



# culture

FALL 2007 • ISSUE 1.2

**SCIENTISM**

Courtroom Neuroscience  
Human Genetics in Fiction

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE

# ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

ON THE NIGHT OF NOVEMBER 10, 1619, RENÉ DESCARTES, THE FRENCH philosopher and mathematician, had a life-changing dream. He awoke filled with wonder; he had, according to historian Louis Bredvold, glimpsed the foundations of a “universal science,” the “possibility of applying the infallible method of mathematics to all the phenomena of the universe and every department of thought.” Descartes dreamed of a human science, modeled on the physical sciences, that would establish human affairs and ethics on a rational and precise basis. His dream captured an enduring modern aspiration.

Writing in the early 1950s, Bredvold noted that the emergence of an exact human science was once more being predicted, presented yet again as a “new hope” made possible by some “astonishing recent progress in the physical sciences.” He might well have been writing yesterday. Scientism is back with a vengeance, propelled by new discoveries in the biological sciences and the expanding field of neuroscience. As in its earlier manifestations, scientism retains a utopian cast, promising to solve intractable human problems (like crime; see Matt Crawford’s article) and establish ethics on a scientific foundation.

In light of this dismal project, it is tempting to decry utopian, and for that matter dystopian (see the review by Kevin Seidel), visions of the future. But that, I think, would be a mistake. One of the great weaknesses of contemporary cultural analyses is their failure to contemplate alternative futures. This failure undermines social criticism and often leads to a fatalism about, and inadvertent replication of, the very social order that is of concern. Granted, the negative is often more tangible than the positive. But negation is not enough. We also need some vision, however general, of human flourishing—the advocates of scientism have theirs—that will allow us to both understand and critique what is and dream our dreams of what might be.

—JED

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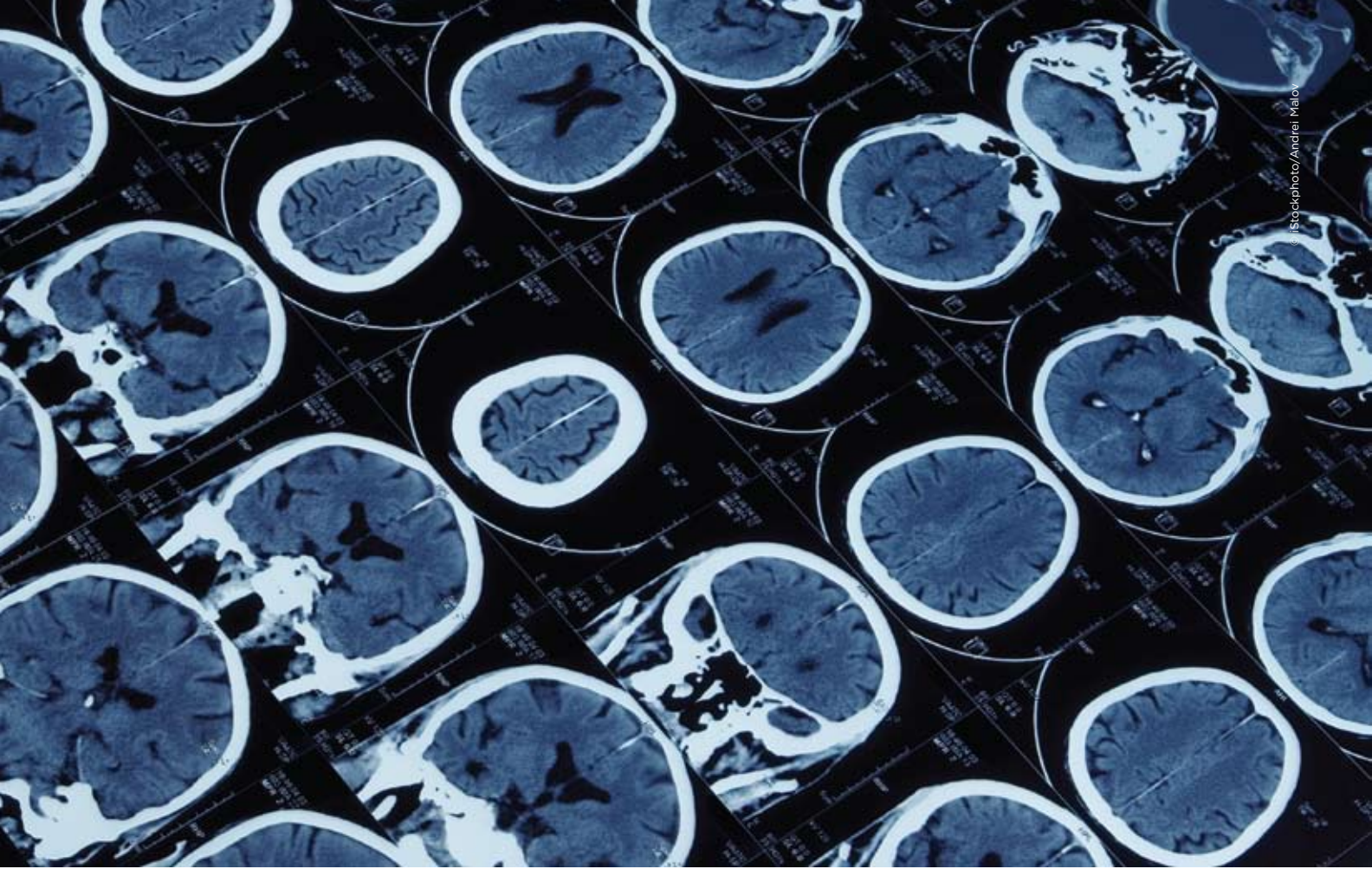
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# “My Brain Made Me Do It”

The rising abuse of neuroscience

*Matt Crawford*

BEGINNING IN THE 1990s, defense lawyers started showing juries images of their clients' brains and invoking clinical research to make the claim that, because of brain abnormalities revealed by scans, a defendant could not be held accountable for his or her actions. By now the use of some sort of "brain defense" has become common in capital cases, a fact that was recently brought to the attention of the broader public by Jeffrey Rosen, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*. If doing wrong is "hard wired," this would seem to call into question our usual understanding of moral responsibility, and punishing the wrong-doer for his actions would then make as much sense as punishing a defective car for overheating. As currently practiced, "neurolaw" tends in only one direction, toward exculpation.

