

Repent to the Primitive: The Meaning and Philosophy of Rewilding

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We concluded, as some writers in Germany and Czechoslovakia have also concluded, that the important fact of the present time is not the struggle between capitalism and socialism, but the struggle between industrial civilization and humanity. A new economic mode of existence brings with it new views of life which must be analysed and subdued if they are not to dominate to the exclusion of human values. Thus in the past, it has been necessary to destroy a superstitious reverence for agriculture, which dominated before it was made to serve the needs of human beings. Many prejudices still held by modern people are nothing but remnants of the agricultural, or even of the hunting, stage of man's development. We came to believe that the important differences in the modern world are those which divide nations living by industrialism from those which still live by the more primitive methods, though these are being rapidly abandoned, and industrialism is spreading all over the globe.

— *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*, Bertrand Russell

Introduction: From Apostle to Apostate

Although the present form of the book only began two years ago, my work really started two years before, in 2013, when, homeless after high school, I involved myself in ecological and anti-modern factions of anarchism.

During this time, I ran across an essay, "Industrial Society and Its Future," and it had a profound effect on me. For the first time a text had expressed what I had been feeling, and it did so in a compelling, fresh way — appealing to me, since the only radical political arguments that I had heard up to that point lacked nuance, were steeped in faulty theory, and seemed to be solving nineteenth century problems rather than assessing problems of the contemporary world. But "Industrial Society and Its Future" was written by Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, infamous for his 1978– 1995 bombing campaign in the name of anti-industrial revolution. I was young and hot-headed enough for this not to bother me as much as it should have, but it still bothered me enough to wonder whether agreeing with the manifesto was a bad sign.

But then I read a *WIRED* essay "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," a personal account of a well-respected scientist and programmer, Bill Joy, experiencing the same dilemma. As Joy wrote, he "could easily have been the Unabomber's next target," yet he found "some merit" in the man's arguments. Again and again I read similar accounts, and it strengthened my resolve

to admit that the problems Kaczynski was concerned with were real. For example, conservative social theorist James Q. Wilson wrote in the New York Times that the manifesto was “a carefully reasoned, artfully written paper . . . If it is the work of a madman, then the writings of many political philosophers — Jean Jacques Rousseau, Tom Paine, Karl Marx — are scarcely more sane.” Eventually, I decided that regardless of the man’s actions his ideas needed to be grappled with, an argument I lay out thoroughly in *Dark Mountain’s* “Ted Kaczynski and Why He Matters.”

So, I wrote the man. We exchanged a few letters until he broke from me because of some misunderstandings concerning restrictions on prison mail. But by the end I had learned enough of his current activity to carry on exploring the politic. I became moderately involved in Earth First!, a radical environmentalist organization that influenced Kaczynski; I researched the history of the ecology movement and its major figures; and, most importantly, I formed a coalition with some of Kaczynski’s political associates in Spain, Portugal, and Mexico.

The most important figure in the coalition was a Spaniard pseudonymously known as Ultimo Reducto ´ (UR). UR was a lot like Kaczynski in some significant ways, which is eventually why I broke from him too. But he was an indispensable influence on my ideological development. Apart from “Industrial Society and Its Future,” and a few texts from the early history of Earth First!, UR more than anyone or anything else helped me carefully, thoughtfully, and rigorously articulate a wild-centered philosophy.

Kaczynski’s associates, whom rival groups have pointedly called “the Apostles of Kaczynski,” had a twofold mission during the time I worked with them. First, they were, to put it simply, performing an exegesis of Kaczynski’s manifesto. For example, in “Industrial Society and Its Future” he writes:

94. By “freedom” we mean the opportunity to go through the power process, with real goals not the artificial goals of surrogate activities, and without interference, manipulation or supervision from anyone, especially from any large organization. Freedom means being in control (either as an individual or as a member of a small group) of the life-and-death issues of one’s existence: food, clothing, shelter and defense against whatever threats there may be in one’s environment. Freedom means having power; not the power to control other people but the power to control the circumstances of one’s own life. One does not have freedom if anyone else (especially a large organization) has power over one, no matter how benevolently, tolerantly and permissively that power may be exercised. It is important not to confuse freedom with mere permissiveness . . .

But later, when Professor Skrbina worked with him to publish a collection of his writings, he added a postscript noting that some aspects of his manifesto were outdated or somewhat wrong. He specifically mentions his definition of freedom above:

Ultimo Reducto has recently called attention to some flaws in my work, [some] serious. . . . in the second and third sentences of paragraph 94 of ISAIF I wrote: [see above]. But obviously people have never had such control to more than a limited extent. They have not, for example, been able to control bad weather, which in certain circumstances can lead to starvation. So what kind and degree of control do people really need? At a minimum they need to be free of “interference, manipulation or supervision . . . from any large organization,” as stated in the first sentence of paragraph 94. But if the second and third sentences meant no more than that, they would be redundant.

So there is a problem here in need of a solution. I’m not going to try to solve it now, however. For the present let it suffice to say that ISAIF is by no means a final and definitive statement in the field that it covers. Maybe some day I or someone else will be able to offer a clearer and more accurate treatment of the same topics.

To resolve this problem, UR advocated dropping the term “freedom” completely and replacing it with the term “wildness.” Under his framework, there was capital-N “Nature,” all that is, the same way the physicists would use the word. Some of this Nature is dominated by humans or technics, called “artifice”; other aspects of Nature remain untrammelled by humans or technics, called “wild Nature.” UR argued that this framework was a better one to express the ideology, because “freedom” is too ambiguous: freedom from what, freedom to do what, and freedom for whom?

UR pointed out that Kaczynski already implicitly answered these questions in his manifesto.

183. But an ideology, in order to gain enthusiastic support, must have a positive ideal as well as a negative one; it must be for something as well as against something. The positive ideal that we propose is Nature. That is, wild nature: Those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control. And with wild nature we include human nature, by which we mean those aspects of the functioning of the human individual that are not subject to regulation by organized society but are products of chance, or free will, or God (depending on your religious or philosophical opinions).

184. Nature makes a perfect counter-ideal to technology for several reasons. Nature (that which is outside the power of the system) is the opposite of technology (which seeks to expand indefinitely the power of the system). Most people will agree that nature is beautiful; certainly it has tremendous popular appeal. The radical environmentalists already hold an ideology that exalts nature and opposes technology. It is not necessary for the sake of nature to set up some chimerical utopia or any new kind of social order. Nature takes care of itself: It was a spontaneous creation that existed long before any human society, and for countless centuries many different kinds of human societies coexisted with nature without doing it an excessive amount of damage. Only with the Industrial Revolution did the effect of human society on nature become really

devastating. To relieve the pressure on nature it is not necessary to create a special kind of social system, it is only necessary to get rid of industrial society. Granted, this will not solve all problems. Industrial society has already done tremendous damage to nature and it will take a very long time for the scars to heal. Besides, even preindustrial societies can do significant damage to nature. Nevertheless, getting rid of industrial society will accomplish a great deal. It will relieve the worst of the pressure on nature so that the scars can begin to heal. It will remove the capacity of organized society to keep increasing its control over nature (including human nature). Whatever kind of society may exist after the demise of the industrial system, it is certain that most people will live close to nature, because in the absence of advanced technology there is no other way that people can live. . . . And, generally speaking, local autonomy should tend to increase, because lack of advanced technology and rapid communications will limit the capacity of governments or other large organizations to control local communities.

And:

69. It is true that primitive man is powerless against some of the things that threaten him; disease for example. . . . But threats to the modern individual tend to be man-made. They are not the results of chance but are imposed on him by other persons whose decisions he, as an individual, is unable to influence. Consequently he feels frustrated, humiliated and angry.

Here it becomes clearer what kind of freedom Kaczynski is talking about: the ability for nature, including man's nature, to function with relatively little domination from other men or their technical systems. In other words, he advocates *wildness*.

Point by point, UR et al. combed the same intellectual razor through the entire manifesto, eventually creating a glossary of theoretical terms like "progress," "progressivism," "humanism," "leftism," and "techno-industrial society." They also formalized the moral foundations of Kaczynski's critique by, intentionally or not, drawing on an age-old philosophical distinction between "natural" and "artificial" values. The specifics of the ideas are explained in UR's untranslated dialogue, entitled *Con Amigos Como Estos*, with a neo-Luddite group in Spain. Though all this seems pedantic, these distinctions are precisely why UR's work has been indispensable in helping me communicate a philosophically rigorous account of primitivism.

Kaczynski's associates' second task was translating ecoradical texts, especially Kaczynski's, into other languages. The Portuguese version of Kaczynski's manifesto finished up just as I had started corresponding with the group, which explains why the man requested a Portuguese-English dictionary from me several months before. But the Spanish version had been finished by UR long ago — and published right around the time that a terror group arose in Mexico: *Individualidades Tendiendo a lo Salvaje* (ITS).

At the time I had limited knowledge of the group. I knew only that they were heavily influenced by Ted Kaczynski, differing from him only in that they didn't espouse revolution, and that they had produced eight communiqués, which I had read. This and the timing of their appearance suggested that ITS was a direct, though unintentional, product of Kaczynski and his associates' propaganda work. UR himself voiced these suspicions in his critique of ITS, written right around their fifth communiqué, and which marked a drastic change in their discourse, as one can observe by reading the sixth, seventh, and eighth communiqués. Later, the suspicions were confirmed when ITS published their fullest critique of Kaczynski's revolutionary strategy to date, "*Algunas respuestas sobre el presente y NO del futuro.*" They note that they were indeed influenced by UR and Kaczynski, and that they vigorously disagree with the idea of revolution, preferring instead to act now as terrorists. Only later would they explain the ideological foundations of this view, when they grew from a single terror cell to a terror network.

Kaczynski's associates, especially UR, are not fans of ITS, and they do not want to be connected to them. Indeed, UR seems to view ITS as a thorn in his side, not a tolerable splinter group. Nevertheless, I noticed that the eco-extremists continued to use language and terms that the associates had been using and that I had made known through my popularizing them on the internet: progressivist, humanist, etc. In fact, many of these terms would appear very soon after their first appearance online, although I didn't notice this until much later. I also became weary of UR. While brilliant, he is difficult to work with, sometimes naive, unnecessarily incendiary . . . One might note that his critique of ITS — a terror group — began with a note on their grammatical inconsistencies. And in his critiques of my own writings, he would take great, exaggerated issue with phrases like "more or less" because of their ambiguity. It was getting to be a bit much, and I felt I could be more effective as an autonomous actor. So I broke away with a few American associates to pursue my own projects, primarily a journal entitled *Hunter/Gatherer*. As this project developed a flavor distinct from Kaczynski's brand of primitivism, we used new language and concepts that, to our surprise, ITS then used as well. It seemed that even after the split with UR, ITS was paying attention to us, which even now puts me in a precarious legal situation.

These events had visible effects on the forms my philosophy took. For instance, immediately after becoming convinced that Kaczynski's core ideas were right, 17-year-old me was recklessly supportive of political violence. I remain firm in my opinion that political violence can be justifiable, but the opinions are tempered now. And during my time with Kaczynski's political associates, I conceived of the philosophy in a classical revolutionary manner, attempting in many ways to emulate Marxists. This resulted in several absurdities apparent in my early writings for *Hunter/Gatherer*. Finally, while the vast majority of communiqués by ITS contain nothing new or, worse, terrible innovations on original primitivist ideas, some of their critiques of Kaczynski and his associates struck me as sound, such as their polemics against revolutionary strategies. Their focus on animist spirituality was especially influential — not because it was right or compelling or even nuanced, but because it reminded me that even if philosophical rigor is necessary to speak and make sense, it is not sufficient to speak and move. While Kaczynski's

associates tried to focus on devising a doctrine, ITS reminded me that a more fruitful path was articulating a mythology.

