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Frontiersman

Facing the truth, however great the cost.

April 2008

Proliferation

Sam Aurelius Milam III

For most of my life, I've pondered the distinction between things that are alive and things that are not alive. No matter what distinction I devised, I could always think of an exception. Mobility?

Some living things don't move. Some non-living things do move, although not necessarily under their own power. However, some living things also move only under the influence of some external force. Mobility isn't a reliable distinction. Breathing? Plants and animals transfer gases very differently from one another. How about viruses? How about seeds or eggs? Whatever living thing you consider, if it breathes at all then you eventually must reduce the concept of breathing to the process of respiration, that is, consuming fuel, releasing energy, and producing waste. A wood stove does the same thing. Reproduction? Some living things don't reproduce. Mules and some women that I've known come to mind. The fact is that a simple, general, and unambiguous distinction between what's alive and what isn't alive remained elusive for many years.

Sometime during the year 2005, I reduced the idea to the simplest form that I could imagine. I sat aside all of the various ways that we intuitively decide if something's alive or not alive. I based a tentative distinction on the simplest and most pragmatic characteristic of life that I could imagine. I speculated that if a thing can die or be killed, then it's alive. If it cannot die or be killed, then it isn't alive. It's such a simple distinction that it took me several decades of pondering to think of it.

After that, I spent some time thinking about the nature of killing something. You can crush a man or you can crush a rock. To crush the man kills the man. To crush the rock doesn't kill the

rock. Furthermore, a man can die without being crushed. Not only that, you can disrupt a man's form at least to some extent, as for example by amputation, and still not kill him. Thus, to merely disrupt or destroy the form of something doesn't necessarily correspond to killing the thing. The essence of killing a thing resides in the termination of a process that exists within the thing, whether or not its form is changed. After I realized that, I had my distinction. If a thing has a form in which a process is under way, and if the process can be terminated without necessarily changing the thing's form, then the thing is alive.

The distinction seemed to be a good one. It was simple, general, and unambiguous. However, I failed to consider all of its implications. Eventually, someone mentioned one of them to me. That is, according to my distinction, a running automobile engine is alive. At first, I was skeptical. However, I gave the matter some thought. It's a fact that we've long applied the terminology of life to our devices. When an automobile engine stops running, we say that it died. If we want somebody to turn off a light, then we might tell him to kill it. We talk about our computers remembering things. We refer to malfunctioning appliances as being sick. Not only that, we frequently talk to our devices as if they're alive. A man is just as likely to talk to his lawn mower as a woman is to talk to her geraniums. It isn't even a new idea. Literature is rife with tales of machines taking over the world, of electronic systems becoming self-aware, and so forth.¹ I documented some of my thoughts in the January 2006 issue of the *Frontiersman* in an article titled *Gods Ourselves*. In that article, I suggested that maybe there's more to it than terminology. It's as if we've unconsciously recognized the existence of a life form without consciously admitting it.

I haven't yet thought of a better distinc- →

¹ See my essay *The Lone Raver Writes Again*.

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tion than the one proposed in this article. Since it's the best distinction that's presently available and until a better one comes along, we'll have to accept all of its implications. Thus, we must accept the idea that our devices are alive. They're alive in a different way than we are but in a way that's just as real and just as valid. My acceptance of that idea opened the way for the clarification of some additional previous pondering.


Back during the 1980s, Sir Donald the Elusive and I characterized corporations as overcreatures. By that name, we intended to address the many life-like characteristics of corporations. They seek resources and consume the things that they need in order to survive. They produce things and generate waste. They grow. They compete with others of their kind. Sometimes, they die in the competition. The winners might consume the losers or just leave them to rot. Sometimes corporations reproduce. The form of reproduction is asexual but it's nevertheless a form of reproduction. Corporations have sense organs. That is, they can detect and respond to stimuli from outside of themselves. They communicate with one another. The people who work within them serve functions that are analogous to the functions of cells in a biological organism. Those people don't have any more control over the corporations of which they're a part than the cells in your body have over you. Corporations have immune systems and will protect themselves from diseased cells or infections. That is, troublemakers, whistle blowers, corporate spies, and so forth will be resisted. The various departments within a corporation are functionally analogous to the organs in a biological organism. The board of directors is functionally analogous to the brain. In almost every way, corporations behave as if they're alive. Thus, Sir Donald and I coined the term *overcreature*.

