

# interpretation

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# Book Review

WILL MORRISEY

**Algeny.** By Jeremy Rifkin "in collaboration with Nicanor Perlas." (New York: Viking, 1983. 255 pp.: cloth, \$14.75.)

Consider, if you will, two books. Both are polemics against 'bioengineering,' the process whereby scientists combine genetic material from different organisms to produce new genetic structures, and thus new organisms. Both works are obviously intended for what publishers call "the intelligent general reader."

The author of Book 'A' observes that for some centuries we have lived in what he calls a Promethean age; men have transformed their lives by "turn[ing] the earth into an extension of themselves" "with the aid of fire" [5]. The name Prometheus, he reminds us, means "foresight" [5]; men have used fire to conquer nature, to control future events.

A new technology begins to supersede this "pyrotechnology." "Biotechnology" does not merely reshape nature from the outside, as, for example, dynamo power machines that reshape ore into new machines, or as modern tyrants attempt to reshape men by machinelike institutions. Rather, it reshapes organisms from within, eschewing the crude and superficial techniques of industrialism. "Biologists now view living organisms as information systems" [208]. Using artificial information systems, computers, engineers will in effect "program" organisms, "mesh[ing] living material and the computer into a single form of production" [21]. "[C]ybernetics is the organizing framework for the coming age, the computer is the organizing mechanism, and living tissue is the organizing material" [213].

The author of Book 'A' uses the popularization of Darwinism as an example of what is to come. Darwin himself acknowledge his debt to Smith and to Malthus; the author contends that Darwin's doctrine owed much of its popular success to its compatibility with the *ethos* of capitalism. Attacking Darwin's theory of evolution as empirically baseless and logically false or tautological, he contends that a civilization's ruling metaphor is usually subphilosophical. With bioengineering metaphors becoming popular, men should ask themselves if they are not in the thrall of a new myth, replacing Spencer's "survival of the fittest" with the "survival of the best informed" [221]. This myth would reduce nature to a mass of manipulable data.

"Information," then, replaces "knowledge," as "change itself is honored as the only timeless truth;" "we saturate knowledge with temporality" [240].

The belief that there are no ironclad truths or some objective reality that human beings can discover does not mark the end of the great self-deception that has long plagued

humanity, but only the beginning of a new chapter. . . . It is not humility that animates the new cosmological jargon but bravado [243].

“Nature is being made anew, this time by human beings” [244], and our biological tinkerers will surely botch the job.

Book ‘A’ should not be represented as a pathfinding effort, or a profound one, but its author states issues clearly and with energy. It is a skillfully-written polemic. As with all polemics, its author reserves the hardest questions for his opponents, not for himself. He fails to ask himself, for example, the question Socrates asks Cleinias: as we would be no better off for having all the gold in the world, effortlessly, if we did not know how to use it, could knowing how to make men immortal benefit us if we do not know how to use immortality, if we do not know how to live? Will men free of genetic disease, served by docile, manufactured slaves, and capable, at least, of that immortality the transmission of one’s exact genetic structure to another organism would bring, really imagine that they had solved any fundamental problem?

Book ‘B’ is far more polemical than Book ‘A’ and much less skillfully written. Its author complains that “we have invaded the long-silent burial grounds of the Carboniferous age” for the fuels that enable us to construct the dwellings, factories, machines, clothes, and roads that “exist as a kind of ghoul-ish testimonial to our violation of the past” [3]. This attempt to make the reader feel guilty over men’s necrophiliac trifling with extinct cycads and equisetums is a mere foreshadowing of absurdities to come.

Theories, he tells us, are “tools, perhaps, but not truths” [31]. They merely legitimize a “society’s” economic, political, and other activities while “at the same time” removing “all responsibility for those activities” [35]. The theories of St. Thomas Aquinas, that apologist for feudalism, exemplify this dangerous human propensity toward the “legitimacy without responsibility” that “is the ultimate dream of every political elite” [36]. “[S]mall snippets of physical reality . . . have been remodeled by society into vast cosmic deceptions” [41]. Morality is “humanity’s chief accomplice in the appropriation of nature” [53]; “goodness” is only “a mask for our nihilism” [56].

