

Life as a Robotic Vacuum Cleaner

The following cartoon lifted from The Wall Street Journal (Pepper and Salt) captures much of what this article is about. While the cartoon is a kind of teaser, the matter at hand is both serious and at the same time somewhat humorous. Actually that turns out to be a nice combination. Focusing too much on either side would turn out to be less than desirable.



Recently I saw on YouTube a video about one of those robotic vacuum cleaners which, I understand, have been around for some time. In other words, the technology isn't anything new. The clip was about four minutes long with one of those round devices making its way around a house. My impression was of a flying saucer from Mars that had just landed, the first wave of an all-out assault by midget aliens. At one point it came across a woman sitting on a sofa while she was reading a magazine. Two of its feelers—they looked like cat whiskers only not as delicate—were twirling about rapidly on the lookout for any obstacles.

The woman saw the vacuum cleaner approaching and simply raised her legs in order to allow it to pass under her. True to form, it continued on its merry way. Once the vac cleared this human obstacle, the two feelers continued to whirl giving off a cat-like purring sound as it followed an apparently pre-programmed

sequence. While this was happening the video was playing soft unidentifiable music in the background. The woman, of course, smiled at it as she would a pet and resumed her reading. She was possibly wishing her husband and children were as obedient as that device.

I came away both impressed and amused. Who wouldn't? Obviously such videos are geared to make you go out and purchase one. As for how they work in reality, I have no idea; neither do I know anyone with such a device. Nevertheless, I felt this robotic vacuum was easy pickings for an article with the reader clearly seeing where it might go. It comes as no surprise the following thought comes to mind, that we're about to be compared to one of these machines. Actually it isn't the first time we've been compared to a robotic device. We can expect more such comparisons to be made with recent discussion about AI that's all the rage. The chief concern, of course, is that AI is becoming increasingly sophisticated which means the comparisons between us humans and machines will tend to increasingly blur.

And so the brief article at hand pretty much falls in line with this theme or at least partly so. I'm fully aware that any talk about comparing us to robots or AI has negative connotations, actually, far more sinister ones which we've culled from recent movies. We can't avoid that, but I hope to offer a wholly different and unexpected twist on it. Robotic behavior can be representative as the ideal way to live. A crazy if not dangerous statement but not so much provided we pay close attention to the actual facts at hand. It turns out that the exact opposite from what we expect works in our favor.

As for the robotic vacuum, let's say someone pushes the button to start it or whatever is required to get it going. Before this happens we can assume the vac is parked in some dark corner waiting to spring into action. No question about it. Since we know this device can spring to life at any moment, just looking at it lurking in the background is a bit creepy. We may not see it during the night but are aware of its presence. I wonder if anyone has ever put a skull image or something along this line on it. Once activated, the person who did so goes off to take care of chores or the like. God forbid that he or she takes a nap and is caught unawares! Surely the device has its eyes...whiskers...focused on us. You can't but feel uncomfortable that despite its size, it might sneak up behind and swallow you

whole and entire. The seemingly harmless whiskers in reality are the tip of a giant tongue with hundreds of suckers hidden inside. Obviously the instructions never told you about this. Then in true form according to sci-fi movies you take a hammer or whatever is at hand and smash the thing to bits. You succeed, of course, but again in true sci-fi fashion a broken part that flew into a corner flashes dimly, a sign that it isn't dead and will reassemble to seek revenge. Now begins part two of the nightmare.

As already noted, these robotic vacs have what appear to be two sets of whiskers that rotate not extremely fast but fast enough to keep it informed of obstacles ahead. This contributes a life-like character or better still, some midget in the inside who's in control. Obviously that how it does all those zig-zag movements across a room. As I said, I never saw one in real life which in a way makes it all the more fascinating. I'd probably be disappointed should I get one for Christmas. An added attraction are videos of cats reacting to them. Some play with their "whiskers," others attack it and best of all, some actually riding on them. All in all they don't seem to be afraid but accept them, perhaps thinking they're pets. Imagine, a pet of a pet.

