

**MARK TWAIN**

**WHAT IS MAN**



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**MARK TWAIN / WHAT IS MAN**

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You cannot keep your mind from wandering. If it wants to:  
It is master. Not you.



**MARK  
TWAIN  
WHAT IS  
MAN**

-I-

a. Man the Machine

b. Personal Merit

*The Old Man and the Young Man had been conversing. The Old Man had asserted that the human being is merely a machine, and nothing more. The Young Man objected and asked him to go into particulars and furnish his reasons for his position.*

**Old Man:** What are the materials of which a steam-engine is made?

**Young Man:** Iron, steel, brass, white metal, and so on.

**Old Man:** Where are these found?

**Young Man:** In the rocks.

**Old Man:** In a pure state?

**Young Man:** No, in ores.

**Old Man:** Are the metals suddenly deposited in the ores?

**Young Man:** No, it is the patient work of countless ages.

**Old Man:** You could make the engine out of the rocks themselves?

**Young Man:** Yes, a brittle one and not valuable.

**Old Man:** You would not require much, of such an engine as that?

**Young Man:** No, substantially nothing.

**Old Man:** To make a fine and capable engine, how would you proceed?

**Young Man:** Drive tunnels and shafts into the hills; blast out the iron ore; crush it, smelt it, reduce it to pig-iron; put some of it through the Bessemer process and make steel of it. Mine and treat and combine several metals of which brass is made.

**Old Man:** Then?

**Young Man:** Out of the perfected result, build the fine engine.

**Old Man:** You would require much of this one?

**Young Man:** Oh, indeed yes.

**Old Man:** It could drive lathes, drills, planers, punches, polishers, in a word all the cunning machines of a great factory?

**Young Man:** It could.

**Old Man:** What could the stone engine do?

**Young Man:** Drive a sewing-machine, possibly nothing more, perhaps.

**Old Man:** Men would admire the other engine and rapturously praise it?

**Young Man:** Yes.

**Old Man:** But not the stone one?

**Young Man:** No.

**Old Man:** The merits of the metal machine would be far above those of the stone one?

**Young Man:** Of course.

**Old Man:** Personal merits?

**Young Man:** Personal merits? How do you mean?

**Old Man:** It would be personally entitled to the credit of its own performance?

**Young Man:** The engine? Certainly not.

**Old Man:** Why not?

**Young Man:** Because its performance is not personal. It is the result of the law of construction. It is not a merit that it does the things which it is set to do it can't help doing them.

**Old Man:** And it is not a personal demerit in the stone machine that it does so little?

**Young Man:** Certainly not. It does no more and no less than the law of its make permits and compels it to do. There is nothing personal about it; it cannot choose. In this process of “*working up to the matter*” is it your idea to work up to the proposition that man and a machine are about the same thing, and that there is no personal merit in the performance of either?

**Old Man:** Yes, but do not be offended; I am meaning no offense. What makes the grand difference between the stone engine and the steel one? Shall we call it training, education? Shall we call the stone engine a savage and the steel one a civilized man? The original rock contained the stuff of which the steel one was built, but along with a lot of sulphur and stone and other obstructing inborn heredities, brought down from the old geologic ages’ prejudices, let us call them. Prejudices which nothing within the rock itself had either power to remove or any desire to remove. Will you take note of that phrase?

**Young Man:** Yes. I have written it down; “*Prejudices which nothing within the rock itself had either power to remove or any desire to remove.*” Go on.

**Old Man:** Prejudices must be removed by outside influences or not at all. Put that down.

**Young Man:** Very well; “*Must be removed by outside influences or not at all.*” Go on.

**Old Man:** The iron’s prejudice against ridding itself of the cumbering rock. To make it more exact, the iron’s absolute indifference as to whether the rock be removed or not. Then comes the outside influence and grinds the rock to powder and sets the ore free. The iron in the ore is still captive. An outside influence smelts it free of the clogging ore. The iron is emancipated iron, now, but indifferent to further progress. An outside influence beguiles it into the Bessemer furnace and refines it into steel of the first quality. It is educated, now its training is complete. And it has reached its limit. By no possible process can it be educated into gold. Will you set that down?