Exculpation is a generous tendency, with good liberal associations, and indeed it is usually law-and-order conservatives who get alarmed by this sort of development. But there is cause for concern among civil libertarians as well because defense lawyers are not the only ones who are excited about potential uses of brain imaging. As reported by Rosen, professors of public policy dream of being able to use brain scans to predict a propensity for illegal behavior—not only for violence but also for tendencies like racial bias. This would open a vista of social control previously only imagined and expand the dominion of criminologists: if human behavior is electro-chemically preordained, there remains no discernible ground on which to object to pre-emptive interventions directed against those identified as hard-wired malfeasants. Such interventions might take the form of surveillance, incarceration, or medication. And in fact, such a program of prevention is already being offered by today's neurocriminologists as a prospective good.

But neurolawyers and neurocriminologists are not exactly neuroscientists. The irony is that "we have no evidence whatsoever that activity in the brain is more predictive of things we care about in the courtroom than the behaviors themselves that we correlate with brain function," according to Elizabeth Phelps, a cognitive neuroscientist at New York University, quoted by Rosen. In other words, if you want to predict whether someone is going to break the law in the future, a picture of his brain is no better than a record of his past behavior. Indeed, it is quite a bit worse. The significance of a brain abnormality revealed in a scan consists of the fact that that particular abnormality has been

correlated (imperfectly) with the behavior of large numbers of other people, which is the provenance of social science. So the scan itself is an intermediate thing, gratuitously interjected between social science of the sort that has long played a role in the courtroom and the judgment that must be made in the particular case. The story of neurological causation of behavior told by lawyers and criminologists merely adds a layer of metaphysics.

While such uses of brain scans are gratuitous, they are not without consequence. Margaret Talbot, writing in *The New Yorker*, reports on a forthcoming study in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, of all places. It shines a light on the magical, totemic effect of brain scans on those viewing them. For the experiment, the authors tested three groups: neuroscientists, neuroscience students, and lay adults. The subjects in each group were offered explanations for psychological phenomena familiar to everyday experience (for example, our tendency to assume other people know the same things we do). Some of these explanations were contrived to be pointedly bad explanations. The authors found, in Talbot's words, "that all three groups were adept at identifying the bad explanations, except when [the authors] inserted the words, 'Brain scans indicate.'" Then the students and lay adults tended to accept the bad explanation.

These findings suggest that we are culturally predisposed to surrender our own judgment in the face of "science." This tendency presents an opportunity for all manner of cultural entrepreneurs who seek authority over others, whether in law, policy, psychiatry, or management. There is no arguing with a picture of a brain. Among those charged with the administration of human beings (to say nothing of marketing), there is a great hunger for scientific-looking accounts that can justify their interventions, as the aura of neutral science imparts

If doing wrong is "hard wired," this would seem to call into question our usual understanding of moral responsibility, and punishing the wrong-doer for his actions would then make as much sense as punishing a defective car for overheating.



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legitimacy to their efforts. Thus does power get laundered into something more august: authority. Is this cynical manipulation? Perhaps not; the hankering after reductive explanations can be a sincere reflection of professional and institutional interests. The need for public reason-giving predisposes lawyers, judges, shrinks, and policy wonks to explanations that are objective, hence universally affirmable. This is to their credit, but unfortunately it also disposes them to be easily enthralled with half-baked scientific claims about human beings, and to lend their voices to publicizing them. Such publicity exploits our cultural tendency to conceive ourselves in mechanistic terms, and furthers it.

#### INDIVIDUALISM AND SUBJECTIVITY

Invoking a mental mechanism seems to do important cultural work at the nexus of science, law, and liberal political culture.

Science and law both place a high value on detached objectivity. In their pursuit of law-like generalizations, scientists try to conduct experiments that are fully replicable, free of their own idiosyncratic subjectivity. Similarly, a defense lawyer who points to a brain scan appeals to something visible to all, rather than making unverifiable claims about the private reality of his or her client. More generally, in a courtroom as in the public square, an individual is supposed to make no claims against his fellow citizens that are not universally affirmable; he must make his case in the language of formal rights rather than demand his due as an individual with a proper name. The ideal liberal subject would seem to be an averaged subject, free of idiosyncrasy (this may help to explain our love of public opinion polls and the attractions of the normal). Subjectivity, then, seems to be an irritant both for science and for one of our central liberal ideals, namely, the rule of law. If individual consciousness can be reduced to an objectively observable mechanism, this would solve both problems with one stroke.

