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# Cultural Conservative Policy Insights

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The Counterfeits of Transcendence

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In a previous policy insight, entitled "Cultural Conservatism and Transcendent Norms," it was argued that a high understanding of right and wrong is implicit in the stance of cultural conservatives.

The present essay takes the argument a step further. It deals with the problems of moral relativism, because the relativist position is often based on ideas about culture. Challenging those ideas will expose the dangers which emerge when transcendence is misallocated to sheer "human consciousness," or to the alleged future of our consciousness, and when transcendent right and wrong are thereby mismanaged. In the hands of cultural radicals, the mismanagement is common and multifarious.

To pursue these topics, we should begin with a brief review of what moral norms are, how they can be transcendent, and on what levels.

Moral norms are statements of what is right and wrong. They acquire transcendence by being true to something transcendent. 'Transcendent' means going beyond or rising above something. Depending on what this "something" is, there are different levels or degrees of transcendence. In the case of moral norms, I distinguished five such levels in the previous policy insight, like so many rungs on a ladder. They are as follows.

## The Ladder in Review

Bottom rung: if moral norms are true at all, to anything, then right and wrong transcend our decisions and "commitments." The alternative to standing on this rung is ethical nihilism.

Second rung: if moral norms are true to a public standard, then right and wrong transcend our personal beliefs. The alternative to climbing onto this rung is personal relativism.

Third rung: if moral norms are true to goods higher in human beings than their genes, and more deep-seated than class labels and citizenship papers, then right and wrong transcend racial, juridical, and economic divisions. The alternative to mounting this rung is a racist, nationalist, or Marxist form of tribalism.

Fourth rung: if moral norms are true to goods that are not reducible to the pains, pleasures, and consequences occurring in a given set of circumstances, then right and wrong transcend the "situation" and situational calculations of "utility." The alternative to reaching this rung is some form of situation ethics or consequentialism.

Top rung: if moral norms are true to the goods of human nature or to those present in the Mind of God, then right and wrong transcend all cultures and ideologies. The alternative? We shall see.

### Shoots and Ladders

This ladder of transcendence brings out a crucial difference between cultural conservatives and cultural radicals. Many radicals *seem* to stand on the top rung, with talk of being in "harmony with nature," or with talk of bearing "prophetic witness" to God, as in liberation theology. But it quickly turns out that neither sort of talk is serious.

"Nature" is malleable in their view with enough pounding (perhaps by artillery), and God takes sides against the bourgeoisie.

Or else "nature" becomes a biospherical victim, raped by Western males, and "God" dissolves into New Age pantheism.

In either case, 'nature' and 'God' cease to be serious terms pointing us away from changeable contingency, toward the permanent things. They become vacuous terms, empty slots waiting to be filled with fashionable content.

In short, cultural radicals tend to jump off the top rung and slide down curvaceous shoots. One shoot descends through a jaundiced cultural relativism (every culture's ethic is good, it seems, except that of the West), stopping at Marxist tribalism. Another shoot starts with God, but He is "immanentized," turned into the inner voice of private conscience; so the shoot swirls down to personal relativism. A third, starting with faith denatured into "commitment," is an express shoot to nihilism. At the end of all the shoots, Right and Wrong are vulnerable to ideological reassessment.

Cultural conservatives, by contrast, are grateful for the intellectual achievements of the West. Implicit in this gratitude is some insight, at least, into the wisdom of climbing the ladder. Following Socrates, who left the Sophists behind on the bottom rungs, or following Moses, who left behind the "utilities" of Egypt, cultural conservatives cluster on the top rungs and stay there. We affirm that moral norms do transcend private subjectivity, tribal boundaries, class distinctions, transient situations, calculations of utility, and ideological partisanship.

Cultures and their relativities, however, are a more complicated topic. Many aspects of human action do vary from culture to culture. We do not argue for the kind of pan-human uniformism which would make Greek statues "the" right kind to make, or European parliamentary democracy "the" right kind of government. Our concern in this essay is solely with relativism as a thesis about the truth or soundness of moral norms, which are different from aesthetic standards and political beliefs. In this precisely moral form, cultural relativism will be very unattractive to cultural conservatives. Let us see why.