**Young Man:** Yes. “*Everything has its limit iron ore cannot be educated into gold.*”

**Old Man:** There are gold men, and tin men, and copper men, and leaden mean, and steel men, and so on and each has the limitations of his nature, his heredities, his training, and his environment. You can build engines out of each of these metals, and they will all perform, but you must not require the weak ones



to do equal work with the strong ones. In each case, to get the best results, you must free the metal from its obstructing prejudicial ones by education smelting, refining, and so forth.

**Young Man:** You have arrived at man, now?

**Old Man:** Yes. Man, the machine man, the impersonal engine. Whatsoever a man is, is due to his make, and to the influences brought to bear upon it by his heredities, his habitat, his associations. He is moved, directed, commanded, by exterior influences solely. He originates nothing, not even a thought.

**Young Man:** Oh, come! Where did I get my opinion that this which you are talking is all foolishness?

**Old Man:** It is a quite natural opinion indeed an inevitable opinion, but you did not create the materials out of which it is formed. They are odds and ends of thoughts, impressions, feelings, gathered unconsciously from a thousand books, a thousand conversations, and from streams of thought and feeling which have flowed down into your heart and brain out of the hearts and brains of centuries of ancestors. Personally, you did not create even the smallest microscopic fragment of the materials out of which your opinion is made; and personally, you cannot claim even the slender merit of putting the borrowed

materials together. That was done automatically by your mental machinery, in strict accordance with the law of that machinery's construction. And you not only did not make that machinery yourself, but you have not even any command over it.

**Young Man:** This is too much. You think I could have formed no opinion but that one?

**Old Man:** Spontaneously? No. And you did not form that one; your machinery did it for you automatically and instantly, without reflection or the need of it.

**Young Man:** Suppose I had reflected? How then?

**Old Man:** Suppose you try?

**Young Man:** (*After a quarter of an hour.*) I have reflected.

**Old Man:** You mean you have tried to change your opinion as an experiment?

**Young Man:** Yes.

**Old Man:** With success?

**Young Man:** No. It remains the same; it is impossible to change it.

**Old Man:** I am sorry, but you see, yourself, that your mind is merely a machine, nothing more. You have no command over it and it has no command over

itself; it is worked solely from the outside. That is the law of its make; it is the law of all machines.

**Young Man:** Can't I ever change one of these automatic opinions?

**Old Man:** No. You can't yourself, but exterior influences can do it.

**Young Man:** And exterior ones only?

**Old Man:** Yes, exterior ones only.

**Young Man:** That position is untenable. I may say ludicrously untenable.

**Old Man:** What makes you think so?

**Young Man:** I don't merely think it, I know it. Suppose I resolve to enter upon a course of thought, and study, and reading, with the deliberate purpose of changing that opinion; and suppose I succeed. That is not the work of an exterior impulse, the whole of it is mine and personal; for I originated the project.

**Old Man:** Not a shred of it. It grew out of this talk with me. But for that it would not have occurred to you. No man ever originates anything. All his thoughts, all his impulses, come from the outside.

**Young Man:** It's an exasperating subject. The first man had original thoughts, anyway; there was nobody to draw from.

**Old Man:** It is a mistake. Adam's thoughts came to him from the outside. You have a fear of death. You did not invent that you got it from outside, from talking and teaching. Adam had no fear of death, none in the world.

**Young Man:** Yes, he had.

**Old Man:** When he was created?

**Young Man:** No.

**Old Man:** When then?

**Young Man:** When he was threatened with it.

**Old Man:** Then it came from outside. Adam is quite big enough; let us not try to make a God of him. None but gods have ever had a thought which did not come from the outside. Adam probably had a good head, but it was of no sort of use to him until it was filled up from the outside. He was not able to invent the triflingest little thing with it. He had not a shadow of a notion of the difference between good and evil he had to get the idea from the outside. Neither he nor Eve was able to originate the idea that it was immodest to go naked; the knowledge came in with the apple from the outside. A man's brain is so constructed that it can originate nothing whatsoever. It can only use material obtained outside. It is merely a machine; and it works automatically, not by willpower. It has no command over itself; its owner has no command over it.

