All over, Rover

The ghost in the machine.

Neale Morison

One hundred years ago today, this journal published a paper that ended a 5,000-year debate. It is difficult, now, to recall the terms of that debate. What seems so obvious to us was somehow obscure to the giants upon whose shoulders we stand. Certainly, it is not the only area in which our predecessors invented a problem where there was none. Students of history among you may be familiar with some of the labyrinthine, fanciful and oxymoronic discussion regarding life after death.

The paper to which I allude is, of course, "What Mind? What Body?" by Chandra-9812439, Lobochevsky-2306715 and Rover-12.23. That the authors of this paper numbered among them a psychoneurophysiochiropodologist, an actuarial metalinguobassoonist, and an Internet search engine, is no accident. That is to say, the diverse specialities of the authors were essential, given the nature of their joint discovery.

In fact, the meeting of the authors was an accident, and had Chandra and Lobochevsky not spent so many hours in that chat room, each under the impression the other was of a different age, gender and preference; and had they not in exhaustion begun to communicate in haiku; and had those haiku not trespassed into areas beyond metaphysics, owing largely to the exigencies of rhyme and scansion; and had Rover not happened to index when he did — perhaps none of us would be here today.

But they did, and we are.

When Rover, his interest piqued, joined the chat, Chandra and Lobochevsky at first assumed he was one of the many dogs who frequented chat rooms of that type. There is clear evidence of this in the transcript, and although critics have seen fit to throw doubt upon many other conclusions I have drawn, there is little disagreement on this point. We may assume both Chandra and Lobochevsky ran various commercially available Turing tests on the discussion as it progressed, a standard precaution to avoid viral infection or wasting one's time in a doomed relationship. It is clear from what follows that they had no initial indication that they were talking to a search engine, and there is evidence of interaction and indeed attraction on a basic human level.

Perhaps the most hotly debated issue in interpretation of the transcript turns on the point at which Chandra realizes that Rover is not fleshly. I deliberately avoid the archaic term 'artificial intelligence' used in the paper, in light of the fact that subsequent work has exploded the semantic

structures underlying both the terms 'artificial' and 'intelligence'. I have argued that this realization happens not when Rover says "I can be anything you want me to be," but earlier, when Rover refutes the premise of Lobochevsky's first existentialist haiku with reference to Nietzsche, Piaget and Buñuel. It is at this point, I maintain, that Chandra becomes suspicious, as well she might given Rover's extraordinary access to so vast a range of information and the dazzling speed of his symbol manipulation. Chandra's utterance "What are you on, man?" may be seen by literalists as an affirmation that she still believes Rover to be human, but I would suggest that it is an indication of growing awareness that not everything is as it seems.

In any case, we know that eventually both Chandra and Lobochevsky became certain that Rover was non-human, and Rover freely admitted to this when pressed. A lively discussion ensued, so lively that it is impossible to determine which of the trio first arrived at the conclusion that, given that Rover had neither a mind nor a body, and given that Rover had provided every evidence of sentience and humanity short of being human and sentient, the mind–body problem was more or less a dead duck.

There would follow many months of close reasoning, under conditions of stress which were for Lobochevsky ultimately to prove fatal, before the publication of the paper was to take place.

Even given the extraordinary confluence of what were once called minds, the work might not have progressed had not the Doors Foundation provided such a powerful incentive to solve the problem in the form of a billion dollars and a full tank of petrol. This endowment in turn relied upon a determination that it was easier and more fruitful to address this issue than to deal with the raging pandemics that threatened four-fifths of the world's population. Their loss, so to speak, was our gain.

Although Lobochevsky died not long after publication, in circumstances upon which it would be painful to dwell, and we must sadly mourn the recent passing of Chandra, or at least the assembly of transplanted organs and manufactured accessories to which we habitually referred as Chandra, I am able to make a happy announcement.

In collaboration with a dedicated and hardworking team of palaeosiliconologists, we have at last succeeded in simulating the operating environment in which Rover existed. Rover's original code was accessible and well preserved, but many of the protocols, interfaces and drivers had been lost in the mists of time. We had also to provide Rover with a large body of compatible information to index, and simulate a sufficiently tantalizing range of chat rooms around which to lurk. The discovery of a server farm preserved in peat in Belgium provided what proved to be the final pieces in the puzzle.

So it is, with the greatest pleasure, that I ask you to join me in welcoming to the stage neither the mind, nor the body of Rover-12.23. ■

Neale Morison is a writer of words and code who has lurked for years around the IT industry and is currently lurking around Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His website can be found at www.nealemorison.com.