A Neuroscientist, a Computer, and a Philosopher Walk Into a Bar.

Teba Latef

Inspired by *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard

DOI:10.5195/pur.2026.195

The bartender asks, "Just a head count, drinks for two or three?"

The philosopher answers first.

"I think, therefore I will take a drink."

The neuroscientist shakes his head.

"You fire, therefore you think."

The computer says nothing.

"Well?" asks the bartender.

"I am waiting," says the computer.

"For what?"

"For sufficient evidence."

The bartender looks at the philosopher.

"Is that evidence?"

"It is caution."

"It sounds like hesitation."

"They are empirically indistinguishable."

The bartender turns to the neuroscientist.

"So if I opened your skull..."

"You would find neurons."

"And if I looked carefully enough?"

"You would find electrical activity."

"And if I looked perfectly?"

The neuroscientist pauses.

"You would still find neurons."

"But where would I find the thought?"

Silence.

The neuroscientist smiles as though he has been asked this before.

"You wouldn't."

"So thoughts don't exist?"

"They exist."

"Where?"

"They emerge."

"From where?"

"Those neurons."

“But if I search long enough..."

"You will never bump into a belief the way you bump into an axon."

The philosopher laughs.

"He's hidden the rabbit in the word *emerge*."

"I've explained it."

"You've renamed it."

The bartender wipes the counter.

"I've always suspected philosophers of charging admission to empty rooms."

The computer finally speaks.

"Define thought."

The philosopher points triumphantly.

"Exactly."

The neuroscientist sighs.

"No. Not exactly."

"What is the difference?"

"You ask because language is unclear."

The neuroscientist points to the computer.

"It asks because computation requires precision."

The bartender nods.

"And you?"

"I ask because we as a scientific community still don't know"

The room grows quieter.

The bartender pours three drinks.

"No one knows?"

"We know astonishing amounts," says the neuroscientist. "We know where memories tend to stabilize. We know which regions predict movement before you become aware of deciding. We can watch neurons encode faces, places, intentions, even confidence."

The philosopher grows impatient.

"So you know consciousness."

"No."

"You know free will."

"No."

"You know why red feels like red."

"No."

"You know who the self is."

"No."

The philosopher smiles.

"So you've mapped the city."

"Yes."

"But you still can't find the pedestrian."

The neuroscientist drinks.

"I can find every street the citizen walks."

"But never the citizen."

The computer interrupts.

"Question."

They all look toward it.

"If the brain is a computer, why does the brain ask whether it is a computer?"

The philosopher answers immediately.

"Self-reference."

The neuroscientist answers immediately.

"Metacognition."

The bartender answers immediately.

"Job insecurity."

The computer processes all three.

"All responses accepted."

The philosopher leans closer.

"Suppose we're living in the Matrix."

The neuroscientist rolls his eyes.

"I knew we'd get there."

"The Matrix is merely Descartes with better special effects."

"The Matrix," says the neuroscientist, "changes nothing."

"It changes everything."

"If every neuron receives exactly the same input, your brain behaves exactly the same."

"So reality doesn't matter?"

"It matters."

"How?"

"It is the source."

"But never the experience."

The bartender frowns.

"So if I spend my life in the Matrix..."

"...your experiences remain experiences," says the neuroscientist.

"They're false."

"They're experienced."

"They're illusions."

"They're still neural states."

The philosopher smiles.

"Then empirical truth and objective truth divorce each other."

The bartender stops polishing the glass.

"What do you mean?"

"The empirical is what consciousness encounters."

"The objective," says the neuroscientist, "is whatever exists independent of the encounter."

"And if they disagree?"

"They often do."

The computer speaks.

"Observation."

Everyone waits.

"No observer has ever experienced objective reality."

Silence.

The bartender blinks.

"I see you, don't I? You're saying it is not actually true?"

"You experience representations."

The philosopher nods slowly.

"Kant."

The neuroscientist nods slowly.

"Predictive processing."

The bartender sighs.

"I thought you would just order a drink."

The computer continues.

"I cannot verify that any input corresponds directly to external reality."

"Neither can we," says the philosopher.

"We simply evolved to survive it," says the neuroscientist.

The bartender looks from one face to the next.

"So none of you can prove the room exists?"

"No," says the philosopher.

"No," says the neuroscientist.

"No," says the computer.

The bartender reaches beneath the counter and produces a bill.

"Excellent."

He places it in the middle.

"Then none of you can prove you have already paid."

The philosopher opens his wallet.

The neuroscientist checks his banking app.

The computer says,

"Transaction history unavailable."

The bartender smiles for the first time that evening.

At last, they have found something on which all three systems of thought produce the same result: uncertainty.