Our Posthuman Future, by Francis Fukuyama

reviewed by Richard J. Coleman in the July 26, 2003 issue

"Posthuman," the newest buzz word, is beginning to eclipse "postmodern." Postmodernism consists of a philosophical reexamination of foundational suppositions of the Enlightenment: objectivity, realism, universal truths, rationalism, the blank slate, essences and metanarratives (socialism, liberalism, etc.). But "posthuman" refers to biology, as thinkers grapple with the fact that we have entered a period of monumental advance in the life sciences. Just as splitting the atom in 1945 set the stage for the cold war, so the discovery of DNA in 1953 launched us into a new era of biotechnology. While postmodernism deconstructed the idealism of the Enlightenment, posthumanism is about constructing a new human. Ironically, it remains to be seen whether that reconstruction can happen without the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future* is a retrospective of his bold declaration that we have reached the end of history; that is, the major alternatives to liberal democracy have exhausted themselves (*The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992). Fukuyama does not easily fit into a niche. He is sometimes a philosopher, sociologist, social psychologist, anthropologist or economist. But preeminently he is a social scientist interested in what makes us tick as social beings and in what political consequences our actions bring.

Fukuyama recognizes that history is reinventing itself--not politically or philosophically, but technologically. He spares us the obligatory purview of the latest genetic engineering promises. What he does, and does very well, is to examine the early stages of biotechnology: greater knowledge about genetic causation (the heritability of intelligence or homosexuality), neuropharmacology (Prozac and Ritalin), and the prolongation of life.

At each turn of the technological screw, bargains with the devil must be made because biotechnology, unlike many other scientific advances, "mixes obvious

benefits with subtle harms in one seamless package." The further prolongation of the life span, for example, would disrupt the natural norm of one generation making way for the next. In the workplace, grandfathers would be competing with fathers, who would be competing with sons and daughters. One of Fukuyama's strengths is that he is continually asking what the political implications of the new technology are and how can we prepare for them.

As we contemplate a posthuman future we face the pressing issue of whether it will be necessary to post "No Trespassing" signs in order to protect ourselves from the incessant tinkering of biological engineering. It is instructive to compare Fukuyama's position on this issue with that of Leon Kass, another prominent thinker focusing on this issue. Kass presents an alarming metaphor. Human nature itself lies on the operating table, ready for alteration, enhancement, wholesale redesign. Kass takes his stand by the barricade of human dignity. Daniel Callahan writes that Kass's judgment calls about proper limits will come from weighing costs and benefits (see his review of Kass's *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity* in the Century, September 25-October 8, 2002). Kass opposes cloning because it is another step in the process of dehumanization (loss of human dignity).

Fukuyama's approach is different. He discusses both dignity and human rights as protective measures but counts them as secondary to defining what is essentially human. Kass is adamant about the clarity of boundaries. Clarity about your origins, for instance, is critical for self-identity. But when Fukuyama considers what constitutes the foundation of civilization, he issues another bold assertion. A more solid foundation for political order will rest upon "the most deeply felt and universal human drives, ambitions, and behaviors that are species-typical for our species."

Fukuyama is well aware of the postmodern conclusion that there is no such thing as a human essence. His arguments to the contrary are brief but well aimed. Philosophical giants such as David Hume and their followers will not allow us to commit the "naturalistic fallacy" of deriving an ought from an is, a moral obligation from an empirical observation about the natural world. How often have we heard that human nature is culturally conditioned, genetically determined, or not uniquely differentiated from animals? It is about time that someone stood up for the tenacity of human nature. If we are hard-wired for language, then let's acknowledge that there is a persistent human nature regarding matters of the heart and spirit. Fukuyama is not the only prophetic voice to rebut the mantra that nature gives no guidance as to what human values should be, but every voice is a welcome part of

the chorus.

In the end, I think Fukuyama is right to argue that rights and dignity need the support of a coherent understanding of human nature. Human rights and dignity sit upon a slippery slope of cultural prejudice and political convenience unless they have roots sunk deep into our essential being. Unfortunately, many will be disappointed with the thinness of Fukuyama's understanding of those behaviors and characteristics that are uniquely human.

Factor X, as Fukuyama calls it, consists of reason, moral choice, language and a broad range of emotions. But is this enough? What about faith, hope and love? I'm not asking Fukuyama to suddenly become a theologian espousing Christian doctrine, but I would like him to acknowledge that psychologically, genetically and culturally we are creatures who can barely get through a day, much less a lifetime, without believing, hoping and loving.

Fukuyama's principal argument is made even thinner by his glaring omission of evil and sin. Fukuyama overlooks the paradoxical dynamics of freedom and necessity, of standing in nature and yet above nature. If the time has come to translate human nature into human values, then it is also time to speak of our human predicament as well as our human condition, and to understand the difference.

Fukuyama does more than resist the temptation to succumb to the prevalent atmosphere of inevitability--that given the speed and scope of technological development, science will have its way with us. He devotes three chapters to exploring the politics of biotechnology control. He reminds us that the international community recognized the potential for destruction when the atom was split and acted accordingly. Look around and you already find federal agencies (e.g., the FDA), regulations, legislation, international agreements, protocols and even a few self-imposed limits. There is much more to be done. And it won't be easy. We are all too eager to use technology to remake ourselves, and self-regulation will not work when there are so "many commercial interests chasing too much money."

It is not just the fact that I am a pessimist and Fukuyama is a cautionary optimist that accounts for my discomfort. Fukuyama does take note of our presumed right to genetic modification and our pernicious pride that we can overcome with better technology whatever deficiencies we face. He is aware of the persistent reductionism inherent in empiricism and of the process of dehumanization à la *Brave*

New World at work in a consumer-driven society. But he is not sufficiently concerned that those doing the surgery are guided by the optimistic belief that while mistakes will be made, they can always be corrected.

There are others, such as Daniel Greenberg, who have detailed the distorting influence of money and politics upon science (*Science, Money and Politics*), others who see with greater depth the philosophical reasons why scientists do not make good border guards (Kass and Hans Jonas), and still others who have a wider perspective on the difficulties confronting a fuller democratic participation (Steve Fuller, Philip Kitcher). But Fukuyama presents a very good introduction to our posthuman future. His book is a fresh look at what biotechnology can do for us (there are other, already tired accounts). Let the debates begin: "What is our essential nature?" and "What should our political response be to the manipulation of our genes?"