

Book Review *The Psychoanalytic Review* Vol. 103 (3) June 2016

*Soul Machine* (The Invention of the Modern Mind)

By: George Makari

(A Summary Review)

WW Norton & Company,  
2015...pp. 656 with index

The subtitle to this excellent text is “The Invention of the Modern Mind” ...odd on a first reading...is the mind invented? Is it not just a given? Or, might it be a construct, so to speak, a child of society, religion, cultural mores and the observing and naming self? All of which is to say that this text takes the reader on a journey from understanding the vital principle of life as the immortal rational soul – in Western societies – to the contemporary understanding of mind as a vital principal in an alive body without the promise of or recourse to any transcendent reality. Its sometimes a bumpy ride; the author outlines, starting with Thomas Hobbs, the fierce polemics as road markers of the struggle to know who we are and our place in the world.

But what is meant by alive? Is the world simply a place of moving parts? If so, where is its source? Does it have a source? More specifically, what is consciousness and how have we come to know and to name such a dimension of human experience? These are some of the questions that this informative, well researched and singularly well written text addresses. Makari’s text, over six hundred pages, is a sophisticated reading of the birth of the modern understanding of mind, the integration of the complex body, as a valid subject of study, and the investigation of consciousness as a defining quality. In just a few pages he outlines the prevailing philosophy of the well ordered universe, with individuals possessing a rational soul, grounded in Aquinas’ Scholastic interpretation of Greek thought, to the seventeenth century world view revolution, which echoed through Italian, English, French and German many of whom were physicians as well as philosophers, and budding psychologists. His treatment of known thinkers such as Hobbs and Rene Descartes is complimented with his discussion of some less known, but equally important individuals, such as Pierre Gassendi. Given the range of individuals Makari attends to, my review can just summarize his general focus. I have too much respect for the scholarship and reflections evidenced in this text to do much more than say: if you have any interest in this topic at all...buy this text and read it. It is its own reward.

Makari traces the evolution of our western understanding of human life from seeing it as an unquestioned consequence of an immortal soul, as the *enlivening* force, to our contemporary understanding of matter, mind, consciousness and everyday lived experience, as simply the evidence of being alive. What we accept today... matter is alive...it is not just in motion...is a result of the progressive and detailed study of the body and equally detailed awareness of the functions of the brain. He traces as well the slow unfolding of the neurological substrate of the brain as well as the consequent growing appreciation of the psyche and its role in behavior and self-experience; he does all this with a keen and perceptive eye to the historical context of this growth in our self understanding. This is a fascinating history, a necessary history to know in its social, political and intellectual dimensions if one wishes to understand how we got to where we are today and, more specifically, how psychoanalysis grew from such soil. Free will or mechanical actions, psychological insights or self-delusion, a free epicurean life-style or a constrained one, Makari with his mastery of history and his graceful writing situates the ongoing struggle to know who we are and highlights those thinkers who experienced human ignorance as a spur to further investigation rather than as a resting place for the satisfied mind. Freeing oneself from a subordination to a religiously informed self-understanding to amassing the detailed physical and psychological dimensions of body, brain and mind has been a hard won achievement in western history - obviously.

Among the many interesting and informative historical scenarios Makari paints, I was particularly well informed, for example, by the author's comprehensive study of the work of Philippe Pinel as an example of how society was to understand as well as respond to psychological aberrations. Makari does not rush to find answers. He traces the slow and yet exciting discoveries of body/mind/psychology from basic causes to the complexity we recognize today, particularly in our understanding of consciousness. This last point, I believe, is of particular importance, since in contradistinction to some proposals suggesting that the question of consciousness has been solved, via neurological investigations, Makari notes

*Over the last three decades, impressive advances in computing and neuroimaging again have engendered the dream of eliminating the psyche. A flurry of new fields, such as neuroaesthetics and neuroethics, hold out that promise. If history is to be our guide, their efforts will be long on promissory notes and not much else. For to date, there is no valid neuroscientific account for consciousness or human agency. (P. 596. Footnote 508)*

As mentioned, this text in its entirety is a careful presentation of the major moments in western thought leading to such a conclusion. In resolving a simplistic and all encompassing notion of a "soul" many thinkers along the way have succumbed to a basic materialism; thinking thereby that they have solved the

problem of human consciousness, when in fact, they have just side-stepped it. Makari is too good an historian, a physician and a psychoanalyst to take that road and in doing so he is keeping alive a basic question as to what makes us human. He has not gone from subordinating human beings to God to subordinating human beings to their physiology... be it their bodies or their physical brains. Mind is not a consequence; it is an informing dimension of what it feels like to be alive. We participants of the twenty-first century are children with a long heritage. We have been gifted a level of self-understanding and consequent autonomy that was not always in case. Psychoanalysis helps us plumb that gift - our modern minds - in order to know and to appreciate the range of who we are. Makari's text will help you to better know who you are as well.