E verybody says that we are living through a technological revolution. And it’s true. But what will likely prove to be truly revolutionary about our time will not be advances in technology as such, but the transformations of our lives as social creatures that will result from those advances. Such transformations are what tend to matter most about all revolutions. But we have given surprisingly little thought to how this particular revolution is likely to play out. We tend to focus on the remarkable quantitative leaps forward in speed, scale, volume, and accessibility of information made possible by the advances of this era. We compare the days we’re living through to the age in which the printing press first appeared on the scene. Yet our reflections on what such changes will mean—and especially on the effects they are likely to have on our political life—have generally been superficial.

Flurries of attention swirl around the prospect that politics can be “hacked” as reliably as an individual’s life, whether through the use of algorithms, big data, gamification, or simple quantification. Our technological revolution is therefore sometimes seen to promise more informed, efficient, and expedient policies than human deliberators or analysts can produce alone. Already at our fingertips, they call out to be embraced.

Then there is social media, whose enthusiasts see it as an improvement on the production of values, not just the production of knowledge. Politics, in fact, is now seen by some of our pre-eminent technologists as what’s next for social media. Facebook co-founder Sean Parker recently told Politico that his new social platform, Brigade, is meant to address a critical shortcoming in the way “social media can transform politics,

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and make the world more open.” The problem? “When it comes to your civic identity or your political identity or your charitable identity,” said Parker, “frankly you don’t want to express that side of yourself on Facebook. It’s not the right medium to do it.”

An appetite for Brigade reflects the recognition that we have yet to process the effect of our technological revolution on how we experience politics in theory and in practice. Yet Parker’s own words lay bare the remarkably incurious, impoverished way that even the most technologically attuned conceive of and experience politics. For Parker, the practice of politics begins with the expression of one’s political identity. Today, this is a conventional idea, not a transformational one. The internet merely ratifies our peculiar commonplace notion that to socialize is to express one’s identity—even as it underscores how anti-social our expressions of identity can become in a world forced open. But rather than opening us to the problematic origins of our online and offline obsession with identity, some of our most influential technologists are making our obsession the foundation of what they mistakenly believe is a transformation of politics.

The full measure of the technological revolution in politics will be deeper and more coherent. While technology occupies vast territories in our collective imagination, technological theory has remained the province of a highly select few. Yet as Parker unwittingly shows, while politics has begun to capture the imagination of that elite, political theory remains a mystery that they typically lack the training even to recognize as a “known unknown.” In the realms of “social” and “quant” alike, technological force is brought to bear on apparent problems that arise from unquestioned and facile assumptions about the foundations of political thought, and so of our political life.

Fortunately, it is not too late to do better. It is certainly not too early. After an initial wave of confusion and amazement, most Americans have incorporated our ongoing technological revolution into the way we process reality. Many of us may never understand how code, Wi-Fi, or even a touchscreen works. But almost all of us are now able to encounter technology, ever improving and advancing, as something familiar and predictable. Although the ongoing revolution conjures up visions of even more staggering achievements, these do not require the imaginative leaps that took us from the telegram to the internet, or from the home phone to the smartphone. Today, the real surprises in store are
not about what technology can do for us, but what technology is doing to us. Recognizing this makes us better suited to grasp the meaning of the revolution we are living through.

**MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT**

Even once we have turned to consider how technology is changing us, our widespread ignorance of political theory distorts our view of the future. In a reasonable but superficial way, our concerns about technology and society revolve tightly around issues that seem important because they feel urgent. Will technology make us less secure, taking away our jobs and our safety? Will it make us more secure, predicting crime and providing companionship? Will it make us superhuman, subhuman, or posthuman?

These uncertainties press firmly upon our acutest anxieties. Political theorists through the ages have labored to steel us for the future through more subtle lines of inquiry. But today, our public philosophers also have some catching up to do. Few recognize exactly how technology is transforming the foundations of political theory. Even fewer have been able to articulate how those transformations are hiding in plain sight. If we try to keep up with our revolutionary times by racing against our anxieties, the tectonic shifts in our political foundations are apt to thrust up great stumbling blocks for theorists and other citizens alike.

