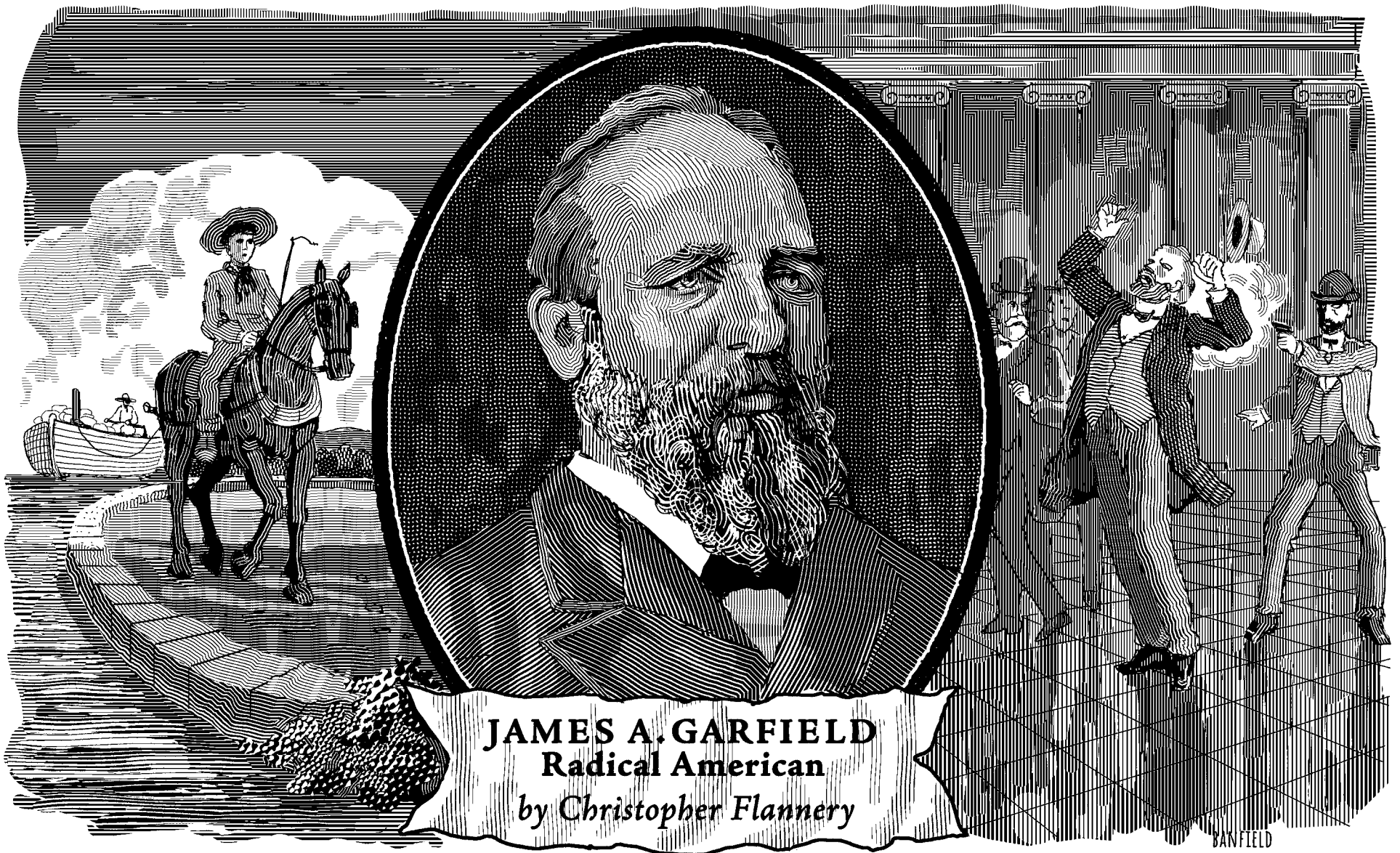


VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2023

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Essay by Glenn Ellmers

PANDEMIC PANDEMONIUM

Science and civic accountability.



