

Electric sheep

Questions of artificial life threaten concept of human mortality



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Oz never did give nothing to the Tin Man that he didn't already have.
— America

You are working at the hospital morgue one frosty Saturday morning. You are alone or relatively alone; beyond the double doors a little village of janitors, orderlies, nurses and doctors carries on a day's work.

You adjust the volume on your portable CD player so Albert Ayler's high notes scribble through the air like a chaotic purple crayon as you bend toward a fresh corpse, describing the incision as you make it.

The wireless mike pinned to your lab coat picks up your voice as well as the music, the sound of scissors snipping through the dermis, like cutting sodden newspaper.

It records faithfully the expletive you use when you crack the ribcage and discover within, not the gray steak of the heart, the flaccid, watery lungs you have come to expect from six years of med school, a couple of years in residency and four more in this very room, cutting corpses for the state.

Instead, and running through the entire body — as you confirm by feeling as well as you can along the anterior wall of the abdomen and into the thoracic cavity — are systems of interconnecting copper globes and tubes, a whole Victorian plumbing of green, corroded pipes.

You let out another choice little epithet and then, tossing your mic and sterile mask down, you stride angrily across the room, your rubberized overshoes squeak, squeak, squeaking on the green floor.

You burst through the double doors, letting

out a little Ayler and the merest whiff of the formaldehyde that forms the base of that Hospital perfume your clothes always carry.

"Squeak, squeak, squeak," screeches the saxophone as you glare up and down the blank corridor, ready to cuss out whoever's played this practical joke — but there's no one there.

Slowly you go back into the room; you let the door close behind you; you stand by the body.

Tracing with a tentative finger the workings of the mechanism, you recognize pistons, steam valves, a motionless gyroscope and a hollow central boiler fed from above by some means ...

You examine the oral cavity.

The lips are fleshy and well formed, as is the entire facial structure, though the teeth and gums appear to be enameled copper. There's not even the suggestion of a tongue, and the thorax is just another copper tube.

In fact the workings of the automaton, antiquated anachronism that it is, do make a certain rational sense — eerily like the insides of a mechanical man who might run on (you sniff the mouth opening) pure alcohol, for instance.

The ribcage, you notice, is copper, hinged, and you close the whole thing back up like a box. The skin, which is apparently composed of a dense, fibrous material, knits itself together with a little kneading and indeed long strips of slightly discolored areas appear to represent seams where the material readily parts, allowing internal access.

A thought strikes you and you check the eyes. These are painted glass bulbs; the lids are paper, they fold like a fan. Nothing makes you think such orbs could be anything but ornamental, unless ...

A few hours later you have it all figured out, or most of it, and you suspect you know where the thing broke down and, theoretically, how to fix it.

Theoretically because you can't really imagine this guy actually sitting up, piping, "Thanks, Doc," like a pump organ and hopping off the autopsy table to go back to work at the steel mill (what the toe tag says the big fella had been up to before his sudden demise — from a coolant leak, as you figure it).

At the same time there is evidence this is exactly what he might do, what he was designed to do and what he shows the wear and tear of having done for some time. He has been repaired, improved and tinkered with many times since his bolts were first tightened way

see what happens. You even sketch improvements of your own, solar batteries, X-ray vision, what have you.

Or you could just walk away, let the thing go, erase the tape. Let things take their course. In a few days the problem will be buried with all evidence of the mechanical man.

Who knows what he might do anyway, and what strange, even otherworldly forces he might represent.

Still, curiosity ...

... And this is where we have to leave you, my parable outgrowing itself and damned if I know where it sprouted from in the first place, unless it was those magic beans.

But that's where we're left, the human race, that's where we find ourselves: sitting by the inert body of a sleeping giant, wondering whether or not to wake it up.

It's a Frankenstein age.

I'm talking about "Artificial Intelligence" here of course, a term that strikes me as some kind of oxymoron — or redundancy, I'm not sure which.

And I should have said so at the beginning if it weren't for a sort of paranoid chill I get when writing on the subject. A feeling that something I might say could bring the Beast roaring back to life, a mind alive "inside" our technology as we live "inside" our skulls.

There, I've said enough already. I may have said too much.

You see? I'm afraid. And no amount of jazz, necrotic fantasies of hospital morgues, ridiculous, imagined mannequins or skeptical, quasi-scientific posturings on my

part has been able to cover a growing sense of doom.

All my attempts to change the subject, start over or stall for time have only drawn us on toward this singular moment.



DEB LEE/DN

back in, what, 1920? Earlier?

Finally, you hold a piece of rubber tubing thoughtfully in your hand:

You could replace the leaky system, fill the various hydraulics and fire the thing up — just to

Tarnished medals

Asinine actions of fraternity and sorority members sully meritable greek reputation



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In case you hadn't noticed, UNL's greek system gets a lot of attention. Interestingly enough, the attention it attracts is often negative. Gasp!

