

Homo Mechanicus

Revitalizing the Human Heart

by

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A disturbing story made national news in June, 2007 after an 11-year-old boy killed a 1000-pound-hog while hunting with his father on an Alabama gaming preserve. The photo accompanying the story showed the boy proudly standing over the pig's bloody corpse wielding his pistol. It explains that he shot the pig eight times with the 50-caliber handgun, then stalked the injured creature another three hours before finishing it off at point blank range. The child, who killed his first deer at age five, is now boasting to have killed the largest wild hog on record. The only problem with the story is that the hog, dubbed "Monster Pig" by sensationalist headlines, was neither wild nor a monster. Its name was Fred, and it had lived its entire life on a family farm until being released onto the preserve just four days before it was killed.

Although I am not a hunter and don't eat meat, I personally believe hunting animals is a more honest and less violent way of acquiring meat than going to the grocery store or fastfood restaurants. But killing Fred had nothing to do with eating. Once a hog grows his size it's simply too fat to eat. Farmers commonly overfeed a particular pig so they can cart it around as an oddity at special events like State Fairs. Eventually these animals become so big, however, they have difficulty standing and walking and have to be euthanized. So the real mystery here is why it took three hours to stalk and kill a wounded animal the size of Fred? Whatever the answer, we can be sure Fred was not killed for his meat, or to be put out of his misery. He was killed for the pure pleasure of killing.

My own 11-year-old daughter was so disturbed by the story that she drew horns on the boy's photo and turned his gun into a pitchfork. But I certainly don't believe this little boy is any more of a monster than was Fred. Like all of us, he's merely living out the story of "how things are" that he's been learning his whole life. In this case it's the story of the Dominator Culture that says, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."¹ Like all children, he's just trying to figure out a story he can repeat throughout his life that somehow makes sense out chaos and

uncertainty. We all live these stories out, making reality out of our habits, so we can maintain a false sense of security about how things are. And if we know how things are, how things work, we don't have to fear the nebulous future, because we can be confident tomorrow will be much like today.

The problem is that if our story is one of domination and violence, then we create a reality maintained by domination and violence. In ancient India, for example, its first human inhabitants, the Aryans, believed the world had been created in seven stages. First came the Sky, followed by Earth, then Water, then a Plant, a Bull, and a Human, culminating in the Creation of Fire. But the entire thing was lifeless and inanimate until the gods performed a triple-sacrifice by crushing the Plant, the Bull, and the Human. Afterward the Sun began moving across the sky, the Earth began spinning and the seasons came, water flowed, and plants, and animals, and people began springing up from the corpses of those who had been sacrificed. The Aryans understood, because of this story, the necessity of taking life in order to survive. They could not grow enough crops in the harsh desert country to survive, so they had to kill animals for food. But because their story showed them that the taking of life is a sacred act, they always killed these animals with the utmost compassion and gratitude. Furthermore, the idea of self-sacrifice became the primary lens through which they related to others, and, as such, they lived together peacefully under a religion that preached "reciprocity, self-sacrifice, and kindness to animals."² They understood the reality and necessity of death, but were, primarily, a biophilous people, that is, lovers of life.³

In about 1500 BCE, unfortunately, the Aryans discovered a new technology called the Horse. Instead of revering the sacrificial bull, they began to value speed, mobility, and the ability to carry bounty and booty effortlessly. At this point their story changed too.

Instead of focusing on the sacrifices that make the world go round, they came to revere Indra, a war god, who roared a fiery chariot across the heavens raiding and dominating the other gods. "Heroes with noble horses," he cried, "fain for battle, selected warriors call on me in combat. I, bountiful Indra, excite in conflict, I stir the dust, Lord of surpassing vigour."⁴ And so the peaceful Aryans traded in their oxen for horses, transforming their slow wooden carts into fiery war chariots, enacting the story of Indra here on Earth, by plundering, pillaging, and terrorizing their neighbors. As Karen Armstrong writes, "When they fought, killed, and robbed, the Aryan cowboys felt themselves one with Indra and the aggressive devas who had established the world order by force of arms."⁵

The point is, like children playing with toy cowboys, or toy soldiers, or toy light sabers, we grow up continuing to live out our stories. If our stories are based on self-sacrifice,

then we create a society of cooperation, compassion, and gratitude. If they are built on domination and violence, we create a world of greed, terror, war, and oppression. And, most unfortunately, even good-hearted people, whom I believe includes most of us, find ourselves swept up in these larger cultural stories, unconsciously and instinctively reenacting them, adding to the suffering around us without thought.

