

# MYSTICISM AND MECHANISM

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*As the footnote on page 1 indicates, this article dates to 1970, when the author was a Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana. The ideas in MYSTICISM AND MECHANISM are as relevant today as they were in 1970, and have not been changed.*

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FRONTISPIECE

*Tendencies Found in Mystical vs. Mechanistic  
Character Structures*

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Mystic	Mechanist
Overfocus on consciousness, mind, spirit, subjective nature	Overfocus on physical world, body, energy, objective nature
Objective nature arises from subjective processes; "mind creates matter"	Subjective nature arises from objective processes; "matter creates mind"
Oversimplifies	Overcomplicates
Religious bias	Scientific bias
Fears objective reality, the existing, the factual; retreats inward to fantasy	Fears subjective reality, the spontaneous, the unpredictable; retreats outward to the purely physical
Fears death (survival myths)	Fears life
Faith	Mathematics
Believes in magic causality, miracles	Believes in deterministic causality
Model of reality a ghost (no further function for the body)	Model of reality a machine (no function for the mind)
"Man is, in essence, a spook"	"Man is, in essence, a zombie"

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# MYSTICISM AND MECHANISM<sup>1</sup>

Charles R. Kelley

The two intellectual forces that have dominated human thought since the decline of primitive animism are mysticism and mechanism. Mysticism and mechanism are incomplete and opposite views of reality. Mysticism is widely expressed in religious and quasi-religious-beliefs, while mechanism, the opposite-appearing twin of mysticism, permeates the fabric of science. Scientists are, for the most part, more ready to acknowledge the irrationalities of mystical belief than they are to recognize and deal with the irrationalities of mechanistic thought. The most difficult irrationality to discover is that which inheres in one's own thought processes.

The fundamentals of mystical and mechanistic thought can be analyzed by comparing the basic presuppositions of the mystic with those of the mechanist. A symmetry becomes evident that clarifies the essential features of the two positions. Mechanism and mysticism can be considered as widespread characterological problems affecting the development of human knowledge. Mechanism and mysticism exist because there are character structures present among masses of individuals that predispose them to mechanistic or to mystical thinking. It is these character structures that must be understood in order for the nature and force of mechanism and mysticism to be comprehended.

## **Mysticism vs. Mechanism**

The primary feature of the life process is the simultaneous appearance within the organism of feeling and energy, of con-

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<sup>1</sup> *The concepts in this paper were first presented in May 1970 when the author was George A. Miller Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois. They were developed further in the invited address by new Fellows entitled "Mechanism in Scientific Thought," Division 21, American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, Honolulu, September 1972*

sciousness and spontaneous body movement, of subjective experience and its objective expression. These paired expressions correspond to the two fundamental realms of nature, the subjective and the objective. The mystical and the mechanistic character differ in the way in which they experience and understand these two realms.

The typical mystical character over-focuses on the subjective "feeling" aspect of the life process at the expense of the objective "action" aspect. He is thus more concerned with mind or spirit or soul than with the body and the physical world it exists in. Consciousness, feeling, spirit is for him the primary reality. He becomes convinced that subjective reality antedates and overrides in importance the merely physical reality of the body and the external world. The typical mystic develops this conviction to the point that he believes that consciousness is independent of the body. This is expressed in the belief in the personal soul, survival of the individual personality after death, and the experience of an unobservable supernatural realm in which consciousness (and usually one or more superconsciousnesses) exist somewhere somehow independent of the physical reality known to the senses. With this view there is a corresponding de-emphasis on the physical world, on the body, on conceptual thinking (as opposed to feeling and intuition) and on action.

The intellect of the mechanist works in the opposite way. The mechanist over-focuses on the objective aspect of the life process, on the body and the physical reality it is part of, on energy and action, to the exclusion of consciousness, the subjective aspect of life. The physical world thus comes to be primary reality in his mind, and consciousness appears derivative, remote, superfluous, epiphenomenal, unconnected to this primary reality. As a belief in the independence of consciousness from the body is the primary diagnostic feature of mysticism, belief in the independence of the body from consciousness is the primary diagnostic feature of mechanism. To the mechanist, consciousness cannot be important in the functioning of the physical world. Thus he develops a view of the course of happenings in the physical world in which consciousness does not enter, plays no part, has no function.

