



## Introduction to the Essay Archive

\* \* \*

*“A writer, or any man, must believe that whatever happens to him is an instrument; everything has been given for an end. This is even stronger in the case of the artist.” –  
Jorge Luis Borges*

Until I entered university in 1985 at the age of 27, virtually all my writing took the form of poetry and song lyrics, but for the occasional editorial piece. When I emerged from high school in 1975, I spent eight years “out in the world” before enrolling at Memorial, and to this day I believe I am better for it. But once I started pursuit of a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and German, I was taken with the various course materials, assigned readings, and class discussions, and the range and depth of my thinking ramped up significantly.

With the weekly assignments and term papers, and all the new topics that were passing through and exciting my mind, it wasn’t long before essay writing came to the fore as the best way for me to communicate complex, detailed ideas and concepts. In the hallowed halls of higher learning these kinds of thoughts were coming to me faster and more frequently than ever before.

Artists have an ‘eye’ for subject matter. A photographer, for example, knows what makes a good shot when she/he sees one. It’s a full half of the battle; the other half being the taking of the photograph. Similarly, a good essayist also knows it all starts with an important topic or a pressing issue that needs to be addressed. However, one doesn’t begin by sitting down and trying to come up with a subject. In my case, an issue

will arise that I feel passionate about, and/or one I feel needs to be clarified or explained, and I am moved to write an essay about it.

\* \* \*

My first essay proper was written as a paper for a contemporary issues course in philosophy. It was my answer to a prevalent question, one we hardly ever hear asked anymore. I present it here in the introduction because it was my first, and because I still think it is a tight little piece that provides a satisfying response to its title query...

## Can Computers Think?

If one is posed a question such as "Can computers think?", then one must clearly define the components of the question. In this case, we must arrive at definitions for the words 'computer' and 'think'.

A 'computer' is simply electric circuits represented by the two-valued formal system of propositional logic. These circuits can solve any problem that is solvable within that system. The circuits need only properly signify the data and process it. This, along with many of its variations and exploitations, has been achieved.

For an adequate definition of what 'thought' is we must turn to the philosopher who, through the demonstration of 'cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I am), confirmed existence for the thinking being. Descartes gives a definition of thinking in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* that should suffice for our purposes here. The Cartesian definition of thinking is that, aside from the obvious functions, the thinking being "...doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and which also imagines and senses." A truly comprehensive assessment of thought.

To begin with, a computer does perform or imitate many functions of human thought. But surely when we examine what constitutes thinking, in the totality of its operation, we discover many abilities of which computers are incapable. A survey of Descartes' definition will reveal that several of these functions are impossible for a computer. Take 'willing', for example. A computer has no will, it has no desire, and it certainly doesn't express any desire to increase its own capabilities or aspire to do anything more than it is

programmed to do. When a question is posed that it cannot solve, it merely acknowledges that it cannot.

For the thinking human, being unable to answer an important question presents a variety of thoughts and feelings pertaining to things like regret, apathy, yearning, and/or willing. All these mental states involve thinking about our own personal involvement in the original thought (the unanswerable question). For the computer, however, subjectivity has no opposite (objectivity). Subjectivity is absolute for the computer, so it simply and passively announces the status quo. It can do no more.

Maybe considering the computer's limitations is just what we need to dispel our contemporary fear of being locked up in utter subjectivity, even solipsism. The computer is an example of a being with just such a problem. But due to its inability to genuinely think, it is not a fear. It is merely an a priori condition for the possibility of its existence. This is a Kantian thesis, obviously.

It is no accident that Descartes chooses to set 'imagining' and 'sensing' apart from the other terms in the wording of his definition. These are functions which can never be achieved by a computer. Moreover, there is something revealing about the fact that a computer doesn't sense anything in any way. Whether we use 'sense' in an empirical or rational context, we realize that sensing is what expands and essentially breeds the bulk of all other forms of thought for the human being.

One might call this a purely contemporary view of the spirit of science. But it must be remembered that long before the word 'science' was coined, sensation was giving rise to all kinds of human thought, the least of which is not imagination. Imagination brings us the capacity for metaphysical thought. We imagine ourselves not existing; we imagine the existence of a superior, absolute being and so on; until, as the pursuit of philosophy illustrates, we incorporate all our powers of thought into attempting to answer questions we may never be capable of grasping.

