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*From Transcendence to Obsolescence:
A Route Map*

ALTHOUGH the age-old problem of the conflict between body and mind that has tortured philosophers from Plato to Kant and obsessed the Church from Augustine to Pope Paul has been resolved in modern philosophical thinking by the elimination of “mind” as an autonomous entity, the conflict would appear to have returned again to haunt us in a new guise. The idealized emphasis on “rational” in the concept of man as the rational animal which characterized Platonic-Christian thought for two millennia had generally been the product of man’s sense of his own physical weakness, his knowledge that Nature could not be tamed or bent to his own will. In lieu of the ability to mold Nature to serve his own ends, man had chosen to extol and mythify that side of his being that seemed to transcend Nature by inhabiting universes of thought that Nature could not naysay. The triumphs of intellect and imagination by thinkers and artists, and the heroic transcending of the body by saints and martyrs who said “No” to their earthborn limitations, provided for centuries the consolations of a victory that could be obtained not by winning the battle but by changing the battlegrounds.

In the course of human history until the twentieth century there was never any serious likelihood that man could win the body-mind battle on the field of the body. If one found that it was necessary to produce ten children in order to insure the survival of five, if one could be swept away by plagues that killed hundreds of thousands, if one lost one’s teeth by thirty, could not be certain of a food supply for more than a few days, carted one’s own excrements out to the fields or emptied chamberpots out the window, one could hardly come to believe (despite man’s fantastic ability to believe almost anything) that one’s ideal self would ever stand

forth on the field of the body, in the natural world. Nature was indeed the enemy, whom one propitiated in the forms of gods and goddesses or saints and martyrs, but who would finally do one in en route to one's *true* home, Abraham's bosom. Good sense taught that it was pointless to waste what little life one did have in a quarrel with the cruelty of Nature when the rational solution could only have been to accept a final repose in the kindness of God. If man was indeed made in the image of God, then it was reasonable to assume that only God could fully appreciate "man's unconquerable mind," while a just assessment of reality required that the field of the body be given up—as how could one do otherwise?—to Nature.

The exaltation of religious figures during all of Hebrew-Christian history prior to modern times was an acknowledgement that saints, prophets, priests, and nuns more fully embodied man's spiritual ideals than most people and that an approximation to spiritual perfection, however difficult, was a more realistic goal than that of bodily self-sufficiency or domination over Nature. The fascination with the fall of heroes in history and fiction involved a painful recognition that nothing physical could endure, not merely in the obvious sense that everything created must inevitably die but that everything created can barely stay alive. The philosophy of *carpe diem*—make your sun run fast if you can't make it stand still, to echo Marvell—was never a prevailing one. For most people, the fear of human fragility and a lack of substantial power against the material world made profound self-confidence a luxury only for kings, who themselves derived their power from God. For others, realism required an acceptance of the Divine will: existence was a gift and the creature had no rights. All was grace.

But by the eighteenth century, the rise of industrialism in the West was accompanied by a decline of religion that cannot be seen as an accidental concurrence. And from then on the trend accelerates. As the average man becomes more enabled to live in comfortable houses that resist the elements, to escape most of the childhood diseases that had made fecundity a virtue, to preserve his teeth into middle or old age, to store food for weeks, months, or years ahead, to communicate rapidly through time and space, to move long distances with ease, to dispose of his excrements through indoor plumbing that makes them all magically vanish in a trice, his perception of Nature undergoes a startling alteration. No longer does Nature seem quite so red in tooth and claw; for a man is much less likely now to perish from the heat or cold, to starve for want of food; his formerly intolerable dependency on the caprices of Nature is no longer so

gross; his relation to the other animals and to the vegetable creation appears thickly veiled—by air conditioning, frozen foods, washing machines, detergents, automobiles, electric blankets, and power lawnmowers. And most startling of all, his need for transcendence seems to fade away. For what, after all, is so dreadfully unpleasant about contemporary Western middle-class life that it needs to be transcended? Yes, of course, traffic jams on the freeways are a strain and suburban life can be parodied, but on the scale of things, in relation to man's historical life on earth, the ills of suburbia are not so drastic as to encourage an unduly hasty shuffling off of this mortal coil.