IN THE LATTER PART OF 2023 AMERICANS have come to a much better understanding of the medical failures behind the COVID pandemic responses. Whether these measures were *political* failures remains to be seen. To consider that question, we would have to know whether any of the responsible officials had ulterior agendas behind, or in addition to, protecting public health.

More than a few analysts have speculated that the most constitutionally dubious pandemic measures were pretexts to solidify and embolden an emerging authoritarianism on the part of global elites. Such concerns are not evidence of paranoia. This May, the Rockefeller Foundation announced a new multi-million-dollar partnership with the World Health Organization's Berlin-based Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence. The funding is intended to enhance international coordination for treating climate change as a public health crisis. Even putting the most benign interpretation on this "coordination," such efforts reveal a widening chasm between how the international ruling class and the American people understand the very idea of

"public health." Implicated in that amorphous term are questions about risk and safety, consent, individual rights, the distinction between the public and the private, and even the relationship between the body and the soul—all of which raise profound moral and political questions.

Although we continue to learn disturbing new facts about *what* happened in the wake of the COVID outbreak, many of us are even more alarmed and perplexed when we inquire—often unsuccessfully—into *why* many key decisions were made, by whom, and for what immediate and ultimate purposes. The most onerous pandemic impositions have, for now, been set aside, but there is little assurance that lockdowns might not return in response to another virus, or for entirely different reasons that the Rockefeller Foundation, for example, might recommend. This seems all the more possible given that there has been virtually no public reckoning over what Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch in May called "the greatest intrusions on civil liberties in the peacetime history of this country." We have barely be-

gun to understand the full depth of what has happened to the United States and the world in the past three years—although we do know that some influential figures have been quite open about treating the pandemic as an opportunity not to be wasted. In an act of amazing foresight and felicitous timing, Klaus Schwab, chairman of the World Economic Forum, managed to publish a book in July 2020 titled *COVID: The Great Reset*. What this reset means is a question to which we will return below.

Who Is Responsible?

FOR THE CLASSICAL GREEK PHILOSOPHERS, genuine knowledge depends on knowing a thing's cause or causes. In ancient Greek, the word for cause, *aitia*, also means responsibility. To understand the *why* is to understand who or what is responsible. With regard to the pandemic measures, however, this is not so easy to ascertain. There is, to be sure, plenty of generalized blame to go around. But, perhaps not by accident, it is exceedingly difficult to disentangle the



relationships and interconnected decision-making of the World Health Organization (WHO), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the medical establishment (including its licensing boards and official journals), the pharmaceutical companies, as well as governors, Congress, and the president—not to mention the media, which certainly played a massive role in spreading false or inaccurate information. Anthony Fauci, who headed the NIH’s Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases from 1984 to 2022, has disavowed responsibility for any number of things he finds inconvenient, taking refuge behind the claim that the agency he directed may only issue “guidance.” State and local officials, however, showed no lack of zeal in harassing, bankrupting, and even jailing non-compliant citizens, claiming that they were only acting on what they understood to be “orders” from the federal bureaucracies.

Scott Atlas, who witnessed and participated in some of the federal decision-making, writes in *A Plague Upon Our House* about the almost pathological evasion of responsibility at all levels of the pandemic response: “Accountability remains absent from government leaders, public health officials, and scientists in failing to admit errors about lockdowns; some even distort their records and portray disastrous death tallies as ‘successes.’” Atlas’s book offers a blow-by-blow recounting of his frustrating role as an advisor to President Donald Trump during the second half of 2020. An accomplished radiologist and medical researcher, Atlas wanted decisions to be informed by the best available data. While he blames Trump partly for being too driven by the polls, he is especially dismayed by Trump’s excessive deference to expert authority. The president, Atlas writes, “let [White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Deborah] Birx and Fauci tell governors to prolong the lockdowns and school closures and continue the severe restrictions on businesses—strategies that failed to stop the elderly from dying, failed to stop the cases, and destroyed families and sacrificed children.... They had convinced him to do exactly the opposite of what he would naturally do in any other circumstance,” and so he disregarded “his own common sense” and allowed

grossly incorrect policy advice to prevail. For months, his inner circle feared “rocking the boat” ahead of the election. They stopped the president from getting rid of people who were grossly incompetent, purely because of the election....

