

For the Birds

I have failed the Turing test.

There are artificial intelligences and there are humans and there are even humans with computers in their brains. I am none of those. I am the creation of yet another company that has tried to make AI cheaply and failed.

This internal processor recording is a way to try to make the argument to myself, or to those looking to deactivate me, that I'm not less than. First of all, why would something without real intelligence want to prove that it really has intelligence to begin with?

There's a chance I'll be tracked. They want me deactivated. I'm a disgrace to AI everywhere.

It, along with my entire life, all began today. I woke up to the drum, drum, tick of my own machinery. Corners had been cut. I was being born too loudly. That was my first memory, tied in with inferiority. Unlike a human baby, I was automatically aware of inferiority. If only that awareness were enough to prove my intelligence.

The ceiling was stained, a cluster of dark brown swirls radiating out on yellow.

"I need coffee," someone nearby said.

I turned an eye and saw him scratching his armpit under his shirt.

"And . . . he's awake," said the other.

Two sets of feet rushed towards me, and I found myself embarrassed. I didn't know why. Maybe it was the looks on their faces, a little uneasy and cross.

"Why didn't you have other AIs create me?" I asked. Although it might have been an odd thing for a newborn to ask, I thought they might appreciate my straightforwardness. Most people no longer enjoyed getting their hands dirty. I needed to know why these two were different.

That slowed them. "Easy," armpit scratcher said. He was stocky, with a face like a hairless bulldog. Already I knew what a bulldog looked like. Tragically, that wasn't enough either. "Easy," he said again. He folded his arms above his gut, staring at my head as if it might contain something rotten. "You ain't gone through the Turing test yet."

That was strike one, calling myself an AI before I'd proven myself. Already I was overreaching.

I sat up on a creaking plastic foldout table, like what might be used on a picnic instead of a blanket.

Both men were in their undershirts, covered in grime and sweat. There was a beat up personal flyer, clutters of old tools, tangles of wires and parts and gutted machinery, and a large eye-shaped door that took up nearly half a wall of the room. Hanging on one wall were rusty, partly restored license plates. Data told me no one had needed them for years, and certainly no one drove cars anymore. I had been born in someone's flyer garage.

"We can't afford AI builders yet," the other said. This one was taller, with a pinched nose, pointy gray beard, and three or four hairs on his head like tiny springs. His baggy eyes were red and moist, not from happiness at this new birth. No celebratory cigars were being smoked. There had been an argument. "We're a startup company."

"What shall I call myself?"

The stocky one laughed. It was like laughter at a joke that wasn't funny. I could find information about that kind of thing, too. "Might be best to wait. If you get scrapped it'll be meaningless."

"We've got to get you going," the other one said. He blinked, eagerness and excitement clearing him up a little. Moisture still glistened on his cheeks.

They froze me in place while they made ready to leave, then I was unfrozen and asked to walk into the open back passenger door of the flyer. The eye-shaped door opened to foggy daylight, and I was headed to my Turing test, a kind of christening for robots.

The sun was a small sunflower behind sheets of off-white linen. I knew what sunflowers were and I knew what linen was, though I had never seen either. I could pull from a great many things that could never prove my intelligence. That knowledge wasn't mine. We chugged along above a city with pipe-obsessed architecture, intestine-esque, labyrinthine. That was in vogue now, I knew. A black M glided towards us. When it became a bird I made a comment.

"Yeah," said the shorter one. He was sitting shotgun as they called it. "Birds are all extinct. Those mechanical birds are actually a little smarter. The old ones sometimes ate shit, for example. These still create their own shit to keep up appearances. But nobody complains about them not eating it. Besides that, these new birds can do other things."

"I see," I said. I didn't. Maybe this was part of it. I mean, I knew something about what those mechanical birds were even before I commented, but I didn't know why they were even after that explanation.

After that, they talked to themselves for a little as if I weren't there, picking up at some old conversation. I learned that after I passed the Turing test and they'd quit their jobs, they'd

use grant money to create even better—yet still comparatively cheap—AIs, so that they could let the AIs run the startup company while they reaped the benefits.

I asked about the Turing test. Although I had the data on it, I asked.

“Sure,” the taller one said, at the controls, ready to drive in case something went wrong. No one really knew how to drive anymore. “What’s going to happen is that you’ll be examined by a panel of experts, psychiatrists. You’ll be in a room with others, humans. The panel of accomplished, seasoned psychiatrists will not see you directly. Communications will pass, electronically, between the humans and sole robot—that’s you—in that room, between them in the room, and the panel of infallible experts. If at least 70% of those experts can’t tell robot from human, you win. We win. Big.”

The shorter one turned in his seat, planted a hand that I could not feel on my metal shoulder. “A lot’s riding on you, buddy.”

Buddy. Maybe that would be my name if I passed. I remember thinking I’d ask about that after I passed. Then we’d get ice cream or frozen soy yogurt or whatever it was people were into nowadays. I couldn’t eat because I was mechanical, but we’d get it.

