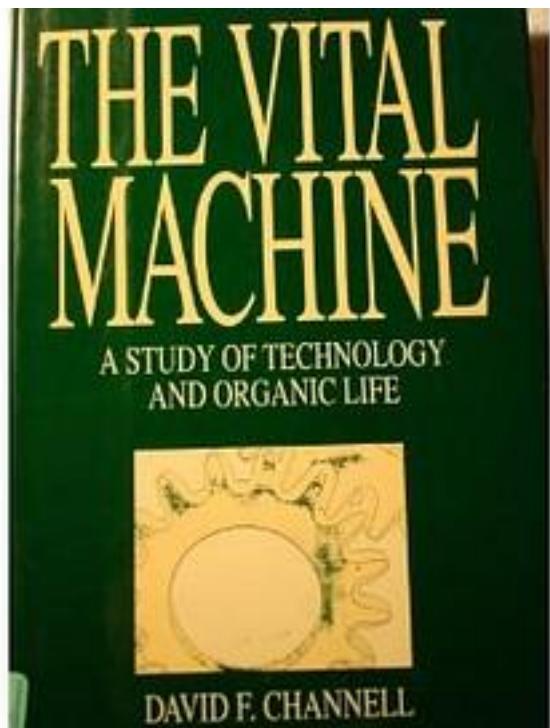


# The Vital Machine



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著者:David F. Channell

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In 1738, Jacques Vaucanson unveiled his masterpiece before the court of Louis XV: a gilded copper duck that ate, drank, quacked, flapped its wings, splashed about, and, most astonishing of all, digested its food and excreted the remains. The imitation of life by technology fascinated Vaucanson's contemporaries. Today our technology is more powerful, but our fascination is tempered with apprehension. Artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, to name just two areas, raise profoundly disturbing ethical issues that undermine our most fundamental beliefs about what it means to be human.

In The Vital Machine, David Channell examines the history of our relationship with

technology and argues that, while the resolution of these issues may not be imminent, a philosophical framework for dealing with them is already in place. The source of our fears, he suggests, lies in an outmoded distinction between organic life and machines, a distinction rooted in the two world-views that have defined and guided Western civilization: the mechanical and the organic. The mechanical view holds that the universe is basically a machine--we can understand it by breaking it down into its smallest components. Even organisms are machines. The organic view claims that there is something more, some vital, directive force. The whole is more than just the sum of its parts. Even machines are organisms.

Channell presents these polar views in a fascinating chronicle of human thought and achievement, ranging over the discoveries of Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein, the philosophies of Plato, Descartes, Kant, and Marx, the fields of alchemy, physics, astrology, and biology. We see not only how the two views progressed independently, but also how they influenced each other, not only how they persisted, but also how they changed. Most fascinating of all, we follow the emergence of a third, all-embracing world view as developments in genetics, relativity, quantum mechanics, and computer intelligence force both science and philosophy to come to a more complex understanding of the universe.

As a central metaphor for this third view Channell proposes "the vital machine." And in this stimulating work by the same name, he reveals how this new metaphor may provide us with the philosophical understanding we need to address the ethical issues our science has created.

作者介绍:

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