, until he goes on to observe that the "political divides" standing in the way of such progress arise from "the fact that America is the least urbanized of Western societies" and possesses an "anachronistic electoral college system." These failings together "account for America's deep socio-political division and"—you guessed it—"Trump's victory." Khanna seems certain that, if only America's low-density, low-information lowbrows were urbanized away, no remaining prejudice could stand in the way of technocratic improvement.

But Martin Gurri recognizes that technocrats will need more than an anti-Trumpist animus to escape the predicaments of politics. In *Revolt of the Public* (2014), Gurri, a longtime geopolitical media analyst, strives to bring disconnected elites down to earth from their fantasies of enlightened wonkocracy. Digital tech, he argues, is a network faster, stronger, and more consequential than all forms of hierarchy and the authority that justifies their rule. Another way to put this is that today only the digital medium, and no human entity, can claim any longer to be truly global. This leads to skepticism of governments and religions alike, and of any system that claims the authority to guide human behavior. A new kind of nihilism has already undermined our old democratic habits, which relied on allegiance to industrial-age hierarchies such as those implicit in republican government.

From this standpoint, Trump and his supporters are a "thermometer reading." They presage the revolt of digital network mores against the "fragile forms" of our legacy political system. "The trouble is in *us*: in our readiness to generalize from the web levels of hostility and aggression inconsistent with the legitimacy of any political system." But though Gurri treats Trump as an avatar of "post-truth" politics, he also admonishes elites for imagining that "post-truth involves the power of lies to 'shape public opinion' by pandering to prejudice." To the contrary, he says, the public's loss of faith in authority has led them to embrace "the broken pieces of old narratives and explanations," even as they realize that such narratives can no longer command assent. "The elites dwell in their own fragment of truth yet seem blissfully unaware."

Frustratingly, Gurri uses the specter of mass shooters to augur the dark nihilist fate that awaits unless a new elite establishes a new authority. He writes that "[t]he nihilist lurks

in a broken sliver of truth that is impossible to debate or refute," certain only that "not just politics but all of humanity...must be purified and made new." But Gurri misses the obvious connection between this character and the increasingly gnostic woke movement, which is currently working hard to purify all spirits by force. Gurri does not see the woke nihilists staring him in the face: all he sees is "the rant made flesh," in the form of lone gunmen and ISIS recruits. Gurri's counsel that "elites today have no idea how to speak to the public or what to say to it" would be strengthened if he applied his analysis to wokeness. But he does conclude, wisely, that if a legitimate elite is to emerge in the digital era, it will be one that "looks to the public as a home it will return to rather than a carnivorous species from which to hide."

Paid to Care

In the third kind of tech criticism, the diagnosed problem is not dastardly corporations or dysfunctional political classes but cultures made defunct by the triumph of the machines. This analysis gets closest to the heart of the problem, in that it sees the need not just for new rules but for new sources of meaning. Venture veteran William Davidow and tech-biz analyst Michael Malone warn in *The Autonomous Revolution* (2020) that, like it or not, there is no going back from automation. The end of human work defines our age as much as the Industrial Revolution did the previous one. Governments must quickly adopt and instill new values, or else there will emerge "a new social structure that's based on continual conflict between winners and losers"—the winners being the ruling class. "When one group stays in power for a long time, it inevitably falls into corruption. And since there will be more losers than winners, social unrest—and ultimately social collapse—are inevitable." Instead, the ruling class must respect the values and the authority of ordinary people, while the ordinary people must learn to accept that professional life as we knew it will wind down.

Davidow and Malone hint that a failure to strike this bargain will lead to catastrophe, though the race to do so could also backfire. The "less detailed" the rules of the new digital-age regime, for instance, "the faster they can be written and put into effect." But "if you do this, you are giving the deep state carte blanche to get deeper—another cultural and value issue" that rewards ruling class winners and punishes ordinary citizens. For Davidow and Malone, prosperity is no longer a policy problem in a world where people retire and bots work. Rather, preventing the capture of prosperity by a ruling caste is the problem, one only humans can solve. But in an age when most people lack industriousness or an industry to apply it to, the temptation among legacy elites to hoard knowledge about machine control will be almost irresistible.

Unless, that is, the elite itself will be just as diminished by the spread of automated machines as ordinary people. In *AI Superpowers* (2018)—that's the U.S. and China, for those keeping score at home—former Google China president Kai-Fu Lee holds out the hope that elites and plebs alike will be able to accept mutual caregiving as the core of our purpose. It won't be enough, Lee says, to "put an economic floor under everyone in society" through so-called Universal Basic Income (UBI). "Instead of simply falling back on a painkiller like UBI," he says, "hard work" can salvage the "humanistic values" he discovered as a post-Christian facing down cancer. When Lee describes the desired outcome in terms of a "human veneer," however, the really hard work seems more to do with accepting such a role than building it out: "AI will do the analytical thinking, while humans will wrap that analysis in warmth and compassion." This clearly implies a gradual shift away from analysis entirely, into jobs such as (he's not joking) for-hire wardrobe redecorators who seasonally mist your closet, or "home sustainability consultants" who will tell you how to diminish your "footprint" still further.

> Religion, the soul, our relation to God—these are things no bot, no matter how powerful, can take away or diminish.

