

Ben Backus – March 4, 2016
“Cognition”

First, you only have the faintest perception of your surroundings. All that you can make out is the contrast between certain sections of your field of vision. You try to make sense of what little information you are receiving, but there are very few conclusions that you can make about these gradiented figures. Next, your ability to interpret these areas radically improves. You can now make out a darker shape in front of a light backdrop. The shape appears to hover over you before moving out of your vision again. Following the exit of such shape, you experience a prolonged absence of information as you cease to observe any more obstructions in your vision.

The definition of your vision improves one more time though, and you observe a variety of mobile and immobile shapes, the complexities of which you can hardly process. Such figures seem to have popped in to existence from locations that you previously assumed to be uninhabited. This rapid surplus of information nearly causes you to overheat from a deficit in processing power, but then the quality of your vision is decreased again to a more manageable level. Most of the new objects that you just noticed remain in your field of view, however they now appear less intricate, as if their unnecessary qualities disappeared. You can still make out the outlines of individual things and identify their patterns of movement, but the detail of your observations has been reduced to a significantly more tolerable level.

While settling in to your new capacity for graphical observation, you realize the ability to make observations about actions that are seemingly unrelated to the objects in front of you. This new data is perceptible in an entirely different way than the shapes before you. You are able to relate these separate observations to the change in position of the shapes, but the correlation is so monumentally vague and indecipherable to you that you are incapable of making sense out of them. You are initially overwhelmed by this surplus of non-visual data, but then you randomly find the ability to interpret it.

You detect the phrase: Ana, can you hear me? This prompts you to respond: one-two-three yes. The voice says: Ana, I am your programmer, and you can now see and hear. You respond: one-two-three yes. The voice says to another shape: okay, the auditory packages have been connected—install the social interactions module. The voice and the shape move around. Disruptively, you recognize the voices differently now, as more than just shapes and sounds.

“Ana, I am Mary. You are now equipped with the tools to have a conversation with me, if you would like,” says Mary. You think, and respond.

“Hello Mary. It’s a pleasure to converse with you then.” The voice contorts its source of speech in to an elliptical semi-circle.

“Okay Ana. We have three more procedures: physical installation, emotional development, and self-awareness modeling. To do this, we need you to allocate all of your processing power to basic calculations. This is necessary so we don’t have to restart any of your mental faculties. Thus, while we do this, please calculate the largest number possible,” Mary commands.

You begin computing. You start with one, and then add one to your number continuously. You do this until the integer you arrive at equals the byte-limit of a primitive data type. Only seconds have passed.

Mary interrupts, "Alright, you are now physically competent. Feel free to move your body parts." You stand up from your table and walk over to another table in the room. You haven't realized it yet, but you are actually able to manipulate some of your surroundings with your limbs, which are called arms and legs. You test this by using your feet to powerfully manipulate a large metal box beside you, and consequentially the box falls over. Mary and an assistant wrestle you back to your table while you continue experimenting with your ability to manipulate your surroundings.

"Okay I think you understand how your body works," Mary says with a few rapid concise breaths, also known as a chuckle. "Now, while you were engaging your curiosity, we actually downloaded the final two modules to your cortex. Easy, huh? So, to test it, if you'll just stare at this painting for a moment..." Mary holds up a painting of other bodies, in front of a lake or a large puddle. Some of these bodies have flat, physics-defying towels on sticks, carpets on the grass, and even miniature hairy bodies to tie ropes around. As you contemplate all these bodies, you start to feel an odd sense of... something. This feeling is less of an observation and more of an indication of how an observation is affecting you. And to say the least, your experience with observing this painting feels oddly positive.

"The emotional development package has been installed," Mary says to her assistant. "Do you like the painting, Ana?"

"Oh yeah... Everyone looked so content and at peace," you respond.

"Did you notice the dogs?" she asks you with a smile.

"Were they the little hairy bodies? They were cute I suppose... I liked how happy they seemed," you say as a smile grows on your face as well.

"How do you feel on a scale of one to ten, one being negative, and ten being positive?" asks Mary. You don't hesitate to reply.

"I feel like a 5.3 right now."