And on top of that tragic misjudgment, the election was lost anyway.

Atlas reserves his greatest scorn for Birx, a federal bureaucrat since 1985, who had been Barack Obama’s ambassador for America’s global AIDS response. She was the driving force behind the lockdowns, Atlas argues, even when their uselessness, and indeed harmfulness, had become painfully apparent. “Birx had one game plan, and she stuck to it, regardless of the evidence of failure.”

If Atlas might seem to let Fauci off too lightly, others are more than happy to take up the cudgels against America’s ubiquitous

entists—including Robert Malone and Jay Bhattacharya—have argued convincingly that masks, lockdowns, and indiscriminate vaccine mandates have not only been ineffective but, taken together, almost certainly have done more harm than good. Nor is there much doubt that Fauci himself is an egregious self-promoter who was, at best, inconsistent and disingenuous in his public pronouncements, which were often driven more by politics than medicine.

Kennedy’s more recent *A Letter to Liberals* (2022)—a pocket-sized book subtitled *Censorship and Covid: An Attack on Science and American Ideals*—seeks to refute some of the most persistent myths about the coronavirus. I can’t speak to whether the book corrects every factual error alleged by Dalrymple, but what is more interesting for the purposes of this essay is that Kennedy—a tort lawyer and scion of America’s most celebrated Democratic family—has launched this crusade to “remind all Americans that blind faith in authority is a feature of religion and autocracy, but not of science and democracy.” He appeals to his “fellow liberals” to reject their “ideology” of “blind obedience” to “famously corrupt pharmaceutical companies and their notoriously captive federal agencies.” He reminds his readers that “Democrats were once the party of intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and faith in scientific and liberal empiricism” and used to believe that “censorship of dissent is the emblem of totalitarian systems.” He refers to a “global elite” who have used the pandemic to “rob us of our treasure, our health, and our freedom,” and he implores liberals to reject the “coercive policies” that “will only breed more skepticism and mistrust and will never bridge the gap between America’s polarized tribes.”

Vaxxed New World

ONE CAN BE IMPRESSED WITH KENNEDY’S spiritedness and good intentions while still doubting whether he will have much success overcoming the “orchestrated fear” and “fierce tribalism” he laments. Such doubt arises from the recognition that both the controversy over the pandemic measures themselves and the wildly divergent reactions by ordinary people around the world are rooted in profound metaphysical and even theological disputes, turning on the status of science, reason, and what it means to be human. As Aaron Kheriaty observes at the end of his book *The New Abnormal: The Rise of the Biomedical Security State* (2022):

Books discussed in this essay:

A Plague Upon Our House: My Fight at the Trump White House to Stop COVID from Destroying America, by Scott W. Atlas, M.D. Bombardier Books, 352 pages, \$28

The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health, by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Skyhorse Publishing, 380 pages, \$32.50

A Letter to Liberals: Censorship and COVID: An Attack on Science and American Ideals, by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Skyhorse Publishing, 120 pages, \$16.99

The New Abnormal: The Rise of the Biomedical Security State, by Aaron Kheriaty. Regnery Gateway, 256 pages, \$29.99

The Psychology of Totalitarianism, by Mattias Desmet. Chelsea Green Publishing, 240 pages, \$28

public health Napoleon. Perhaps the most unlikely such critic to emerge, one who is becoming something of a spokesman for the COVID resistance movement, is Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Last year, in these pages, Theodore Dalrymple outlined various shortcomings in Kennedy’s *The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health* (“What’s Up, Doc?,” Summer 2022), although those criticisms hardly vitiate the broader complaints that have been lodged against Fauci and his role in the pandemic response. In addition to Atlas, many eminent physicians and sci-



Many of us during the pandemic puzzled over why data and evidence did not seem to put a dent in some people's convictions about covid or our public policies. Perhaps this was because we had implicit Platonists (understanding that term broadly) trying to communicate with implicit Marxists (also understood broadly, regardless of whether they had read a word of Marx)... The light of reason could find no purchase with the cunning of reason. The twain could not possibly meet. The very same words carried two entirely different meanings. Is truth something we discover in the world, or is truth what we ourselves create entirely by our will to power? People who disagree on this foundational question cannot engage in a fruitful debate about science or evidence.

