

## The Joys of a Mechanical Existence

Nowadays the word “mechanical” sounds almost obsolete, even quaint, due to the rapid development of computer related sciences and the new vocabulary associated with them. Nevertheless, it retains some use to describe a way of how we behave, not unlike the now more dominant “programmed.” The latter is directly related to computers and connotes a type of preset, prearranged behavior which had been inserted into a mechanism. It can apply just as well to a person who had been fed a specific way of behavior either by someone else or by following ideas and trends taken from society or culture. The extreme of being programmed is being brainwashed, hence the connotations are usually negative and akin to how a robot operates. Anything mechanical is of a physical nature regardless of size whereas a program is abstract and belongs to software. You can see what's mechanical but not a program which makes the latter more elusive. In both personal responsibility is minimized and idealistically speaking, done away with altogether. You can be programmed to operate in a mechanical fashion but not the other way around. It's all one-way. So whether you choose mechanical or being programmed, both are equally impersonal. This remains true whether the latter smacks of intelligence or the former mindless conformity which remains subordinate to the program governing it. If being consigned to live in a mechanical world is bad enough, the prospect of a programmed one governed by an intelligence potentially greater than ours is unnerving. Immediately this raises a lot of red flags about artificial intelligence which is beyond the scope of this brief article.

With this caveat in mind, a few positive ideas about the nature of mechanical existence just might be available to consider. You may wonder if such a proposal is absurd because we've become so conditioned (programmed?) to entertain the possibility of a positive alternative. The chief culprit here lies with utilitarian philosophies and behavioral sciences which take delight in stripping away personal elements from our lives. If they don't succeed fully, they wish to at least minimize them. Sometimes you wonder why this is so, not just with these specific views but pretty much in general. It seems we have an inbuilt resistance to freedom and fear of development in the most positive and wholesome sense. As for the just mentioned utilitarian philosophies and behaviorism, everything is blind and irrational. We have the well known example where the universe is likened to a clock which had been wound up and set to run indefinitely. Sooner or later it will run out and everything goes dead. We dread that prospect even if it's aeons off in the future.

Later in history we witness the rise of computers and get pretty much the same approach though far more sophisticated and potentially sinister. Now the programmer has become the agent who has not just wound up the clock but has designed the chip which keeps it going for a specific time. He can terminate the whole operation at will without

the rest of us knowing. It seems that instead of the inevitable run-down as with the clock, the newer model has resources which will keep everything going forever. And if not forever, the programmer will say “no problem” and proceed to design a different universe. And that keeps repeating itself pretty much along the same pattern. Should we throw in the constant advances of other sciences along with fast-paced political and economic developments, the world becomes a pretty scary place. Ever since around the Industrial Revolution the effects of all this has been well documented. Suffice to bring it up here briefly before moving on to the topic at hand which takes all this into consideration and makes an effort, albeit imperfectly, to turn it on its head.

Despite the negative associations with the adjective “mechanical,” strange to say, it can be of considerable benefit as to how we view the spiritual life as found in Christianity. Obviously this needs to be spelled out, for even suggesting a positive side to what has gained a bad rap sounds suspicious. The hesitation lies advocating subjection to blind fate of which we have an instinctive fear. However, fate is an easy way out...a cop-out...which requires little or no thinking, just acceptance. If elements from the mechanical world view have a positive value as suggested here, we shouldn't dismiss them outright. Some features just may parallel what goes on in the spiritual realm. The word “spiritual” evokes thoughts about our highest nature and can be taken in a number of ways. Basically it means that which transcends normal subject-object experience. But before delving into that, let's stick with the less explored, positive side of a mechanical world view which has a curious parallel with the spiritual one. It might be more accurate to emphasize that both are parallel in form but not identical in essence. In other words, they share an overall pattern. If we can grasp this correspondence, certain aspects of the mechanical can be put at the service of the spiritual. The two can't become fused or misidentified, so that potential error is not worth considering.