All robotic vacuum cleaners come with a program designed to have it carry out basic movements. At first I was a bit surprised that they hadn't been the subject of horror movies. One reason might be that they've been around so long and are physically lowly and unassuming. Nevertheless we can be enthralled by one of these devices as it does its thing. There's something satisfying when it passes over an open, smooth surface. It signals that all is well with the machine. Things get interesting part when it bumps into an object; not hard but gently due to the whiskers. Then the vac moves on and so forth. How and when it actually stops I haven't a clue. Before you know it, we come to see that a robotic vacuum represents a significant part of human behavior.

This resemblance to human behavior is based in part upon predictability. While the rooms to be cleaned have different configurations, their layout is essentially the same. It comes down to a matter of going straight, back, left and right plus not so much avoiding obstacles but going around them. Like these vacs it's only natural for us to follow through on things with an established pattern. Recently I thought of this when altering my schedule for an early morning chore. For some

time I had been cleaning my office on Thursdays but was forced to change it to another day due to some minor intervening circumstances. Despite the insignificance involved, practically speaking I had to adjust mentally. That meant I had to make a deliberate decision to do the cleaning the day before or the day after.

Okay, no big deal. Still, these little things are not to be despised because they open up avenues from which we may gain insight. It turns out that they are mirrors of the Big Stuff and thus deserve our attention. If here you can grasp the mechanism that's at work behind the scenes, neither spurning nor rushing through the situation at hand, without a doubt you're on to something important. This might be the first step perceiving a parallel between the robotic vacuum and ourselves. Furthermore, we've seen how the machine simply bumps into an object and mindlessly moves on. "Mindlessly" is an apt description because the vac doesn't have a mind. On the surface it appears as such. We view it this way because we tend to rush over the small things. We fail to see that if we can understand the pattern unfolding before our eyes, lo and behold, the same pattern is at work in the Big Stuff. Indeed, size does matter.

I mentioned how some YouTube videos have a cat riding on the robot vac. Obviously the cat has more going for it than the vac but being an animal, lives its life from point to point not unlike the machine on which it was riding. In other words, no past, no future. While we can't hop on (would that it was possible), we can envision ourselves on top of one to get a feel of how it works. Two things come to mind. First and above all, it would be simply fun to move about a room while bumping into things. We're hitching a ride on a device that's programmed to operate in a given fashion regardless of us tagging along. The vac's primary function is to pick up the dirt which it does flawlessly. That, of course, is its primary function. When the job is done, the vac comes to a stop. How this happens I haven't a clue. And so it either shuts down or goes into hibernation until we lift it up and place it in another room. Such is the life and times of a programmed robotic vacuum cleaner. Are the parallels between us and it becoming clearer?...

According to the cartoon above, the vac exclaims that it can't remember why or how it had come into a particular room. The real punch line comes just before

this. The vac says that it's happening once again. It cannot remember where it had been if anywhere. It either moved into another room on its own or someone deposited it there. The vac seems to be saying this before setting out on the cleaning job at hand. This not remembering is significant. It lives in the present but a present far lower yet parallel than an animal. Unfortunately that same lack of recollection is essential to the robotic vacuum cleaner's existence. Unfortunately it's not present or better, not active in most people.

When *anamnesis* or a living presence of where we came from is lacking or is not present, we're pretty much on the same level as the vacuum. In fact, this is the deciding point between the two. Such a lack doesn't mean we're stupid. It has nothing to do with intelligence, so the robotic mode, if you will, can apply to a surgeon performing a delicate operation. Recently I saw something parallel to this in action, not, of course a brain surgeon but several local craftsmen installing new gutters in the place where I live. They were laborers indeed but skilled and make a good living. I watched them right outside my office as they went about their business. Job well done, of course, and off to the next one. I heard them talking about not the job at hand, but they were more interested in what comes next. It's this flying from job to job wherein forgetfulness resides which like the brain surgeon, has nothing to do with the requisite skill involved.

Say, for example, there's the possibility that some kind of reality not within the purview of most folks responsible for a person behaving as a robotic vacuum cleaner. Revealing such a reality indeed is tricky, not unlike peeling back a cover to see beneath, this a more delicate gesture than at first glance. I say delicate because we're naturally apprehensive that the person or persons with whom we're doing this are closed to the reality about to be revealed even if it should jump out at them. This is taking into consideration that a blanket of ignorance is covering the human race or more specifically, the faculty of *anamnesis*. Indeed, most people don't like their blankets taken away. As for this faculty, it goes back to God-only-knows-when. We know only of its existence; any attempt to explain it gets us nowhere. Any metaphysical language about *anamnesis* such as referring to a *daimon* is a sure fire way of being laughed off stage. At once this person would be without further recourse to back up his or her claim. Indeed, the experts would have a field day.