And what of the 'cogito' itself? Even the deftest computer programming skills would be hard pressed to produce a computer that could use its 'thought' to fully grasp the essence of "cogito ergo sum". Why it even puts a strain on human thought. For the computer, we think, therefore, it is. More seriously, there is the issue of self-reference and the computer's inability to do so. Well, if the 'cogito' is the ultimate example of self-reference for thinking human beings, then, given the computer's inability to consciously refer to itself, the 'cogito' is also the ultimate example of the computer's inability to

think. After all, we need a meta-language to express self-reference of the system.

We struggled diligently throughout the development of modern logic to insist that it is a formal system. Then, strangely enough, we pose and are somewhat shaken by the very question we strove to avoid. We foolishly wonder if this working system of formal logic rivals the complexity and superiority of human thought. I contend that we are amazed by not only how far-reaching our own intelligence is, but by how much of it we can get a computer to imitate. We have no difficulty with logic on paper. But we are threatened by the system in its empirically sensible, circuited, physical form – the computer.

What about the continuity of thought? If this, too, is an integral characteristic of human thinking, then the computer once again fails to make the grade. Regarding the parallel between electric circuits and the firing of neurons in the brain, I submit that such a comparison is merely a demonstration of the mechanics to which a being, thinking or otherwise, must adhere to process information necessary for meaningful existence in this environment.

Perhaps the emotions and subsequent doubts we experience cloud our view of all such things. Perhaps the fact that a computer is not inhibited by this gives it the appearance of quiet brilliance. At any rate, our yet incomplete appreciation of our own thinking, and what makes it special, is at the heart of the matter. One day we may achieve the understanding and subsequent confidence of William M. Kelly on the matter of man and machines: "Man is a slow, sloppy, and brilliant thinker; the machine is fast, accurate, and stupid." Only with the adoption of such a healthy attitude regarding the issue will we be able to overcome this stumbling block, the better to enhance the usefulness of computers and ourselves.

But really. Can computers think? I think not.

It was just a short paper for a simple assignment, but I felt it was a turning point for me as a writer, and I still do.

With the confidence this gave me, I went back over the editorials I had written before starting university, then I decided on which ones were worth preserving and tightened them up. "Can Computers Think" marked the beginning of my work as an essayist; and writing essays on the bigger questions of life or to respond to significant

contemporary events has been a passion of mine ever since. To achieve a full, straight-on treatment on a substantial topic, an essay is often the best way to go.

\* \* \*

“Essay Archive 1: Early Editorials (1990-1999)” contains five pieces written over the ten-year period after I graduated with my B.A. My years in university in pursuit of my first degree brought my mind to life as never before, and the list of topics I wanted to write about upon graduating was endless. My health, however, was trending in the opposite direction.

The five short essays were sent out as editorials to expound on this or that issue, some of the hot topics that were trending at the time. A few were published in the newspaper, and one came out in a magazine. I wish I had kept the clippings, but those years were exceedingly dark and challenging, and sometimes I could do little more than keep body and soul together (see poetry archives for autobiographical details on this period). Even so, writing is escapism, and during this time it allowed me to work out my thoughts and feelings on subjects that interested or bothered me, and it produced a few interesting pieces despite my poor health and difficult circumstances.

“Essay Archive 2: Navigating a New Millennium (2000-2005)”, features six longer essays written just before and just after the turn of the century. Some were written for special reasons, or in response to a significant event or news story. Others came to be simply because I needed to capture my thoughts on a given subject. As E. M. Forrester once exclaimed: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”

Finally, “Essay Archive 3: Samples from a Coming Collection (2006 - present)”, contains several solid essays written after 2005, hopefully enough to whet members’ appetite for my third book. After my second novel of fiction about the climate change crisis, which should be out before the end of 2021, *If It Happens Out There, It Happens In Here* will be a major collection of essays written since 2005, with a few of the better pieces from before. I will be releasing it as an audiobook for which I will be doing the voice-reading myself.

\* \* \*

The signature is written in a blue, cursive font. The letter 'J' is significantly larger and more ornate than the other letters, which are smaller and more fluidly connected. The signature reads 'Jeff R. Kelland'.