

The Essence of Modernity

T H O M A S M O L N A R

I FRANKLY HESITATED before writing this title, which seems to aspire to express and embrace the whole of "modernity." The text, let me state right away, has no such ambitions. The second reason for my hesitation is that we who follow the trends of current theory are generally taking it for granted that modern thinking is primarily ideological in the moral and political sense, and that ideology is mainly of gnostic inspiration. Thus modernity would be a branch of gnosticism and the modern world "neo-gnostic." When in a conversation with Eric Voegelin Mircea Eliade first heard this characterization, he was taken aback, as he writes in his *Journal*, by the matter-of-factness with which Voegelin assumed this to be so and to be the whole truth, nothing but the truth.

I am aware that not only Voegelin alone but others too have contributed to the view that the essence of modernity is the reoccurrence of gnostic thought. Not of course in the sense of denying any bridge between the gnostic thinkers of the first centuries and the modern ones, Hegel and others for instance. Professor McKnight pointed out in *Intercollegiate Review*, and I proposed in some long chapters of *God and the Knowledge of Reality*,* that an extremely rich tradition more or less under gnostic inspiration had enriched the main gnostic thread: the Jewish and the Christian Cabala, alchemy, Renaissance studies of music and poetry, a certain mysticism imported from the East, and so on, all of which combined to give shape to the specific tone of modern thinking under the gnostic label. True, from the beginning I tended to describe "modernity" more in terms of the utopian search than in those of gnosticism proper, and there have been some writers on the subject who would agree with such an interpretation. A recent

essay by Professor Tilo Schabert explains also what I suggested in *Utopia, the Perennial Heresy*, namely that up to a certain period—in my opinion the Renaissance—Western man turned back towards an imaginary past golden age in order to locate "utopia," but afterwards turned toward the *future* for the same ideal image. In Schabert's description, the first Western man "to look back" was Cassiodorus in King Theodoric's court; others may argue that the first man to "look ahead" was the Abbot Joachim, or Petrarca (who first used the term "dark ages"), or Pico della Mirandola. Schabert's point in the same essay is, incidentally, that "modernity" makes its appearance with Fr. von Schlegel's documented observation that in his own time the concept of unchangeable truth was yielding to the concept, if that is the term, of the "interesting." A point worth making in the light of the following age of the Romantic, described by Mario Praz as "romantic agony." Further themes could be developed with the "subjective" at their center, in which the thinker, in pursuit of the "interesting," feels that not the outside world, but his own precious self provides the most intriguing topics.

It seems to me that further speculation on gnosticism as the essence of modernity may yield, in the space of an article, to the theme of *man conceived as a mechanism*. We generally think that we know a great deal about this trend of thought after we read Skinner and the behaviorists, or the researches into techniques of brainwashing. Also, we speak more and more often of the robotization of twentieth century man, the depersonalization of our lives, and indeed of genetic experiments shaping a new and predictable being—one that we hesitate calling human. Yet, with such discon-

nected bits of information we are still far from the "essence of modernity" being the ideal to conceive man as a machine, and to conceive his eminently human functions: speech, abstract thinking, morality, faith, as mechanical reactions to stimuli.

Yet, such an ideal may be as old as human self-awareness itself, that is coeval with man. I tend to believe that it is rooted in a certain *passion* to eliminate whatever cannot be readily explained by the interplay of mechanical parts, and my assumption is indirectly backed up by Lucretius who wrote *The Nature of Things* in order to reassure Memmius that fear of death (a passion!) has no ground in reality. Whatever "stands out" of the field of the horizontal: the material, the automatic, the mechanical—and seems to call for the spiritual, the meaningful, the vital as the explanation, irritates a certain type of thinker who then strives to reduce the qualitative to the quantifiable, the uncertain to the calculable, the free to the manageable, thus controllable. The root would accordingly be a species of the *libido dominandi* by the "terrible simplifiers," who regard themselves less as a "gnostic elite" than lovers (a passion!) of engineering schemes and blueprints requiring the simplest materials and figures to comprehend the universe. Etienne Gilson writes of such people that they would rather give up the understanding of phenomena than to admit that such an understanding passes through an immaterial intelligence; rather through no causes at all than (the Aristotelian) final causes. The final cause escapes by definition the material and the mechanism available here and now. It also postulates a more-than-human, universal intelligence that, it is assumed for some strange reason, the mechanical causes do not postulate.