It has been said again and again that modern Western man's comfortable life amidst the conveniences of technology has caused him to suffer a spiritual death, to feel alienated, empty, without purpose and direction. And that may very well be the case. But nevertheless a radical distinction must be made: the need for transcendence experienced by most human beings prior to modern times was a very different one from that which is claimed to exist today. It is not likely that the human race before our time, despite its life dominated by religions and churches and yearnings for transcendence, was a jot more spiritualized than it is today. For if the connection between the growth of industry and the decline of religion is a real one, the earlier spiritual longings appear as an escape from man's vulnerable position in his battle with Nature. It was not that man's aesthetic sensitivities to the Idea of the Good and the Idea of the Beautiful were any more developed in past history; rather, man's need to escape from an intolerable physical life was infinitely greater than ours, for our physical lives are not very oppressive. That "other," "better" world offered by religion could not have been *worse* than the "real" one, even in the duties that it required on earth, and as a mere fantasy it offered extreme gratification. When I speak of man's previous need for transcendence over the insupportable conditions of physical life, I do not refer to the needs of great creative people—artists, thinkers, craftsmen—who by their very temperaments can never be satisfied with any status quo. I speak of the masses of people whose spiritual lives were necessary to make their physical lives endurable and who, had choice been possible, would certainly have preferred physical comforts over spirituality. This situation does not for the most part now exist: television and toilets have made the need for God supererogatory. Western man does not generally live in fear of Nature, except when earthquakes or cancer strike, for he is mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully con-

cealed by modern technology. Almost every deprivation has its accessible remedy, whether hunger, cold, illness, or mere distance; and there is rarely a need, except at a few moments during one's lifetime, to go crying either to papa or to God the Father.

If a need for transcendence does exist today, a question that I am not here pursuing, it is in any case not the same need that formerly was so widespread. It is a need based on satiety and not on deprivation, and it does not seek a haven in another world but rather a more beautiful version of this one. What I *am* concerned to examine here is what has happened as a result of the Industrial Revolution to man's conception of his relationship with Nature and what has become the present form of the old mind-body duality.

To the average child of the United States in the present day Nature is indeed a great mystery, not insofar as it is incomprehensible but insofar as it is virtually nonexistent to his perceptions. Not only do most children obtain without delay the nurturing commodities for a satisfied bodily life, but they are rarely in a position to experience a connection between the commodity that fills their need and its natural source. "Meat" consists of red geometrical shapes obtained in plastic packages at the supermarket, whose relationship to animals is obscure if not wholly invisible. Houses are heated by moving a thermostat and clothes are washed by putting them into a washing machine. Even the child's most primitive natural functions are minimally in evidence and it is not surprising that various psychological problems turn up later on in life when man's sensual nature has in some way been concealed at every point by technology. (I recall a student who once remarked that she had no desire to venture out into the country to "enjoy Nature" when she could see all the trees she wanted on color TV.)

The reader should be assured that I am not engaged in presenting these observations in an effort to make the familiar attack on "technology." I have no personal objections to meat in plastic containers or flush toilets and air conditioning. In fact, I like them very much. I have no desire to hunt animals, to chop down trees for firewood, to use an outhouse, or to have smallpox. I have no interest in a "return to Nature," which strikes me as an especially decadent form of aestheticism, like an adult of forty pretending to have the innocence of a child. My consciousness as a person living at a particular stage of history cannot be wiped away by a decision to perform a Marie Antoinette. I would much prefer

to listen to music or work in the garden than to struggle for survival. I have presented a picture of a hypothetical child who sees no relation between the red glob in the plastic carton and the animal from which it came, not to attack either technology or modern techniques of child raising. What I am trying to do is to present a picture of man's current relation to Nature.

With Nature barely in evidence and man's physical needs satisfied beyond what could have been imagined one hundred years ago, man's mind would appear to have arrived at a state of altogether new autonomy and independence—not this time the independence of a mind that has given up all hope of dominating Nature and satisfying the flesh and therefore seeking in desperation a haven in Abraham's bosom; rather, this time, a mind so assured of its domination of Nature and its capacity to satisfy the flesh that it seems to be borne up on its own engine of Will, cut off from any nurturing roots in the earth. Mind, now soaring not on wings of fear but on sturdy pinions of volition, can say to Nature, "*Retro Satbanas!*" Do not presume, it would say, to interfere with my self-determination, for if you do, I will flip on the air conditioning, switch on the electronic air cleaner, swallow down the antibiotics, spread on the weed killer, inject the flu vaccine, fill up the gas tank.

But while all of this newfound mental assurance has been building up, when man has finally found a home in the world, when he feels he is lord of all he surveys, when he no longer needs to have his spirit stroked by the right hand of God—a new "trouble" (which I put in quotation marks because it is thought by some to be purely imaginary) rears its ugly head: man's nurturing environment threatens to stop nurturing and to start killing.

One opens the newspaper each day to find four or five articles whose burden is that pesticides contaminate the food of farm animals in Michigan; Kepone is being dumped in waterways, asbestos fibers in Lake Superior; poison gases render uninhabitable a village in Italy; the Parthenon is decaying faster in ten years than in the previous thousand because of automobile exhausts; ozone and sulfur dioxide increase mortality rates in Chicago and Los Angeles.

