

HUMANISM: PROGRESSIVE PHILOSOPHY AT ODDS WITH ITSELF

JAMES A. MONTANYE

ABSTRACT: Humanism is a longstanding intellectual tradition dedicated to moral, aesthetic, and social perfectibility. Classical liberalism and modern libertarianism are products of classical humanist thinking; so is Enlightenment humanism, which substituted science and secular reason for theological dogma and ignorant superstition. Today's progressive humanist movement, by contrast, transcends freedom, liberty, and reason by seeking utopian perfection through flawed secular dogma and compulsory communitarianism. This article traces the development of humanist thinking and argues that humanism's progressive values cannot be achieved via compulsory means, as evinced by the repeated failure of intellectual attempts to transform functioning societies into social utopias. Perfectibility—within the realm of inherent human possibility—is possible only through the philosophy of classical liberalism.

KEYWORDS: humanism, liberalism, libertarianism, progressivism, unitarianism

[O]ne should not require precision in all pursuits alike, but in each field precision varies with the matter under discussion and should be required only to the extent to which it is appropriate to the investigation. – Aristotle ([n.d.] 1962, 18)

Men, almost certainly, are capable of more than they have ever so far achieved. But what they achieve...will be a consequence of their remaining anxious, passionate, discontented human beings. To attempt, in the quest for perfection, to raise men above that level is to court disaster; there is no level above it, there is only a level below it. – Passmore ([1969] 2000, 258)

James A. Montanye (jmont.ccg@gmail.com) is retired from economics consulting. He lives in Falls Church, Virginia.



INTRODUCTION

Humanism is a longstanding intellectual tradition dedicated to the moral, aesthetic, and social “perfectibility of man” (the Marquis de Condorcet introduced the phrase; see Passmore [1969] 2000 for coverage). Today’s humanist movement bills itself as “a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity” (American Humanist Association 2003). Its declared mission is “to manifest in clear and positive terms the conceptual boundaries of Humanism, not what we must believe but a consensus of what we do believe” (ibid.). The movement nevertheless has transformed classical humanism’s penchant for the humanities into the flexible set of progressive political beliefs and values espoused by self-styled humanists, for whom perfection entails a fanciful stream of something-for-nothing social benefits, financed from a perpetual endowment of national economic surplus that is presumed to flow regardless of the productive behavioral incentives that foster economic growth. Formal membership in humanist organizations at all levels is estimated to be less than fifty thousand; perhaps ten times that number access humanist websites via social media. These numbers are misleading in part: progressive humanist values presently are shared by a substantial majority of Americans.

The essence of contemporary humanism is summarized by the prominent academic psychologist, and self-identified Enlightenment humanist, Steven Pinker:

The goal of maximizing human flourishing—life, health, happiness, freedom, knowledge, love, richness of experience—may be called humanism....It is humanism that identifies *what* we should try to achieve with our knowledge. It provides the *ought* that supplements the *is*. It distinguishes true progress from mere mastery....There is a growing *movement* called Humanism, which promotes a non-supernatural basis for meaning and ethics: good without God. (Pinker 2018, 410)

Pinker’s embrace of humanism is in tension with his earlier stance against the progressive intellectual tendency toward “the denial of human nature” (Pinker 2002): he argues in that context that perfectibility must flow from human nature as it is; he opposes adopting hypothetical measures of perfection that are predicated upon normative imaginings of what human nature *ought* to be. The

conflict between *ought* and *is*—between logic and experience—sets humanism at odds with itself.

This essay argues instead that human perfectibility cannot be achieved via progressive humanist means. Rather, it can be achieved—to the extent inherently possible—only through the philosophy and economics of classical liberalism, by which ordinary individuals remain free to perfect themselves and their societies through human creativity and voluntary cooperation.

Progressive humanist philosophies, when implemented, degenerate perforce into tyrannies that are regressive and dystopian. These ineluctable outcomes ironically preclude the possibility of true human perfectibility by obliging individuals to believe and obey normative creedal doctrines that are derived from false *a priori* axioms that run counter to inherent human nature. The upshot is social and political discord, domestic violence (alternatively characterized nowadays as “domestic terrorism” and mental illness), rising rates of suicide (particularly among the police and soldiers who are charged with enforcing progressive policies), alcoholism, drug addiction, and penal incarceration. These outcomes are inevitable for a variety of sufficient reasons, the principal ones being that the progressive intellectuals espousing humanist doctrines are neither omniscient nor Platonically passionless. The digitalization of homeland security, public finance, and regulatory compliance has facilitated progress toward the progressive movement’s warped vision of “true liberty” à la Rousseau (see, for example, Gupta et al. 2017).

The humanist movement has tempered its aggressive stance in recent decades, downplaying radical means for achieving perfection. The movement’s progressive ends nevertheless imply compulsive means. Tiffany Jones Miller, among many historians, explains how progressive intellectuals of all stripes have “discarded the Founders’ conception of individual freedom as natural rights in favor of a new conception of freedom synonymous with the fullest possible development or ‘perfection’ of human nature” (Miller 2012, 227). The conception of democratic citizenship has shifted, from being one of negative freedom (i.e., the absence of official compulsions), to one of compulsory, positive freedoms that ostensibly enable “the people” collectively to prosper and flourish at normatively higher levels. The meaning of “liberalism” became inverted (perverted) by Progressive Era social thinkers (especially

Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann) to suit this changed notion of freedom within industrial American democracy. Miller quotes the Progressive theologian Samuel Zane for the proposition that “true liberty is a positive thing, and to consider its negative aspects alone is to miss its high and divine significance” (227).

Humanism expresses itself through culture, “that uniquely human realm of artifice in which human beings escape their natural animality to express rational humanity as the only beings who have a ‘supersensible faculty’ for moral freedom” (Arnhart 1998, 64). To this end, progressive humanism emphasizes secular reason and science, accepts humanity as an evolved aspect of Nature, and (following Aristotle) recognizes that ethical values represent pragmatic means for satisfying individual needs and interests. It goes on to characterize stylized visions of human fulfillment, the moral significance of relationships, and the fundamental elements of happiness—a litany representing “not what [humanists] must believe but a consensus of what [humanists] do believe” (American Humanist Association 2003).

Progressive humanists ironically are willing, and often eager, to trade off human liberty—nominally a cardinal humanist value—for the sake of perfecting not only “the people,” but also the human species as a whole, and to do so regardless of the cost to discrete individuals. But why stop with perfecting humanity? Pinker notes that “[d]espite the word’s root, *humanism* doesn’t exclude the flourishing of animals” (Pinker 2018, 410). The balance of this essay confines itself to the human species alone.