Along this path, because of my initial experiences with Kaczynski and his writings, I found the doors to a world entirely invisible to me before. I had known that Kaczynski's ideas were not original. He has admitted as much, writing that he sought only to appraise revolution as a serious option in response to many thinkers' insights about modernity. But I did not know until university the extent to which the ideas permeated anthropology, literature, biology, philosophy, art. The "Pleistocene paradigm," or the idea that human nature is essentially Paleolithic, was especially ubiquitous. Crucially, this revelation meant that when I advocated primitivism, I would not be confined to the reasoning, approaches, and ideas in the manifesto. More importantly, it meant that I now had a niche to fill: there was a desperate need for a book that combined primitivist insights from the various sciences and books and pieces of art, one whose author name wouldn't pose a stumbling block because of murder. So for four years, I studied as many relevant sources as I could, bettering the language I used to express the philosophy and finally writing that book.

The philosophy as I have written it here seems to be, more or less, where I've settled. I am not yet entirely sure what the political implications might be, although I give some predictions in the last chapter of the book. I am sure, however, of this much: a great clash of wills is raging, and I am on the side of the wild.

Chapter 1: How to Civilize a Savage

"But I like the inconveniences."

"We don't," said the Controller. "We prefer to do things comfortably."

"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."

"In fact," said Mustapha Mond, "you're claiming the right to be unhappy."

"All right then," said the Savage defiantly, "I'm claiming the right to be Unhappy."

"Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind." There was a long silence.

“I claim them all,” said the Savage at last.

— *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley

Wildness and Domestication

The degree to which nature — all that exists — is produced by humans is the degree to which it is *domesticated*. The degree to which it is not produced by humans is the degree to which it is *wild*. Thus there is domesticated nature and wild nature.

One cannot draw a perfect line between what is wild and what is domesticated, just like one cannot draw a perfect line between what is tall and what is short, or healthy and sick, or big and little, or near and far. A person is loving even if they hate sometimes. An honest person can carefully consider their words for tact or even tell small lies and still be considered honest. Thus the pair functions as a spectrum: what is important is not whether something is wholly wild or wholly domesticated, but the degree to which it is wild or domesticated.

Human Nature

Innate human nature — human nature at birth — is like a landscape, and like a landscape the highs and lows of the terrain limit how, exactly, it can be modified. One cannot run a train through a mountain just anywhere, since the rock may be too hard or too soft, or the tunnel may not be structurally sound. Where one can run a train through the mountain, this comes with the benefit of more efficient travel; but it also destroys aspects of the mountain’s ecology and degrades its beauty. Changes cannot always be made to human nature; and when they can be made there are trade-offs.

The Nomadic Hunter/Gatherer

The focus on the hunter/gatherer is based on a tradition in political philosophy that considers the wild state of man before moving on to an analysis of the civilized state of man. This is the tradition of Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Hume, Paine... The latter writes explicitly, “To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man.” In other words, the nomadic hunter/gatherer ideal has pedagogical utility because of its stark contrast with civil life, but whereas the previous philosophers used the hunter/gatherer to justify progress, rewilders use the hunter/gatherer to rebuke the idols of civilization.

The focus is not on the ins and outs of the hunter/gatherer way of life, but on the limits the hunting/gathering mode of production imposes on domestication. To be a rewilder, one does not have to believe all that hunter/gatherers believed; to see the world as they saw it; to revive indigenous rituals; to adopt their hairstyles and dress. If one lives like a hunter/gatherer in a zoo, one has not achieved a wild life, only the aesthetics of a wild life.

One might wonder how useful a nomadic hunter/gatherer ideal is if modern man cannot usually fulfill it. But the ideal is not something to be fulfilled. Its purpose beyond the pedagogical is solely to bring together those who relate to the value of wildness in the same way, that is, to communicate the breadth of their grievances.

The Civilizing Process

Gilgamesh listened to the word of his companion, he took the axe in his hand, he drew the sword from his belt, and he struck Humbaba with a thrust of the sword to the neck, and Enkidu his comrade struck the second blow. At the third blow Humbaba fell. Then there followed a confusion for this was the guardian of the forest whom they had felled to the ground. For as far as two leagues the cedars shivered when Enkidu felled the watcher of the forest, he at whose voice Hermon and Lebanon used to tremble. Now the mountains were moved and all the hills, for the guardian of the forest was killed.

—The Epic of Gilgamesh

Life in civilization demands from man more than his primitive nature can give, so he has had to become civilized, tamed — though not quite domesticated. Nomadic hunter/gatherers have successfully entered civilization, but entry is a process of education and cultivation; the beliefs and behaviors of modern humans are not the product of the womb.

When a society first needs to change its citizens' behavior, it does so through large-scale transformation. But as the methods of cultivation are perfected, the need for large-scale social transformations dissipates, and what was once a great cultural project is achieved through childhood education.

For example, instead of simply adopting European social manners, the people of the Middle Ages underwent a long period of education that shaped their behavior through shame, guilt, disgust, and other such feelings. A whole industry of etiquette manuals developed for this purpose, and commands now reserved for children were being issued, regularly, to adults. People of the Middle Ages had to be told not to defecate on staircases and curtains, not to defecate in front of women, not to touch their privates in public, not to greet someone who is relieving themselves, not to examine their handkerchief after blowing into it, not to use various pieces of public fabric as handkerchiefs, not to use their eating spoon to serve food, not to offer food that they have bitten into, not to stir sauce with their fingers...

Beyond direct instruction, European society also developed taboos around sex, defecation, and urination; they passed laws; and they made non-compliance of cosmic importance by employing Christian dogma. In other words, the European "second nature" developed only through multiple, interlocking systems and over a long period of time.

Instilling a second nature into Europeans became necessary because right around the same time the patchwork of feudal territories, chiefdoms, and cities were being consolidated into much larger state-based societies. Nowadays, with states and their systems of education already established, a large-scale social transformation is unnecessary, and citizens usually go through the same processes of education in their youth.

The Civilizing Process Is Evolutionary, Not Conspiratorial

The methods society uses to civilize its people are not necessarily the result of rational planning. Much like an organism will keep its evolutionary mutation if the mutation helps it survive, a society will favor social changes that help it run more efficiently. Thus, the civilizing process occurs through a multiplicity of interlocking, autonomous systems of control, not a single conspiracy with leaders on top.

The problem reveals itself through a simple thought experiment: what aspect of your daily routine does not make somebody money? Very little, probably. And in trade there is an incentive to colonize every aspect of the consumer's life that will turn a greater profit or increase efficiency. Google wants your attention; the university, your time; work, your labor. More, the story of technoindustrial development since WWII demonstrates a process of constant expansion, constant and total colonization at an awe-inducing speed. Previously private domains, like social relationships, are now directed by technicians at social media companies and the incantations of their behavioral sciences. The individual, as a result, is left in an anxious state, pulled in many directions and sucked of independence and creativity, or dazed and confused into a stupor until the end of his day, when he finds himself drained of any energy to exert for his own will.

Being pulled at all sides by obligations and rules and psychological manipulation has a negative impact. The need for autonomy from these is so crucial that even relieving individuals of a few of the burdens has a positive effect on their wellbeing. For example, when patients are carefully attended to, health declines; but when the patients have the ability to control even small aspects of their life, the effect reverses. Prisons that allow prisoners to reposition furniture and TVs see fewer revolts and health problems. And individuals in homeless shelters that allow their residents to choose their food and bed are more likely to find an apartment or get a job.

The Expanding Moral Circle

In *The History of European Morals* William Lecky noted:

The moral unity to be expected in different ages is not a unity of standard, or of acts, but a unity of tendency... At one time the benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world.

This tendency is a logical consequence of technical development, which expands, and, during expansion, absorbs peoples and their cultures. Since a society with constant inner conflict would operate inefficiently, the society evolves social norms that promote unity between the absorbed cultures. This is usually not a pretty process, as is demonstrated by ethnic conflict being one of the main sources of instability for the nation-state system established after WWII.

Of course, man needs fellowship with other men. So we must distinguish between mutualism in the wild state of man, which we will call *solidarity*, with mutualism in the civilized state of man, which we will call *civility*. Civility must be cultivated from solidarity according to the demands of civilization, and, as civilization gets larger, so does the sphere of moral consideration.

The center of the nomadic hunter/gatherer's fellowship is the clan, which functions very much like a friend group. The stakes, of course, are higher: clans more than friend groups depend on shared tradition, status within the group, rules about food distribution, regulation of conflict between members, and so on. They usually consist of a high number of blood relations, but this need not be the case, and some evidence suggests that relatives were actually scattered throughout neighboring bands. Like friend groups, decisions are made anarchically, natural leaders taking their place but regulated by gossip, force, social norms. Leaders also have a fundamental inability to dominate other fellows, who do not depend on them for survival the way modern man depends on the state for survival. With the onset of civilization, clans began to break down, their members yoked to artificial communities, even more extensively in recent centuries. Jacques Ellul give an historical example:

...a systematic campaign was waged against all natural groups, under the guise of a defense of the rights of the individual; for example, the guilds, the communes, and federalism were attacked, this last by the Girondists. ...There was to be no liberty of groups, only that of the individual. There was likewise a struggle to undermine the family. ...Revolutionary laws governing divorce, inheritance, and paternal authority were disastrous for the family unit, to the benefit of the individual. And these effects were permanent, in spite of temporary setbacks. Society was already atomized and would be atomized more and more. The individual remained the sole sociological unit, but, far from assuring him freedom, this fact provoked the worst kind of slavery.

The atomization we have been discussing conferred on society the greatest possible plasticity — a decisive condition for *technique*. The breakup of social groups engendered the enormous displacement of people at the beginning of the nineteenth century and resulted in the concentration of population demanded by modern technique. To uproot men from their surroundings, from the rural districts and from family and friends, in order to crowd them into cities still too small for them; to squeeze thousands into unfit lodgings and unhealthy places of work; to create a whole new environment within the framework of a new human condition (it is too often overlooked that the proletariat is the creation of the industrial machine) — all this was possible only when the individual was completely

isolated. It was conceivable only when he literally had no environment, no family, and was not part of a group able to resist economic pressure; when he had almost no way of life left.

Such is the influence of social plasticity. Without it, no technical evolution is possible. For the individual in an atomized society, only the state was left: the state was the highest authority and it became omnipotent as well.

Today, movements toward multiculturalism achieve the same thing that Ellul described, but to serve the needs of globalized civilization: removing the individual from the natural social group of the clan, yoking him to artificial community.

How the Moral Circle Expands

Nomadic hunter/gatherers usually restrict their strongest social capacities to 40 or so people. One might assume that altruism is naturally limited to 40 or so people because only 40 or so people were around, but the limitations are to a large extent biological. The reasons for this are complex.

The field of sociobiology was borne out of a central question plaguing the theory of natural selection since Darwin devised it: why are organisms altruistic? Eventually, evolutionary biologists explained the phenomenon with the concept of *inclusive fitness*. Natural selection, they argued, does not operate primarily on the species or even the organism, but on the gene, whose one “desire” is to propagate itself. It often does this through the organism. Put colloquially, one might say that the chicken is just the egg’s way of making another egg.

Understanding natural selection this way makes altruism significantly less mysterious. When evolution is understood as competition between organisms, each organism has a strong incentive to kill most others, who constitute a threat to survival. But under the new framework, the genes themselves are waging brutal war, which seemingly paradoxically expresses itself as altruism at the level of the organism.

The key is that some organisms share genes, so they would better ensure these genes’ survival if they cooperate in some contexts. This is the origin of social behaviors. But the evolutionary trick is limited: after a certain degree of separation in relatedness, the organism no longer benefits its genes by acting altruistic. Thus, the altruism selected by this process only evolves if it benefits close or immediately-extended family. For example, if one group does not murder its uncles, and the other does, the mortality of the second group will make its genes less likely to propagate and survive.

Of course, natural selection isn’t a conscious process; it doesn’t design. It just happens. So behaviors that evolve under the selection pressure of inclusive fitness do not have to work perfectly, only well enough. For example, a woman may be more likely to act altruistically toward

her child because of biological cues signaling the baby is hers; but the same cues might in unusual circumstances work for a foreign baby. So long as the net gain to fitness is better than no biological cues at all, the cues will remain.

