

Can a computer ever be conscious? Ray Tallis and Igor Aleksander cross swords...

Consciousness is a delicate subject that scientists have sometimes kept away from because of its philosophical nature. But can a computer ever be conscious?

The latest compelling paper in the regular Debates and Perspectives section from the **Journal of Information Technology** focuses on two of the giants in the field of consciousness. Ray Tallis and Igor Aleksander become intellectual sparring partners in a debate entitled 'Computer models of the mind are invalid'.

Concluding with questions from members of the *Philosophy for All* organisation in London, this article provides a fascinating perspective of a debate that will continue to tax the minds of scientists and philosophers alike for years to come.

More about the debate...

Consciousness has always been a contentious and territorial subject. Philosophers and engineers have each tried to explain it and in this latest debate, Ray Tallis and Igor Aleksander cross swords over whether computers can help us to better understand the very nature of consciousness.

Aleksander believes that philosophically 'information' is an entirely new explanatory force that came into the arena in the 1950s but is still misunderstood. Through the possibility of designing virtual dynamic neural systems, information forms the basis of analysing the relationship between mind and body. He argues this is entirely new to philosophy, which is mostly based on outdated interpretations of 'information' and 'computers'. He sees a parallel of the initial scepticism shown by traditional physicists of Einstein's relativistic ideas.

Tallis refutes this. As computers get more sophisticated and the entry criteria for the category of 'conscious being' gets more stringent, Tallis believes that computers are unlikely to become conscious in the near future. Secondly, there is little or nothing of the conscious mind that is computational in any clear sense of the word. Thirdly, belief in the computational theory of the mind is often based upon a self-refuting denial of the centrality of consciousness in the mind. Fourthly, the computational theory of mind has little plausibility, being dependent on the sloppy use of words, with terms passing promiscuously between people, computers, minds and bits of brain. He argues that if we cannot think of the mind as a significant computational entity, then modelling the mind on computers is invalid.

Aleksander is writing a book on the philosophical potential of information with the working title: "Aristotle's Laptop: Essays on New Wisdom in the Information Age".

Tallis's new book "Kingdom of Infinite Space", is just published.

To read the full article go to:

<http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jit/journal/v23/n1/full/2000128a.html>

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