Anything mechanical works according to a fixed speed (it can alternate, of course, but that's fixed as well) and moves from point A to point B to point C and so forth. This can be observed in the way machines function, large or small. Before our more modern idea of programming came on the scene, precise determining factors were built in to operate the machine, that is, it was designed in such a such a way for such and such a purpose. This was done chiefly through the use of a power source. Either you wound it up or stashed coal into the furnace to power the device which would then function for X amount of time. Our relationship as human beings to this device is irrelevant, for it will continue on its merry way whether or not we are present. Then again, perhaps it would operate better if we weren't around. Such a simple yet relentless operation is appealing but misleading.

Thus when we speak of anything mechanical, the idea of programming is involved. This holds true even before it developed into a science in its own right. For both the absence

of free will is assumed. This faculty, cherished dearly by so many, turns out to be conditioned, and its value blown way out of proportion. Actually wrestling with it gets us in more trouble than we may have bargained for. Should we take a long and hard look at this as well as how appeal to it has screwed up so many people throughout history, the alternative is more appealing. However, that doesn't mean a loss of free will as commonly understood. We want to use it, of course, but treat it in a kind of secondary fashion. One way of doing this is by opting to confine our attention more to the physical world and mechanistic movement essential to it. This, of course, has nothing to do with transforming us into robots but allowing us to have a fuller appreciation of life. That's why the title of this essay has the word "joy" in it, though you don't associate joy with anything mechanical or programmed.

Before conforming ourselves to what may appear as cold, even heartless way of life, we need to take a closer look at the matter-of-fact physical way nature operates which is in accord with mechanical movement. Despite its occasional messy operation, everything moves relentlessly in point-to-point fashion and appears devoid of what we value the most, free will. That means...and this requires some explanation...it suggests a freedom we haven't envisioned before. It might sound like some kind of double-speech where bondage is freedom and so forth. The difficulty is getting beyond an undeveloped way of thinking so we can direct our gaze straight at the point-to-point flow of events which follows this strict mechanical path. Adapting ourselves to this is no small challenge, for our preconceived ideas inevitably will throw up fierce resistance. At the same time, taking this path is altogether easy because it conforms perfectly to objective reality and frees us up from making a whole slew of useless, even harmful, choices. Unconsciously we want to get those choices out of the way as much as possible because we have an innate though yet imperfect focus upon something greater. It seems that here is where resistance arises to acknowledge our natural happiness and to substitute for it various types of mental bondage which leads to physical bondage. That's why we may not get support from other persons. Some kind of gloom hangs over us all which is more illusory than real. We've bought into it as having objective existence. Thus getting a positive view on mechanical activity relative to the spiritual life can be a hard sell due to our prejudices and those from whom we seek advice.

Another reason why overcoming this resistance to any form of mechanical movement is stronger than we've anticipated is the accumulation of negative exposure garnered from the Industrial Revolution. Charles Dickens is a prime example, of the grim way of life in English cities of the time. People like him counter the whole new way of looking at the world that had been introduced with great enthusiasm and unwittingly, the ramifications of which are still being felt decades later. Like evolution, mechanical movement is one of those things society has embraced or in some instances, has resigned itself because the evidence they produce is so obvious even if it's unpalatable. Regardless of their merit,

these theories have an uncanny way of making us unhappy or better, taking away that innate happiness we all have. You wonder why this is so...not just in these two instances but with most everything else that tries to explain human behavior and the like. It's so prevalent that barely we give it the attention it's due.

