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Intimations of the Soul

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Steve Talbott's new book *Devices of the Soul* is, first, a careful and illuminating examination of technological society by a man conversant with its sources and mechanics; second, a calm, elegant but unrelenting polemic against the particular disorder and infirmity engendered by it; and third, a series of intimations toward the recovery of health. In all three guises, the book is a valuable contribution; in the last, it is most intriguing and provocative. The author is a man of unusual breadth of learning: he turned from organic farming to software programming and technical writing, and from that to online pamphleteering with an electronic newsletter called *NetFuture*. He was urging caution against the "widespread utopian expectations for the Internet" well before the Internet had hit its stride. In this book Talbott urges nothing less than a recovery of our humanity, which he perceives as threatened by our idol-worship of technology.

Devices of the Soul: Battling for Our Selves in an Age of Machines
By Steve Talbott
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The book consists of a collection of Talbott's essays reflecting on the implications and perils of our "Age of Machines." (One of the essays was previously published in the pages of this journal, to which Talbott is a contributing editor.) The format has its attendant advantages and drawbacks—it is readable but occasionally repetitive, for instance—but on the whole, it succeeds. Talbott is a supple writer; his tone is at once conversational and didactic; the reader feels himself to be in the presence of a somewhat eccentric but gifted instructor. When necessary, his style enters into the realm of what we might call high polemic: there is outrage beneath his outward calm, and he is willing to set aside politeness for the instructive bluntness of the skilled rhetorician. For example, the three chapters comprising Part 2 concern the humanity of what modern euphemism calls, variously, the "disabled," the "handicapped," or those with "special needs." These chapters are among the strongest in the whole volume, for underlying them is Talbott's deep indignation at the systematic injustice that the Age of Machines is preparing to visit upon these people.

He quotes at length several theorists, the burden of whose theories is to remove certain classes of men from the category of "person"; the theorists of the new eugenics; the theorists, in short, of the most ironbound class society in history. "Probably the most truly handicapped people on earth," Talbott writes, "are those who imagine themselves most free of limitation—mentors for a new race of supermen." This is not his normal style of writing, but the reader cheers the departure from propriety when the subject so demands it.

Talbott is also exercised by what he perceives as the unutterable folly of regular reliance on computers in education. Calling on a variety of research, analogies, and anecdotes, his conclusion is that computers add very little, if anything, to the classroom, and introduce a whole array of problems. The most basic of these, perhaps, is the narrowing of the mind that attends a strictly mechanistic approach to learning, as if the human mind were a mere database for information exchange. "We can hardly avoid the uncomfortable sense that our society has gone quite out of its mind in making the computer the tool of choice for connecting young students to 'sources of information.'" Or again: "Something in our culture works powerfully against a sensitive, participative understanding of the world, often obliterating that understanding wherever it does arise. I believe that a primary task of education today is to counter this one-sidedness." It is simply perverse to expect one of the great machines of this obliteration—the computer—to correct the problem. Later Talbott writes perspicaciously about the effect of this over-reliance on computers in higher education: the gradual replacement of liberal education by business and, concomitantly, understanding and wisdom by mere information delivery. If all we want is "efficient delivery of effective facts and procedures," the business corporation "will far outperform the university." But it is self-evident to Talbott that such a replacement or transformation, though not without its benefits, will ultimately result in our impoverishment. The ideal of the university is one of the crowning glories of Western Civilization; to abandon it, almost unthinkingly, in the pursuit of a bit more economic efficiency would be reckless folly.

Much of Talbott's polemic is constructed against a doctrine that could be labeled Materialism, Reductionism, or Mechanism: the doctrine that matter is all, or that matter is real and mind illusory, or that all mind is the mere epiphenomena of matter. Talbott detests this doctrine, and critiques it gracefully and astutely. "To reduce the possibilities of [our] shared world to the bare potentials of an imagined set of one-dimensional mechanisms is to lose sight of nearly everything that

counts," Talbott writes. He refers angrily to "the prison we have carved out for ourselves with our 'known' senses." He speaks of "a radical displacement of the devising self by its own devices." He apprehends the danger of an "ongoing reduction of normal vision to a kind of blind mechanism." He declares that "the instruments of modern science express our alienation from the world…not because of the dimensional scales they introduce, but because we have tended, with their encouragement, to substitute dimension for the things that count." "There is no denying," he avers, "that what we have constructed so far is more an assault upon the world and a fragmentation of it than a crowning of it."