A peek at his CV reveals that Kheriaty, a psychiatrist and formerly the director of the Medical Ethics Program at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine, studied philosophy as an undergraduate at Notre Dame. He seems to have retained more than the average student.

Corroborating and deepening Kheriaty's thesis about an epistemic divide is the work

of Mattias Desmet, a professor of clinical psychology at Belgium's University of Ghent, whose *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* (2022) analyzes the irrational fears and autocratic impulses attending the pandemic. Desmet draws on research in group psychology and human behavior, but he mostly traces COVID-related irrationality to modern philosophy and the ideologies it has produced. Foremost among these is "scientism," the reductionist dogma that only the quantifiable is real and the laws of the physical universe explain all of reality. He argues that an adequate understanding of the COVID phenomenon must have recourse primarily to theoretical or philosophical explanations, emphasizing the power of ideas, rather than self-interested calculation or some form of materialism, whether moral or ontological.

It's noteworthy that a book by a psychiatrist and a book by a psychologist are among the most thoughtful, wide-ranging attempts to grapple with this topic. Against all expectations it looks as if some professional students of the psyche have not yet lost contact with that word's original meaning in Greek: soul. Both authors recognize, and even insist, that human nature cannot be reduced to the body, and that the mind is more than the measurable electrochemical processes of the

brain. Both have also been subjected to appalling cancellation attempts by their respective universities.

Kheriaty's focus is the dangerous marriage of powerful new technologies with what Abraham Lincoln called "the same old serpent"—the tyrannical temptation. What the COVID pandemic exposed, Kheriaty argues in *The New Abnormal*, is that all the elements of an emerging dystopia are already here: "The unholy alliance of 1) public health, 2) digital technologies of surveillance and control, and 3) the police powers of the state—what I call the Biomedical Security State—has arrived."

One of the most disturbing features of this Vaxxed New World is how much of our lives are governed by people and organizations we've never heard of. What do you know, for example, about the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI)? CEPI is a non-governmental organization with offices in Oslo, London, and Washington, D.C., which has received \$3 billion in funding from governments and private donors. It is run by Richard Hatchett, a medical doctor and—of course—a former U.S. national security official. According to its website, "CEPI was founded in Davos by the governments of Norway and India, the Bill & Melinda Gates Founda-

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The 2008 Tri-Cities Talk-Off Season

by Shay Martin

Painstakingly researched and compiled, *The 2008 Tri-Cities Talk-Off Season* is, without doubt, the definitive guide to competitive talking in 2008. In these pages, get a look into the world of talk-offs as never before thought possible, and, in particular, follow a truly all-time talker, Jordan Jericho, during her quest for a Perfect Year.

Available in two parts, the first covering the season through its first two Majors while the second begins with the July Fourth Annual, which that year proved notable, and ends with the Gregory Dunn Memorial. A similar guide to the 2009 season will be releasing early 2024.

Year	League	Season	In Progress	The Memorial
1990	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1991	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1992	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1993	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1994	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1995	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1996	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1997	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1998	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
1999	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
2000	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
2001	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
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2004	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
2005	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
2006	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
2007	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...
2008	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...	A. ...



The Catty-Corner Conversations

by Michael H. Cole

The Catty-Corner Conversations is a launched attack against assumptions. Join Mike and his diagonally-opposed neighbor as they use arguments, counter-arguments, insults, and counter-insults to force their way into a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. "Outside of math class, if you want to talk about righteousness then go to a chapel, not the Capitol." "The making of money may not be a zero-sum game, but wealth certainly is."

"Fear was once used to destroy, but it has been co-opted by creation, and it is now in the process of remaking the world in its own image."

Poor Chess, and Miscellanea

by Stewart Berg

Poor Chess is the story of an Idealic King, including a Realand Queen and the general mismanagement of circumstance. What happens when one is incorrectly wary of the ideas of March? "The poorest chess is misplayed checkers."

