

More Reflections on Mechanical Existence (or The Ghost in the Machine, Part Two)

To a certain extent, the article at hand follows on the heels of an earlier one entitled **The Ghost in the Machine**, hence the reason for the subtitle. I thought it better to keep both articles on the short side, stringing them along not unlike chapters since they share the same general theme. Who knows. A third one may follow (or even more). The principle reason for taking a serial approach is that the topic at hand is difficult to articulate. Better to approach it in small bits and pieces so it's more manageable.

After having hammered out the first article, I saw a number of flaws which were overlooked or could have been avoided altogether. Despite this, the stuff I had in mind at the time seemed worth putting out there. The possibility always exists to return and develop it at a later time. In the meantime, people can make their own observations as to its merits...or lack thereof. Another factor is that the insights are on the amateurish, unprofessional side. Nevertheless, I had to resist the temptation of this hindering any insights to emerge. The source is a heightened sense of ego noted in the next paragraph, one of the many things we've inherited from Descartes!

So with these necessary caveats out of the way, we can ask more directly around what does this article and the previous one revolve? The take-off point is that everyone is affected by a dichotomy of mind/spirit versus body. Real or perceived is besides the point. This can be summed up briefly as: "I" am an incorporeal entity which is accompanied by a body, and that body often is a source of trouble and thus is unreliable. Starting from here is the wellspring of an endless source of trouble due to a heightened awareness of one's ego or self-centeredness, all of which is fabricated. Perhaps this dichotomy is behind Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum* or I think therefore I am.¹ He uses this formula, if you will, as an aide to step aside from the troublesome, unreliable body with its sense perceptions and to take refuge in the safe harbor of pure thought. Although we've come to decry this today, we should keep in mind that until not long ago people were afflicted with all sorts physical ailments which couldn't be treated. Pain was unrelievable. Hence it was more natural to seek escape from corporeal existence.

Let's take a closer look at the malaise we've inherited from Descartes and make a few general observations of its contemporary manifestations. I'm partial to the term malaise because it's represents a hard to nail down mood which affects us all. Also it's so pervasive and lacks a specific antidote. Because of its universality we have trouble recognizing this malaise right away. Instead, we get glimpses of it here and there and treat the symptoms, not the malaise itself because we confuse the two. Generally everyone acknowledges that part of the malaise at hand is having been set adrift both spiritually and philosophically. Nothing new here. The major difference is that we feel less anchored down compared with other times in history. Furthermore, we're buffeted daily through the media which now largely

¹ *Je pense, donc je suis* as it's rendered in French, Descartes' native language.

comes through our smart phones and other devices. We can bring them anywhere but can't let go of them. In sum, they own us, not the other way around.

One hidden manifestation of this malaise comes to the surface of our awareness when we're focused on a screen. More specifically, this doesn't pertain to hardcore writing or research but being distracted by games and social media as well as updating software and so forth. The chief characteristic of this activity may be described as jumping around. We go from task to task, website to website and so forth. Having been exposed to this for awhile, the desire for getting back to serious work has been diminished without our realizing it. Our attention is not quite the same as before these interventions. We recognize the culprit preventing us from focusing upon the task at hand yet lack the will to deal with it.¹

The effects of engaging in superficial albeit necessary work manifest themselves very quickly and linger longer than anticipated. If we do it daily, even on a small scale (who isn't compelled to do an upgrade or download software), we perceive a diminishment in our ability to remain focused. String several days of this together, and a noticeable loss results. You may not be able to put your hands on what has been going on, but without a doubt, somehow we've diminished. This is perceptible when returning to serious research. It's almost as though we want to run away from it or fidget around with some nonsense to relieve our unease. Some many even attribute a conspiracy going on behind the scenes to frustrate our work. When and how to refrain from unnecessary distractions is emerging as one of the biggest problems of our modern digital age.

