Materialism is NOT a Mechanistic World View

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«The machine image objectivizes at a stroke whatever it touches by emphasizing its inherent otherness from man, its non-communicability. In the magical world-view of the Old Gnosis, all things – animal, plant, mineral – radiate meanings; they are intelligible beings – or the natural faces such beings put on for us in the physical world. But for Newton, the celestial spheres comprise a machine; for Descartes animals become machines; for Hobbes, society is a machine; for La Mettrie, the human body is a machine; eventually for Pavlov and Watson, human behaviour is machine-like. So steadily, the natural world dies as it hardens into mechanistic imagery.»

Theodore Roszak, «Where the Wasteland Ends»[1]

Few people today, even convinced materialists, would deny Theodore Roszak's contention that the idea of mechanism has played a critical role in the history of human thought, and that it may have been the single most important idea that led to the development of that very down-to-earth world-view we now call positivism, or scientific materialism. Indeed, as any good dictionary will show, the word «mechanism» is today synonymous, in its philosophical meaning, with scientific materialism.

Whether or not our use of this term in science and philosophy over the past several centuries has helped to create the «wasteland», of which Roszak's title speaks, has doubtless been the subject of much discussion, and the seeming inevitableness of the development that he describes would likely have been a part of that continuing debate. There is one absolutely crucial question, however, concerning logic, which has not been asked. It is this: is materialism logically entitled to make this now dictionary-authorized use of the word «mechanism»?

In putting the question this way, I mean to challenge a long established assumption. So long established, in fact, that it has had time to universally shape our mental attitudes, not to mention dictionary definitions, and has all but ceased to be critically examined. I wish to contend here that materialism is not logically entitled to use the word «mechanism» as it has done now for more than two centuries, and that if we take this entitlement away, a radically different way of looking at the world must result.

1 Theodore Roszak: American psychologist, Professor of History at California State University, Hayward. Founder of the Ecppsychology Institute.

A Machine is a Machine is a Machine ...

Because «Mechanism» is a synonym for materialism, a «mechanistic» world view is a Godless world view, one that allows no hint of divine purpose to contaminate the single-minded clarity of scientific thought. Cornell University Professor William Provine puts it this way:

«Modern science directly implies that the world is organized in accordance with mechanistic principles. There are no purposive principles whatever in nature. There are no gods and no designing forces that are rationally detectable.»[2]

In science, therefore, and in materialist philosophy, «natural» mechanisms are thought of as possessing no purpose whatsoever, and purposeless «mechanistic principles» are considered essential to their coming into being. So we have purposeless machines that are created by purposeless mechanistic principles. And this is science? Can anyone point to a machine of their acquaintance that serves no purpose and is not built according to purposive principles? I can say with complete assurance that they cannot, because the very definition of a machine in normal usage is that of a tool designed to serve a specific purpose. When humans design something, like the computer I am now using, we have a purpose already in mind to guide our efforts, and we inevitably incorporate a vast quantity of «purposive principles» in our design. If a machine fails, the car won't run or the computer «crashes», we only become aware that this has occurred when they no longer do what we want them to do, i.e. serve the purpose for which they were designed.

Accidental Purpose = Purpose-less Purpose

«Design» is an intentional word, which is to say that in normal usage it always refers to a purposeful (mental) activity. We cannot conceive of anyone designing anything to no purpose. Even if the designer's purpose is totally whimsical, it is still a purpose. In modern Darwinian argument, however, there is much talk about «Designer-less design», indeed the entire synthetic theory is built upon this concept, but nowhere is there a mention of its synonym «purpose-less purpose», which is an oxymoronic concept and therefore impossible for science to admit to. The fact that it logically extends from «Designer-less design» is completely overlooked. As we have seen, the word «design», in normal usage, always suggests the purposeful activity of a designer, otherwise it has no meaning. When we glibly talk about «accidental design» therefore, the concept of purpose is still there in the meaning of the word design, we could not extract it even if we wanted to, and it directly contradicts the meaning of the word «accidental». «Accidental» means without purpose, so «accidental purpose» really means «purpose-less purpose».

This contradiction is the inevitable result of a mistake that was made over two centuries ago. When philosophic materialists first dismissed God the Designer, they ought to have ceased using the language of design, because not to do so involved

2 William Provine «Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics», a paper published in MBL Science, Woods Hole, Mass., Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 25.