

Some Brief Reflections on Waldorf Education as a Powerful Counterforce to the Modern Assault on the Human Being

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Every educational theory and its practice implies and draws upon some image of the human being. So we must ask of every educational endeavor, "What image of the human being is at work in it, and what are the consequences?" To drastically oversimplify, Waldorf education views the human being as a wholeness of body, soul, and spirit with the potential of becoming a free, responsible, caring, and creative individual.

Through its pedagogy and curriculum, Waldorf education strives to nurture that becoming to its fullest in each individual child. Unfortunately, [...] modern culture and education are increasingly dominated by images of the human being that fix and reduce the human to something less than human, to some kind of mechanistic entity.

In the preface to his recent book, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, Ray Kurzweil, a leading figure in the "artificial intelligence" community, writes: "The primary political and philosophical issue of the next century [this century] will be the definition of who we are—of how we define human."¹ Kurzweil has, indeed, identified one of the central questions facing us today. Kurzweil himself, however, is not simply making a neutral statement. Rather, he is contending for a specific image of the human being as a machine. Granted, his is not the old machine of wheels, gears, and cogs, but, rather, the new, streamlined, cybernetic machine of electronic and chemical reactions as information carriers. This image nonetheless depicts the human being as entirely the product of material forces, and, in effect, reduces meaning, values, purpose, the whole realm of qualities, and selves to mere reflections of material, mechanistic forces and processes.

The late Francis Crick, noted biochemist become cognitive scientist, starkly expressed this view a few years ago in the opening paragraph of his book, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*. Crick wrote:

You, your joys and sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast

assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. . . . you're nothing but a pack of neurons.²

Such an image of the human being is dominant today in many fields—cognitive science, genetic research, and much of modern medicine, to name a few. This image also permeates a good deal of popular culture, popular consciousness, and modern education. Consider, for example, this 1997 statement of the International Academy of Humanism in which Crick was joined by other leading figures, including biologists Richard Dawkins and E.O. Wilson and the "humanists" Isaiah Berlin, W.V. Quine, and Kurt Vonnegut. In justification for the scientists' demanding a free hand in human cloning, they write:

Humanity's rich repertoire of thoughts, feelings, aspirations, and hopes seems to arise from electrochemical brain processes, not from an immaterial soul that operates in ways no instrument can discover. . . . Views of human nature rooted in humanity's tribal past [tribal past meaning, as they say earlier in their statement, humankind's religious and moral traditions] ought not to be our primary criterion for making moral judgments about cloning [and presumably about anything else].³

Several observations should make us highly suspicious of such statements from the outset. In the first place, if we agree that the whole "rich repertoire" of culture is simply the reflection of electrochemical brain processes and nothing else, we have to include in those processes the thoughts and words of those who write such statements. So why should we accept the results of their electrochemical brain processes rather than our own? Furthermore, these statements are patently self-serving. In spite of the seemingly objective, scientific language, the clear intent is to justify unrestrained scientific and technological development without any considerations of the moral and environmental consequences.

Power and profit are intimately intertwined with this supposedly scientific view. Beyond these initial common sense responses, there are other reasons for

1 Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

2 Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribners, 1994).

3 Quoted in Leon Kass, "The Moral Meaning of Genetic Technology," *Commentary*, Vol. 108 (September, 1999): 38.

calling into question an exclusively mechanistic view of the human being. The doctrine of the mind as simply another word for brain mechanisms means, to Crick and others, that no non-sensory, immaterial realities exist: no soul and spirit, for sure; but also no meaning, purpose, values, truth, beauty, or goodness. No ideas even. All these are, at most, a kind of illusory foam churned up by the electrochemical discharges of the human machine.

Such a view can, of course, never do justice to the reality of ideas, because ideas are non-sensory, immaterial. To be sure, most of our ideas probably arise initially in connection with our sense experiences of the physical world, but they themselves are never found among the objects of that world. Nonetheless, they can be powerful enough to penetrate that world, enabling us to understand and transform it radically. After all, it is by means of ideas that atoms are split.

The fundamental power of ideas was once vividly expressed by the great mathematician Stanislaus Ulam, who was active in the Manhattan Project. “It is still an unending source of surprise for me,” he wrote, “to see how a few scribbles on a blackboard or on a sheet of paper could change the course of human affairs.”⁴ And we ought not to forget that books that reduce ideas to mechanistic electrochemical discharges are themselves presented in the form of ideas.

Furthermore, a whole class of ideas exists called *ideals*: truth, beauty, goodness, love, joy, patience, kindness, fidelity, and so forth. These ideas—non-sensory, immaterial through and through—are extraordinarily powerful, for, to the extent that we are able to identify with them, they change us.

Machines, obviously, are unaffected by ideal, moral considerations, and neither will human beings be so affected to the extent that they allow themselves to be defined, treated, and act as machines.

Taken seriously, the view of the human being as a machine permits programming of the machine. But it means also that all actions of the individual are unfree, completely determined by the automatic operations of the machine, rather than by an at least partially free and responsible self. Since mechanical operations cannot take responsibility or be held accountable, any conceptions of human freedom, self-directed action,

responsibility, and creativity are rendered meaningless. And, yet, all of us, including those who hold to the mechanistic view of the human being, have to assume in practice that our behavior is influenced by plans, purposes, and motives, for which we are responsible.

When people write books promulgating the view of the human being as mechanistically determined, they surely believe that they themselves freely write those books, even though for the purpose of persuading readers that there is no freedom, purpose, or self-determination. A theory that has to assume in practice a freedom, purpose, and self-determination denied by the theory itself would appear to be rampantly self-contradictory.

Of course, a view that denies the existence of a self that can be held accountable would lend itself to the interests of those who are eager to engineer and control nature and human beings, and, in short, to employ any technology that works to their special advantage—and to do all this at will, without restraint, and for a profit. This is a view, moreover, that undergirds the growing global conglomerate of scientists, governments, universities, and corporations that seek to exploit and control nature and human beings for their own power, profit, and prestige. Unfortunately, this image of the human—and of all life itself—permeates much modern education from top to bottom.

Over a century ago, in an essay on education, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “the surest bulwark of all that is sacred in the human being is not to accept degrading views.” Our culture and education today are shot through with degrading views and their destructive consequences. Nevertheless, the human being is—for a time at least—still human, a being of body, soul, and spirit; a being of interwoven intelligence, emotion, and intention, all capable of infinite development. This, our full human being, contains within itself the resources for countering and transforming all those forces that would reduce the human to the non-human. But we must recognize, strengthen, and draw upon this fullness of the human being while it is still possible, while there is still time. Ours is now a critical moment, for ominous signs exist that the time remaining for the fully human is seriously threatened and may be drastically limited. This is why Waldorf education is far more important than we ourselves are perhaps even aware.

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4 Quoted in Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 11.