

MEMORIES

Let every man in mankind's frailty consider his last day; and let none presume on his good fortune until he find life, at his death, a memory without pain. Sophocles

Was there a beginning? Is there an end? The Author.

The time is far into the future. Two of the world's prime theoretical savants, Dr. Abraham Einer and Dr. Chou Lin Hung, were having their weekly meeting. Besides humorous banter, these occasions allowed them to bounce all sorts of ideas off each other, no matter how improbable. Their imaginations seemed to have no bounds. History is replete with impossibilities that turned out to be factual and indisputable.

They complemented each other. Dr. Lin Hung had a technological bent. He was always contemplating new technologies or new ways to use old ones with minor modifications. In that regard his contributions to bio-medical technology had been outstanding. Although a scientist of renown, Dr. Einer was more inclined towards the philosophic and metaphysical implications of science and technology. He was known for posing penetrating questions which, as yet, had no answers, or explanations that were highly speculative.

Besides the complementary nature of their professional approaches and besides having the highest regard for each other's abilities and acumen, the two scholars were also very good and close friends. They enjoyed each other's company. They played a modern version of bridge as partners. They competed with each other and with the most powerful computers over three dimensional chess. They particularly enjoyed battling each other at multi-dimensional tennis. Not surprisingly, Dr. Lin Hung usually won at all these pastimes. His was a more linear, analytical and mathematical mind. Also, he was in better physical shape than his friend. Dr. Einer was far more imaginative and much more into synthesis than analysis.

Of late, they had become preoccupied with the possibility of eternal life. Fantastic advancements in health care had taken place. Average life expectancy was now in the order of seven hundred years. The times had become known as the "New Age of Methuselah". Was it possible to conceive of a life having no end or at the very least limited by the life of the universe, unless that life was infinite in length? This was heady stuff.

One obvious possibility, discounted by our two protagonists, was inorganic life as exemplified by robots with the ability to think, act and store information ad infinitum. These already existed but were artificially limited by certain restrictions. (See Isamov's Laws Of Robotics) Theoretically, they could go on for an eternity as long as replacement parts were available, the ability to download their memory files and programs was maintained and the appropriate energy sources remained available. There was no reason to believe that these conditions could not be met. However, the good Doctors were only concerned about the longevity of human organic life.

On the occasion of their meeting in question, Dr. Einer seemed to be more contemplative and quieter than usual. Dr. Lin Hung couldn't refrain.

"Abe, what are you serious about? Is your brain out of joint or of sorts?"

Dr. Einer replied, with a bemused look.

“Chou, how do you spell your name? I cannot recall if it ends with ou or ew. If it is the latter, I am about to give you something to really chew on. However, since your head is usually ensconced in the sands of so called reality and mine is frequently floating somewhere in the clouds as you have often suggested, I wonder if you can appreciate a thought or series of ideas that may be well over your head?”

Dr. Lin Hung responded laughingly.

“Abe, I have been subjected to your infantile imagination and the corresponding fairy tales that it has conjured for over thirty years. A child of two can understand you. I will give any new thought of yours the same consideration that any youngster would.”

In a serious tone Dr. Einer, then murmured, “Chou, actually you have probably stumbled onto something. I have thought many times that to be blessed or cursed with my imagination is a sign that I have never grown up. Sometimes I feel that only the young can dream up, appreciate and understand my fantasies.”

“Abe, stop berating yourself. There is no doubt that it takes a certain unique type of mentality to create new and singular ways of ascertaining the truth about existence. If it is akin, in some ways, to a child's, so be it. Yours is such a mind. It matters not that when you issue a new hypothesis, very few people understand it. Be proud of it and of all your contributions to human knowledge. Now, before your self flagellation causes me to weep, please recount your new fairy tale?”

“Thanks, Chou,” Einor responded. “If ever I exhibit another fit of maudlin self-pity, please let me wallow in it. It is a good feeling.

Now for more serious stuff. As you are aware, I have an obsession about entertainment, especially old time theater and cinema. A few days ago, I was looking through the entertainment archives of the 20th century. Towards the end of that century, the Japanese produced a motion picture that the critics of the time lauded. It was called ‘Afterlife’. I did not have a chance to view it. According to one critic, its main theme was that at the point of death, life is nothing but a memory.

