

The Spiritual Scientist

An ezine for those who think!

Conscious Robots



Question: Scientific advancement in fields like artificial intelligence promises to produce conscious robots. When consciousness is thus produced by robots, will the soul hypothesis – the theory that the soul is the source of consciousness – be disproved?

Answer: No. The advances in artificial intelligence are proving, not disproving, the soul hypothesis. Let's see how.

Most of us get our ideas of scientific advancement in artificial intelligence from science fiction movies depicting conscious robots. But such fictional robots can never be actualized, no matter how much science advances, because, as eminent authority John Searle of the University of California at Berkeley explains: "You can expand the power all you want, hooking up as many computers as you think you need, and they still won't be conscious, because all they'll ever do is shuffle symbols." Despite all their technological wizardry, the most sophisticated computer at the level of digital circuitry does nothing more than change digital signals from zero to one or one to zero. Such processing, even if done at phenomenal, incredible speeds, can never produce consciousness because it does not even refer to consciousness.



One of the most dramatic successes of the artificial intelligence program was the victory of the chess-playing computer Deep Blue over the then world chess champion, Gary Kasparov. After the match, Kasparov was disgusted and C.J. Tan, the scientist who led the team that made Deep Blue, was delighted. But what were the feelings of Deep Blue which had actually "won" the match? No feelings. Deep Blue had simply done number processing as per the sophisticated program that had been written with the guidance of several chess masters. Thus, it had "played" chess and "won" the match without experiencing any of the essential emotions of playing and winning: the excitement of confrontation, the thrill of victory. In other words, its artificial intelligence didn't make it conscious. Consciousness was not present in the digital circuitry of Deep Blue, but in its maker Tan. Taking this analysis further, where was the consciousness of Tan present? In his brain? But his brain, like Deep Blue, is merely an information processing structure; all it does is change the electrochemical signals in its neuronal cells. Just as the changing of digital signals cannot produce consciousness, nor can the changing of electrochemical signals. The logical inference is that his consciousness comes from the non-mechanistic, irreducible source of consciousness, the soul.



This indeed was the conclusion of Noble Laureate neurophysiologist John C Eccles, who after four decades of brain research dismissed the promise that consciousness can be mechanistically explained or produced as "extravagant and unfulfillable" and asserted that each person has a "divinely created psyche," or, in other words, a soul.