Talbott is concerned that our infatuation with technology and mechanism will reduce the mystery of life; that it will desiccate us of all human vitality; that our spirit will be deadened and our mind shriveled by this "displacement of the devising self" by mere devices. Whatever one prefers to call this impoverishment, the reader of this volume is left in no doubt as to where Talbott stands: he stands athwart it, boldly, imaginatively, humanely.

His book may be seen as a collection of hints pointing toward restoration of health. It is on this point that it is most interesting, though in some ways also exasperating. Talbott takes up his pen against the doctrine of Materialism; yet his imagery and framework are for the most part resolutely distant from that which stands as its greatest antagonist: religion. It is as if religion were quarantined from this argument. Near the end of a strong and moving chapter in advocacy of the humanity of the retarded, Talbott writes, "I've always felt a strong identification with the conventional center and core of my own culture, even while finding myself compelled to seek an intellectual escape from its unexamined assumptions." Now that is exquisite vagueness. Is this core not Christianity or Judeo-Christianity? Should it not be called so if it is so? This is very likely a noble vagueness borne of respect. But it is still an ambiguity and a lacuna in this volume. The statement serves more to maintain quarantine than to reveal an opinion. We know with unquestionable clarity the depth and learning of Talbott's antipathy for narrow Materialism or base Reductionism; we do not yet know what he considers the truth that ought replace these manifest falsehoods. The contrast is striking; and the question is, Why? Why has Talbott set himself at arm's length from this most ancient and impressive of antagonists of the Reductionism he so justly opposes?

It is possible that Talbott's distance from religion is merely accidental. We hear it said in our private lives—at least I have heard it said, not least because I have said it—that So-and-So is unchurched or irreligious but

"a very spiritual person." This may be a mere euphemism for our distress at their unbelief; but in any case it seems to be simply factual to say that Talbott, *as a writer*, is unchurched but very spiritual indeed: sensitive to the spiritual aspects of life. Talbott describes himself as an active member of a church, but it seems almost as if he has set his religion aside momentarily, as if he were under some authorial obligation not to bring it up. Why would he feel such an obligation?

Aristotle tells us that what defines a sophist is not his cleverness but his moral purpose; not his faculty but his object. Talbott's moral purpose here, if such a phrase can be properly given to so rich and varied a slim volume as this, is emphatically a just one. He wants to resist the "ongoing reduction of normal vision to a kind of blind mechanism." He wants to resist the barrage of "assaultive reductionist assertions" to which we are constantly subject, this lecture of human smallness and inconsequence. He wants a world where the retarded and disabled and defective are welcomed into society, and not enslaved or extinguished. And since Talbott plainly believes such labels of limitation and incapacity apply to all men, in other words that we are *all* defective and disabled, we might rightly condense his argument by saying that he still believes in equality. He affirms the brotherhood of man. Now only Christianity ever first believed in this doctrine, and this because it heeded the teachings of a Jew. Only the civilization built by the men of the West ever dared to proclaim the universal equality of man. Talbott aims, in his moral purpose, to vindicate the Christian or Western doctrine of equality.

Here I have merely added the sort of theological argument that usually accompanies apologias like the one Talbott has delivered. His notion of equality is the equality of Christian orthodoxy. He is most definitely, in his words, avowing the "center and core" of his culture. He quotes Jacques Lusseyran—a blind Frenchman who survived and even *thrived* in a Nazi concentration camp—speaking of a love of God and of life that "could turn toward [others in the camp] the flow of light and joy which had grown so abundantly in me." Lusseyran's excerpt is the only part of the book that makes explicit reference to divinity; he gives glory to God. Meanwhile, Talbott, in his powerful address to the souls of men, aims to defeat a certain species of His enemies.

