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The Golden Age

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The arrival of the Golden Age, though without doubt the greatest achievement of human history, was observed with only a quiet and subdued sense of satisfaction. There was no pomp or ceremony, no speeches or banners, no parades or bands playing. There were no vulgar displays of fireworks or public drunkenness. All of that had been left behind long ago. We would have been proud of our unique accomplishment had we not long ago abandoned pride as well. The celebration of the Golden Age, such as it was, was only to be found in the hearts of those fortunate enough to have lived to see the day. In all outward respects, it was a day like any other day.

The extirpation of discontent, dissatisfaction, irrationality, and waste has become a reality; the final solution to the problems posed by civilization and its discontents, and the consequent attainment of a lasting happiness for each and every human being, has been attained at long last. But before the Golden Age was a *fait accompli*, it was apparent for

some time where the course of our social evolution was inevitably and relentlessly heading. Before its arrival, the Golden Age was keenly anticipated, and the ground for its success carefully prepared. It is as important to understand these preparations as it is to understand that the whole process of the perfectibility of man was accomplished through consensus. Coercion had no role to play in the dawning of the Golden Age, for that which is obtained through force is inherently divisive and unstable.

There were, of course, those who scoffed, who mocked and ridiculed the earliest efforts toward the perfection of man as unworkable social engineering, as an unrealistic, pie-in-the-sky fantasy. All were agreed as to the magnitude of the project—the perfectibility of man realized not provisionally, but finally. Some doubted that such an ambitious undertaking could ever be realized, but the doubting Thomases and nay-sayers had underestimated the miracles of modern medicine and the wonders of technology. That the yearning implanted in every human heart since the beginning of time should find its satisfaction in a rational and systematic program for the attainment of happiness may seem a gentle irony, but one with which we can gladly live.

Human beings had evolved into the particular psycho-physical creatures we were in the context of a state of nature. Over the course of many thousands of years we came to live exclusively in a civilized state, and as a consequence found our nature at odds with our condition. But once we came to view genetic engineering as part of the ongoing evolutionary process, we could tailor ourselves as creatures who could survive and perhaps thrive in the context of civilization, rather than allowing ourselves to be hobbled in our progress by drives and instincts that were no longer relevant to our world. And as the state of nature become more and more distant from our concerns, and we refashioned ourselves in such as way as to be in complete harmony with the state of civilization, those products of our state of nature become increasing distant from our present concerns—that is to say, the culture and social organization that emerged from the epoch of the conflict between uncivilized human nature and civilized context of life became increasingly irrelevant and ultimately incomprehensible.

Needless to say, all diseases have been eradicated. Sickness, even fatigue, is unknown. The miracles of medicine followed one upon another in orderly

succession. Even that hypochondria that would make a malady for itself were none known has been cured. Further advances in medical technology promise regular progress in the lengthening of life. Every generation of parents can know that their children will live that much longer than they themselves can expect, and that much more again for their children's children, and so on down the generations.

Medicine was the model for all that followed. The early visionaries who foresaw the perfection of man began with the systematic improvement of man's physical condition, but we do not live by bread alone. No systematic effort could stop short of considering the whole man, and the whole man is that inscrutable fusion of mind and body that makes any treatment of either in isolation inadequate. And so was undertaken an equally systematic attempt to improve the intellectual condition of man—his economic, social, cultural, and political condition. And the perfection of the mind required no shift away from the medical paradigm; the improvers of the body incrementally expanded their scope until they became improvers of both mind and body, the ultimate strategists of health and pathology. The dictatorship of the doctors, some detractors called it,

but it worked, and there was no arguing with success.

Who does not wish to be healthy? And who does not wish to be happy? Who does not desire to be rid of infirmities and disabilities? When one has on offer freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom from superstition, freedom from care, freedom from disturbing and unpleasant thoughts, liberation from both oppression and repression, the opposition may as well try to shout down the song of the Sirens. Relentlessly, implacably, and zealously the causes of human misery were hunted down and exterminated at the source. Nothing could stop this juggernaut, under the wheels of which were thrown infirmities of the human condition so familiar that we had, for a benighted time, ceased to think of them as weaknesses. But now we are free of them, absolutely and utterly free, and the better for it.

There was, of course, some initial resistance when we began the process that brought us to our present exalted state, especially with personality intervention, which some backward elements of society—malcontents, mostly, and the criminal element—failed to recognize as being in their own

best interests. It didn't take long, however, for virtually everyone to agree upon the purely pragmatic benefits of programmatic personality intervention. On this even employers and employees could reach an agreement. The Siren song of happiness again greased the wheels. Happy employees are productive employees, with far less absenteeism and far fewer days off sick. So employers lined up to add the benefit to their health plans, and employees signed up as soon as it was made available. Practice makes perfect, and before long the process had improved to such a degree that those who had not yet joined the personality intervention program were clamoring to be allowed to participate. The underlying biological causes of every conceivable form of mental discomfiture now has a successful gene therapy that can be adapted to the individual DNA profile of anyone, ensuring infallible results. Every condition once given a name in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* now has a cure thanks to our infallible mastery of the genome.

