

## Important Questions

By Jaari Moreno

The man sat in his living room chair, staring at the device. In fact, it had been nearly two hours and he had not taken his eyes off of it. He watched as it pulsed with light – the dark cylindrical tower that had invaded his home. He breathed heavily as the wall clock ticked and ticked. The man was quite fond of chess, and saw the machine as another opponent.

“Dad.” A voice called from behind him. He knew that it was a mere siren, attempting to draw his gaze. He strengthened his resolve and continued.

“Dad, you’re creeping me out.” The man suddenly shushed the voice and, without facing them, began to speak.

“Don’t talk so loud. It’s about to do something.”

“But you have to talk to it for it to do something. That’s what it’s there for.”

“Why would I talk to that thing? It’s not human. If I wanted information, I’d consult a book or the newspaper, not some robot with a fake voice.”

The man’s son walked out from the kitchen and sat down on the couch. He wore a polo shirt, khakis, and a pair of tennis shoes. He donned a pair of frameless glasses and wore his hair slicked back and neat.

“It does more than just tell facts. It can play music, help you make a shopping list, and you can even sync it up to your TV to ask it to play shows for you.”

The man had still not taken his eyes off the device. His son, growing tired of his stubbornness, finally talked to it.

“Alexa, play ‘What’s Going On’ by Marvin Gaye.”

The man flinched as it responded back. “Okay, here’s ‘What’s Going On’ by Marvin Gaye, playing on Amazon Music.”

“What’d you go and do that for?” the man said as he reprimanded his son.

“What do you mean? Isn’t this your favorite song?”

“I don’t want it to know that Jake! I don’t want it to know anything about me!”

“Oh, because your music taste is the most sought-for secret in the world. I think I hear the police outside now.”

“Don’t talk back. Aren’t you supposed to be at work now anyway?”

“I still have a couple days off for the holidays, but I think I am going to head back home to spend some time with the kids. I’ll be back with Laura and them to help you with dinner. Try not to destroy Alexa while I’m gone, she wasn’t cheap.”

The man muttered unintelligibly under his breath as he watched him walk down the hallway, the music still playing. Jacob closed the door tight, but the man rose out of his seat, facing towards the device. He slowly turned around, enchanted by the beginning of the chimes and bongos in the next song of the album. He walked up to the door, making sure the lock was engaged. He turned back around, staring down the hallway. Gaye’s voice began to creep in, and he began to loosen up. He looked around the hallway, becoming caught up in the past – framed pictures of him revealed a younger, more scholarly individual. Photos that his wife had taken while he was working captured moments of curiosity in still image.

The man took one off the wall and looked at it for a while. It was him working on his master's thesis. A cluster of papers atop the round, tan kitchen table – most of them crumpled up or had portions of them scribbled out. Amidst the chaos was one book, the focus of the man's thesis: *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes. The sight of it brought about both fond and stressful memories; the man recalled numerous late nights, early mornings, dreary afternoons, but also epiphanies, achievements, and triumphs as he powered through to complete what he believed to be one of his greatest feats. He continued staring into the photo, before his eyes came to a stop on the still version of himself. An expression of intense focus distorted the youthful features of his face. Glasses that were at the tip of his nose, a hand placed on his forehead. The pen was gripped in such a way that it looked like it was becoming deformed. But the man still felt a sense of longing to go back to such a time, although tumultuous. He was healthier, more energetic, more driven. The man saw his reflection staring back at him, and hung the photo back on the wall.

He looked at his bookshelves, neat and orderly. He began to search for the book that had treated him so well. Dusty and faded, it emerged from the shelves as the man tugged on it. He blew on the cover, revealing the title once again. He opened it up, seeing his hurried handwriting with notes in the margin, underlined passages that once had connections in his mind. He took the book back to the chair and began to read.

As he read, he became increasingly aware again of Alexa's presence. He glanced up from his book, watching it pulse again. He tried to focus back on his reading, but the mere presence of the device made him uneasy, as if there was quite literally someone else in the house with him.

After futile attempts to concentrate, the man tried to dispel his worries. He referred back to his readings and his education. What was he afraid of? And why was he afraid of it? How did he get to the point of fearing this thing that otherwise posed no threat?

Descartes' first meditation speaks of "What Can be Called into Doubt," and how knowledge built on falsehoods is often faulty. This knowledge is not true knowledge, but figments of the mind that have been conjured and solidified on grounds that are incorrect. In hopes of finding said grounds, he reflected on what had created this path.

The ceiling fan lightly whirred in the child's room as he sat leaned against his bedframe. The light reflected off his glasses as his eyes darted back and forth between the pages. He sat there, absorbing each and every syllable of the information. This was the first time that he had read a work by Descartes, and he was sure it would not be the last. Born into a middle-class home, the child was used to being alone in his room, awaiting his parents' arrival from their work. His father was an electrical engineer at IBM, who had recently started working long hours for a project that he said would be revolutionary, but that he couldn't reveal much about. His mother was a top saleswoman at her company, traveling often from office to office and coming home at indeterminate hours. Both of them worked hard to put food on the table, and he recognized that, but he couldn't help feeling a little bit disconnected. Books helped to fill that void. He read everything that he could get his hands on, ranging from fantasy to mystery, biographies to historical fiction. But what he found most compelling about all these books, no matter the genre, was the motivations and intentions behind every character. What did each of them want? What were they working towards? What was their true nature? It was these questions that made him fall in love with the process of thought, causing him to delve into the world of philosophy.