But there is a paradox here, because another principle of both science and liberalism is epistemic “individualism.” That is, we are commanded to judge things for ourselves, rather than rely on authority. Yet this presents precisely the problem of idiosyncrasy that science and liberalism must overcome. Alexis de Tocqueville shows how this paradox gets worked out in the mental life of a citizen. Thrown back on himself and told to rely on his own judgment, an individual finds that he is in fact not competent to judge everything for himself. Understandably, this makes him anxious, so he casts about for help. He cannot look to tradition—that would be perverse, given his belief in progress. So he looks to the mass of his contemporaries, and finds reassurance in the numerical weight of their opinions. The individualist, it turns out, is a conformist. Today’s deterministic view of individual consciousness may be attractive for the same reason: it lightens the burden of responsibility. Modern thought posits a radical self-sufficiency of the individual, hence radical responsibility, and when this view founders on the rocks of psychic reality, we reach for an opposite doctrine of radical irresponsibility. ■



# Cubitopia

The utopian ideal of the cubicle

*David Franz*

AT THE END OF THE 1970s, the old regime of the American corporate office was under fire. The walls and doors that separated one employee from another had come to be seen as obstacles in the path of revolutionary change. It wasn't long-haired radicals who led the charge, nor was it the blue-

collared proletariat who felt bound by the old order. This was a revolution of white-collar professionals. Their intellectuals—architects, advertisers, and especially business writers—argued that individual offices were becoming a thing of the past, and none too soon. Oversized offices, offices with windows, corner



offices—these structures of arrogance and petty resentment had for so long seemed permanent and inevitable. Now they had to come down. A new world was rising from this rubble, a world of openings: open lines of communication, “open door policies”—or no doors at all! A new age was dawning: the Age of the Cubicle.

Architecture publications of the 1970s described the new cubi-cled office as “cybernetic,” without walls to stop the “free flow of ideas.” If the pictures in cubicle advertisements were any indication of their promise, cubicles helped ideas flow quite freely indeed. Without computers, email, and the internet, employees in these ads are pictured in moments of frenzied, low-tech communication: pointing to each other across the room, handing papers over and around the burnt orange (“aesthetically pleasing and humanly satisfying”) partitions, all while talking on the phone and jotting down notes.

West Coast technology companies gave the cubicle its initial sparkle. In the late 1970s, business writers described the radical work arrangements of Silicon Valley with breathless enthusiasm. The computer chip company Intel often served as

the example of what cubicles made possible. The company had no time cards, no dress codes, no assigned parking spots, no special cafeterias for executives, and above all, no offices, just a sea of half-wall partitions. The long, low buildings of Intel were fields of shared labor, like the communal farms that had so recently dotted the hills around Intel’s Silicon Valley campus. CEO Andrew Grove, hip and casual in an open-necked wide-collared shirt and gold chains, was an unpretentious man of the people. He moved among the workers of Intel “empowering” them to do their jobs, and sat at a cubicle at one side of the vast work floor ready to help. Most incredible of all (and unlike the communal farms), this social experiment was economically viable. In a time when the great industrial powers were falling to Japanese competition, Intel was making money hand over fist. The model was powerfully attractive. In 1980, *Atlantic Monthly* contributor James Fallows asked the question on the minds of so many worried observers of American industry: “Could the tire companies, the machine tool makers, the color TV industry, learn to work this way?”

The fascination with fluid, egalitarian organization might have remained a passing fad had it not been for management writers. In the early 1980s, precisely at the moment of the cubicle’s ascent, management consultants found a public hungry for management wisdom. Suddenly management books, previously confined to business school bookstores, joined diet manuals and self-help books as best-sellers. They instructed Americans in the subtleties of Japanese management, quality control, and globalization, but behind these particular trends management writers saw what they believed to be the beginning of a new era in which bureaucracy and hierarchy would be obsolete and equality, creativity, and change would rule the day. Management writers often referred to this shift as the “management revolution,” writing books with titles like *Liberation Management* to drive the point home. The cubicle, with its flexible structure and inherent egalitarianism, provided the physical backdrop for this vision.

Needless to say, the cubicle has lost much of its luster. Less favorable interpretations of the “revolution” were always possible, of course: one person’s







flexibility was another's part-time job without benefits. But the cubicle no longer enjoys even this ambiguous position. In 2006 *Fortune* ran an article entitled "Cubicles: The Great Mistake," complete with a public apology from one of the first cubicle designers. Twenty years after his *Atlantic Monthly* article extolling the virtues of the cubicled office, Fallows wrote another on how he changed his mind. In *Dilbert*, *The Office*, *Office Space*, and many other popular satires of contemporary office work, the cubicle is a symbol of all that is petty, uninspiring, and even dehumanizing in corporate life. The promises of cubicle utopia now seem curious, to say the least.

More than a mere curiosity, the short history of cubicle utopianism is suggestive of a deeper current of restlessness in contemporary economic life. The utopia of the cubicled office was less a positive vision for the future than an expression of frustration with the present. Cubicles were most appealing as an abstraction and when pitted *against* something broad and amorphous like "bureaucracy" and "hierarchy"; their own character remained in the background. It is telling that "change" (not any *particular* change, mind you) was first spoken of in management talk as a good at the time of the cubicle's rise.

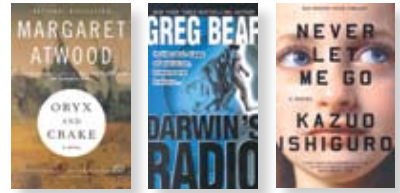
Frustration with the present is nothing new to capitalism. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wondered at the disruptive power of markets, noting that under their influence "all fixed, fast-frozen relations...are swept away." In the early twentieth century and with very different politics, economist Joseph Schumpeter argued that capitalism was characterized by a process of "creative destruction." There certainly is a disposition cultivated by capitalism—the watchfulness for opportunity, the striving for lower costs, the

quest for new markets—that has always introduced a shot of dynamism into the world. But there is something different about the sound of such phrases to us today. "Creative destruction" used to be a counter-intuitive, even provocative, phrase. Capitalists—conservative in dress and morals—were, on the face of it, the establishment, hardly creative or destructive. But we now listen to internet executives in flip-flops, goatees, and tie-dye talk about the revolutionary potential of their company. Filtered through the counter-culture, "creative destruction" has become a business ideal. "Game changing products" and "disruptive technologies" are cause for shareholder celebration. "Change-agents" and people who can "re-invent themselves" are employee-of-the-month material.

