8

TERREL MIEDANER

The Soul of the Mark III Beast

"Anatol's attitude is straightforward enough," Hunt said. "He considers biological life as a complex form of machinery."

She shrugged, but not indifferently. "I admit being fascinated by the man, but I can't accept *that* philosophy."

"Think about it," Hunt suggested. "You know that according to neoevolution theory, animal bodies are formed by a completely mechanistic process. Each cell is a microscopic machine, a tiny component part integrated into a larger, more complex device."

Dirksen shook her head. "But animal and human bodies are more than machines. The reproductive act itself makes them different."

"Why," Hunt asked, "is it so wonderful that a biological machine should beget another biological machine? It requires no more creative thought for a female mammal to conceive and give birth than for an automatic mill to spew forth engine blocks."

Dirksen's eyes flashed. "Do you think the automatic mill feels anything when it gives birth?" she challenged.

"Its metal is severely stressed, and eventually the mill wears out."

"I don't think that's what I mean by 'feeling.' "

"Nor I," Hunt agreed. "But it isn't always easy to know who or what

has feelings. On the farm where I was raised, we had a brood sow with an unfortunate tendency to crush most of her offspring to death—accidentally, I imagine. Then she ate her children's corpses. Would you say she had maternal feelings?"

"I'm not talking about pigs!"

"We could talk about humans in the same breath. Would you care to estimate how many newborn babies drown in toilets?"

Dirksen was too appalled to speak.

After some silence Hunt continued. "What you see in Klane as preoccupation with machinery is just a different perspective. Machines are another life form to him, a form he himself can create from plastic and metal. And he is honest enough to regard himself as a machine."

"A machine begetting machines," Dirksen quipped. "Next thing, you'll be calling him a mother!"

"No," Hunt said. "He's an engineer. And however crude an engineered machine is in comparison with the human body, it represents a higher act than simple biological reproduction, for it is at least the result of a thought process."

"I ought to know better than to argue with a lawyer," she conceded, still upset. "But I just do not relate to machines! Emotionally speaking, there is a difference between the way we treat animals and the way we treat machines that defies logical explanation. I mean, I can break a machine and it really doesn't bother me, but I cannot kill an animal."

"Have you ever tried?"

"Sort of," Dirksen recalled. "The apartment I shared at college was infested with mice, so I set a trap. But when I finally caught one, I couldn't empty the trap—the poor dead thing looked so hurt and harmless. So I buried it in the backyard, trap and all, and decided that living with mice was far more pleasant than killing them."

"Yet you do eat meat," Hunt pointed out. "So your aversion isn't so much to killing *per se* as it is to doing it yourself."

"Look," she said, irritated. "That argument misses a point about basic respect for life. We have something in common with animals. You do see that, don't you?"

"Klane has a theory that you might find interesting," Hunt persisted. "He would say that real or imagined biological kinship has nothing to do with your 'respect for life.' In actual fact, you don't like to kill simply because the animal resists death. It cries, struggles, or looks sad—it pleads with you not to destroy it. And it is your mind, by the way, not your biological body, that hears an animal's plea."

She looked at him, unconvinced.

Hunt laid some money on the table, pushed back his chair. "Come with me."

A half hour later Dirksen found herself entering Klane's house in the company of his attorney, for whose car the entrance gate had automatically moved aside, and at whose touch the keyless front door had servoed immediately open.

She followed him to the basement laboratory, where Hunt opened one of several dozen cabinets and brought out something that looked like a large aluminum beetle with small, colored indicator lamps and a few mechanical protrusions about its smooth surface. He turned it over, showing Dirksen three rubber wheels on its underside. Stenciled on the flat metal base plate were the words MARK III BEAST.

Hunt set the device on the tiled floor, simultaneously toggling a tiny switch on its underbelly. With a quiet humming sound the toy began to move in a searching pattern back and forth across the floor. It stopped momentarily, then headed for an electrical outlet near the base of one large chassis. It paused before the socket, extended a pair of prongs from an opening in its metallic body, probed and entered the energy source. Some of the lights on its body began to glow green, and a noise almost like the purring of a cat emanated from within.