The author of Book ‘B’ cites Darwinism as the most influential nihilism of the last hundred years. He calls Darwin’s lifelong interest in collecting biological specimens a characteristically bourgeois obsession. He claims that Darwin based his theory on an analogy between the Galápagos Islands and the British Isles, neither of which offers a sufficient variety of organisms upon which to base a theory of nature; however, the biographer quoted by the author actually refers to Darwin’s study of vampire bats and jaguars—organisms inhabiting that somewhat larger place, South America. The author also claims that “Darwin himself couldn’t believe” [151] that the eye could be the product of evolution, although in the passage cited (*The Origin of Species*, Chapter VI, fourth section) Darwin goes on to explain his reasons for overcoming this doubt.

This tendentiousness combines with sentimentality. With each advance in

bioengineering, “cell by cell, tissue by tissue, organ by organ, we give up our bodies as we give up our political power, a piece at a time” [237]. This is a locution that might allow us to ignore to whom we are giving up our bodies: ourselves, at least as long as we maintain our political liberty. But the author of Book ‘B’ believes the collaboration of science and commerce so reprehensible, men’s weakness for myth so damaging, and his own condemnation of both so compelling, that in the penultimate chapter he reassures his readers: “Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, Charles Darwin — these were not evil men” [242], only misguided ones. One supposes that their shades will be as touched by the magnanimity as they are relieved by the mercy of this soft-hearted miniature Nietzsche. In the meantime, he tells us in his concluding sentence, “the cosmos wails” [255].

Book ‘B’ will find its admiring readership among the devotees of what Professor Harvey Mansfield, Jr. has called “cucumber liberalism”: persons (they would shrink from being called ‘men’) who derive their morality from Erich Fromm, their politics from Charles Reich, their theology from Harvey Cox, their economics from E. F. Schumacher, their military science from Jonathan Schell, and their vision of history from William Irwin Thompson. Readers, in short, more general than intelligent.

The problem, as you have guessed, is that Book ‘A’ and Book ‘B’ coexist between the covers of one book, Jeremy Rifkin’s *Algeny*. This unevenness has at least two causes.

First, according to the publicity material accompanying the book, Mr. Rifkin “has authored five books in the past five years on economic, political, cultural, philosophical, and theological themes.” This suggests that Mr. Rifkin partakes of the very industrialism he condemns, but without sufficiently rigorous ‘quality control.’

The second cause is more fundamental. Mr. Rifkin is not quite sure how to think about nature, although he does have a fairly clear idea of what he thinks about it. Nature, he writes, consists of interdependent parts; it “asks us to surrender to the oneness of which we are a part” [47] and to be as “participatory” [56] as it is. Life begins “where security is nonexistent, where all things are vulnerable, where there are no hierarchies, no pecking orders, only relationships and mutual dependencies” [249]. Life means undifferentiated “comradeship” [253]. The human attempt to organize life is unnatural, “not of life but of death” [254].

Presumably, Mr. Rifkin exempts his own book from the latter dictum. But of course the problem remains: how does one think, much less write, about Mr. Rifkin’s genial chaos? The cosmos does indeed contain many things, more than Darwin or the cyberneticists see, but how does one assess the relative significance of, for example, competition and love? Mr. Rifkin cannot say. In an utterly mediocre man, this would cause random thinking. In Mr. Rifkin, who is not utterly mediocre, it causes unevenness — patches of sense and nonsense stitched into a motley banner for a band of miscellaneous crusaders.

“[T]he new world we are entering is alien to the vision of all the great theolo-

gians, philosophers, and metaphysicians of the past” [218–19]. On the contrary, it is an extension of the Machiavellian project as elaborated by Bacon. Understanding this project remains as important as ever, and few contemporary writers have understood it as well as the late Hans Jonas. His last book, *Philosophical Essays*, contains several pages on bioengineering, an activity he understands better than Rifkin does because he understands thinking better than Rifkin does. To an undergraduate who wants to know more about this issue, my advice is: skim Rifkin, read Jonas, study Bacon.