One recourse of handling this hairy situation, strange to say, is by offering no argument. Maintain silence right from the get-go. That means don't bother putting forth arguments but allow the person with whom we're speaking to come out with his or her position just-as-it-is and listen to it just-as-it-is. Translation? Let him or her function as a robotic vacuum cleaner. Indeed, we have a paradox on our hands. On one hand it's the easiest thing in the world to let things be as they are. On the other hand, it's ultra-hard. The best way to decide which is which is to give-it-a-go and be prepared to fall flat on your face...not just once but several times. In the case at hand which deals with likening human behavior to a robotic vacuum cleaner, it's best not to counter any argument that goes against all the scientific evidence out there which explains it to death. As just noted, that's a sure fire recipe for disaster and to become a laughing stock and run the risk of being stigmatized for life.

The silence we're maintaining in face of knowledge which is in part and being played out before our eyes is one of the hardest thing to do anywhere, any time. Still, practice makes perfect starting with small examples. We work our way up until the big ones come our way which invariably will happen. The example at hand—watching a computerized vacuum cleaner doing its thing—falls under the category of the former and prepares us for the latter when we apply it to human behavior.

Opting for silence prepares us for awareness of something we haven't yet encountered but is akin to a gesture of abandonment (perhaps the best way of putting it) enabling us to handle rebukes or humiliations. We're dealing with a pre-existing or transcendent pattern laid out on its own...almost magic-like...without our interference and is present to us by literally inserting its form into us. Actually this idea of informing, inserting a pre-existing form or *morphe*, if you will, goes way back in time and has fallen out of favor in more recent decades. It might be far-fetched, but this could tie in with what Jesus says of the Spirit...the *Pneuma* or breath...which blows where it wills yet we can't latch on to it. We have to be careful with the verb "wills" and not confuse it with the modern sense of willing prevalent today. Rather, willing by the *Pneuma* is the *Pneuma*-in-action.

Admittedly what's being described here is so common in daily experience...in fact, comprises daily existence...and tends to be overlooked, even denied. No small

wonder that experts fail to see a reality represented *morphe* at work simply because it isn't visible. What is at work according to the example of a robotic vacuum cleaner is software which essentially is low grade. Nothing to be proud of, to be sure. That's analogous to what operates within us most of the time, a rather scary as well as embarrassing thought. Because of this, any experts shy away from acknowledging this reality even though deep within they know it's true. And because we lacked the instruments to detect *morphe*, it's next to impossible to acknowledge. Better, then, to take the quick n' easy way out by saying it doesn't exist. Nevertheless the vacancy left needs to be filled and fill it we do with everything except clarity of vision.

If we grasp how society at large goes about its business without awareness of an external influence à la *morphe*, we get a truly frightening picture. Coming face-to-face with such a void would result in our automatic dissolution. This sounds like it might be over the top but unfortunately is not the case. A quote from Romans might have some bearing here. "For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope." Admittedly this is a strange, even cruel verse. It sounds like from the get-go God is deliberately throwing a monkey wrench into what he had just made. As an after-thought he adds hope, an extra cruelty, if you will. Actually Paul seems to have an insight into the futility he sees all around him which he labels as *mataiotes*.

Indeed God saw creation as "good" as recorded in Genesis. Pretty much from the start humans looked at it in a somewhat perverted manner which forced God's hand. Now the way is paved for the entrance of *mataiotes*, a kind of stop-gap measure. This can be described as a state of being without use or value or in a word, purposelessness. Now bring to mind again a robotic vacuum cleaner and see how the two tie in. What compounds the situation is being governed by low grade software. It is insulting the more you think of it, reducing the human person to a kind of bottom feeder, of sucking up dirt while bouncing around aimlessly. Can this example tie in with Jesus' parable about the rich son who left home and was reduced to eating the same food as the pigs?