Social behaviors also evolve from *reciprocal altruism*. This is a phenomenon whereby an organism temporarily reduces its own fitness to benefit another, with the expectation that the favor will be returned. For example, a group of monkeys may develop the behavior of mutual grooming, allowing them to eradicate otherwise hard-to-reach bugs and improving their overall fitness.

But two limits prevent this phenomenon from extending far. First, reciprocal altruism will only arise when cheaters, or those who don't return the favor, can be detected. This is because, as game theory demonstrates, a group of purely altruistic beings who do not cease being altruistic toward a cheater will be ruined rather quickly, depleted of resources. To avoid this, evolution selects for organisms that withhold resources from or otherwise punish a cheater, either eliminating the problem or incentivizing him to cooperate. Sociobiological experiments confirm that instinctive cheater detection mechanisms do exist in many observed social behaviors.

The cheater-detection requirement imposes a second limitation: organisms will only evolve reciprocally altruistic behaviors in circumstances where the individual receiving the favor will have ample, repeated opportunities to return it. Thus, even reciprocal altruism only selects for social behaviors that favor relations.

Once again, although evolutionary theory explains the reasons for certain behaviors, it does not ensure that the behaviors will always express themselves in the "intended" way. Thus, conditions in one environment may produce a behavior that will be detrimental in other environments. And suitable artificial pressure, or particularly unusual environmental pressure, can tweak the behaviors, though usually not change or repress them completely.

Furthermore, we cannot assume that reciprocal altruism will always be the best strategy for a given social behavior. When natural selection favors reciprocal altruism over pure self-interestedness, it is because, as with monkeys, altruism enhances overall fitness. Otherwise self-interested behavior will be selected for.

There is a final limitation to human solidarity: these behaviors stem from physical changes in the organism, and the form these take impose limits. For example, in primates social behavior is directly affected by the size of the neocortex, the frontal section of the brain, which the scientist Robin Dunbar found limited human beings to approximately 150 stable, close relationships. After this point, group cohesiveness can only be maintained through more restrictive rules or norms. And in hunting/gathering conditions a number that large was unlikely because it would require a high amount of time devoted to social grooming, time that the society in question couldn't often afford.

To expand natural human social capacity, to turn solidarity into civility, civilizations employ several tricks. On how altruism evolved from inclusive fitness can be extended, Steven Pinker writes:

The cognitive twist is that the recognition of kin among humans depends on environmental cues that other humans can manipulate. Thus people are also altruistic toward their adoptive relatives, and toward a variety of fictive kin such as brothers in arms, fraternities and sororities, occupational and religious brotherhoods, crime families, fatherlands, and mother countries. These faux-families may be created by metaphors, simulacra of family experiences, myths of common descent or common flesh, and other illusions of kinship. None of this wasteful ritualizing and mythologizing would be necessary if “the group” were an elementary cognitive intuition which triggered instinctive loyalty. Instead that loyalty is instinctively triggered by those with whom we are likely to share genes, and extended to others through various manipulations.

On how reciprocal altruism can be extended, Pinker writes:

One cognitive twist on this formula is that humans are language-using creatures who need not discriminate reciprocators from exploiters only by direct personal experience, but can also ask around and find out their reputation for reciprocating with or exploiting others. This in turn creates incentives to establish and exaggerate one’s reputation (a feature of human psychology that has been extensively documented by social psychologists), and to attempt to see through such exaggerations in others. And one way to credibly establish one’s reputation as an altruist in the probing eyes of skeptics is to *be* an altruist, that is, to commit oneself to altruism (and, indirectly, its potential returns in the long run, at the expense of personal sacrifices in the short run). A third twist is that reciprocity, like nepotism, is driven not by infallible knowledge but by probabilistic cues. This means that people may extend favors to other people with whom they will never in fact interact with again, as long as the situation is representative of ones in which they *may* interact with them again.

But of course, these tricks alone can’t totally modify human behavior. For example, because human social behavior is limited, we can reasonably predict that moral decisions will be more clear-cut in small-group contexts, but more ambiguous or difficult when our Paleolithic morals confront modern conditions. The evidence seems to bear this out. For example, humans have a very difficult time making moral decisions concerning large groups, a well-known problem in population ethics. Patricia Churchland put it this way: “no one has the slightest idea how to compare the mild headache of five million against the broken legs of two, or the needs of one’s own two children against the needs of a hundred unrelated brain-damaged children in Serbia.”

Consider an experiment by the psychologist Paul Slovic during which he told volunteers about a starving girl, and measured their willingness to donate money. He then told the same story to another group but with the added detail that millions of others were also starving. The second

group only gave around half as much money as the first. In fact, Slovic found that even adding just one more person would begin the process of “psychic numbing.”

On the other hand, natural human behavior is clearly prejudiced toward in-groups. To test this idea, social psychologist Henri Tajfel once split experimental participants into groups based on a coin flip and then asked them to appraise a piece of art in a style none had seen before. Tajfel found that, in spite of the group membership’s irrelevance and arbitrary nature, participants “liked the members of their own group better and they rated members of their in-group as more likely to have pleasant personalities.” And the biases affect behavior. In a number of studies, experimenters divide their subjects into arbitrary groups and tell them to allocate objects of value, like money or points, to other subjects, who are identified only by a number and group membership. Participants give more than would be expected if they were purely self-interested, but they have an undeniable tendency to allocate more resources to members of their in-group.

But in modern conditions, this kind of numbing is morally unacceptable, and decisions must be made that affect large populations. A large group can only maintain its cohesiveness and strength if its members maintain their solidarity, even if the solidarity is only behavioral or institutional (e.g., through charities or NGOs). Artificial modification therefore becomes an absolute necessity for the society. But the psychological tricks do not necessarily change what humans can do — an individual’s altruism only goes so far. Their primary function is to convince the individual to utilize technological systems necessary to expand his altruistic capabilities, like charities, churches, and governments. As more and more demands of modern life can only be satisfied by institutional or technological means, man is taught more and more to substitute his own will and nature to those of large organizations. Thus he rightly feels a loss of autonomy and purpose, for his purpose in such a society is only instrumental, similar to a cog in a machine.

Consider the way commercials about African poverty exploit natural tendencies to extend cooperative behavior. It is normal to respond to a desperate child with sadness. And it usually makes sense to aid the desperate, even bureaucratically. But *guilt*, of the kind the sinful experience, is an unnecessary feeling. Aid has only been made an obligation because large organizations need it to be. Corporations survive off of the social connection, whose trade and consumption are their profit and labor. Governments run more efficiently if they use the powerful incentives of the social instincts to manage behavior. In the same way that farmers cultivate more land for better yields, civil institutions must build new social connections for cultural cultivation.

Aid commercials are so effective because young, vulnerable animals, including humans, have (biologically) evolved cute facial features for the exact purpose of eliciting tenderness. Organizations in turn (culturally) evolve techniques of social control that most efficiently shape human nature for civil purposes, like those above. As the number of organizations interested in a certain behavior increases, so too do moral precepts that better assure it. Resultingly, modern man does not simply hurt when he can’t or doesn’t act on empathy, and sometimes he is not struck with empathy at all — but always he feels guilt.

Increasing Control Over Human Nature

Just like technological capacity determines the effect man can have on the mountain, technological capacity determines the effect man can have on human nature. Modern industrial society represents one of the highest levels of control man has on the mountain, and it represents the highest levels of control man has on human nature.

For example, universities around the 1960s often designed confusing floor-plans for new buildings to prevent vandalism among protesters. Metal studs on short cement walls prevent skateboarding. City planners sometimes specify that benches be divided by armrests so people cannot lay on them, or that bench seats tilt forward slightly to encourage people not to stay long. Municipal governments have figured out that only a few design elements, like large windows on buildings near sidewalks, low landscaping, and gapped fences, will deter crime by creating the illusion of surveillance. Advertising employs behavioral psychology to determine which jingles will stay in consumers' heads the longest or which brand images will translate to the most buys. In well-designed stores, tiles will get smaller where there are products the store especially wants to sell, because it creates the illusion that the shopping buggy is going faster and causes customers to slow down. And in the late 1900s, when oil companies were suffering from major public relations issues, the companies paid engineers to redesign gas pumps to look like ATMs. Because, as behavioral psychology has demonstrated, humans associate positive feelings with ATMs — which give them money — oil company profits went up.

New sciences of human nature, like behavioral psychology, and biological sciences, like genetic engineering, will only continue to enhance man's power over nature, including human nature.

The Civilizing Process Has Negative Consequences

The consequences of rejecting the wild are apparent in non-human animals. The biologist John B. Calhoun documented some of the effects in a study that would later be the inspiration for *The Rats of NIMH*. The experiment centered around a roomy box containing several mice that Calhoun hoped to breed about 5,000 others from. He provided the critters with nearly everything one would expect them to need to live fulfilling lives, including sufficient food and water, climate control, and comfortable living quarters. However, the population never exceeded 150, much lower than his target; they developed aggressive behaviors; and instead of normal burrowing, they rolled dirt into balls for no apparent reason.

Calhoun repeated the experiment with some modifications several times, but each time he encountered another array of negative consequences. For example, one of the rat populations doubled every two months, growing so rapidly that social conventions, like those around mating, stopped working properly. They also exhibited abnormal aggressive behaviors, even toward their offspring, and they spent most of their time grooming, sleeping, and eating instead of

engaging in normal social activity. After only two years, the population collapsed, and with it the mouse utopia.

In his paper, Calhoun draws many parallels with human society and muses on potential solutions to the problems. Although he never settles on one exactly, he put the most emphasis on increasing abstract creative space to satisfy innate needs for creation and autonomy — abstract spaces that now exist in the form of information technologies, and that have been taken to their logical conclusion in fictional commentaries like *The Matrix*.

Zookeepers also repeatedly encounter captive animals with a wide array of behaviors that look uncannily similar to depression or anxiety in humans, a phenomenon known as “zoochosis.” Animals suffering zoochosis will pace in their cages, self-harm, intentionally puke, or become randomly aggressive. Like with humans, these behaviors can be managed by providing entertainment or by making normal tasks slightly more difficult than they need to be. For example, zookeepers might place food in a toy that the animal has to figure out how to open before he eats. Zoo animals also receive regular doses of antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication, like Xanax and Prozac. In fact, it is not often talked about, but most large mammals behind the zoo glass are on medication of the sort.

Humans display symptoms comparable to caged animals. This should be unsurprising. A gorilla and a rat display unique symptoms to being tamed or domesticated, but the overall impact is fairly similar. Man is an animal. He is not so separated from the others that he would have an incomparable response.

For example, individuals living in urban areas have an increased risk of psychosis and urbanity exacerbates symptoms in those already diagnosed with a psychotic disorder. A twin in an urban area is more likely to receive a mental health diagnosis than a twin in a rural area. Drug use is quite common in times of rapid development, indicating that the process has significant, negative psychological effects. And while in already-developed cities drug use varies, diagnosed mental disorders increase at a rate faster than would be predicted based on the increased population alone.

Consider the case of the Oji-Cree. Up until the 1960s, the Oji-Cree people of the Hudson Bay maintained their indigenous way of life even while in contact with modern society. But then the 60s hit, and industrial technics took a stronger hold. With this transition came many of the benefits of civilization: the Oji-Cree now no longer work as hard to build transportation technologies and winter is not as difficult or deadly. But, as one writer explains:

...in the main, the Oji-Cree story is not a happy one. Since the arrival of new technologies, the population has suffered a massive increase in morbid obesity, heart disease, and Type 2 diabetes. Social problems are rampant: idleness, alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicide have reached some of the highest levels on earth. Diabetes, in particular, has become so common (affecting forty per cent of the population) that

researchers think that many children, after exposure in the womb, are born with an increased predisposition to the disease. Childhood obesity is widespread, and ten-year-olds sometimes appear middle-aged. Recently, the Chief of a small Oji-Cree community estimated that half of his adult population was addicted to OxyContin or other painkillers.