### The Ugly Relativist

As a popular phenomenon, cultural relativism is just like personal relativism: a mushy reluctance to be "judgmental" about other people. It rarely amounts to a consistent or thought-out position. It retreats when confronted with dreadful persons ("How about Hitler?"), and it backs away from ghastly cultures. How about the Aztec sacrifices?

The retreat is usually to life-style issues, especially sexual mores. But here again, private acts have public consequences, and the boundaries of the "life-style" terrain are very elusive.

In the horn of Africa, for example, is female circumcision a life-style issue or a public-health issue? In many cultures the infanticide of unwanted children is conventionally permitted, usually by exposure; if the unwanted babies are almost entirely girls, is the conventional permission a life-style issue or an oppression-of-women issue? The same must be asked about concubinage and the institution of the harem. Millions of men are told by their culture that a wife is obliged to "screw upon demand" (as Mrs. Friedan demurely puts it). Is the obligation sound in those cultures (*pace* Betty), being a relativity of life-style, or is it an injustice?

Setting aside mushy tendencies, then, which retreat on an ad-hoc basis when attacked by WHO or NOW, we can see what a thought-through and consistent cultural relativism will need to allege in ethics. It will need to say that our standards of injustice or public health are just that: *our* standards. Western standards. The Nubians have their own standards, which are just as valid from their point of view as ours are from ours. What goes on between Saudi men and women is regulated by *their* culture, not by ours, and so we have no standing to criticise. In a word: what is good or bad, right or wrong, varies with each culture according to its own principles; no such ethic is more true than another, and no culture can be judged or criticised by principles other than its own.

No one doubts that different cultures diversify human beings in fairly deep-seated ways. Cultures give diverse answers to the meaning of life and diverse meanings to the experiences of life. Hence they yield diverse moral norms for the conduct of life. No one doubts, either, that inside each culture there tends to be a coherence between its norms and its world-view. The question, rather, is whether these norms can be equally sound: whether it can be the case, somehow, that theirs are sound for them while ours are sound for us. This is where the relativistic thesis will require a certain relentlessness. Watch.

Diseases are not likely to change their behavior when they cross cultural borders. Whether female circumcision increases the risks of these diseases is just a matter of medical fact. If it does increase the risk, then the status of female circumcision as a public health issue is also a matter of fact, one would think. So, given that the Nubians themselves prefer health over disease, how *can* it be the case that their norms (requiring such circumcision) are "just as true" for them as ours are for us? Don't they catch the diseases?

Similarly, there are psychological facts about the growth of a mature, self-reliant person. If this is a good sort of person to be, when you are an American female, why isn't it a good sort to be when you are a Saudi female? If certain marital arrangements would be unjust in New Jersey, because they frustrate a woman's potential for personal growth, then why aren't they unjust in Riyadh? Do the women there flourish on stultification?

Notice, please, that the cultural relativist is not simply telling us to think twice about our conceptions of justice and public health, in the light of other people's experiences. He does not tolerate a sophisticated universalism any more than he tolerates a crude one, because both are non-relative. He requires us to decide that the Nilotic cultures have their own concepts of medicine and disease, their own way of drawing the line between life-style and public health, and that their norms, consonant with their own concepts, are just as valid for them as ours are for us. Ditto for the Saudis and sexism.

If we object on the ground that medical and psychological facts are objective, the relativist tells us that "objectivity" is a Western concept. He is, in a word, relentless.

It used to seem less costly to be a relativist. At the turn of the century, his major enemy was the Protestant missionary. He could argue that anthropologically important cultures were threatened with extinction at the hands of small-minded mission boards. And he had the support of positivism. Late or "critical" positivism tightened the seal between the realms of fact and value; it exalted science and shielded every exotic "ethic" from embarrassment by science.

These comfortable conditions no longer obtain. Positivism is dead in philosophy, so that the facts are free again to show their moral relevance. Religion is no longer the primary factor bringing Westerners into the Third World. The enemies a relativist has to face today are medical doctors and international experts in economic development. Against them an ethical relativist has a hard time holding his ground except by dire conceptual maneuvers. He has to tame down the very concepts of health, development, justice, prosperity — and even factuality. They have to be domesticated as "our" concepts, so that they will cower back into safe cages marked "Western." The relativist is driven on relentlessly from his ethical relativism to a more general, conceptual relativism.

