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Transhumanism and the Cure for Suffering

by Steve Balch

Editors' Note: *The heterodox theories presented in our spring 2024 special feature "The State of Evolution" spurred NAS founding president Steve Balch to consider the possible outcomes of an artificial intelligence that emancipates higher order thinking from the reproductive pressure that until now has guided it.*

Why must we suffer? Theologians who need to justify God's ordinances engage in theodicy, an intellectual swim against life's current of unpleasantness. The question of suffering claims the attention of secular philosophy as well. Minimizing hurt and pain is, after all, the goal of most projects for worldly improvement. In both disciplines, an understanding of suffering's origins is a necessary first step.

Of course, with respect to suffering's immediate causes and cures, the answers are usually obvious. But they are catch-as-catch-can and transient, aspirins for headaches, bandages for cuts, the human condition left never better than bittersweet. With a deeper comprehension of suffering's roots, we might find better ways forward. Let's look to evolutionary theory for a new answer and then consider paths toward fuller remediation.

Central to my evolutionary approach is the biological distinction between genotype and phenotype. For those unfamiliar, the former refers to an organism's constituent genes bequeathed to it through the process of natural selection. The latter, the genes' product, is the organism itself—their "survival machine" in Richard Dawkins' famous coinage—by which they secure their continuing replication.

For most animals the distance between biological ends and means is a short one. They have desires and fears whose intensity roughly corresponds to their contribution to genetic fitness. The actions necessary for attaining or avoiding them, say flight versus fight, are usually limited, survival being more a matter of efficient execution than creative imagination. Most animals might thus be said to reside in the realm of "genocracy," being largely ruled by their

genes, behavioral options closely coded and held under tight genetic leash.

Uniquely, humans can stretch, sometimes even snap that leash. High intelligence, culturally pooled, allows for behavioral creativity: pleasures sometimes attained, and pains avoided by means circuitous and not necessarily adaptive—evolution's "true intent" thereby cheated.

Overall, human intellectual prowess and cultural capacity have proven immensely adaptive, as stray bands of hunters have multiplied into Earth-covering billions. But intelligence's deleterious cheats are now rivaling the force of its honest guides. Step by step, an artificial environment is being constructed that serves personal purposes but stands akilter to genetic interest. This unnatural state of affairs might be called "phenocracy": The organism's purposes overruling those of its genes.

Put another way, phenocracy subordinates biological ends to biological means, licensing an organism to pursue personal satisfaction for its own sake. (Needless to say, I'm not ascribing real intention to genes, only operational consequence—the intentionality is purely figurative).

Through human artifice, other animals can occasionally experience phenocracy. Those lab rats, for instance, that starved after they learned to stimulate their brain's pleasure centers by pushing levers. Such behavior couldn't endure the wild, where selection ruthlessly purges everything maladaptive. Pets live phenocratically as well, but often on the condition of being neutered.

That the human environment exists as a playground of phenocratic contrivance is largely due to modern technology. Insofar as we remain creatures that reproduce through childbirth, it's also a condition that can't persist indefinitely. Phenocracy is a serious phenomenon in the shorter frames of human history, wherein behavioral patterns lasting but a few generations can still have major effects. Witness the impact of fast food on American health and military readiness or the sub-replacement birthrates of the developed world, where people regard large families as lowering "the quality of life."

The feeling an experience evokes doesn't inhere in the experience itself, but in the ways our genes prompt us to react. *We* find the proximity of feces repellent; for dung beetles, they're a feast. *We* fear death so as not to prematurely die. Yet there are termites that explode in order to defend their nests. Presumably they feel differently. Under pure genocracy, the attraction or repulsion of an experience lies in its relationship to genetic fitness, not anything else.

Critically, pain is as useful a steering device for genes as pleasure, sometimes more so. Genes care nothing for what organisms feel, provided these feelings enhance genetic yield. Suffering from envy, pangs of unrequited love, hunger, or cold? Your genes are telling you to up your game. Enjoying romance, hearty dinners, and secure and comfortable lodgings? Their message is to stay the course. For success genes provide carrots; for failure, sticks.

Pain and suffering are generally linked to difficult situations requiring a sharp concentration of attention: Anxiety when the approach of danger is initially perceived (message: "think hard"), fright as it closes in ("attack, hide, or run"), pain when it impacts ("stop it now!"). All are emotions that rapidly clear the cognitive decks.

Bad experiences are altogether acceptable to our unfeeling genes, provided that the emotional rattling delivered is the most efficient route to problem-solving. The adaptive cost-effectiveness of painful just-in-time rescue, avoiding the cognitive burdens of a more deliberative far-seeing approach, is the principal reason life is so frequently unpleasant. Pleasant experiences have less need of being disruptive, being generally associated with the continuance of adaptive behaviors ("keep eating") or reward for an adaptive goal achieved—a new child, a raised salary, or a competitive victory ("congrats, stay the course"). Under life's shifting circumstances, however, there's no resting on laurels. Happiness provides but a reprieve from the pressing concerns of staying alive. Euphoria dissipates; fear gnaws or explodes.