He heard the turning of the lock at the door, earlier than he had anticipated, followed by the sound of his father's heavy dress shoes stepping onto the hardwood floor. The boy bookmarked his page and jumped up from the carpeted floor. He saw his father, hair slicked back, glasses tucked close to his eyes, button up neat, and ran to hug him. Looking out the window, the boy saw his

mother's car approaching from down the street. Excitedly, he asked his father if they could eat dinner together tonight. His father lovingly obliged.

His mom walked through the door with her coat on. He hugged her too, and went to the table. He heard the pot whistle as the water came to a rolling boil. A plate of warm spaghetti appeared on the table in front of him. His father and mother sat with him. They ate, and they enjoyed their time together.

After that night, things changed. His father was increasingly absent, his mother becoming more and more occupied. He continued to read, passing the hours by himself.

One day, his father came home and told him to turn on the television. The boy flicked on the TV and saw a rocket ship taking off from Cape Canaveral. The newscasters said it was footage from earlier in the day when astronaut John Glenn took off to become the first American to orbit the Earth. His father, arms wrapped around his son, said that this is what he had been working on. He helped to develop a machine, able to do calculations in a fraction of the time needed by humans. Obviously happy for his father, the boy smiled and said it was amazing. The footage continued, showing a room full of wires and screens and spools, each part carrying weight like ants lifting their rations to the hill. But the boy couldn't help but feel a little disconcerted at the sight. Of course it was a marvelous innovation, but what did it mean for the future? How capable can these devices become?

The boy soon found his answer. A little older now, he persisted in his reading. The world continued to march on, and man soon found his way to the moon, with the computer becoming an integral part of his mission. Man soon took these computers and weaved them into his life, until they could be found in thousands of homes across the United States.

His father grew busier, keeping up with the demand for his services as the world continued to march onward. His mother too found herself caught up in this newfound industry, going from office to office selling Apple IIs. And the boy stayed back, letting the old teachers guide his path.

The boy went to college eventually and said goodbye to his parents. He continued his reading and found his dorm life to be somewhat similar to his life at home. And life continued marching on.

But the world's march seemed to move faster than his. The old teachers were unable to prepare him for the rapid progress of the world, with everybody seeming to move faster than he was able to. In all of it, he was able to find respite with somebody who helped him to settle down.

They grew together gradually, each becoming closer and closer to the other as time went on. They eventually found that it was hard for them to be apart. He recalled one late afternoon when they were studying together in her dorm, her vinyl player playing smooth jazz to help them both focus. They decided they needed a break, and she took out her favorite record. He fell in love immediately.

Years later, he finished his master's degree, claiming its title and beginning work as a professor of philosophy. He began with such drive, such passion. Every single student, he saw as an epiphany waiting to happen. He wanted them to find that missing piece, and what they could do to make the world better for themselves and their future generations. But he began to see these future generations, and how they all seemed to be thinking less and less. The focus slowly began to shift away from self-actualization and reflection to constant movement and stimulation. And the man felt he had no place in the world anymore.

He slowly became reclusive and shut off from the world, spitting out facts to his classes on the history of the subject and notable figures of the subject, lacking connection and cutting off the bellows to the students' fires. He and his now wife began to raise a son, but he attempted to restrict his access to technology, in a futile effort to live like he did, learning from books and drawing his own conclusions. But he couldn't, as the machine had its own agenda.

He watched as slowly everything became consumed by it, each aspect of life that was once so sacred had become infected. Music slowly lost human touch, with acoustics becoming hollow, synthesized versions of themselves. Television and cinema became mass produced, with a tinge of greed hidden behind each production. All around him, it felt as if humanity was slowly losing itself in these machines, until they were no longer able to think for themselves.

It was here that the man encountered the falsehood that had fueled his fear.

“Alexa, can you tell me anything about René Descartes?”

“René Descartes was a French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician, widely considered a seminal figure in the emergence of modern philosophy and science. Mathematics was central to his method of inquiry, and he connected the previously separate fields of geometry and algebra into analytic geometry.”

“But what about his ideas? Can you tell me anything about his ideas?”

“According to an Alexa answers contributor, René Descartes was a French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician. He is perhaps most famous for his philosophical construct, ‘cogito, ergo sum,’ which in English translates as ‘I think, therefore I am.’”

The man felt validated with these words. The mantra that echoed throughout generations had come full circle, and he reached his own epiphany.

Artificial intelligence is not capable of higher-level thinking. It is not capable of creating art or exploring the imagination. Artificial intelligence cannot replace the human element. Despite its ability to learn and grow, it is still restricted by the knowledge of humanity. The man realized that its purpose was to be integrated into our processes to increase our efficiency, but it could never replace our ability of cognition. We still have to teach it everything that it knows and does.

The man realized that it truly was an innovation, allowing humans to free up the most valuable currency for the larger questions of the universe, and in turn allowing them to pursue them without the burden of solving every aspect of it. But the man still had one final question for the machine.

“Alexa, will artificial intelligences take over the Earth?”

“According to an Alexa answers contributor...”

And this was the end of the man’s turmoil. For he realized that the worst enemy of humanity was itself, but as long as we persisted in our streams of thought, we would find solutions and prosperity, as we always did.

The voice slowly became drowned out as the album continued to play and transitioned into “Mercy Mercy Me.” His wife, Deborah, came out of the next room. He grabbed her hand and they began to dance together.

“You finally figured out how to work that thing, Ben?” He smiled.

“Yes, I think I have.”