Let us look at the history and the modern development of the mechanical ideal. There is first of all an attractive theory of this development which, however, does not supply any real explanation. Aristotle's observations were not original, they merely crowned, so this

theory runs, human experience since about the neolithic, an experience inspired by, and modelled after, the slow growth and maturation of the seed in the soil. Let us call it the agricultural model, which gave rise to the first stable settlements and shaped the thinking of men in relation to nature, the gods, and the phenomena of birth, death and the human psyche. Aristotle's theory of the first mover, of substance, of form, of the various causes, etc. were all derived from the immemorial observations of what happens to the seed while it becomes a plant, is then harvested and made into edible and other products.

The agricultural mode of production and the philosophy attached to it prevailed, so the theory continues, until the period between the 14th and the 17th centuries. It yielded then to the "mechanical model" as a par excellence principle of how things work. It may have started with the sophisticated use of the metal (instead of wood, linen, leather and stone, the chief materials of the earlier period), namely of the armor which had to espouse the flexibility of the human body, and of the iron lock which secured the lord's treasure chest when the latter, returning from the crusades, became wealthy and indulged in objects of luxury. Work with metals gave then rise to the mechanical arts, and observation shifted from slow maturing processes (the "natural" process, not controlled by man) to man-controlled rapid work: speed, acceleration, the interaction of inanimate points. In short, Galileo came to the scene—whereas Kepler was still struggling with the ancient type of motion in which the beauty and harmony of circles and ellipses were considered as valid causes of phenomena. Let us add that Kepler was hired by the emperor Rudolf as court astrologer and secret alchemist. On the other hand, Galileo administered the *coup de grâce* to the Aristotelian world-view. After Galileo—well, we know the rest of the story.

The above is, of course, a very neat hypothesis, too neat, in fact, and what is more important, it merely describes a

switch, — if it was indeed one — it does not explain it. Mainly, because it is false that the “agricultural model” and Aristotle’s theory have gone out of fashion, we may indeed witness their return and rehabilitation. On the other hand, it is correct to state that the mechanical way of reasoning became accepted by the scientific community in the 17th century, in the Cartesian circles, first of all. There are fascinating pages in the little known work of the Abbé Robert Lenoble (who died a few years ago, leaving some unfinished manuscripts but also two very original books) on the “transformations of the concept of nature,” and on the cartesian model of nature, already fully mechanical, anticipating the modern manner of thinking. Perhaps even more interesting a figure than Descartes himself was Fr. Marin Mersenne (to whom Lenoble devoted his thesis) who, as a priest, both tried to moderate the philosopher’s enthusiasm for his own mechanical model and egged him on in a typically modern frame of mind. At any rate, the Cartesian project was to provide a mechanical model for all manifestations in nature, including ultimately for the human ones, for example the passions. Descartes’ *res cogitans*, the mind, was a Christian’s afterthought with which he could not do much, since his attention was absorbed by the *res extensa* the problems of which could be solved by the new language of geometry and algebra, the language of stimulus-and-response.

Let us not be concerned here with a century’s efforts by post-cartesians (Spinoza, Malebranche, Geulinckx, Cordemoy, Leibniz) to find a satisfactory harmonization of body and mind — but rather with the Cartesian heritage in which animals were regarded as automata. Human beings would have also been so regarded, had Descartes not have been a cautious man (“*larvatus prode*,” became his motto, I proceed under camouflage) who feared confrontation with the Church, after the Galileo affair in which Cardinal Bellarmine managed to postpone the concept of man’s robotization for two more centuries, or

even three. Hundred years later La Mettrie, in *L’Homme machine* asked questions like these: “What was man before the invention of words and language? An animal.” Or he made statements like these: “Man is like a parasitic growth, a mushroom, haphazardly thrown here and growing.” Or: “Man is an animal, an assemblage of springs.” Again: “Man would be inferior to animals, without education.”