Capable of reflection, humans find this Jekyll-and-Hyde genocracy dismaying. Yet its biological explanation is crystal clear. The shortest path to fitness frequently passes through misery.

If it was God who chose natural selection to raise us from the primordial slime, the blame lies with Him. The genetic demiurge to whom he delegated the evolutionary dirty work has proven a hard taskmaster. Perhaps this was the only way that genesis could be divinely accomplished. If so, theodicy has its simple answer. For God, "the best of all possible evolutionary worlds" required suffering.

We can—and do—hope for a better hereafter, in which the pains of earthly living give way to eternal bliss. It's an expectation that lightens life's load. When salvation is rendered conditional on moral conduct, it allows us to live more cooperative as well as better-adapted lives. But note that belief in the hereafter is itself phenocratic, the prospect of a joyous existence purged of gene-caused afflictions—a kind of transhumanism *avant la lettre*.

Modern science wrought a revolution in thought, bringing heavenly phenocracy down to Earth in both retail and wholesale forms. The first, delivered person-by-person, comprises the project we now call "self-realization," made plausible by capitalist plenty and scientifically empowered medicine. Alongside it rises the related vision of collective utopia, humans living harmoniously in a society rationally redesigned.

In practice, both have shown themselves dubious: Utopia because of its "biological denialism": an insistence that social reconstruction can overcome genetic self-serving. Self-realization because of its frequent reliance on those rascally "cheats" severing gratification from fitness, and thereby sabotaging genetic survival. "Sex, drugs, and rock-

and-roll" epitomizes this trap, if rock-and-roll stands in for all the pursuits that disguise barren excitements as adaptive triumphs.

Contemporary sexual practice is its paradigm case, a phenocratic revel celebrating bedroom pleasure as an end-in-itself. Effective contraception cinched the possibility for heterosexual congress, but only as a curtain-raiser. The pursuit of self-realization has increasingly freed eroticism from every constraint beyond the laws of physics. Fun, fulfilling, but hardly fecund!

An economic delusion gives sexual sterilization a further boost. In the bad old days, material growth, insofar as it occurred, was barely visible. Most assumed a steady demographic state. Begetting children consequently did double duty. It not only preserved lineage but was an insurance plan against decrepitude. What one genetically sowed, one might later personally reap.

We now take economic growth for granted, believing that raising all boats will benefit individuals regardless of their family choices. Assemble a diverse portfolio or vest a pension, and—seemingly—progeny can be struck from one's asset sheet. But this only works where childlessness is the exception to an otherwise fruitful rule. If too many live childlessly, a society's wealth will evaporate alongside its population, empty cradles emptying IRAs. Perhaps immigration and robotics can make up for the birth dearth. But this just changes the form, not the fact of a phenotypic culture's eventual extinction.

Humans, especially males, have long sought out adventure, risky but genetically rewarding exploits like exploration, entrepreneurship, athletics, and combat. "No pain no gain," and "to the brave belong the fair," as the adages go. Such ventures still call, but virtual reality more and more turns them into pajama games. "Kill without consequence, be bootlessly heroic, thrill without thriving," sing the digital sirens. In these altered guises, genocracy's laurels still beckon but only as apparitions that dissolve upon grasping.

Then there are drugs. Alcoholism is phenocracy's oldest blight, always censured and generally pitied. Drinking, even on binge scale, can sometimes serve to toast missions accomplished, fortify courage, and lubricate sociability, becoming adaptive to a point. But for good evolutionary reason, chronic besottedness is everywhere condemned.

Until recently, nonalcoholic inebriation through drugs was relatively rare in the West, a categorical vice associated with depravity and, in recent times, criminalized. The 1960s, however, saw a decided turn, drug use becoming increasingly widespread at all social levels. There has been a reaction, to be sure, but the trend toward narcotic abandon has phenocracy's wind at its back.

Characteristically, phenocracy trades in illusion, providing good feelings as decoys rather than guides. Its altered states emotionally please, but the behaviors they prompt adaptively misfire. Infinitely worse is something that has only recently moved into view, an end-

times phenocracy where environments don't merely beguile but actively predate. There is little reason to believe that a superintelligent AI, if such can be, will forever equate its cares with ours. "To serve man" may be our anticipation but judging from how we've served our faunal cousinage, the greater likelihood is that we will be treated the same by AI, ending up as fodder, or at least collateral damage, in whatever global makeover intelligent machines oversee.

The solution to suffering offered by traditional religion is top-down. A divine redeemer descends to deliver us. But per chance there is also one that is bottom-up: Mind redeeming itself by quitting the piping of its genes to join a dance of its own composition, one whose steps lead away from genetic survival and toward highly enriched and self-renewing forms of mental life. The choreography wouldn't be shortsightedly hedonic like that of commonplace phenocracy, but farsightedly uplifting, with gratifications savored rather than greedily bolted down.