Despite Silicon Valley’s more utopian instincts, few will deny that technology has made it more reasonable to view politics with growing fear and pessimism. Today the politics of technology seems to militate strongly against freedom — or, where they do favor freedom, to oppose order, as in the case of the Silk Road and its anarchist architect, Ross Ulbricht, who was recently sentenced to life in prison. Biotechnology evinces the same pattern: Our nightmares oscillate between the individual playing God and the state doing so.

To be sure, the elite’s technological push away from “ordered liberty” in the classical sense is facilitated by the rise of a popular political spirit now dramatically at odds with the animating sentiments captured in the Bill of Rights. The internet tends strongly to “democratize” all that it touches, yet the internet’s controlling mores do not conduce to free speech, privacy, or self-defense. Were we to convene a constitutional convention for the internet, the prevailing culture online would not produce equivalents of the first, second, or fourth amendments — a jarring illustration of Tocqueville’s visionary dictum that people in a
democratic age “want equality in liberty, and if they cannot obtain that, they still want equality in slavery.”

Nevertheless, it would compound our mistakes to treat these broad cultural trends the way Sean Parker treats expressive identity: as the only foundation from which technology can shape the politics of the future. However subtle, several powerful currents of technological change are already countervailing the apparently dominant tendency toward autocracy, mobocracy, or idiocracy. These hidden currents come sharply into focus from the vantage of political theory, which allows us to glimpse what revolutions are in store for the experience and conception of politics. If our better canonical political theorists are to be believed, true foundations are the creation of a founding few, not a byproduct of the inertia of the many. This is a piece of wisdom not lost on technologists such as Peter Thiel, who half-jokingly describes start-ups as secret conspiracies to take over the world, and who assembled his team of venture capitalists under the name Founders Fund. (Then again, one of the first partners to join the fund was Sean Parker.)

Indeed, to invoke Thiel and Tocqueville against a wide range of theorists, new modes and orders need not always arise from those embarked on a foundational political project. If Americans, on Tocqueville’s account, must trace the origins of their identity past the Liberty Bell to Plymouth Rock, it is worth asking whether, now, we cannot express a comprehensible identity in the wake of our technological revolution without first understanding how its vanguard has recast — as the Puritans once did — some of the fundamental questions concerning the nature of human freedom. Before we begin to face the politics of technology with an attitude of terror, defiance, and resignation on the one hand, or utopianism on the other, we must orient ourselves toward the ways in which technology has shifted the foundations of our theoretical landscape.

To begin such an undertaking is to call for a reassessment beyond the capabilities of any one person or machine — or even a network of persons or machines. What follows is a necessarily provisional inquiry, far more suggestive than exhaustive, concerned primarily with identifying exemplary changes and their comprehensive, interrelated character. To paint with a broad brush is to presume a large canvas; much as Tocqueville beheld that the New World occasioned a new political science, we should confidently consider that the vast realms flung open by technology have begun to do the same.
Since the birth of political theory, philosophers have wrestled with the real and figurative relationship between persons and regimes. Just as regimes appear unitary at first glance, only to contain interlocking parts within, so too is the whole person divisible into components. Theorists will probably always disagree about how independent, self-sufficient, or illusory the parts of the human whole really are or should be. But the dividing lines have remained remarkably fixed over the millennia, and today we tend to think of them as marking off three parts—the mind, body, and spirit.

Much is to be gained from considering how our technological revolution is altering the landscape of political theory in the realms that correspond to each of these three human parts. Though a myriad of possible alterations may seem likely, a few hold particular importance. Certain stubborn problems of mind, body, and spirit have dramatically shaped and constrained the development of political theory. If our technological revolution is having a revolutionary effect on these problems, we would do well to put them first, at least initially to the exclusion of others.