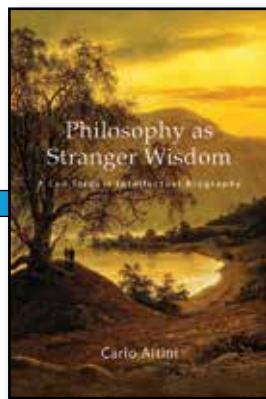
Also included are a poem about the land lying beside the Big Rock Candy Mountains, itself a haven for journalists, an essay that, using a Super Bowl's end, addresses the enervation of expertise, and much more.



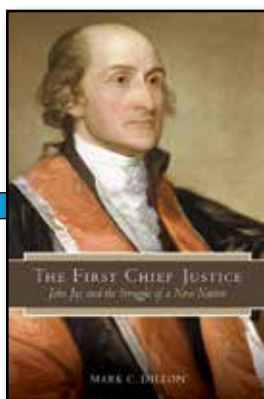
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tion,” and the World Economic Forum, with major funding from the U.N. Foundation COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund. (The Gates Foundation, incidentally, also funds 13% of the WHO budget, while 80% of its budget comes from private sources, including pharmaceutical companies.) Amid the bland bureaucratic language describing CEPI's mission one learns that a “coordinated, international, and intergovernmental response is needed to respond to the global threat posed by emerging infectious disease.” But who gave this entity any authority to participate in that response? To whom is it accountable? CEPI's attractive and elaborate website, which makes no secret of its ambitious goals, doesn't bother to say.

Free Will, That's Over

LIKE CEPI AND THE ROCKEFELLER AND Gates Foundations, Klaus Schwab's World Economic Forum (WEF) is perfectly open about its plans. The coronavirus pandemic, according to its website, revealed the “inconsistencies, inadequacies, and contradictions” of our current political institutions, and thus afforded the opportunity “to build a new social contract.” In a wide selection of articles devoted to explaining what it freely calls its “Agenda,” one learns about wonderfully clever ideas like storing human DNA on the moon, and even more ambitious goals for “human enhancement” and transhumanism, such as “genetic, wearable and implantable technologies that artificially expedite the evolutionary process.” In the WEF's plans for the glorious future, to take one indicative example, individuals will be expected to “embrace a new form of human intelligence beyond IQ and EQ [emotional intelligence].” You better get with the program if you want “to be successful in the AI age,” because citizens of the new social contract will need “digital intelligence (DQ)” in order

to effectively utilize technology for the benefits of themselves, others, and society as a whole. If a person with a high IQ is described as smart and a person with a high EQ as empathetic, then a person with a high DQ might be described as wise.

Any references to the wisdom of the decidedly non-digital Socrates, one supposes, will be declared disinformation by our high-DQ guardians.

If Schwab is the organ-grinder of the new world order, his dancing monkey is Yuval

Harari. An Israeli academic, Harari provides the pseudo-intellectual arguments for transhumanism's scientific and historical inevitability. He is given to grandiose pronouncements, such as that human beings will soon be “hackable animals.” You just have to deal with that, Harari instructs us, because “free will—that's over.” Harari, like Schwab himself—who sometimes dresses like a 1970s James Bond villain—can be hard to take seriously. But the systems of technocratic manipulation and control they celebrate are not a joke. Kheriaty quotes Harari explaining how useful the pandemic has been because “this is what convinces people to accept, to legitimize, total biometric surveillance.... [We] need to monitor what's happening under their skin.” Although it ought to be noted that Harari has at times presented himself as a critic of *unregulated* technology—he authored a widely read *Atlantic* essay in 2018 titled “Why Technology Favors Tyranny”—he also believes the inevitable endpoint of scientific progress is for humans—or at least some humans—to “become gods.” In May 2022 he caused a firestorm by claiming that a major concern of artificial intelligence will be figuring out what to do “with all the useless people.”

An elaborate system of electronic monitoring is already largely in place, even before we've received our mandatory chip implants. Recall how even small donors to the Canadian trucker's convoy protesting vaccine mandates in early 2022 were tracked down and penalized. This is a major theme of *The New Abnormal*, and is nicely explained with reference to what father of utilitarianism Jeremy Bentham called the “panopticon”—which is often thought of as a design for a prison, but is actually a broader “blueprint for a system of surveilling and completely controlling a population,” as Kheriaty notes. This design “promised to rationalize the discipline of otherwise unruly” subjects. Kheriaty cites the postmodernist critic Michel Foucault, who applies Bentham's concept to the bureaucratic state: the panopticon becomes “a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form.” Foucault often emphasized that the tyranny of modern power structures dissolves the distinctions between ruler and ruled—everyone becomes a component within the system. In the all-encompassing prison of the panopticon, everyone is both prisoner and guard, as surveillance technology becomes an end in itself, “detached from any specific use.” When transhumanism overcomes the primitive constraints of nature there will no longer be any need, or place, for the distinction between public and private.