At its full extremity, this taming of the true amounts to saying that each culturally distinct segment of humanity lives in its own reality. Equivalently, it amounts to saying that a culture not only contains a distinctive vision of the world but somehow produces a world to match the vision.

Sheer human consciousness, in other words, in its culturally conditioned diversity of forms, is alleged to "transcend" the world of mere factuality. Moral norms are then assumed to be true to some such form of consciousness, and the counterfeit transcendence given to it accrues to them. Right and wrong are thus made to "transcend" such mere matters of fact as the epidemiology of AIDS.

This remarkable loss of grip on reality clarifies the difference between what the cultural relativist is saying and what a moderate moral pluralist might say.

A moral pluralist is someone who divides morality into two parts: the basic principles and the details. He is willing to recognize that there are certain basic norms which are cross-culturally valid (such as respect for human life, the honoring of commitments, sexual self-discipline, or the like), but he says that in spelling out how to live up to these basics, cultures have developed diverse bodies of secondary norms, many of which are more-or-less equally attractive ways to concretize the basics. In other words, the status of the details will be analogous to that of traffic rules. Driving-on-the-left and driving-on-the-right are alternative ways of securing the orderliness required by some basic value, like safety to life and limb.

Now, there is plenty of room for debate with a pluralist of this kind. (One may question whether he has grasped the differences between goods, norms, and strategies to secure their observance.) But a quarrel with him is on radically different ground from a quarrel with a real relativist.

For the moderate pluralist concedes the main point which a relativist denies: namely, that there is a universal foundation for basic ethical norms, which are therefore sound and binding for any human being, whether his culture recognizes them or not. The quarrel between a traditional moralist and a moderate pluralist is over the nature and extent of these basic norms, while the quarrel of either with a relativist is over the very existence of them. As a result, a person who thinks there is evidence to support moderate pluralism should not misapply that evidence, as though it supported moral relativism.

Stating the relativist's position in its full relentlessness also sheds light on where the burden of proof lies. From the vast differences among human cultures, and from the enormous changes which have re-shaped human life over the millennia, one can easily get the impression that the burden of proof lies on those who would defend a moral universalism. How can the Neanderthals have been held to the same moral norms as we are?

Yet traditional moralists have been able to show that moral norms rest upon extremely deep-seated features of human existence, such as the inner requirements of being an intentional agent, a maker of plans, who needs physical and social immunities in order to carry

out his or her plans. Moral theorists have thus been able to show how the norms rest upon goods in which we are always striving to participate, whether we are Neanderthals, British soccer fans, or something civilized.

The norm against rape, for example, rests upon such required immunities, and upon goods we all pursue, like integrity and self-direction. So, while it is easy to see how culture can alter the conventions under which women give consent, it is hard to see how a culture could make their consent irrelevant — so that the norm against raping them would become groundless in that culture, and a contrary norm permitting rape ad-libetally would become true.

Or consider the needs of children and the goods which parents pursue in raising children. Consider the fact that we know how to produce irreversible mental retardation in a child, if we want to. We put the child into a closet, feed it through a crack, and never speak to it for the first six or seven years of its life. In our culture, anyone who treats a child in this manner is subject to criminal prosecution. So ask yourself: what could another culture have in it which would make parenting so different from our understanding, that such treatment would be morally good in that culture?

Examples of this kind, in which the demands of "human nature" are seen to set constraints on culture, could be multiplied indefinitely. In their cumulative impact, they shift the burden of proof onto the shoulders of the relativist. He has to show us what factor in the constitution of cultures is able to neutralize these constraints where morality is concerned.

This is the burden which the relativist cannot carry without resorting to dire conceptual maneuvers, in which reality itself is sacrificed, and Nubian consciousness, Saudi consciousness, or whatever, acquires a counterfeit transcendence. Cultural conservatives therefore decline to lend the relativist our aid. We refuse to pretend that reality varies according to local taste. So we cannot pretend that every culture's ethic is equally good.