Consider, then, that the technological revolution in political theory is playing out in three key ways. In the realm of the mind, technology is recasting the problem of memory; in the realm of the body, the revolutionary development concerns the vectors of mobility; and in the realm of the spirit, the foundational project of modern political theory is being supervened upon by a radical alternative that could be described, with a wink, as the relief of nature’s estate.

In each of these three realms, political theorists have identified manifestations of a comprehensive “crisis of modernity.” Due to a historic break from pre-modern or pre-democratic times, efforts at human advancement have unearthed latent challenges that threaten to halt or even reverse our progress. In the realm of the mind, overcoming our indebtedness to the past has fostered a paralysis of forgetfulness. In the realm of the body, dismantling inherited hierarchies has revealed hidden barriers to achievement within the seemingly “level playing field.” And in the realm of the spirit, relieving humanity of the suffering imposed by our natural limits has imperiled the natural world and alienated us from our very being. Critics of modernity tend to be skeptical of the notion that technology can guide us away from the paralysis, resentment, and alienation that has soured contemporary life. Modern science, they argue, is the creature of a revolution in political thought that defines
modernity itself. They have not yet considered that the current technological revolution has made manifest a new theoretical project—one that has already begun to break the impasse of modernity in all three realms of mind, body, and spirit.

The time has come to consider this theoretical project. Modernity’s critics have sagely debunked faith in progress, will to power, and other efforts to break our modern impasse by resorting to modern tools. In so doing, however, they have too tightly circumscribed their horizons. While political theory has failed to break the impasse, technology has succeeded. To date, the technologists cannot understand, and the theorists cannot accept, what has happened. But that is all about to change.

THE EPOCH OF FORGETFULNESS

Begin with the problem of memory. In the political-theory tradition, the problem of memory that arises in modern or democratic times involves a compression of our time horizon. Traditionally, human memory develops out of the persistence of great and terrible deeds and personages. The epoch of memory is the epoch of gods and titans, heroes and founders, myths and legends. Terrible events—the wrath of God, the establishment of the Law, the deaths of the ancient fathers—make it possible for humans to orient themselves in temporal space, making and keeping promises and traditions. Memory begets identity.

Then comes the temporal break that inaugurates the modern era, the epoch of forgetfulness. Over time, human greatness begins to fade, first from lived experience, then from memory. Antagonism toward greatness—increasingly associated with inequality, suffering, and arbitrary rule—produces hatred toward the irrational persistence of patterns established by traditions and promises that no longer hold sway over the mind. Memory, and the past itself, become enemies. But even as we compress our time horizon in one way, declaring war on our indebtedness to that which we no longer honor, we constrict it in another. Vengeful toward the arbitrary and unequal quality of promises, we sacrifice our ability to create the future. Rather than ending history, we merely arrest it, caught in an impasse wherein we grow obsessed with the present we have trapped ourselves in.

From the standpoint of the epoch of memory, greatness is great for its own sake—the measure of all things. From the standpoint of our
own time, however, greatness is revealed as a means to an end. Not just valuable for its own sake, it allows human beings to live truly as a community of the unborn, the living, and the dead. Significant, memorable deeds, projected as promises into the future, serve a generative function in service of all.

There is a problem, however: In modern times, we fear great deeds because we associate them with violent inequalities of power. We instinctively reject new wars, new conquests, new religions, and new lawgivers. We want no new nobility. Our appetite for greatness is therefore channeled into new discoveries. But Earth’s limitations have often turned this appetite against humanity as a whole—placing destructive, controlling new powers in the hands of a very few.

Then came the current revolution in technology. Without exhuming aristocratic mores that no longer enchant in our democratic age, the current technological revolution places a tremendous premium on creating powerful new promises around surmounting stubborn human challenges. As our best technologists take momentous first steps in manifesting those promises in lived experience, they are doing more than “opening up the world” of the present; they are opening up the future by enabling us to sustain new memories of lasting, significant deeds. Unlike scientific advancements fraught with dread because they disrupt the ethos of equality ruling a modern or democratic age, the refocusing of technological progress around great leaps in energy, travel, and geographic choice creates fresh landmarks in the popular imagination.

