Brave New West: Romano Guardini and the dissolution of the modern world

“What we call Man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as instrument”

C. S. Lewis The Abolition of Man.

Romano Guardini (1885–1968), a priest so much at the forefront of Catholic intellectual life in the twentieth century gave us an incisive analysis of the modern world, its presuppositions and predilections in his treatise The End of the Modern World. This work provides a useful starting point for understanding the contemporary rejection of the unborn child by so many of our contemporaries. Here I examine some of Guardini’s ideas, written in the 1950s, the point at which he considered the modern world was coming to an end.

In the third chapter of The End of the Modern World, he points out that three ideals in particular appear to have delineated European consciousness since the enlightenment, ideals that even today have a topical relevance for considering the moral and spiritual foundations of childhood and the family. These are the idea that Nature is self-subsistent, that the human personality is an autonomous subject and that cultures are essentially self-created from norms intrinsic to them (EMW, 50). In this article, I would like to discuss the modern view of Nature and its accompanying attitudes to technology so clearly presented by Guardini with special reference to the contemporary and secular view of the unborn child.

The new man: Guardian of Nature

Despite the ever-growing presence of post-modernism - what Guardini still saw as the nameless offspring of history soon to follow modernism – man’s relationship to nature has changed dramatically during the Enlightenment, even since the Romantic period, a period referred to by Guardini through the figure of Goethe. For the Romantics, nature was pervaded by a sense of the numinous and was experienced “wondrously as a rich source bestowing harmony on all things”; in a sense nature was benevolent and haunted by the sense of the sublime. Today, this has changed dramatically:

"Today man experiences his world as finite, but a finite world cannot inspire the devotion which was inspired by the limitless cosmos of the recent past." (EMW 53)

Man’s relationship the nature or to “the world” (equivalent to the totality of all that is in contemporary thought) is today dominated by the sense of the finite. Contemporary secularism attempts to establish the limits of human life within finite matter and so within the frames of material birth and death. Yet even these no longer subsist within boundaries set by “wisely ordered nature”. They must increasingly be set by secular man whose domination of nature now extends to include man himself as part of finite nature, though the figure of man encountered here is not distinguishable to nor transcendent to “the world” or to nature itself, as for example in Genesis, chapter 3.

This finitude produces a peculiar attitude to the world today, one that is currently enshrined in the global warming movement and in popular forms of environmentalism; it is the attitude that the world is no longer self-sustaining and in harmony with man:
"Since the world is finite, it is fragile...It is menaced and endangered on every side and becomes the more glorious and precious. Man now feels responsible for his universe; man must now take care of being." (EMW, 54)

This new level of responsibility inevitably includes man who is part of “the world” of nature (and nothing more) and under this new guardianship, as C. S Lewis once pointed out, there will be some who consider themselves Guardians and some who must be persuaded of the necessity of such power. In such an age, it will be tempting for those who consider themselves the Guardians of Nature (and thus of man) to try to improve upon man who historically has left a trial of evidence suggesting his incompatibility with the perfectibility of nature itself.

In this way, man becomes the author of his own being and in such a drama human life becomes susceptible to the exercise of power which is severed from the truth of being – that man is a creature distinct and sovereign over the natural world. Such Power will consider conscience an offspring of nature and therefore as malleable as man himself. For such “man-moulders” of the new age, especially those with connections to the scientific-technical and educative worlds,

"The ultimate springs of human action are no longer, for them, something given...They know how to produce conscience and decide what kind of conscience they will produce." (The Abolition of Man, C. S. Lewis, 38)

The inclination today (continues Guardini), in citizens from both the scientific and governmental sphere – those who consider themselves “agents of contemporary development” - is to utilise power ever more completely without acknowledging it. Instead, power is labelled ‘utility’, ‘welfare’ or ‘progress’ and tends towards the development of scientific advance and government without a corresponding ethos. Power thus comes to be expressed in a way that is not ethically determined (EMW 133-134)

The problem with this situation, is that the weak, the vulnerable and the most needy in a society with this kind of ethos suffer. Those who cannot defend themselves become the victims of an idea of human freedom predicated on a false humanism in which man has no responsibility beyond himself. In such a society, technology becomes the ultimate temptation through which even life itself can be mastered and subject to the finitude in which man now lives under the sign of Power.

**Technological man and the ruthlessness of ‘progress’**

Throughout Guardini's analysis of the modern world, he raises the potential dangers promised by what he calls the “grim magnificence” of the scientific-physical conceptualisation of the world today, so often at the forefront of our minds. To answer how we must view such possibilities, we must realise how different man’s concept of nature and “the world” remains today and how much this view of the world is centred in “technics” or technology (EMW 54).

With nature as a raw body of facts, as no longer a standard of value or a “shelter for his spirit”, technological man has a tendency to attempt to remould the world. However, with nature or “the world” as all there is and without a transcendent reality against which
to measure this, technological man can only remould the world in the image of man because despite his protestations, man remains so far above the *animalia* that in such an epistemology, man can know no higher being in whose image he can mould “the world”.

In contemporary debates, especially about the future of the unborn and the future of embryo manipulation at the scientific and genetic level, the proponents of such a worldview consistently hold out the future well-being of mankind (anonymous, unknown and unknowable others) as the justification for the use of technology to manipulate the human person towards purely hypothetical and yet unknown ends.