Dirksen regarded the contrivance with interest. "A mechanical animal. It's cute—but what's the point of it?"

Hunt reached over to a nearby bench for a hammer and held it out to her. "I'd like you to kill it."

"What are you talking about?" Dirksen said in mild alarm. "Why should I kill . . . break that . . . that machine?" She backed away, refusing to take the weapon.

"Just as an experiment," Hunt replied. "I tried it myself some years ago at Klane's behest and found it instructive."

"What did you learn?"

"Something about the meaning of life and death."

Dirksen stood looking at Hunt suspiciously.

"The 'beast' has no defenses that can hurt you," he assured her. "Just don't crash into anything while you're chasing it." He held out the hammer.

She stepped tentatively forward, took the weapon, looked sidelong at the peculiar machine purring deeply as it sucked away at the electrical current. She walked toward it, stooped down and raised the hammer. "But . . . it's eating," she said, turning to Hunt.

He laughed. Angrily she took the hammer in both hands, raised it, and brought it down hard.

But with a shrill noise like a cry of fright the beast had pulled its mandibles from the socket and moved suddenly backwards. The hammer cracked solidly into the floor, on a section of tile that had been obscured from view by the body of the machine. The tile was pockmarked with indentations.

Dirksen looked up. Hunt was laughing. The machine had moved two meters away and stopped, eyeing her. No, she decided, it was not eyeing her. Irritated with herself, Dirksen grasped her weapon and stalked cautiously forward. The machine backed away, a pair of red lights on the front of it glowing alternately brighter and dimmer at the approximate alphawave frequency of the human brain. Dirksen lunged, swung the hammer, and missed—

Ten minutes later she returned, flushed and gasping, to Hunt. Her body hurt in several places where she had bruised it on jutting machinery, and her head ached where she had cracked it under a workbench. "It's like trying to catch a big rat! When do its stupid batteries run down anyway?"

Hunt checked his watch. "I'd guess it has another half hour, provided you keep it busy." He pointed beneath a workbench, where the beast had found another electrical outlet. "But there is an easier way to get it."

"I'll take it."

"Put the hammer down and pick it up."

"Just . . . pick it up?"

"Yes. It only recognizes danger from its own kind—in this case the steel hammer head. It's programmed to trust unarmed protoplasm."

She laid the hammer on a bench, walked slowly over to the machine. It didn't move. The purring had stopped; pale amber lights glowed softly. Dirksen reached down and touched it tentatively, felt a gentle vibration. She gingerly picked it up with both hands. Its lights changed to a clear green color, and through the comfortable warmth of its metal skin she could feel the smooth purr of motors.

"So now what do I do with the stupid thing?" she asked irritably.

"Oh, lay him on his back on the workbench. He'll be quite helpless in that position, and you can bash him at your leisure."

"I can do without the anthropomorphisms," Dirksen muttered as she followed Hunt's suggestion, determined to see this thing through.

As she inverted the machine and set it down, its lights changed back to red. Wheels spun briefly, stopped. Dirksen picked up the hammer again, quickly raised it and brought it down in a smooth arc which struck the helpless machine off-center, damaging one of its wheels and flipping it right side up again. There was a metallic scraping sound from the damaged wheel, and the beast began spinning in a fitful circle. A snap-

ping sound came from its underbelly; the machine stopped, lights glowing dolefully.

Dirksen pressed her lips together tightly, raised the hammer for a final blow. But as she started to bring it down there came from within the beast a sound, a soft crying wail that rose and fell like a baby whimpering. Dirksen dropped the hammer and stepped back, her eyes on the blood-red pool of lubricating fluid forming on the table beneath the creature. She looked at Hunt, horrified. "It's . . . it's—"

"Just a machine," Hunt said, seriously now. "Like these, its evolutionary predecessors." His gesturing hands took in the array of machinery in the workshop around them, mute and menacing watchers. "But unlike them it can sense its own doom and cry out for succor."

"Turn it off," she said flatly.

Hunt walked to the table, tried to move its tiny power switch. "You've jammed it, I'm afraid." He picked up the hammer from the floor where it had fallen. "Care to administer the death blow?"