So it's time for a rebellion, if you will, against these ideas. As with mechanical movement, the subject at hand, we can reject the negative side and favor the positive. Not just that but be aggressive about it, not allowing ourselves to be bowled over by arguments trying to prove the case otherwise. Perhaps some of our reluctance stems from being conditioned to negate personal elements when it comes to doing science, and science is pretty much everywhere in many forms. Objectively speaking, there doesn't seem any reason to devalue ourselves. This observation is so obvious that it passes over our heads. Thus we need to be on the look out as to how such a view creeps in. We can find real freedom in a mechanically determined world (and let's include an evolving world as well), the one we've been conditioned to escape, and use it for our good, all the while relishing the prospect. Actually, we can be at our happiest governed by a mechanical world view where every last detail has been predetermined, and predetermined can include the newer computer oriented world view. A large part of getting there is the need to shed our preconceived ideas about what mechanical means and transfer them from our mental operations to ones which are physical. It so happens that the source of our worry and concern—that which upsets our happiness—is not on the physical plane but on the mental one which evokes strong emotional responses. This is very interesting because the notion of happiness seems to have no problem fitting in with either a mechanically oriented world view or one where evolution plays a dominant role. However, it turns out that both are operative most of the time.

So what happens if we opt to go down the mechanical path? We've spelled out some of the fears and dangers associated with this view, but that's not of concern here. First we have to appreciate that everything sentient and not sentient—animals, insects rocks and otherwise—goes about their business blindly, efficiently and without the exercise of free will. That's what we call “natural,” and we admire it. Nothing could be manufactured to approximate their perfection. With this in mind, we have it within our power to imitate their operations. A starting point is to observe how our bodies go about their business which they do very well minus our mental interference. The heart beats, the lungs breathe and the stomach digests food while countless other tasks are going on within us regardless whether we're attentive to them or not. The same applies when we get a cut. Automatically the wound heals itself minus whether we've having positive or negative thoughts. This, of course, leaves out the power of thought on our bodies as has been demonstrated effectively which is not within the scope of the current article.

The second observation we hit upon is that the operation of natural functions is very

impersonal. The personal stuff comes in...interferes...when we attach an "I" to these marvels. If we could question these physical operations as to why they're function thus, would they respond in a personal way? It is out of the question because they're too engaged in their tasks and merrily go their way. Also, if they are injured, they don't ask our permission to be healed but take immediate action themselves, all mechanically and in good order. We might say that disease and what leads to death is just as mechanical despite the pain involved. That leads to the perennial question about suffering which plagues us all. Perhaps...and just perhaps...attention to this mechanical point of view might shift our attention from suffering to pain. It seems that suffering involves a personal "I" whereas pain does not. So if you do away with the I (admittedly a tough proposal), you do away with suffering and are left with pain which, despite its nature, also goes on its merry way. It's easier said than done, but at least the possibility of taking this practical stance is out there. Nothing mysterious is involved except the mystery of that mechanical movement which continues minus our intervention.

Insight into the mechanical way of how our bodies work leads naturally to observing its operations outside ourselves or in the world at large which, of course, includes other people. It so happens that everyone else and other living beings function no differently from the physical point of view. The big exception, of course, is that most people are carrying a lot of baggage around in their minds. Rarely do they focus upon that which is physical, being preoccupied with their thoughts which makes them more removed from reality. Throw in electronic gadgets and that makes them even further removed. They may be enthralled by so-called virtual reality whose value or lack of it is out of the question here. In the not too distant future that may require some consideration from this article's point of view. At the moment we can stick with the basic standard of happiness. Are people happy when they are interacting with virtual reality? The verdict is out, but from the evidence thus far, it doesn't seem so. What's interesting about computer generated programs is that they raise the question as to what we mean by reality. Perhaps this nagging doubt is the source of unhappiness, at least in this area. So while we're primarily concerned with mechanical operation in general, using it as an analogy may be obsolete or well on the way toward obsolescence. Too early to tell. However, there's a lot of mechanically-oriented stuff out there for us to work with.