Since this dilemma is experienced by many people on a daily basis, alienation from the tasks required of them spreads out to other aspects of their lives as when not transfixed by a screen. The result? A certain indisposition to focus on anything which is not unlike that malaise as just described. It's difficult to find an adequate word to describe our state of mind since this phenomenon is new. One thing is certain. The resulting indisposition has its roots in the overall idea of a machine, the concern of this essay as well as the earlier one. After all, a machine (and here, of course, it means a computer) is a direct connection with the malaise of not being able to concentrate. Is their scientific proof? Most likely. Whether or not there is, try fiddling around on a computer such as accessing the Internet and then do some serious work. Right away you feel the two are vaguely incompatible

So necessary and unnecessary computer-related work (also applicable to smart phones as well, if not more so) effects a transformation in our lives more quickly and profoundly than we imagine. The problem is we don't know where it will lead us. Indeed, this is a cause for alarm requiring us to stand back and see how these activities affect perceptions of ourselves and of the world about us. While a noble idea, the problem is actually doing it because we're glued hopelessly to tinkering with our devices. If a change in our behavior results from limited exposure to

1 This notion of attention is important because a bit later it'll be used in a way related to awareness, prayer, etc. So it seems that digital awareness is a culprit behind hijacking other deeper meanings and applications of the term.

screen-related activity, who knows what happens when it's done big time. That's not far off. Most likely after just a generation or two a strange type of person, even alien to what we know now, will have evolved. That's pretty much where we stand presently with the final verdict is still out. One prediction, however, seems fairly certain. The near future generations won't have any memory nor even feel the need for it. Everything will be there online.

So the dilemma at hand is traceable to the idea of a machine. The first article started off with examining the more antiquated view of a machine as analogous to the human body. In and by itself the machine is lifeless and requires animation by the presence of some type of ghostly entity (software would be a good way of putting it). Without this ill-defined presence the machine wouldn't be set in motion. However, a major drawback exists. It occurs according to a prearranged pattern blind and indifferent with regard to our personal needs. At this point we can re-introduce the last article's title from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle as applied to René Descartes' famous (or should we say infamous?) mind-body dualism expressed by his *cogito ergo sum*.

In the present article we'll stay with what this sentence involves because it's quite ingrained and difficult to shake from our collective consciousness. The relevance of a ghost-in-the-machine remains true despite today's more sophisticated scientific developments which Descartes never would have dreamed of. This image has an enduring legacy by getting into the minds of a few persons who expanded and passed it on to the next generation and then to the next, almost virus-like. In order to supplant this enduring pattern, something new must come along to shake it off. More accurately, it has to be someone (singular or plural) with the courage not just to develop a new insight but with the ability to pass it on to others. And that doesn't mean virus-like as just described. That's too impersonal and mechanical. A one-on-one contact is required, old fashion-like.

From what I gather, Ryle's application of ghost to Descartes' insight as an independent, parallel entity somehow informs the "machine" or body. Again, the example of software come to mind. This offers a take-off point to describe a reality not unlike it yet in many ways different from it. The alternative of interest is a kind of residual memory...a pseudo-*anamnesis* to put it tentatively. In the first article as well as elsewhere on this homepage *anamnesis* had been discussed. In essence it has to do with remembering but not in the conventional way of recalling stuff from the past. Yes, it is a recalling though more being aware of our deepest identity as rooted in something far larger, God, for example. This is fine but in some ways inadequate since this word has so many applications. Anyway, we'll let it go at that.

Anamnesis plays an important role with regard to cultivating the spiritual life over an extended period of time, not just at the beginning when we're getting acclimatized to a brand new reality. Accessing our rootedness in transcendent reality by a process of recollection may seem a novel approach and for this reason frowned upon, but it's as ancient as Plato himself. As for Plato, the previous

article has an appendix of some references to *anamnesis*, so refer to that or any other source. Getting into it here would be outside the scope of this article. The main point is to explore another aspect of *anamnesis* which is a take-off on Plato's original idea. It's rooted in experience relative to practicing pure awareness. The best part is that you can go out and see if it works.

