15.0 The Chinese Room

Suppose someone (call him ‘Tex’) who understands English but not Chinese. Tex is locked in a room that has in chute, out chute and book full of instructions (in English) concerning the manipulation of Chinese characters.

Stories in Chinese, along with questions about those stories – which are also in Chinese – come in through the in-chute.

Using the rules contained in the book (which are written in English), Tex writes out certain strings of Chinese symbols, and puts them in the out shoot.

Tex does not understand the stories, the questions, or the answers he writes down. As far as he is concerned, he is merely coping squiggles.

Tex clearly does not understand Chinese - but is it clear that the system of Tex + the book does not understand Chinese?

Suppose that the book was written is such a way that Tex will be able to answer questions in Chinese that he has never heard before. Do we still have the intuition that Tex + the book does not understand Chinese?

What about if the system could pass a Turing Test?

What if the system was placed in the head of a robot that looked and acted just like a normal Chinese human?

Does it understand Chinese?

Searle’s rejoinder to this line is that this response depends crucially on their being a system bigger than Tex (i.e. the authors of the book, the robot, etc.) that does understand Chinese. I’m not at all sure that that makes a difference.