Virtual reality has the benefit of raising the question what we mean by reality and what doesn't belong to it. So when we manage to step back and take a look at the sharp division between what's out there and what's in here (i.e., within our human skin), often we get the impression that everything we perceive falls under an illusion. All along throughout our lives we've had a hunch, albeit dimly, that our experiences are somehow lacking which is why we're fond of speaking in terms of life-as-a-dream and other related images. Not only that, we're conscious of how rapidly time passes which implies that we're missing something big. But where does that Big Thing reside? It's a question we

pose but haven't the answer, hence the reason why there's so much anxiety and fear, and that has no place in impersonal, mechanical operations. We don't quite know how to label things accurately as they zip by us and when death draws near, fear that we've passed our lives in continuous uncertainty. Perhaps this is what the Preacher or Ecclesiastes is harping about when he utters his famous “vanity of vanity, all is vanity.” Yet this is only part of his message. In a way, he prefigures insight into reliance upon the mechanical nature of reality by alluding often to natural phenomena: “the sun rises and the sun sets...the wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes” [1.5-6].

If we consider the manner by which we comport ourselves on a daily basis, much of our thoughts and actions are preset. We function in a predictable way and prefer to do things mechanically, all pretty much on schedule. This is not unlike the impersonal mechanical operations already noted, including our natural functions, but a problem arises when something crosses our personal “I” as it invariably does. Our thoughts are mostly governed by self-interest and hence actions springing from them. There's no problem if we're aware of this, for it's a start on the right path. Yet after the action has exhausted itself—the action which came to birth relative to our self interest through thoughts—we look back on what had transpired and are either ashamed of ourselves or feel guilty that we've missed something important. Here's an example where that dream-like quality we have about life comes into play, especially after the passage of some time. It's rather unsettling and leaves us disappointed and helpless at having wasted time. Yet this time may be punctuated with positive experiences as when we read or hear an edifying text or sermon and be moved by it. Then we go back to our normal lives and discover that this inspiration has evaporated with alarming speed. It's as transitory as any of our other experiences. We have no choice but to acknowledge this and move on due to the demands of daily life. Later at some point we return to what had inspired us and feel renewed, although this second time around is different. We're aware...painfully so...of how we've strayed. It gets worse. We repeat the same pattern over again. The gap between our inspiration (which was genuine) and our straying from it makes us wonder what's really going on. Are we deluding ourselves? Is that which is inspiring us the culprit? These questions reveal that we've hit upon a make-of-break point. Either we continue with the same pattern which now has become boring, drop it altogether or adopt a different stance.

Just about any pattern from the mechanical point of view always has a cause followed by an effect. In a sense, we don't have to exert much energy examining physical reality because it goes along this fashion quite nicely and without out interference. This has an analogue within us difficult to describe. For the most part we're not attentive to it because our interaction with the world at large militates against it. Whether we're at rest or in action, the outside world impinges upon us in a mediate fashion through

images we incorporate and form into a pattern of predictable behavior. This template, in turn, can be applied readily to other situations. We assemble a number of them over a life time, and they become our constant companions even if we wish to evict some or all from our lives. It turns out that those we wish to get rid of hang around all the more, as though we've become obsessed by their presence, hence our inclination to follow their whim even if we don't wish to go.

The nature of a pattern can be outlined as follows. We have a run-of-the-mill experience which triggers the emergence of these images so quickly that we're at a loss as to how it happens. We move on to another experience of the same character (let's exclude the dramatic stuff because that appears much less often in real life) and behold, more images. The procedure continues from dawn to dusk and beyond as in the less controllable form of dreams. Yet even when we're asleep our dreams conform to those few established patterns and the images associated with them. A small number of patterns are beneficial; perhaps if we had a large number of them and hence more options, we'd go crazy. The same would hold true if we had none, or so we've come to believe. Nevertheless, the point to keep in mind is the mechanical nature at work throughout which is parallel to yet removed from the mechanical nature of the outside world. We're doing our thing and that is doing its thing. The latter is based upon external reality whereas the former is in imitation of it. Sometimes when we get frustrated with the constant repetition of a given series of images we look at the outside world and become angry. Their constancy taunts us by always getting in the way, and we rush to the conclusion that life is meaningless, indifferent, cold and couldn't care less about our welfare. Often this is as far as too many people get. It's easy to resign oneself to the frustration and move on because there's no other choice. Life must be lived.