During a Saturday morning walk a few months ago, for example, I encountered an acquaintance who told me he'd just gotten back from a deer-hunting trip to Minnesota. "I love it up there!" he exclaimed, "I just love being out in the woods. I'd still be there if I hadn't killed my limit during the first three days. I just love it! But there was no reason to stay." He went on to explain how much he's looking forward to his young son becoming old enough to "tote a gun" so he can enjoy the woods too. This man, whom I've known many years, is a kind, loving, and jovial soul. He's a progressive thinker, a good neighbor, and a loving husband and father. During the same conversation he told me how much he enjoys and agrees with my liberal letters he sometimes sees published in the paper. It is very obvious that he is, at heart, a biophilous person, a lover of life. But he's caught up in a larger cultural story, a necrophilous story that loves death. It is because of this story that he doesn't realize he could have stayed in the woods and enjoyed nature as long as he wanted to, without having to kill a thing. And, furthermore, he doesn't have to wait until his preschooler can carry a gun to teach him to enjoy and appreciate all that nature has to offer. But the cultural myth, which has a profound effect on our collective unconscious, only allows us to see the world through dominion and violence. So, in relating to Creation, and ultimately to our own creativity, too many of us don't know the power of birthing, nurturing, and protecting life, but instead, only understand subduing and dominating life.

Men, in particular, are more violent and dominating than women, perhaps because we do not, ourselves give birth, but, also, because our story is patriarchal, making it more our responsibility to subdue and dominate everyone and everything we think is below us. And just as technology transformed the ancient Aryan story into one of violence and domination, all of us today, especially men, love technology, gadgets, and machines. We've taken our reenactment to a higher level by trading our horses in for horsepower, but the story is essentially the same. Remember that the root of the word *macho* is the same as the root of the word *machine*. To be real men we have to love machines, we have to be mechanical in our approach to life.

In his book, *The Heart of Man*, Erich Fromm calls such men, *homo mechanicus*, referring to the tendency for people, especially men, to take on the very characteristics of

machines, so that we become cold, unfeeling, mechanical, and detached. "But man is not meant to be a thing;" he says, "he is destroyed if he becomes a thing; and before this is accomplished he becomes desperate and wants to kill all life."⁶ Like Darth Vader seeking to destroy and replace the living Earth with a mechanical Death Star to bring order to the Empire, our techno-based story is homicidal, genocidal, and, ultimately, suicidal.

Machines don't feel compassion, they don't understand unity and harmony, but only see others, at best, as part numbers in a well-oiled machine, easily replaced when they no longer prove necessary.

Sure, *homo mechanicus* still goes through the motion of being *homo sapien*, of being truly human, faithful to his original prototype, but, without true heart, he is only a tin man, and his idea of love is merely a mechanical function. This is why *homo mechanicus* often associates beauty and sex with machines, evidenced by car magazines, and tool shop calendars featuring beautiful women bending over a hood, or holding a giant pipe wrench. Referring to an old cartoon in the New Yorker featuring a woman selling perfume telling a patron, "It smells like a new sports-car," Erich Fromm complains, "There are apparently a great number of men who are more interested in sports cars, television and radio sets, space travel, and any number of gadgets than they are in women, love, nature, food; who are stimulated by the manipulation of nonorganic, mechanical things than by life."⁷ He goes on to warn, "It is not even too farfetched to assume that *homo mechanicus* is more proud of devices which can kill millions of people across a distance of several thousand miles within minutes, than he is frightened of and depressed by the possibility of such mass destruction."⁸ This is so, Fromm concludes, because, "*Homo mechanicus* becomes more interested in the manipulation of machines rather than in participation in and response to life. Hence, he becomes indifferent to life, fascinated by the mechanical, and eventually attracted by death and total destruction."⁹

The indifference toward life and penchant for destruction explains why our own story of domination and violence has brought our world to the edge of doom by destroying the environment and engaging in global oppression, war, and terror. Our story allows us only to see a "Monster Pig" with which we must wage battle, rather than Fred the pig, a docile creature raised on a family farm. Today *Homo mechanicus* sees only a world of terrorists, of monsters, of bad parts, that must be hunted down and killed. It is unable to see or mourn the hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and children it destroys along the way.