The use of this tactic – an essentially rhetorical device – masks the imposition of power upon the human person without recourse to ethical standards or determination and without any consideration of value at all – except the hypothetical ‘value’ of ‘welfare’ or ‘progress’ as if these were ethical norms in and of themselves.

In light of the debate currently being undertaken in the United Kingdom about the creation of human-animal ‘hybrid’ embryos for research purposes, the question has to be asked as to how the ‘welfare’ of hypothetical others who do not in fact exist can be considered an ethical norm? Gordon Brown, the leader of the UK’s New Labour government, along with many others currently in Parliament including my own Member of Parliament, have consistently claimed that the creation of human-animal ‘hybrids’ at the embryonic level will lead to “cures” for currently incurable diseases and will therefore alleviate the future suffering of others.

Such claims, however, always mask the potentially “destructive effects of a ruthless system” that fails to account for what ‘wellbeing’ or ‘suffering’ actually means or what the truly and authentically human means (*EMW* 56). They also fail to establish or demonstrate whether the utilitarian concept referred to of the greatest good for the greatest number (even when this number is non-existent) can justify the kind of deterministic and materialistic manipulation of human life at the level of embryonic development that is suggested.

As a criterion for human action, the elimination of suffering and the consequent promotion of pleasure at the root of utilitarianism, although (especially the former) potentially a good, cannot be considered the greatest good “to which everything else in the activity of an individual or a society should be subordinated” (*Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyla, 36). The human person, especially, cannot be used as a means to an end and the utilitarian impulse, as Wojtyla points out is essentially an impulse of egoism (*LR*, 37) behind which, in contemporary society, lies a profound fear and dread of human suffering.

Suffering, for all its fearful aspects however, is not without meaning and the attempt to avoid it, especially by the manipulation of the human person at such a profoundly vulnerable level, is both egoistic and short-sighted. The use of evil to bring about good is always a mistake and can never turn evil into good. This is because, as C. S Lewis once put it, there will always remain a ‘great divorce’ between the two which cannot and should not be crossed by man.
The primal temptation: Power

In the light of the foregoing remarks, the present UK government's justification for the manipulation and creation of human and human-animal hybrid embryos should be seen in terms of power united to a utilitarian ethic. Not afraid to expose the true motive behind such abuses of technology, Guradini states that,

"The man engaged today in the labour of 'technics' knows full well that technology moves forward in final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the race. He knows in the most radical sense of the term that power is its motive – a lordship of all; that man seizes hold of the naked elements of both nature and human nature." (EMW, 56)

And what could more clearly demonstrate the exercise of such power but the desire and action of seizing “nature and human nature” at its point of origin in conception, a point historically haunted by the presence of God in the Creation story and in the breathing of the soul into the body of the unborn child. The possibility of directing the course of human life from this most sacred of points has become the primal temptation, the temptation in an ultimate sense to “be as gods” (Gen. 3). Indeed, the supreme apotheosis of lordship would be to create life and direct its purpose entirely to our own.

Man’s actions then, in the realm of the newly conceived embryo, are entirely dependent upon the perceived relationship between technology, power and ethics. They are, without doubt, urgently in need to communicating in these terms in a way that preserves the dignity of the unborn, embryonic human person. Without an incarnational view of man, however, the temptation to see this relationship in terms of utility is very marked in today’s culture in the West. This inevitably means that for man his action in this sphere,

"bespeaks immense possibilities not only for 'creation' but also for destruction, especially for the destruction of humanity itself." (EMW, 56)

As Guardini goes on to point out, once the state becomes “autonomous” – disconnected from any specific religious allegiances or underpinnings in particular, as it is today – “it will be able to delver the last coup de grace to human nature itself”. It will be able to wield the power of definition over human life and its meaning, to the point of being able to determine what humanity will become. As C. S. Lewis points out, however, in reality this is an illusion for what it will in effect mean is the mastery and Guardianship of the many by the few (the Controllers or Guardians) – a situation already so devastatingly portrayed by Aldous Huxley in his novel Brave New World.

This new situation of man, in which he finds himself co-terminus with “the world” and yet strangely alienated from it and unable to account for the abyss that separates himself from the animalia surrounding him has other consequences. The finiteness of being which permeates man's new relationship to nature, says Guardini, will precipitate a new “religious emotion”, one that will accompany man's alienation and loneliness in “the world”. It is as if, with stoical bravery man must now face alone this finiteness of being that has no explanation, no meaning and no ultimate purpose or destiny.

At first, this new sentiment seems high-minded and noble – a kind of atheist’s virtue that appears to belittle the Christian’s hope as feeble, weak-minded and facile. In fact, it is the
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Dr. Stephen Milne, 2008.

atheist’s hope which is feeble, whose so-called bravery is almost wholly illusory as it is held in the face of a situation that, by definition, has no meaning and which is therefore of no value. Stoicism can be of no greater value in such a world than cowardice.

Yet it continues to be held amongst many ‘new atheists’ in the face of a reality so different from the atheist’s suppositions that these become self-evident: nothingness versus the splendor of God, immutable non-being versus the beatific vision. To compare Dante and Sartre would be almost cruel; what is asserted by Sartre would be barely noticed by Dante, for whom Love itself is the power that moves all, the primum mobile "that moves the sun and the other stars” (Divine Comedy: Paradiso, Canto XXXIII).

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