

Distinctions, defenses, perfections, proportions, progressives, and disbelievers

With the perspective afforded by printing them under a cover nominally dated a year ago, new papers appear on topics of the day, “the day” now being the week before Halloween 2005.

When John Ellis van Courtland Moon began contemplating the *casus belli* for America’s post-9/11 offensive in Iraq, few would have predicted the sadistic humor with which the soldier-jailors of Abu Ghraib would carry out their small part of their country’s mission. How, in law and in moral psychology, did the high-minded and wrong-headed so quickly merge? Moon finds a documentary pattern, and calls its result “the death of distinctions.”

We move from prisoners’ dilemmas of the all-too-real variety to those of the all-experimental variety to learn that “human sociality may have evolved more as a defensive response to the possibility of loss than as an opportunistic attempt to capture gain.” The empirical research leading to this insight is the work of Tim Johnson, Mikhail Myagkov, and John Orbell.

Malcontents and utopians travel through time, space, and political anthropology seeking economic equality, individual freedom, and civil peace in stable coexistence. And they never find them so configured. Why not? Philip Carl Salzman, in a major essay, asserts that these three strengths do not — because logically they *cannot* — all exist simultaneously in any society. Two of the three can, but never the complete set. Inferred from observation and formalized in theory, this sobering result takes on here a stern new name: “The Iron Law of Politics.”

Even if *society* cannot be perfected, how about science? Can it be steered away from politically troublesome behavior by limitation of materials and material assets? Aaron Levine asks if restrictions on federal support for human embryonic stem-cell (hESC) research has actually changed behavior, whether for

better or for worse. In a neatly rendered scientometric analysis, he compares proportions of research reports attributable to competing countries over time and finds clear trends in the geographic distribution of publication, showing that, yes, a country leading the hottest of races can indeed be forced back into the pack — by its biggest funder, its own government.

Of course, progress not only solves problems; it causes them. In the stem-cell case, critics see crimes against nature committed by scientists of demigodlike ambitions. A hundred years ago, and for much of the century that followed, other scientists — social and environmental — and their engineering colleagues did to nature what now in retrospect is often thought to have been criminal. Robert H. Nelson discusses the era of progressive perfection — in the Soviet Union, in the United States, in Brazil and elsewhere — in an essay-review of Paul R. Josephson’s *INDUSTRIALIZED NATURE*.

Progressives and perfectionists have long had a complaint about evolutionary theory, since it promises future realities elaborated from, rather than transcending, current endowments. Ironically, religious fundamentalists have had a similar complaint. No less ironically, the current — but not necessarily permanent — global life-sciences hegemon, the United States, leads the developed world and a surprisingly wide slice of the not-yet-developed world in the percentage of its citizenry willing to declare evolutionary theory a dead letter. What might be made of this jumble? Allan Mazur interrogates survey data, separating expectation from explanation.

Seven reviews of nine books — the earliest published in 1798, the latest two in 2004 — round out this issue.

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