### The Wrong Nature

There is a deep reason behind the allure of relativism. There is a deep-seated error about the concept of human nature which, for the last 300 years, has been driving many Western thinkers towards some form of relativism — not only the sweet "everyone is right" form we have just been talking about, but also towards ferocious forms.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, European philosophers began to assume that the term 'human nature' meant man-minus-culture. They therefore tried to imagine man in a pre-social condition, roaming solitary and inarticulate in primaevial forests. The philosophers would divide soon enough, along ideological lines. Those who pictured this pre-cultural state in favorable terms (a noble freedom, from which man fell into systems of taboo and tyranny) would split off from those who pictured it unfavorably (a rag-tag of dirty, hungry, and fear-driven wretches).

During these same centuries, the philosophers were trying to perpetuate a traditional belief about moral norms, i.e. that they were valid across cultures because they were grounded somehow on the universality of human nature. But now, if this nature was man-minus-culture, the grounding of any norms upon it became increasingly difficult to conceive. How could one conjure norms out of the solid flesh? Would norms reduce to physical limits upon the satisfaction of our appetites? If not, could one give the norms a purchase in the savage mind? Noble or nasty, could the savage enjoy "clear and distinct ideas" of right and wrong, unable only to pronounce them? Was the pre-linguistic brute a taciturn cartesian?

The absurdity of these suggestions soon sank the tradition they were meant to defend. The effort to see moral norms as "natural laws" would be abandoned, and morals would be assigned an origin in history as cultural products (as in the thought of Giambattista Vico). Morals would

then be free to vary, however, in style and content, like other cultural products. They would be free to evolve and obsolesce, like other cultural attainments. To recognize that they had in fact done so would be to assert their cultural relativity. End of story.

But it is the beginning, alas, of another story. If "human nature" was the pre-cultural brute, unimaginably alien from us in his wordless mystery, then man as we meet him in history (and in ourselves) is everywhere man-the-artifact. If that is so, then history is the factory in which Man himself is the most important product. If that is so, then it is he himself who varies, evolves, and obsolesces in ceaseless rhythms of self-construction and dismantlement; his more particular products, including his morals, being but "moments" of the larger design. They evolve through man, with man, and in man. But if that is so, then their "truth" is no more than their coherence with him at the current stage of his self-creation. Well, if that is so, man is no more subject to his morals (or to his nature) than the potter is subject to his clay. And if that is so, let us no longer be fooled! Let us take history by the throat! Let us make a New Society by conscious design, that it may yield a New Man of predesigned consciousness!

From Vico to Hegel to Marx, this series of half-truths and corny inferences, in which an industrial metaphor runs riot, has often been called *the* intellectual adventure of modern man. Unfortunately, for many of us, it hasn't only been intellectual. The people of Cambodia felt it enter their heads from a small, round muzzle.

It may seem that this adventure in self-demiurgy, marked as it is by international violence in pursuit of a largely uniform, "socialist" model of society, is poles apart from the irenic, "They're okay, we're okay" of cultural relativism. But in fact they are closely related. The socialist crusade was born from a simple rotation of relativism, from a synchronic framework, in which many valid moralities exist simultaneously, to a diachronic one, in which the valid moralities succeed one another, building upon one another, across time. The immunity of Aztec human sacrifices to outside moral criticism (in the synchronic framework) thereby becomes the immunity of Revolutionary Justice to bourgeois criticism. In the diachronic framework, the "outside" just becomes the "outmoded." The bourgeois, speaking from the standpoint of an outmoded class, has no standing to criticize. Only those who are objectively on the side of Revolution are entitled to object (but they, like believing Aztecs, won't). The present and the future thus acquire a counterfeit transcendence over the past; and streamlined moral norms, made to be true to this alleged future, "transcend" all the relics of old decency, all the moral experience of past history.

Of course, in order to pull off such a rotation, one needs a substantive philosophy of history, which tells one (allegedly) what the "meaning" of history has been at each stage, in the light of where history is "going." This illusion of insight is furnished by Hegelianism and its Marxist perversion.