The openness to new possibilities entailed in this ideal undoubtedly has a certain appeal. We are increasingly freed from rigid job descriptions, fixed roles, and career tracks. Career and management experts encourage us to be light on our feet, ready to make a move should the opportunity arise. However, our situation is also fraught with anxiety. Companies are freed from loyalty to us as well, should we fail or our niches disappear. We are haunted, as sociologist Richard Sennett says, by the "specter of uselessness."

Perhaps someday the old offices with their big, solid walls will return. For now, however, restlessness seems to have settled in and put down roots. Cubicles, no longer the symbol of a wonderful society of the future, achieve a nearly perfect architectural expression of the restless present. Starting over no longer requires sledgehammers and demolition workers—just a new idea and a few screwdrivers. ■





*Books reviewed in this essay:*

Margaret Atwood. *Oryx and Crake*.  
New York: Anchor, 2003.

Greg Bear. *Darwin's Radio*.  
New York: Ballantine, 1999.

Kazuo Ishiguro. *Never Let Me Go*.  
New York: Vintage, 2005.

# PLAUSIBLE WORLDS

## Human Genetics in Fiction

*Kevin Seidel*

EVER SINCE DON QUIXOTE TILTED HIS LANCE against the windmill, novels have expressed ways to fight the sense of futility so often induced by technological change. Whether we make our living inside or outside the scientific guild, whether we are inclined toward naive optimism or fatalistic despair, we can learn a great deal from three fiction writers who grapple with the challenges that genetics and biotechnologies pose to human thinking and feeling.

*Oryx and Crake*, by Margaret Atwood, depicts a future world both terrifying and ridiculous, dominated by corporations that have grown rich and powerful selling their transgenic products to the masses. The pigoon, for example, made by OrganInc, is a pig that can grow five to six human-tissue organs at once, each easy to harvest for smooth transplant to a human body. ChickieNobs are a tasty fast food made from transgenic chickens that are all breast, actually twelve breasts—no bones, no feathers, no head, just twelve bulbs of meat, covered by “stippled whitish-yellow skin,” connected by fleshy tubes. These are the products of a future world seen in retrospect by the novel, a world already ruined, given to readers piece

by narrative piece, from the post-apocalyptic vantage point of Atwood’s narrator, Jimmy, also known as Snowman to the docile new species of humanity who survive the apocalypse. The circumstances of the survivors’ creation and of the catastrophe that has left Snowman alone with them are not fully explained until the end of the novel. Readers learn early on that Jimmy is good with words, and he is good at making people laugh. In high school, he meets Crake, a biotech genius with a taste for reading the ancient Stoics. Jimmy and Crake become friends, watching executions and assisted suicides on the web and trolling through porn sites. They become rivals when they fall in love with a girl that they see on one of these sites, Oryx. When the love triangle between Jimmy, Oryx, and Crake goes wrong, the world suffers.

Atwood writes everywhere with beautiful and cutting precision. She makes Jimmy the fallible Moses of her story, writing a genesis account of the world before the fall of Adam and Eve, or, in this case, Crake and Oryx, a fall in which Jimmy is complicit. Atwood paints the lives of her charmingly deprived biotech nobility with profound satire, the depths of which can-



not easily be reached with a single reading. Her novel will be strong tonic to anyone who feels constitutionally cheerful about the future; it also works as a lightning rod for a certain kind of misanthropy, which enjoys fondling the idea that humanity will soon be extinct. Instead of endorsing that antipathy, with *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood channels it into the ground.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is the story of "Kathy H." and her closest friends, Ruth and Tommy, who meet as children at a school called Hailsham. Its committed teachers, rigorous curriculum, special emphasis on creativity, and countryside setting give Hailsham all the trappings of an elite prep school, but the children are not preparing for college or prestigious careers. The children at Hailsham have been artificially conceived to serve as organ donors until they "complete" (or die), usually in their early thirties. Some, like Kathy, delay their initial donations by serving as "carers" to other donors. What drives the novel is not the gradual illumination of the truth about the school and its children. Rather, it is the weight of unacknowledged love and unexpressed grief that gives the novel its force.

Kathy's story turns less around a lost past than a lost future, the sorrow of finding your life already laid out and the future fully disclosed. So she concentrates on moments of uncertainty: when her Hailsham group first leaves the school, and they stand together at their new house "uncertain about the future"; or the moment in Norfolk when she and Tommy decide to go searching for her lost tape, and they "had nothing but fun and laughter before us." Such moments are the counterpoint to the far-from-great expectations given to Kathy and her friends at Hailsham. Through Kathy's account, Ishiguro subtly shifts the moral center of what it means to be human away from origins (how the children were conceived), education (the manners that they learn), and creativity (what the children paint and write), toward participation in an open future, and it is Kathy's lack of such a future, exacerbated by her love for Tommy, that she cannot fully grieve or put into words. She can only find consolation performing her role. To read *Never Let Me Go* is to be a donor waiting for completion under Kathy's expert narrative care.