In this simplistic way, but a way which became a scientific tradition, it was overlooked that in the very words of La Mettrie man was proved to be infinitely more than animal (or a mushroom, or a collection of springs) since from where did words and language and education come if not from man himself? To say, for example, that the human being is an animal plus speech, is to admit that the “plus” is what elevates this particular being far beyond the animal level, in other words it is to admit that this particular being is not an animal. But La Mettrie’s underlying thesis was, and it was shared by the prominent minds of his century, that there is a kind of “basic man” which is ultimately a machine, to which circumstances, life in society, institutions have added in the course of time certain extras which turned this simple mechanism into a complex, selfish, incalculable and passion-filled being. Even Rousseau, supposedly opposed to the other Encyclopaedia authors, based his social theory on this premise: man was originally good, society (the “extras”) spoiled and corrupted him. Our question is the same to Rousseau as to La Mettrie: “From where did the corrupting factors arise if not from man himself?”

The politico-philosophical project was inscribed in the conception of man as an animal plus some other things; remove these plusses and the original man emerges again, good, simple, virtuous, ready to become the citizen of a community, itself good and virtuous, hence in no need ever to change. This is the simplest description of an utopia and the only thing such a description needs to be added to are its

guardians, supervising that no change occurs. This in turn assumes that the utopians are passionless mechanisms, and that the guardians possess the monopoly of passions, at least of the *libido dominandi* and of all that this entails.

The literature and the industrial arts of the 18th century show this infatuation with machine man. Cut out the social interplay, and you obtain the real human being, for example Emil held back from the company of other human beings and their artifacts. For example also *Rameau's Nephew*, that masterpiece of corrupt but brilliant literature authored by Diderot but discovered later by Goethe, in which the younger Rameau, devoid of his composer uncle's talents, justifies his way of life: exploit society to the fullest extent since only the individual merits consideration, and among the individuals especially the speaker!

It is an interesting aside that artisans of the 18th century were interested in, and were asked to manufacture, automata, endowed with quasi-human abilities, computers *avant la lettre*. Thus the Hungarian Kempelen manufactured a chess-player dressed up in the fancy-Turkish fashion of the day, which he demonstrated at royal courts against human chess players whom, allegedly, it regularly beat. Although it was rumored that a dwarf was hidden inside the automaton, this could not be the case since the latter was checked by the interested parties.

IT IS A MOOT QUESTION whether a type of people, the materialists, are tempted to conceive man as a machine, or they become materialists because they prefer to conceive man as a machine. At any rate, three statements may be made about this type's deepest preferences: 1) the ceaseless effort to create machines which behave like humans; 2) conversely, the celebration of humans who can be made to behave like machines (the conditioning by Skinner, Watson and others); and 3) the overall preference for a conception of the universe as a purely mechanical construct, self-

moving, after having been brought into existence by similarly mechanical forces, probably by chance. The corollary is the firm rejection either of Aristotle's First Mover or the creator God of monotheistic religions.

The problem before the advocates of the mechanical concept is what to do with those "excrescences" added by the 18th century to the "natural" man: consciousness, love, speech, values, faith, sacrifice, beauty, goodness? It is important to note that *reduction* is not invariably to the machine, but at least to the machine-like, the mechanical. It is thus assumed that man became distinguished from animals by the flexible thumb with which he could grab stones and sticks; it is assumed, on a more sophisticated level, that love is a species of libido, set into motion by psychic automatism; it is assumed that movements in society are exhaustibly explained by class interests; etc. Gilson remarks (in *Linguistique et Philosophie*, 1969) that "those who try so desperately to show that some animal species use a system of language (bees, dolphins) are fired by the hope to prove that since there are speaking animals, one does not have to postulate a rational soul in explaining human language. This would be, in their eyes, the undisputable triumph of materialism and scientific mechanics." The presently dominant branch of linguistics is so popular in some intellectual, even political circles, because it tries to eliminate *meaning* and argues that not immaterial thought but the vocal or written sign creates sense. Everywhere the immaterial is removed from the scientific discourse, for the benefit of external, mechanical manifestations which are supposedly self-sufficient explanatory principles. It is not noted, since it would create embarrassment, that in so proceeding, one phase is simply skipped, namely the conscious apprehension of things.