These steps toward cultural relativism (and worse) are inevitable, it seems to me, where the initial step of taking "nature" as an exclusive alternative to culture (as prescinding from culture) is accepted. For, as we saw a moment ago, traditional moralists base universal norms on features that are cross-culturally valid, such as the fact that we are intentional agents, ever in pursuit of certain goods and needing certain immunities. But then, if the cross-cultural is the "natural," and the "natural" is the pre-cultural, it is easy to show that what the moralists posit is not "natural." Agents need intentions; intentions are plans; plans mean language, and language is a cultural product, culturally variable. Culture turns up at the very foundation of "natural-law" ethics, and when it does, natural-law universalism is checkmated.

But it's a fool's mate. One needn't accept the first move of the gambit. "Human nature" cannot name a pre-social state, because even the most barbaric of men could never have existed in such a state. Sociobiology has had to be invented, after all, in order to give evolutionary theory a way to cope with this enormously awkward fact: man is so ill-designed as an animal, that his success as a species is inexplicable without a culture.

Moreover, sociobiology grows out of the discovery by ethologists of instinctive behavior-patterns which cannot be explained in terms of the survival of the individual manifesting the behavior. They serve the survival of another: the young, the mate, the herd. It has thus been interesting to see what features of society could exist pre-culturally, by pure genetic programming of "social instincts." Still, there remains a quantum leap between the genetic transmission of information and its linguistic/cultural transmission. If man has non-human ancestors along a genetic line of transmission, then the "mutation" which precisely marks him off from those ancestors has got to be the coming of language and culture. Why should we start, then, with a concept of "human" nature which is worse than useless, because it fails to notice this demarcation?

Conceiving human "nature" so that it includes culture may seem like an odd idea, but in fact there is no logical or methodological problem about it. Older philosophers had understood language, culture, and social existence (at least at the family/clan level) to be constants of human existence, their presence invariant across the species, and hence to be part of "human nature." In other words, their concept of man's nature abstracted from every particular culture but didn't prescind from any of them. Of no one culture could it be said that having *this* culture was natural to man; and yet man could not be conceived *as man* without having a culture. The same kind of concept appears in many modern research projects, especially in psychology and psycholinguistics. The modern writers do not talk about abstracting and prescinding, but they would say that a statement of human nature includes a linguistico-cultural "variable" or parameter, which would be closed in any possible realization of the nature.

Logically, then, one has a choice: to form the concept of human nature inclusively, man-with-a-culture, or exclusively, man-minus-culture. (Note that neither way of forming the concept takes 'nature' to mean what a person is born with genetically — so that nature contrasts with "nurture." This yields a useful concept, too, but it does not concern the nature of the species. It deals with the biological endowment of the individual.) Recognition of the choice defeats the cultural relativist's quick checkmate of his opponent, and a thoughtful evaluation of the options is not to the relativist's advantage. His concept of human nature has yet to bear any theoretical fruit. If one returns to the older, inclusive concept of nature, one not only legitimates many modern projects of cross-cultural comparison, but one also accounts for many non-biological constants which have emerged in such comparisons. The most common values which attract us and the general exigencies of purposive action are among these constants. They provide new evidences for those of us who defend moral universals against the relativism, irenic or bloody, of cultural radicals.

### Nature Wronged

We are now in a position to notice that the concept of human nature is subject to another dangerous ambiguity. The term 'nature' seems to contrast not only with 'culture' but also with 'history'. How should we conceive of history in its relation to our nature? Does history illustrate human nature or obscure it? Have historical events fulfilled the possibilities and taught us the limitations of our nature, or have the events choked off possibilities and imposed limitations? Many thinkers who took a favorable view of the "noble savage" deplored the course of history as one long departure from nature — from the "rights" and joys of nature. Their concept of human nature came to include a normative "natural pattern" for human culture, but it was at odds with all the historical patterns. Such thinking also survives among cultural radicals. Let us see in what form.

The contemporary Left arms its moral convictions with a view of history which is curiously negative, and with an assurance about the future which is curiously smug.