This kind of contemporary greatness is not simply “inspirational.” Much more important, it exemplifies how long-term thinking can create a psychologically “sustainable” future. Rather than seeing our technologists as the swiftest of innovators, we should see their promise-making as they do—as a protracted effort on a multi-generational timeline. In one sense, the true “payoff” of this innovation lies very far in the future. But in another, the payoff is close at hand: It is in the fact of our attachment to a “very far future” that belongs to us, and in which we belong.

Because our turn against historical greatness has bred a fear that greatness itself is at odds with how the human spirit now must be, we have trapped ourselves in a present hostile to memory and shorn of promises great enough to make us at home in the future. But by restoring such promises in harmony with our spirit, the technological revolution in human greatness reconciles us to memory and the
prospect of an “inescapable” past — relaxing the paralysis of forgetfulness that has brought about our current impasse in the arrest of history.

But technology, of course, cannot do all this for us. We must meet it at least halfway. As our best technologists know, technology is also being used to deepen our impasse and strengthen our paralytic forgetfulness. Digitization can end up erasing our collective and personal memories, and artificial intelligence can be deployed to compensate for the loss. Unless we focus attention around how the technology of memory must be a greater and more theoretical enterprise than merely storing what happens on the cloud, our human future will itself become clouded.

**The Body Politic**

To relieve the paralysis of the mind is to set the body in motion. But here another obstacle arises. For modern political theorists, the vectors of mobility are a central concern. Initially, the political problem posed by the motion of bodies in physical space involved the destabilizing and dangerous relationship between excessive and errant motion. For Hobbes, the sovereign’s elimination of contending claims to power prevented the fruitless and uncontrollable thrusting of equals upward and outward in space. Under a “mortal god,” mobilization is moderated. Bodies move in concert and in concord, industriously, securely, and contentedly. For Montesquieu, the establishment and maintenance of horizontal boundaries took on a similar political role; spatial enclosures permitted the laws to shape the tempo and direction of the body politic.

In one sense, these predicaments were cemented in place by the confines of the European nation-state, where closed frontiers made the firmness of foundations essential to managing the forces of social motion. The Old World lacked, above all, new space — a physical expanse large enough to forgive or accommodate the longings, excesses, and errors of moving bodies. In a deeper sense, however, the challenges arose from the confines of the past. Beyond the frontier lay not only new territory but new time — space which was “only waiting,” in Tocqueville’s pregnant phrase, for history to begin. The presence of such space, Tocqueville recognized, made the North American continent fortuitous in three tremendous ways. First, it permitted the foundation of a new democratic order free from the encumbrances of the Old World. Second, by absorbing the force of Americans’ excessive motion, it absolved them of their errancy. Finally, it enabled theorists to observe the
political problems that emerged from the new vectors of mobility made possible in the New World.

In his own observations, Tocqueville discovered that the vastness of America’s new space by no means emancipated humankind from the politics of motion. Suddenly, the problem of too much motion within enclosures raised the specter of too little structure. Tocqueville scholar Joshua Mitchell distilled this idea in *The Fragility of Freedom*: “There must always be boundaries; where they do not exist in the material world, they must exist in the mind.” The vastness of the horizon, and the infinitude of imagination it aroused, did not set the radically mobile Americans at ease. Instead, it occasioned a bipolar sort of anxiety unparalleled in the Old World—now brooding and isolated, now frenetically plunged into public society. In both settings, the expanse of the world led us to dwell more on its indifference toward us than its novelty for us.

In a physical world free of the freight of a past enchanted by the persistence of memory, democratic life threw up invisible horizontal barriers to bodies in motion—a perversity that betrayed the hopes of those who still remembered the vertical demarcations that had ordered the vectors of social mobility in the ancient regime.

This nearly simultaneous enclosure of bodies and minds created a vicious circle. As ambition and accomplishment became the provenance of a dwindling few, Tocqueville foresees, the curse of a modern or democratic age would be found in an all-too-stable equality. Enervated by the petty competition of all against all in a perpetual present, the literally vast majority would sink to a level of inert dispersion that presaged a sort of heat death of history. The arrest of history brought on by the paralysis of the mind would usher in a failure of history in the realm of the body.