For there can be no doubt that Reductionism or Materialism—those systems which would euthanize, on grounds of "compassion," human "defectives" like Lusseyran—are enemies of God no less than of man. They are wicked theories and mute idols as well. The silence of their muteness is filled by the cacophonous lunacies of men, whoever's

happen to be loudest. Preach strict sterile materialism long enough and soon you will find the world frothing with wild paganism. The void made in the souls of men by Materialist doctrine was in the twentieth century filled by the bloodiest of fanaticisms. And those who survived, their souls intact, the very camps of annihilation to which the espousers of Reductionism and Materialism like the Nazis and the Communists sent them—sent them on the very principles of their reductionist madness—are in a particularly good position to show us just where Materialism and Reductionism failed. They failed at the crematory of Buchenwald, nearby which Jacques Lusseyran lay at death's door until "the Lord took pity on the poor mortal who was helpless before him." In retelling Lusseyran's tale, Talbott's moral purpose is not obscure. His resounding negative on the materialist proposition is clear as bright sunshine. He aims to discredit and overthrow these tyrants of the mind. The very title he has chosen for this volume conveys this. We know what he opposes; but we do not really know what he affirms. He gives us only intimations of recovery.

At one point, Talbott all but declares his belief in miracles, and then adds this dénouement: "A miracle, in the worthy sense of the word, is whatever expresses those meaningful potentials of the world we have not yet fathomed." And: "There are far more miracles in our lives today than in the past; it's just that we've trained ourselves not to notice them." In short, we have made ourselves ignorant by trying to make ourselves the gods of a purely material world. Elsewhere, Talbott's target is a relative of Reductionism: Scientism, the idol-worship of the scientistic mind. "The genetic engineers and cheerleaders…seem remarkably confident that they have mastered what the rest of us have not: namely, what it means to be human." And now the zinger: "This is odd considering that most or all of them would profess discomfort with the language of meaning as opposed to the instrumental language of science." Later he employs the common trope of the materialists, psychologizing the opposition to boisterous effect: "In a society where the cry echoes from all sides, 'You are nothing but a machine,' we can rightly ask whether what we are really hearing is, 'I sense that I am becoming nothing but a machine and, dammit all, I won't tolerate anyone else being more than I am.'" He has these scientistic thinkers dead to rights, as he has the materialists and reductionists, even if he hesitates to take the next affirmative step.

This is not to say that Talbott gives no proposals at all. He gives many, the most intriguing of which is his introduction of the idea of a "conversation" with the natural world. He contrasts the organic give-and-take of a conversation with

the rigid managerial method of the engineer or technician who engages merely in a "mad, free-associating soliloquy." He devotes several chapters near the end of the book to revealing and often amusing descriptions of these mad soliloquies. It is a sane and fruitful idea, this notion of the conversation as the corrective to the disorder of the Age of Machines. In education, for instance, he applies it to good effect against the deadening influence of technocratic illusions, the "shoveling facts" method of instruction, which issues in a "penchant for gibberish" and the "denaturing of human relationships," especially that of teacher to student. Talbott is decidedly on to something in his thoughtful essay into the idea of a conversation. But it can hardly be called a philosophy sufficiently expansive as to stand alone against the materialists and reductionists. The reader is still left wanting for something larger.

This is a fine and valuable book. In it, the critic of the disorder of a technologically-enthralled society will find abundant material for consideration and refinement. He will find a judicious and knowledgeable ally whose experience in the heart of the Age of Machines will almost certainly exceed his own. He will find a man alive to a world beyond our immediate senses; and, though he is gentle and generous, a writer implacably hostile toward that insufferable reductionism which harangues us on the nothingness beyond: on the unreality of nonmaterial things. He will find much insight on varied subjects—yet all skillfully woven into the thematic narrative. He will find a philosopher whose discerning polemic gives flesh and bones to his own inchoate instincts and worries. Steve Talbott has a steady bead on the disease, and is ready to call on considerable resources to cure it—but his vision of health remains only a series of intimations.

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