

Forty Monkeys

Maybe this world is another planet's hell. Aldous Huxley

The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds and the pessimist fears that this is true. James Branch Cabell

Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity and I'm not sure about the former. Albert Einstein

Milton Bell was in a state of shock, compounded by a state of total confusion. He had no inkling as to where he was and how he had gotten there. An instant earlier he had been safely ensconced in his office/laboratory working with his computers and supposedly trying to analyze a plethora of statistical data. What he was actually doing was probably responsible for his current dilemma as we shall shortly learn. In any case, now he found himself in a completely mystifying situation.

He was not the only one bewildered and baffled. He was surrounded by a group of weird looking individuals eyeing him in utter astonishment. They conversed excitedly in a language totally foreign to Bell. The chamber he was in looked, by any measure he was familiar with, rather bizarre. The walls seemed to undulate and change colors with varying rates of speed, causing Bell to experience bouts of dizziness. These variations in the shape and color of the walls were accompanied by weird sounds that had an atonal quality unlike any that Bell had ever heard. After about ten minutes, he started to find this environment soothing, enabling him to compose himself sufficiently to try to communicate.

"Where am I? Who are you? How did I get here?" he asked in an agitated manner.

Now subdued, the Aliens turned their attention to Bell. They too must have tried to communicate but without success. Suddenly, another Alien, one with an air of authority, entered the chamber, and raised his arms, whereupon everyone stopped talking. He approached Bell with some sort of helmet in his hands. Alarmed, Bell backed away. The alien smiled, as if to suggest that there was nothing to fear and once again came closer to Bell. He slowly extended his arm and gently patted Bell's head. The alien's aura and demeanor dissipated Bell's fear and he replied in kind by touching the alien's arm. The alien then placed the device on Bell's head and made some adjustments. Unexpectedly, the alien's voice came through, loud and clear, in flawless English and in a kindly sonorous tone.

"The device I placed on your head enables us to communicate. It may appear to you that I am now conversing in your tongue. That is not the case. I have no knowledge of your language, although I expect I will. You also will become conversant with ours in due course. For the time being, we will communicate in this manner. Out of courtesy, I advise you that the contrivance enabling us to engage in conversation also allows me to probe your mind. This does not mean that I am able to invade your private thoughts but only that, in a general manner, I can learn something about your species. Thus I have a certain advantage since we are not allowing you to engage in the same practice. Everything you will learn about us will be provided voluntarily but on what in our opinion is a 'need to know' basis. However, we will attempt to answer any questions you pose."

"I have no idea of where I am and how I got here. Can you shed some light on that?" Bell queried.

"We are as mystified as you are," the Alien replied. However, before we get into that, perhaps we could identify ourselves by our appellation and our vocation. I am called Embel and I am the curator of our Museum of Natural Science and History. The prime currency of our world is knowledge so that the position I hold is one of the highest in our hierarchical order of authority. The people of our world, while not homogeneous, share many critical traits and values, making it possible to live with each other in complete harmony."

Bell hesitated before replying. He was wondering how much to reveal. After all, he did not know these creatures. As far as he was concerned they were a possible threat to him and more importantly, to the national security of his country. He found the notion that he was on some other world incredulous. He decided to reply in kind, giving as little information as possible.

"My name is Milton Bell. In my homeland, I am a professor of mathematics. My specialty is statistics. In my world we have not as yet achieved the state of grace you presumably have here. Despite being biologically pretty much identical, the citizens of our world are characterized by a great variety of racial and ethnic types, beliefs and values, languages and customs. We have not been able to overcome our differences, although we are working diligently towards that end and have made some progress. Admittedly, we still have a long way to go."

While hearing every word, Embel was deep in thought. He had already learnt much about Bell's world because of his circumscribed ability to read Bell's mind, a fact that Bell had not appreciated. He was on the horns of a dilemma. He recognized the menace that Bell represented to his world. Bell belonged to a species whose murderous instincts had violated the principal tenet of Embel's world, the sacredness of life. His first instinct was simply to eliminate Bell as the far lesser of two evils. However this went against every grain of moral principles that he and his co-citizens held. He decided to question Bell further before deciding on any course of action.

"Can you tell me exactly what you were doing immediately prior to finding yourself here? Had it anything to do with your profession?"

Bell realized that he was being probed but also acknowledged that there might be a connection between what he had been contemplating and what, indeed, had come to pass. He decided to take the bull by the horns and state exactly what he had been considering and what actions he had taken. While recognizing the advanced state of technology and science of these people, he also felt that perhaps he could impress upon Embel that he and his were no slouches in that regard. Again he failed to appreciate that Embel already knew just about all there was to know about humanity's abilities.

"As I have already stated, I am a professor of mathematics, primarily engaged in statistical research. I do not profess to be at the top of my field but I have acquired a certain reputation. More specifically, my endeavors are two pronged. First is trying to discern an across the board method or formula for determining the optimum amount of numerical data required to get statistical results that are close to or actually 100% accurate. This is of importance when the amount of information is massive. A simple

way of putting it is how can we separate the wheat from the chaff. A lot of excellent work has been done. All I am trying to do is perfect the methodology.

My second research prong can be viewed as the other side of the coin. It is the exact determination of the degrees of uncertainty present when the amount of data is limited and its quality questionable. I must admit that my studies appear to be rather pedestrian but, nonetheless, they are of prime importance when a course of action amongst competing ones needs to be selected.