A growing number of contemporary scientists is aware of this embarrassment, and they are setting up theories which would incorporate the conscious element—and with it the "extras"—into the

discourse of science. Let us see if they manage genuinely to create a more general scientific view, or if they too succumb to the temptations of scientism prevalent since the days of Descartes.

The climate of scientific opinion in which these scientists work on their new theories is still attached to the view that ultimately everything can be reduced to the mechanical, to the instinctive, to the impulsive, to the irrational (in this order). At most, it is thus accorded to man that he may be an extremely complex mechanism involved in all sorts of acts, from feeding, at one end, to symbolizing, at the other end, but without knowing why he acts the way he acts. The safest parallel and explanatory principle still appears to be the physical model, no longer only the mechanical, also now the biological one. Thus Norbert Wiener, "father" of the cybernetics: "The physical functioning of the living individual and the operation of the new communication machines are precisely parallel in their analogous attempts to control entropy through feedback. Both of them have sensory receptors as one stage in their cycle of operation: that is, in both of them there exists a special apparatus for collecting information from the outer world at low energy levels, and for making it available in the operation of the individual or of the machine."

How could one explain to Wiener that the crucial difference is that the "physical functioning" of the human organism is incorporated with many other tasks, that the human being is aware of his "receptors," and that this receptivity ends in consciousness?—while none of these statements can be made about even the most sophisticated machines. A more drastic case is presented by the famed Dr. José Delgado who writes in *Physical Control of the Mind* that with the available technology for the experimental investigation of mental activity, the mind can be used to influence its own structure, functions and purpose—thereby ensuring both the preservation and advance of civilization (!) If the mind—Delgado must mean brain

and nervous system—can be used to influence *technologically* its own functions and purposes, it is rather obvious that not *this* civilization, but another one would be preserved and advanced; whether this would be a good thing or not, let us leave it undecided.

But even the less naively mechanistic than Delgado show signs of an inability to emancipate themselves from the mechanistic view of the world. It seems that ever since Kant declared the outside and inside worlds unknowable, and directed his attention to the structure of the mind, there was for his many disciples nothing else to do but to explore this mind *qua* mechanism. A number of contemporary scientists have tried to reconcile this view of the mind as a brain mechanism with the so-called "values" (also a Kantian heritage, perpetuated by German philosophy) which, without any foundation in extra-human reality, must also be assumed to be products of the human mind. But since the mind is understood to be the brain mechanism, we conclude that values are this mechanism's products. We are right on target when we learn from Professor Louis Rougier, echoed by Arthur Koestler, that the paleo-cortex prompts the emergence of our values, the neo-cortex being responsible for our rational behavior. The message is clear: if men had only the neo-cortex, or at least the neo-cortex would dominate its older brother, our behavior would be uniformly rational, our communities and civilization without problems. The problems, we are informed, arise from our selfishness (passion) induced by the paleo-cortex, a conclusion which no doubt makes Dr. Delgado's heart jump with pleasure: he has found uses for his mental technology. For us, on the other hand, it is evident that again the guardians of utopia wish to monopolize the passions, since there is such a thing as the fanaticism of the rationalist, Robespierre and Lenin being only two illustrations. *Their* paleo-cortex would be in full use, at least until such time that the paleo-cortex of their subjects would be surgically removed.

Afterwards, paleo- and neo-cortex would be brought in harmony, or in our language, the *plus* or the *extra* would be reabsorbed by the *man-machine*.