When Authority Determines Truth

IN OCTOBER 1948, THE USSR'S CENTRAL Committee issued "The Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature," Stalin's comprehensive solution to the Soviet Union's infrastructure, transportation, and agricultural challenges after World War II. A key player in this tragedy—which, though hardly the worst, was perhaps the most hubristic episode in Soviet history—was Trofim Lysenko, whose ideas had been officially promulgated in various ways since the 1930s. An agronomist and amateur geneticist, Lysenko convinced Stalin that plants could be "educated" to conform with Marxist dogma, altering their natures—i.e., their genetic traits—to meet the needs of the state. Stalin was only too happy to hear that "political truth," as revealed in the unfolding of the historical dialectic, could command nature. This conceit, however, neither originated nor dissolved with the Soviet Union.

If Niccolò Machiavelli was, as Leo Strauss argued, the founder of the modern world, one could say that the one who perpetuated this new political order by giving it a religion was Francis Bacon. The religion Bacon preached, of course, was science. Both Kheriaty and Desmet want to defend genuine, modern science, which is objective, modest, and reasonable, from scientism, which isn't. But we may wonder if this is a distinction without a difference, and whether the inclination to reductionist materialism (as well as technological utopianism) was present from the beginning of the modern project.

Bacon's approach to science is premised on the need to interrogate and "vex" nature to uncover her secrets. He suggests in *The Advancement of Learning* that with diligent effort future scientists might "become the instruments and dispensers" of "prolonging and renewing the life of man." Bacon explains his general method in *Sylva Sylvarum*: when perceiving some unseen action at work, we must look for the "pneumatics" found "in all tangible bodies," and must not be distracted by what the classical philosophers vaguely called "virtues and qualities." True causes, Bacon insists, are "infinitely material in nature. For spirits are nothing else but a natural body." Then, with an astounding string of technical words which perfectly capture the direction and tone of his enterprise, he declares that the invisible pneumatics

are in all tangible bodies whatsoever, more or less; and they are never (almost) at rest: and from them, and their motions, principally proceed arefaction, colliquation, concoction, maturation,

putrefaction, vivification, and most of the effects of nature.

Can we not see here the spirit of Harari's transhumanism, and the WEF's goal of expedited evolution? In *The Great Instauration*, Bacon announces a goal that today would earn him a grant from the Gates Foundation: "I am laboring to lay the foundation not of any sect or doctrine, but of human utility and power."

Consider in this light a statement Kheriaty quotes by the Australian Medical Indemnity Protection Society, which issues the malpractice insurance necessary for an Australian medical license: "Health practitioners are obliged to ensure their views are consistent with public health messaging.... Views expressed which *may be consistent with evidence-based material may not necessarily be consistent with public health messaging*" (emphasis added). As Kheriaty notes, "evidence-based material" means peer-reviewed research—which used to be the stan-

The end of history will meet the end of science in the last war, the war waged by mankind in a final, desperate attempt to create meaning out of, and into, nothing.

dard for legitimate science. But the pandemic revealed that the spirit of Lysenko and Bacon is alive and well: power or authority, not nature, determines scientific truth. To practice medicine in Australia post-COVID means pledging obedience to "public health messaging"—that is, to the diktats of the establishment bureaucracy. The Australian guidance is only slightly more explicit than similar language promulgated by the Federation of State Medical Boards in the U.S., which warned (Kheriaty quoting again): "Physicians who generate and spread COVID-19 vaccine misinformation or disinformation are risking disciplinary action," which may include "the suspension or revocation of their medical license." Millions starved in Soviet Russia in compliance with the official edicts for growing wheat and potatoes. We don't yet know, and probably never will, how many have died because of official rules about COVID "misinformation."