Anamnesis can be regarded through the practice of pure attention or any similar. "Regarded" is a rather loose term since it's difficult to put a finger on how you actually go about accessing something you carry around all day and for the most part aren't aware of. The simplest way putting it is to be aware purely and simply, allowing any and all thoughts to arise and fall away while observing the whole process disinterestedly. It can be in any and all situations, quiet or noisy, alone or in a crowd. Upon accessing it you become informed—receive the invisible form—of *anamnesis*. This form stays with you day and night so it makes no difference if you're "at prayer" or "not at prayer." And so you have it, whole and entire.¹

A wide variety of Christian prayer has as its goal accessing this faculty. Any practice worth its salt concludes with statements about not knowing, of being in a delightful ignorance, resting in God and all the rest. All you have to do is look at the conclusion of any worthwhile book related to prayer. They boil down to the same thing. While having this in end common, most ways of getting there lack talk about *anamnesis*. Instead, they abound in a whole slew of do's and don'ts, especially the latter or the consequences if you stray from the path laid out authoritatively as by the Church. Such an attitude is quite ingrained. It reveals that those propounding these prescriptions are unacquainted with our *anamnesis* faculty which conceals a fear of talking about spirituality in terms of awareness. This can be seen in the way distractions are handled. They are from the devil, a result of our fallen nature and above all, our sinfulness.

Distractions don't apply just to Christian prayer but virtually to all forms of spirituality. No one ever is free from this bugaboo which hovers over us all. Worrying about it may be a contributing factor to the Catholic obsession with Purgatory which will burn away all such annoyances, a kind of negative condolence. Regardless, how we deal with distractions is a huge determining factor in whether we're up to the task at hand, that is, persevering through their continuous assault. A contributing factor to this central issue is a failure in promoting the fact that already we're made whole and entire. Since supposedly we're not—and this view is more pervasive than we think—we're obliged to follow a program that will get us out of our supposed predicament. The bottom line is that this too is a distraction and gives us the illusion of doing something.

Adopting some kind of spiritual discipline is what most people do in order to rid themselves of distraction. Plenty of practices are out there suitable to individual needs, and we shop around which is perfectly fine or so it seems. This shopping

1 There's nothing new about watching our thoughts arise and fall. However, I'm not sure if the notion of *anamnesis* is tied in with it, technically speaking. Because of this, take such an association with a grain of salt.

presupposes that our current state of affairs isn't satisfactory, that some kind ideal state exists outside ourselves to strive after¹. This striving presupposes knowledge of a lost state which hopefully can be recovered. And so getting from here to there or from where we are now to where we'd like to be is what it's all about. Thus throughout life we wrestle with all sorts of memories which are a kind of shoot-off of *anamnesis*. Sparks or remote flashes may be more like it. Perhaps it'd be better to call them another form of pseudo-*anamnesis*. In sum, trying to reconcile being here with being there is the task at hand. We may have some success or think we do, but ultimately it doesn't work. As for the failure, it's traceable directly to not appreciating the nature of *anamnesis*, a forgetting in a more profound sense.

While learning not to identify with thoughts and memories forms the bread and butter of any spiritual practice, the point of interest here parallels this and requires closer examination. Of concern is not so much the appearance of distractions during the earlier or even later stages of spiritual development as pertaining to mindfulness or the like. It has something to do with later in life, even towards the end of one's journey. It should be kept in mind that there's no precise time when this occurs; no objective measurement exists. What's needed is to recognize the transition and take action. At this juncture we're dealing with a condition where a person has advanced to some degree. By "advanced" this isn't in the usual sense but applies to someone who has gone through the mill as far as life goes. In sum, it has a lot to do with having been humiliated and as a result, how to comport oneself relative to thoughts, etc.. As long as we're alive, memories will strike again as they are wont to do. The major difference now? Neither the nature nor intensity of thoughts changes. Indeed, they continue to encircle us but are of no real threat unless, of course, we consent to them. The act of consent has become more remote, a major benefit of older age.