No twinge of discomfort is tolerated; no passing dissatisfaction is countenanced; no unsettling thoughts or ideas are allowed to stand. The doctors took a proactive stance in not only curing all known

pathologies, but also anticipating any possible pathology, whether for the individual in his development or for society in its evolution. Each stage of life has its appropriate therapeutic regime, each time of day its particular behavior modification medication, and, with this attentive and rigorous management of the vagaries of the human mind and body, a degree of discipline unknown even to the severest ascetics of antiquity has been attained effortlessly and painlessly.

Those who perfected the methods of treating cognitive discomfiture sometimes expressed profound regret that earlier generations had been denied the medical treatments that would have alleviated their suffering and immeasurably improved countless lives. While for most people the whole issue was a moot point, some more daring thinkers speculated how much better off all of us would have been had there been an opportunity to treat and to cure the frankly disturbed minds that had once exercised a disproportionate influence over civilization. Imagine, they would say, the benefits that would have accrued to every succeeding generation had Dante been rescued from his obsession with Beatrice and never have felt the compulsion to write his *Commedia*, or had Dali

been treated before poisoning the world with his nightmarish visions. If only Handel had been given lithium his manic-depressive cycles might have been smoothed out to a balanced norm, and he would not have wasted his time writing the Halleluiah chorus. The present effort to create a perfect society would have been much easier for all concerned if we hadn't had to work against such entrenched obstacles. But the past is what it is, and if it cannot be changed, it can at least be obliterated.

Now that our minds and bodies are in harmony with our civilized environment, our culture had also to be brought into harmony with our changed condition. Museums began to put their more disturbing works in the basement, but as time passed and more and more works were found to be disturbing, or to have disturbing implications, entire wings of museums were shut down one after another. When the museums finally closed altogether people had long since ceased to go to them, but the poor workers at these establishments had to look up from their crossword puzzles every now and again, and when they did so they were confronted by the remnants of our disturbed and disturbing past. It was a great relief to all when one by one they all shut their doors for the final time.

Galleries, too, closed their doors, as no one any longer felt the need to create new art. It is, after all, time intensive and produces no social benefit while creating a need for more productive members of society to support those who devote their time to useless pursuits like painting and sculpture. By common consensus everyone recognized the irrationality of such an arrangement, and artists were retrained in vocational institutions for practical careers in construction, health care, computer programming, and other useful industries.

Since all this occurred early in the evolution of our perfect society, it generated a certain degree of interest in the press. Research followed, studies were pursued, statistics were compiled, and it was thoroughly documented that former artists were happier, more satisfied with their lives, slept better at night, and reported a higher degree of contentment than they had known previously. The evidence was overwhelming that their lives were substantially improved by abandoning art for practical careers—no more sleepless nights, no more existential dread, no more anxiety of influence, no more chaotic, troubled personal relationships.

Some countries—back when there were countries—took the shorter and quicker path to the elimination of art, by simply dynamiting their cultural history and in one fell swoop separating themselves from the folly of their ancestors. At the time it was shocking, but in retrospect everyone agreed that they had been on the side of the angels, and if their action seemed somewhat precipitate, so had it also seemed when Alexander cut the Gordian Knot (or, perhaps more to the point in this context, when he burned Persepolis one drunken evening). The analogy is not without justification: history is a kind of knot, a tangled skein that we have mostly unraveled by more patient methods, but this does not rule out the possibility that at certain times other methods, perhaps of a rough and ready character, might be more appropriate to the circumstances.

The disappearance of art was a relatively rapid phenomenon. It took longer for literature to pass from the scene of human history, but it, too, eventually followed the arts into oblivion. When men still wrote books many theories were advanced in the attempt to explain the different rates at which art and literature withered away.

For some time, indeed for centuries, the realization that the perfectibility of man was on the horizon and would someday be the case in fact was an inspiration to writers, and literature poured from the presses like a tidal wave of books on every facet of the coming transformation of the human condition. And when books of original insight were no longer produced, the flood of words was little diminished, as the secondary literature commenting upon the earlier wave swelled to a prodigious volume of volumes, commentaries piled upon commentaries to the n^{th} iteration.

This proved to be a necessary catharsis, a purgation of the poison lurking within our minds, eating away at us from the inside out. Like an itch that had to be scratched, and once scratched can be forgotten and never thought of again, the literary epoch of human civilization passed relatively quickly from the scene, like a psychotic episode, a scant few thousand years dividing the prehistorical and the posthistorical epochs, an interlude of ink and paper between silent eternities innocent of literature.