*Darwin's Radio*, by Greg Bear, weaves together the story of Mitch Rafelson, an anthropologist with an uncanny gift for discovering ancient human remains; Kaye Lang, a microbiologist who studies retroviruses; and Christopher Dicken, an epidemiologist who works as a "virus hunter" for the U.S.

government. Kaye's pathbreaking research turns out to be the key to understanding an outbreak of bizarre stillbirths around the world. When various government agencies and the biotech industry mobilize to find a cure, they create a political juggernaut at least as dangerous as the disease, and Mitch, Kaye, and Dicken struggle to prove that the virus, SHEVA, is not actually a disease but a genetic messenger. The central idea of the novel is that over the centuries the human genome has been steadily compiling instructions for adapting to social change, but these instructions, and the specific adaptations they code for, have lain dormant, unexpressed in the seeming waste places of the human genome. SHEVA is the genome's radio signal that now is the time to adapt. The result is a new species of human beings.

Bear's artistry shows itself in the way he makes the gradual understanding of SHEVA part of the plot of his novel, so that readers experience how close scientific discovery is to novelistic discovery. *Darwin's Radio* and its sequel, *Darwin's Children* (Del Rey, 2003), explore the possibility of living with a new species of humanity made so by nature, better equipped for life together than either the cyborgs of *Blade Runner* or the mutants of *X-Men*. Bear also ventures into territories of human experience that Atwood and Ishiguro do not, writing beautifully about Kaye's surprising encounter with a transcendent, personal presence that "found her very good." Notwithstanding the allusion to the early chapters of Genesis, Bear's description breaks ranks with modern-day creationists who keep their god confined to the gaps of what science does not know and to literalistic readings of what happened "in the beginning." At the same time, by imagining the adaptive potential latent in the human genome, Bear ruffles the feathers of orthodox neo-Darwinists, for whom change can only occur gradually through random mutation.

With Atwood we can criticize more sharply the collusion between literary banality, represented by Jimmy, and scientific self-absorption, represented by Crake. With Ishiguro we can learn to sympathize with those powerless to change the roles prescribed to them by new technology, but neither of their novels will make us want to learn more about the science, or, for that matter, care much for scientists. Greg Bear is better in this regard because he includes genomics theory and the lives of ordinary scientists within the compass of his fiction, provoking readers to envision a future world that is plausibly good. ■

# Reconsidering the Roots of Multiculturalism

An interview with recent IASC Fellow Kevin Schultz



*In September 2007, American Quarterly will publish recent Institute Postdoctoral Fellow Kevin Schultz's essay, "Favoritism Cannot Be Tolerated." We spoke with Kevin about the article and its implications for views of individualism and multiculturalism.*

**Historians tell stories and then tease lessons from them. Let's begin with your story, then consider the lessons.**

My paper tells the story of what happened when the Gideons—a society of mostly businessmen made famous by their hotel Bibles—tried to put a Bible in the hands of every public school student in the United States. This took place in the early 1950s, when the Cold War was heating up and when many Americans were looking for a way to differentiate themselves from those godless communists living in the Soviet Union. The Gideons thought it would be important for Americans to affirm their Christianity, so they asked permission to go into public schools and distribute their Bibles.

The problem was, of course, that many non-Christians attended America's public schools. The Gideon Bible is basically a Protestant book, so Catholics were offended by the Gideons too. I examine the court case that resulted when

Catholics and Jews came together to fight the Gideon initiative. The case eventually went to the New Jersey Supreme Court, then to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the courts upheld a decision that "favoritism cannot be tolerated." The court thought that allowing the Gideons onto public school grounds was playing favorites to Protestants.

**Was this case unique?**

It was unique in that it was the Gideons who were the defendants. That Catholics and Jews came together so publicly to fight against the Protestant majority was somewhat unusual. But it was not at all unique in how Catholics and Jews stepped up to ensure that America affirm its pluralism. During these Cold War years, both Catholics and Jews were struggling to figure out how they could maintain their claim to being good, full-fledged members of American society while retaining a distinctive identity, and without being penalized for doing so.

**What do we learn from the Gideon case and others like it?**

Two things really. The first is that religious groups were really important in crafting the language of contemporary pluralism—what today we call multiculturalism. Usually we think of multiculturalism in terms of race, gender, or sexuality, but





Handing out free Bibles in Times Square, New York. © Jerry Arcteri/Corbis

the story of the Gideons shows that Catholics and Jews were really struggling with the issue of American pluralism long before racial or gendered minorities were granted the public recognition to do so. My research puts religious groups in the vanguard of the movement to affirm a multicultural America.

My second argument is more theoretical, but just as important. Prominent political theorists like Michael Sandel and Alasdair MacIntyre have been arguing that America is a diffuse and disconnected place that lacks any vision of a larger community; that what it means to be an American is simply to affirm an individual's right to do this or that and not to have to give anything up to the will of the majority. Because of this stress on individual rights, they call America a "procedural republic." I'm actually pretty sympathetic to this critique, but I think the people who are making this claim don't know the history of our "procedural republic."

My essay shows that there are good reasons for the emphasis on individual rights. Historically, most conceptions of the American nation have been grounded in a sense of exclusion, in a sense of—for the Gideons—America as a

Protestant nation, or—for many other Americans—of America as a white nation, or some other kind of place, each with a limited definition of what it means to be a full-fledged member. The emphasis on proceduralism eliminates many of the descent-based exclusions, making America something defined by shared ideas, not blood.

### Does that leave us without "any vision of a larger community"?

Yes and no. To be sure, proceduralism and state neutrality certainly have their problems, and finding a collective vision is probably the most important one. But in my mind, the affirmation of a rights-based society is really the least-worst option. As we all know, dealing with pluralism is a worldwide problem—as witnessed in our culture wars here in America, Muslim immigration throughout Western Europe, and the postcolonial battles raging in Africa. Most of these debates—which have too often led to violence—are grounded in affirming some descent-based identity and some claim as to who has the right to define the nation, to define what it means to be an American, to be French, and so on. In this atmosphere, an ideological definition of what it means to be American grants eligibility to anyone who chooses to affirm certain fundamental propositions. You don't have to affirm Protestantism, for instance, but you do have to affirm democracy, individual rights, limited free-market capitalism, and other things like these.