Ideals of human perfectibility are neither universal nor consistent among humanists. The Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain saw perfection in a fusion between spirituality and the humanities. Earlier humanists imagined that humanity could perfect itself as a species via active and passive eugenics policies. Modern humanists accept the necessity of social discipline and sacrifice, especially among other individuals. The French general and statesman Charles de Gaulle claimed that “[t]he self-sacrifice of individuals for the sake of the community, suffering made glorious—those two things which are the basic elements of the profession of arms—respond to both our moral and aesthetic concepts. The noblest teachings of philosophy and religion have found no higher ideals....Had not innumerable soldiers shed their blood there would have been no Hellenism, no Roman civilization, no Christianity, no Rights

of Man and no modern developments” (de Gaulle [1932] 1960, 14, 69), and therefore no humanism. President Woodrow Wilson shared de Gaulle’s sunny view of militaristic perfection: “I am an advocate of peace, but there are some splendid things that come to a nation through the discipline of war” (quoted in Goldberg 2007, 107; see Pinker 2018, 165 for other examples). Humanism admits a broad range of values, and much of it is intrinsically contradictory.

Progressive humanists believe that even the most reluctant individuals would voluntarily embrace a perfected world in which secular authorities orchestrate, via combinations of noble lies, nudges, and coercion, a normative mix of compulsory economic cooperation and exchange, self-sacrifice, and arbitrary visions of social justice, culminating in a utopian “end of history.” Regrettably, attempts to effect perfected states of nature and grace—from the French Revolution to modern times—have ended in abject horror, followed eventually by regression to humanity’s inherently egoistic nature. The fanciful hopes and denials of progressive intellectuals nevertheless spring eternal. The economist and Nobelist F. A. Hayek observed that

Most people are still unwilling to face the most alarming lesson of modern history: that the greatest crimes of our time have been committed by governments that had the enthusiastic support of millions of people who were guided by moral impulses. It is simply not true that Hitler or Mussolini, Lenin or Stalin, appealed only to the worst instincts of their people: they also appealed to some of the feelings which also dominate contemporary democracies. (Hayek 1976, 134)

Progressive philosophies that purport to “make democracy work for everyone” by establishing elected tyrannies have made most ordinary individuals worse off most of the time by leveling people downward rather than uplifting them.

Humanists, aided and abetted by an indefinitely large number of parallel progressive movements, are in the vanguard of modern intellectual excesses. Success and failure by their lights tends to be judged by the elegance of their theories and intentions, while foreseeable adverse outcomes are ignored. The historian and philosopher of science Timothy Ferris considers a parallel case:

French revolutionaries suffered two closely related misfortunes. First, they neglected the fundamental lesson of science and liberalism—that the key to success is to experiment and to abide by the results—assuming instead that the point of a revolution was to implement a particular philosophy. Second, they chose the wrong philosophy. (Ferris 2010, 113)

The economist Julian Simon explained that

Many unselfish well-off persons think they know better than do poor people what is good for the poor and for the world. Most of us secretly believe that we know how some others should live their lives better than they themselves know. But this belief matters only when it is hitched up with arrogance and the willingness to compel others to do what we think they ought to do." (Simon 1996, 542)

Hayek explains the roots of this hubris:

The intellectual, by his whole disposition, is uninterested in technical details or practical difficulties. What appeals to him are the broad visions, the specious comprehension of the social order as a whole which a planned system promises....there can be few more thankless tasks at present than the essential one of developing the philosophical foundation on which the further development of a free society must be based. Since the man who undertakes it must accept much of the framework of the existing order, he will appear to many of the more speculatively minded intellectuals merely as a timid apologist for things as they are; at the same time he will be dismissed by men of affairs as an impractical theorist....If he takes advantage of such support as he can get from men of affairs, he will almost certainly discredit himself with those on whom he depends for the spreading of his ideas. (Hayek [1949] 1990, 20, 22).

Intellectual humanist philosophy persists, because it provides an efficient platform for signaling the professional, intellectual, and social virtues of conformity, cooperation, and trustworthiness.

The first two sections below illuminate humanism's intellectual history. The third section critiques its false presuppositions, and the final section argues that humanism itself is perfectible only through classical liberalism.

1. CLASSICAL HUMANISM: MORE, COMTE, AND CROLY

Classical humanism unfolds along a bright line running through Thomas More's sixteenth-century utopian vision, August Comte's nineteenth-century "positivism," and the progressivism of Comte's twentieth-century American disciple Herbert Croly. These three visions are summarized below.

Thomas More

Humanist thinking dates to antiquity, although humanism *per se* is attributed to a handful of sixteenth-century Renaissance thinkers. Chief among them were the Dutch philosopher

Desiderius Erasmus and the English philosopher and courtier Sir Thomas More; the latter was immortalized in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). Erasmus and More were friends and mutual admirers: Erasmus advised friends to read More's novel *Utopia* if they "wished to see the true source of all political evils" (quoted in More [1516] 1806, 10).

More's novel is styled as a colloquy between himself and a traveler, Raphael Hythloday, who recounts his impressions of life among the Utopians. The Utopians' spirit of peace and brotherhood epitomized human perfection: few laws were needed to control these eusocial (highly social) people and their benevolent government, and economic resources miraculously were abundant despite economic prosperity generally being no greater than in antiquity (see DeLong 1998). Like the socialist author Upton Sinclair upon his return from a chaperoned tour of the Soviet Union, Hythloday believed that he had seen the future and that it worked.

More's characterization of Utopia's attainments echoes loudly within progressive humanist thinking. Consider, for example, this exchange between Hythloday, More, and a fellow interlocutor regarding political economy:

I must freely own that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot think that a nation can be governed either justly or happily: not justly, because the best things will fall to the share of the worst men; nor happily, because all things will be divided among a few (and even these are not in all respects happy), the rest being left to be absolutely miserable. Therefore, when I reflect on the wise and good constitution of the Utopians, among whom all things are so well governed and with so few laws, where virtue hath its due reward, and yet there is such an equality that every man lives in plenty—when I compare with them so many other nations that are still making new laws, and yet can never bring their constitution to a right regulation; where, notwithstanding every one has his property, yet all the laws that they can invent have not the power either to obtain or preserve it, or even to enable men certainly to distinguish what is their own from what is another's, of which the many lawsuits that every day break out, and are eternally depending, give too plain a demonstration—when, I say, I balance all these things in my thoughts, I grow more favourable to Plato, and do not wonder that he resolved not to make any laws for such as would not submit to a community of all things; for so wise a man could not but foresee that the setting all upon a level was the only way to make a nation happy; which cannot be obtained so long as there is property, for when every man draws to himself all that he can compass, by one title or another, it must follow that, how plentiful soever a nation may be, yet

a few dividing the wealth of it among themselves, the rest must fall into indigence. (More [1516] 1806, 62–63)

