



Book Reviews

Sternberg, Eliezer J. *Are You a Machine? The Brain, the Mind, and What It Means to Be Human*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2007. 176 pages.

Kids are inveterate philosophers and for this generation of kids, raised steeped in digital technologies, their natural curiosity and gift for raising philosophical questions are often provoked by their interaction with a regular stream of digital toys. Whether in the guise of Tamagotchis, Sims, Aibos, or online identities, today's kids are surrounded by what Sherry Turkle calls "evocative objects," objects which provoke reflection on such issues as what it means to be alive, whether machines have minds, what it means to be human, what is the self, and whether there is anything special or unique about us human beings.¹

These issues form the background to Eliezer Sternberg's *Are You a Machine? The Brain, the Mind, and What it Means to Be Human* (with illustrations by Shannon Balke), his brief and accessible introduction to philosophy of mind. Sternberg, a student at Brandeis University majoring in neuroscience and philosophy, introduces readers to recent developments in neuroscience and artificial intelligence and discusses their impact on the relation between mind and body. Sternberg began writing *Are You a Machine?* as a final project for a high school English course and while there are elements of the text that might appeal to young people, its subject matter is complicated enough to limit its audience to advanced high school students.

Sternberg's intent is to reveal that debates over the nature of consciousness currently taking place in philosophy, the biological sciences, and artificial intelligence "matter not only for abstract philosophical exchange, but also for our conception of ourselves" (p. 25). His engagingly written text opens with two chapters that present the core issues in these debates, including the mystery of consciousness, the nature of the self, and the status of the free will. Before delving into the sometimes complex philosophical debates over the nature of consciousness, Sternberg discusses dualism and its critics, the basics behind the functioning of the central nervous system and artificial intelligence, and the work of leading neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio and Gerald Edelman on biological theories of consciousness. The second half of the text is devoted to key debates in contemporary philosophy of mind. Following an account of Alan Turing's widely discussed "Turing Test of Consciousness," Sternberg briefly yet accurately summarizes many of the competing theories from key players in the field, including John Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment, Thomas Nagel's famous query regarding what it is like to be a bat, David Chalmers' property dualism, the problem of zombies and qualia, and Hubert Dreyfus's phenomenologically-based critique of A.I. In the final chapter Sternberg offers his own contribution to the debates, combining Searle's and Dreyfus's skeptical arguments and suggesting that formal algorithms characteristic of computational processes will never be sufficient to account for our mental models of the world.

Throughout *Are You a Machine?* Sternberg introduces complex philosophical debates with engaging thought experiments that would likely be appealing to young people. His discussion of the mysterious power of consciousness is prefaced with a Sherlock Holmes story, the mechanics of the mind is presented via a reflection on his brother Benny's dislike of broccoli, and he begins his discussion of Cartesian dualism with a discussion of basketball tryouts. Key philosophical ideas are accompanied with numerous illustrations meant to elucidate the theories. Each chapter of *Are You a Machine?* includes a list of further readings with recommendations for readers interested in delving more deeply into the philosophical theories discussed.

Are You a Machine? presents a concise and balanced introductory account into many of the core issues and theories in contemporary philosophy of mind, and this college student is to be commended for his clear grasp and exposition of what can be arcane material. With its discussion of robots, zombies (and zimpos!), and

bats, the text clearly whets the appetite for fuller and more in-depth discussions. Where the book is less successful is in identifying its audience. On the surface, there is much to suggest that its audience is indeed young people. It was written by a college student himself (who graciously thanks his high school teachers in the acknowledgments). It opens most chapters with narratives or thought experiments and includes illustrations that would, I think, appeal to young people but would probably be deemed too cute by older readers. And yet, despite Sternberg's best efforts to keep the material accessible, it is difficult material and probably not suitable for anyone less than an advanced high school student. Furthermore, the book doesn't include material such as study questions, questions for reflection, or exercises that might help teachers or parents facilitate further philosophical discussion or encourage students to engage in their own philosophical thinking. At the same time, it is probably too introductory for all but the most basic college philosophy courses. It often reads too much like a report rather than a philosophical text and there are many competing texts on the market.

Are You a Machine? is a good resource for teachers or parents who might wish to philosophically engage with the digital world their children no doubt occupy but is probably not appropriate for all but the most advanced of those children, themselves.

Dennis Weiss

Notes

- 1 See for instance her *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

McKinley, Cheryl. *The Secret of the Boat*. First Books, 2004.

———. ***The Mouse in the Bathtub*. Author House, 2005.**

Cheryl McKinley's *The Secret of the Boat* is a delightful tale of Andy, a young boy, who visits his Grandfather at the lake for the summer. This is a tradition for Andy and he has made friends during past visits so he slips right into the friendships and slight rivalries. Upon Andy's arrival, his grandfather announces that he has a surprise for him in the yard. Well, Andy rushes out to see but the only thing different from last year is the addition of a rather sad looking rowboat. Could this be a "surprise?" When his good friend Chuck shows up Andy learns the exciting news: there will be a fishing contest and the person who lands the biggest fish will win a \$100! Wow—that goal drives Andy for the rest of the story. How can he be the winner? Chuck and the twins Danny and David are pretty sure that they will each win too. Can everyone be so sure? Curiously enough, his friend Kate never seems interested at all in the contest and she involves Andy in a series of science projects, which he also likes.

The problem in the story is that when Andy's grandfather asks if Andy will help him fix up the decrepit rowboat, Andy responds "Sure, I'll help you." Andy is skeptical that the boat is worth the time and effort and when the job turns out to be long and tedious, he is all for quitting. His friend Chuck reminds him that he made a promise to help. But did he? Andy wonders. What if he changed his mind and decided he wanted to spend time camping or fixing up his tree house? Does he have to help? He didn't actually say the word "promise" to his grandfather.

The central part of the story has Andy thinking about the nature of promises. What makes a promise a promise and do we have to keep them? McKinley does a nice job of interweaving the children's reflections on promise making and keeping with the day to day events of children enjoying summer at