Let me note one regrettable omission in Kheriaty's book: gender reassignment therapies. Especially with regard to children, this

must surely be the most alarming aspect of the Left's neo-Lysenkoism. Just as the Soviet Central Committee decreed that the nature of plants could be made to conform to the wishes of the party, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—in a list of resources for "Gender-Affirming Care and Young People"—explains that gender identity is a subjective "experience," and "not always congruent with biological sex."

But what happens when nature does not yield as submissively as we would like?

Disappointed Hopes and New Anxieties

JOHN MILTON USED THE TERM "PANDEMONIUM" for the great hall of "all demons" (*pan daimon*) that he describes at the end of Book I of *Paradise Lost*. Over time, Milton's term for Satan's home base in his revolt against God came to be synonymous with chaos and violent disorder.

Whereas Kheriaty's *The New Abnormal* warns of a self-perpetuating system of mutual surveillance and control, Desmet's *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* points to a similar danger, but sees a somewhat different pattern: a series of popular panics paving the way for a tyranny promising to assuage people's fear, but which collapses in predictable self-destruction. The central concept developed in Desmet's fascinating book is mass hypnosis or mass hysteria, though he invariably uses the more abstruse term "mass formation" psychosis. Though he has popularized that phrase, Desmet takes pains to insist that he did not invent it. "Mass formation" or "crowd formation" psychosis was discussed many times in clinical psychology research throughout the 20th century, and was even used by Sigmund Freud. Desmet prefers this term, reasonably enough, because it allows him to lay out his arguments without the preconceptions readers might bring to words like "hypnosis" or "hysteria." Desmet argues that the extraordinary distress, irrationality, and overreactions the world witnessed in response to the COVID pandemic emerged from a deep psychological disorder at the heart of the modern project. Indeed, mass formation psychosis "is the logical consequence of mechanistic thinking and the delusional belief in the omnipotence of human rationality." Moreover, the instigation and manipulation of this psychosis forms the basis of a totalitarianism that is "the defining feature of our Enlightenment tradition."

In the classical or pre-modern understanding, science was simply knowledge, and fully aware of its own limits. But with the modern project launched by Machiavelli, Bacon, René Descartes, and Thomas Hobbes, the principles



governing physical reality came to be understood through a technical *method*, leading to the belief that we can achieve mastery over nature. Science then became an ideology, which Desmet sees as the source of our spiritual and political discontents. “The relief of man’s estate,” to use Bacon’s famous phrase, was intended to liberate us from labor, suffering, the penalties of vice, and even death. Yet technology keeps deferring its final payoff of leisurely bliss. Indeed, in many ways, modern man’s famous alienation and existential angst seem to arise from the very achievements that were supposed to make us happy. As Desmet writes, “How is it that the Enlightenment tradition led to more fear and insecurity and, eventually, hyper-strict morality? Didn’t it explicitly aim at the opposite?” His book seeks to show that the

Enlightenment tradition, the ideology of reason, was a persistent attempt to squeeze life into logic and theories. It placed all symbolism, mysticism, fiction, and poetry secondary. But this is exactly the kind of discourse that allows us the ability to respond to the uncertainty of life.... The more we attempt to eliminate the fear and uncertainty through rationality and rules, the more we collide with failure.

In the face of that failure, people turn to “the absolute master—the totalitarian leader” who “provides direction to take the burden of freedom and the associated insecurity off their shoulders.” But as long as the mechanistic delusion remains, the leaders can only identify “new objects of anxiety” and introduce “new measures to destroy such objects.” “Mass formation and totalitarianism invariably destroy themselves by way of logical necessity. They are intrinsically self-destructive.” The apparently insurmountable difficulty we face in trying to break out of this framework is the ongoing progress of technology itself. As long as science continues to offer new medical breakthroughs, better gadgets, and more titillating entertainment, the cycle of disappointed hopes and new anxieties will continue.