More, speaking as himself, and foreshadowing the tenets of classical liberalism, responded skeptically to Hythloday's rosy account:

it seems to me men cannot live conveniently where all things are common. How can there be any plenty where every man will excuse himself from labour for as the hope of gain doth not excite him, so the confidence that he has in other men's industry may make him slothful. If people come to be pinched with want, and yet cannot dispose of anything as their own, what can follow upon this but perpetual sedition and bloodshed, especially when the reverence and authority due to magistrates falls to the ground? For I cannot imagine how that can be kept up among those that are in all things equal to one another. (64–65)

A fellow interlocutor, whose comments foreshadowed Burkean conservatism, was equally skeptical:

You will not easily persuade me that any nation in that new world is better governed than those among us; for as our understandings are not worse than theirs, so our government (if I mistake not) being more ancient, a long practice has helped us to find out many conveniences of life, and some happy chances have discovered other things to us which no man's understanding could ever have invented." (65–66)

The novel ends with More concluding that

though it must be confessed that he [Hythloday] is both a very learned man and a person who has obtained a great knowledge of the world, I cannot perfectly agree to everything he has related. However, there are many things in the commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments. (More [1516] 1806, 192)

More doubted that the elimination of money and property could improve the social order within a functioning society. And as a staunch Catholic who maintained facilities in his private residence for torturing religious heretics, he surely would not have countenanced the Utopian's cheerful acceptance of alternative religions. His fictional account of perfection is descriptive rather than prescriptive or predictive—descriptive perhaps of prevailing populist sentiments, with Hythloday foreshadowing Voltaire's sunny character Dr. Pangloss. The novel can be read partly as a satirical commentary on populism. Its humanistic spirit nevertheless anticipated the philosophy of classical liberalism and modern libertarianism.

August Comte

A comprehensive “positive polity” along utopian lines was described three centuries after More by the French philosopher August Comte. Comte claimed to disdain utopian social visions, despite proposing, by his own account, “the wildest of them all,” viz., “to systematize the art of social life” by directing “the spiritual reorganization of the civilized world.” His positivist motto Love, Order, Progress survives in Brazil’s national motto, *Ordem e progresso* (Order and Progress), although Comte would not recognize modern Brazil as being a child of his creative imaginings. He is best remembered instead for having coined the terms *sociology* (also termed *social physics*) to describe his *positive* approach to social theory (not to be confused with logical positivism) and *altruism* to describe the sacrifices that his philosophy demanded from all individuals.

Comte’s positive polity substituted “the permanent [secular] government of Humanity for the provisional government of God” (Comte [1851] 1875, 325). It proposed “a systematic religion developing the unity of man; for it has at length become possible to constitute such a religion immediately and completely...the priesthood becomes the soul of true sociocracy” (Comte [1852] 1858, 48, 340). Comte appointed himself the high priest of his positive and universal religion, an artifact perhaps of his earlier bout with clinical insanity. Nevertheless, his characterization of theocentric and secular religions as being substitutable behavioral responses to resource scarcity was prescient and is widely accepted nowadays (see Tillich [1951] 1973, 221; Montanye 2006; Nelson 1991, 2001, and 2010).

Comte’s voluminous philosophy was grounded on a foundation of sacrificial altruism:

Our harmony as moral beings is impossible on any other foundation but altruism. Nay more, altruism alone can enable us to live, in the highest and truest sense. The degraded being who at present exist[s] only to live, would be tempted to give up their brutal selfishness, had they but once had a real taste of what you so well call the pleasures of devotedness. They would then understand that, to live for others is the only means of freely developing the whole existence of man...In this way you see how happiness and duty will necessarily coincide. (Comte [1852] 1858 [1852], 310–11)

Comte’s vision dealt only in duties; no collateral rights were necessary, because all individuals were presumed to know, in their heart of hearts, the sweet feeling that comes from obedience. John

Stuart Mill, whose utilitarianism was influenced by Comte, ultimately described Comte's vision as being "the completest system of spiritual and temporal despotism which ever yet emanated from a human brain" (quoted in Passmore [1969] 2000, 224). Comtean positivism nevertheless sparked considerable interest among free-thinking intellectuals in Europe and America.

Herbert Croly

One American utilitarian thinker who took a keen interest in Comte's philosophy was Herbert Croly. Croly's progressive opus, *The Promise of American Life* (1911), became the twentieth century's intellectual blueprint for perfecting humanity. His vision materially influenced the policy proposals of Woodrow Wilson (who committed America to making the world safe for a version of democracy that would enable visionary leaders like himself to enact progressive policies most easily) and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. It also influenced the American humanist movement, which is discussed below. Croly's vision, like Comte's, amounted to a secular Sermon on the Mount, albeit one that facilitated fascism and war across Europe and the world, and that since then has fostered social and political unrest in America.

Croly's argument follows from his belief that "[t]he faith of Americans in their own country is religious, if not in its intensity, at any rate in its almost absolute and universal authority. It pervades the air we breathe" (Croly 1911, 1). He described how America's early promise of democracy had become negated by

manifestations of economic slavery, of grinding the faces of the poor, of exploitation of the weak, of unfair distribution of wealth, of unjust monopoly, of unequal laws, of industrial and commercial chicanery, of disgraceful ignorance, of economic fallacies, of public corruption, of interested legislation, of want of public spirit, of vulgar boasting and chauvinism, of snobbery, of class prejudice, of respect of persons, and of a preference of the material over the spiritual. In a word, America has not attained, or nearly attained, perfection. (18–19)

The upshot for Croly (foreshadowing progressive politics and law) was that:

No preestablished harmony can then exist between the free and abundant satisfaction of private needs and the accomplishment of a morally and socially desirable result. The Promise of American life is to be fulfilled—not merely by a maximum amount of economic freedom, but by a

certain measure of discipline; not merely by the abundant satisfaction of individual desires, but by a large measure of individual subordination and self-denial. And this necessity of subordinating the satisfaction of individual desires to the fulfillment of a national purpose is attached particularly to the absorbing occupation of the American people—the occupation, viz.: of accumulating wealth. The automatic fulfillment of the American national Promise is to be abandoned, if at all, precisely because the traditional American confidence in individual freedom has resulted in a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth. (22)

The gravamen of Croly's thesis entailed a critical choice: "The antithesis is not between nationalism and individualism, but between an individualism which is indiscriminate, and an individualism which is selective" (409).