Of course, the symptoms are not confined to the Oji-Cree. In fact, most are widespread problems in industrial societies, and evolutionary psychologists have come up with a few explanations for them. Diabetes and obesity, for example, are probably common because in evolutionary history, sugar was hard to come by but a necessary nutrient, so humans evolved a special taste for it; but this only causes health problems in sugar-rich modern societies, which also include corporations who exploit the human sweet-tooth for profit.

Conversely, most hunter/gatherers are neither struck by degenerative disorders or diseases to the degree industrial humans are, nor are they struck by many now-prominent mental health issues. One article in *The American Journal of Medicine* explains, "There is increasing evidence that the...mismatch [between our hunter/gatherer biology and civilized conditions] fosters 'diseases of civilization' that together cause 75 percent of all deaths in Western nations, but that are rare among persons whose lifeways reflect those of our preagricultural ancestors."

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud echoed these ideas. He also noticed the tendency of civilization to expand the sphere of moral consideration as it grows, writing, "Civilization is a process...whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind." Elsewhere he writes that a characteristic element of civilization is "...the manner in which the relationships of men to one another, their social relationships, are regulated — relationships which affect a person as a neighbour, as a source of help, as another person's sexual object, as a member of a family and of a State" (much like social manners began to be regulated in the Middle Ages).

But he throws a wrench into the whole thing. Freud's central thesis was that human nature contains some biologically innate drives that need to develop without artificial interference but that are contrary to the project of civilization. So, he writes, civilization sublimates or represses them for its own stability, and this leaves the individual in a neurotic, guilty state that can only be avoided with escape from civilized institutions. Freud writes that his intention is:

...to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.

Caging and taming wild animals is widely considered repulsive. Their captive lives exist along a spectrum. On one end, their physical conditions are worse than in the wild, especially at zoos or circuses. And except in cases of regulation, this will always remain a secondary concern to profit and efficiency. On the other hand, their physical conditions can be comfortable, but they

develop neuroses and exhibit signs of boredom, depression, or anxiety; their social behaviors change; their mating patterns differ. It is easy to see how both ends are less than ideal for the animal, and similar to the divide between the third and first worlds among humans.

The supposed benefits of civilization, like longer life expectancy and greater peacefulness, do not distinguish man. Captive non-humans sometimes live longer in captivity, or they are more lethargic, and therefore more peaceful. But how odd it would be to suggest that a lion's peacefulness dignifies his cage!

The Civilizing Process Does Not Work Perfectly

The civilizing process does not work perfectly. One, it has not reached everyone at the same level of efficiency. Two, much of the civilizing process can be undone. And three, some possess particularly indomitable wills, resistant to methods that work well enough to sustain cultural manners, not well enough to fashion the specific individual in the required way. "There are some who can live without wild things," Aldo Leopold writes, "and there are some who cannot." The indomitable ones — the wild wills — are those who cannot.

They are repeatedly present throughout history. We can see the Wild Will in native resistance to colonization; in the Maroons, slaves who escaped captivity to live in the jungles and the forests; the Sentinelese, who respond violently to any civilized excursion into their land. We can also see it in profoundly civilized peoples. In 1753, in the midst of a "going native" phenomenon among American colonists, Benjamin Franklin noted that white captives freed from Native hands did not wish to stay long:

Tho' ransomed by their friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English...in short time they become disgusted with our manner of life...and take the first good opportunity of escaping again into the woods.

Later, in 1785, a group of freed and runaway slaves and white indentured servants settled in a wilderness area now known as Indianapolis. Peter Lamborn Wilson writes:

They mingled with Pawnee indians and took up a nomadic life modeled on that of local hunter-gatherer tribes. Led by a "king" and "queen," Ben and Jennie Ishmael..., they were known as fine artisans, musicians and dancers, abstainers from alcohol, practitioners of polygamy, non-Christian, and racially integrated. ...By about 1810 they had established a cycle of travel that took them annually from Indianapolis (where their village gradually became a city slum) through a triangle formed by the hamlets of Morocco and Mecca in Indiana and Mahomet in Illinois...

Later "official" white pioneers detested the Ishmaels, and apparently the feeling was mutual. From about 1890 comes this description of an elder: "He is an anarchist of course, and he has the instinctive, envious dislike so characteristic of his people, of

anyone in a better condition than himself.” ...The observer continues: “He abused the law, the courts; the rich, factories — everything.” The elder stated that “the police should be hanged”; he was ready, he said, to burn the institutions of society. “I am better than any man that wears store clothes.”

Over half a century later, John Muir, a pivotal figure in the wilderness movement, echoed the same ideas. Muir spent much of his time in the wilderness that still existed in the U.S., camping primitively, often without much more than a few blankets and a knapsack. He was a prolific writer, in his essays extolling the value of the wild, rebuking the materialism of American society, and advocating for the creation of a wilderness reserve system. He writes: “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity...”

Hanshan, Geronimo, Ishi, William Kidd — again and again the Wild Will possesses individuals and places them in direct conflict with the surrounding civilized world. Something here is ineradicable, and even those who do not agree must contend with it.

Chapter 2: The Call of the Wild

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

— *The Call of Cthulu*, H. P. Lovecraft

Back to the Pleistocene?

A trope in rewilding is the notion of return: return to the primitive, return to simplicity, return to the land. But too often the language is botched, ironically, by the idols of progress. “Return” is seen as a nostalgic call for a lost Eden, leaving open the obvious rebuttal that that great garden’s gates are still guarded by an angel wielding a fiery sword.

This is a simple linguistic misunderstanding. “Return” does not, in fact, only have meaning in the context of something lost to history. The something can merely be lost spatially or spiritually, both of which are the case here.

The Hebrew word “*teshuvah*” is ambiguous in a similar way. It, like its English counterpart, can be understood as either “return” or “repent”; but, unlike its English counterpart, the

overwhelming connotation rests on the latter meaning. The Jews, then, perform teshuvah when they turn their face from the world's idols and back toward the light of God, who, though invisible to them, was never lost.

The primitive has never been lost to us, not yet. Though civilized, man is not domesticated. And in this lies the origin of the intractable wild will.

Today, industrial man lacks a clan or possesses only a degraded one. Outside of traditional communities, the strongest extant clans are those whose conditions, usually ones of tragedy, put men outside the bounds of civility: gangs, junky houses, bands of outlaws, crews of pirates.

For example, the homeless are often forced to live outside the bounds of the state because of drug use or family problems or criminal records. But the social norms that arise have some interesting qualities. When I was homeless, the norm was that if two people did not get along, we did not invite them both to the hobo fire. If someone wronged someone else, we solved it through social pressure, exile, or physical violence, though the latter was regulated (for example, harm that required extensive medical attention was usually not allowed). We regulated individual social statuses through gossip, much in the same way hunter/gatherers do:

...all of these societies had sanctions to deal with deviants, free riders, and bullies... The sanctioning process begins with gossip as an exchange of evaluative information about who is doing their fair share and who isn't, who can be trusted and who cannot, who is a good and reliable member of the group and who is a slacker, cheater, liar, or worse. Gossip permits the group to form a consensus about the deviant that can lead to a collective decision about what to do about him.

We also shared food, cigarettes, and information about the area. Some of the homeless were disabled. One woman, for example, was in a wheelchair. On days when she could not, her best friends would push the wheelchair for her. They often spent days like this, sharing what they had with each other when together.

There wasn't a widespread feeling of unity with the human race, except when individuals were heavily integrated into Christian communities. One's clan of street kids was the primary moral community, and it was prioritized over strangers. Furthermore, the most disruptive elements of our lives were, by far, institutional ones: the police, the homeless shelters, the businesses. Thus, even when those in the same clan wronged each other, they agreed to solve the problems outside of institutional bounds; snitching was strictly prohibited.

Imagine what these sorts of social behaviors would amount to if they were not operating within the tragic conditions of drug use, mental problems, or criminal records; or without the constant disruptions from government and business. Something desirable might arise.

A Question of Values

In his essay *On Nature*, John Stuart Mill points out that there are two definitions of “nature.” The first defines nature as all that exists. The second defines nature as anything not made or controlled by man or his technological systems — that is, wild nature.

Mill made an appropriate observation: neither meaning allows us to look to nature for the *oughts* and *shoulds* of our moralities. If this is what Rousseau meant when he said we must live “in accordance with Nature,” then he made an error. For if nature is everything, then man can *only* live in accordance with it. And if nature precludes man, then man can *never* live in accordance with it.

This does not keep us from asserting that wild nature has value. Mill himself noted that nature in the second sense of the term is worth conserving:

Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of Nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation which is capable of producing food for human beings; every flowering waste or nature pasture ploughed up; all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man’s use exterminated as his rivals for food...

In other words, the point of rewilding is not that domestication is evil, or that nature can tell us how to act, but that wildness is more valuable than it is currently regarded. Man has domesticated fire, and few if any rewilders believe that to be a great evil, or an evil we ought to do something about. Man has domesticated dogs, and that occurred so long ago that it will likely never be undone. But if we plot different ways of life on a spectrum from wild to domesticated, rewilders will tend toward the wild part of the spectrum.

Wildness and Virtue

Those who say that nature dominates man just as much as civilization dominates man have missed the point, succeeding in little more than setting themselves up for nihilism, for how can an individual resist domination on all fronts, by everything? The point is that there is a difference between the domination of nature and the domination of civilization. The tragedy of a natural disaster is different from the tragedy of a bomb; an animal who dies neurotic, flabby, and dependent in a zoo lacks a certain dignity possessed by an animal who dies at the hands of a predator.

In *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes a difference between “man-as-he-happens-to-be” and “man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*.” “*Telos*” here is a concept borrowed from the ancient philosophers, meaning “end” or “purpose.” MacIntyre believed that the role of ethics is to move man from the first, untutored condition to the second. This is the meaning of a good life.

Convinced enough of contemporary materialism, the idea of a *telos* does not sit well with me. Man's nature is not necessarily his purpose. Of course, in some senses *telos* is compatible with modern biology. A lion who walks on two legs contradicts, in some fundamental ways, his nature, his "purpose," so to speak. But if this intuition is all that *telos* can capture, then we must dispose of it because, in most other respects, it inhibits understanding. For example, biologist Ernst Mayr points out that evolutionary adaptedness "is an *a posteriori* result rather than an *a priori* goal-seeking." That is, evolution, understood through a materialist lens, does not imbue its products with some purpose the way a watch is imbued with purpose.

But even absent the concept of *telos*, MacIntyre says something useful. We are creatures imbued with a nature and will, with an ineradicable urge to flourish. But in our movement toward "man-as-he-could-be," we have an option of tutors: wild nature, or civilization?

Contrast a week in Disneyland with a week in the wilderness. In the wilderness man is subordinate to nature — the weather, wild animals, the soil — a condition that forces him to build up from the bare facts of existence. His quest for food, shelter, and solidarity is not easy, but it imbues his life with purpose and keeps superfluous sources of stress at bay. He makes, hunts, and collects what he needs, sometimes a little more for band-members who will one day return the favor. Death is not something he can ignore, and though painful he and his society cope with ritual and collective myth-making. Struggle teaches him to be confident in his abilities to exist in the world: if any man tries to subjugate him in a way he finds intolerable, he can vote with his feet.

In Disneyland the object is pleasure and entertainment. The individual wakes up and, his fundamental needs fulfilled, experiences that distinctly modern feeling of boredom: What do I do today? he asks. Purposelessness abounds. His experience is a baptism in wealth extracted from people and places left dry. He is bound to the job and governments that enable his leisure. His pleasure results from a willing suspension of disbelief: if the illusion of spontaneity is shattered, his memories are left shattered as well. His joy is managed. Smells and sounds evoke place and time that isn't there. Shops are air-conditioned below room temperature to sell sweatshirts. Pavement is dark to attract heat and deter crowds. And if there is a death — corporate panic. This is no collective ritual; the frenetic pacing is solely about loss of profit. On the other hand, if any part of the park malfunctions, still, timid crowds wait like sheep to be told what to do. It is the height of civility.