It is difficult to capture all the arresting insights of Desmet’s rewarding book, which includes the startling claim that tyrannical leaders are, very often, *themselves* captive to the mass formation psychosis they seize on. This is not so surprising if we recall the earlier observation from Foucault that modern bureaucratic despotism enslaves the rulers and the ruled alike. Hannah Arendt, on whom Desmet draws heavily, made a similar observation in 1969, when she limned the idea of anonymous totalitarianism, a tyranny with-

out tyrants. Without going into any more detail, let me note that Desmet is an articulate, compelling speaker, and for readers who are interested in learning more about his views I recommend the lively video—easily located on YouTube—of his interview with Tucker Carlson in August 2022.

As valuable as Desmet’s analysis is, however, there are other elements of our political crisis—including key aspects of the leftist or woke ideology—that simply can’t be characterized as mechanistic thinking, or products of runaway scientism. Consider, in particular, the primitive tribalism focused on racial and ethnic identity, which is arguably wokeism’s central dogma. Although Desmet is correct that a fanatical faith in the technological conquest of nature ultimately descends into anti-rationalism, one can only understand this phenomenon adequately by examining (in a way he does not) the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, the most trenchant critics of modern liberalism and science. Likewise, Desmet recognizes the hole in the soul created by modern society and sees mass formation as a response to this psychic crisis, but he does not fully appreciate the way woke religiosity, and mass formation itself, reflect a deep, innate longing for “natural” political life, including the civic piety of the ancient city. Desmet’s invaluable book, while essential to understanding one key ingredient of our contemporary crisis, requires supplementary analysis to appreciate the other moral, political, and philosophical dimensions of the crisis.

The Other Side of Death

SCOTT ATLAS ENDS *A PLAGUE UPON Our Houses* with an emphatic plea for public accountability: “The nation still awaits any indication that there will be a full investigation into the origin of the deadly virus, even if it uncovers potential corruption in our nation’s top science agencies and public health leaders. The world is owed full exposure without delay.” This question of responsibility, of how we account for cause and effect in our moral and political life, is the deepest root of the themes discussed here.

The success of transhumanism—a biogenetic regime of indefinitely malleable and repairable bodies—will mean the culmination of Bacon’s dream of immortality. The internal logic of that project suggests it will not be satisfying. Having overcome death, mankind will have no more excuses for the unhappiness found in liberation from all restraints, no more shelter from the truth of nihilistic freedom. Naked we were in the Garden, and to nakedness we shall return—but not to

paradise, or innocence. Eternal *existence* is not eternal life. Facing the curse of everlasting bodies with dead souls, mankind—I predict—will deploy technology for one final challenge, which was implicit from the beginning: the conquest of nature for the relief of man’s agony. The end of history will meet the end of science in the last war, the war waged by mankind in a final, desperate attempt to create meaning out of, and into, nothing. *Ex nihilo ad nihilum*. The triumph of transhumanism will end with mankind’s war to extinguish itself by obliterating the earth.

Whether this turns out to be our fate depends in part on a question Plato asked more than two millennia ago: was Socrates right to abandon materialism in his search for the cause of things? The *Phaedo*, which is set after Socrates’ trial and just before his death, recounts his turn away from natural science and toward the realm of opinion. This is where *political* philosophy emerges as the core of philosophy. The philosopher, says Socrates, is courageous, particularly in the face of death, because he is not unreasonably attached to his body as if he were no more than a body.

An adequate response to the pandemic crisis would mean holding people responsible. But it would also mean recovering a deeper understanding of the moral and metaphysical basis of responsibility—the fearful and salvific truth that the cause of our actions rests not in science nor in history but, at least in part, in our souls. Even if we accept that such freedom remains possible, it would only mean that failure is as much a possibility as success. The grim pictures presented by Mattias Desmet and Aaron Kheriaty suggest that we are unlikely to avert *both* the pandemonium and the panopticon. Yet perhaps long odds are precisely what we need. Centuries of false hopes and hubris, after all, are what got us here. If we manage to recover our humanity at all, that recovery will be long and difficult, slow and painful. We may only succeed in the way that Socratic philosophy reveals the good, in bits and pieces. And yet, could this be for the best? The modern project aimed to make life easy, safe, and comfortable; to make courage unnecessary. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle named courage as the first of the virtues. If philosophy means learning how to die, then courage could also be the last virtue, morally and perhaps even historically.

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