Such, indeed, is the point of view of science as we know it today. The laws of physical science accord no position in nature to consciousness. The socially unobservable events of that shadowy insubstantial subjective realm have no status at all in physical theory. They are not particles, not waves, not force, not energy -- not anything that could intrude on the course of physical events. Unlike all other natural events involving energy transformation, they are generated without subtracting from the energy of the physical process the mechanist believes must produce them, and their occurrence results in no addition to the physical energy in the world when they are done. This is the view of physical science, a view which contradicts every man's subjective conviction, for it is evident to every normal man that his conscious processes -- his feelings, perceptions, ideas -- modify his physical behavior. Yet "scientific determinism" holds this evident fact to be an illusion.

In both the mechanist and mystic, then, there is a split in perception of subjective and objective aspects of reality. It is only the direction of emphasis that forms the distinction between the two. The mystic over-focuses on consciousness, and accords it primary reality, losing sight of its dependence on the body. The mechanist over-focuses instead on objective external physical reality, losing sight of or ignoring the way that physical reality is almost continuously being modified as a result of subjective internal conscious processes of individuals.

The direction of the mystic's thought process brings him to believe in a magical causality of "mind over-matter," which may include divine intrusion in the course of physical events, blessings, curses, charms, communications from the dead, direct mental control over physical objects, faith healing, etc. etc. The direction of the mechanist's thought leads him to believe in a deterministic causality, and a refusal to recognize that bodily movements of the living individual can be expressions of subjective conscious events. In simple but accurate terms, the essence of the individual to the mechanist is man the zombie, without conscious control over what he does, while to the mystic, the essence of the individual is man the spook, that which continues to exist after the body is dead. The *Frontispiece* summarizes differences in the two positions.

There is a kind of symmetry between mechanism and mysticism, the focus on consciousness and the world of the spirit by the mystic, balanced against the focus on the body and the physical world that the body exists in by the mechanist. Consciousness and objective nature are different aspects of reality, however, and are not parallel in all respects, so this symmetry cannot be complete. Thus, consciousness is a function of life, existing in the spontaneously moving living individual, conditional on the physical integrity of the body of that individual. Death means the end of consciousness, but not the end of the physical matter which comprise the body. Dead bodies are real, but ghosts and spirits and souls are only fantasies. There are bodies without minds, physical processes without consciousness, but no minds without bodies, no consciousness existing apart from physical processes. Thus the mechanist, unlike the mystic, deals with a partial reality, the reality of inanimate matter.

As a consequence, mechanism is a much stronger position than mysticism from the standpoint of efficacy. The mystic is fundamentally impotent to change physical reality; his wishful thinking and faith in the miraculous change nothing in the world about him. The deterministic causality of the mechanist corresponds to an important reality, however, the reality of inanimate physical nature. The laws of the physical sciences, e.g., the laws of mechanics, thermodynamics, and electricity, work; they apply to real events, and knowledge of them has made possible modern man's ability to control physical nature. But the magical causality of the mystic corresponds to no external reality at all, and so results in no control over that reality. Blessings, curses, charms and prayers for divine intercession have no impact on the physical world; dams, bridges and internal combustion engines do. For the mystic to obtain any control over reality he must do it indirectly, by controlling other men's minds. If he can persuade others that his magical causality is effective, they will accord him a corresponding measure of power. His power, however, is dependent on his ability to keep these others from discovering the truth. Such has been the base of the power of organized religion in human history.

Mechanism and mysticism are thus inherently unequal forces competing over the centuries for the minds of men. Dealing

as it does with an important though partial aspect of reality, mechanism has the virtue of being able to learn, to develop, to advance over the centuries. Advance it has, of course, enormously, though only with respect to physical processes and mechanical aspects of life. There has been no corresponding advance in dealing with those aspects of reality in which conscious processes play a role. Magical causality deals with no reality and so has made no advance. Fashions in mystical thought change, but mystical thought is today in essence just what it was two thousand years ago. The mystic often even makes a virtue of the unchanging quality of his belief. But the sad truth is that because of the force of mysticism, man has over the centuries made virtually no progress in understanding consciousness and its place in nature.