Furthermore—and this is important—there is a thicker meaning to this affirmation of America's proceduralist tradition than many of the critics acknowledge. Oftentimes, the critics are so put out by the racial or gender claims made in the name of multiculturalism, they find it easy to dismiss multiculturalism as simply an effort by aggrieved minorities to use guilt to get some form of reparation. But we need to see that this call for group recognition is undergirded by a long tradition of religious toleration, a toleration that emerged as a way beyond the religious wars of the sixteenth century. We also need to recognize that the dissenting tradition of state neutrality is a founding ideal of the American republic. The call for a neutral state, then, is not some postmodern quest for freedom, where everybody gets to define the good life for themselves and forget everybody else. Rather, it's something that sits at the very historical heart of what it means to be an American. This is why we find the strange paradox in the religious groups that I study—Catholics and Jews—who have insisted, in key respects, on a secular state. ■



# Book Reviews

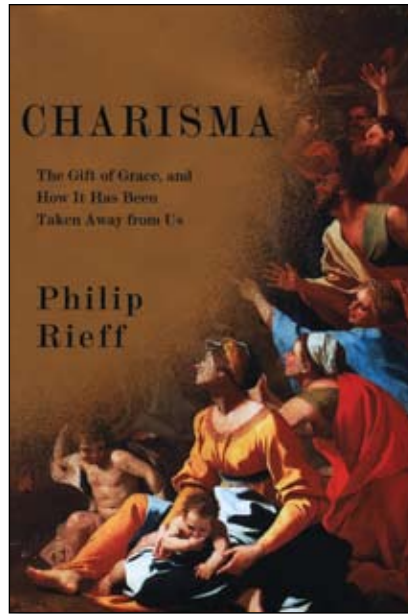
## Charisma: The Gift of Grace, and How It Has Been Taken Away from Us

**Philip Rieff**

New York: Pantheon, 2007. 288pp.

Social scientists have remarkable difficulty distinguishing between authority and power. Max Weber set the distinction in its canonical form some one hundred years ago: we obey authority because we ought to; we obey power because we are afraid not to. This is clear enough when power is manifest as physical violence, but what about the power to manipulate through symbols? What is the difference between the use of religious imagery by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Madonna? Distinctions between inspiration and manipulation, heroism and celebrity, prophecy and propaganda, are obviously crucial to our lives, but remain largely invisible to social science. It is tempting to blame either the American experts of survey and spreadsheet or the French post-Marxists of recent fashion for this stammering inarticulacy. But the late Philip Rieff argues in *Charisma* that Weber himself is to blame.

It is from Weber that we get our concept of “charisma,” that indefinite follower-attracting aura associated with rock stars and celebrity politicians. Rieff shows how Weber pulled the term from the obscurity of Protestant historiography, where it referred to God’s “gifts of grace” to the church and served as a rhetorical weapon against Catholic institutions. Weber de-theologized the concept, equating charisma with a general type of leadership that could include



as diverse a set of characters as shield-biting Norse warriors, Socrates, and Jesus. But his meaning remained otherwise close to the concept in Protestant polemic. Weber’s “charisma” is profoundly individualistic. It is a force alien to every culture. The charismatic leader bows only to the compulsions within himself and claims followers strictly on the basis of this personal authority. Weber saw Jesus’s formula “you have heard that it was written...but I say to you...” as the essence of charisma. Such a personal power could only be disruptive. Indeed, Weber believed charisma could only create something new insofar as the charismatic energies cooled.

Rieff argues that in Weber’s attempt to make charisma a sociological concept rather than a theological one, he obscured what is most authoritative and social about charisma as it existed in Christianity. The deep inwardness of the

charismatic is only possible in a culture that is clear about what must not be done—what Rieff calls a creedal culture: “both Christ and Socrates felt authority more strongly, not less; they intensified as they criticized the received renunciatory demands” (148). True charismatics (and every creedal culture must be on guard against the power-hungry false ones) do not speak on their own behalf, but in the name of limits that are above them and before them. Rieff reminds us that Jesus also said that he came “to fulfill the law and the prophets.”

For Rieff, it is the acknowledgment of creedal limits that allows us to distinguish charismatic authority from the manipulative skill cultivated in leadership seminars and television studios. “There is no charisma without creed,” Rieff says. In this pithy formulation, Rieff captures the difference between Martin Luther King, Jr., who called us to recognize what our commitments required of us, and Madonna, who calls us to “express ourselves.” It is a crucial distinction and, according to Rieff, a distinction that requires us to consider precisely what Weber thought it necessary to ignore, namely, the particularities of tradition. ■

—David Franz

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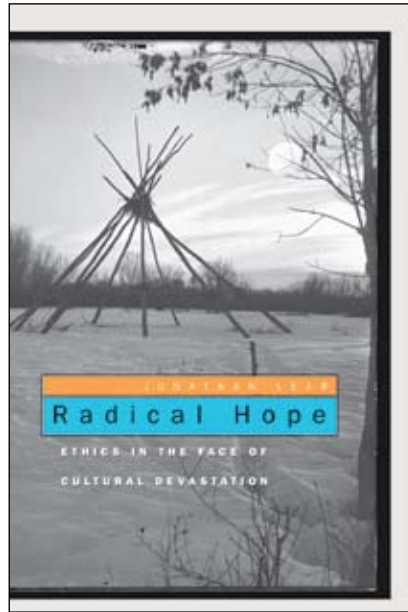
## Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation

**Jonathan Lear**

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 187pp.