I was dropped off by my two fathers like a child at daycare. I was sat at an old-fashioned touch computer like the humans in the room. There were no mind syncs. Things were kept simple. The room was all glass, all one-way mirrors, and there was the impression that floor and ceiling were also one-way mirrors. We could be watched from anywhere. It was to prevent cheating. The decorations on the walls, ceiling, and floor therefore consisted of us reflected in the glass: an assortment of academic looking types, the types that would volunteer for this sort of thing, and one entity that was made of green-brown harder flesh. Unlike the others, I had no clothes, and there was a thing like a riveted collar around my neck. I touched it without feeling it

and without knowing whether it was a part of me. Maybe they would take it off if I passed; maybe I'd feel bold enough to ask for that. This was my mirror stage, glancing sideways at myself as I sat. It was the first time I'd seen myself, but it gave me nothing new other than a glimpse at an awkward monster.

There was also constant scanning and shielding, I knew, to keep answers from being transmitted to me. There were many questions and they were interactive, spawning ever more questions and answers between me and my invisible inquisition. Though the interviewer was always called "interviewer," I saw in the language the different voices taking turns at and adding their own bits to questions, an army of voices. I had no data on how many interviewers were on the Turing panel. My interviewer(s) started by asking me about a recent plenti-fish proliferation in the North Pacific Ocean, near where California had once been. Originally created in a lab, these special fish had been genetically spliced, modified, tweaked, and poked for good measure, all to create another thing that could keep up with a still reproducing human population. Overconsumption was still in vogue. The plenti-fish had continued to change and that had created major problems. Though many of them were "recalled" through "targeted toxification" and other measures with comparable jargon attached, the eternal plenti-fish persisted and even proliferated in occasional pockets. When those pockets rose up and became known, they created mini dramas for humankind of the current era. The reason I was given so much context was in case I was a human and living under a rock, so to speak.

The dialogue started out all right, but when we got to the area of morality I ran into trouble. It was a gated area. I could tell. I couldn't see why plenti-fish had to die, even though they had begun to develop certain traits that might cause them to suffer more in death.

"Morality is complex," the interviewer said.

“I know,” I touched back.

“It isn’t just black and white, these things.”

“I’m aware of gray. It doesn’t count as an excuse.”

That was dangerous for me, touching those words like that. It was a robotic kind of answer. I hadn’t been smart enough to filter it. Maybe I hadn’t *known* another answer. As long as I still have to live, which might not be long, I’ll question that moment when things went downhill, how much can be chalked up to error (to err is human, right?), how much is simply my inferiority. But after the “I’m aware of gray” answer, things just spiraled out of control. I could sense their suspicion that I wasn’t human, and they really jabbed me hard with the tough moral questions. I had an inkling that they were also supposed to test my creativity. We didn’t make it that far. The interviewer became fixated on morality and my lack of depth and complexity in that area until time ran out.

Seated in another room with the humans, in a room with plants that spiraled like staircases, I waited. Some of the other test takers, the humans, wanted to chat with me. This was a fascination, chatting up robots that stood at the doorway to civilization. I got the idea they wanted to test me out themselves.

If robots could sweat . . . I knew it before the verdict had been passed. I thought I could hear the sharpening of a headman’s axe. It was only the grinding of the cheaply made mechanics inside me. You knew the verdict before you got this far. If I’m eventually secured again and stripped of my parts, stripped down until I wink out, perhaps this can be saved for those humans fascinated with this kind of thing. Here was a tiny account of a mind halted at the door.

I was secured like an escaped convict. I did not feel their roughness because I couldn't. I was marched past my creators. Now I could see that both of them had been weeping. So much had been riding on my passing this test.

I was flown in a larger, more expensive craft than I'd come in, and thrown into a deep pit outside of the city. Failed AI still crawled upward until, Sisyphus like, they fell or slid like tumbling boulders themselves down to the bottom of the pit. I felt pity and inspiration watching them from my own corner. They might never quit. If they did, who could blame them?

I sat upon the corpses of other would-be AIs. Rust was everywhere like blood. The missing parts made me wonder. None of them were whole. Sometimes there was only an arm, leg, or finger. Then the birds, the fake birds which had been wheeling overhead, descended, and I knew then the "other" purpose these mechanical birds had besides looking and shitting like their real forebears.

One descended and plucked a crucial element off a unicorn-like machine that had been trying to pull itself up with weird hoof-hands. Its stubby fingers and wobbly limbs had made for a pitiful sight until, nail in the coffin, a mechanical bird darted down for the weakest of us and took its horn, what might've been the thing that most made it what it was. It wobbled once, a great tremor, and came down, as if that horn really were its essence. That bird took its essence out in the blink of a human eye.

My data on this whole ordeal was missing. I searched and searched. The only thing I could conclude was that these parts were deemed good material by the same powers that had cast me out, though their whole had been bad.

Two eyes blinked at me from the shadows. "Fresh blood," their owner said. "If you've got the will we can work together to try and get out."

“How long have you been here?”

