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CLAREMONT
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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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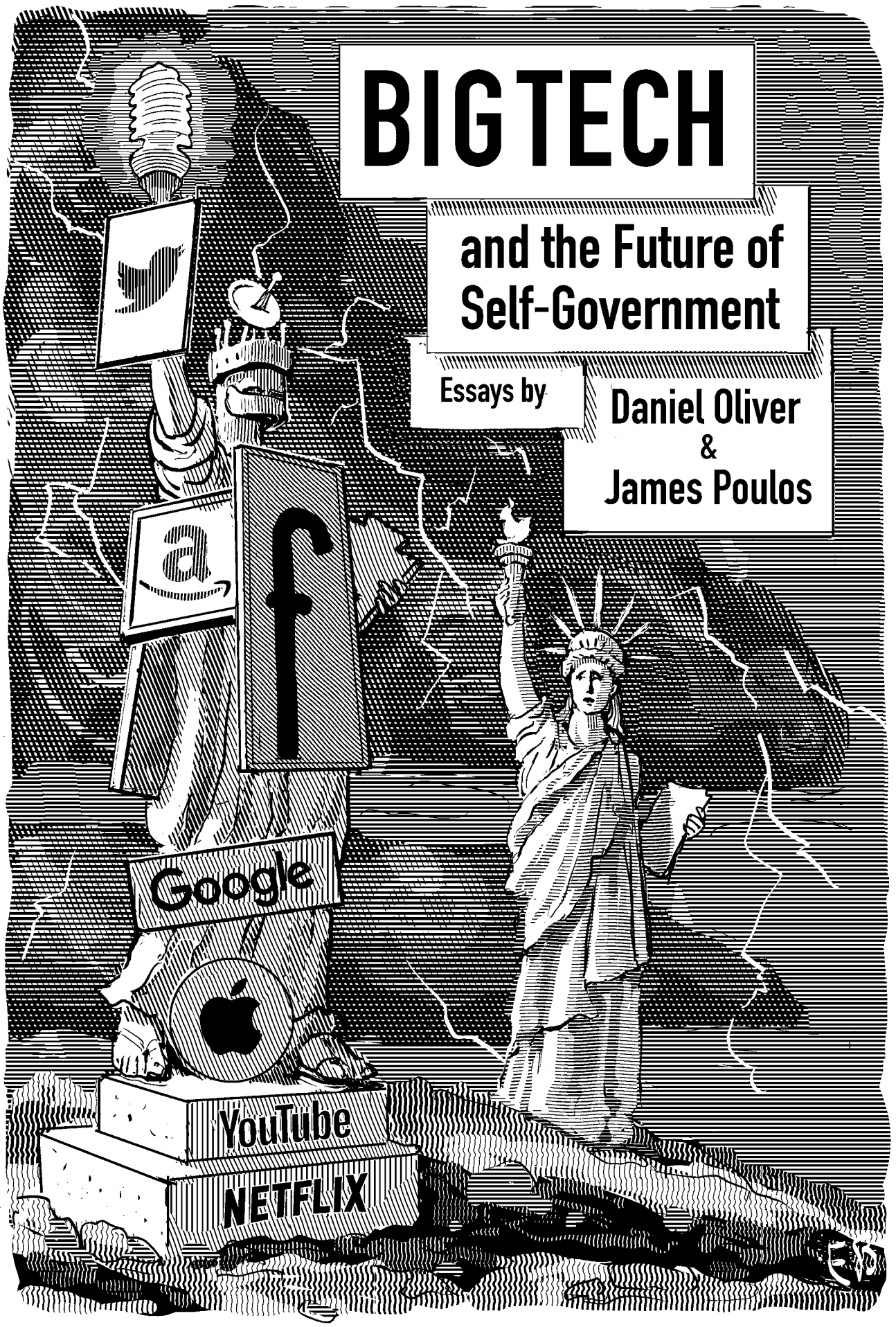