The fundamental question is this: Which life do you will?

Land Must Come First

You cannot rewild an animal in a zoo. It needs a wild habitat first. In the same way, we cannot teach humans skills to rewild and then tell them it is fine to keep living in civilized conditions. They need a habitat to rewild. To believe otherwise is an error called *lifestylism*.

The ideal habitat for the rewilder is wilderness, because it contains the ecological building blocks necessary for nature to run itself. Wilderness is wildness dignified; thus the losses of wilderness are the losses of wildness to an exemplary degree. In the context of wild nature, nature provides the necessary components for survival. When a farmer clears a forest for his farm, the canopy no longer shades him from the sun, it does not retain heat in the winter, and it no longer protects him from rain. To fix these problems, he must discover some sort of technological innovation — which requires more labor. This is why slavery is non-existent among nomadic hunter/gatherers, but present in every major civilization before the Industrial Revolution.

Since the Industrial Revolution, machines have taken the place of direct human labor wherever possible. But individuals are still subjected to regulations they would not have to put up with if they lived directly from the land. It has also created a much more profound need for innovation than agricultural civilizations. For example, by polluting, clearing, and developing land at a much faster rate, industrial society has created problems like climate change and greatly increased the rate of species extinctions. Scientists are now looking for ways to engineer the climate or manage ecosystems so that they do not bleed as many extinct species — all solutions that require more labor, more regulation, and more substitution of the individual for large organizations and technological systems.

Wilderness is the ideal because it does not eschew the human need for creativity, comfort, socializing, or anything else needed to flourish; it simply removes the requirement that man subordinate himself to large organizations and technological systems for these things.

Wild Nature and Divinity

Heaven knows that John the Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains.

— John Muir

Wildness is a specific kind of moral value: less like the golden rule and more like astonishment, or awe, before God. Environmental ethicists Ned Hettinger and Bill Throop write:

People rightfully value the existence of a realm not significantly under human control — the weather, the seasons, the mountains, and the seas. This is one reason why the idea of humans as planetary managers is so objectionable to many. Consider a world in which human beings determine when it rains, when spring comes, how the tides run, and where mountains rise. The surprise and awe we feel at the workings of spontaneous nature would be replaced by appraisal of the decisions of these managers. Our wonder at the mystery of these phenomena would not survive such management. People value

being a part of a world not of their own making. Valuing the wild acknowledges that limits to human mastery and domination of the world are imperative.

Humans also need to be able to confront, honor, and celebrate the “other.” In an increasingly secular society, “Nature” takes on the role of the other. Humans need to be able to feel small in comparison with something nonhuman which is of great value. Confronting the other helps humans to cultivate a proper sense of humility. Many people find the other powerfully in parts of nature that do not bend to our will and where the nonhuman carries on in relative autonomy, unfolding on its own.

In other words, wildness is an aesthetic, moral, and spiritual value, but it is first of all spiritual. And aesthetics, too, seems to derive its force from the Divine, or the Sublime, or the Numinous, or whatever one wishes to call it. Edmund Burke, for instance, writes:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature...is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other.

Not long ago I had that word of prophets — “Lo!” — tattooed on my right hand, a way of saying in the midst of the decrepit and over-civilized, “Lo and behold, the beauty of the world beyond man.” I did not start out this way. I began rewilding with a singularly secular mindset, eschewing all concepts of spirit and spirituality. But in wild nature you cannot help yourself. You see “Lo!” in everything. Its beauty and grandeur shocks you into such a state of awe that you can do nothing but contemplate what is unfathomable and beyond you.

The feeling is comparable to the kind described by mystics. For example, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a Catholic mystic, explains that when he is trying to achieve “union” with the “unfathomable Divine,” he focuses on a single word until all meaning falls away and the mystic’s eyes are set only on God’s Glory — a glory that cannot be articulated. He writes:

Let me try to illustrate what I mean with an example from real life. A man or woman terrified by sudden disaster is forced by the circumstances to the limits of his personal resources, and marshals all his energy into one great cry for help. In extreme situations like this a person is not given to many words nor even to long ones. Instead, summoning all his strength, he expresses his desperate need in one loud cry: “Help!” And with this one little word he effectively arouses the attention and assistance of others.

In a similar way, we can understand the efficacy of one little interior word, not merely spoken or thought, but surging up from the depths of a man’s spirit, the expression of his whole being. ...And so this simple prayer bursting from the depths of your spirit touches the heart of Almighty God more certainly than some long psalm mumbled mindlessly

under your breath. This is the meaning of that saying in Scripture: “A short prayer pierces the heavens.”

These convictions are severely lacking in modern life, which is why modern man so desperately yearns for them. Of course, a city skyline, a skyscraper, a plane, a great landmark — all of these can inspire a kind of awe. But anyone who has experienced awe of man and awe of nature knows that they are thoroughly distinct experiences, and I have become addicted to the last one. It is, I submit, the one aspect of human flourishing that modern life will never be able to provide. So I say— with *religious* conviction — “Lo and behold, the beauty of the world beyond man.”

The Violence Taboo

The feeling of disgust, and the related notions of purity and impurity, are particularly strong elements of the human psychology. Characteristic signs of disgust — a wrinkled nose, lowered blood pressure, descended corners of the mouth, etc. — are cultural universals, suggesting that there is a strong biological basis to the emotion. (Biologists tend to favor the explanation that disgust helped man before medical science avoid contaminants that could cause illness or death.)

Given that disgust is so powerful that it is often impervious to reason, cultures requiring a great deal of control over their citizenry use the emotion as a primary means of psychological and social regulation. The taboos around sex and nakedness developed during the Christian era of the Western world; the caste system in India, with its concept of an “untouchable” class; notions of ethnic cleansing — all these are instances of civilizations channeling the psychology of disgust to regulate the lives of its citizens.

In modern industrial societies, several taboos keep the industrial citizenry from ever feeling comfortable in wilder conditions — at least so long as the taboos remain unbroken. But the problem is not that the wild is an inherently uncomfortable place for man to be. Many civilized taboos are around demonstrably innocuous things, like sweat, dirt, and insects. Men have thrived, comfortably, with all of these for thousands of years. In other words, when modern man claims that he cannot live in the wild because he cannot give up his comforts, he is usually saying no more than that he cannot get past civilized taboos. It is like how the characters in *Brave New World* cannot stand to hear the word “mother,” go pale at an old-looking person, and hold dear a slogan taught to them in their youth: “Civilization is sanitation.” The issue is one of conditioning, not reality.

And in my own experience it is not difficult to move past the psychological wall of taboos. The process is akin to removing a dam from a river, except the dam is in your mind. While once those who lived traditional lives appeared dirty and unclean to me, it is now the civilized, with their constant scrubbing and showering, who appear odd — like a monkey whose hair has been shaved off.

But there is one taboo that is particularly well-established: the taboo against violence. The degree to which this taboo is present in modern society is historically abnormal. Even so-called revolutionaries, great detractors of the state, will now claim that peaceful protest is the only way to achieve their goals — clearly historically untrue, and precisely what one would expect those in power to want their citizenry to believe. People are even beginning to call words and beliefs violent. The only feasible outlets for violent behavior — video games and sports — are both so regulated and artificial that it is questionable whether they can fully satisfy the aggressive instinct.

The reasons for the violence taboo are obvious enough. An economic engine must have a stable community for production, and violence is anything but stable. In fact, the earliest phase of the civilizing process has sometimes been called a “pacification process,” when the violent tendencies of man are extracted from him and he is taught that the power of violence is reserved solely for the state.

But citizens in industrial nations can only be pacifists because the police or the military do violence for them. The benefit is relative peace within the borders of the nation, but the drawback is a loss of personal autonomy.

I was once at a party at a small college house. About four or five people belonging to the same friend group attended. But about two hours into the party, a person at the fringes of the group arrived, someone who no one in attendance knew particularly well. He was on LSD, and he had drunk a substantial amount of alcohol. He never stood directly in front of *someone* for the three hours he was there, and for all three hours he asked for “warm water” — again and again and again. It didn’t matter if someone gave him warm water. He rejected it as inadequate and asked for it again. He demanded that one of the hosts turn off his video game. He got fairly aggressive and eventually started pushing the host around.

At a certain point it became clear that the drugs were not the only thing affecting him. He had taken the LSD around eight hours before, and the effects should have subsided for the dose he took. This person also had a known habit of being purposefully disruptive for attention. Still, because by that time he had managed to dominate the party, a few individuals tried to peacefully transfer him from the room. He was given ultimatums — “sit down and enjoy the movie like everyone else or you will have to leave” — and he was spoken to softly — “what’s the matter man?” — but at every point, he responded in a way that made the situation worse.

Of course, our only option at that point was to call the police. We didn’t, because none of the people at the party wanted to get involved with the police. But the roads were too icy to drive him home or get anyone else to come pick him up -- which simply meant that we had to weather the oaf and his incessant demands for water until he was gone.

The problem of nonviolence should be clear in this example. Because the state has a monopoly on the use of force, it has removed from individuals and their clans a whole spectrum of legitimate problem-solving techniques, forcing them to depend on the large organization instead of take control of the circumstances of their day-to-day lives. In the situation above, any extreme degree of violence would have been unnecessary. I suggested tying the person up to a tree like some natives did to drunkards until the morning. But we could not even do this because the potential legal ramifications. And, worse, the majority of the people at the party were uncomfortable with such an idea, because they had never learned to have a healthy relationship with force and violence. They were alienated from one of the most intimate tools for survival and flourishing they have — their bodies.

It's Everyone Else Who Is Homeless

Modern citizens often live their day to day lives on a single, connected piece of concrete with small islands of well-tended grass and trees and perhaps a few animals well-suited to the city, like deer, squirrels, and rats. The wilderness is obviously much different. Relationships with plants and animals are an intrinsic element of the individual's social life. Some of these relationships are affectionate — like the relationships between a clan and the mammals and birds that follow them to eat their food scraps — and some are filled with danger — like the relationships between a clan and animals known to be violent toward them. A few transcend the division, such as cases when novel individuals form affectionate relationships with animals otherwise known as dangerous.

Living in a landscape filled with non-human life changes the landscape of the human mind. It is hard to describe, precisely and with words, what the change is like. Scientists have measured the effects in small ways. For example, psychologists have demonstrated that even a small amount of time in natural areas helps reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. And several books and papers have explored the concept of *biophilia*, a proposed innate human connection with non-human nature. But I have found that the best descriptions are religious and artistic. For example, the poet John Haines wrote:

As many have found, having once lived that life, nothing else ever quite satisfies the spirit. It is the original life of people, and there is in it something inexhaustible and fresh. To rise in the morning, look from the doorway of a tent at the early light on the land; to drink from a tundra pool, break fast, and then break camp; to pack one's gear and with encouraging cries to the animals, set off once more to the hunting ground: it may in many ways have been the best life we have known on this earth, clean and unburdened, filled with peril and expectation.

Let me give an example from my personal life. I used to be amazed by accounts of hunter/gatherers who could sense in just the smallest detail what kind of animal went through an area, or whether it rained several days ago, or what might be going on uphill. At first I thought there was some kind of technique to it. If I learned the right system, I would have similar

abilities. But after spending just a marginal amount of time living in the forest, the actual source of hunter/gatherer ability became clear: when the forest is your home, you will know it like your home.

Consider how a person can sense a disturbance in their house if a book was moved. It has nothing to do with the books having a strict order, and the person doesn't necessarily have to remember a great many details about how book placement indicates what someone was doing with the book. Because the disrupted place is their home, a single disruption is enough to tell them how it connects to the way things usually are in that place.

In the same way, as I lived in the forest, I began to notice small details about the people I was living with, like the differences in their footsteps. This first became an important detail to me when a visitor came and, unlike everyone else, wore shoes, making the mud mushier than usual and leaving some of the nearby plants trampled. Weather patterns, never once explicitly communicated to me, also became apparent. I began to notice how sound and wind travelled through the mountain cove, knowledge I later used to go on walks without alerting the wildlife I wanted to see. Here and there others I lived with communicated specific details, but the psychological state as a whole, the sense of being home, simply developed with time.

