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Brain (脑)

(Obvious cool-guy) Arlindo Oliveira wrote a book: *Digital Mind: How Science is Redefining Humanity*. His not-stupid writing demonstrates hours clocked in reverent study—a repertoire including hits in not one but several sciences, along with an evident knack for gnawing the fat across campus in the halls of humanities. And yeah the subtitle however unsubtly winks at this marriage proposal, but the bulk of the work tips no more than a little fez in the general direction of philosophy. Anyway, the book is, on the one hand, the Portuguese academic’s gracious invitation to crush up and display for us an offering of that pedigree; the rest, meanwhile, unforced, sometimes speculative yet suggestive throughout, is a prolonged musing on the future, of artificial intelligence and machine learning—conversations wisping around a general pool, the ontology of mind.

Hark

I just read that the Chinese word for computer, an adjectival phrase, originates from a 1965 book called 電腦和你, *Computers and You*, which just as well could be this book’s English title, if poorly translated: *The Electric Mind and You, Reconciled in Harmony*. The prescient first two characters together make “electric brain,” the word that comes out of one-fifth of the planet’s (human) mouths when speaking of the

thing I wrote this with. So the notion's not new, it's a computer—it does what brains can also do, but not as well. Oliveira relays this translation, proselytizing the word, but not without a new testament heralding the *redefinition* of humanity; his sermon implores us incant the phrase with its full volume, to mean it. Because while the shortish history of “computers” has intermittently wondered aloud, “would a machine mind?” the threshold beyond which maybe it could be that synthetic minds are actually nears. Most of what's included here are chapter-length check-it-outs painted carefully, detailing a couple cool seasons from centuries of science—a guided museum jaunt. What makes this guy cool is that he's stoked to talk into the night about biology, neuroscience, philosophy, the future of humanity. He's *enthused* and seems nice.

Tales

There are decent detailed chapters on technology, computer science, probability, neuroscience, etc. One chapter helped me feel something: in a characteristically lengthy discussion concerning cell biology, Oliveira produces this pretty wonderful picture, borrowing from other authors like Dawkins to decoupage a wild tapestry: the history of life. The paragraph version goes like this: cells, the most basic fundamental unit of life, are first alive, however that started. Many (trillions) of them comprise animated beings like you, but the earliest earthlings were single-cells, slurping microscopically thither. Left to right, present tense. Time passes; these cells, which possess a baffling ability to self-replicate, begin to congregate in whatever strange forever ago, becoming aware (in an uneducated sense), of the advantage. But *why*? The question is duh never answered. You're allowed only this Schopenhauerian perpetuation of replicates, an apparently

collective, endless (so far) and meaningless, duplicative will. But in that congregation multicells throbbed with presumed purpose, mutating evermore complex constructions of selves within selves, replicable structures of convenience and strength. These weird things invent epigenesis, cell differentiation, become organs. The shared will of individuals in harmony to design over epochs such fantastic machines, a rainbow of swamp-beings circling each next other stormily, each experiment in turn put on semi-supervised trial. Evolution is apparently not only slow genetic perfectionism; specification and taxonomical variability are, too, the products of increasingly sophisticated mutant algorithms for engineering vessels equipped with functions fit for shrunken copy-pasting birthed by a perseverating group-uncanniness wrought from a preposterous amount of submicroscopic instances of life whatever it is squished together forever. And we're just the latest prototype of us it them. But that's cool, too.

And it is, cool, because of course that's just it. The story gets better, as these little miscreants embark upon social engineering projects, divide labor, roleplay, some have the gall to *be brains*, those nuts. And just like that, the industrial revolution of earthling cellular history changes everything changes. The mind then is a kind of magic invention made of stuff making stuff; they we discover electricity, neuron firing missile firing; they we develop DNA, hylc printers of travelling beasts, all seemingly unintentionally; we they die. And then squirming, clawing around in and out of this totally far-fetched stupor I opened my eyes and spoke.

I am

Some people speculate that these first two words of *Infinite Jest* respond to “Who’s there?,” the first line of *Hamlet*, from which the title phrase arrives. It’s a funny joke maybe mushrooms can tell well. His dislike for Wallace notwithstanding, Harold Bloom’s claim that the duplicitous Iago’s “I am *not* what I am” responds to Corinthians 15:10 measures a standing wave of the same echo.

“If we do not know another language, we have missed the best and simplest opportunity of getting our ideas disentangled from the swaddling clothes of their native syntax.”

The former’s thing was to personify Frye’s mythos of winter, the ironic fool of the last few decades. The latter’s pilgrimage, a life’s paean to the “invention” of the human courtesy of our good man Will, the archeology of influence, of preaching a Falstaffian vitalism thumbing its nose at monochrome jpeg humanity. His our forebears developed a newer humor, Wallace pushed forward a mathematical literature, a “reinvention” or maybe just “extension.” Oliveira reaches out to the convex earth figures like God, proposing, the ring inscribed “redefinition.”

The measured cadences of these historical oracles represent a kind of strategic withdrawal from action: they marshal and review the ranks of familiar but deeply-held ideas. The rhetoric of persuasion to action itself, which is the next stage of prose as we proceed from literature outwards into social life, is considerably stepped up in its rhythm. Here the repetitions are hypnotic and incantatory, aimed at breaking down

customary associations of ideas and habitual responses, and at excluding any alternative line of action. Such a rhetoric may be heard in its purest form in the speech rhythms of a boy talking to a dog, with the object of persuading him to sit up or shake hands or otherwise move out of the normal line of canine endeavor. When addressed to a human audience, such rhetoric must follow the dialectic of rhetoric: it must have either a rallying point or a point of attack, or both [end blockquote]¹

We can create minds, says Oliveira say I said say cells the cell. He brushes dualism aside as a doctor shoos an annoyance. Here's the real idea quick: there is a drama in our own story that is teleological, science is this great magic that is a kind of truth creeping into vision. We create minds, we save the trajectory, we preserve the picture, the lines ever crispier. Get the car back on the road...

am i

The when, what, who having all been proposed to, the why never unexplained, the how in progress; what's left, where? Of them, it is best. Neither has an answer, but one has observations. Where? Did everyone go? Oliveira guesses at an explanation: all possible timeworn life ever grew ingeniously bored, struck themselves blind eagerly, eyes packed in with ice and crystallized their own heavens in material VR fantasy. Diving into sparkling bits, electrocuting themselves. I don't *know*. Evidently, one among several translations for אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה is "I create what(ever) I create;" another "I am who am I am;" If even he couldn't be badgered for a name we're far behind schedule on the divinization of cool. If you believe doesn't matter what matters is that what is real: I

¹ *THEORY OF GENRES, NORTHRUP FRYE*

believe a mind can be written in perfectly written things I don't believe. What we will
whatever we will amble onward, clutching.