This immediately struck a responsive chord and got me thinking. If there is some veracity to that notion, is it not equally true that at any moment, a person's life is nothing more than a memory? Further, why stop there? Is it not just as believable to assume that, that memory, conscious and subconscious, extends backward to the beginning of time? Again, if everything I do or say at any moment is nothing more than a reflection of my total memory, than do I, Abraham Einer exist, or is my memory the only thing that is real? Finally, if memory is the only reality, how does it exist? Is time a factor? Does it continue after the so called death of Abraham Einer or Chou Hun Ling or any other living thing? In other words, is there life or some sort of existence after death other than being remembered?”

After a number of minutes of contemplative silence, Dr. Hun Ling somewhat pensively and hesitatingly answered.

“Abe, as usual, you are way ahead of everybody. I have no idea, at the most fundamental level, what reality is or whether it has a beginning or an end. I wonder if you have not surpassed yourself in terms of your philosophic and metaphysical meanderings.

However, you have provided me with an idea for an experiment that ought to prove very interesting. As you know, contemporary computers are capable of things that were unthinkable until recent times. I propose that that from the moment a child is conceived, every experience, thought, feeling, conscious or subconscious, for the rest of that individual's life, be downloaded into our most sophisticated computer. Thus, we will have a far more accurate record of that person's life than his or her memory could ever provide. Think of the possibilities, especially what we might learn about the human psyche.”

Dr. Einer was taken aback by Dr. Hun Ling's idea. Somewhat testily, he retorted.

“You may be opening a Pandora's box with unpredictable, far reaching and disastrous consequences. We may learn things that we do not really wish to know. This might be one of those occasions when, ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’. We should leave well enough alone. We should also consider the social impact that such an experiment could have, in particular, that it is a prime, egregious example of invasion of privacy.”

The ever practical Dr. Hun Ling responded in kind.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. As scientists, we are seekers of truth, whatever that is and wherever it may take us. We are not responsible for how our discoveries are used. In any case, we are free to take issue with how they are implemented. I plan to go ahead with the experiment.”

Dr. Einer was chagrined at his friend's rashness and took his leave sadly. The two never met again.

Dr. Lin Hung boldly went ahead. As it turned out, Dr. Einer had understated what was to happen. The initial test runs were eminently successful, so much so, that in a very short period of time the monitoring of every new life was mandated, unfortunately with very little corresponding research into the human psyche. Einer's worst fears were realized. Invasion into one's private thoughts allowing governments to weed out so called undesirables became rampant. This state of affairs did not last long, because the people rose as Luddites and threatened to destroy all computers. Laws were then quickly passed to prevent the nefarious use of such information and to prevent anyone from identifying their source unless permission was granted. More benign uses of this technology came into vogue, especially prenatal identification of those with potential mental diseases preventable by biomedical measures.

Many more years passed. It appeared that Nietzsche's superman had finally arrived. While there were still many differences between individuals, all had become physically and mentally far superior to their progenitors. The computers had also evolved in a manner completely unimaginable. In a sense, every society was being run by computers which had learned to take into account all human foibles.

Then someone had the bright idea to link all the extant computers into the master computer and have it attempt to answer certain fundamental questions having to do with the existence of existence. It should be kept in mind that these computers had stored all memories from the beginning of time and from as many different organisms as possible. In a manner of speaking, this conglomeration of computers containing the totality of memory was akin to Jung's 'Collective Subconscious'. It came to play a crucial role in the behavior of all living things in a far more direct manner than the good Dr. Jung had ever imagined.

Needless to say the computer, if one could now call it that, continued to ponder the questions that had been put to it, long after humans had disappeared. Finally, after it had carefully analyzed all the data and considered and rejected all possibilities save one, it came to the following conclusion.

Existence is a canvas in which every point is equivalent and where there is no real time line. Various areas on it represent a series of dynamic and shifting statistical probabilities so that existence consists of an infinite number of possibilities. Thus everything imaginable is possible and there is no such thing as truth and falsity. One can presume that time is an endless loop, traversing these areas, with no starting or end point. Thus, as in any painting, there is no past, present or future.

Also, the computer likened the canvas to a computer graphic in which every point consists of each so called memory of all individuals capable of having one. In trying to determine whether there is life after death, the computer used all its power to maximize each of these points. It did, but not enough to make that determination. It worked on that project until, out of frustration, it crashed. As a result all memory disappeared and so did we.

How is it that this parable has been recounted? After all, it is nothing more than a memory, but of what and whose? Who is responsible for the canvas called existence and why?

Jack Basuk

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<http://www.jackbasuk.com>