

Imagine that you are confined to a locked room. The room is virtually bare. There is a thick book in the room with the unpromising title *What to Do If They Shove Chinese Writing Under the Door*.

One day a sheet of paper bearing Chinese script is shoved underneath the locked door. To you, who know nothing of Chinese, it contains meaningless symbols, nothing more. You are by now desperate for ways to pass the time. So you consult *What to Do If They Shove Chinese Writing Under the Door*. It describes a tedious and elaborate solitaire pastime you can "play" with the Chinese characters on the sheet. You are supposed to scan the text for certain Chinese characters and keep track of their occurrences according to complicated rules outlined in the book. It all seems pointless, but having nothing else to do, you follow the instructions.

The next day, you receive another sheet of paper with more Chinese writing on it. This very contingency is covered in the book too. The book has further instructions for correlating and manipulating the Chinese symbols on the second sheet, and combining this information with your work from the first sheet. The book ends with instructions to copy certain Chinese symbols (some from the paper, some from the book) onto a fresh sheet of paper. Which symbols you copy depends, in a very complicated way, on your previous work. Then the book says to shove the new sheet under the door of your locked room. This you do.

Unknown to you, the first sheet of Chinese characters was a Chinese short story, and the second sheet was questions about the story, such as might be asked in a reading test. The sheet of characters you copied according to instructions were (still unknown to you) answers to the questions. You have been manipulating the characters via a very complicated algorithm written in English. The algorithm simulates the way a speaker of Chinese thinks - or at least the way a Chinese speaker reads something, understands it, and answers questions about what s/he has read. The algorithm is so good that the "answers" you gave are indistinguishable from those that a native speaker of Chinese would give, having read the same story and been asked the same questions.

The people who built the room claim that it contains a trained pig that can understand Chinese. They take the room to country fairs and let people on the outside submit a story in Chinese and a set of questions based on the story. The people on the outside are skeptical of the pig story. The questions are so consistently "human" that everyone figures there is really a Chinese speaking person in there. As long as the room remains sealed, nothing will dissuade the outsiders from this hypothesis.

Searle's point is this: Do you understand Chinese? Of course not! Being able to follow complex English directions is not the same as knowing Chinese. You do not know, and have not deduced, the meaning of a single Chinese character. The book of instructions is emphatically not a crash course in Chinese. It has taught you nothing. It is pure rote, and never does it divulge why you do something or what a given character means.

To you, it is all merely a pastime. You take symbols from the Chinese sheets and copy them onto blank sheets in accordance with the rules. It is the same as if you were playing solitaire and moving a red jack onto a black queen according to a card game's rules. If, in solitaire, someone asked you what a card "meant", you would say it didn't mean anything. Oh, sure, playing cards once had symbolic significance, but you would insist that none of that symbolism enters into the context of the game. A card is called a seven of diamonds just to distinguish it from the other cards and to simplify the application of the game's rules.

If you as a human can run through the Chinese algorithm and still not understand Chinese (much less experience the consciousness of a Chinese speaker), it seems all the more ridiculous to think that a machine could run through an algorithm and experience consciousness. Therefore, claims Searle, consciousness is not an algorithm.