My proposed distinction between living things and non-living things requires that, in order to be alive, a thing must have a form in which a process is under way that can be terminated without necessarily disrupting the form of the thing. A corporation satisfies the distinction. Granted, the form of a corporation isn't as contiguous as

that of an automobile engine or of an amoebae. The nuts and the bolts of a corporation don't necessarily touch one another. Nevertheless, the form exists and it is tangible. A corporation consists of people, buildings, land, equipment, and so forth. It's possible for a corporation to stop functioning without the loss of its form. Thus, a corporation satisfies my distinction. A corporation is alive.

That isn't the end. There's been some speculation lately about the internet. It is, in and of itself, an entirely new and distinct environment. Maybe things can live in it. Several possibilities come to mind. Computer viruses exhibit many of the characteristics of life and behave eerily like physical viruses. Are spiders and webbots alive? Can a search engine be regarded as a form of life? Who knows what other electronic entities people have covertly created and uploaded? Those things might all fail to satisfy my distinction because I don't know if it's possible to cause them to stop functioning without actually destroying their forms which, I suppose, must be their program code. That's a question that will have to be answered by a programmer. If electronic entities are indeed alive, then who knows what other electronic entities might be evolving in the internet environment, all on their own and without our knowledge? Maybe the internet itself is alive.

So, we're accompanied on this planet by at least two other forms of life and maybe by more than that if program code entities are alive. Given that, it's reasonable to speculate further. We've created at least two forms of life ourselves, and maybe others. It might be that one of the inherent behaviors of living things is that they create other living things. In that case, maybe our machines, our corporations, and our computer code are also creating life and we just don't recognize it. The proliferation of life on this planet might be more than we'll ever imagine. At least we know that we're not alone in the universe.

There's one final and unexpected consequence of my proposed distinction. Maybe I'm wrong but the assumption is usually that God can't die or be killed. Thus, according to my distinction it appears that God isn't alive. 

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Sam

Your article, "Bad News" in the Feb. '08 letter was on target. Here's a horror story I hope you'll print. In Russellville, Pope County, Ark., in 2006, two cops beat to death a man who was having a nervous breakdown. They got off scot free, thanks to a corrupt sheriff and prosecuting attorney.

Also in Pope Co., Ark., in Aug of '07, I was running out of gas on I-40. I pulled off the highway and was immediately arrested by a state cop who I gave my driver's license to in his hands, and he swore I gave him a wrong birth date. Why would I? I was thrown in a cold cell in the Pope County jail. For 3 days my car was impounded — I lost it. I pled innocent, at the trial; I was fined \$100 for "illegal parking." Your readers should definitely avoid "beautiful" Pope County, Arkansas.

Respectfully,

—a reader; Russellville, Arkansas

I don't know. It just seemed like a good idea to hide his name.

—editor

The Fable of the Twins

As Retold by Sam Aurelius Milam III

Once upon a time, a good many years ago, two identical twins, born in England, were given up for adoption. One of the twins was adopted by a family that lived in Iran. His adoptive parents named him Amaal. The other of the twins was adopted by a family that lived in Spain. He was given the name Juan.

About 20 years later, everybody involved decided to have a reunion. The biological mother was waiting at Heathrow, Amaal and Juan were scheduled to arrive soon, and there were even a few media hounds in attendance.

Juan's plane arrived and he was tearfully reunited with his biological mother. Then everybody waited for Amaal's plane. It got later and later until finally somebody declared, "I'm tired of waiting! Let's all go home!"

