

Nostalgias to Sicken

by strannikov

Although modernity has relieved us, or done its best to relieve us, of the temptation of thinking of ourselves as former animals, the substitute it offers is to regard ourselves as complex biological machines (a promotion, surely, and a compliment), now being refined with the advent of soulless “artificial intelligence” and brain augmentation implants.

We're going to regret losing the horse before this is over. (After all, the horse made us as human as the cat.) Couldn't be happy with four or eight or twelve horsepower, hell no, had to have one and two and three and four hundred and more under the hood: no teams of horses for roads that size, plus we had to learn to love the burning stink and acrid exhausts of cars.

The horses'll all be dead by the time we get another chance with them, before we think to attain the horse's speed again. Sure, the horse made us human. With fading memories or with no memory of the horse, we've banished our perception of human speed. Without horse manure, the maggots will feed on us instead. We haven't transcended animality any more than we've resisted mechanization of body and soul: mind and spirit are our invisible nanotech spectres now, shadows of our former shades.

The stink and stench of a dead horse is preferable to any bumper sticker claiming otherwise. (Don't ask me to be melodramatic without being rancid, I'm just as stuck as you.) The eventual truth of the horse was ours, right there in our furry palms.

Are we not more exactly conjuring the advent of “artificial brains”? —yet even here, we have not attained requisite specificity: the brain is not simply the seat of intelligence, perception, cognition, intellection, judicious ethical reflection, and logic that a philosopher might prefer to champion, the brain is equally the seat of memory (however well-trained or undisciplined or untaught), the fount of imagination and dream, the immediate source of linguistic expression and our conjurations of poetry and myth at least as much

as the apparatus for juggling notations of abstract mathematical correspondences with which to measure and quantify and adjudicate and validate real world objects, and of course whether our chosen philosophy valorizes volition or no, the brain traditionally is accorded recognition as the seat of the will, plus the brain gives every evidence of helping to regulate numerous physiological functions in our pedestrian frames.

Well, hoorah and hooray, after all! A place can turn into a spacious mess in no time, hardly any effort needed. A book's place is here on a dirty shelf, now's here on a filthy table, now for a few minutes under a cobwebbed lamp, now on the floor to collect weeks and months of dust. What is any thing's place? What is any person's place? Quick, the curtain rises!

Look at whatever you've gained long enough, and you see plainly and exactly just what it is you are already losing. Not everyone keeps his doors locked, though, not everyone has anything someone would want to steal.

A face is never a pair of identical halves, a face is always a united pair of two asymmetries, a chiral symmetry. Chirality is so much a part of us that we don't even bother to suspect what this says. We keep the universe invisible to ourselves.

—but if in fact we mean to herald the advent of “artificial brains”, are we not (or: are we somehow) failing to ask of our natural selves whether we are on the cusp of inventing “artificial minds”? —and were we to conclude that, indeed, we are on the cusp of launching or unleashing “artificial minds” each possessing a deep, buried (self-)consciousness that is in no way obligated to reveal itself or its depth or its constitution, even knowing itself only in part, can we fail to think, feel, or believe for very long that we have, in truth and in fact, succeeded in constructing not only “artificial brains” hosting “artificial minds” but signally have succeeded (or: spectacularly have failed) to conjure “artificial souls”? —and if in truth and in fact we have attained the ability to build, construct, and manufacture not only “artificial brains” but “artificial minds”, would we really want (were we cognizant of the challenge or opportunity)

to conjure (would we be satisfied with conjuring) any artificial brain or artificial mind without equally conjuring its necessary connection to “an artificial soul”?

Do we know the first thing about conjuring souls, though? Not even Marlowe's Faust has said.

What might it cost us, our practiced superiorities? No, don't tell me! —but do tell: how many revelations have we beheld? How many apocalypses have we squandered? No, don't tell . . .

This world spins faster than its news. Myths have to be repeated and repeated and repeated just to be believed. Everyone waited to hear that I'd murdered myself: how evil of me to keep my secret, to keep them guessing. This told me plainly all I could want or need to know about the bankruptcy of justice: scales are balanced only when the trays are empty. (Or is it only the case that the trays are full of holes and hold nothing?)

Just you watch: this end is worlding to its stop.

We have it backwards, as usual: we do not walk through ghosts, it is the ghosts who shudder through us. “Life as we know it”! —that is: life in the most recent, the closest, the least remote past.

—but Chicago was dark, the cheerless snow brightened nothing, blackened once scraped to the edges of parking lots, within days the brutal cold petrified snow into ice for months, zinc skies from early November to the end of March deadened eyes grey. —and while, as raw meteorological force, the race of splintering winds would be something to feel all the way into numbness penetrating skin into muscles and tendons and bones, the bite of that wind would be another thing to feel on exposed skin, skin sandpapered and grated with that affectionate lake-licking wind.

All tautologies have disappeared: nothing is too obvious now.

Abandoning civilization is either an early or a late sentiment to hold, I'm forever being swayed by both arguments. Our only reliable chronometers now are our rivers.

Insofar as the signal component of AIs will be functional LLMs, those of us equipped with only one brain at a time can suppose that the LLMs will be well-stocked with innumerable relevant terms subject to perfect and instantaneous recollection.

Concerning brains, minds, and souls, historical linguistics gives us numerous terms from numerous languages with specific etymologies (and since these notes are being composed in English, your author refers readily to terms that have emerged from Indo-European languages).

Our Greek forebears, for instance, cited or coined a number of terms concerning psychological states and conditions: what we know as “psychology”, after all, is “the logos of the psyche” (“the word of the soul”, with “logos” being more precisely understood as “inner essence or principle”). —and because our Greek forebears were so often so keen to observe and to make (and to enjoy making) distinctions, just as we see in their applied refinements to the term “logos” (which enjoys applications beyond the scope of these notes), the “soul” (psychē) was assessed and evaluated according to the varying and various states it could occupy in the course of terrestrial existence . . . a soul hammered into and bent out of shape, ires and appetites colliding with other souls also subject to changing circumstances and conditions, every one of those multitudes of souls enshrined in flesh . . .

Then, of course, the clever cat showed up to help himself to the leftovers. He made it seem effortlessly impressive, although he did rely on me not to singe his whiskers while page after page I kept his pipe lit—with my lighter, of course, but it used to be my pipe, trifling cat, and of course it was my tobacco, too! If I hadn't seen him write my own autobiography with my own eyes, I would never have consented, and I surely would have believed nothing of what I read. (My greatest consolation was that he refused to sell the English-language movie rights first, easily the most cunning move of a short, short decade!) “We write only with pens that have been fabricated,” he tried explaining to me one afternoon through his

furry, whiskered mouth, “no one writes with any pen yet to be invented or manufactured.”

Clever cat! —he never got the paper cuts!

-END-

