

Angel, Animal, Machine: Models for Man

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George Santayana once said that philosophical systems, like good dishes or like women, have their characteristic odors. If the special traits of a philosophy are best determined by the scent of it, its special odor is most readily revealed by what it says about the nature of man. Of late we have had the great good fortune to smell the clean sea air of materialism. The joy of smelling the ocean after centuries of incense and decades of the positivistic chemistry lab is so great that many of us feel a permanent commitment to the robust though simple odor of salt air. Such commitment is understandable—it was the battle against superstition and the smell of death that made Lucretius a materialist—but it may be time to recall that the ocean wind does not carry the subtlest scents, and that no man can acknowledge the sea alone.

One of the philosophically most exciting controversies today concerns the relation of men to machines. The questions of whether men are machines, whether machines can think, and what men can do that machines cannot duplicate are widely discussed in philosophical journals and in books. These questions are, of course, not recent. Descartes asked similar questions in the 17th century, and came to the conclusion that animals were machines, as were men on the physical side of their nature. De la Mettrie in the 18th century and T. H. Huxley in the 19th both decided that men were machines, although their notions of what a machine was differed substantially. On first hearing, the question "Are men machines?" conveys an ominous impression. Many of us are afraid that

if the correct answer turns out to be affirmative, it will be tantamount to the discovery that we really consist of gears, radio tubes, and bailing wire. The picture we get is that of humanoid monsters, and we instinctively reject the thought that a careful autopsy might show to the world that we were but ingenious toys made of metal and plastic.

This, of course, is but the nervous man's reaction to a question misunderstood. The reason why it has been supposed that men are machines is neither to humiliate them nor to discover their manufacturer. There is no expectation of finding that men are really assembled out of inanimate components instead of being produced by the usual, well-known method. The significance of asking the question is entirely different. What we are interested in is whether it is possible to gain some insight into the nature of man by using as our model a complex inanimate object. If the model of the machine turns out to be a profitable one, it will not establish that machines should be given a place as a species in the animal kingdom, nor that man should be considered a clever artifact. The most that we can expect the ma-

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