Everything that needed to be said had been said, repeated, commented upon, denounced as error and enshrined as wisdom—and all of this many times

over, each generation recapitulating the struggle of the previous generation to acquire knowledge, to reconcile itself to this knowledge, and finally to free itself from the presuppositions of what was once thought to be knowledge, now revealed as folly. Even if we set aside the personal trauma this confrontation with the past causes to each successive generation—the terrible toll of learning, as it were; the trial of acquiring a tradition—anyone can immediately see the inefficiencies built into this system through its redundancy. Why could we not be finished with this absurdity once and for all?

Even after books ceased to be written, they continued to be read for quite some time, pointlessly agitating otherwise quiescent minds. Why, after all, should we trouble ourselves over the unpleasantness that occurred in the House of Atreus, a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing? The essence of this question, *mutatis mutandis*, proved a source of perplexity, especially in the universities, before they also were all closed by common consent. Why read? Why bother? Why debase oneself before the past? Indeed, the mystery was such a vexation that, before the schools were finally closed, one antiquarian unearthed a reference to what were once

called academic conferences, in which scholars would gather together to discuss matters of common interest. Such activities had ceased long ago, but after talking it over with curious colleagues, a group of professors decided to stage an academic conference as a kind of historical recreation, to see if it might shed any light on why anyone should care about what had been said and thought in the past.

A topic for the conference was chosen by picking slips of paper out of a hat, the topics themselves taken from notices of conferences printed in yellowing journals in the basements of libraries (back then there were still a few libraries, but, happily, they are no more). The first slip read "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson." Very well. The scholars would gather and discuss the poetry of Emily Dickinson. A venue was settled upon, hotels were arranged, and the experiment got under way.

The conference was brought to order with a great feeling of expectation. The Chairman banged his gavel on the table and announced the opening of the proceedings. One participant rose deliberately to his feet and asked the question that was on the minds of all present: "Why was Emily Dickinson so

concerned with Death?" Since no one was any longer disquieted by natural life processes that ultimately issue in the dissolution of the individual organism, all were at a complete loss as to why Dickinson had written so much about death. And their lack of understanding was not for lack of effort; they were honest and earnest men, not accustomed to avoiding difficulties or choosing the easy way. They grappled mightily with their failure to comprehend. But their world had changed, and no longer resembled the world of Emily Dickinson. Her works had passed beyond the point of a mere feeling of foreignness, as when one reads a translated book from some inaccessible milieu of the past, and had become quite distant, quite alien, quite incomprehensible.

When the unsettling inquiry was made, it remained unanswered, hanging in the air like a pall over the proceedings. Some scholars looked to one side, while others tapped their feet or shuffled papers. After the silence continued unbroken for several minutes, the chairman cleared his throat, paused, and announced that since it was evident that no one had anything to say, the conference was finished. And so it was that this last ambitious experiment in anachronism ended less than an hour after being

convened. The scholars, each one of them, returned to their rooms, packed their things, and made their way home, initially perplexed, but ultimately relieved that the embarrassing exercise was over.

For some time I myself kept a single book, long after I had disposed of all the rest. This was St. Augustine's *City of God*, which I held onto as I found a certain sense of satisfaction in reading his descriptions of life in paradise before the fall of man (his *Confessions*, on the other hand, was among the first of my books to go). Our first parents, as Augustine put it, were agitated by no mental perturbations and annoyed by no bodily discomforts. There could be no better expression of human perfection, whether in Eden or in the Golden Age. As I perused Augustine's chapters I felt a special kind of satisfaction when I reflected on how the human race had managed to reconstruct paradise, or, if you will, replant the Garden of Eden. But later I thought that maybe this feeling was pride, and when I realized this I got rid of my copy of the *City of God* as well, as it occurred to me that pride might lead to worse things such as ambition.

When finally those traditions that shaped us lost their meaning and ultimately become

incomprehensible, our bond to history was broken and we were cast free of the past. We learned not to resist this separation from what we once were, and when we needed consolation we assured ourselves that we were condemned to be free from the past. It became obvious that the best course of action was simply to let go—to so thoroughly quit old errors, abandon former follies, and renounce past crimes, that they should become as nothing, disappearing into utter oblivion.

To relive the past, to continually return to and review the pathetic and contemptible chronicle that is human history, is to resurrect it after a fashion, to revivify it with the lifeblood of the present, sacrificing ourselves to a haunted past, giving ourselves over the ghosts and spectres. Without this cultivation of man's follies, the perverse tending of our perverse history, our imperfections, we reasoned, might be permanently laid to rest, withering on the vine and ultimately wasting away. Annihilation, then, of the diseased, deranged, and deluded past proved our surest method for cultural cleansing. We would not be content with half-measures; nothing less than perfect mental and physical health would satisfy us. We would brook no compromises; we would purge the past; we

would wield a sledgehammer in the service of the greater good.