Although we are not there yet, by a comfortable margin, it is clear that the imperative of competition and the prejudice of precaution have entered into a vicious cycle of their own, producing a viscerally physical form of political and economic stagnation that seems to foreshadow Tocqueville’s dystopia. Our invisible barriers to advancement show forth in our obsession with securing marginal advantages at minimum risk. Instead of the terror of the unbounded horizon, our vectors of mobility have been arrested by fearfully circumscribed horizons.

In reaction, policy leaders have strained to reinvigorate the body politic both along the horizontal vector (“stimulus”) and the vertical vector
But today’s horizontal, which sees money as a boundlessly animating spirit, hopes to bring good order to spaces by immoderating the motion within them, not moderating it as Montesquieu would. And today’s vertical, which prescribes money as the measure of all things, fails to absorb the intransigent pride that Hobbes warns will cripple a commonwealth within its frontiers. In attempting to transform a political problem into an economic one—controlling the vectors of mobility with the velocity of money—public policy has sustained too much of one kind of motion and too little of another.

The dilemma is a formidable one, but it is made more daunting by a grand misunderstanding of the new vectors of mobility aroused by our technological revolution. Just as technology today is mistakenly or overly valued for its “inspiration” in the realm of the mind, in the realm of the body it draws excessive and misdirected praise for its power of “disruption.” The impact of our technological revolution on the experience and conception of politics is not restricted to the invasive monetization of stagnant offline markets. More than a disruption of our alternately indifferent and isolating modern spaces, we are presented with an altogether alternative space, virtual in character and networked in structure. Technology’s hierarchies of scalable networks are revolutionizing our experience and conception of bodily space—not just by “disembodying” us on the internet, but by establishing new patterns of motion that can be incarnated in the physical world.

As the problem of moving bodies at the center of modern politics plays out in Cartesian space, the flattening and fragmenting of thought and movement is seen as a price worth paying for human gains in predictability and control. The rise of virtual, networked space offers vectors of mobility wherein such tradeoffs do not need to be made. In the new space created by the technological revolution, money becomes less important to ordering and directing human intentionality as the cost of organization and action drops.

Doubtless, the likelihood of a certain kind of excessive movement increases in the short run, as people mistakenly believe that the internet “democratizes” influence, for instance, by “giving everyone a megaphone” or a “presence.” But as we have quickly discovered, the vectors of motion that led us toward frenetic but fruitless activity in Cartesian space typically become even more fruitless in virtual and networked space. Functionally infinite storage of information, and its acceleration
to light speed, humble us in a generative way, moderating yet strengthening our motion. Equally overawed by the ubiquitous infinitude of technology’s new “New World,” we may ameliorate the stinging envy and burning pride aroused by our sense of insignificance and interchangeability—the hallmarks of stagnation in the Cartesian age.

Some may shudder at the prospect of technology rising to the status of a mortal god. But the better touchstone is Tocqueville. “To force all men to march with the same step, toward the same purpose, that,” he wrote, “is a human idea.” “To introduce an infinite variety in actions, but to combine them so that all these actions lead by a thousand paths toward the accomplishment of a great design, that is a divine idea.” In Tocqueville’s sense, virtual, networked space re-ores our vision toward the “divine” horizon. Rather than causing a stampede away from physical reality, it is more likely to awaken in our shared imagination a curiosity about how to restore the experience of human significance in the world of flesh and blood.

Creating Nature

The foundation of that project from outside the precincts of politics will carry with it one of history’s ironies. Critics of modernity trace our political crisis to the inauguration of an earlier project launched from the realm of technological theory. In addition to Descartes, Bacon is condemned for conceiving of the purpose of science as “the relief of man’s estate.” As Leon Kass put it, these “great founders” of “modern science” set “power over nature, including human nature,” as “an explicit goal, perhaps the primary goal,” of technological advancement. Kass approvingly cites Aldous Huxley’s “predictions and concerns,” wherein the “really revolutionary revolution” in technology “is to be achieved, not in the external world, but in the souls and flesh of human beings.” Today, Americans across the political spectrum continually voice alarm that science will destroy humanity in an effort to save it. But few have stopped to consider how this crisis in the realm of the spirit might be alleviated by a revolutionary advance in the technology of nature itself.