Because the images pass before our minds and grab us with such suddenness we lack the response time to do anything about it. This is where we feel tricked constantly, of coming up short, hence the source of discouragement in pursuing the spiritual path. Our reliance upon computer related devices re-enforces this helplessness because incessantly they're throwing out images and data, an action which reflects our minds in their equally incessant giving birth to images. Still, we love these devices, and they love us because we see so much of ourselves in them. In the long run all these devices do is mirror our own minds and how they spew out images, cold and raw, with no relation to them. So the bone of contention comes down to our passiveness before the parade of these images. Really, it's amazing how we accept them and don't do a thing to change the situation which you'd think would be Priority Number One in life. We simply lack guidance or direction as what to do except surrender passively.

Though we may be tempted to throw in the towel, some indescribable and mysterious place within us precludes this saying quietly yet persistently that we're composed of

something better than what we've been exposed to. The place, if you will, reveals itself when we're most desperate which is when we have recourse to something greater than ourselves, i.e., God. This recourse happens all the time despite what may be thrown out there to counter it. Then the crisis passes (sometimes it gets worse) and we revert to our usual mechanical existence. The trick is to stay in this place once we discover it. Wherein does it consist, for surely it lacks extension in time and space? For the most part it comes to the fore when we're in trouble and looking for help. Does this mean it's a product of our imagination? Let's say it is thus. That means everything else is a product of our imagination. What makes it unique is the peace and gratitude we experience which isn't present elsewhere. Part of our doubt is the suddenness with which it rises. We have little or no time to reflect upon its source or how we got to the blessed state which passes as quickly as it has come into existence.

Pressing on further with our search, we can identify the chief characteristic of this place as one of vision which is both physical and not physical. It might be more accurate to use the active verb "seeing" because we're more interested in its application. While this distinction between physical and not physical may be helpful to move the topic of interest along, in reality there's no distinction. We see and see simply with the whole person, doing it all at once or not at all. We know when we're doing this properly because of a certain interior unity we experience which is expressed by having no interest as to examining the nature of this seeing. We're too taken up with its activity. Here our preconceptions and thoughts on their own tend automatically toward dissolution much to our great relief. This impacts our senses directly which pull together as one, if you will, as reflective of our interior unity. Some will argue that hearing is more important while others claim it's seeing. Unfortunately the rest of the senses aren't given much consideration, but they too fall in line with this unity of seeing. Such appears the meaning or at least points in this direction by the four creatures in the Apocalypse who "were covered with eyes in front and in back" 4.6].

Perhaps the most common way of expressing the primacy of seeing in ancient Greek philosophy is by the familiar noun *theoria* (*theoreo* being the verbal root). It means being a spectator which ranges all the way from watching a game to paying close attention to various aspects of reality. And so early on *theoria* had become the central way of presenting philosophy. As for the other senses, they are unified into a type of seeing, a *theoreo* which simply is another way of stating that we've become more attentive than ever to each and every aspect of existence. This physical vision has an analogue with the immaterial one where we now look more globally, if you will, than at particulars though not of the particulars escapes our attention. Such is the active insight we take away apart from the usual sense of peace and contentment which strikes us as the primary benefit.

