

Refocusing the Debate on the Turing Test:
A Reply to Jacquette
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Dale Jacquette's "Who's Afraid of the Turing Test" [Jacquette, 1993] is a criticism of my article "Subcognition and the Limits of the Turing Test" [French, 1990]. Unfortunately, Jacquette transforms the main point of my article into something that it was never meant to be and then directs his criticisms against this interpretation of my arguments rather than against my arguments as I meant them to be understood.

In 1950 Alan Turing wrote his "Computing machinery and intelligence" [Turing, 1950], a now classic article in which he proposed to replace the question "Can machines think?" with an "imitation game", today known as the Turing Test, as a means of determining the intelligence of machines. The essence of the game is as follows. A computer is put in one room, a human being in another and each room is linked to an interrogator by teletype. By means of typed questions the interrogator attempts to determine which room contains the computer and which one contains the person. If the machine can successfully fool the interrogator into believing it is the person, then it will be judged to be intelligent.

Four decades of philosophical debate over the Turing Test has focused on whether or not passing the Test would constitute a sufficient condition for intelligence. Here, the crucial question has been: could a machine pass the Turing Test without being intelligent? In contrast, my article asked another question. I said, "OK, let's grant that passing the Turing Test would be a sufficient condition of intelligence, but could any machine ever actually pass such a test?" I attempted to shift the discussion of the Turing Test away from the language of necessary and sufficient conditions for intelligence, and to focus on the essentially insurmountable — and, in general, unrecognized — difficulty that any real computer, as opposed to the (vastly big and vastly fast) computational impossibilities favored by a number of philosophers when discussing the Turing Test, would have of actually passing a rigorously administered Turing Test. I then examined the philosophical ramifications of that difficulty.

In essence, I am making two claims about the Turing Test, to wit:

- it is effectively so hard that nothing but humans could pass it;
- to be useful as a test for intelligence, it would be nice if *some* intelligent beings other than those that had experienced the world as we humans had, could pass it. (I go on to suggest how the standard Turing Test might be modified to achieve this.) From this, Jacquette erroneously concludes that I want the Test to be designed so that "every intelligence is capable of winning the imitation game." In other words, he believes that I am criticizing the Turing Test because passing it does not also constitute a necessary condition for intelligence. This is a misunderstanding of my views. Nowhere do I make that claim.

My most important point examines what is largely overlooked about the Turing Test — namely, the immense difficulty anything that had not lived life as a human being would have in passing it. We humans respond very consistently to "subcognitive" questions (i.e., questions that draw on the subconscious structure of our minds), such as, "Would *Flugblogs* be a good name for a start-up computer company?" — Of course not! — or "Would *Flugblogs* be a good name for air-filled bags that you could tie on your feet to walk across swamps with?" — Sure, not bad! Our answers emerge from a vast set of learned, associative, and mostly unconscious influences involving sounds (Which word is prettier, *farfalletta* or *blutch*? Why, exactly?), connotations (Would you like it if someone called you a *trubhead*? Why, exactly? How could this be explicitly programmed into a machine?), pictures, smells, past events, and so on *ad infinitum*. Questions like these subtly probe our vast, complex and intricately interconnected associative concept networks that have been learned by experiencing the world. These are the kinds of questions that would unfailingly unmask any computer that had not lived life as we had. Further, questions of this sort suggest that it is impossible to isolate the physical level (bodies, sense organs, etc.) from the cognitive level in any discussion of intelligence.

Even if Jacquette were right in claiming I was faulting the Turing Test for not providing a necessary condition for intelligence, his criticism would still miss the pivotal issue of my paper. My article was an attempt, as its title suggests, to explore the *limits* of the Turing Test. My goal was to redirect the debate on the subject. Until now the question has always been "Could a machine pass the Turing Test and yet still not be intelligent?". I propose examining a different question: "Could any machine ever really pass such a test in the first place?"

Let me finish by reiterating the conclusion of my original article. Turing invented the imitation game only as a novel way of looking at the question, "Can machines think?" But it turns out that the imitation game is, in fact, so powerful that it is really asking: "Can machines think exactly like humans?" Jacquette incorrectly transforms this observation into the assertion, which serves as the basis for his criticism, that I want the Turing Test to provide not only a sufficient condition for intelligence, but also a necessary condition. Not only is this an erroneous reformulation of my arguments, but, unfortunately, it would seem that Jacquette has also missed the main point of my original article.

References

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