Croly saw the failure of America's promise in

the political corruption, the unwise economic organization, and the legal support afforded to certain economic privileges are all under existing conditions due to the malevolent social influence of individual and incorporated American wealth; and it is equally true that these abuses, and the excessive 'money power' with which they are associated, have originated in the peculiar freedom which the American tradition and organization have granted to the individual. (Croly 1911, 23)

Specifically, "[t]he millionaire, the Boss, the union laborer, and the lawyer, have all taken advantage of the loose American political organization to promote somewhat unscrupulously their own interests, and to obtain special sources of power and profit at the expense of a wholesome national balance" (138). This result seemed incongruous to Croly, for whom America's "sovereign popular will" had redefined the meaning of American constitutional democracy: "For better or worse the American people have proclaimed themselves [via the abolition of slavery] to be a democracy, and they have proclaimed that democracy means popular economic, social, and moral emancipation" (270). Accordingly, "[t]he fulfillment of a justifiable democratic purpose may demand the limitation of certain rights, to which the Constitution affords such absolute guarantees; and in that case the American democracy might be forced to seek by revolutionary means [sic] the accomplishment of a result which should be attainable under the law" (36). Croly asserted further that

[d]emocracy must stand or fall on a platform of possible human perfectibility. If human nature cannot be improved by institutions, democracy is at best a more than usually safe form of political organization; and

the only interesting inquiry about its future would be: How long will it continue to work? But if it is to work better as well as merely longer, it must have some leavening effect on human nature; and the sincere democrat is obliged to assume the power of the leaven. (400)

According to Pace Croly, America's constitutional plan for republican democracy was designed to harness the self-interest of ordinary individuals rather than to leaven it. The Founders' plan also sought to restrain the destructive tendencies of government itself. Croly recognized that "[n]o plan of political organization can in the nature of things offer an absolute guarantee that a government will not misuse its powers; but a government of the kind suggested, should it prove to be either corrupt or incompetent, could remain in control only by the express acquiescence of the electorate" (Croly 1911, 333). Yet, six decades after Croly's progressive vision first gained social, political, and legal traction, the political scientist Theodore Lowi ([1969] 1979) observed that America's "promise" remained enslaved by interest group politics. The upshot of Croly's progressive liberalism differed only in detail from the post-Civil War state of affairs against which he railed.

Croly recognized that his overall proposal for restoring America's promise "may be disagreeable, but it is not to be escaped. In becoming responsible for the subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose, the American state will in effect be making itself responsible for a morally and socially desirable distribution of wealth" (Croly 1911, 23). He recognized as well that his proposed remedy would not be acceptable immediately because of the sacrifices it entailed. Force, therefore, would be required, especially in public education, where social indoctrination is easiest (see Lott 1990):

Men being as unregenerate as they are, all worthy human endeavor involves consequences of battle and risk. The heroes of the struggle must maintain their achievements and at times even promote their objects by compulsion. The policeman and the soldier will continue for an indefinite period to be guardians of the national schools, and the nations have no reason to be ashamed of this fact. It is merely symbolic of the very comprehensiveness of their responsibilities—that they have to deal with the problem of human inadequacy and unregeneracy in all its forms. (Croly 1911, 284)

Until the nation's "unregenerate" population withered away, Croly proposed following Robespierre's promise "to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by terror."

2. THE HUMANIST MOVEMENT

The twentieth century experienced worldwide expressions of humanist values (see www.americanhumanist.com for coverage). The International Humanist and Ethical Union sitting in Amsterdam issued declarations in 1952 and 2002, professing to proffer “the official defining statement of World Humanism.” American manifestos (statements of principles and intent) were issued in 1933, 1973, and 2003, the first by the Unitarian Humanist Fellowship founded in 1927 and the latter two by its successor organization, the American Humanist Association (AHA), founded in 1941 and which has absorbed other humanist groups since then. Each of these proclamations expressed conventional humanist principles, viz., the evil of theological dogmatism, the superiority of scientific explanations and empirical evidence, the nature of human values, and the quest to perfect human potential. The 2002 *Amsterdam Declaration* included artistic creation and imagination as humanist values; the 2003 *American Humanist Manifesto III* added joy and beauty, human rights, resource equality, and environment protection. A *Secular Humanist Declaration*, issued in 1980 by the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, raised concerns that the rise of politically conservative Christian fundamentalism threatened American democracy’s progressive agenda. Nowadays humanists of all stripes assert a grab bag of *ad hoc* “natural” human rights that ironically are among the first to be sacrificed in the quest for human perfectibility.

The three *Humanist Manifestos* promulgated by the AHA demonstrate the evolution of modern progressive humanist principles.

Humanist Manifesto I (1933)

The AHA’s first manifesto claimed that “[m]an is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement. He must set intelligence and will to the task.” To this end, the statement asserted a bold point (number 14) that echoed More, and was fully worthy of both Comte and Croly:

The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of

humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.

The word *socialized* suggests humanism's philosophical orientation, although its vision actually is communitarian—more Leninist than Marxist. In this regard the manifesto hewed to Croly, who asserted that “[t]he national economic interest demands, on the one hand, the combination of abundant individual opportunity with efficient organization, and on the other, a wholesome distribution of the fruits; and these joint essentials will be more certainly attained under some such system as the one suggested than they are under the present system” (Croly 1911, 380). Socialism *per se* entails only the collective ownership of productive capital; it makes no demand for “a wholesome distribution of fruits.” The manifesto, by contrast, endorsed not only economic regulation and joint public-private enterprise, but also the “wholesome distribution” of economic surplus (if any), objectives that are more totalitarian than socialist. To this end, Mussolini coined the term *totalitarian* to “describe a society where everybody belonged, where everyone was taken care of, where everything was inside the state and nothing was outside” (Goldberg 2007, 14). Totalitarianism aptly characterizes progressive humanist thinking.

Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

The abject failures of Crolyism, early progressive humanism, fascism, and communism “to realize the world of [man’s] dreams” had become painfully evident by the end of World War II, although Croly’s political journal, the *New Republic*, nevertheless continued touting the desirability and presumed successes of Soviet communism. Grudging acceptance of these failures, however, compelled the AHA to issue a revised manifesto in 1973. The statement opened with an oblique apology for having gotten the first manifesto’s fourteenth point so wrong:

It is forty years since Humanist Manifesto I (1933) appeared. Events since then make that earlier statement seem far too optimistic. Nazism has shown the depths of brutality of which humanity is capable. Other totalitarian regimes have suppressed human rights without ending poverty. Science has sometimes brought evil as well as good. Recent decades have shown that inhumane wars can be made in the name of peace. The beginnings of police states, even in democratic societies, widespread government espionage, and other abuses of power by military, political,

and industrial elites, and the continuance of unyielding racism, all present a different and difficult social outlook. In various societies, the demands of women and minority groups for equal rights effectively challenge our generation.

As we approach the twenty-first century, however, an affirmative and hopeful vision is needed. Faith, commensurate with advancing knowledge, is also necessary. In the choice between despair and hope, humanists respond in this Humanist Manifesto II with a positive declaration for times of uncertainty.

The revised manifesto abandoned its predecessor's radical means for reaching heaven on earth. It nevertheless retained a "commitment to the positive belief [candidly grounded partly upon the certitude of 'faith'] in the possibilities of human progress and to the values central to it." Rather than specifying concrete means by which to proceed, this statement merely set forth "a set of common principles that can serve as a basis for united action—positive principles relevant to the present human condition. They are a design for a secular society on a planetary scale." The statement rejected doctrines that "sacrifice individuals on the alter of Utopian promises," without acknowledging that its litany of "shoulds" and "oughts" could not be achieved without sacrificing individuals for the collective perfection of humanity.

Humanist Manifesto III (2003)

The AHA's third manifesto tersely characterized humanism as "a progressive philosophy of life." Its "lifestance"—which is "guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience—encourages us to live life well and fully." This revision reflected the AHA's "ongoing effort to manifest in clear and positive terms the conceptual boundaries of Humanism, not what we must believe but a consensus of what we do believe." It also reflected "the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals." To facilitate this progress, the AHA established a lobbying presence in Washington in addition to tilting litigiously at theocentric iconography in the public square—the Bladensburg, Maryland "Peace Cross," for example (see *American Legion et al. v. American Humanist Assn. et al.*, S. Ct. Slip Op. 17-1717 [2019]).

The ends of "movement" humanism remain those described by More, Comte, and Croly. However, the abject failure of humanist means—i.e., central planning by omniscient political deities

who are presumed to be capable of divining the “general” and “popular” will, and the “sovereign national spirit” by which individuals might be compelled to be “free”—has left humanism without a coherent means (apart from lobbying and litigation) of achieving its aspirational ends.

3. HUMANISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Progressive humanism rests as an intellectual curiosity until its aspirational goals and *ad hoc* means become operational, at which point it changes from idle fantasy into tyranny and chaos. These consequences are foreordained because one-dimensional humanist thinking overlooks the connection between progressive ends and the necessary means for achieving them. The subsections below consider eight contradictions within humanist philosophy: abuse of reason, presumption of altruism, religion, fairness, elective fascism, central planning, the lack of staying power, and the inability to perfect humanism from within.

Abuse of Reason

Contrary to the way its proponents present it, humanism’s commitment to fallacious, presuppositional reasoning and pseudoscientific positivism is both wistfully romantic and intrinsically anti-Enlightenment. The economist Ludwig von Mises characterized such commitments as representing

man’s revolt against reason, as well as against the condition under which nature has compelled him to live [economic resource scarcity]. The romantic is a daydreamer; he easily manages in imagination to disregard the laws of logic and nature. The thinking and rationally acting man tries to rid himself of the discomfort of unsatisfied wants by economic action and work; he produces in order to improve his position. The romantic is too weak—too neuroasthenic [sic]—for work; he imagines the pleasures of success but he does nothing to achieve them. He does not remove the obstacles; he merely removes them in imagination. He has a grudge against reality because it is not like a dream world he has created. He hates work, economy, and reason. (Mises [1922] 1981, 365)

Mises’s comment was directed at public enthusiasm for socialism and communism, but it applies equally well to progressive humanist thinking.

Croly soft-pedaled his scheme as an experiment: “A democracy organized into a nation and imbued with the national spirit, will

seek by means of experimentation and discipline to reach the object which Tolstoy would reach by an immediate and a miraculous act of faith" (Croly 1911, 282). The framers of the American Constitution similarly considered their project to be an "experiment": the word appears nearly fifty times in *The Federalist Papers* (1787); Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1804 that "[n]o experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth" (quoted in Ferris 2010, 162). Compare Jefferson's observation with Stalin's response to Lady Astor's blunt question "How long are you going to keep on killing people?" Stalin's reply: "As long as it is necessary....you blame us for killing a handful [upwards of 30 million] for the most promising social experiment in history?" (quoted in Chambers [1952] 2002, 82). The conspicuous difference between these two experiments is that the American one (at least what's left of it) still generates prosperity and flourishing; the Soviet experiment diminished both before collapsing. Failed theories are abandoned within the natural sciences. Not so within the intellectual tradition of progressive social science.

Altruism

Progressive humanism's ideals demand discipline and sacrifice. Croly explained that

The Promise of American life is to be fulfilled—not merely by a maximum amount of economic freedom, but by a certain measure of discipline; not merely by the abundant satisfaction of individual desires, but by a large measure of individual subordination and self-denial....To ask an individual citizen continually to sacrifice his recognized private interest to the welfare of his countrymen is to make an impossible demand, and yet just such a continual sacrifice is apparently required of an individual in a democratic state. The only entirely satisfactory solution of the difficulty is offered by the systematic authoritative transformation of the private interest of the individual into a disinterested devotion to a special object. (Croly 1911, 22, 418)

Croly's program, like More's utopian vision and Comte's positive polity, depended upon individuals being purposefully *altruistic* (sacrificially benevolent) with respect to life and property. Yet sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and modern economics teach that sacrificial altruism among humans occurs naturally only within the family unit; otherwise, it is deemed a likely symptom of mental illness. Ordinary *generosity*, by comparison, is financed

voluntarily out of economic surplus, and so entails no true sacrifice (see Montanye 2018). The ethicist John Mueller clarifies the progressive distinction between altruism and generosity: “*benevolence* [altruism], or good will, can be extended to everyone in the world, and *beneficence* [generosity], or doing good, cannot” (Mueller 2010, 36). About progressive schemes based upon the presumption of human altruism, Pinker notes:

Today’s fascism light, which shades into authoritarian populism and Romantic nationalism, is sometimes justified by a crude version of evolutionary psychology in which...humans have been selected to sacrifice their interest for the supremacy of their group. (This contrasts with mainstream evolutionary psychology, in which the unit of selection is the gene).” (Pinker 2018, 448)

The biologist Richard Dawkins, who introduced “selfish gene” theory, and who is both an avowed humanist and a socialist, sides with Pinker on the facts but differs on the spirit: “Human superniceness is a perversion of Darwinism, because, in a wild population, it would be removed by natural selection....Let’s put it even more bluntly. From a rational choice point of view, or from a Darwinian point of view, human superniceness is just plain dumb. But it is the kind of dumb that should be encouraged” (Dawkins 2017, 276–77).

