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Summa Cum Laude Examination Paper

April 13th, 2022

A Philosophical Look at the Bobiverse

"The voices and the light faded, and the world ended." (Taylor 18) These are the last human thoughts of Robert "Bob" Johansson in the book *We Are Legion (We Are Bob)* by Dennis Taylor. The rest of the book follows Bob as a Von Neumann probe, a self-replicating, deep space probe with an artificial intelligence created from the template of Bob's mind. At the junction of computer science and philosophy, the question of Bob's nature appears. I will argue that Bob, in his robot form, although having lost all his human body, still is the same Bob as his former human self.

The first question that must be answered is "What is Bob?" Before his untimely death, Bob was a regular human. He started a successful tech company that was bought out by one of its main competitors. Flush with cash from the sale, Bob decides to invest a portion of his newfound wealth in cryogenic storing, the process of freezing the body in hopes of being able to revive it with future technology. He signs a contract with a company that promises to store, maintain, and hopefully restore Bob after his death. Ironically, two days after signing the contract, Bob is hit by a car and dies. After his restoration 117 years in the future, we are given the following explanation of what Bob now is. He is described as

> "a copy of the mind of Robert Johansson, created by scanning his cryogenically frozen brain at the subcellular level and converting the data into a computer simulation. You are, essentially, a computer program that thinks it's Robert Johansson." (Taylor 22)

Bob's entire human body is gone. Physically, he is a computer simulation stored on a complex machine.

Physically Bob is just a machine. At a deeper level, there is an uncertainty about the metaphysical nature of Bob. Throughout the book Bob and others argue about what Bob has become. One of the first groups involved in the discussion is the Free American Independent Theocratic Hegemony (FAITH). FAITH took over America during the interim between Bob's death and the present. It is a conservative Christian government that took over in a bloody coup. FAITH owns the technology that made Bob possible. They hold the following opinion, "The Ministry of Truth is of the opinion that, while (replicants) are without a soul, they are merely based on God's creation and not an attempt to usurp His authority." (Taylor 49) To FAITH, Bob, and other replicants like him, are not human or even animals, they have no soul and are therefore simply machines. Although FAITH is the owner of Bob's technology, I do not agree with their definition of Bob. Even in FAITH, different factions believe different things about the replicants status. Certain groups believe they are an abomination and should be destroyed. Other groups are willing to accept a well-rounded view of the replicants. Since FAITH is divided on the question, the answer must come from somewhere else.

I propose we go to the source. Bob has questions about his status. He wonders if he is alive, if he has free will, and if he is still Bob. There are several features Bob demonstrates that show he is alive and a version of the original Bob. The first is self-awareness. Bob shows a large amount of self-awareness throughout the book. The first example of this comes when he is pondering his current state and whether he is conscious:

> "For that matter, Descartes had his famous cogito ergo sum; but Thomas had added to it with his "Since I doubt, I think; since I think, I exist." Well, I was certainly full of doubt.

> Doubt implied self-awareness, and a concern for one's future. So I was a conscious entity, barring evidence to the contrary." (Taylor 52)

Bob recognizes his internal states. He experiences doubt and fear about the future. If Bob could not question his own state of being, then he would not be conscious. Since he can question himself, then he must be conscious.

Bob demonstrates what appears to be free will throughout the series. A question about computers is always whether they can make choices on their own, whether they have freedom. This question looms large for Bob. Since he is a computer program, everything that he does started as computer code. One of the goals he is given as a probe, is to travel the universe exploring, making more probes like him as he goes. Bob experiences hesitancy when it comes to replicating himself. If he had no free will, he would not experience reluctance to follow through with the goal of his mission. One scene exemplifies this tension. As Bob thinks about creating more of himself he thinks, "If I hadn't done all that code cleanup, the mission imperatives would be exerting their influence and I would have already started building the space station and Bob clones. But with those removed, I was an unconstrained entity, with free will." (Taylor, 88-89) Bob no longer operates solely under the code he was created with. Something about his creation allows him to be self-modifying. His programming gives him free will. With this free will, he changes his programming allowing himself even more free will. This shows that he can make choices beyond his programming, an essential humanlike ability.

There are many objections to the claim that a computer could be a mind. One of the main counterarguments comes from *Minds, Brains, and Science* written by John Searle. Searle writes a treatise about whether computers can think. He contends that "there is more to having a mind than having formal or syntactical processes." (Searle 31) He creates a famous thought

experiment to illustrate his argument. In the thought experiment, Searle describes a man in a room, with a book describing the correct response to every possible input. All the inputs are in Chinese characters, same with all the outputs. Searle contends that even if the man responds correctly to every input, he has no meaning of the output. He is simply following the program, not understanding what the words mean or what is responding to. One of the conclusions of his argument is "No computer program by itself is sufficient to give a system a mind. Programs, in short, are not minds, and they are not by themselves sufficient for having minds." (Searle 39) I believe that Searle would say something similar about Bob. He would claim that while it appears Bob is responding on his own volition, it is all just a result of his programming. He would contend that he has no real free will and that his response to input is solely a program.

We Are Legion responds to Searle's claim directly. As Bob ponders his current state of being, he references the Chinese room thought experiment. He counters the argument with the statement:

> "Was I nothing more than a Chinese Room? Could my entire behavior be explained as a set of scripted responses to given inputs? That was probably the easiest uncertainty to answer. The classic Chinese Room, which just used scripts to react to input, had no internal dialog. Even if you made its behavior stochastic to introduce some variation in behavior, it was still only active when responding to input. When not processing a response, it just sat there, idle. By worrying about this, right now, I fell into a different category." (Taylor 52)

Bob presents a simple response to Searle's argument. Bob is active outside of receiving input. He has thoughts and makes choices without prompting. In the Chinese room, the only interaction is

when the program is running. For Bob, the program is always running. He does not need outside input to interact. His argument also continues by describing his internal dialog.

Robot Bob is presented as the same person he was before his transformation. Taylor takes strides to show how a human AI would function in the world. I argue that Bob still has the same essence as his former self. He can make choices independent of any of his programming. He is conscious, perceiving the world around him while also having an internal dialog. Even though he does not have the body of a human, he portrays the essential characteristics of humanity. He does not share human matter, but he certainly does share a human mind. *We Are Legion* presents a compelling story of a new type of intelligence. We are not at the current level of technology that Taylor describes. We do not have self-replicating probes. We cannot convert the human mind into a digital matrix but, if we could, and the results turned out like Bob, I think we would have a hard time denying the humanity present in these new beings.

References

Searle, John R. "Two: Can Computers Think?" *Minds, Brains and Science*, Harvard Univ. Pr, Cambridge, Mass, Massachusetts, 2003, pp. 28–41.

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