The effort to restore a more natural science has not yet been closely linked with the science of creating nature. Our fear is that such a project would require acts of godlike transformation, since the only raw material for natural creation is nature itself. And our dramatic push into nano-technology hastens that fear along, giving rise to the prospect
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of “designer” humans, resurrected dinosaurs, monstrous chimeras, and more. In an added twist, the development of virtual networked space has done little to hearten us — directing so much human endeavor away from the natural world altogether that it seems to cede natural science to those with the least natural of aims.

Nevertheless, the relief of man’s estate carried out by our technological revolution includes a real hope of release from the bitter paralysis that characterizes our age, yet which neither modern science nor modern politics has been able to resolve. Given its profound departures from the modern experience and the modern conception of mind and body, our technological revolution should be seen to betoken a departure in spirit as well.

For the “modern project” inaugurated by Descartes and Bacon has been seen to damage the human spirit above all. Though nature has faced its ration of abuse, it is humankind that cannot survive a break in its right relationship with the natural, according to modernity’s critics. Dissevered, humans become so profanely and mechanically appetitive that their violent nihilism seeks out a bigger target than nature itself. As Heidegger suggested, the modern project that “fills out that world by means of proposing and planning” ends in the seemingly rational judgment that humankind, too, is inherently nothing, just another void to be filled.

Conditioned by the modern project, we reason that the rise of the internet, with its interface screens that are boundaries yet portals, augurs our ever-greater technological alienation from the natural world. But in the silence that prevails when we turn off our devices, to reflect on how our technological revolution may be made manifest in real life, we may glimpse its foundation in a new kind of natural science.

Consider the relation between our present experience of the internet’s “inner” space and our future conception of outer space, which continually calls out to us to bring forth new life. In an effort to explain the way that the idea of human unity could become historically thinkable, Tocqueville observed that the unification of “an immense flock” of humanity “under the scepter of the Caesars...dispose[d] men to receive the general truths that Christianity teaches.” The human spirit quickly comprehends and adopts the conceptions it has been conditioned through experience to receive. While, on the one hand, the fruits of the modern project have conditioned us to fear that technology will
complete our alienation, our experience with revolutionary technology has prepared us to envision a different destiny. Though virtual, networked “inner” space can never become a realm of flesh and blood, in its anti-Cartesian scale and structure it is preparing us to found such realms, equipped with 3-D printing, terraforming, and other tools, in the new worlds of outer space. In its reunification of inner and outer space, the current technological revolution aims to humanize the alien, not alienate the human.

If our best technologists share our fear that we could lazily foreclose eternity by locking ourselves in a perpetual present, devoid of horizons in space or time, they share our hope of re-opening experience to the infinite. As abstractions, these notions can be disorienting and misleading, but as practical experiences, they help us understand technology in a sense that is powerfully freed from the old model of science as the forcible imposition of will upon nature. Rather than transforming nature for the relief of man, our future hinges on relieving Earth of that unbearable burden. The spiritual vector described by forming life afresh in vast but barren spaces corrects the excess and errancy of its opposite—plunging ever deeper into the crevasses between life’s building blocks to deform it.

In the meantime, rather than ungluing us from the physical world, our technological revolution will reintroduce our habits of mind to the politically significant concept of an underlying unity between seen and unseen, material and immaterial, finite and infinite. The much-bemoaned disenchantment of the world depends not only on a view of science that delinks those conjunctions and makes them into antinomies, but on centuries of experience of those disjunctions as constitutive realities of life.

That experience is now giving way to the experience of a world quite new: good news for those who have always believed that mind, body, and spirit are, in the ultimate sense, three parts of a larger whole.