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The conceptual history of cognitive science remains for the most part unwritten. In this groundbreaking book, Jean-Pierre Dupuy—one of the principal architects of cognitive science in France—provides an important chapter: the legacy of cybernetics. Contrary to popular belief, Dupuy argues, cybernetics represented not the anthropomorphization of the machine but the mechanization of the human. The founding fathers of cybernetics—some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century, including John von Neumann, Norbert Wiener, Warren McCulloch, and Walter Pitts—intended to construct a materialist and mechanistic science of mental behavior that would make it possible at last to resolve the ancient philosophical problem of mind and matter. The importance of cybernetics to cognitive science, Dupuy argues, lies not in its daring conception of the human mind in terms of the functioning of a machine but in the way the strengths and weaknesses of the cybernetics approach can illuminate controversies that rage today—between cognitivists and connectionists, eliminative materialists and Wittgensteinians, functionalists and anti-reductionists.

Dupuy brings to life the intellectual excitement that attended the birth of cognitive science sixty years ago. He separates the promise of cybernetic ideas from the disappointment that followed as cybernetics was rejected and consigned to intellectual oblivion. The mechanization of the mind has reemerged today as an all-encompassing paradigm in the convergence of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science. The tensions, contradictions, paradoxes, and confusions Dupuy discerns in cybernetics offer a cautionary tale for future developments in cognitive science.