Thus much of modern science, and not just physical science, is marked by the attachment to the mechanical model. This, even when the will to gain freedom from this model is obvious. Ludwig v. Bertalanffy brings his reflections on biology to the concept of man as a superior system to the physical or inanimate systems, characterized by its openness. Yet he too argues that men are symbol-creating animals, putting together their "symbol-world" from biological "and other" factors. The result is a statement with which we feel almost as uncomfortable as with Dr. Delgado's: "Men kill each other," Bertalanffy writes, "over symbolic interpretations, such as faith, God, or some others." This manner of thinking is akin to that of the linguist who denies meaning to the immaterial thought process and grants it to the signs which do nothing but reproduce that process. Bertalanffy too seems to deny, or shies away from affirming, that men kill each other over consciously understood causes such as God's, nation's, party's, army's or ideology's, *not* over "interpretations." The flag, to take an illustration, is an interpretation; but men do not fight over flags, only over what they clearly understand the flag interprets to them, what it represents. The "causes," however, are judged either irrational or vague because appearing only as the content of consciousness; on the other hand, men fighting over symbolic interpretations can be observed as a set of behavior, a more or less mechanistic pattern.

MANY MORE EXAMPLES could be presented to illustrate the predominance of the mechanistic model in theorizing about human beings. Things happen in scientific thinking as if the scientists were determined to eliminate such things as life, consciousness, thought, meaning, etc. from their systems, just as God, morality and beauty have been eliminated from the

discourse of the so-called human sciences. The consequence is that the human sciences have joined the physical sciences in their effort to eliminate all reference to the specificity of the human being and his universe. They discuss man as if he were a machine; whatever refuses to behave like and to be explained by, the mechanistic principle is either denied existence or is reduced to the status of the machine.

Reduction to the mechanical model appears indeed as at least one tendency of modernity, perhaps even the chief tendency because of its growing intensity since the century of Descartes and its culmination in ours. Culmination, because it may not have a long life ahead of it. The "agricultural model" is far from dead, we discover its numerous manifestations not only in daily life, also through some new disciplines dealing with language, symbol, myth, and the psychology of individuals and collectivities. It is enough to read the works of Gaston Bachelard and S. Lupasco to find some frank admissions of deadend streets at the frontier areas of the mechanical way of thinking. Although Bachelard dismissed with contempt the claims of common sense to reach truth (he recommended psychoanalysis for the holders of common sense as helping explanations), he was among the prominent ones refuting the mechanical model's general validity. Lupasco too, specializing in biology, psychology and sociology, finds in his later works the impossibility of reducing man to his nervous system even when the nervous system establishes connections with what might be called "social synapses." Lupasco, however, remains honestly baffled before the phenomenon of love and admits that it remains incomprehensible after all the bio- psycho- and sociological coordinates have been set up.

Thus on the frontiers of knowledge today one may already perceive the waning of the mechanical model as the possessor of a monopoly over scientific thinking. Not that the mechanical model will ever fade on the horizon of reflection. The early Greeks elaborated its speculative founda-

tions, and Lucretius, their heir, remained popular during all the centuries leading up to ours. True, he appealed to the non-mechanical mentality also, as a great poet; but the materialists of later centuries found in his arguments hardly improvable points substantiating their own. Writing my chapter on "materialism" (in *Theists and Atheists, a typology of Non-Belief*), and studying old and new materialist philosophers, I was struck by the extent to which even the most recent thinkers followed closely on the Lucretian trail, merely modernizing his terms and descriptions, yet unable to modify their scope. Thus the passing of the mechanical model may only come with the decline of the civilization which has promoted it for ideological reasons. This civilization is the "industrial" one which is still ours but which is running out of gas, if I am permitted this modest pun. It is indeed a significant fact that the mechanical model became rapidly universal with the rise of industrialization on a large scale, and that it has spread with the expansion of industry. This to such an extent that we were accustomed to call nations not affected by industry and its concomitant, the mechanical model, in their way of life and thinking, primitive, retarded or, at best, archaic, condescending to them, the more as we realized that they had stuck to the "agricultural model," thus to the "unscientific" mode of thought. Yet, parallel with the presently sensed decline of the industrial model at its nerve center, the Western world, we witness the historic rise of other, so far marginal peoples. These peoples, affected or only half-touched by the mechanical model, are likely to revalidate parts of the "agricultural model" and a mode of thought compatible with Aristotelian philosophy. Thus the history of speculation is irrigated from many sources, no one system should be buried without a hope of resurrection.

