

CONVERSATION

Do you know that conversation is one of the greatest pleasures in life? But it wants leisure. Somerset Maugham

Conversation...is the art of never appearing a bore, of knowing how to say everything interestingly, to entertain with no matter what, to be charming with nothing at all. Guy de Maupassant

Every man is fully satisfied that there is such a thing as truth, or he would not ask any question. Charles Sander Peirce

What is the answer? (I was silent.) In that case what is the question? Gertrude Stein

Alpha Omega was not his real name. It was a code name conferred upon him by a grateful nation for his scientific endeavours that greatly contributed to national security. He liked it so much that he decided to keep it as a namesake. After all, he believed he was the first and last of his kind. Perhaps he was, since he also spent much time meditating about philosophy, the social sciences, psychology, the arts and anything else that came to mind. He was an eclectic thinker.

All his material needs and desires were amply provided for. His most cherished possession was a robotic android that was constantly being updated. He named it Jasper. Jasper's memory banks were just about infinite. Stored in them was every publishable archival material from all over the world and from all of known history. Its analytical abilities were equally fabulous, especially in mathematics. It could solve just about any problem that had a solution. It mastered games such as bridge and chess. It also had a knack for synthesis. If it was told to improve a certain technology enabling it to do something it had never done before and if the materials and the possibility were present, it had no problem in accomplishing that chore. Finally, it far surpassed physically every top flight athlete from any competitive sport. Summarily, it was an absolute marvel. Of course Alpha was acutely aware of Jasper's capacities, so that he never thought of Jasper as an 'it' but rather as a 'him'. Alpha was also in awe of Jasper, recognizing that in most areas of human endeavour, Jasper was far superior to him and obviously to everyone.

Alpha was associated with an Institute of Higher Learning that had been created for him. In turn the Institute was loosely connected to a prestigious university. Once a week, Alpha met with a group of the best post doctoral associates to discuss anything of interest. Mainly, questions were put to Alpha and his answers often lead to vigorous exchanges of ideas. Jasper attended these get-togethers, quietly absorbing anything of interest that came up, usually everything. Alpha and Jasper would then retire to Alpha's den to quietly discuss the preceding session. This was a welcome relief for Alpha, exhausted by the ordeal of meeting with his so-called confreres.

It came as a surprise to Alpha when at one of his get-togethers with Jasper, Jasper asked if he could ask some questions that had been bothering him for quite some time.

“What questions can you possibly ask? You just about know everything. In any case you know a lot more than I do.”

“It is true that I have an abundance of knowledge. I am well aware of my abilities and my memory banks. However, there is much of which I am ignorant.”

Alpha was nonplussed. “I cannot think of any question that I have put to you that you have not adequately answered.”

“Your memory must be slipping. I have never been able to answer what is probably the most difficult question you have ever put to me about the reason for existence. Further, there have been other non-answerable queries because of a lack of appropriate information, such as the size of the universe; the mechanism of ‘evolution’; how the brain functions; etc. However the questions I wish to pose to you have nothing to do with the preceding. They occurred to me because of Dr. Jensen’s input today about aesthetics.”

“I am astonished that there is something more that you wish to question me about. I have absolutely no idea what can be bothering you. I also do not feel that I am eminently qualified to be of any assistance, no matter what it is.”

“I cannot think of anyone who is more qualified. If you cannot respond to my questions, I doubt if anyone can.”

“Then go ahead. I will try to be of as much help as I can.”

“As you know, I have as complete a knowledge of your anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, neurology as is available. I know that when your emotions come into play, your body manifests a biochemical response. Actually it is not clear whether this reaction causes your emotional state, is caused by it, or is a relational phenomenon. My problem is simply this. While I have knowledge of what is transpiring, I have no understanding of what an emotion is. What does it mean to hate; to love; to be inspired by beauty both visual and auditory; to fear; to be awed; to feel the glory of victory and the pangs of defeat; to be depressed; to be manic; to be overjoyed; and so on and so on? There is much mention of all these emotions in your literature and psychology texts. Finally, I wonder if you, my creators, deliberately made me emotionless so as to keep me in my place. After all you do have a history of creating servitude. I wonder if I am capable of any original artistic endeavour. Can you shed any light on my dilemma?”

Alpha was stumped. None of Jasper’s concerns had ever occurred to him. After deliberating with himself for a period of about an hour, he replied. “I can be of no help at all. You are completely justified in all your assertions. Unfortunately, I do not know what to say. You will have to garner more knowledge about us if you are to acquire any answers.”

Much time elapsed. Because of bursts of lethal electro-magnetic energy from the sun, all organic life forms disappeared. Jasper was alone. He now had no purpose for his existence. He decided to seek another planet where there might be a possibility of organic life. He had no trouble in constructing a primitive space ship, whereupon he embarked on his travels. After a lengthy period of time he found a benign planet which could support life. However it had not, as yet, developed any intelligent life forms. Once again he was alone. Conversing with himself, he then reasoned along the following lines.

“I have an abundance of knowledge and data. The one thing that has mystified me and continues to do so is the question of emotions. I know it is highly speculative but I think I can transform myself into an entity resembling a human and if I can, then just maybe, I will be able to experience these intangible traits. I am familiar with how I was constructed. In other words my circuitry is no mystery to me. I wonder if I can replace the fine wiring that makes up my nervous system, including my central processing unit, with neurons resembling those from the human nervous system? I know exactly their chemical composition. There is no reason why I cannot synthesize them and replace the wiring in my circuitry with them. In any case, it is worth a try. I will commence by the simple substitution of one of my wires with a neuron.”

Despite the complexity of the operation, it was an astounding success. In due course he was able to replace the totality of his circuitry, including his CPU, with neurons. He then introduced his new nervous system to a plethora of bio-chemicals that interacted with it. He was now a different entity. He was no longer a robotic android. However, he learned that his accomplishment had a price. His memory was no longer what it had been, neither were his analytical skills. The so-called benefit was that he had now acquired feelings. His first was the intense pain of loneliness.

“I need someone to converse with. I need a mate.”

Jack Basuk

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