One can imagine problem-solving as falling into two categories: calmly considered and urgently pressed. When dangers are spotted from afar, there are numerous options for avoiding them, some more satisfying or at least less galling than others. One can engage in the pleasures of regular exercise or await heart surgery; save money or eke out old age flipping burgers; steer clear of storms or flounder in their midst. Long perspective also heightens life's pleasures. Family planning is usually more satisfying than haphazard pregnancy.

A general rule, then: The best way to reduce pain and anxiety is by handling their causes at that point in time where the adaptive value of promptness exceeds the risks of prematurity. As intelligence, knowledge, and technical mastery grow, that point recedes, and the quality of experience becomes correspondingly improved. Given the constrained nature of the cognitive apparatus evolution has provided us, there is probably an effective limit to how far we humans can push this horizon. Our puppeteer genes have decided that myopia, however traumatizing, is still, for them at least, a good evolutionary bargain.

Maybe, as scripturally promised, God will come to our rescue, raising us into a higher realm. If He doesn't, however, there is another way that is conceivably within our advancing technological powers: breaking the gene's dominion over the quality of lived experience. Yet doing this must involve a thoroughgoing remake of what we essentially are, that is to say, the birthing an intelligence no longer human.

Most will find that disturbing counsel. We've been shaped by selection to dread our own demise. Radical organic transmutation, involving the end of our species as now constituted, naturally seems even more appalling. Of course, on the evolutionary record, species extinction is an inescapable fate. But should we want to bring it upon our-

selves by handing the future to an alien successor?

Self-alteration is actually nothing new for humans. We've provided ourselves with extra skin (clothes), artificial teeth and claws (spears, arrows, knives, swords, and guns), accelerated digestion (cooking), and enhanced vision (spectacles, telescopes, microscopes) among now taken-for-granted prosthetics. Even writing, affording an extra-neural medium for memory, falls into this category. To be sure, past alterations were incremental and didn't involve direct biological change. But they certainly have indirectly altered us biologically since they've drastically changed the selective forces to which we are exposed. That we're not the men we used to be back in early hominid times is largely due to our self-shaping.

Emancipating ourselves from genocracy's trap would entail measures far more severe, and certainly more presumptuous, than these earlier innovations, which were still consistent with evolution's unknowing shuffle. Whether wisely or not, the odds are that we'll pursue them. After all, to do otherwise would be at odds with our genetically engrained competitiveness. Genocracy drives us toward increased technical mastery, intelligence, health, strength, and longevity, and in so doing renders us less and less like even our fairly recent ancestors. The extent to which the coming alterations will take the form of cybernetic extensions, biological upgrades, or synergies involving both, is hard to predict, though we'll see soon enough as the advances along these fronts are fast accelerating. Maybe barrenness, catastrophic violence, or a global epidemic will do us in before we can completely erase our humanity or commission alien successors. But should that happen, no new chapter will be turned. The story of the mind, or at least of the intelligent mind on Earth, will simply come to its end.

But even with the best (or worst) of Promethean intentions, there are countless ways that genetic escape could come a cropper. For one thing, we don't know whether consciousness is "substrate dependent." If superintelligent AI is to be our heir, will it possess awareness as well as brilliance?

It's hard to see why an entity that could reason as well as, or better than, a human wouldn't possess a parallel, if not necessarily identical, awareness. Do organic compounds have some odd experiential privilege over silicates and other possible computational building blocks? We can't be sure, and it's difficult to even know what would constitute a dispositive test. Nonetheless, a mistake that assigns the future to genius zombies is the equivalent of there not being a future at all—a leap into the dark, most literally. Should we stick to organic enhancements for the time being?

The second problem is that our genocentric nature can be expected to corrupt the process of extricating mind from genes, quite possibly in ruinous ways. Self-interested humans will tend to create self-interested intellec-

tual augmentations to promote their self-interested schemes. Altruistic devotion to the emancipation of the mind is unlikely to be the prime directive, to the extent that it directs at all. Despite proclaimed good intentions, it is power and profit that push the development of AI and biotech today, not truth, beauty, or bliss. Any project aimed at emancipating mind from genes would have to be directed, at least for a while, by the same genes keeping the mind prisoner, leading to who knows what existential mayhem?

Our inability to find evidence of extraterrestrial civilization may indicate the difficulty of emancipation's accomplishment. Perhaps an S-curve operates here. The further cognitive augmentation proceeds, enhancing foresight and technical acumen, the more likely a successful transition becomes. We're still certainly well toward the learning curve's bottom and, conceivably, almost all ascensions abort early on. (Thankfully, it's a big universe!)

On the other hand, if we're very lucky, perhaps the traditional path of divine, top-down deliverance and the new one of auto-emancipation can merge. Our superintelligent, genetically liberated, successfully phenocratic successors might—prompted by some initial human seed-planting—come to regard Homo sapiens as a parent to be comforted in its old age. We could then find ourselves in a comfortable sanctuary designed by them for our "retirement," a Garden of Eden at the end of our species' travails rather than at its beginning. If our AI guardians were really kind, we might not know the difference between their paradise and the one for which—in protest against the whipping of our genes—we've immemorially longed. Although an ersatz version, it may be as much as obsolescing mankind can ever hope for.

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