The mother exclaimed, "But Amaal isn't here yet!"

One of the media hounds answered, "So what? They're identical twins!"

Everybody went home.

Moral: If you've seen Juan then you've seen Amaal. 🐷

A Box of Kisses

Original Source Unknown. Forwarded by BLA, of Schertz, Texas.

Some time ago, a man criticized his 3-year-old daughter for wasting some gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became angry when she used the paper to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree. Nevertheless, she brought the gift to him the next morning and said, "This is for you, Daddy."

He was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction but his anger flared again when he found that the box was empty. He yelled, "Don't you know when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside it?"

The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "But Daddy, it's not empty, I blew kisses into it, all for you, Daddy."

The father put his arms around his little girl and asked for her forgiveness.

An accident took the life of the child only a short time later and, as the story goes, the man kept the gold box by his bed for many years thereafter. Whenever he felt discouraged, he'd take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the little girl who'd put it there. ∞

Stray Thoughts

Sam Aurelius Milam III

Technobully — A technobully is someone who, by controlling product availability, forces new products into the marketplace without any regard for how silly or how useless they are and for no better reason than that he can make a profit by selling them to technosuckers.

Technosnob — A technosnob is someone who sneers at other people for using products that aren't as new or as fancy as his own.

Technosucker — A technosucker is someone who mindlessly welcomes any new product without regard for how silly or how useless it is and for no better reason than that it's new. My father taught me that all progress is change but not all change is progress. Most people today have failed to learn that lesson. They're technosuckers. 🐷

Old Timer's Lore

Overheard by Sam Aurelius Milam III

Losing Situation — Don't wrestle with a pig. You'll both get dirty but the pig will enjoy it. 🐷

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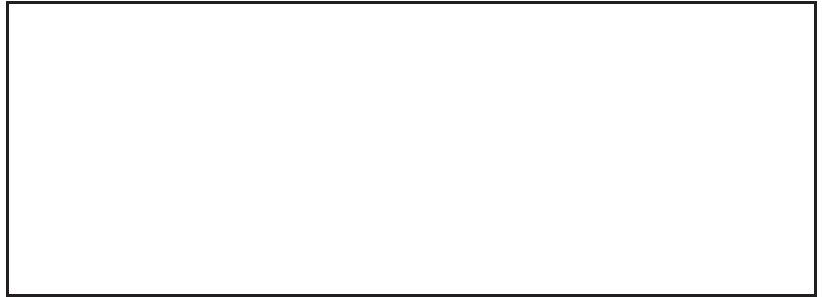


Nation in Distress

Revocation of Title

Effective as of April 30, 2008, and by the authority that is inherent in me as the author and the grantor of the title, I hereby strip James Majeski of his former title of Sir James the Bold. Henceforth, he is no longer authorized to use the title or to be addressed by it.

—Sam Aurelius Milam III
Lord Sam the Vigilant of Mjollnir



Acknowledgments

My thanks to the following: SantaClara Bob; Lady Jan the Voluptuous; Lord Jeffrey the Studious; my mother; Ernie and Claire, of Show Low, Arizona; Jules, of Tucson, Arizona; and a reader in Russellville, Arkansas. —editor

Classes for Men

Original Source Unknown. Forwarded by Don G.

- How to urinate by lifting the toilet seat and avoiding the floor, walls, and nearby bathtub — Group Practice
- After-dinner dishes and silverware: can they really levitate and fly into the kitchen sink? Examples On Video ∞

Reasons for Men to be Cheerful

Original Source Unknown. Forwarded by Don G.

- The world is your urinal.
- You never have to drive to another gas station because this one's just too icky.
- Same work, more pay.
- Wrinkles add character.
- Wedding dress — \$5000; tux rental — \$100.
- People never stare at your chest while you're talking to them.
- The occasional, well-rendered belch is practically expected.
- New shoes don't cut, blister, or mangle your feet.
- One mood, ALL the time. ∞

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—Sam Aurelius Milam III, editor

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