Unfortunately the comparison rings true but doesn't preclude operating at a high level of efficiency. That's completely different level and, course, begs for an explanation. On one hand we're positing what's low grade and on the other, that

which seems to be the exact opposite. I'm not sure, but this might fall under the heading of a confusion of categories. We seem to be confounding two realities that on the surface appear similar but in fact are opposed to each other. The former as signified by the programmed robotic vacuum cleaner can be impressive with its efficiency and ability to take on what's in front of it and then move on. Everything a person does is automatic, by the book as it should be which is a sure-fire path to garner praise and recognition. This high level of efficiency also acts as a screen to block out awareness that at heart essentially we're operating in a low grade fashion.

Fortunately I happened to have known a person who saw right through this though given his educational background, he was unable to express it. However, that remained secondary. No question. He had The Real Stuff which was self-evident. What's so remarkable about this fellow was that pretty much he had been reduced to being a kind of quadriplegic for the past eight years. He was confined to a wheelchair and needed constant attention; fortunately he could eat on his own and was a voracious reader. I mention him because he was the best comparison to a robotic vacuum cleaner I could come up with. A comparison valid only on the surface insofar as he fulfilled all the requirements applicable to one.

Despite all this or perhaps better put, because of all this, my friend was joyful 7-24. Usually when you admire a person you exaggerate. However, in this circumstance everyone was overwhelmingly impressed. Those whom he had touched were touched not just superficially but for good. Sometimes I'd sneak in on him in the day room when he'd either be reading or just sitting there. All I wanted to do was simply watch, to be in his presence in an anomalous fashion which was a gift unto itself. Now here's the strange thing about this fellow. Early on in his confinement right up to the end he'd greet people with a huge grin and wave at them in a vigorous child-like fashion. Instead of receiving an equally positive response as you'd expect, almost always he was greeted with a gentle disdain. People would acknowledge him awkwardly after which they'd seek to escape his presence as quickly as possible. I had watched this carefully over the years and got to understand why.

My friend seemed to have transcended himself as much as the body, mind and spirit would permit. Without a doubt he was constantly on the verge of passing

over into the next realm. And so he was an unsettling reminder of that reality which externally conforms to robotic existence but internally is light years away from it. Although you might be hard pressed to examine why, he quickly and efficiently considered all necessary human functions as subservient to What Counts. Most of us are gloomy to one extent or another. However, to be as joyful as this fellow was unnatural...in a word, supernatural. Because it was unsettling for folks who to compare themselves with him, the first step was to run away. He was a silent reminder of what we are and what we could be.

This mini-digression is of supreme importance. We'll return to my friend later that we may better understand what he was really about. To date focus had been on a robotic vacuum cleaner, symbolic of the mindless way we go about doing things. "Mindless" is a kind of misnomer, for as already noted, one can be a supremely fine vacuum cleaner getting all the crumbs from the corners. In other words, it excels at *techne* rather than *sophia*, the ability to get stuff done vs. it's application, the latter commonly taken as wisdom. However its reality stops right there. Sometimes people will praise a person for such exactitude in his or her job or profession, yet that's like praising how efficiently the vacuum did its job without the ability to acknowledge such accolades

In light of this, wherein lies the transition, if such a one exists? Posing the question implies that one has sufficient insight to know what's involved. I'd say that dissatisfaction with oneself gets the ball rolling. A person is aware, sometimes uncomfortably so, of being a robotic device and asks if there's something more to life than moving about on the floor picking up...well...dirt. So after having one's face in this dirt (literally à la vacuum cleaner) plus constantly bumping from pillar to post, there's bound to emerge an awareness that there's more to life. "Bound to emerge" sounds a bit zealous or wishful thinking. That would be wonderful but as we know, chances for it to happen are slim. This is something that happens on its own which means we don't have the opportunity to know from where it comes. Something like Jesus' words apply here: "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" [Jn 3.8].

This not knowing is of supreme value as to the unknowability of the wind's source which has a reality and freedom unlike ours. Actually the contrast couldn't be

stronger. However, the faculty of hearing enables us to tune into it, not sight. Hearing in and by itself is dumb, just as dumb as the vacuum cleaner. However, it enjoys one thing that transcends the world represented by the robotic vacuum. It remains independent (or is not dependent) of being programmed.

