Question

Isaac Asimov

The corridors within Multivac were commodious and well-ventilated. There were even nooks where a technician could pause to eat his sandwich and pour a hot cup of coffee for himself out of his thermos bottle.

But Ben LeLancey was always a bit uneasy when he interrupted a hard day in that manner.

“It doesn’t seem right,” he muttered. “I get the feeling Multivac is staring down at me and doesn’t like it.”

Joe Cialli, who was an old hand as computer technician and who could actually remember the days before Multivac could talk, found statements like that revolting.

Be said, “The trouble with you, Ben, i s that you let size impress you.” Be moved his hand in an upward, crossward arc. “Nothing. Just size. Just a billion tubes, two billion relays, four billion circuit-complexes, and—nothing. In here,” and he tapped his forehead gently, “everything.”

“I know that,” said Ben, troubled. He looked about him. Be didn’t see the end of Multivac in either direction. It was half a mile long, a quarter of a mile thick, five stories high. It was the world repository of all knowledge. The Library of Congress was all but obsolete. The smallest junior college, any village factory for buttonhooks, could plug into it and learn whatever could be learned. Problems in economics and sociology that were too complicated for a generation of scientists even to approximate were solved by Multivac in a matter of minutes.

Joe watched Ben’s eyes and seemed to read his mind without trouble. “Sure,” he said, “it solves problems. But only when we set up the proper relationships, feed in the pertinent data, adjust the circuits for necessary correlations. After that, it’s just electrons following lines of least resistance.”

“What more is the human brain?” demanded Ben, challengingly.

“Ah, but the brain isn’t half a mile long. It fits in one skull. And the human brain can create. A human brain wrote “Hamlet” and human brains built Multivac. There’s no comparison. A machine is no more than a machine, whether it’s a lever or Multivac.”

They sat on little stools, their backs against the smooth wall of the resting recess. All about them were the glowing indicators, whose ever-changing pattern of light acted as guide-spots to the immensely complex electronflow that twisted and writhed within Multivac’s vast interior.

Multivac was “on its own” now; that is, no question was being put to it, or would be put to it for some time. It was making correlations at random.

Ben stared at the steam curling up lightly from his coffee and thought of that. He said, “It’s awfully quiet, today.”

“No correlations, I suppose,” said Joe, indifferently.

“I don’t like it when it’s on its own. I keep wondering: What’s it doing? What’s it thinking about?”

“This is your problem, not Multivac’s. Random correlations. What’s mysterious about it? It’s like giving a person so many hours a day off his job in order that he might spend his time thinking quietly.”

“All right. You admit Multivac can think.”

Joe Cialli snorted. “Just a metaphor, Ben. It happens not to be thought in any literal sense. When you throw in the random correlation circuit, all you’re doing is letting the electron flow be determined by the chance effects of thermal noise. Throw the dice and see what turns up; turn the kaleidoscope and watch the design; set twenty million billion monkeys to work on twenty million billion typewriters—”

And as though on cue, Multivac’s quiet, resonant voice filled the corridor. It said: “GEORGE . . . WASHINGTON . . . WAS . . . FATHER . . . OF . . . HIS . . . COUNTRY . . . BUT . . . HAD . . . NO . . . CHILDREN.”

Joe laughed and the echoes of his mirth rasped sacrilegiously against Ben’s ear.

Ben said, “Stop that, Joe.”

Joe subsided to a grin. “It’s funny, isn’t it? Why not laugh? There’s your example of random correlation for you. Multivac had the datum that George Washington is called ‘Father of his Country’. He also had the datum that Father George had no children. He put the two together.”

“And sounded surprised,” said Ben. “It seemed an incongruity to him. He’s been thinking about it.”

“You’re hopeless,” said Joe. “Multivac can’t sound surprised. His voice isn’t fitted for inflection. And he can’t think. He just correlated two statements containing an element of contradiction and therefore connected them with the conjunction ‘but.’ He just made a special case of the statement: “a but not a.” He looked at his watch. “Well, fifteen minutes more and he’s off his own. Back on informational utility and then you can stop worrying.” He yawned.

But Ben put his elbows on his knees and buried his chin in the palm of one hand. “He’s too quiet. That’s the only thing he’s said. After all, he’s getting bigger all the time. More circuits. More data. More refinements. When he started, he could accept data only when it was reduced to a binary puncture pattern. He could only give out answers in the same way. Then it could print words instead of having to make patterns. Then it could throw words on a screen. Now it can speak words in any of ten languages, and it can accept spoken data.”

“What of it?”

“How much bigger, how much more complex, before it becomes alive. At what moment will it stop being a machine and become a person? There must be some boundary line.”

“You’re being metaphysical. You might as well ask when can a piano compose its own symphony, just because it is being tuned to greater and greater perfection.”

Ben stared again at all that magnificance of complexity about him, of which he could see only an inner skin. All those millions of tons of matter, so carefully designed— Surely, there could come a point when machine was too feeble a word.

Multivac remained quiet. Usually, its time “on its own” was a medley of odd scraps of information, off-hand correlations, occasionally a startling conjoining of isolated facts that set human scientists busily and excitedly to work.

But now, only that casual remark about George Washington. Nothing more.

Ben thought uneasily: It’s meditating. It’s deep in thought about something.

He shook himself to break the mood.

Joe Cialli got heavily to his feet. He said, “How could you ever tell it was alive, anyway? What would be the magic giveaway?”

Ben said, “Well, let’s throw Multivac off its own and into informational.” (He would be relieved to do this, and even more relieved when his week’s session of interior duty would come to an end and he could take his place outside the mach . . . the thing, whatever it was.)

They walked to one of the main section levers and made certain it was in series-lock so that its shift from one main circuit to another would simultaneously shift circuits in every one of the hundred other main sections.

Ben lifted his hand, and midway in the gesture, froze.

Multivac spoke again!

The words tumbled grandly down the corridor, echoed back, and sounded again, while Ben and Joe stared white-faced at one another. And then Joe reached for the lever, managed to hook his fingers about it and ram it home.

The voice of Multivac cut off.

But Ben could still hear it.

He could hear Multivac saying, over and over, till cut off:

WHO . . . AM I . . . WHO . . . AM I . . . WHO . . . AM I . . . WHO . . . AM I . . . WHO . . .