

Was Stephen Hawking Really Just a Computer?

Stephen Hawking once pronounced that he thought he was little more than a computer and that, because of this, he was unafraid to die. "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

But last week, Hawking, one of the most revered scientists of modern times, did die. He had suffered for decades from Lou Gehrig's Disease, which left him, in the last years of his life, confined to a wheelchair, almost completely unable to move his body.

Maybe it was easier for someone like physicist Stephen Hawking, who suffered from Lou Gehrig's Disease and was almost completely dependent on technology for everything—including his ability to speak—to think that he actually *was* a computer.

Those of us who are still under the impression that we are human beings—and rational ones at that—can be excused for being a little skeptical of the assertion from someone who thinks his brain is actually a pre-programmed machine that he doesn't believe in a programmer.

For the creature who created the computer to announce that he actually is the very thing he created seems on the face of it to lack basic plausibility. What if a famous painter suddenly announced that men were merely portraits? How would we react if a prominent sculptor all of a sudden issued a statement saying he thought men were really just statues? And I wonder what we would say if an accountant decided that we were all just entries on a spreadsheet.

In fact, if you look at the kinds of things most people do,

they very seldom seem to come to these kinds of conclusions. A farmer seldom decides, based on raising animals his whole life, that men are basically cows or sheep. And funeral directors rarely come to the decision that all people are really just nicely dressed corpses.

Why is it that some scientists, then, are so prone to making these broad reductionist claims? How can the practitioners of such a great discipline go so terribly wrong about the world outside their own field of study? It sometimes seems as if the clarity of their thought on things outside science varies in inverse proportion to their knowledge of the things that are the subject of science.

If Hawking's death were simply a matter of having his switch turned off, then I suppose he will never know he was wrong. But I'm thinking he knows better now.