

uncanny ability to play Rachmaninoff but paralyzed by stage fright. If a pill allows him to wow audiences at Carnegie Hall, does that diminish his achievement? While Dees believes that “overcoming obstacles builds character and makes us all better people,” he notes that “many technologies, from irrigation and permanent settlements to airplanes and air conditioning,” make life easier. Still, the argument is a slippery one: Morally, we know that we should not degrade others in order to advance our own ends, but do we degrade ourselves when we use available technologies, such as the “stage fright” pill?

This leads to a final objection to neuroenhancers: They “fundamentally alter an individual’s personality and create . . . an inauthentic life with artificial happiness.” Dees believes that a person’s “achievements and his relationships must be real before he can live a truly good and happy life.” From Aldous Huxley to the creators of *The Matrix*,

Drugs that enhance performance are not as morally problematic as those that give a false sense of happiness.

social observers have warned about the dangers of creating a happy “reality” that is simply an illusion, and Dees agrees that “a good life must be connected to the reality of people’s lives and to the reality of their own accomplishments.” On this basis, he excuses drugs that enhance memory: They may make people perform better on tests but don’t create false memories. But Dees argues that we need to develop “a more nuanced view” regarding drugs that give a false sense of happiness. True, they may allow some individuals to overcome paralyzing grief or depression, but simply using “enhancements to separate people from the real world is morally bankrupt.”

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Earth Exceptionalism

THE SOURCE: “Where Are They?” by Nick Bostrom, in *Technology Review*, May–June 2008.

PHILOSOPHER NICK BOSTROM has surprising aspirations for the *Phoenix* spacecraft, which landed in the arctic zone of Mars on May 25. The director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University wants the probe to turn up nothing—sterility, dead rocks, lifeless sands.

Such an outcome would be a good omen for humanity, Bostrom writes. It would provide new evidence that the emergence of life is extremely improbable. It would suggest that billions upon billions of rolls of the dice have produced a score of only one. Heretofore, the notion that 100 billion galaxies containing possibly 100 billion stars each would have only once gener-

EXCERPT

Burn, Baby, Burn

[The United States] has experienced [a] trend, almost exclusive to our country . . . to reintroduce fire. Nature kindles fires galore, but reforms in American fire policy and practice also account for much of the escalation in burning on public lands, which is where nearly all large fires now reside. Federal agencies have for several decades sought to promote fire in the name of ecosystem management: Fires that would have been

suppressed are left to burn. Fires are deliberately set. Fires have escaped. . . . [But] today’s fires do not burn as those of the past did; they have to accommodate more than a century of human-wrought changes. . . . The sudden reliance on large fires in the public domain is comparable to economic shock therapy in Eastern Europe. . . . We are long past the time when every burned acre must be labeled “destroyed”; we are not yet to the point of recognizing that not every acre burned is “enhanced.” Turning fire management over to fire likely belongs in the realm of faith-based ecology.

—STEPHEN J. PYNE, author of the *Cycle of Fire* series, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 2008)

ated the spark of life seemed almost preposterous. Yet after nearly half a century of searches for extra-terrestrial intelligence with increasingly powerful telescopes and data mining techniques, the night sky has yielded no messages, no aliens, and no spacecraft.

The likely explanation for this, Bostrom writes, is that the path to life forms capable of colonizing space leads through a “Great Filter,” a term he borrowed from George Mason University economist Robin Hanson. This filter consists of one or more steps that must be negotiated against odds so great as to

make a particular process essentially impossible—except once. If the filter is in the human past, maybe it was traversed 3.8 billion years ago, when life first shows up in the fossil record. Or maybe it happened after single-celled organisms became more complex eukaryotes 1.8 billion years later. That’s Bostrom’s optimistic scenario.

But what if the Great Filter is ahead of us? This would mean, according to Bostrom, that some horrific probability lies in our future—nuclear destruction, climate catastrophe, genetically engineered superbugs, or high-energy physics

experiments run amok. If other advanced civilizations were born but failed to pass through the filter, could our earthly civilization be any different?

If traces of some creature are found on Mars, it could mean that the emergence of life is not so rare. If it could happen twice in a single small solar system, it’s probably occurred in galaxy after galaxy. It could mean that all the civilizations created by the life forms that evolved over time were somehow destroyed before they could colonize or communicate with others. It could mean the Great Filter is in Earth’s future.

ARTS & LETTERS

Yoknapatawpha Diplomacy

THE SOURCE: “Combating Anti-Americanism During the Cold War: Faulkner, the State Department, and Latin America” by Deborah Cohn, in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3.

A HALF-CENTURY AGO, DURING a period of particularly fervent anti-Americanism, the U.S. State Department launched a massive campaign, quaint by today’s standards, to win hearts and minds around the globe. At the height of the Cold War, America mobilized not seasoned diplomats and practiced public-relations specialists, but intellectuals. Nobel Prize-winning novelist William Faulkner was dispatched to South America.

Faulkner (1897–1962) was a curi-

ous emissary in a propaganda war. One of the world’s most reclusive celebrities, he had to be persuaded to attend his own Nobel Prize ceremony in Sweden in 1950. But as the Soviet Union filled the world canvas with portraits of a grossly materialistic America without cultural achievements, Faulkner responded to appeals to his patriotism and agreed to represent the United States internationally. Acclaimed as a writer earlier in Europe and South America than in his home country, Faulkner “fulfilled the wildest dreams and underlying political agenda” of the government that sent him, writes Deborah Cohn, a professor of Spanish literature at Indiana University.

He ran into a rough patch in Brazil on his first Latin America foray, in 1954, when he drank himself into a “pre-coma” state and was unable to participate in as many activities as the State Department had hoped, but redeemed himself with gracious press interviews on the rest of the trip. In 1961, on a tour to Venezuela, where Vice President Richard Nixon’s motorcade had been stoned three years earlier, Faulkner lectured, gave press conferences, and conversed with unsympathetic Marxist critics and pro-Soviet journalists as a “nonpolitical, modernist author who addressed ‘universal truths,’” Cohn says. A year later, when the National Guard was called in to enforce the desegregation of the University of Mississippi near his home, State Department officials noted in internal communications that he provided a counterbalance to Soviet efforts to define America as a land of bigotry and race riots.