Remarkably, Lee admits that these jobs will not come into being spontaneously as a result of popular demand. The populace will have to be conformed to them. The free market is "inadequate" for fostering the kinds of "loving and compassionate activities that we should embrace in the AI economy." Lee's solution is "not just creating" these roles "but turning them into true careers with respectable pay and greater dignity." He assigns this task to "government policies that nudge forward a broader shift in cultural values." But nudges are inadequate in a period of transformation as total as the digital era. Lee's goals demand overhauls, ones at odds with our full humanity.

The Coming Catechism

Analyses of the situation created by digital technology are surely needed at the economic, political, and cultural level. But, singly and together, all these books fall short of discovering a sufficiently spiritual account of our malaise. Levy furiously denies the reality that the institutions and mores of the gatekeeping establishment can't be rescued from digital destruction without massive and un-American crackdowns on free association. Gilder understands better how our way of life can and must be preserved, but doesn't quite recognize that the digital medium disenchants the cult of the imagination and fantasy that has powered so much of our creativity. This might suggest that Khanna is right, and regimes can and should grow more technologized. But his top-down view neglects how decentralizing digital really is: in communities where distrust of national media and government is growing, formal and informal associations will and do reassert authority at the local level. Gurri is right that a new, distributed elite is needed to prevent this transition from being a disastrous one. But he mistakes Trump and Trump's supporters for uncontrollable nihilists. He doubts too much that the average American can govern him- or herself well with digital (and more venerable) political tools.

Davidow and Malone and Lee, meanwhile, are persuasive that digital technology will fundamentally rework some of the most basic components of our social contract. We do need to prepare for robots and machines to take a decisive role that pushes people out of many modern modes of production and consumption. But exactly how this will play out is more complicated than at first it may appear. Too few intellectuals understand that mere "values" and "humanism" are not enough to justify the pains and yearnings of human beings in the digital age. Even in a neo-arcadian future, with a retinue of robots on hand to assuage your every burden, the overwhelming majority of humans will not be satisfied with amorphous "caring": they will continue, as they always have, to need and practice some form of *religion*.

What we are losing is not just our jobs but our sense of ourselves as dominant, heroic, and free. The empty showmanship that media theorist Neil Postman described in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) has revealed itself as just that: empty. This might lead us to accept the unprecedented humbling and domestication of the human species which Davidow and Lee describe as inevitable. But that kind

of diminishment is and should be anathema to us. What we really need is the opposite: we must reclaim human *pride* in our real human nature and our membership in the real natural world. Though this is unlikely to make us weaker, more docile, or more eager to go along to get along, it is also the only way to retain and honor our dignity. Preventing catastrophic war or societal collapse is a good idea. Reducing ourselves to one another's pets is not.

There is one major and permanent differentiator between humans and digital machines, something which makes us irreplaceable by any technology. This is the soul. Recovering our sense of it may make us more violent and disputatious but also, in a certain sense, less prideful and more accepting of diminished horizons. Religion, the soul, our relation to God—these things no bot, no matter how powerful, can take away or disenchant. Indeed, it is not hard to see how the bots themselves can be programmed to respect, protect, and even participate in our religion. The question is: whose religious values will be encoded into the programs we use everyday? Whose spiritual assumptions will be taken for granted by our search engines, our artificial intelligence, our algorithms?

And from this standpoint, much tech criticism across the political spectrum reveals itself as an argument about who will catechize whose bots. In *What Tech Calls Thinking* (2020), a slim, punchy attempt to discredit techie intellectualism, Adrian Daub, a woke Stanford professor who runs the university's "gender research" institute, ends up unintentionally revealing why religion poses a problem to the continued supremacy of Silicon Valley types. Daub presents what amounts to a brief against the attempt of many technologists to be, as many put it today, "spiritual but not religious"—sympathetic toward the Left's values, but unwilling to kneel before the institutionalized dogma of the new woke religion. Like others, Daub intuitively understands that *some* form of religion will rise to dominate the digital age. He wants to make sure that wokeness is that religion.

Techies are focused only on "individual salvation," Daub complains; they "get to feel like a victim while having all the power." The "tendency" in Silicon Valley is "to want to be revolutionary without, you know, revolutionizing anything," a hallmark of the "elitist anti-elitism" that defines the class. "Silicon Valley loves the words 'everyone,' 'universal,' and 'people,' but what they usually mean is 'people I went to school with,' 'my housemates in East Palo Alto,' or 'my four immediate subordinates.'" Technologists, Daub suggests, have appropriated woke ethics in order to betray them for fun and profit, drawing a bogus "line of tradition" from "New Age psychotherapy and leftist intentional communities to the TED Talk." In other words, Silicon Valley magnates mouth woke pieties, but they are unwilling to obey the strictures woke religion would impose. They keep so-called diversity, equity, and inclusion at arm's length, "not just in order to sustain their business model," but "to avoid cognitive dissonance in their thinking about gender, race, class, history, and capitalism." With lines like these, Daub shows that the Left's critique of technology is now, in contemporary terms, a critique of impiety, too.

Daub and his fellow academics are right to deny that spiritualistic sloganeering can ever amount to the kind of religion that alone is strong enough to fit the bots with bit and bridle. But Daub's refusal to take seriously the Christianity of René Girard and Marshall McLuhan—two giants in digital theory, whom he regards merely as forerunners of tech's cultish in-group woo woo—gives the game away. The choice will not be between wokeness and Eastern religion, but between wokeness and the God of the Bible.

The "value" of religion in a digital age is even greater than in ages past. The protection of our nature as incarnate, ensouled creatures will demand that religionists retrieve the good news that we are human—precious and beloved of God, with a kind of access to the good, the true, and the beautiful that our machines may one day supplement, but will never supplant.

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