However, recently I have found my mind wandering and conjecturing about other things. One such stemmed from what has been labeled the 'Forty Monkeys Syndrome'. Simply stated, it suggests that if forty monkeys, each before an old fashioned typewriter, were typing away madly and randomly, sooner or later every great work of fiction, poetry, etc. would arise. After all the number of letters in the alphabet is finite as well as the number of words in all the languages of the world. Of course, it would take an immense amount of time. However, I speculated that instead of forty monkeys, why not use one or several of our super computers programmed to also produce randomly, all possible combinations of our alphabet and thus reproduce what the forty monkeys had done."

"We do not know much about your computers, but wouldn't it also take an immense amount of time, no matter how powerful they are?" Embel interjected.

Bell deliberated before replying. Would he be giving away something that was of prime importance to his country if he responded truthfully? Perhaps to once again impress his host, he decided to provide an honest answer. Besides, he really did not have an inkling about the way computers worked. His knowledge on that subject was quite rudimentary.

"Our most advanced computers have power and speed that is unimaginable. I am sure that you are familiar with one of the fundamental laws of physics that states that the speed limit of anything is the speed of electromagnetic energy in a vacuum or in more familiar lingo, the speed of light. Is that not true here?"

Embel was quick to reply.

"We have a theory that suggests that is so. However we have difficulty accepting that there is a limit to the velocity of any moving object or energy form. Nevertheless, even if your computers operated at the speed of light, as you put it, would it still not take an enormous amount of time to accomplish what you set out to do?"

"Yes! Definitely!" Bell replied. "Still, these limitations were ingeniously overcome. I really don't know how, except that the concept of 'Action At A Distance' or 'Non-Locality' was somehow employed. This meant that our latest and most powerful computers could respond instantaneously to any programming request. As a lark, I decided to test them. I programmed the computer that had been made available to me to engage in what the forty monkeys had been doing in that fable. An instant after I initiated the program, I, inexplicably, found myself here."

A few minutes went by before Embel replied, during which he had become very somber.

"I have a number of things I wish to raise with you. I hope I will be able to do so, although if my speculations are correct, and I hope they are not, we may not be able to complete our discussion.

I find you and the species you represent abhorrent. By looking into your psyche I have been able to learn what sort of beings you are. You are carnivorous and because of that also murderous. We are not. Our nutritional intake is derived from non-living things. From our atmosphere we absorb oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide which is then converted into proteins, carbohydrates and fatty acids. I won't go into that process further except to say that a natural balance is maintained between what all living things take in and what they excrete so that the concentrations of needed nutrients are maintained. Of course this is abetted by a population that remains relatively constant.

You are also obsessed with the gratification of your senses, especially sexual enjoyment and eating. You try to enhance your emotions by consuming immoderate amounts of alcohol and drugs. You have an apparent need to control others and your environment thus necessitating strong regulatory authority to curb your unwholesome appetites. Competition and an adversarial approach are the norm, nearly always leading to win/lose situations and corresponding jealousies. We, on the other hand, are peoples of the mind. We derive our pleasure from interactions where everyone wins. We cooperate fully in the seeking of new knowledge. We are not encumbered by fruitless beliefs that are used to estrange one from the other as in your world. We value knowledge, civility and friendship. Envy is unknown here.

Perhaps the thing I find most difficult to comprehend is that while you definitely have potential for greatness, it is rare that you display it. Indeed, while some of you have achieved that state of grace, overcoming tremendous odds, most your kind live as barbarians. That is perhaps the thing I find most distasteful about you and yours - not coming close to realizing your dormant positive possibilities.

When I first learnt about what sort of personages you are, I very much feared that you would infect us with your diseased mentalities. This fear has been replaced by a greater one. In your folly to test your fabulous computer, you did not take into account all the possible consequences. Did you not realize that your computer would record everything that your world's scribes, poets, scientists, philosophers, etc. had ever written as well as everything that was going to be authored and thought about? What you actually achieved is the collapse of the future, the present and the past. Time ceased to exist. Since time is one of a multiplicity of universal dimensions all irreversibly linked, the disappearance of one causes all the others to vanish, rendering your universe non-existent. It is probable that you and all of your cohorts simply jumped into parallel universes. More than likely, you were luckier than any of the others who may not have found themselves in as congenial a vicinity as you did, with results rather too horrific to contemplate. If it is any consolation, I suspect that some have survived, at least temporarily.

I do not know whether the number of parallel universes is infinite. It matters not. You and especially your master computer, which will continue to perform in a manner consistent with the forty monkey program you brought into it, are like an unstoppable virus. You have infected our universe. The odds are that the computer in question has quantum leapt into some parallel universe which will also disappear and eventually so will all the others. Existence will no longer exist.

It also means that if time ceases to be, it never was. Therefore it also follows that existence never was and we never were and that all there was, is or will be is an existential void devoid of any meaning, purpose and sense. All was for naught, a most depressing thought. Your experiment....."

Jack..... Date: Eternity

Author's Note: I found this story of mine so depressing that I decided to dedicate it to a very close friend, who is a Professor of Mathematics, specializing in Statistics. By sheer coincidence, his initials are M.B. I apologize for the glaring errors in his field, as well as the Physics and Logic in the story. They are due to my abysmal ignorance of the subject matter. However, I plead dramatic license.

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