Should we be able to insert into one vacuum that active hearing which simply moves around an object it had bumped into instead of stopping there, we'd witness no outward change. In fact, the vac would continue in accord with its low grade software. However, the hearing works completely independent of this programmed software, if you will. The hearing enables it to realize that yes, I am a vacuum cleaner and will function accordingly. I differ from no other except the ability to be aware of where I came from...*anamnesis*...and allow that faulty to impart its form or *morphe* in me as a go about my work of sucking up dirt. Thus we have two robotic vacuums in action together: one programmed in the usual fashion and one with hearing that is active. Both do the same thing but with a world of difference. Telling them apart would be like telling how my dear friend stands apart from others so strictly confined.

Now the vacuum cleaner which is operating with the added benefit of hearing would make you think it would get the job of cleaning done more thoroughly and quickly. That's what you would expect but such is not the case. At this point the temptation arises to say we've been taken in. Nevertheless, the two entities work together exactly indistinguishable from each other. As it'll be pointed out shortly, the two are totally and absolutely independent of each other. The vacuum cleaner being robotic is suggestive of how we operate most of the time. Rarely if ever does it become aware of acting as such. More accurately, the new reality (new in the sense that here it's introduced for the first time but far older, archetypally so) always had been present in the machine. We've been so focused upon the job it's supposed to do that rarely if ever we bother to consider what may lay under the hood, if you will.

Should we venture a peek—and close to 100% we do it by looking, employing our faculty of sight—and the result? Nada. Instead, we have to listen or perhaps better put, pay attention to what's actually going on. To do so comes not from ourselves. It's a lightning bolt flashing that *morphe* into our perception much like

suddenly becoming aware of the wind. That minus not knowing where it comes from or where it goes while being perfectly content with this is tantamount.

Now back to my quadriplegic friend. No question he's indistinguishable from anyone confined to a wheelchair requiring constant help. Such a person does evoke dark thoughts in many of us. What a waste. However, this more often applies to what we think of ourselves. As for my friend, indeed, a "waste" even though he has a friendly demeanor which most people find annoying. It'd be okay if he were as such here and there throughout the day, but all the time? Clearly that is not human. No one can be as such. Nevertheless, the proof is there by so many witnesses.

And so it's this fellow's constancy despite the many occasions people bypass him. He has the same demeanor with them as with anyone who stops to chat. So it'd be no stretch of the imagination to equate him with a robotic vacuum cleaner by reason of his point-to-point movement. Although obviously he doesn't clean, he's mobile in his chair and constantly bumps into things. That's the external parallel. However, what's inside is a radically different world. Should you get to know him more, he's quite cunning. Most people don't pick up on this, but it's true. He uses his limited natural functions or better, has put them asleep or on hold, allowing that faculty of hearing to predominate. That's his essence which was manifested by those who took the time to speak with him. Like the wind...the *Pneuma*...he could blow right into a person and leave him or her profoundly changed...even jealous at not being like him. Actually I've heard more than one person say how he or she wished to be in such a physical condition. A sentiment right from the heart but misdirected. That would be equivalent to saying that by paralyzing myself I will cause the divine joy in this fellow to be transferred over to me.

That's a key issue here. What belongs on the physical level *cannot cause* what's on the level of hearing, hearing as defined just above. Italics are used because despite its importance, our focus represented by sight is elsewhere. At this point we can substitute hearing for attentiveness since it's closer to the matter at hand. What bothers us is the lack of external differences between what we see and what we cannot see, the robotic vacuum cleaner inserted, if you will, with that faculty of attentiveness.

It's actually quite maddening at how we cannot distinguish between the two. Somehow we intuit a difference but can't lay our hands upon it. The unfortunate reality is that we do it over and over again and can't get out of the rut. That's why the mindlessness of the vac is so instructive. It's both tragic and humorous at the same time. Tragic in that we don't intuit what's going on and humorous by reason of the continuous repetitiousness of the situation. I'm not sure but some years ago a movie entitled Ground Hog Day made light of this or something like it. Pardon me for not knowing the details, never having seen it.