However, this vision is secondary. Distressing circumstances have forced us to see...one way, if you will...or in a manner which isn't snared by the object it sees. One-way is the chief characteristic of this seeing because of the intensity involved. Of course, the cause of distress isn't lost sight of but recedes into the background in our desire to get relief. Our seeing now becomes concentrated and goes directly to the source that will alleviate the pain neither looking to the left nor to the right but straight on. Such an observation is incontestable, pretty much ironclad proof that something "out there" is ready to help us. Though it may not work in accord with our preconceived ideas, it works effectively enough which is why down the ages people persist in doing it. Even in such circumstances we can be at peace because now we know its reality is somehow secondary to that original interior unity we've perceived. Nevertheless, we're prone to lose it quickly and are dismayed because we've fallen back into the old habit of expecting what we see to respond to our new-found inner harmony. Given the tension of modern life, it's even more difficult to hold the two together. So throughout all this our recollective faculty spoken of in other articles as *anamnesis* is more persistent than we may have thought. Never can we shake the *anamnesis* of our newly discovered peace and are teased by it just being out of reach when we're in the thick of daily life. We want to go there but can't. The pressure of that two-way vision is too intense. That means we have to find a practical way to practice the one-way seeing that initially had capture our attention.

Seeing one-way is exactly what it means, a steady gaze outward which never looks back to the source from which it had come. This is so...obviously...because there's no other place to attribute the seeing. In a way, it's absolute, total and unconditioned, words we spontaneously use from actual experience with this seeing. If we get this far back, is there any other place left for us to go? It doesn't seem so. To make sure, we can try out a number of mind games, if you will, such as adopting a scientific frame of mind. For example, we may listen to what brain research has to say on this matter. Then we can turn to philosophical and theological speculation, all very fine, but for the most part they attempt to apprehend this one-way type of seeing as an object. The venture may be fruitful to some extent, but once we've gotten into this one-way stream, there's no genuine option but to run with it.

We may posit the last characteristic of this seeing (there doesn't seem to be any more). It's straight, straight and unswerving as an arrow. That puts it square in our faces where we have the choice either to accept or reject it. Already the latter has been described where our inherent one-way seeing passes into a regular type of seeing, of seeing objects and being swept away by them without returning to our native vision, if you will. This can be frustrating over time, but even more time is required to see how this spreads out and makes clear, relentlessly so, that our preconceived ideas and emotions are secondary what's really going on in the world.

Now the more we have a clearer apprehension of this one-way seeing, the more the two-way seeing impinges upon us. The pressure it has to bear on us is immense, and we can't figure out why we're so afflicted despite the validity of the insight that had gotten us on this new path. There comes to mind Gospel examples of forgiving seventy times seven on a daily basis which seems like an exaggerated way of speaking but is true in reality. Then we have the just man who stumbles just as many times in the course of day but gets back up and moves on. Later in Christian tradition Anthony of Egypt started out as a hermit and was sorely tempted. The more he withdrew into further solitude, the more intense were his temptations. It's okay to experience this for a limited time but for the rest of our lives as with Anthony? Yet if we pause at a given point during this distress, that one-way seeing persists...has never left us...and contrary to our expectations, never passes judgment. Along with this is an awareness that we're sustained in existence and don't suffer dissolution stemming from the incredible amount of our failures or more accurately, our heightened awareness of them. Provided we can endure this painful experience, after a while we discover something better than our initial insight which has induced all this. In other words, the way of seeing proposed here and our failure to live up to it work hand-in-hand.

So despite any doubt that comes our way, we persist in our faith that there exists a guiding force behind this strange state of affairs. We can't have it any other way, really. We're dying to attach a name to it which is natural. Despite our distress, invariably we're led to intuit some type of not-human or trans-human factor as operative. That stems from the fact that we haven't passed out of existence but remain functioning regardless of our inner disposition. When we're happy, we scratch our heads and do the same when unhappy. The list of physical gestures can go on and on indefinitely. Herein lies a brand new appreciation of mechanical existence at the service of things spiritual. When we're left with little or nothing of our own resources that awareness of continuing in existence switches over, if you will, to a sudden appreciation of how smoothly our body functions minus our mental interference. Then we're led to believe that the same holds true with other people even if they're not aware of it. Obviously this can be extended to just about all aspects of creation. Now everything within us and exterior to us functions automatically in a fully mechanical, impersonal fashion. All we have to do is sit back and enjoy the ride.