Altruism is chimerical, because an inherent sense of *property* (relationships between individuals and things) is ingrained in human nature; for example, children that are denied property rights in personal possessions become socially maladjusted and remain so well into later life (Pipes 1999, chap. 2). The distinguished biologist E. O. Wilson once (he has partly apostatized) offered a curt explanation for the failure of altruistic social schemes among humans: “Wonderful theory. Wrong species” (quoted in Pinker 2002, 296). Contemporary social commentators nevertheless carp ignorantly about inherent egoism’s dominance (see, for example, Tomasky 2019, 123–51, 189–237). Rousseau at least was barking up the right tree when he proclaimed that “[t]he first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying ‘This is mine,’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society” (Rousseau [1754] 1992, 183).

Religion

Pinker asserts that “[t]he members of Humanist associations would be the first to insist that the ideals of humanism belong to

no sect” (Pinker 2018, 411). If this is so, then they remain willfully blind to humanism’s conspicuously religious form. The movement was proffered initially as a “new religion” (Potter 1930)—Unitarianism (professing reason and conscience) but with most vestiges of God exorcised. This vision was prophetic. Mises observed that progressive politicians and bureaucrats act (à la Comte) as if from a desire to emulate, if not to be, gods:

the terms “society” and “state” as they are used by the contemporary advocates of socialism, planning, and social control of all the activities of individuals signify a deity. The priests of this new creed ascribe to their idol all those attributes which the theologians ascribe to God—omnipotence, omniscience, infinite goodness, and so on” (Mises [1949] 2008, 151).

As secular societies became self-defining, covenants that once were symbolized by rainbow, cross, and crescent became symbolized instead by flags, pulp slogans, reimagined evils, and all-too-human deities.

Croly’s vision of America’s promise and future carried evangelical overtones as well: “If such a moment ever arrives, it will be partly the creation of some democratic evangelist—some imitator of Jesus who will reveal to men the path whereby they may enter into spiritual possession of their individual and social achievements, and immeasurably increase them by virtue of personal regeneration” (Croly 1911, 453–54). Americans routinely witness this evangelical zeal in their political candidates. The writer Jonah Goldberg notes that

The New Deal amounted to a religious breakthrough for American liberalism. Not only had faith in the liberal ideal become thoroughly religious in nature—irrational, dogmatic, mythological—but many smart liberals recognized this fact and welcomed it. In 1934 [the philosopher John] Dewey defined the battle for the liberal ideal as a “religious quality” in and of itself. Thurman Arnold, one of the New Deal’s most influential intellectuals, proposed [trumpeting Croly] that Americans be taught a new “religion of government,” which would finally liberate the public from its superstitions about individualism and free markets. (Goldberg 2007, 223).

Indeed, *Humanist Manifesto I* (discussed earlier) was proffered overtly as a “new” secular religion that was necessitated by “science and economic change having disrupted the old beliefs [along with ‘increased knowledge and experience’].”

Denying humanism's religiousness at this juncture is disingenuous.

Fairness

Humanists regard "fairness" as key to social "equality" as if both concepts were intrinsically free of ambiguity and contradiction. The linguist George Lakoff shows that fairness and equality actually have multiple conflicting dimensions, some of which are progressive ("equality of distribution and need-based fairness"), others of which are conservative ("equality of opportunity and contractual fairness") (Lakoff 2006, 50–51). These dimensions include:

- Equality of distribution (one child, one cookie)
- Equality of opportunity (one person, one raffle ticket)
- Procedural distribution (playing by the rules determines what you get)
- Equal distribution of power (one person, one vote)
- Equal distribution of responsibility (we share the burden equally)
- Scalar distribution of responsibility (the greater your abilities, the greater your responsibilities)
- Scalar distribution of rewards (the more you work, the more you get)
- Rights-based fairness (you get what you have a right to)
- Need-based fairness (you get what you need)
- Contractual distribution (you get what you agree to)

Former President Lyndon Johnson famously committed his administration to replacing America's traditional "equality of opportunity" with a new "equality of distribution" (Johnson [1965] 2019). His policy of "affirmative action" toward selected identity groups reified Croly's demand for political discrimination: "The national government must step in and discriminate; but it must discriminate, not on behalf of liberty and the special individual, but on behalf of equality" (Croly 1911, 190).

Progressives' obsession with equality responds directly to the human propensity for envy (see Schoeck [1966] 1987). The philosopher Harry Frankfurt (along with some economists) aptly argues that

Economic inequality is not, as such, of any particular moral importance; and by the same token, economic inequality is not in itself morally

objectionable. From the point of view of morality it is not important that everyone should have *the same*. What is morally important is that each should have *enough*. If everyone had enough money, it would be of no special or deliberate concern whether some people had more money than others. (Frankfurt 2015, 7)

Progressive humanist intellectuals forcefully disagree.

Elective Fascism

The term *fascism* has become shorthand for those means and ends of which progressive humanists disapprove. Goldberg offers instead a comprehensive definition that coincidentally describes its spiritual form:

Fascism is a religion of the state. It assumes the organic unity of the body politic and longs for a national leader attuned to the will of the people. It is *totalitarian* in that it views everything as political and holds that any action by the state is justified to achieve the common good. It takes responsibility for all aspects of life, including our health and well-being, and seeks to impose uniformity of thought and action, whether by force or through regulation and social pressure. Everything, including the economy and religion, must be aligned with its objectives. Any rival identity is part of the “problem” and therefore defined as the enemy.... [“American fascism is milder, more friendly, more “maternal” than its foreign counterparts; it is what [the late comedian] George Carlin calls ‘smiley-face’ fascism.”] (Goldberg 2007, 8, 23)

Goldberg terms the smiley-face variety “liberal fascism.” Woodrow Wilson described his own version as obliging the individual “to marry his interests to the state.” Hayek observed that “while the ideas of Hume and Voltaire, of Adam Smith and Kant, produced the liberalism of the nineteenth century, those of Hegel and Comte, of Feuerbach and Marx, have produced the totalitarianism of the twentieth [and now beyond]” (Hayek 1955, 206).