So the million dollar question is how do you transform these memories into something else? I avoid the adjective "positive" since that's opposite to "negative," two categories proper to conventional memories. The question is posed in reference to someone who has been practicing awareness for some time. You just can't go out there willy-nilly thinking you're in charge. And as anyone knows, it's difficult to come up with a suitable approach since we're so used to thinking in terms of positive-negative. For that reason we'll have recourse to Ryle's title of his book, **Ghost in the Machine**, albeit in an altered form. That altered form consists in applying the word "ghost" to memories not of the garden variety. In essence they are the same, only now they've become more rarefied. One thing needs to be made clear. Sometimes we hear about a state we hope to achieve where we're no longer bothered by memories. It may be true theoretically but practically speaking it doesn't exist. If it did, how nice if someone would step forward and speak with us. Such persons must exist. However, never would they come forward because that would ruin their hidden vocation of saving the world from destruction.

1 Perhaps this could be called in a non-technical sense a *hairesis*, a picking and choosing, which is the root of the word "heresy."

The type of memories of interest to us hovers around the borders of *anamnesis* but are a shadow of it. Again, *anamnesis* is more than our recollective faculty. It defines us, tell us of what we are, and draws upon the source from which we had come. For a Christian, that of course, would be God. As for God, he's more than bumping up against a Big Black Wall which says "Go no further." As for this wall, it doesn't turn out to be an obstacle but more a support against which we rest. From it we direct our lives forward. The best part is that it can be reached by anyone at anytime by trying it out. We do this simply observing the rise and fall of our thoughts, nothing more. This tried and true practice has a way of putting memories in their place instead of allowing them free reign over our lives. However, never do this disappear; they're just muzzled. From this position in the background they assume a different character, one we call ghostly. They retain the same overall form as memories but have a form which is hollowed out. That will be touched upon in greater detail shortly in light of the notion of *aporia*. Suffice to mention it now.

This experience seems little explored and for that reason, can remain a source of confusion. One reason is our unfamiliarity with *anamnesis* along with our innate preference to favor any type of form or manifestation over what is opposite to it. When hearing the word "opposite" automatically there comes to mind a state devoid of life and which hints as a blankness of mind just like the aforementioned Big Black Wall. Because we're so addicted to entertaining forms—any form is better than the dreaded nothing—it's virtually impossible to consider the existence of a positive alternative.

Sources for information as to the lack of form are difficult to come by and usually are associated with Eastern religions, so to find refuge there is a tricky proposition. The contrast between them and we in the West is quite profound and can't be bridged on a whim. Some type of gnosticism creeps in to compensate by inserting various subtle forms which never satisfy. The desire to have such ersatz forms shows how unprepared we are and need substitutes to compensate for our inability to rest in pure awareness. Watching our thoughts arise and fall sounds easy but doing it reveals this inbuilt tendency. We're so addicted to a ceaseless passage of forms parading before our eyes, more than we're ready to admit. So instead of running off to seek a cure from some Eastern master of meditation, the place to start is being aware of our addictive state of mind and soul. That will go a long way to temper any decision in that direction. Perhaps after pondering how much we're tied to forms we may be better prepared to forsake them. This is related directly to practicing awareness, another way of accessing our *anamnesis* faculty. It won't produced miracles, of course, but is a way tried and true going all the way back to Plato and Christian apologists who had adopted much of his approach.

An endearing characteristic of Socrates is his one-on-one approach with real persons who live real lives. In such encounters he's fond of employing his favorite weapon, *aporia*, which is comprised of the noun *poros*, a means of passing such as over a river. Tack onto it the alpha privative and you have literally no means of

crossing a flowing body of water. As for the applied meaning, you're stuck on one side as you gaze longingly across the water at the other where you'd rather be. *Aporia* reveals Socrates' fondness for putting a person into a state of puzzlement or confusion as to currently held assumptions about life, pinning him down with no place to go. In such a situation a person is forced to suspend any and all judgments. The best part is possession of a new-found freedom which at first is liberating but after some time requires a path of disciplined living. However, it's not in the conventional sense of following external rules or guidelines. This can come as a disappointment because we expect them even if they are not appealing. At least they give an objective sense of purpose and direction. However, that's not part n' parcel of what we're getting at.