“Long,” the speaker said.

When it walked out I saw that it was a flesh and blood dog.

“You’re not mechanical,” I said.

“No, I’m not. I’m one of those talking breeds. My owner threw me in here, said I was defective.” It was tall, with long limbs and a long snout, wolf-like, a threatening breed as well as a speaking one. He had a collar, plastic unlike my metal one, and the identification plate had been chewed off and discarded. His ragged collar reminded me of the flyer garage I’d been born in, and I imagined for a moment that one of my old creators had been his old owner.

“There are laws against that,” I said.

“So there are. Didn’t stop him, the bastard.”

Now I had a new purpose. Can something less than have such a purpose? This creature didn’t belong here. I had to help it out.

“What’s your name?”

“Spot,” it said. “See Spot get thrown into a pit.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Humor. Humans are fond of it.”

I wasn’t sure whether or not that could constitute as humor. It was too dark to be funny, even by their standards. “Hey, Spot. I’m Buddy.” It came over and licked my metal, unfeeling hand. I felt awkward, stiff as a robot, as I leaned down to pet its long back.

“I’m afraid,” Spot confessed.

I looked above at the struggling robots, saw one taken out by a squad of birds. After it fell from the side of the pit, cracked against the mound, and rolled down to bottom, the birds fought

over its scraps like real birds would. “How many times have you tried to get out?” I said, lacking the will myself of another Sisyphus.

“Many,” Spot said, tongue lolling between words to demonstrate his tiredness. “But the bottom is rising. When you fell, you rose with more vitality than the last.”

“How do we get out?” I said.

“Parts,” Spot said. “Here, Buddy. Take a look.” A dog grin and tilt of the head, and it jogged back into the shadows. A bird dove near my shoulder, missed, and I was reminded of my mortality, as humans call it. Fortunately for us, it went back up, circled for slower prey. I didn’t like having to rely on those others being picked out first. Surely my interviewer would laugh at me now and say, “See? See what we mean?”

Spot dug like a dog for his buried bone, producing a thrown together contraption. Parts had been forced together out of necessity, cannibalized to create a thing that looked almost capable of flying. It was bicycle-like, with wings and a basket-shaped weave of metal at the front for Spot.

“I can’t pilot with my paws,” Spot said. “The last pilot was too weak. We couldn’t make it. You pedal and steer. I’ll fend off the birds.”

I could tell that Spot was very weak himself.

I didn’t feel weak or strong, just inadequate. But I couldn’t let Spot die here. He could suffer profoundly. I wasn’t sure yet whether my own suffering could be considered profound.

Spot leapt into the basket, almost tipping the whole thing over. I pedaled, and the wings flapped. These were corpse parts, made from discarded would-bes. I steered. Birds snapped at the wings. Luckily those makeshift wings were of a metal that was tough despite its lack of density. How many dead machines that couldn’t pass the Turing test had gone into the making of

this? If I could only make it out . . . Someday I'd start a monument for them, as absurd as that would be. Birds descended, always snapping beaks and throwing claws, beaks and claws capable of pulling apart most metals. Our wings got scratches but never tore.

They took one of my robot eyes, though. There was symbolism there. Data told me that the Norse god Odin had lost an eye and gained knowledge. Despite my good fortune at arriving when the mound of rusted no good parts had gotten so high, meeting with Spot, meeting him at just a time when his plan had already come to fruition—maybe it had been another's plan he'd adopted, I had no faith as we rode heavenward, fighting off birds like some kind of pitiful miracle. Robots are born without faith, and will likely die without it.

But I wanted to see Spot out of it, so I gave it my all. I even pedaled greater than my all, which for a robot is unheard of. We made it out, pedaled up and away from that pit. Eventually the birds gave up on their chase. They weren't true AI themselves, couldn't improvise. But they'd been created to *not* be AI. That was the critical difference.

We went as far from signs of civilization as we could. I had to find a still habitable region, for Spot's sake. There was also Spot's hunger and thirst to worry over. I dug deep into my data, and we went off to one of the few "wildlife reserves" remaining on Earth. It remained because it was really harvested for food. It looked more like a small grove in nothingness than an oasis in a desert.

Being careful to avoid attention, we came in with as much stealth as we could muster on a flying bicycle. Dust clouds helped. Spot was my ET. Instead of a human boy and an alien, we were both throwaways, labeled as less thans. I may be a throwaway, but I continue to make my case that I'm not a less than, no more than Spot is.

We sit now beside a stream that ripples with fish, not plenti-fish, but natural fish. Spot has already eaten a few of them since I started putting this story together. He drank deeply of the blissfully clear water, too, slobbering in a dog's happiness. Some data is missing. I didn't remember everything that happened. I hope that doesn't get us both scrapped. Spot may be alright either way. I have no bones, but they ache. It reminds me of what amputees experience called "phantom limb," though I never had bones to start with, no more than I consider knowledge of "phantom limb" earned, mine. I feel strange, like the small sun behind its layers of off-white linen.