Although my quadriplegic friend is admirable, it's a condition best to avoid if possible. In a word, worthy of admiration, not imitation. However, the way he comports himself—mobile in a wheelchair like the robotic vacuum cleaner—points to a view on life we tend to miss close to one-hundred percent. Physically he's reduced to pretty much the bare minimum. However, mentally and spiritually he's way beyond. In a word, we could say that he has mastered the point-to-point attention to physical reality proper to his situation. He has learned to see the robotic nature of his condition, of how it demands a simple yet profound awareness of where confinement leads...rather, explodes...to a state of exceptional freedom. Indeed, this is something beyond the ken of most of us. We look not with disdain but with a certain horror as being confined instead of seeing this as a way of being set free.

Does this bear a similarity with what the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is all about? In brief, we have the infinite God becoming man. As often as that has been hashed and rehashed, it doesn't cease to amaze. We have two natures combined (united, I guess is a more proper term) with one person. So this person...Jesus Christ...walks around as ordinary as it gets. The backward nature of his time and culture makes it more amazing. His contemporaries, unlike later theologians, didn't approach him asking about which nature (human or divine) is operating. They didn't think like that, obviously. So in this one person Jesus we have the divine—and by way of experiment let's call that awareness without bounds—who's walking around in a human body like all human bodies of that time as well as now in the twenty-first century.

Putting this in terms of the article at hand, we have, as it were, one nature in a single person being obedient to the other nature. Interestingly enough it's the

divine to the human, not the other way around. Because the human is the physical thing out there for friend and foe alike to behold, the divine by necessity gravitates toward it and by reason of this gravitational pull, if you will, lives parallel but apart from the human.¹

So if we want to tie in with this most unusual arrangement, the only one ever in history, we don't attempt to imitate it. That implies one nature watching the other, always on the look-out to see how well we're doing. Instead, we let go all attempts at imitating (harder than you think) what we want. What we do want turns out to be what we already are. And what we are is this almost scandalous human condition which becomes more so when age sets in with all its physical unpleasanties. Such was the case of my quadriplegic friend. Clearly I recall those caring for my friend's most intimate needs saying that it was like handling the body of an angel if such a thing could be imagined.

No small wonder that people came up with various interpretations of the Incarnation. Everything to avoid what's staring us right in the face. When pondering this I happened to hit upon a quote from **The Zen Teaching of Huang Po**, #21 which put it perfectly: "The ignorant eschew phenomena but not thought; the wise eschew thought but not phenomena." A paradox on the surface but underneath, right on target. We have here the ignorant identified with its opposite, thought.

Apply this to the robotic vacuum cleaner. That device equals the ignorant who exalt thought. To do so is not the problem. As note earlier, we can have a first class device but one which runs on low grade software. On the other hand are the wise who disdain thought. Such disdain isn't a form of anti-intellectualism or the like but of putting thought firmly and rightfully in its place and then shutting the door. Such is the program that governs the vacuum cleaner. Low grade, of course, but with one tiny, ultra-thin difference that goes almost completely unnoticed. That consists of first recognizing this situation and allowing oneself to be informed by a reality other than the program governing the vacuum cleaner.

¹ There's a Greek preposition found chiefly in the so-called last discourse of St John's Gospel. It's used to show...rather, suggest...Jesus' relationship with the Holy Spirit and Father. In essence, *para* says that he is beside or right there in the presence of either one or both. At the same time each Person don't suffer a merger but remain apart.

I'll conclude with an observation that got my attention from a respected Catholic magazine, I think from letters to the editor. It began with italicized letters meant to get one's attention and was critical of seminary education. More specifically, the author asked why students must spend three years studying philosophy and the like, Plato being singled as representative of that approach. Instead, seminarians should be instructed in various social and ethical issues that impinge upon people living in today's stressful world. On the surface, great. While this matter is not with the field of my personal interest, I couldn't help but be disappointed but then again, why should I?

This comes of no surprise in today's climate where ignorance of the past is so prevalent. Indeed, the person who made this observation clearly had not cultivated friendship with the person of Socrates. Granted, there's a humungous world of difference between then and now. However, human nature remains the same. As for the person who made the observation, I don't think he'd be inclined to meet Socrates should he knock on his door. And if indeed it was Socrates, chances are he'd slam the door in his face. There are more pressing matters to take care of. In fact, he just listed them.

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