She stepped back, shaking her head as Hunt raised the hammer. "Couldn't you fix—" There was a brief metallic crunch. She winced, turned her head. The wailing had stopped, and they returned upstairs in silence.

Reflections

Jason Hunt remarks, "But it isn't always easy to know who or what has feelings." This is the crux of the selection. At first Lee Dirksen seizes on self-reproductive power as the essence of the living. Hunt quickly points out to her that inanimate devices can self-assemble. And what about microbes, even viruses, which carry within them instructions for their own replication? Have they souls? Doubtful!

Then she turns to the idea of feeling as the key. And to drive this point home, the author pulls out every stop in the emotional organ, in trying to convince you that there can be mechanical, metallic feelings—a contradiction in terms, it would surely seem. Mostly it comes as a set of subliminal appeals to the gut level. He uses phrases like "aluminum beetle," "soft purring," "shrill noise like a cry of fright," "eyeing her," "gentle vibration," "the comfortable warmth of its metal skin," "helpless machine," "spinning in a fitful circle," "lights gleaming dolefully." This

all seems quite blatant—but how could he have gone further than his next image, that of the "blood-red pool of lubricating fluid forming on the table beneath the creature," from which (or from whom?) is emanating a "soft crying wail that rose and fell like a baby whimpering"? Now, really!

The imagery is so provocative that one is sucked in. One may feel manipulated, yet one's annoyance at that cannot overcome one's instinctive sense of pity. How hard it is for some people to drown an ant in their sink by turning on the faucet! How easy for others to feed live goldfish to their pet piranhas each day! Where should we draw the line? What is sacred and what is dispensable?

Few of us are vegetarians or even seriously consider the alternative during our lives. Is it because we feel at ease with the idea of killing cows and pigs and so on? Hardly. Few of us want to be reminded that there is a hunk of dead animal on our plate when we are served a steak. Mostly, we protect ourselves by a coy use of language and an elaborate set of conventions that allow us to maintain a double standard. The true nature of meat eating, like the true nature of sex and excretion, is only easy to refer to implicitly, hidden in euphemistic synonyms and allusions: "veal cutlets," "making love," "going to the bathroom." Somehow we sense that there is soul-killing going on in slaughterhouses, but our palates don't want to be reminded of it.

Which would you more easily destroy—a Chess Challenger VII that can play a good game of chess against you and whose red lights cheerfully flash as it "ponders" what to do next, or the cute little Teddy bear that you used to love when you were a child? Why does it tug at the heartstrings? It somehow connotes smallness, innocence, vulnerability.

We are so subject to emotional appeal yet so able to be selective in our attribution of soul. How were the Nazis able to convince themselves it was all right to kill Jews? How were Americans so willing to "waste gooks" in the Viet Nam war? It seems that emotions of one sort—patriotism—can act as a valve, controlling the other emotions that allow us to identify, to project—to see our victim as (a reflection of) ourselves.

We are all animists to some degree. Some of us attribute "personalities" to our cars, others of us see our typewriters or our toys as "alive," as possessors of "souls." It is hard to burn some things in a fire because some piece of *us* is going up in flames. Clearly the "soul" we project into these objects is an image purely in our minds. Yet if that is so, why isn't it equally so for the souls that we project into our friends and family?

We all have a storehouse of empathy that is variously hard or easy to tap into, depending on our moods and on the stimulus. Sometimes mere words or fleeting expressions hit the bull's-eye and we soften. Other times we remain callous and icy, unmovable.

In this selection, the little beast's flailing against death touches Lee Dirksen's heart and our own. We see the small beetle fighting for its life, or in the words of Dylan Thomas, raging "against the dying of the light," refusing to "go gentle into that good night." This supposed recognition of its own doom is perhaps the most convincing touch of all. It reminds us of the ill-fated animals in the ring, being randomly selected and slaughtered, trembling as they see the inexorable doom approach.

When does a body contain a soul? In this very emotional selection, we have seen "soul" emerge as a function not of any clearly defined inner state, but as a function of our own ability to project. This is, oddly enough, the most behavioristic of approaches! We ask nothing about the internal mechanisms—instead we impute it all, given the behavior. It is a strange sort of validation of the Turing test approach to "soul detection."

D.R.H.