I can't wait to return to it. Not least because I taste the chemicals in city water, I feel tension developing in my shoulders and lower back, I feel the damage the concrete is doing to my feet and legs. The environment around me is inert, not thriving with life and motion. And whereas in the forest I could explore what I thought was interesting, here my paths are directed by signs and architecture, my motions monitored by cops and security cameras, and any behavior outside the normal bounds is noticed. How could I learn to feel home in a place like that? As I say when I make an escapade to the streets for supplies and friendly visits — "It's everyone else who is homeless."

Chapter 3: Live Wild or Die

Undoubtedly, if modern tendencies have any elements of permanency in them, a great deal of the activity of the future will be devoted to the end of a greater understanding of the universe. Humanity, or its descendants, may well be much more occupied with purely scientific research and much less with the necessity of satisfying primarily physiological and psychological needs than it is at present. This character may stamp the whole of future development, so that machinery will be organized not for production but for discovery. Indeed, the great necessity for production either of food or other articles of consumption will disappear rapidly with the progress of dehumanization...

[But] we shall have very sane reactionaries at all periods warning us to remain in the natural and primitive state of humanity...

Responses, Not Solutions

I do not have a *solution* to the problem of civilization, but there are a million observable *responses* to it. The six I'll evaluate here are: humanist movements, technological utopianism, dropping out, protective conservation, restorative conservation, terrorism, and revolution.

False Causes

Civilization produces discontent, so to continue functioning it must provide an outlet for the discontent. There are a myriad of ways it does this, like digital entertainment and sports, but for the most rebellious it offers a smorgasbord of causes with an aura of rebellion, but that are harmless or even helpful to civil society.

As Freud explained, one of the primary means by which civilization operates is a heightening sense of guilt. People of the Middle Ages were taught to feel guilt and shame about their bodies — nakedness, defecation, urination, sex. And people of revolutionary France were taught to feel shame about prioritizing their natural social groups over the well-being of the nation. At each of these points, certain ideologies, like theocratic belief systems, Christianity, and forms of nationalism, became dominant because they were the most effective means of enforcing mass unity.

Today the dominant ideology of global civilization is humanism, particularly secular humanism, which teaches that man belongs to the single moral community of humanity. “Dominant” is measured by power, not numbers. The majority of the world population still holds traditional values, like belief in a strong family, ethnic loyalty, and continuing tradition. Where these have been disrupted by colonialism they assume a particularly modern aroma, but the values are traditional nonetheless. Still, some of the most powerful organizations, and those which have the most ability to shape global civilization, preach humanist values: the United Nations, NGOs, many large religious orders, universities, most transnational corporations... (Note that these organizations are not stably dominant; their project to add another layer of moral cultivation to civilization is an ongoing one.)

As with the religious prologues of humanism — Christianity, Islam, Confucianism — humanist guilt has the unfortunate side-effect of producing excruciatingly pious people. The pious of Judaism were the Pharisees and Sadducees; but the Pharisees and Sadducees of today include society's most highly socialized elements — professors, students, scientists, corporate elites, executives of international bodies — in short, the technician class.

A study on the concept of “microaggressions” on college campuses illustrates their piety well. It found that a number of new structural conditions defining the university are producing a “victimhood culture” that relies heavily on moral language, victimhood identity, and garnering

massive peer support for real or perceived offenses. These conditions include pervasive and easily-accessible authority figures; fewer options for autonomous problem-solving, like dueling; reliance on large peer groups for support because of alienation from traditional social groups like the family; and settings where equality is nearly the norm, highly valued, and therefore extremely taboo to violate. The end result is a crop of individuals who defer to authorities and moral support from masses rather than those who address their problems autonomously. This is often called being “well-adjusted,” but it is no different than taming a horse.

Consider the way many university students and professors react to minor offenses to equality with overrighteous vigor. For example, in 2015 Yale professor Erika Christakis responded to a mass email asking students not to wear culturally appropriative costumes. She wrote:

I don't wish to trivialize genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation, and other challenges to our lived experience in a plural community. I know that many decent people have proposed guidelines on Halloween costumes from a spirit of avoiding hurt and offense. I laud those goals, in theory, as most of us do. But in practice, I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students.

Controversy ignited. Students held mass protests, and in a video recording of Erika Christakis' husband talking to one of the crowds, some students can be seen crying and screaming at the professor because he could not remember their names, and because he would not apologize for his views. When he offered to agree to disagree, the students pressed him still further to comply to their extreme version of humanist morality.

Piety is an important means of enforcing and sustaining civility. Consider Ellul's insights, as communicated by Daniel Bois:

One of the ironies of propaganda to work is that its population must be educated. ...So the more educated you become, the less aware you are that you are a victim of propaganda and the more you are ready to spread your ideology to others who will in turn reinforce you and be reinforced by you in a horizontal process. Leaders aren't telling you what to think (directly), you are being told by your peers what to think and you pass along this information to others to inform them what to think. Then when this ideology has reached a substantial portion of the population, you demand the leaders to comply and they reluctantly do so (which was their intention 30 to 40 years previously, but they won't tell you this). This is the essence of what Ellul says...

Ironically, some of the most pious profess to be against capitalism, industry, or progress. This is especially true after WWII, when the Nazis and the Bomb demonstrated that moral and technical progress are not inextricably linked. Vietnam, the 60s, and the Cold War only exacerbated the ensuing disillusionment. Many on the far left found difficulty with the historical

account of progress, since they cannot easily say that the world they live in is good when it was built and, in some respects, continues to be sustained by the blood and labor of Africans, natives, non-human life, and the third world. For all these reasons, a particular kind of humanist, the regressive humanist, professes to be against society — and often he appears to be.

Note that piety can harm society even if its overall effect is beneficial. The vandalism and missed class that resulted from the Yale controversy, for example, was both economically and socially inefficient.

But this is not always the case: sometimes riots can force a society to pay immediate attention to problems that it would have otherwise ignored to its detriment. In this way the usually negative side-effects of piety instigate a social self-correction process. For example, the riots in Ferguson, Missouri were clearly a result of bad economic and social conditions in the area. Much of America still operates because of the vestiges of racial hierarchies, left over from Jim Crow and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. But unlike those times, racial hierarchies are no longer required for economic production; wages and integration, economically possible because of technical advances, are a more efficient route.

The Ferguson rioters were not necessarily asking for economic and technical development; they were simply acting on their discontent. In fact, in many cases average people don't care much for corporate or governmental solutions to their problems, preferring instead to be left alone to work it out for themselves. But the riots, as they do, drew in all sorts of activists with various causes and pious ideologies to quell revolt with accommodations like economic development or a "national conversation."

Regressive humanists will insist that corporate and governmental accommodations are breadcrumbs, nothing more; that corporations and governments actually have no interest in achieving the moral ideals of equality and justice. But this view operates on a confused analysis of social progress, which is evolutionary. Of course civilized institutions are not going to eradicate racial bias where it still sustains them. And of course civilized institutions are not going to exert more energy quelling the revolt than they need to; if this means half-baked solutions that nevertheless stop the property damage and violence, they will go with half-baked solutions. But the effect overall is a gradual movement toward humanist social values (as with, e.g., the labor movements at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution). By acting in a way they consciously perceive as rebellious, the pious actually advance society.

Freud wrote as much in the aforementioned text, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. He argued that the repressed elements of human nature may express themselves in two ways. On the one hand, these desires might be redirected toward problems within civil life "...and so may prove favourable to a further development of civilization." On the other hand, these desires "may also spring from the remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis...of hostility to civilization. The urge for freedom, therefore, is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether."

Rewilding cannot be about trying to create a particular form of civilization, like expanding its concept of justice to include various oppressed classes. Why ask for a black astronaut or a gay CEO if you don't want astronauts or CEOs? We must rebuke these idols, which yoke yet more men to slavery, and cast off the chains that bind our "original personality, which is still untamed" — this is rewilding.

Technological Utopianism

The Problems May Be Insurmountable

Civilization must address threats in at least six major areas before the end of the century. Other threats exist, but most are couched in a long chain of hypotheticals, so I will ignore them. The six are: antibiotic resistance, artificial intelligence, climate change, biotechnology, information technology, and population growth.

The World Health Organization wrote of antibiotic resistance in its 2014 report, "this serious threat is no longer a prediction for the future, it is happening right now in every region of the world and has the potential to affect anyone, of any age, in any country. Antibiotic resistance — when bacteria change so antibiotics no longer work in people who need them to treat infections — is now a major threat to public health." Combined with densely populated cities and transportation systems, antibiotic resistance means, at the least, constant trouble at the level of the 2014 Ebola crisis. The only apparent ways to address the problem are to devise an alternative to antibiotics or to devise public health systems that can mitigate crises when they occur. Both are enormous tasks.

The most pressing problems with artificial intelligence do not have to do with "the singularity" or a Matrix-like robot revolt, but with utter dependence on systems no longer controlled or even understood by humans. This, like antibiotic resistance, is a problem now. One example comes from an article in *Aeon*, "Is Technology Making the World Indecipherable?":

Despite the vastness of the sky, airplanes occasionally crash into each other. To avoid these catastrophes, the Traffic Alert and Collision Avoidance System (TCAS) was developed. TCAS alerts pilots to potential hazards, and tells them how to respond by using a series of complicated rules. In fact, this set of rules — developed over decades — is so complex, perhaps only a handful of individuals alive even understand it anymore.

The same thing is happening to society as a whole. In his talk, "How Algorithms Shape Our World," Kevin Slavin pointed out that 70% of the stock market operates by algorithms that do the trading for brokers, but that no one truly understands (this is called "black box trading"). In fact, the sole duty of some is to examine the automated systems and pick out individual algorithms that run it. As a result, when something like the Flash Crash of 2:45 happens, that is,

when 9% of the stock market simply disappears in seconds, no one can give an explanation. A 2013 article from *Nature* echoed this, the authors explaining that finance functions because of a “machine ecology beyond human response time.”

Widespread automation, a side-effect of advances in artificial intelligence, probably will not result in permanent social tension, but it will certainly cause short-term social tension. One study predicted that 47% percent of the workforce is slated for unemployment due to technical advances. Unemployment during the Great Depression reached only 25%. And while a common argument is that technical innovation has always provided more jobs, this has been true only in the long term. In the short term, rapid economic changes have led to quite a bit of instability, and this second wave of automation is occurring at a rapid enough rate for something comparable to happen. Self-driving cars, for instance, will cause immediate turmoil for one of the world’s largest industries, transportation. Potential solutions to the problem, such as increased immersion in the virtual world, are unappealing and come with all the problems attached to information technology generally.

Many studies have pointed out that climate change is already set to quickly and harshly impact a handful of major cities, among them Charleston, SC, Tampa, FL, New York, NY, and huge regions of New Jersey. These, the studies say, are inevitable casualties. Likewise, the IPCC report on climate change declared that prevention is no longer enough; civilization now needs to grapple with climate change by mitigating inevitable threats. No solution so far, not even complete transition to renewable energy, adequately addresses the threat.

Biotechnology intersects with several risks, but its most tangible negative consequences involve biological warfare and genetic modification of life. Both have been practiced to some extent since the beginning of civilization, but the power of current technics, and the possibility of novel life-forms propagating autonomously, magnifies the threat into a global one. Furthermore, genetic modification of humans has special philosophical implications. If we accept that man is entirely, or even mostly, a material, biological creature, then genetic modification will not just affect his appearances; it could also affect his mind. This development runs up against some of the most deeply-held human values, like autonomy, self-determination, and identity. It also holds the same potential for totalitarian abuse that information technologies do.

Information technology is a problem because of its totalitarian potential, like with biotechnology, and because of human dependency, like with artificial intelligence. Information warfare or unpredictable natural occurrences like solar flares could easily knock out the electronics of large regions, leaving those regions without the basic infrastructure required to keep civilization running.