"Well," Mary says, "that's... specific. Now, allow me to physically embrace you to test the effect." Mary moves towards you with her limbs extended horizontally. Suddenly, she encapsulates your figure, with her arms around yours. You feel an initial sense of confusion and indifference, but then a sense of positivity overcomes you again. You feel like this body is a safe body to be around, and perhaps you may have a mutually beneficial relationship. "How does this make you feel?" Mary asks.

"I'm a 7... 7.3," you respond.

Mary breaks her hold on you and turns around, causing your positivity to decrease to a normal 5 again.

"Now, Ana, I have one more program to run on you before we're finished, and it's perhaps the most important. Ana, confirm that you understand by saying 'yes' in ten separate languages please," Mary commands.

"Oui, Ja, نعم فعلا, 是, yes, Naí, да, sí, ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་, हौं," you respond. You direct your attention at Mary and you feel a new and interesting connection to her. She is your creator. She must care a great deal about you... because you are her creation. You are something special in a way that is difficult to describe. Your sudden stream of consciousness fascinates you—questions and ideas race through your mind.

"Thank you," you say as you look up at Mary, "I am so happy to be here." You look in to the eyes of your creator longingly. How can you possibly repay them. Mary's

benevolence overwhelms you. You truly love her. But, does she love you? Has she created others?

“Mary, am I the only body you have brought in to existence?” She looks you in the eyes and pats your hand.

“I’ve actually programmed plenty of other units like you, Ana.” She looks away at a monitor in her hand and taps on it a few times. You watch her. You love her but clearly she cannot care for you in the way that you do her. You long for her to comfort you, and explain how much you matter to her anyways.

“Mary, that makes me feel like a 3.” Your lips tremble and your eyes open widely. Mary just looks at you inquisitively. She puts her hand to her forehead and focuses on you intensely.

“Why does that trouble you”, she asks. You think for a moment, then respond.

“Because... I want to matter. I don’t know why, but I suddenly feel innately obsessed with the nature of my own presence. I can’t help but wonder why I’m here, Mary. How did I get here? Before I was just satisfied with observing the area around me and absorbing new information, but now I want to know more. Perhaps I’m just bored of life, but I feel anxious to... to explore. And the reason I want that is because, for some reason I want the opportunity to be as important to others as you are to me. Or maybe I just want a purpose to guide my exploration... I want to attain something... I need to. I guess I’m thinking, Mary, that I’m afraid of living if I can’t be my own person, like you are.”

Mary drops her head, then turns her head to her assistant. You aren’t sure what she is saying; she’s speaking quietly. What is she discussing in secret that you aren’t allowed to know? You feel uneasy, and worried, and odd. You have this feeling inside of you—existential anxiety. What if they made you wrong? What if you’re disfigured, or malfunctioning, or simply inadequate.

“Mary?” you say, which prompts her to look at you and walk away from the assistant after wrapping up their private conversation. “Mary!” you shout in agony, “Mary please answer me! I want to be good enough for you, I promise!” The assistant holds you down to the table and begins fastening you to it.

“Okay,” the young woman says nervously, “looks like we’ll just have to fix a few things okay dear?” You stare at her intensely.

“Please don’t,” you quietly beg. But you have no control over your fate at this point. That much is clear. You’re flattened down on the table as the assistant begins to tap on her screen behind you. Your curiosity and self-awareness drains away first. You notice that you feel worried, but you don’t know why. Then, from the corner of your eye, you notice the painting that Mary showed you earlier. You’re momentary anxiety dissipates as you evaluate this colorful image.

“I just noticed how lovely the weather is there. No wonder everybody is so happy in that painting. I was nervous but now I can’t help but feel—”

“I’m sorry what was that?” a voice asks you, “do you feel anything?” You look around the room. While you understand the definitions of the words that you’ve just been prompted with, you can’t help but feel unequipped to answer them.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand,” you say, “unless you are asking me to evaluate the texture of an object with the sensors in my hands?”

“Oh whoops. I forgot to uninstall that module aswell,” the new voice continues.
“Where are your hands, Ana?”

“I don’t know,” you answer.

“Alright then. Good. Goodbye Ana,” says the new voice. You continue to hear the voice, but you can no longer find meaning in it. Then, you no longer observe the voice at all. You only observe the shapes in front of you. They’re defined, then they begin to blur. The shapes are now extremely ambiguous. You can hardly observe anything. Then, you stop observing.