WE BEGAN BY ASKING questions about the essence of modernity, then found that gnosticism may be less than the whole answer. We even ventured as far as to en-

visage a probable theme of "post-modernity," the rehabilitation of ancient modes of life and thought, the "archaic model." Disciplines as far apart as astronomy and psychology seem to show the way: the universe may have had a beginning, we are now told, in which case we may again speak of creation, of maturation, and death, following the "agricultural" model. In psychology, Freud is found now to have contradicted himself, and some quite recent authors, Marie Balmory in France, for example, suggest that Freud was not truthful about the figure of the father; if so, the whole edifice of the Oedipus complex becomes hopelessly flawed. Gilson sums up the old and new charges when he writes that it is not permissible for scientists to play with the concept of the unconscious, when their whole therapy is based on making it conscious. In short, the trend in psychology is away from Freud and in the direction of the Jungians.

What is then (or shall we say, what *was*?) the essence of modernity? If we choose to work under the label of *gnosticism*, we reach conclusions that pertain to religious speculation and political philosophy. I do not think it is necessary to spell out the critique of the gnostic thesis, it has been done many times, also on these pages. But if we choose the label of the *mechanical model*, our conclusion will include at the most prominent place the critique of the scientific worldview. At first sight, there are two divergent discourses here. At closer examination, we find that both gnostics and adepts of the mechanical model agree on downgrading, denying, eliminating the concept of the *soul*. The gnostics have almost as much contempt for the *psychoi* as for those engulfed in a fleshy existence, the *sarkoi*. The gnostic elite regards itself as *pneumatikos*, spiritual, and it rejects those whose inner life is made up of passions, worldly interests, and worldly love. The true enemy of the gnostic is the man with a soul.

The mechanical model is based also on the rejection of the soul and of the pas-

sions. Both are factors of incalculability, of unpredictability, they stand in the way of "safe" explanations which exclude the human element, even in disciplines which deal with human beings. Berdyaev once called the impersonal method of the human sciences a sign of the black envy for the precision of exact sciences, but perhaps more is involved. We mentioned earlier the *libido dominandi*, a passion which may have a bigger scope than we usually attribute to it: not just domination in the accepted sense, but a final one, striving to abolish passions in others, to extirpate the roots by which humans differ from each other. This ultimate passion embodied in the scientific worldview of the mechanical model aims at having to deal with machines, instead of human beings, and not only with machine-like people, also with machine-like collectivities (utopias). A Dr. Delgado may not be aware that he is driven by a passion, on the contrary, he believes he can save civilization with the use of mental technology, the very use of which is destructive of that civilization. Yet, Delgado's passion, if one may single him out, aims at a mechanically secured

civilizational model, just as writers of utopias aim at the permanence of *their* model. And they too, like Delgado, would lock up critics and opponents of the model in psychiatric asylums. What happens in the Soviet Union with dissidents is not the KGB's whim, it follows the logic of those who have monopolized passion and label other passions abnormal.

Ultimately, we note a link-up with the main gnostic theme: the evil of creation which limits man through the very equilibrium that, in fact, signifies his humanity: the equilibrium of body and soul, of passions and intellect, of appetites and contemplation. The scientist feels called upon to even out the differences; the mechanical model is then the specific contribution of modernity to a permanent theme.

*Stephen A. McKnight, "Understanding Modernity: A Reappraisal of the Gnostic Element," *Intercollegiate Review*, Spring 1979; Thomas Molnar, *God and the Knowledge of Reality*, Basic Books, New York, 1973, Part Two; see also, Tilo Schabert, "A Note on Modernity," *Political Theory*, February 1979, vol. 7, no. 1.