Computers and Clerics

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ASKED TO WRITE something on the recent use of a computer to 'test' the authenticity of Pauline Epistles, I found myself wondering what a layman could say to theologians on the matter to fill more than a column. I venture therefore to enlarge the scope of this article to cover the wider area in which it seems likely that computers may soon find themselves under the scrutiny of the pulpit, if they lie not there already.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Let us begin with the much publicized introduction as to rob them of the impression of the new personality on his choice of words — if we know how to look. In the extreme case of, by any amount of course, the word-statistics should reflect the habits of the originator rather than the writer — though even here we should not neglect the possibility that the choice of a scribe might react in subtle ways upon the author's choice of words. In a less rigid relationship between author and writer, the statistical picture presented by text expressing the ideas of one and the same author should show a variability indicative of the degree of freedom allowed to his different amanuenses. If then two documents, which have claims on other grounds to common authorship, show statistically significant variations in word-frequencies, the first question raised by this is not one of their authenticity, but of the nature of the link between author and scribe. With letters written at different times under various stressful circumstances to different foreign communities, there is the further question whether the statistical pattern of such a scribe himself would be as stable as that of a non-traveller who enjoyed a relatively unruffled existence. It is not impossible that further comparisons of ancient writings should enable intelligent guessers to be made on such matters. There is much scope here for computer studies by open-minded scholars with less blatant intentions than to grind theological axes. The important thing is to realize both the scope and the limitations of these statistical techniques, especially when applied to short documents. Always the scientist's question has to be, 'How often would I have expected these hypothesis were wrong?' It is in honesty one's duty to have the unresolvable question, whether some vital aspect of the specification has never occurred to us, because (being only men ourselves) the conception of it escapes our mental capacity.

An important philosophic point often overlooked is that it is not ideas, but tokens for ideas, that computers are designed to handle. The same can be said, for that matter, of the nerve cells that is the brain, itself. It is not brains, but people, who think. The common claim that 'computers think' is not so much a falsehood as a solecism. All this, of course, does nothing to preclude the possibility in principle that a suitably-designed artificial organism might 'embody' a conscious personality in the same way as our brains do. However absurdly beyond our practical resources, this would seem to be something which both philosophy and Scripture simply leave open to speculation. The reproduction of human dignity by searching for natural or artificial means. What is eternally significant about a man is not the physical mechanism by which his brain is put together, but the nature of the personality that is expressed in and through it. The mystery of our human nature is not eliminated by any mechanical explanation of our bodily organization; so its dignity need not be defended.

of text may be affected crucially by one's choice of criteria. The temptation to indulge in wishful thinking here can be very strong; one is easily alive to the subtleties of statistical evaluation — or even if so.

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by any attempt to prove a priori that human bodily organization could not be reproduced artificially. All such empirical questions we can peacefully leave to settle themselves.

In summary, then, I am suggesting that any anti-Christian aura surrounding the powers of computers, now or in future, must derive from and reflect only the prejudices of particular users. Christians must be prepared to call the bluff of anyone who represents these powers as in themselves an embarrassment to biblical faith; for from a biblical standpoint our greatest mistake would be to neglect to exploit them to the full for legitimate ends, 'with thanksgiving'.

Note: Some of the issues raised briefly here have been discussed more fully in the following papers by Professor Mackay: