

**Q:** Briefly describe Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment. Do you think it provides a decisive objection to the cognitive science thesis? Why or why not?

**A:** The basic argument of Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment is that syntax is insufficient to produce semantics. He describes a man who only speaks English placed inside a room with a set of instructions on how to manipulate symbols (which happen to be Chinese). He is then fed symbols (ordered as questions) from outside the room, manipulates those symbols based on the instructions, and delivers the results back out of the room as output. The output is recognized outside the room as answers to the questions that were sent in. Searle then asks whether the man inside the room understands Chinese. That is, does he associate any meaning (semantics) with the symbols he manipulates. The obvious answer is "no." The man started with no understanding of the Chinese symbols, and the manipulation of those symbols is not enough to cause him to develop that understanding. This, then, conflicts with the idea of a mind as a physically implemented information processor in that the person is acting as a physically implemented information processor while not achieving any understanding of the information, which is often considered a necessary part of mentality. **A computer in the exact same position following the exact same rules would be doing exactly the same task and producing exactly the same output, so there is no reason to assume that the computer would gain an understanding of Chinese when the human did not.** Searle ultimately argues that in order for there to be what we call understanding, there must be a specific sort of interaction between the formal information-processor and the specific hardware (biological brain) associated with the processor.

Since, in the example, the purely computational/syntactic task (properly manipulating the Chinese symbols) is clearly not the same for us (or at least me) as a full understanding of the language, the argument against the brain as solely an information processor / computational/syntactic engine would seem to be a valid one. However, I would have a hard time calling it decisive because of the following: The only solution Searle has for how we get mental states of understanding as opposed to just information processing is the mental states are specific to our biological makeup. While this is fine for saying that no computer would have the same mental state that a given person does, it would also seem to be sufficient to say that no two people would have the same mental states (that is, no-one else can really understand Chinese [as "I" would] because "I" am the only one with my exact biological makeup). However, this would do two things. First, it would seem to violate intuition on the same level as our determination that we do understand, which is fundamental to the argument in the first place, and second, it voids the argument in the sense that a computer's potential understanding (arising from its physical/"biological" makeup) of Chinese is different in only the same sense as another person's understanding (dependent on his physical/biological makeup) of Chinese is different from the first. Because of this apparent problem/dilemma with the thought experiment, I am inclined to see the objection as far less than decisive.

Let me put it this way: I would much rather defend pure dualism than try to defend a materialistic view holding that two distinct humans can experience the same mental states while a machine (which appears to be only distinct in a physical [not just informational] sense – the same way the humans are distinct) cannot.