Central Planning

Humanism entails intellectual efforts to perfect societies via central planning and control. Dewey (one of thirty-four signatories to the *Humanist Manifesto I*), argued that “comprehensive plans” were necessary “if the problem of social organization is to be met.” The alternative is “atomistic individualism...a continuation of a regime of accident, waste and distress.” For Dewey, “dependence upon intelligence” was the only alternative to “drift and improvisation” (quoted in Sowell 2009, 51). Friedrich Engels similarly

described spontaneous social organization as a chaotic system by which “what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed” (quoted in Sowell 2009, 51). For Dewey and Engels, nothing short of contemplation and construction was worthy of respect; spontaneous social organization lacked intellectual standing.

These views were wilfully blind both to their impossibility, and to their unintended outcomes. Similarly blind were Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policies: Roosevelt candidly acknowledged that “what we are doing in this country were some of the things that were being done in Russia and even some of the things that were being done under Hitler in Germany. But we are doing them in an orderly way” (Goldberg 2007, 122, quoting Roosevelt’s interior secretary Harold Ickes). Roosevelt naïvely valued impossible guarantees of freedom from “want” and “fear” over the potential for collateral dystopian tyranny, which ironically would come to hobble some of his other policy guarantees, such as freedom of speech and a diversity of deliberated opinion.

So great was the seductive rhetoric of the new communitarian “religion of government” that the writer, news magazine editor, and avowed communist Whittaker Chambers continued discounting the “invidious evil” of progressive tyranny even after apostatizing his faith in Soviet religion: “I know that I am leaving the winning side for the losing side, but it is better to die on the losing side than to live under Communism” (Chambers [1952] 2002, 541). The socialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre more aptly conceded that his and Chambers’s chosen political religion had to be judged by its rosy intensions rather than its dismal results.

America’s flirtation with progressive social policies has yielded many conspicuous failures. Lowi ([1969] 1979) shows how attempts by Croly’s progressive heirs to deliver on America’s ostensible promise by means of social planning and control, guided by fanciful visions and good intentions, ratcheted American politics into a deep state of organized privileges and entitlements, wrought through smiley-face legislative bargaining. European nations, by comparison, dispensed with bargaining, instead choosing blunt-force fascism as the means for achieving their progressive goals. The AHA’s *Humanist Manifesto II* candidly acknowledged the tyranny that these goals and policies entailed.

Staying Power

Many attempts at creating heaven-on-earth utopias followed in the wake of More's classic novel and Comte's positive polity. The United States alone witnessed the rise of 137 altruism-based utopian sects between 1787 and 1860 (Bushman 2005, 165). Most struggled for about two years before their followers reverted to inherent human egoism and the sects dissolved. The Mormons remain the most successful communitarian sect to have arisen during this period, although their social experiment nearly collapsed early on:

The economic reform put Joseph Smith's Zion in company with scores of utopians who were bent on moderating economic injustices in these years....The system never worked properly...After its brief life in Jackson County, Joseph never put consecration of property in full effect again.... to this day the principle of consecration [merely] inspires Mormon volunteerism and the payment of tithes to the church. (155, 183)

Croly's treatise was similar in one respect to Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon*, which assumed

that by giving a nation an alternative history, alternative values can be made to grow....[It was] a "document of profound social protest" against the dominant culture...[an] amalgam of Enlightenment, republican, Protestant, capitalist, and nationalist values that constituted American culture....[It] turned American history upside down. (Bushman 2005, 104)

Croly's work, unlike Smith's, was fundamentally secular, although it too projected an essentially religious vision.

A sufficiently long period of coercive progressivism (several generations at least) might succeed in "perfecting" the human species via the so-called Baldwin effect, by which the process of Darwinian natural selection incorporates purposefully efficient behavioral responses into genetic propensities. This possibility remains untested in political contexts: voluntary utopian societies tend either to dissolve or transform within a few years. Longer-term tyrannies tend to be overthrown, collapsed under their own deadweight, or else survive in modified form by adopting classical liberal values and means. Progressivism presently continues unabated, although the humanist movement appears to be in descent.

Perfecting Humanism from Within

Humanism, as philosophy, fails conventional tests of truth—it is not coherent, it lacks close correspondence with reality, and it is unsuccessfully pragmatic. Alternative approaches, based on principles of love and social science, have been proposed as methods for fine-tuning humanism’s means without diminishing its progressive ends. They too fail muster.

The economist Lionel Robbins canonically defined economics as “the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means that have alternative uses” (Robbins 1935, 16). Mueller, among others, proposes instead a “science” of economics that restores Augustinian and Thomistic ideals of Christian *love*—

the loves (and hates) that motivate and distinguish us as human beings....
As Augustine was the first to point out, all economic choice involves not one but two kinds of preferences: a ranking of persons as ends, which is reflected in the way we distribute the use of our wealth, and a ranking of scarce means, which is reflected in the particular contents of our wealth.
(Mueller 2010, 2, 92)

Mueller claims that grounding economic theory upon love, instead of production and distribution, restores economics’ “missing element” (108–12). To this end, he proposes revising Robbins’s definition of economics to refer to “the science of human providence—personal, domestic, and political—for oneself and other persons, using scarce means that have alternative uses” (129). The proposed approach entails altruistic moral choices, rather than economic tradeoffs, and so lies beyond the realm of economic science. Mueller proposes a return to the moral philosophy, theology, and providential political economy from which economic science emerged in the late nineteenth century.

George Edgin Pugh, an automation and decision consultant, who turned later to motivation and behavior studies, and then to sociobiology and ethics, commits a similar error. Pugh begins well enough by noting that human perfectioneering traditionally

concentrated on the prescriptive function. The fact that most of these [ethical] theories failed as a descriptive or predictive science was not generally considered a serious defect. It was assumed that if a theory could define what people ought to do, then the problems would be solved because they would naturally want to do what the theory said they “should.” Unfortunately this hypothesis has not been confirmed

by subsequent experience. Many of the traditional ethical theories have had little practical impact because people did not “want” to do what the theory said the “should.” (Pugh 1977, 342–43)

He goes wrong by proposing to

reconcile the concepts of ‘should do’ and ‘want to do’ [via] a new science of economics, one that can relate economic means to human objectives. The real goal of a science of economics should be to align the economic structure so that it is as efficient as possible in the support of human objectives. There is no reason why such a science cannot be developed, but it will require us to recognize human values as the primary criterion for economic policy. (441)

Pugh shifts casually and deceptively between notions of science and policy, tacitly echoing Comte’s assertion that “our economists can do nothing better than repeat, with pitiless pedantry, their barren aphorism of absolute industrial liberty” (quoted in Martineau 1858, 448–49). Pugh implies, without proof and contrary to voluminous evidence, that a revised “economic structure” can support “human objectives” better than a process that is grounded upon the classical system of individual liberty and property rights.

