Giving up meat

Run faster and remember everything.

My death was not nearly as traumatic as I had expected.

By the time my DNA had used up its quota of replications, I had got used to 'seeing' with both my old eyes and my new ones — being inside my skull and outside looking at it. So it wasn't so strange as you might think to watch myself die. In particular, it wasn't as scary as everyone imagines: after all, I already knew I would 'go on' in this new form, and at 137 I had already grown accustomed to the loss of most of those bodily functions you youngsters consider so essential.

Yes, I know your opinion on that. We agreed not to turn this interview into a shouting match, remember?

Never mind.

I remember the beginning very well. As you know, I had a climbing accident in which my spinal cord was severed at the fourth lumbar vertebra. This was just after Dr Anfrager had developed the hypoallergenic neural nanocontacts that make stable nerve–wire junctions possible. They bound the major nerves to wire bundles on both sides of the break. After that it was just a matter of hooking the wires up to a neural network and training it to make the right connections.

My memories from before the repair are pretty fuzzy, sort of like

stories I was told repeatedly by a good friend. I guess that's just what they are, in effect. I don't really have the sense of having 'been there' until the neural network was fully integrated and had built a model of how I think. What? Oh. Yes, I guess it's sort of confusing for you when I talk about the NN as an external agency, a technology that keeps me alive. From your point of view, I suppose 'it' is me. But I'm no machine. I'm the patterns that are stored in it — the ghost in the machine, as it were.

Really, that's why I agreed to this interview. People don't understand. Everyone's afraid a PC will steal their soul, or something. Back when I was the first, no one really cared — I was a novelty, a marvel of technology. But now that kids are getting PCs, there's a lot of hostility out there, and I don't want them — the kids — to be subjected to that.

Anyway, at first I was a poster child: 'Miracle cure for spinal cord injuries!' But when I took up sprinting, they didn't know quite what to make of me. The 'artificial spinal cord' actually worked better than the original. And when I first broke the world 100-metre record, it was disallowed, as you probably remember.

No? Well, it was a big deal for a while, but that was just the beginning of public reaction to 'unfair performance enhancing prostheses' — and I suppose they were right, it really isn't fair to put microseconds up against milliseconds.

Things got more interesting when the new NNs and propagating connections came out. The higher up the spinal cord the NN could explore, the more intricate a model it could build of my nervous system — and inevitably it started working on a model of my cerebral cortex. That was when they first started calling it a PC. After that — well, you know the recent history.

Best thing about being in a machine? Cute.

The best thing isn't the mediated ESP — although it's great to talk to people without having to make sounds with my vocal chords and all. The best part is being able to remember stuff! I mean, I can remember the Library of Congress just like what I did yesterday. Well, not quite, I guess: I have all the data, but I have to make a model of them before they actually belong to me like regular memories. But my uplinks make that a lot easier than learning ever was. My NN processes information the same way my old brain did; that's the whole idea! But when I need to digest massive quantities of information, I can load a program into any QC and do it fast. When I was meat, I could only grasp really simple ideas, sort of the grand overview of things. And I still have that, from the NN. But now I can also see the details, and make a model of the world that is far more elaborate and complex than I could ever see before.

I'll give you an example. I always thought the purpose of physics was to find simple, intuitive ways of understanding the complex, messy world. But I was bitterly disappointed by the most successful physical theory of all: after almost two centuries, we truly understood electrodynamics — and it wasn't simple! It was really complicated, and hard! What a letdown that was.

I use the past tense because now I get it. I really do. I don't have any trouble remembering the details of Maxwell's equations or propagators and vertices in Feynman diagrams, because I use a QC for that and leave the 'intuition' to my NN. It's allowed me to clean up a lot of the slop in physics. I guess that's why you wanted to interview me, right? 'Axiomatic physics developed by a machine mind!' I can see the headline now. Well, have it your way — as long as you also publish this conversation verbatim, like you promised.

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