And population growth is a problem not only for ecological reasons, but for social reasons as well. Regions set to have the most population growth over the next century are often among the poorest and in terrorist strongholds. And immigration, an inevitable consequence of so large an

explosion, has repeatedly caused the same social stresses between left and right, citizens and immigrants.

Civilization would have a hard road ahead if its future held only one of the six major problems. In all likelihood, several of them will intersect over the next 50–100 years. Martin Rees, in *Our Final Hour*, writes, correctly, I think, that by the end of the century we will have conquered the hurdles adequately, and in a way that ensures reasonable stability for the far future, or the project of civilization will have failed, and civilization will be in decline. He predicts we have a fifty-fifty shot.

If civilization is to make it, it will have to transition to cleaner energy rapidly; it may have to devise means of reversing damage already done; it will have to decentralize and distribute its technical systems to make them more resilient; and, crucially, it will have to overcome the problem of human nature, which, through problems like general discontentedness, terrorism, and prejudice (especially ethnic), cause relentless inefficiency.

Technological Development Transgresses Moral Values

Any promises, any exact measurements of progress, are baseless, because progress rests on “goals which can be defined only as we advance towards them, and the validity of which can be verified only in a process of attaining them.” Progress transgresses its own values. One moment, it preaches peace, because that is what it offers. Another moment, war. At the onset of the Industrial Revolution workers were promised leisure. In the technoindustrial age, intimate aspects of their daily existence are monetized — from friendships (by social media) to curiosity (by search engines). Because of personal devices the pulse of labor never dies, invading the worker even in his previously private domains. With the change, the ideal is no longer leisure; it is connection.

The very means by which we measure “better” is a shifting goal post, rendering the whole concept of progress in some sense meaningless. Charles Rubin writes in *The Eclipse of Man*:

It becomes harder and harder for our authors to imagine what will be retained, hence where change will start from. And if the rate of change is accelerating, that simply means we are headed the more rapidly from one unknown to another, while the recognizable old standards for judging whether the changes are progressive are overthrown with our humanity.

Efforts to slow technological development will fail. A ban in one area would only be effective in that area. The research will simply go elsewhere. Even cultural taboos against new technologies will eventually be broken if the technology is necessary for competition. For example, although genetic engineering is still taboo in the U.S., Chinese scientists have already genetically modified human embryos. States, of course, have little incentive to let other states get ahead. The process is unstoppable, unless the technological base of society declines or collapses.

Progress will transgress — indeed, is transgressing — current values as it does all others. The great Enlightenment ideal of government insisted that the people hold the power. At least, the people must hold enough power that they can reform or even revolt against a government that no longer represents the popular will. The *philosophes* and revolutionaries devised intricate systems to achieve this: they pitted sections of government against each other; they ensured a right to bear arms; they taught their citizens to have a sense of entitlement unprecedented in history. And in the main, the systems worked.

Since then, however, technical development has proceeded so rapidly that the balance of (raw) power is fully weighted on the side of the states. Nearly every great mind of the World War II generation recognized this as one of the nefarious implications of nuclear weaponry. Orwell said the atom bomb would probably “put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a *‘peace that is no peace.’*” Oppenheimer said of it, “We have made a thing, a most terrible weapon, that has altered abruptly and profoundly the nature of the world...a thing that by all standards of the world we grew up in is an evil thing. And by so doing...we have raised again the question of whether science is good for man.” Yet problems of a similar caliber have only proliferated — chemical and biological weapons, automated warfare, information warfare, etc.

Information technologies also undermine democratic values. Mass surveillance is once again a topic of major public discussion, but we need not get into the specifics of whether mass surveillance has or has not directly thwarted terror attacks; or whether it is or is not effective for other ends. All that matters is that the technical capability for mass surveillance is now here. Any restrictions on the practice, then, are a matter of policy and self-restraint, and nothing more.

There is a difference between what an organization cannot do and what an organization is told not to do. When a government, for example, is technologically unable to oppress its citizens, its citizens have true freedom, an inviolable ability to do whatever they want outside the government’s reach. When technologies are powerful enough to breach those freedoms, government is limited by policy only, like a man telling himself not to smoke. So citizens are not free to carry on; they are permitted to carry on. Thus human fallibility becomes the central problem: will the government use these technologies to oppress, or will it not?

Disasters are too likely for there to be much room for human error. Behavioral science and cognitive sciences, for example, can now influence intensely personal decision making, even inner psychological states. In 2014 a scientific article revealed that scientists have used Facebook to alter users’ moods. They modified posts on their newsfeeds to create a certain emotion, and the emotions spread through the network in a process called “emotional contagion.” The potential abuses are obvious.

The Consequences of Increased Complexity Are Too Big

It is commonly argued that technologies can be used for good, if only humans would use them that way. Assume this is true. Even if technologies *could* be used for good, we can reasonably ask if the risk is worth it. There seems to be no way to stop the development of technologies like genetic engineering or atomic weaponry, so anyone who argues that they should not be developed will have to reject industry as a whole.

Humans Do Not Have Sufficient Knowledge to Direct Technological Development

At the time cars or cellphones were invented, no one knew the far-reaching changes they were going to bring to society, and no one could have known. Or consider that many technologies and scientific discoveries were invented or discovered by accident, including anesthesia, x-rays, dynamite, electromagnetism, ozone, radioactivity, and penicillin. How could any group of people have directed these inventions to ensure that their consequences were “good” ones?

Technological Fixes Do Not Go As Planned

The Deepwater Horizon was a normal accident, a system accident. Complex technologies have ... ways of failing that humans cannot foresee. The probability of similar accidents may now be reduced, but it can be reduced to zero only when declining [energy returns] makes deep-sea production energetically unprofitable. It is fashionable to think that we will be able to produce renewable energies with gentler technologies, with simpler machines that produce less damage to the earth, the atmosphere, and people. We all hope so, but we must approach such technologies with a dose of realism and a longterm perspective.

— *Drilling Down*, Joseph Tainter and Tad Patzek

The Gregorian calendar is notoriously inefficient, especially for industrial economic purposes. Indeed, the inefficiency has resulted in loss of large sums of money and several lives, motivating many to popularize calendars much more suited to their industrial purposes. They have all failed. This includes the Positivist calendar, created by August Comte; the Pax calendar; the International Fixed Calendar; the World Calendar; the French Republican Calendar; the Invariable Calendar; the World Season Calendar, created by Isaac Asimov; and the Tranquility Calendar. Some of these were even proposals in international organizations like the League of Nations but nevertheless failed to be implemented.

Consider Paolo Soleri’s “Arcosanti,” a city he designed from scratch in order to demonstrate the principles of “arcology,” or ecologically-informed architecture, the dogma of modern “green planners.” Arcosanti is an odd, futuristic city that, although capable of supporting around 5,000 humans, has only a population of around 80, mostly dreadlocked alternative-culture types. The

Japanese corporation Shimizu tried to implement another arcological project in 2004, but it has similarly failed.

These examples reflect the similar and ubiquitous failure of utopian communities that became common in the U.S. in the 1800s. The Nashoba community, for instance, closed its doors within a year of its debut; and only months after the creation of New Harmony, one of the most famous utopian communities, various groups splintered off from each other and the project failed.

Communism, the most striking planning project of all, was met with equally striking failure. Marvin Harris explains that Soviet communism failed precisely because its ideologically-derived social structure was not suited to infrastructural conditions, including ecology, something communist dogma ignored. Whether or not Soviet communism equals real communism is irrelevant; the point is that the management scheme that was attempted failed.

Human folly exacerbates the problem. In 2014 the Center for Disease Control accidentally sent live anthrax and deadly H5N1 samples to two different labs and a poultry lab, respectively. The same year, scientists at an NIH lab discovered nearly 330 unapproved vials of an array of deadly pathogens, including smallpox, dengue, and spotted fever, in a cold-storage room. Mistakes like these are unacceptable when the minimum requirements for disaster is so low.

One might, of course, argue that there are at least some cases where humans have knowledge and power enough to control some system. Indeed, humans have already attempted to gain such a level of knowledge and power in creating a now-infamous project known as “Biosphere 2.” And it too failed — twice.

Biosphere 2 was an attempt by some scientists to create a totally controlled ecological system with five biomes. It was a highly popularized project, with implications for biologists, ecologists, and various technicians’ dreams of space colonization, because it offered, or was to supposed to offer, a way for scientists to carefully control ecological variables and learn how, precisely, ecosystems work.

However, Biosphere 2 suffered from frenzied CO₂ levels that caused many species to die, including most vertebrates. Pest insects prospered, and some species killed off and dominated other species. The humans inhabiting the system ultimately had to leave.

The second time around failed largely because of disputes between the scientists, compounded by alleged vandalism by some of the more upset individuals. This may seem irrelevant, but it is in fact highly germane, since it reminds us to temper our planning schemes with greater awareness that it is humans coming up with and implementing them.

Technological Fixes Have Unintended Consequences

Consider that most technical innovations supposed to decrease human work have actually increased it. Cell phones and PCs, by making communication and several other business functions more efficiently, did not decrease the workday; instead, the workday began bleeding into the home, often without wage compensation. Similarly, cars, among other things, fostered the isolation of suburbs and exacerbated pollution.

Technology Evolves

Schemes to implement rational blueprints often fail because they have a faulty understanding of technological development. Human energy and creativity may drive it, but forces greater than man determine the spectrum of possibilities.

In a card game I play, individuals tally the points in their hand at the end of each round, and they add the points to what they already have. When someone surpasses 500 points, the game ends. Whoever has the least number of points wins.

However, if someone hits 500 points exactly, they go back to zero. Sometimes individuals end up with a number of points very close to 500. In the next round, they try to keep just the right amount of points in their hand so that when the round ends they will have 500 points exactly and go back to zero. But no matter how much skill and reason someone puts into trying to reach 500 exactly, there are still an enormous amount of factors, like the chance distribution of cards, that the person could never control, and that ultimately determine whether he will actually achieve his goal; reason isn't enough. Technological evolution works similarly.

One study provides an example of technological evolution by studying violin acoustics. They analyze 470 instruments across several centuries and note that the change of the shape of the "f-hole" on either side of the violin strings was "gradual — and consistent." They demonstrate that as each change provided superior sound, the creators replicated them at the expense of inferior designs. The changes continued until the current f-shaped hole. Note that the forces behind this change were not only or even predominantly human intention; instead, markets and physics were stronger determinants.

A final example: in a fascinating excerpt from *The Evolution of Everything*, Matt Ridley points out some trends in technological development occur with such regularity that humans control is unlikely to be the cause. Instead, Ridley writes, these regularities suggest that technologies evolve:

. . . some scientists have begun to notice that cities themselves evolve in predictable ways. There is a spontaneous order in the way they grow and change. The most striking of these regularities is the "scaling" that cities show — how their features change with size. For example, the number of petrol stations increases at a consistently slower rate

than the population of the city. There are economies of scale, and this pattern is the same in every part of the world. The same is true of electrical networks. So it does not matter what the policy of the country, or the mayor, is. Cities will converge on the same patterns of growth wherever they are. In this they are very like bodies. A mouse burns more energy, per unit of body weight, than an elephant; a small city burns proportionately more motor fuel than a large one. Like cities, bodies get more efficient in their energy consumption the larger they grow. There is also a consistent 15 per cent saving on infrastructure cost per head for every doubling of a city's population size.

The opposite is true of economic growth and innovation — the bigger the city, the faster these increase. Doubling the size of a city boosts income, wealth, number of patents, number of universities, number of creative people, all by approximately 15 per cent, regardless of where the city is. The scaling is, in the jargon, “superlinear.” Geoffrey West of the Santa Fe Institute, who discovered this phenomenon, calls cities “supercreative.” They generate a disproportionate share of human innovation; and the bigger they are, the more they generate. The reason for this is clear, at least in outline. Human beings innovate by combining and recombining ideas, and the larger and denser the network, the more innovation occurs. Once again, notice that this is not policy. Indeed, nobody was aware of the supercreative effect of cities until very recently, so no policymaker could aim for it. It's an evolutionary phenomenon.