For a time, competition in sports and business was a difficulty, but in no wise insuperable. Competitive sports, with their tendency to encourage divisiveness and hooliganism, were eliminated in favor of team-building exercises that focus on encouraging the personal best of each participant. In this way a positive good was invariably substituted for a dubious and questionable indulgence.

The economic form of perfection was more of a challenge, but trade and commerce now flourish in the Golden Age, thanks to legions of dedicated economists and their selfless efforts to promote the general welfare. The steady progress of rational econometrics has made it possible to precisely regulate the business cycle to eliminate boom and bust swings in the economy. Adequacy has been substituted for every excess, and sufficiency for every deficiency; there are no shortages or gluts. We have exhaustively teased out the implications of cost/benefit analysis, systematically considering every problem from every angle, and have without exception settled on those solutions that provide the greatest return for the lowest investment. Per capita

income is evenly distributed and grows by a predictable and sustainable rate every year without fail. No one gets rich, no one gets poor, no one goes bankrupt, and everyone pays their bills in full and on time.

That the bell curve could be flattened and all might find meaningful, gainful employment somewhere in the middle, between the extremes that defined our divided and conflicted past, seemed an impossible goal, more than any sociologist or therapist or counselor would dare to dream even in their most utopian moments. But this was made our goal, the impossible dream we dared to dream and did in fact achieve.

Nations were another problem, but they impeded rational economic integration, and therefore fell victim to the inevitable consensus that backwardness in any form must be abandoned if we were to realize our full potential. Nations were once the embodiment of a people's history, and when every nation nourished its own ambitions and particular grievances, there was little chance that men could set aside their private ambitions and quarrels. Peace between the nations was a natural consequence of the perfection of man, and indeed it

preceded the actual dissolution of nations, which became the more superfluous the more perfect man became. We now have that government that governs the best by governing not at all, and since that is the government we have proved ourselves to deserve, that is the government we have.

Perhaps the last relics of our former discontented civilization to disappear were those superfluous ornaments of daily life that were once so intimately associated with the self-image of individuals, namely, food, clothing, the decoration of houses. Now that people have learned to derive their self worth not from merely contingent circumstances, not from the accidents of fate, but from deep within themselves, articles of personal ostentation have joined art and literature in the graveyard of civilization.

This is not to say that it was easy; on the contrary, it was a long and difficult process to separate ourselves from our pointless vanities, but we proved ourselves up the challenge, and with each small triumph in the casting off of an irrational tradition we grew in our own eyes and knew we were better for the change. With every mind perfectly balanced there was no longer a demand for mind-altering and

psycho-active substances; even innocuous distractions like flavorful food or pointless activities like smoking inevitably fell away as each day became closer to perfection and thus better than the day before. Spices, alcohol, and tobacco disappeared one after another from grocery stores as they ceased to be purchased, passed their expiration dates, and were pulled from the shelves never to be replaced.

Once we learned to value only that attributable to ourselves alone, anything more than this came to seem vulgar and garish. Now men and women value themselves and each other simply for whom and what they are, in and of himself or herself. There is no more meretricious parading of costumes. Everyone dresses appropriately for the climate in which they live, and everyone wears sensible shoes. No more time is wasted on long, elaborate dinners or exotic or unusual foods. Everyone eats, no one goes hungry, and that is enough. Similarly, no resources are expended on houses or furniture beyond what is required for the necessities of life. Homes are as serviceable as public buildings, sturdily built, well maintained, fireproof, and reinforced to withstand floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes. As no one goes hungry,

so no one goes without the creature comforts of shelter, bedding, and facilities for cooking and washing.

All discontent has been utterly and completely abolished. Men and women are content to eat, sleep, bathe, and work, and no longer feel any unhealthy compulsions that would disproportionately consume their time or energy. Every day is blissfully happy and lived in the fullness of the moment. All needs are provided for; no one is in want. There is no need to read or to think; no one is searching for anything, for they lack nothing. If they did pick up a book, they would only find the experience disturbing, as it could serve no purpose other than to upset the perfectly balanced equilibrium of their minds. Indeed, the skill of reading and writing has nearly disappeared, having rapidly atrophied once contentment and felicity became the norm.

It may well be that these are the last words to be written by any human being—and, if we do not fall from grace, restored as we are to our untroubled Eden, no one will ever read them. If, perchance, dear reader, you find yourself puzzling over these lines, we must have failed and fallen, and I can only

express my deepest sympathies for the barbarous conditions in which you must find yourself living.

The End ?

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