### **The Mystical Character Structure**

The character of the mystic is such that he is in touch with his body core, and so with his feelings and emotions, but out of touch with his intellect; and with the external world which only his intellect makes comprehensible. The mystic feels and senses inwardly with great vividness, but cannot conceptualize and act consistently and effectively in relation to the outward world. He is inwardly attuned but blocked from outward contact. His powerful inward awareness is expressed in strong undifferentiated feelings, deep cosmic longing, a desire to reach out, to "embrace the universe," to be "beyond himself" and the confines of his body.

This block against outward expression of his feelings leaves him locked in his body core, however, and he experiences this block as an imprisonment. His body is a "trap" in which his "real" self, meaning his alive core, is caught. He longs to be free of his trap, to open out, to soar, to expand, unfettered by the confines of his body.

This deep longing to be free of the block around his body core is the source of the myths, invented and perpetuated by the mystical character structure, of soul and spirit, of survival of individual consciousness after death, of another world, where his cosmic longing will at last be fulfilled.

Unfortunately for the mystic, there is only one reality, not two or three or seven or a hundred and thirteen. That one reality is the singular reality that he can learn about only by the difficult continued application of his reasoning mind. Man acquires the knowledge to guide his life only through the unremitting effort of observing, organizing his experience, forming ideas and testing them empirically, making his own mistakes and finding them, correcting them, and learning from them. Knowledge of reality is gained by a tough-minded confrontation with facts, and the putting away of every shred of wishful thinking, of belief in magical causality, miracles, or faith. Faith not only does not move mountains, it will not move a single molecule. It will not turn a motor or operate a thermostat or feed one hungry child.

It is hard to cope with reality. It requires clarity, focus, and continuing effort. There is no short cut to reality, not any, anywhere, at any time. There is no "other road" to reality through some "super-reality" invented by a mystic. Every man has only two choices: 1) to confront reality as it is, and endeavor to cope with it directly and honestly with his special tool, the conscious reasoning mind. or 2) to evade reality, to cop out, and to accept whatever version of mystical wishful thinking comforts him most for abandoning the only reality he will ever have the option of facing, in the only life he will ever know.

### **The Mechanistic Character Structure**

But God, we are told, is dead, and the modern world is becoming the world of reason and science. The stubborn centuries-long battle between science and religious superstition has slowly but inexorably moved in the direction of science and its orientation in physical reality. Churches have been disestablished, dogmas discredited, "divine truth" challenged. But before we celebrate, we should note that, as yet, power is only passing from the hands of the mystic to those of its opposite-appearing twin brother, the mechanist; -- from he who cannot cope with the reality of the physical world to he who cannot cope with the reality of consciousness.



As the character structure of the mystic shapes his frame of reference, his principles and values, and ultimately the view of nature and of man that he espouses, so it does with the mechanist. But the mechanist loses touch with his core, with the source of his deepest feelings. Instead his awareness develops upward and outward, into his head and its orientation toward external reality. Thus the mechanist develops intellectually, forming a more and more elaborate model of the world outside, which serves as a compensation for the lost world within.

In his intellectualization, the mechanist always uses the machine analogy, having made himself unaware of that source of living power in his core. He reasons ever outward, always branching further and further, developing more and more complexity, but faltering when he attempts the reverse direction, from the branches toward the trunk, from the special to the general, from the complex to the simple, from the brain, the neuromuscular system, down and into the body's core and its feelings. The simplest direct perception of basic life processes is forever beyond the mechanist's reach. Simplicity characterizes the core, the fundamental integrative aspects of the life process.

The mechanist rejects the magical causality of the mystic, and constructs a worldview with no room for miracles. But he develops his own causal principle rigidly, based entirely on the mechanistic causality he observes in inanimate nature, and rejecting the most important natural causal force he knows, the living process from which the conscious processes and spontaneous movements of living things emerge. And so the mechanist ends with the absurdity of trying to apply the laws of the world of dead matter to all matter, to living things, even to himself.