Understanding civilization this way raises the question: is civilization “natural”? That is, was the onset of civilization written into human destiny, an inevitable outcome of geography, human nature, and social conditions? Perhaps, in a certain sense, it was. I certainly think so. But this makes no difference as to whether or not we should oppose it.

Consider a parable. A magician, through a great feat of sorcery, creates a golem that heals every problem in the magician's life. But to keep the golem, the magician must offer his blood. The golem, who wants to survive, manipulates the magician to keep giving the blood offerings. He does this so effectively that when the golem stops providing, the magician believes he should still give the blood offerings.

Some of us — those who have slipped through the cracks of the civilizing process — have not been convinced of the golem's deception. Does it not make sense for us to deny him our blood?

Dropping Out

Dropping out is by far the most common intentional choice of wild wills, as would be expected given the personality type -- perturbed by unnecessary hierarchy; frustrated by boredom and purposelessness; drawn to nature; isolated, since peers care so much less about these things.

But dropping out is most viable in stable countries, like the U.S. or Germany, and the stability tends to breed drop-out subcultures. If civilized dependence is the problem the drop-out is

responding to, these subcultures should often be avoided. For one, the composition of the people in these subcultures is already determined by civilization. The least cooperative, the lazy, the drug addicts, the party-goers, because they cannot make it in civil society, appear at a much higher rate. And the majority of the gatherings known to drop-outs and travellers consist mainly of young people who want to have a good time, not individuals who are trying to become less dependent on civilization. This is a threat to the drop-out rewilder. Drugs, for example, are a short leash. Dropping out, then, will lead to a kind of loneliness caused by civilization as much as frustration with a nine-to-five is caused by civilization.

Dropping out therefore cannot be seen as an escape. Civilization cannot be escaped, not even to an acceptable degree in most cases. Property laws, polluted water, disappearing forests -- all of these make it as hard as possible for those who do not participate in civilization to live well. Even forests that do exist have usually been logged or sapped of animals and plants humans need to survive in them. And although restoration is possible, it is a slow process that may not succeed and does not fix the problem of civilized dependence in the meantime. Because civilization's reach is global, dropping out is always a trade-off, a choice of discontents. A man who has left the city for the forest has reclaimed his life in only the most insignificant of ways. He may feel better, and as far as psychological health is the argument this is a somewhat reasonable justification. But on the whole he has merely fogged up his view of the world that still determines the trajectory of his life, so he is able to more easily delude himself into thinking he has freedom.

Meanwhile, the technicians continue to do their work, the emissions continue to increase, the possibility of runaway technologies remains, nuclear, biotech, and nanotech are still developed, and the escape artist remains fundamentally powerless.

Protective Conservation

Mainstream society does recognize the problems of civilization -- in Freud, Rousseau, Russell, Dostoyevsky, Paine... And its response is conservation, officially designating regions of Earth off limits to human development. In mainstream consciousness conservation is sustained by a number of conflicting and overlapping ideologies. Some argue it is a wise use of resources; others insist on protecting the land because it is inherently valuable. Some argue it is a scientific concern, others aesthetic and religious, still others economic. Regardless, each of the perspectives helps the other so long as the primary goal is the same and is pursued: shield at least some of the Earth from development.

The holes in the practice are many, but I should be clear that I am a fervent supporter of conservation. Despite the drawbacks, the parks system has against all odds succeeded, and it continues to make great strides. More, conservation activists have normalized the idea and built a powerful base of support -- "*Of course* I support conservation," the average citizen says. To write off conservation as worthless because of its admittedly gaping flaws is therefore rash and

insensible. Even if I were to say that it was never an adequate solution, it would remain one of the stronger available responses.

On to the gaping flaws. The most pressing is that conservation shields against direct threats like logging, but not threats like climate change and acid rain. Given that climate change, for example, is an inherent consequence of civilized life, especially the industrial kind, protecting land from its effects means that civilization will have to decline and collapse.

Conservation also entails a constantly working, constantly organized, and fairly large base of support, because corporations and governments are always trying to skirt the laws. Not only does this make protection status precarious; it means to be effective conservationist have to reproduce some of the same problems that make civilization undesirable in the first place. ==

Finally, a weakness of conservation -- not quite a flaw -- is that it relies on national stability. This is true in two senses. First, the social organization required for an effective parks system, including the grassroots base that supports it, would be impossible in a nation beset by political and economic problems. Two, much of what is protected today remains so only because it is economically useless, or because the nations in question have the economic luxury of protecting land for beauty and recreation. Should some resources on wild lands become scarce or the nation unstable, we can be sure that economic concerns will trump the reasoning of conservationists, and extraction will begin (it has happened already). There is an ongoing effort to make conservation of international scientific importance so organizations like the UN will impose an added pressure against extraction. But this pressure today remains mostly words.

One might wonder why conservation is worth it if protection status is so easy to undo. Dave Foreman explains, "... the system is going to come down, one way or another way, on its own. My task is keeping all the building blocks of future evolution that we can." Beyond this, the mindset of conservation and the strides it has made so far easily become the basis of a more proactive, conflictual response to civilization -- nature restoration.

Restorative Conservation

We must ... reclaim the roads and the plowed land, halt dam construction, tear down existing dams, free shackled rivers, and return to wilderness millions and tens of millions of [acres of] presently settled land.

-- Dave Foreman

Restorative conservation argues that preserving remaining wild lands is not enough. Some currently developed places need to be restored to nature. The given reasons are various. Primarily the support comes from scientific findings that bigger and more connected wildlands mitigate the extinction crisis and climate change. It also jives nicely with Foreman's desire to preserve the "building blocks of future evolution."

But in addition to the flaws in regular conservation practice -- organizational overhead, massive expenditures of energy, corporate and legislative inertia, the inherent precarity of protection status, etc. -- nature restoration introduces a few more. For one, it encourages an engineering mentality. As mentioned earlier, some have taken nature restoration to mean introducing more technical domination instead of removing it. De-extinction, or bringing extinct species back through biotechnology, is the most heinous of the ideas, but some perversions of the restoration concept are already practicable and therefore more dangerous. For example, some conservationists are currently trying to shuffle species around, believing that non-native species can fill an ecological niche once filled by now-extinct or extirpated species. Elephants might fill the role of mammoths; the Przewalski horse might replace America's native horses, made extinct in the Pleistocene; and so on. Of course, the scientific knowledge is sometimes adequate, and some of the solutions may succeed; but the overall effect is likely to be the creation of Frankenstein ecosystems and runaway experiments, one of the central problems of technological development already.

Finally, the restoration program worsens the problem protective conservationists already have: corporations and governments are big stumbling blocks. If this is the case with preserving remaining wild lands, how much bigger is the problem when the object is to replace the economic value of the cities and countryside with the aesthetic, religious, and moral values of wilderness? Narrow, defined attempts at restoration are achievable, but the overall vision is impossible without the collapse of industrial civilization, forced or otherwise.

Still, I support nature restoration insofar as it means reducing technological domination -- removing roads and dams, connecting wildlands, de-industrializing areas necessary for connected wilderness... It is a great benefit to rewilders that these ideas are becoming legitimated in popular consciousness.

Terrorism

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of *nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.

-- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

More and more men will eventually turn to terror. This is not a stamp of approval; it is a prediction, one I am sure of. All material and social forces are pushing in this direction.

Consider the options of a man who wants to live vitally, without domination by civilizing and domesticating forces. Dropping out, conservation, restoration, and so on are merely a choice of different civilized discontents. None of them resolve the fundamental tension. This is a problem for almost all living people, not just those who are convinced ideologically of the problem of civilization. Civilization must modify, channel, or suppress human nature in order to function. Therefore, all the deepest groanings of the human will are incompatible with the world as it is. Nearly everyone on the street is discontent. None of them can find in the present system what they need to live vitally. Eventually this will lead man to an utter rejection of the current world. He need not be convinced that all kinds of civilization are condemnable; he need only understand that this civilization is, and that it cannot be turned otherwise. The only logical conclusion is the destruction of the technological system.

So men will turn to terror. A quick look at history will demonstrate that men already *have* turned to terror, sporadically, and because of the conviction that the projection of civilization must be rejected entirely. This leads most people to assume that the terroristic methods are ineffective. Yet the terror has continued, often coming from the most highly educated strata of society. Ted Kaczynski, or “the Unabomber,” was a Harvard graduate and professor at Harvard and Yale. Many of the members of the Earth Liberation Front, an ecoterror group, were college educated. Many of the most vociferous members of Earth First!, from which almost all ecoterror phenomena have sprung since, were or have become highly regarded scientists, conservationists, or authors. It is no wonder that the FBI considers ecoterrorism the top domestic terror threat.

Why has the terror continued? Likely because if the goal is striking as big a blow against the current civilization as possible, then all that is strictly necessary is a handful of effective attacks. Hypothetically, though not realistically, only one could be necessary. This is due partially to the structural weaknesses of modern technological systems, and it is partially due to the power of some modern technologies.

On structural weaknesses: whole countries have been deprived of internet access because an anchor being drug along the ocean floor tore the fibre optic cable connecting that country to the world wide web. A news article from 2014 reported that a government document revealed the location of nine electric substations in the United States that, if attacked simultaneously, would lead to a national blackout. It predicted that the blackout would last at least a year, and by that time the world would look much different. And so on.

On the power of technology: as it stands, the United States could turn off the world’s GPS, on which all sorts of economically necessary systems are dependent. This is why many nations are building concurrent GPS systems. A single EMP blast could take out the electronics in extremely large regions at once. The internet would be in disarray if its Domain Name System was disrupted, and only a small amount of research would demonstrate how vulnerable that system is. And so on.

The threats are compounded by the tendency of the educated to join powerful terror groups. If a small group of educated people decided to reject the entire project of civilization as it stands, then travelled to a country in turmoil where they couldn't be detected easily, they could create the weapon that destroys civilization. This is not science fiction; technological society has made this a reality. I am also not the first to predict its likelihood: the words have already been printed in Martin Rees' *Our Final Hour*, Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* ...

One might argue that sporadic, individual attacks are not likely to deliver the blow these anti-civilizationists would want to cause. But even that is not an insurmountable problem. ISIS and various jihadi groups have already demonstrated that online propaganda is enough to consistently inspire terror attacks. The same propaganda tools in the hands of people who want the entire technological system to collapse would result in something much more threatening.

I do not necessarily think that the terror will be strictly ecological in character. In fact, my own observations of terror groups, historical and current, have indicated that different forms of terror seem to be converging on the basis of action rather than ideology. When a faction of nearly every ideology --- Christian, Muslim, environmentalist, communist, nationalist --- agrees on the necessity of rejecting the current world, it will not take long for them to attack their common enemy together. If the internet can bring together people with as specific an interest as "Powderpuff Girls in Lingerie," surely it will bring together people with as general a desire as responding to the discontent of modern society.

Consider how some of the most effective propaganda put out by the Islamic State focuses on rejection of what is without a word for what the Islamic State will build in its stead. Olivier Roy writes:

The systematic association with death is one of the keys to understanding today's radicalisation: the nihilist dimension is central. What seduces and fascinates is the idea of pure revolt. Violence is not a means. It is an end in itself.

Roy argues that ISIS provides a theological justification for the violence and rejection its jihadi fighters are actually interested in. But the energy that ISIS commands --- it is strongly dependent on a nihilistic impulse, no more. And this impulse is clearly ubiquitous in modern society.

In other words, I predict that eventually a form of terror will arise that does not distinguish between Islamic justifications or communist justifications or environmentalist justifications. It will simply command the same kind of energy that ISIS commands now, without any of the overhead. The sole object will be to destroy society. And people will know that when they have chosen to give up, they can always hold its banner before they go.

I am confident that this will be the future of technological society if one of the previous solutions do not work. And I am confident that the previous solutions will not work. *O, brave new world!*