What happens when a culture dies? What would it mean for a people to contemplate the end of all they know and hold dear, due to their incorporation into other cultures because of catastrophe or conquest? Answering such impossible questions is Jonathan Lear's project in this profound meditation on cultural vulnerability. Lear's animating interest is to illuminate a capacity deep within humanity, within culture, for resilience and renewal even in the face of severe devastation.

The subject of this study is the life and example of Plenty Coups, the great chief of the Crow Indians. Lear begins his exploration with a suggestive passage from Plenty Coups's autobiography: "But when the Buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing else happened." Lear understands these words to be recognition by Plenty Coups that although people who went by the name Crow lived on, what it meant to be Crow no longer made sense in the old ways. On the reservation, the ideals of the nomadic warrior culture and traditional Crow practices could not provide individual tribe members with a meaningful horizon of significance. The old ideals were still second nature, but they were no longer adequate to the new circumstances. The consequences



were enormous: for the rites of passage of young Crow children, for the life trajectories of braves and squaws, for the relations between men and women and between young and old. Plenty Coups bore witness, according to Lear, to the end of history.

But Lear believes that Plenty Coups bore witness to something else: hope. He does this by drawing on Crow tradition in fresh ways, neither abandoning practices that had become obsolete, nor defending them to the death. On a vision quest Plenty Coups is instructed in a dream to learn from the wisdom of the Chickadee, a significant figure in the Crow religious imagination. The Chickadee's wisdom was its ability to listen and adapt in order to survive. Appealing to the Chickadee, "least in strength but strongest of mind," the Crow were able to remain firmly, yet innovatively, within their own culture even as they confronted an increasingly

alien and hostile world. The future would be vastly different, even desperate, but authentically Crow all the same.

Beyond the possibility of cultural survival for the dispossessed, Lear raises important questions about our own way of life and whether we possess the resources—the language and symbols, practices and traditions—for discussing its vulnerabilities. While it is hard to imagine our present way of life threatened as radically as Plenty Coups's, we confront major challenges at nearly every turn—terrorism, environmental devastation, global pandemics, energy shortages, and more. *Radical Hope* provokes even the most confident reader to consider just how well we are facing up to such vulnerabilities.

Whatever the future brings, what seems certain is that reflecting on how we think about and act on our vulnerability will be central to ensuring that the future leads to the possibilities not only for our survival but for our flourishing. Lear's accomplishment is that he offers us a useful starting point: we might begin by listening to Plenty Coups the way he listened to the Chickadee. ■

—Joshua J. Yates

# In the News



Jim Hall

## Friday Seminar Focuses on Scientism

Each year, the Institute runs a regular Friday seminar for fellows and faculty. The seminar provides a gathering to discuss and exchange ideas on current topics and scholarship and is organized around selected readings as well as presentations by guest speakers.

For the 2007–08 academic year, the Institute's Friday seminar will be devoted to the theme of scientism. One of the persistent aspirations of modern thought since the seventeenth century has been to integrate the human sciences with the natural sciences, in terms native to the latter. Distinctively human qualities, such as reason, creativity, and a moral sense, are to be explained as manifestations of more fundamental natural mechanisms (currently genes, brain synapses, and the like). Since the early twentieth century, however, there has been a complaint, voiced from various quarters, that such deterministic accounts are incompatible with our own experience of ourselves and end up explaining away more than they explain. Yet the appeal of scientific and reductive accounts of the human person seems, if anything, to

have grown. What is the source of this appeal? We will consider manifestations in contemporary culture where a reductive explanatory posture seems to do important cultural work as a form of authority. The goal of the seminar will be to make us alert to such instances, and to equip our scholars to render explicit the claims that are usually left implicit in reductive explanations. ■

## New Faculty and Postdoctoral Fellow Join the Institute

This year the Institute welcomes two new faculty members and a new postdoctoral fellow.



**Slavica Jakelić** joins the Institute as a Research Assistant Professor of Religious Studies. Professor

Jakelić earned her Ph.D. degree in Religious Studies at Boston University and has been the Associate Director of our Center on Religion and Democracy for the past several years. Earlier, she worked or was a fellow at a number of interdisciplinary institutes in Europe and the U.S.: the Erasmus Institute for the Culture of Democracy in Croatia, the Institute for the Study of Economic Cultures at Boston University, Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna, Austria, and the Erasmus Institute at the University of Notre Dame.

Professor Jakelić will serve as Co-Director of the Institute's Program on Religion, Culture, and Democracy and its Fellowship Program.



**Joshua J. Yates** joins the Institute as a Research Assistant Professor of Sociology.

After graduating from the University of Montana, Professor Yates worked for a year at the Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs, a research center focusing on relations between the U.S. and the countries of the Pacific Rim. He then did stints as a Mickey Leland Hunger Fellow/VISTA volunteer and at the Congressional Hunger Center, where he served as the first director.

Professor Yates received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Virginia. He will direct the Program on Global Culture and Social Change and

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## The Institute has a new look!

Our redesigned website now makes available our research objectives and vision statement, information about supporting the Institute, and an online order form for Institute publications.

You can also sign up for our eNewsletter. Go to [www.virginia.edu/iasc](http://www.virginia.edu/iasc).





co-direct the Fellows Program with Professor Jakelić.