In the inanimate realm, the mechanist's view of causality is correct, and it works. Unlike the mystic, he is able to cope successfully with one aspect -- and an important aspect -- of reality. In this aspect, his view is much more powerful than that of the mystic, and in the long run, given the chance to test his method empirically, this power must assert itself. That is what has happened in the west, beginning with the Enlightenment. The

result is the rise of physical science, the industrial revolution, the ever-accelerating pace of modern technology.

Living things, too, have their physical mechanical aspect, so even in the realm of life the principles of mechanism have had a partial success. The body is a material object, and its workings include complex and fascinating mechanisms. There is much to interest and involve the mechanist in the body's physical complexities.

But in any realm in which consciousness plays a significant role, the mechanist's model breaks down. His approach, instead of clarifying, obscures, and his explanations fail to explain. Autonomous movement and all subjective processes (feeling, sensation, remembering, imagination, conceptual thought) are forever beyond the possibility of mechanical explanation, because they are not mechanical processes. Volition, purpose, judgment, morality, and ethics are necessarily misunderstood, obfuscated, muddled by those trying to use the models and methods of physical science with them and, in particular, those who attempt to apply mechanistic causality to living processes, as do the determinists in philosophy, biology, and psychology.

As a result of mechanistic and mystical character structures, determinism has made inroads into fields in which it has not the slightest justification. The mechanist is, by his character structure, blinded to one branch of the life process in his own core, i.e., to consciousness, its nature, force, and causal efficacy, the role it plays in his actions and in the action of all living things. This blocking from his own awareness of the role and function of his consciousness allows him to accept the illogical, contradictory, ultimately silly position that denies a role to conscious processes in nature. Remember, the mechanist is strictly and rigidly logical in dealing with inanimate nature, and prides himself on being scientific and on excluding magical causality from his explanations. But his blindness to consciousness makes the obvious causal properties of mind seem like "magical causality" also, and he cannot grasp or deal with them scientifically. Thus he attempts the futile, impossible task of constructing a "science" of life, of psychology, of morality and ethics without consciousness,

and without the natural phenomena that are the product of consciousness, e.g., choice, volition, control, purpose, responsibility, morality.

And the so-called "sciences" constructed by the mechanists in philosophy, biology, and psychology are as irrational, as divorced from nature, as illogical as the constructions of mysticism itself. The rational mind, required to choose between mechanism and mysticism in the realms of nature in which consciousness is important, can only rebel against both. Mechanistic "sciences" in these realms are only pseudo-sciences, based, not on man's search to know and understand reality, but on the mechanist's evasion, on his attempt to block from knowledge what he blocks from his own mind, i.e., the central role consciousness must play in a natural science of the living.

The confusion, the equivocation, the superficiality, contradictions, and ultimately the absurdities of the mechanist's efforts to abolish consciousness from nature have been documented again and again in science. Robert Efron uses the concept of the reflex to show how the mechanist goes about to destroy the meaning of concepts which can be understood only by implicit reference to conscious processes. The reflex is a reaction by a living organism that is involuntary and automatic, a response that is not voluntarily initiated or controlled. Efron points out that the meaning of the term derives from the implicit knowledge of all of us that there are some reactions that are not automatic but voluntary, that are consciously initiated and controlled; this implicit knowledge is all that gives the term "reflex" its meaning. Without the implicit acknowledgement of the role of consciousness in some behavior, the mechanist is forced into the absurd alternatives of claiming either that all responses are reflexes or that there are no reflexes. In either case, the term "reflex" no longer has a distinctive meaning, apart from other reactions. Why then is the term so much employed by exactly those for whom its distinctive meaning should not exist, i.e., by the mechanistic biologists and behavioristic psychologists, the very ones who should have no use for it? Explains Efron:

“The reductionist biologist retains and uses the word "reflex" because it enables him to make implicit use of the old concept of reflex (i.e., involuntary behavior independent of consciousness) without admitting that his new definition still logically rests upon the concepts of consciousness and volition. He needs the concepts of "automatic" and "involuntary" but wishes to evade the fact that the use of these terms is meaningful only by virtue of the existence of non- automatic and voluntary actions.”<sup>1</sup>

And by an extension of this same process the entire structure of mechanistic biology and behavioristic psychology is a tissue, a fabric of equivocation, evasion, circumlocution, of the substitution of implicit reference to conscious processes.

