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COMPUTER WORSHIP



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My recent researches into electromagnetic theory, a cornerstone of computer design which has lapsed into meaningless liturgy and ritual, drove me to read the surviving volumes of a current ex-communicant, Oliver Heaviside. His works being virtually unobtainable, I visited the Institution of Electrical Engineers in London where his personal library lies in dusty disorder. Seventy years ago Heaviside was one of the five most famous men in electromagnetics, but he does not fit the current ideology. His personal library is uncatalogued, some of it unrestored since the incident in the 1940s when a burst pipe leaked water over it for a year or two. The librarian said that it was years since anyone had looked at his books.

I was amazed to find echoes of my worries about the meaningless mumbo-jumbo that is today's electromag-

netic theory in Heaviside's writings.* I went to London several times to search through the dusty volumes.

One day, feeling tired of study, I left the Institution and strolled across London to St Paul's Cathedral. As I climbed the steps and went inside, I was struck by the similarity between cathedral and institution, each with its marble statues, gold-lettered inscriptions on the walls and impressive halls and stairways. The Institution even has a glass panel let into the wall behind which are a number of near-holy relics, including a small stained-glass window. Teilhard de Chardin† says "... there is less difference than people think between research and adoration." I see good evidence of this in the Institution.

Computer worship takes strange forms, the chief being the confusion of computer with human which seems to echo the story of Genesis. This attempt to create computers in man's image may simply seem funny at first, but if you start to consider what would happen throughout the transport industry if zealots were surreptitiously trying to put legs on to automobiles and trains instead of wheels, so as to make them like humans, the more destructive side of this aberration becomes clear. A lot of effort goes into trying to give the computer human attributes, like the ability to play chess, in spite of the fact that we already have an abundance of chess-playing humans.

Western philosophy rests on Plato's work, the attempt to find the ultimate truth in pure number and logic. Through the centuries, western religious morality has

* On page 44 of the magazine *Pensée*, May 1972, Dr Lynn Trainor, Professor of Physics at the University of Toronto, said:

"In many fields there are certain things in vogue at a given time. Nearly everything published in high energy physics, for example, is junk. It has nothing to do with reality — it's a whole castle of cards. Yet you are on safe ground if you write a paper according to the currently accepted style. You will be published, especially if you make some curves and graphs that make it appear that you did some calculations. The fact that it is all a house of cards with very little reality to begin with is somehow ignored."

†Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Fontana, 1965; New York: Harper, 1959)