For example, the liberal Left has an economic creed which includes the conviction that people *ought* to enjoy equality in economic condition. Impelled by this conviction, Leftist authors marshal evidence that people were equal once, long ago, or write "analyses" to prove that people would be equal now, if artificial inequalities didn't stand in the way (accumulated over the course of history), and they exult "prophetically" that people will be equal some day.

Their moral attachment to economic equality is thus furnished with the armaments of Leftist conviction: a belief in "primitive communism," or at least a belief that men have grown unequal through a history of crimes and usurpations, a belief that what keeps them unequal today are conspiracies among dark manipulators of power and wealth, and an unshakeable conviction that the Future belongs to equality as the Left conceives it.

If one looks for the logic behind this pattern of hope and conviction, one is quickly perplexed. For these "armaments," as I have called them, do not flow from this or any other moral conviction in a logical way. To see this, take a moral conviction not widely shared on the Left but broadly supported in other segments of society.

Take the conviction that people ought to abstain from sexual activity outside of marriage. Millions of people accept *norms* against fornication and adultery. But they don't believe in "primitive chastity"; they don't think that the major obstacles to chastity are artificial temptations, invented by feudal enemies of virtue; and they strongly doubt that a society of sexual sanctity is around the corner. Are they "illogical" in failing to hold these points? Certainly not. Views about the past and the future are simply not entailments of moral conviction.

Where, then, does the Left get those salient ideas which I have called its armaments? The mystery clears up, I submit, when one considers the idea of something's being "naturally" the case. That men seek shelter from the elements (and from the eyes of their neighbors), we might say, is "naturally the case." It is documented from remote antiquity. It is rooted in such powerful drives that we don't expect it to disappear. If we came across a society in which shelters of all kinds were banned, we should marvel at the "artificiality" of such a ban and seek to learn its historical origins. If they turned out to be remote, we should be amazed that the ban had stood so long.

In other words, the claim that something is "naturally" the case carries corollaries about the past and the future: what is naturally the case must have been so in the past (as we would never pronounce natural what has never been the case), and if it is not now the case, it is being impeded by man-made obstacles, which are certain to be swept away eventually, because obstacles to what is naturally the case are inherently fragile.

In this way, the idea dawns that the modern Left, in saying that men ought to be equal in economic condition, covertly assumes that they are *naturally equal* in that regard. For then the armaments follow as implications.

The result is this: an ideology of what is "naturally the case" acquires a counterfeit "transcendence" over everything that has historically been the case; moral norms are made true to that ideology, and Right and Wrong again acquire a specious transcendence over all "mere matters of fact."

Witness the same pattern in how the Left has developed and defended an article of its cultural creed.

Feminism began with the moral premise that women ought to be equal to men in power, income, social standing, and all the ramifications of these. Thereupon feminist "scholars"

launched a hunting expedition through the cultures of the past and the primitives of the present, looking for the happy and pacific "equiarchies" which must once, they believed, have existed. For what they call "sexism" had to be proved to be an historical aberration, and therefore a non-sexism up to feminist standards had to be assumed to exist "back there somewhere," as the natural state from which the sexists ab-erred.

The hunting scholars came back empty-handed, sad to say, but this embarrassment could be remedied. When "mere matters of fact" fail to show what the ideology expects them to show, it is a sign that the facts aren't facts. They are encrypted enemy messages. They need to be "de-constructed." The record of the past needs to be re-read with a more suspicious hermeneutic. And so "Women's Studies" departments were created to give gainful employment to a new kind of revisionist historian — the kind who would reinterpret all evidences of male leadership (or loafing) as evidences of crimes, conspiracies, alienations, and false-consciousnesses.

If sexism, in a word, was "artificial," it had definite and incriminated inventors, who, by hook or by crook, had to be uncovered. If ordinary historical scholarship didn't expose them, consciousness-raising would.

And meanwhile the conviction that the Future would be feminist in its arrangements gathered an unshakeability which has insulated these women against the lessons contained in a resounding series of electoral defeats.