Also coming to the Institute this fall as a postdoctoral fellow is **Regina Smardon**. Dr. Smardon holds a B.A.

in Anthropology from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, and an M.S. in Education and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Pennsylvania. She is a cultural sociologist and ethnographer interested in social class inequality in the American education system, especially the special education system. As a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute, she will be developing a manuscript entitled *Learning to Label*, based on her 2002–04 fieldwork exploring the meaning of disability expansion in an Appalachian school district. ■

**THE HEDGEHOG REVIEW**  
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

*The fox knows many things,  
but the hedgehog knows  
one big thing.*  
—Archilocus

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Kristine Harmon

## “Love and Justice”

A lecture by philosopher  
Nicholas Wolterstorff

Thursday, November 1, 2007

1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Dome Room, The Rotunda, UVa Grounds

Reception to follow in the Colonnade Club

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

## Nicholas Wolterstorff Delivers Fall Lecture

*Prominent philosopher and Institute Senior Fellow Nicholas Wolterstorff will deliver a lecture this fall on “Love and Justice,” in connection with his forthcoming book on the topic. We caught up with Professor Wolterstorff and asked him about his theme.*

### How did you first become interested in the topic of justice?

My interest in the topic of justice did not arise out of teaching responsibilities, nor out of a larger writing project, but out of personal contact with severe cases of injustice—namely, out of acquaintance with blacks and so-called “coloureds” [persons of mixed descent—ed.] in South Africa, and out of acquaintance with Palestinians. It was their faces and their voices that inspired me to think and write about justice.

### The term “love,” in popular parlance, has many meanings. What do you mean by the word “love”?

What I mean by “love” is caring about. Caring about resembles benevolence (generosity, charity) in that it seeks to advance the other person’s well-being. But caring about differs from benevolence in that to care about someone is not only to seek to advance their well-being but is also to see to it that their worth is honored. Thus caring about incorporates doing justice.

### As you have noted elsewhere, love and justice are usually seen to be conflicting ideas. Why, then, is it important to think about these concepts in tandem?

Those who think of love as benevolence rightly see love and justice in conflict. To be charitable is to forgive—and to forgive can seem an injustice. Some seek to resolve the conflict by giving up on justice in such cases; others propose that, when conflicts arise, we do justice and let go of love, in the expectation that in the eschaton or end times, love can reign supreme. I hold that it is always wrong to perpetrate injustice, even in the name of love; and that it is equally wrong to reduce our relation to our fellows to rendering them their due, as this falls short of truly caring about them. ■

# Human Flourishing

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Over the past decade, I have increasingly encountered the concept of “flourishing,” and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture pursues its research questions with an eye toward the “cultivation of human flourishing.” What’s the idea? What is it for a human being to flourish?

A common answer to this question is the one offered by the utilitarian tradition. One asks if people experience their lives as satisfying; the more satisfying one’s life, the better that life; the less satisfying, the worse.

One problem with this approach is that felt satisfaction is easily manipulated. Afrikaners and slave owners of the American South, for example, often spoke of “the happy Negro.” There was, of course, a great deal of willful ignorance involved in the conviction that segregated and enslaved people felt satisfied with their lives. But there were some enslaved persons who did feel that way; they had been schooled into being satisfied with their constraints. Nonetheless, their lives were in serious need of improvement.

Why so? An answer that has recently gained currency is the so-called *capabilities approach*. The defect in the lives of enslaved persons is that, whether or not they experience their lives as satisfying, they never have the oppor-

tunity to develop and exercise certain fundamental human capacities. In this approach, one is flourishing only when one has the opportunity to develop these capacities and when one does in fact exercise them virtuously. Those who make this argument are working within the Aristotelian tradition of ethical thought. They use “flourishing” to express the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* (or “happiness”).

The concept of *shalom* that we find in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is also a notion of flourishing, but it conceptualizes flourishing somewhat differently. The Aristotelian tradition and the ethical traditions of pagan antiquity generally understand flourishing as the well-lived life; that is what constitutes happiness. The biblical writers understand flourishing as the life that is not only lived well but goes well; that is what constitutes *shalom*.

Had the biblical writers been philosophers, and had they engaged the ancient pagan philosophers, I think they would have wanted to make the following three points.

One may be living one’s life well and yet it may not be going well. Job in his suffering is an example. Aristotelians try to accommodate Job’s situation by saying that there were certain virtues that he could not (fully) exercise, and

hence that he was not living his life as well as he could. I think the biblical writers would reply that, apart from whether or not his suffering impaired his virtuous activity, Job’s life was not fully flourishing. (They might have added that some virtues can only be exercised in straitened circumstances.)

Second, *shalom* includes the idea of being treated justly. One can be wronged in a way that conceals the wrongdoing and has no negative impact on how one lives. The biblical writers would say that, nonetheless, one’s life in this respect was not going well, that the wrongdoing diminishes one’s flourishing.

Third, as compared to *eudaimonia*, the concept of *shalom* places more emphasis on harmony. Flourishing, in the sense of *shalom*, requires that one exist in harmony with nature, with one’s fellow human beings, with God—and indeed, with oneself.

My own view is that *perceived satisfaction* is an inadequate standard. The important debate is whether the concept of *eudaimonia* as the well-lived life captures what it is for a human being to flourish, or whether we need the broader concept of *shalom* to capture it. ■

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# Recent Books

## Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference

**Kristen Deede Johnson**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 288pp.



How can we live together in the midst of our differences? This book describes the move from tolerance to difference, and the accompanying move from epistemology to ontology, within recent political theory. Building on this "ontological turn," Johnson then searches for a theological answer by putting Augustine into conversation with recent political theorists and theologians.

*Kristen Deede Johnson is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Hope College and a former Research Associate of the Institute.*

## The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility

**Jeffrey K. Olick**

London: Routledge, 2007. 272pp.



Acknowledging the importance of social memory has not only provided agency to ordinary people when it comes to understanding the past, but has also made conflicting interpretations of the meaning of the past more fraught. Olick looks at how catastrophic pasts, such as those of Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa, are remembered, and the role that this remembering plays in social structures.

*Jeffrey K. Olick is Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia and a faculty fellow at the Institute.*

## culture

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