An earlier decision scientist, Norbert Wiener, argued against the quasi-scientific mechanization proposed by Pugh:

The great weakness of the machine—the weakness that saves us so far from being dominated by it—is that it cannot yet take into account the vast range of probability that characterizes the human situation. The dominance of the machine presupposes a society in the last stages of increasing entropy, where probability is negligible and where the statistical differences among individuals are nil....a community that puts its dependence upon such a pseudo-faith is ultimately bound to ruin itself because of the paralysis which the lack of a healthy growing science imposes upon it. (Wiener [1954] 1988, 181, 193)

Hayek agreed, noting that although the

ambition to imitate science in its methods rather than its spirit has now dominated social studies, it has contributed scarcely anything to our understanding of social phenomena, not only does it continue to confuse and discredit the work of the social disciplines, but demand for further attempts in this direction are still the latest revolutionary innovations which, if adopted, ill secure rapid increases in progress. (Hayek 1955, 14)

4. ACHIEVING PERFECTION THROUGH CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

Classical liberalism offers an alternative means for reforming progressive humanism. It has the virtue of meeting the methodological challenges of philosophy and science while respecting inherent human nature.

Progressive humanism's rich history of failure reveals that the key to human perfectibility lies outside prevailing humanist philosophy. One likely place to seek relief is within the philosophy of classical liberalism. This philosophy matters, as Ferris notes, because "the freedoms protected by liberal democracies are essential to facilitating scientific inquiry, and...democracy itself is an experimental system without which neither science nor liberty can flourish" (Ferris 2010, 2). Simon emphasized that

human imagination can flourish only if the economic system gives individuals the freedom to exercise their talents and to take advantage of opportunities. So another crucial element in the economics of resources and population is the extent to which the political-legal-economic system provides personal freedom from government coercion. Skilled persons require an appropriate framework that provides incentives for working hard and taking risks, enabling their talents to flower and come to fruition. The key elements of such a framework are economic liberty, respect for property, and fair and sensible rules of the market that are enforced equally for all. (Simon 1996, 408)

The notion of human perfectibility is rendered impossible by Simon's lights, because *a priori* knowledge of perfection is impossible. Humanists could not recognize "perfection" even if it were to be achieved.

The Institute for Humane Studies proposes four classically liberal rules for guiding humanity *toward* perfection (Hayek [1949] 1990, 27):

- Recognition of inalienable rights and the dignity and worth of each individual
- Protection of those rights through the institutions of individual private property, contract, and the rule of law
- Voluntarism in all human relations
- The self-ordering market, free trade, free migration, and peace

The overarching goal here is to increase human freedom, in part by shrinking the centralizing tendencies of the modern state. The

Institute’s proposals stop short of characterizing all government activity as a fundamentally criminal enterprise—that is, as a “stationary bandit that monopolizes and rationalizes theft in the form of taxes” (Olson 1993, 567). It alludes instead to the government’s role as setting “market rules that are as impersonal and as general as possible, allowing individuals to decide for themselves how and what to produce and what to consume, in a manner that infringes as little as possible on the rights of others to do the same, and where each pays the full price of the costs to others of one’s own activities” (Simon, 1996, 584). In this way, “each generation leaves a bit more true wealth—the resources to create material and nonmaterial goods—than the generation began with....[I]f humankind did not have a propensity to create more than it uses, the species would have perished long ago” (582). By this light, the successes that Pinker (2018) attributes to Enlightenment humanism owe more to classical humanism’s other child, classical liberalism.

The distinguished legal scholar Richard Epstein similarly distills to a few simple rules the path to perfectibility:

individual autonomy, first possession, voluntary exchange, control of aggression, limited privileges for cases of necessity, and just compensation for takings of private property, with a reluctant nod toward redistribution within the framework of flat taxes....[E]ven though there are some daunting exceptions, these rules do have the virtue of offering solutions for 90 to 95 percent of all possible situations....The effort to clean up the last 5 percent of the cases leads to an unraveling of the legal system insofar as it governs the previous 95 percent. No single, carefully constructed hypothetical case offers sufficient practical reason to overturn any rule that has stood the test of time. (Epstein 1995, 53, 307)

Epstein follows Lowi by documenting the means by which the explosion of vague progressive policies, coupled with the outsourcing of legislative, executive, and judicial functions to autonomous regulatory agencies, has replaced America’s rule of law tradition with an incoherent system of rule *by* law. This transformation has created a breeding ground for wasteful social and political corruption that surely would have revolted Croly.

Compare Epstein’s simple rules with this alternative vision offered by another prominent legal scholar, Cass Sunstein, who directed the Obama administration’s regulatory reform program:

I contend that in three categories of cases, private preference, as expressed in consumption choices should be overridden. The first category

involves what I call collective judgements, including considered beliefs, aspirations for social justice, and altruistic goals; the second involves preferences that have adapted to undue limitations in available opportunities or to unjust background conditions; the third category points to intrapersonal collective action problems that, over a lifetime, impair personal welfare or freedom. In all of these cases, I suggest, a democracy should be free and is perhaps obliged to override private preferences. (Sunstein 1997, 44)

This dictum both echoes Croly and epitomizes the “abuse of reason” against which Hayek and other thoughtful scholars rail.

CONCLUSION

This essay began with two epigraphs: one presenting Aristotle’s claim that intellectuals should rest content with the degree of precision that matters allow; the other concluding that efforts to perfect humanity against its inherent nature only make things worse. Progressive humanists, despite their ostensible commitment to reason and science, do not take such insights to heart. Attempts at perfecting humanity along lines that run counter to human nature ineluctably immiserate ordinary individuals. Classical liberalism succeeds where progressive humanism fails by freeing individuals to pursue, with minimal interference, their own notions of the good, rather than obliging them to follow the dictates of false social prophets.

Progressive humanist philosophy itself is perfectible, but only within the compass of human nature, and only to the extent that principles of classical liberalism are reincorporated. Humanism’s progressive ends cannot be achieved through a faith-based belief “in the possibilities of human progress and the values central to it” (AHA 1973). The most worthy possibilities and values can be achieved only by allowing human nature to run its natural course.

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