### The Question of Natural Law

But now, perhaps, it's the cultural conservatives' turn to be embarrassed. If we say that moral norms are true to human nature, or even to nature's God, isn't an "ideology of nature" inevitable? Doesn't every form of "natural law" doctrine enshrine such an ideology? In fact, doesn't the modern Left continue a pattern of thought that goes back to the very roots of the West, where the "ought" of nature, reflected in the Garden of Eden, stands in tension with the "is" of history?

Well, in fact, no. What the modern Left is continuing is only one form of natural-law doctrine, a late and singularly stupid form, consisting in the inference,  
if it ought to be the case,  
then it is naturally the case.

What a peculiar inference this is can be seen by glancing at some familiar alternatives. I can think of at least three.

(1) With many of the ancients, one can hold that what is naturally the case, though pleasant and desirable enough, belongs to an unrecoverable past, to golden and silver ages antedating history as we know it, and that here, in history, man's duty is to embrace other, more practicable ideals. Thus there will be no inference from the premise

it ought to be the case

to the conclusion

it is naturally the case,

because "it" might be an ideal appropriate only to history as we know it. Nothing hopeful will be inferrible about the future either; and history, though in a sense a departure from natural happiness, will not lack consolations of its own. It succeeds to nature not as evil succeeds to the good, but as the complex good succeeds to a perfect simplicity.

(2) With a number of 19th Century thinkers, one can hold that what ought to be the case lies ahead of us, as the moral attainment of a mode of society which is still beyond us, but whose eventual coming is assured, being the aim and term of nature in its universal evolution. There is an inference from 'it ought to be' to 'it will be' and, indeed, to 'it naturally will be,'

but there is no inference to what has been the case in the past, nor any incrimination of the record of the past. History, instead of being the enemy of nature, becomes her instrument.

(3) Lastly, with a large party of religious and conservative thinkers, one can hold that what is naturally the case is *anything but* what ought to be — is rather a bloody chaos, from which the historical achievements of the higher cultures have sporadically and precariously delivered us. Thus there will be no inference from 'ought to be' to 'naturally is' because there is a counter-inference from 'ought to be' to 'naturally isn't'. The future will be an object of anxious concern rather than complacency.

In other words, one has to be willing to combine superstitions — a golden age of nature in the past, as in alternative (1), with a naturally arriving millennium in the future, as in alternative (2) — in order to begin to approach the belief-system of the economic and cultural Left. And in order to approach closer, one must repudiate entirely alternative (3), because it tends to breed gratitude for the achievements of history rather than revolutionary contempt.

But what of the suggestion that the Left derived its superstitions from Christianity, so that the triad of nature, history, and future corresponds to Paradise, the Fall, and Salvation?

In muddled minds anything is possible, I suppose, but it needs to be made clear that the alleged similarity of "pattern" hides a deeper and more important conflict of doctrine.

The Left's fundamental tension between nature and artifice (or removable obstacle) is simply missing from Christianity. In Christianity man sins with his nature, not against it. The nature to be reckoned with in history is fallen nature, and it knows neither a golden age of harmony as its past nor a self-developing millennium as its future. Hence, among the above-mentioned alternatives, none is congenial to Christianity except the last. The precarious decencies of the better civilizations are the best hope we have in this life. Any better possibility for man, whether the one that existed fleetingly in Adam's innocence, or the one which exists salvifically in Christ, is reckoned to the supernatural, not to the natural.

Moreover, there is no resemblance between the views of the Left and the doctrine of natural-law morality which Christian thinkers developed. For there is a large difference between this inference:

if it ought to be the case,  
then it is justified in terms of goods natural to man,

which is what medieval theoreticians of this morality would have held, and this one:

if it ought to be the case,  
then it is naturally the case,

which is the fallacy of the Left. For Christian natural-law doctrine, whether one agrees with it or not, had nothing to do with what "naturally" happens. It was about the goods which we constantly want and need, and which therefore are not just "contingently" related to our well-being. To recognize these goods and feel their attraction does not require an ideology of nature. It takes only an open-eyed experience of life. To formulate exact moral norms that are "true to" these goods, so that they protect them and tell us how to pursue them coherently — this requires no ideology of nature either. But it is hard work. It needs disciplined thought and so requires a high civilization.