A person like Socrates who induces *aporia* can't help with a plan of disciplined life. As far as he goes, he's a midwife bringing people to birth in the truth. Interestingly the Icelandic word is *ljósmóður* which literally translates as "light mother." In other words, this person is responsible for bringing a newborn into the light. Once the child has come out of the womb and handed over to the mother, the midwife leaves the scene. If she were to hang around, to be sure, undoubtedly a conflict would arise.

When reduced to a state of *aporia*, you realize that any and all means used to garner information is suspect. In the meanwhile you're wondering how you ended up in the living state of suspended animation. All your faculties function as they do normally but in another sense you're paralyzed from head to toe. This paralysis can't be induced on one's own although you have to be disposed for it. You've been on the hunt for freedom from yourself, and now find yourself all strung up. On the surface it seems you've assumed a zombie-like existence but remain fully functional though we could say, mysteriously paralyzed. That's the best way to put it, really.

At this point talk about perceiving thoughts and emotions which once had been dear to us now have become one step removed from us. That is to say, they have become ghosts...still present but not directly without our orbit. Nevertheless, our mental activity continues churning out thought after thought. Nothing, in fact, can stop this, so might as well resign ourselves to the fact. A major difference now has been put in place. We can say in truth but not knowing exactly way, somehow these ghosts are not emanating from us. Many a time we feel the need to follow these thoughts just as we've done our whole lives. Now their pull has less force though in a way they are more persistent. They want us where they are, not where we are now. As for this new "location," it's one without specific focus. In fact, better not to apply such a space (or time) oriented word. The only way its presence can be detected is negatively, not unlike the way the presence chatter highlights silence. As for the chatter, it's like the area around a black hole which essentially is invisible. You get to perceive the suspended condition more by absence than by presence. All mystical-sounding but in reality not in the least.

Never are thoughts suspended once and for all. That is, never are we totally free from our interior baggage and never will though we are approaching it continuously. What strikes you fairly early on is the relentless nature of this situation, something you hadn't bargained for. The ghost-like figures continue to hover around us, waiting to pounce. So one response is appreciation of a mythical approach to life which supplements though doesn't eliminate the convention one. Our regular thought processes which are shoved over into the ghost realm, if you will, retain the potential of crowding in on us so intently that the best way to describe it is a haunting. Haunting takes place when the more tenuous ghosts hammer away at us and don't let go.

Consider an example, if you will, of how many people handle this and do so naturally perhaps without knowing the dynamics going on. When you get older, you tend to sit or hang around pretty much without thoughts or are aware of thoughts hovering in the background, ghost-like as described. Moving about physically becomes more a challenge and is part of the experience. Extreme cases can be found in nursing homes or observing, for example your parents or grandparents. While you can carry on a conversation with them, often they're not that interested, content to just sit there. They've gone beyond the heavy combat with thoughts and emotions as well as dealing with the just described ghosts and are less susceptible to their haunting.

So let's conclude this somewhat convoluted essay with an appeal. Go go ahead and imitate how older people hang around. It's familiar to many of us, and as we know, will end up there anyway. No harm will come if you don't succeed. The state of living with memories which never leaves us will come into clearer focus if you persevere in this simple practice. Of course, memories continue as usual but have become hollowed out as noted above. Because they are both ever present with us yet in a way difficult to articulate outside us, they've lost much of their punch. Also we're aware of the danger of being haunted. We can appreciate their redemptive character which is really interesting. Our travails in life come into clearer focus as having centered around restoring something precious which had been lost early on in life. The ghost-like figures present within us remain, of course as traces of our struggles but have ceased being a part of our psyche. We can manipulate them more readily, even mock them. This is quite unlike our usual thoughts which unfortunately manipulate us since for so long we have been passive to them. To have them so put in place truly is wondrous, a pretty good indicator that we've grown in freedom.

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