Referring to the samurai warriors of Japan who vowed to give up guns in favor of their swords, Aikido master Mitsugi Saotome laments:

If we must struggle and fight among ourselves, could we return to a less sophisticated time when the battlefield was filled only with the screams of soldiers killing soldiers; a time before whole cities were alive with the horror of the mutilated and burning bodies of the weak, and the innocent, and the children? Removed by technology, many have never seen the pain in the eyes of a starving child chewing at his dead mother's breast. Frightened at the cold touch of her body, how can he understand why there is no milk, no lullaby? We cannot see the enemy's tears.

The enemy is not human. The enemy feels no pain.¹⁰

All of us, men and women, know this story of indifference to the suffering of others, and have been taught to enact it in our daily lives. We may feign concern, acting as if we're still *homo sapiens*, perhaps by pretending to care about unborn children who don't really exist, or by widespread news coverage of carnage close to home, like the recent tragedy at Virginia Tech; yet we say little nothing about the hundreds of thousands of living people dying in today's pointless wars. But the solution is not to return to an imagined and fictional time when only soldiers killed soldiers and innocent civilians didn't get in the way. The answer is to end war altogether by promoting the story of oneness, unity, compassion and cooperation. It is a story of life and gratitude, of relationship with all beings.

Today this story, which is really our most ancient story, is reemerging in the consciousnesses of many as we collectively become more aware of the Universe's true origins. We now know, according to physicists, that everything that now exists was once condensed into a sphere smaller than a ping-pong ball. The entire Universe, which continues to expand and evolve, could once fit into the palm of every hand it has since birthed. But the story of Universalism reminds us that all of Creation is still a ball, perhaps no bigger than a grain of sand in the hand of some other Universe, yet a unified whole nonetheless. 13.7 billion years ago, before our Universe unfolded, all of us were there, in some form—Americans and Iraqis, Hitler and Jesus, soldiers and civilians, 11-old-boys and even Fred the pig. It is the story of life and birth, of a continuing creation story, that says, "Just as the Universe is expanding, you must continue expanding your mind and heart. There are no parts, no things, no machines. It's all part of God. Everything is animated. Everything is alive. All is one and originates from one source. All truth comes from one source. All truths are true, even if they sound a little different. Everything is related. There is no creature, no being, no object that doesn't share the divine spark. Everything is alive. Life is true power. Life must be revered and protected and nurtured. And when it is time for life to end, we must let go with compassion and

gratitude, giving our own lives selflessly, but never taking life for selfish reasons.” It is not a story of fall and redemption, but of original goodness and blessing. As a Christian mystic once said, “Goodness has no need to enter the soul. It is there already, simply unperceived.” There is a story written on every heart, called “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” about our most basic need to give and receive love, that comes more natural to us than any of the other myths we’ve made up. Let us all work to replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, with living hearts. The story of *homo mechanicus* is not a story of progress, or of order. It is merely the story of a tin man longing to become human again, longing to find his heart. Longing for a story that begins, “Once upon a time...” and the rest is up to you.

1 Genesis 1:28

2 Armstrong, Karen, *The Great Transformation*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2006, p. 7.

3 This appears to be true also of early Hebrews, as evidenced by the *Proverbs* 12:10, “The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.”

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Fromm, Erich, *The Heart of Man*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, NY, 1964, 1980, p. 57.

7 Ibid. p. 58.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Saotome, Mitsugi, *Aikido and the Harmony of Nature*, SEDIREP, Courbevoie, France, 1986, p. 126f.