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Life is Not a Machine

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I recently read an incredibly annoying article in a 2015 *New York Review of Books*. This liberal-policy-wonk and literary monthly is run by Secular Humanoids, i.e., people trained by universities in the humanities who worship science more than most scientists, who (having studied science) do not usually confuse it with theology.

The NYRB worships evolution, genuflecting at every mention of Darwin's name, and spitting at the very idea of shit-kicking lowbrow Xtians who might question His Holy Writ.

Whoever Tim Flannery may be (his last work was a travel book about the Pacific Ocean) he is qualified to pontificate on the Sacred Doctrine in a piece titled, "How You Consist of Trillions of Tiny Machines," a review of work in evolutionary biology. "We consist of trillions of electrochemical machines that somehow..." blab blab, and "as we contemplate the evolution and maintenance of this complexity, wonder grows to near incredulity."

But don't worry; we have Faith. It's "almost magical." Ribosomes "work like a pair of gears" with "tiny mechanistic operations." "Nanomachines...within the mitochondria are minute

biological electrical motors that possess rotors, stators, and rotating catalytic beads”—like a Toyota or something.

It’s “like a fairy tale,” but, of course, it isn’t really magic, after all. We know better. Life is nothing but a meaningless accident—or as one of Flannery’s authors puts it, “chance and contingencies.” (Nano-machines from Mars somehow blew into Earth’s primordial oceans, and hey, presto. Really.

The Second Law of Thermodynamics is mysteriously bypassed, and lo, the little bitty machines produce germs, trees, dinosaurs and New York intellectuals.

It appears that some of us humans are so stupid that every time someone invents a new machine, we use it as a metaphor for life itself, and then come to believe that the metaphor is literally factual. As soon as clocks were invented, certain Enlightened highbrows conceived of a “Clockwork Universe,” all made of springs and gears, and devoid of soul or any élan vital.

L’homme machine was now seen not as the divine microcosm but as an automaton, or—as we would say—a robot or android. Steam engines were invented, and psychoanalysis suddenly revealed the hitherto-unguessed fact that repression constitutes the energy-source of “Civilization (and its discontents).”

Other savants contemplated electricity and internal combustion and concluded that humans are not conscious beings but “behavioral” machines (except for the behavioral scientists themselves, I guess, who must’ve been at least conscious enough to realize this shattering truth). Nothing but, nothing but...machines.

As soon as the computer is invented, naturally the universe becomes—a computer. The human brain is a computer, and the universe is nothing but data, information. Soon computers will be more intelligent than humans because they can process more data than we poor meat-machines. We will die out, but computers will become immortal, fleshless, brilliant, shiny—

like angels in a Gnostic Dualist Paradise of pure mentation, only without a god.

So, if we are already machines, and are going to be uploaded into even better machines, and if we are the measure of the Good—then machines are ipso facto Good. Technology occupies the niche, in effect, of the absent deity. Science cannot be questioned. If something can be invented it must be invented, because the mechanistic is by definition the truly moral.

If technology accidentally seems to cause problems (like say Hiroshima, Chernobyl, Fukushima, the Pacific Garbage Patch, the eradication of species, the pollution of watersheds, the end of the world). technology will solve these problems because it is “almost magic,” almost—no, it is our Savior.

In the late 18th century, the first mad man, James Tilly Matthews, who believed himself to be a machine appeared (see Mike Jay’s *The Air Loom Gang*, 2003) and was incarcerated in London’s Bedlam psychiatric hospital. I remember a big sob story, maybe in *Life* magazine, when I was a kid, about a boy who was locked up because he thought he was a robot. Nowadays, that kid could be writing for the NYRB and no one would blink an eye.

Now, we are all machines—“almost incredible!”—but true. Life? Bah, our machines will live for us. No, wait—we are our machines. “Trillions of tiny machines” in a clockwork universe. Let us leave flesh behind at last. Let us return to Mars, abandon Earth to its pollution and death-rays.

L’homme-machine—c’est nous.