Although we had been taught in our high-school science classes for decades that neither matter nor energy could be created or destroyed, suddenly it dawns upon someone that the refuse being dumped into the oceans and atmosphere for years and years in ever-increasing quantities

does not "go away." Where was it supposed to go? Suddenly, the human race has been put into the position of affluent teen-agers who dump beer cans from their moving sportscar and then drive off. The cans appear to have vanished, but no, there they are, astoundingly enough, rolling around the neighborhood where they had been dumped. And when the teen-agers arrive home, they find other beer cans dumped by other teen-agers. The neighborhood is a place of beer cans; the ocean a place of toxic effluents; the sky is vaporized garbage. And to add insult to injury, man's unconquerable mind turns out to have a mouth, through which it is fed; and worse still, it is being fed garbage. Its own!

Before continuing, let us stop for a moment to see where we have been: in the early days, man had no power over Nature and turned, instead, to his mind and its gods for consolation. Meanwhile, his mind produces a technology that enables his body to be as strong as the gods, rendering the gods superfluous and putting Nature in a cage. Then it appears that there is no Nature and that man has produced virtually everything out of his own ingenuity and it can be bought in a supermarket or a discount store, wrapped in plastic. By now, man is scarcely aware that he is eating animals and producing wastes or that the animals come from somewhere and the wastes are headed somewhere. This "somewhere" turns out to be, practically speaking, a finite world whose basic components cannot be created or destroyed although (and here is the shocker) they can be turned into forms that are unusable by man. As more and more of these basic materials are rendered unusable by man, it becomes apparent that man has failed to see that now, as in the past, the roots of his being are in the earth; and he has failed to see this because Nature, whose effects on man were formerly *immediate*, is now *mediated* by technology so that it appears that technology and not Nature is actually responsible for everything. This has given to man a sense that he mentally and voluntarily determines the ground of his own existence and that his body is almost a dispensable adjunct of his being. This is modern man's own peculiar mythology: The Myth of Voluntary Omnipotence. It is the contemporary form of the Faust legend, a legend which in all of its variants ends the same way.

Nowhere is this modern version of the Faust myth so apparent as in the words of industrial corporations who attack the basic conception of environmental protection. If the classic flaw of the tragic hero is overweening pride and a refusal to acknowledge his own finitude, the contemporary Faustian attitude is archetypically struck in the advertise-

ments of steel and oil companies protesting that "stagnation is the worst form of pollution." The current terminology of doublespeak can be seen in the modish word "trade-offs," a concept which would admirably serve as the basis for present-day tragic drama. One would suppose from such talk that modern industrial corporations, with their fears of economic stagnation and their estimate of clean air as an unaffordable economic luxury, were Shelleyan Prometheuses, defending man's sublime aspirations in the face of a tyrannical and boorish Zeus. *Sic itur ad astra*, indeed!

The continual appearance of the concept of "trade-offs," in which one sacrifices the "luxury" of an uncontaminated environment in order to permit economic "progress," brings to my mind a cartoon that I saw years ago, before anybody ever heard of the environment: two emaciated and threadbare prisoners are bound with manacles and pedicles to the middle of a wall about four stories high in an immense featureless white room. Flailing upon the wall, about two stories above the ground, one enfeebled prisoner says to the other, "Now here's my plan. . . ." Is this not an emblem of modern man? Oblivious of his roots in the earth or unwilling to acknowledge them, intent only upon the desires of his unconquerable mind, he refuses to see that his well-nurtured body and Faustian will are connected by fine tubes—a "life-support system," if you wish—to the earth. Can those Faustian thoughts continue without a narrowly prescribed nutriment for the body, a nutriment prescribed not by that Faustian mind itself but by a biological determination that has been *given* rather than *chosen*? Are not the limitations once described as the will of God and as "grace" as much limitations now as they have ever been in the past? Unless man can create himself, unless he can determine his own existential nature, how can he talk—absurdly, madly, derangedly—about "trade-offs" with the environment or "negotiations" with Nature? Can one negotiate with the *données* of human existence? Even a Promethean Sisyphus needs food to push his rock.

I recently had occasion to publish two essays describing the traumatic effects which polluted air has had upon my wife and me during the past six years, one of my major points being that we are not "cardiac and respiratory patients" but normally healthy people whose lives have been radically altered by industrial emissions since we came to live in the Chicago area. One of these essays, a brief account of our experiences that appeared in the *New York Times* and was subsequently reprinted in other newspapers, brought me a number of interesting and varied responses from readers. A letter that particularly struck me read as follows:

Dear Sir:

Since all of the environmentalists who worry about pollution are also consumers of the products of these belching plants (the automobile for instance by which you reach your farm), what IS the answer? Do we cut off our noses to spite our faces? Do we destroy our economy: eliminate many necessities of life; go back to living in tents for the sake of clean air? The answers are complex.