James Hankins: Our Age of Conformity

Harvey C. Mansfield: Feminism vs. Womanism

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Book Review by C.J. Wolfe

To Heal the World

Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.
Basic Books, 384 pages, $30

It's rare that a debate boils down to whether the participants actually believe in good and evil. Socrates' debates with some sophists did; so too did Abraham Lincoln's with Stephen A. Douglas. Most do not. Those skeptical of moral reasoning usually don't deny the good outright but claim to adhere to a "thinner" conception of it than their interlocutors. They oppose actions that cause physical harm, for instance—but not much else. Many liberals and libertarians wave away moral judgment using just these sorts of arguments.

But if the only proposition concerning human nature you can admit is that we are consenting beings, you might as well be a relativist for all the moral responsibilities you neglect. Throughout his career the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks—who served 22 years as chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth and taught for years at the London School of Jewish Studies—rejected arguments that presuppose radical autonomy on the grounds that they necessitate in advance a denial of morality. He returns to this point in his last general-audience book, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, published shortly before his death in November.

Sacks notes that his doctoral supervisor, the English philosopher Bernard Williams, also wrote a book titled *Morality* (1972), in which he argued that moral philosophy was a dead end one had to think one's way out of. He never found a replacement for morality, but Williams was adept at showing why utilitarianism and Kantianism insufficiently answered Socrates' question, "How should I live?" As an orthodox Jew Sacks answers that question in the tradition of the Torah—a particular theological answer, rather than a universalizing philosophical one, which requires asking questions about who one must become to be open to God and the truth.

Sacks seeks to restore a notion of "common good" constructed from neither *a priori* rights nor metaphysical commitments. Sacks maintains we have *duties*—and not universal duties, but duties to *particular* people. His idea of the common good is the classic one: goods that are not diminished when people engage in them. Education is such a good: my learning about something will not diminish the source of knowledge for others to enjoy. The shared elements of traditional morality themselves are a common good, Sacks argues. But in today's fragmented society we often focus on ourselves to the exclusion of others and so diminish our common good. Sacks repeats throughout *Morality* that, since the 1960s, there has been a move from talking in terms of "We" to speaking in terms of "I." As Tom Wolfe once wrote, it is now all about "ME."

Sacks situates the common good of morality alongside two other spheres of life: the political and the economic. The decline of the moral sphere in the West has left us with a morality-shaped hole in our lives—witness our loneliness, familial breakdown, addiction to social media, and disregard for others exemplified in "cancel culture" and polarized politics. We have tried filling this hole through the state (using power) and the free market (using money), but there simply is no outsourcing morality.

Readers will find much to agree and disagree with in this book. But on the most crucial matters, Sacks invariably offers good common sense. He pushes back against conservatives like Notre Dame's Patrick Deneen, for example, who would paint the American Founders as proto-leftists. Sacks emphasizes the difference between liberty and license in the founders' thinking, and between their understanding of unalienable rights and the government-created rights of socialists. He writes:

> It is genuinely sad to see how, almost without people noticing, Britain and the United States have abandoned their own unique tradition, that of Locke and Jefferson, and instead embraced the Rousseau-esque French revolutionary model of rights as claims against the state, so that they could achieve by their own, local, cooperative, altruistic efforts what politics and power cannot achieve: namely, a devolved sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.

There are many beautiful passages and formulations in *Morality*. One of my favorites is this:

> Why bother to remember anything if you can look it up in a microsecond on Google or Wikipedia? But this confuses *history* and *memory*, which are not the same thing at all. History is an answer to the question "What happened?" Memory is an answer to the question "Who am I?" History is about facts, memory is about identity. History is about something that happened to someone else, not me. Memory is my story, the past that made me who I am, of whose legacy I am the guardian for the sake of generations yet to come.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was among the most morally serious, intellectually honest, and insightful public intellectuals of our time. He will be greatly missed by believers and nonbelievers alike. We should be thankful he left this book with us. May his memory be for a blessing.

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