**Young Man:** Well, never mind Adam: But certainly, Shakespeare's creations...

**Old Man:** No, you mean Shakespeare's imitations. Shakespeare created nothing. He correctly observed, and he marvelously painted. He exactly portrayed people whom God had created; but he created none himself. Let us spare him the slander of charging him with trying. Shakespeare could not create. He was a machine, and machines do not create.

**Young Man:** Where was his excellence, then?

**Old Man:** In this. He was not a sewing-machine, like you and me; he was a Gobelin loom. The threads and the colors came into him from the outside; outside influences, suggestions, experiences (reading, seeing plays, playing plays, borrowing ideas, and so on), framed the patterns in his mind and started up his complex and admirable machinery, and it automatically turned out that pictured and gorgeous fabric which still compels the astonishment of the world. If Shakespeare had been born and bred on a barren and unvisited rock in the ocean his mighty intellect would have had no outside material to work with and could have invented none; and no outside influences, teachings, moldings, persuasions, inspirations, of a valuable sort, and could have invented none; and so,

Shakespeare would have produced nothing. In Turkey he would have produced something, something up to the highest limit of Turkish influences, associations, and training. In France he would have produced something better, something up to the highest limit of the French influences and training. In England he rose to the highest limit attainable through the outside helps afforded by that land's ideals, influences, and training. You and I are but sewing machines. We must turn out what we can; we must do our endeavor and care nothing at all when the unthinking reproach us for not turning out Gobelins.

**Young Man:** And so, we are mere machines! And machines may not boast, nor feel proud of their performance, nor claim personal merit for it, nor applause and praise. It is an infamous doctrine.

**Old Man:** It isn't a doctrine; it is merely a fact.

**Young Man:** I suppose, then, there is no more merit in being brave than in being a coward?

**Old Man:** Personal merit? No. A brave man does not create his bravery. He is entitled to no personal credit for possessing it. It is born to him. A baby born with a billion dollars where is the personal merit in that? A baby born with nothing where is the personal demerit in that? The one is fawned upon, admired,

worshiped, by sycophants, the other is neglected and despised where is the sense in it?

**Young Man:** Sometimes a timid man sets himself the task of conquering his cowardice and becoming brave and succeeds. What do you say to that?

**Old Man:** That it shows the value of training in right directions over training in wrong ones. Inestimably valuable is training, influence, education, in right directions training one's self-approbation to elevate its ideals.

**Young Man:** But as to merit the personal merit of the victorious coward's project and achievement?

**Old Man:** There isn't any. In the world's view he is a worthier man than he was before, but He didn't achieve the change the merit of it is not his.

**Young Man:** Whose, then?

**Old Man:** His make, and the influences which wrought upon it from the outside.

**Young Man:** His make?

**Old Man:** To start with, he was not utterly and completely a coward, or the influences would have had nothing to work upon. He was not afraid of a cow, though perhaps of a bull: not afraid of a woman, but afraid of a man. There was something to build upon.

There was a seed. No seed, no plant. Did he make that seed himself, or was it born in him? It was no merit of his that the seed was there.

**Young Man:** Well, anyway, the idea of cultivating it, the resolution to cultivate it, was meritorious, and he originated that.

**Old Man:** He did nothing of the kind. It came whence all impulses, good or bad, come from outside. If that timid man had lived all his life in a community of human rabbits, had never read of brave deeds, had never heard speak of them, had never heard any one praise them nor express envy of the heroes that had done them, he would have had no more idea of bravery than Adam had of modesty, and it could never by any possibility have occurred to him to resolve to become brave. He could not originate the idea, it had to come to him from the outside. And so, when he heard bravery extolled and cowardice derided, it woke him up. He was ashamed. Perhaps his sweetheart turned up her nose and said, *"I am told that you are a coward!"* It was not he that turned over the new leaf she did it for him. He must not strut around in the merit of it, it is not his.

**Young Man:** But, anyway, he reared the plant after she watered the seed.