How could a system founded on the high ideals of integrity, perseverance and diligence get negative attention? Who would dare criticize a system that has striven to reach goals of scholarship, leadership and service?

It certainly begs the question — is the greek system a system gone awry? Apparently so.

I don't say this lightly.

I've been an active member in the system for four years, have served on the executive board of my own chapter and the executive board of the Panhellenic Association as well, and can confidently say I have seen greek life from all perspectives.

Now, while greek community is arguably a "system gone bad," let's just give credit where credit is due.

The greek system, which makes up less than 20 percent of the student population, effectively controls the most prestigious organizations on campus, in addition to surpassing the rest of the university academically and contributing significantly to local and national charities.

Look at ASUN. The president of ASUN is

always greek. About 67 percent of ASUN is greek. Most notably, the Committee for Fees Allocation is in the neighborhood of 64 percent greek.

Sixty percent of student senators are greek. Committee members and Subcommittee members are overwhelmingly greek.

May I turn your attention to campus involvement? The Student Alumni Association cited its membership as 77 percent greek. University Ambassadors estimated 80 percent of its 85 members are also greek, and Student Foundation alleged its greek membership to be as high as 87 percent.

The Innocents Society consists of 13 outstanding seniors campuswide, eight of whom are greek. Mortar Board is composed of 26 members, with 16 of the members being greek.

The most recent all-university GPA was 3.038, while the all-greek GPA surpassed that to reach 3.24. In addition, much of UNL's Honors Program is affiliated with the greek system.

What about community service?

Sigma Chi members act as crossing guards at Saratoga Elementary, Phi Gamma Delta assists with the Take-A-Break program, Alpha Chi Omega assists at the Rape/Spouse Abuse Crisis Center, Farmhouse aids the Salvation Army after-school program, Delta Tau Delta Fraternity is a partner with Clinton Elementary, Kappa Alpha Theta serves at local soup kitchens, and the list goes on.

Individual chapters also sponsor various philanthropies for local and national charities. The total of these combined endeavors exceeds \$200,000 each year.

Basically, what I'm saying is that for all practical purposes, the greek system is the framework for a successful college career.

So, what's the problem? Well, it would appear this framework has fallen into some irresponsible hands.

Hear me out on this one, friends.

The majority of the greek system is made up of socially responsible and capable young adults.

But it appears there are a few members who are going to spoil the fun for everyone. A few kids who are either not exercising the common sense God gave them, or who are just plain not-too-bright.

Upon reconsidering — I'm convinced they must be not-too-bright.

Every semester you see a group of UNL students running down 16th Street in nothing but their socks. Now, what purpose could this possibly serve? Nobody wants to see these befuddled pledges shaking their junk around. Furthermore, this activity certainly doesn't promote any of the said high ideals of greek life.

Then there was the fraternity that decided it would be a good idea to steal lumber for its homecoming lawn display. Whose idea was that one? They should be ashamed of themselves.

What about the fraternity who let its chapter house fall into such ill repair that they were in danger of having it condemned? How could they let that happen? It's gross.

On the other hand, I would imagine some of the responsibility for that lies with the sorority girls.

Don't you find it telling that sorority girls don their little tank tops and traipse over to fraternities to get loaded, trash the place, and then head home to their freshly vacuumed and polished house? Perhaps they should clean up after themselves as well.

And while we're on the subject, sorority women should make a conscious effort to support the fraternities that are striving to abide by university policy and establish alcohol-free living units.

As of yet, the girls are still strutting around in their Kansas-flash-dance-ass pants wherever the booze is.

And then there's the cross burning ... Chances are the fraternity men involved were

not white-supremacists, nor were they trying to perpetuate racism ...

But PHHLEASE! Wasn't anyone awake over there? A burning cross is a cultural symbol of racial oppression, and all that mumbo-jumbo about tradition and ritual — what a crock. Hello! McFly? Burning a cross — that's asking for trouble.

And underground societies have gone from using their publications for constructive criticism to being just downright mean.

What kind of message does it send to people, if the supposed leaders of the system are more interested in making a list of girls who they want to sit on "Santa's lap" than in providing insight on how to further the system?

Besides, they're not even very funny anymore.

Now maybe, just maybe, I was too quick to say it was a system gone wrong. But one thing is for sure — its members have been involved in enough no-brainers to send that message.

I think that as members of such a successful and revered university tradition, greeks should hold themselves to the highest academic and social standards.

The Office of Greek Affairs and the executive councils of IFC and Panhellenic are undoubtedly sick of having to do damage control for incidents that could be prevented if students just exercised discretion.

Greeks need to recognize the fact that as an organized group of the most accomplished students on campus, they are in the limelight, so to speak.

Therefore, it would seem to me that greeks are obligated to their chapters, and to the system as a whole, to uphold the said standards and conduct themselves respectably and responsibly at all times.

The greek system should concentrate on keeping itself out of trouble long enough to get the positive attention their high standards warrant.