### The Ugly Gnostic

However, as Hans Jonas and Eric Voegelin have reminded us, there *is* a religion which the ideology of the Left resembles. The key feature shared by synchronic

relativism, diachronic relativism, and the Left's ideology of nature is the counterfeit transcendence which these positions assign to human consciousness or its future — transcendence over mere matters of fact. There was once in the West a religion which assigned the same sort of false transcendence to its God.

Its obscure beginnings belong to the three centuries from about 150 B.C. to 150 A.D., which were also the centuries in which Jerusalem discovered Athens. Jewish thinkers like Philo of Alexandria and Christian thinkers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus were critical of what they found in the Greek philosophical tradition, but also grateful. They believed that the physics, ethics, and metaphysics of nature, developed by the Greeks, would contribute to understanding the purposes of the God of revelation, who was also the Author of nature. This other religion disagreed.

This other religion insinuated, at this crucial moment in the formation of the West, the suspicion that God, the true God, was not the Author of the facts around us. They were too ugly. The true God had, it was said, a horror of material things, which were meaningless. Rather, the Creator of this cosmos of bodies must have been an inferior spirit, perhaps one hostile to the true God. This suspicion took pagan, Jewish, and Christian forms, the last coming to be known as the heresy of Gnosticism.

Now the God of the Old Testament explicitly claimed to be the creator of the visible facts, and so this other religion, Gnosticism, repudiated Him and the Torah He revealed. Therewith it repudiated the entire culture of Jerusalem.

At the same time Gnosticism insisted that its True God could only be known by revelation, because He had left no "footprints" in nature. Hence Gnosticism repudiated the culture of Athens.

The result of the two repudiations was an anti-cultural theism, worshiping a God to whom all the facts were irrelevant. He transcended the world, perhaps, but not as its creator. The Creator-God of Judaism and Christianity was transcendent as the Source of the truth of being. This other God was more like a "transcendental ego," source of consciousness and "meaning."

In an anti-cultural theism there is no ethics. Gnosticism proved the point by generating movements at opposite ends of the moral spectrum — from extreme asceticism and absolute sexual abstinence (so that one might imitate the True God in His horror of bodies), to extreme libertinism and licentiousness (because the True God only cared about the spirit, and the flesh could therefore do as it pleased).

Neither tendency could be moderated by appealing to the needs of a viable culture and a livable society, because the True God was the enemy of the societies of this world. His purpose was to inform the wise of their way of escape from the entire system of this world. Hence His devotees could brook no counsels of moderation.

In fact, Gnostics acknowledged no duties of any kind toward the larger society or the civil government. Their only duties were to each other. They moved through the visible society of unbelievers as a hidden fellowship of the Pure. Not surprisingly, several Gnostic sects turned to a novel mode of self-expression. They invented terrorism.

### **Conclusion: Standing on the Top Rung**

The very top rung of the ladder of transcendence — on which moral norms, rooted in God or human nature, transcend all cultural and ideological diversities — is dangerous as all high places are dangerous. It needs balance. The footing is delicate. Most cultural conservatives

stand on it, but with lively fear of the pitfalls, such as those we have been sketching in these pages. Whether we are Christians or Jews, religious in our personal lives or non-religious, we feel a lively gratitude for the intellectual security provided by the heritage of the West. We have inherited from our philosophers a concept of human nature that is steady, abstracted from the facts but not "liberated" from them. We have inherited from our theologians a God who takes responsibility for our nature and for its redemption in history, not its recasting.

Sobered by the self-demiurgic follies of modernity, cultural conservatives will not pit nature and culture against one another, will not exalt tomorrow's culture as transcending human nature, and will not demean historical culture as betraying human nature.

Forewarned by the example of Gnosticism, cultural conservatives will not try to add another rung to the ladder, making moral norms transcend human nature itself and all its historical cultures.

For the grounding of norms in the Mind of a God who is an alien and a stranger to all of human history is ultimately no different from grounding them in a "nature" that has been betrayed by all of history or in a "human future" that puts to shade all of history. Strange nature, strange future, strange God — man cannot live by the morals of a stranger. We need to live by morals whose very transcendence is grounded in "what we have seen, what we have heard, what our hands have handled" (1 John 1:1).