For example, the behaviorist psychologist likes to describe each individual's behavior in terms of "S-R chains," sequences of stimulus-response connections. He would have us believe that stimulus and response are complexes of physical events, their connection formed and made understandable in terms of deterministic causality: Yet in the overwhelming preponderance of significant human behavior, the "stimulus" that is responded to is not a complex of physical events at all, but a mental creation stemming from an organized perceptual field, from remembering, from cognizing. We each create in consciousness a dynamic ever-changing internal model of the world around us, and it is the model to which we respond, not the physical events which make possible the creation of the model.

To offer a simple example, consider the automobile driver approaching an intersection on collision course with a crossing vehicle. The driver hits his brakes; that is his response. What, however, is the stimulus? The crossing vehicle forms one small

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<sup>1</sup> Efron. R. *Biology without consciousness and its consequences. The Objectivist*, February 1968, 7 (2). This article (continued for four issues) represents an excellent analysis of the contemporary confusion in biology due to the mechanist's attempt to evade the role of consciousness in nature.

portion of the pattern of light striking his retina, and the consequent pattern of discharge ascending his optic nerves. This pattern will be present whether or not he sees the other vehicle, and we know from eye fixation studies that he can look directly at an object such as the other vehicle and not see it.

What then is the stimulus? The behaviorist would like to pretend that the physical events that sometimes give rise to consciousness form the stimulus that leads to the response. But we all really know that what gives rise to the response is not the physical events but the mental awareness of the other car. If the driver does not become aware of the other car he does not respond to it. The stimulus is not physical but mental. Even if the driver only thought he saw the other car with no physical "stimulus" his response would be the same.

The use of "stimulus" as if it were a description of physical events prior to consciousness, but used with the implicit assumption that the physical "stimulus" is created in consciousness and this mental stimulus responded to, is present in virtually every behavioristic description of behavior in which consciousness plays a role. It is the implicit realization that the stimulus does not really refer to physical events, but rather to the conscious processes by means of which the event is perceived, related to past experience, understood, and as a consequence of these conscious processes, a response originated. This implicit realization alone gives the explanation of the behavior in S-R terms its meaning. The behaviorist needs this implicit reference to conscious processes, for it is only by reference to conscious processes that the most significant human behavior becomes understandable. The behaviorist's attempt to exclude consciousness from his explanation is a deception and a farce. As Michael Polanyi has stated:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Polanyi, M. *Knowing and Being*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

“... a behaviorist analysis merely paraphrases mentalist descriptions in terms known to be symptoms of mental states and its meaning consists in its mentalist connotations. (p.215)

... Behaviorist psychology depends on covertly alluding to the mental states which it sets out to eliminate.” (p. 216)

Philosophers and scientists have known this about behaviorist "explanation" in psychology for decades. Understanding why it is done, the motivation behind the behaviorist circumlocution and, especially, understanding why such a superficial, impoverished, pseudo-scientific approach to psychology as behaviorism would ever reach wide acceptance, requires the larger context of an understanding of the mass psychology of mechanist thought itself to become comprehensible.

In the presence of a mass distortion of thought, knowledge develops selectively, and only in directions that are consistent with the mass distortion. Those bucking the distortion may have a temporary impact if they are sufficiently brilliant, but are soon swept away as the distortion asserts itself upon the legacy they leave to knowledge. Their concepts are reshaped, data and conclusions selected, key observations and experiments ignored or misinterpreted, basic concepts evaded, as the mass distortion asserts and reasserts its power. And the distorting power of mysticism and mechanism is enormous. This is why today there is no third position, no viable alternative, to man's great twin irrationalities, mechanism and mysticism.

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