This was a profoundly disturbing letter. The writer was by no means insensitive to the problems of our time; she saw that a complex dilemma is involved; and she was obviously very concerned about the entire affair. Yet her expression "for the sake of clean air" is a familiar one and reveals that the heart of the problem has not been grasped. For when she asks, "Do we eliminate many of the necessities of life for the sake of clean air?" one wants to know: what are the necessities of life in comparison with which clean air cannot be regarded as a necessity? But to ask this is to raise a purely rhetorical question, for the problem is really an ontological and not an ecological one.

When the writer refers to the "necessities of life" one must ask what it is that she means by *life*, and I am proposing that by "life" she means her desires and her will; by the "economy" and "necessities" she means those things which support her mind's conception of itself. There is not a body in sight. She sees steps taken to preserve the environment as actions "for the sake of" clean air. She does not see them as "for the sake of" her own biological existence. *Somehow*, she is alive: she eats food, drinks water, breathes air, but she does not see these actions as *grounds of life*; rather, they are acts that *coincide* with her life, her life being her thoughts and wishes. The purity of the elements that make her life possible is not seen as a condition of existence. Instead, the economy, the "necessities" and not "living in tents" are what matter. *That* is life. Her existence on earth somehow takes care of itself and if it does take care of itself, then why sacrifice the "necessities" of life "for the sake of" the superfluities, like "clean air"?

The pattern of thought which this letter reflects becomes clearer if we make some substitutions: "Do we eliminate necessities of life for the sake of clean air?" could equally well be presented as "Do we give up smoking for the sake of avoiding lung cancer?" since smoking occupies the role (for those who feel they must smoke) of a necessity of life and "avoiding lung cancer" occupies the position of "for the sake of clean

air." However, "avoiding lung cancer" can be more clearly stated as "remaining alive," which would then yield the question: "Do we give up smoking for the sake of remaining alive?" And in a final transformation we may obtain: "Do we give up the necessities of life for the sake of remaining alive?" I offer that as the paradigmatic question behind all of the similar ones that people ask. On the surface, we are faced with a paradox: how can someone ask whether it is necessary to give up a condition of life in order to remain alive? But the paradox evaporates when we realize that the "necessity" is no necessity at all, from the viewpoint of our biological existence. Rather, the "necessity" (smoking, the present economy, etc.) is a mental stance, a wish, that in fact is inimical to the survival of the body that would make it possible to continue to fulfill the wish.

We are able to see that this is a variant of the traditional mind-body problem, the view here being that man is his mind, that man is his thoughts and wishes. But man's sublime mind (not to mention the very unsublime wishes described above), while it may wander at will through the universe and be connected to the heavens at one end, is connected at the other to the earth. As free as that mind may appear in its wanderings, thoughts rely on calories, because they are fueled by the same metabolic processes that make all other human activities possible. A thought may have no weight and take up no space, but it exists as part of a stream of consciousness that is made possible by food, air, and water. Every moment of man's existence as a human being is dependent upon a continuous burning up of energy, his classical tragic conflict consisting of a mind that is capable of envisioning modes of existence that are not supportable by a human engine thusly fueled. The confidence of Oedipus that he could outwit causation provides the model for the present environmental dilemma. But there is little that is new about this dilemma besides its peculiarly contemporary terms. The struggle between the "necessities of modern life" and the "environment" is the age-old struggle between the individual will and the universe, the substance, in other words, of classical tragedy.

Thus "the problem of the environment," which many people persist in viewing as a peripheral arabesque drawn around the "important" concerns of human life, must ultimately be seen as a central philosophic and ontological question about the self-definition of contemporary man. For all one's admiration of man's unconquerable mind and its Faustian aspirations, that mind would seem to be eminently conquerable, particularly by itself. It is, after all, a very frail vessel, floating upon a bloodstream

that is easily contaminated by every passing impurity: alcohol, nicotine, sulfur dioxide, ozone, Kepone, DDT, sodium nitrite, red dye #2—the list appears endless. As much as at any time in the past, however, man's relationship with Nature is nonnegotiable. Perhaps within a certain narrow range man's constitution is susceptible to adaptation, but in the light of the innumerable and arbitrary concurrences that make human life possible, man's adaptability seems very limited indeed. In the past, man's Faustian aspirations were seen against the background of his terrifying weakness in the face of Nature. Today, man's Faustian posturings take place against a background of arrogant, shocking, and suicidal disregard of his roots in the earth.