MY EVENING WITH MR. WANG

Berel Dov Lerner

BDL: I am so glad that you finally agreed to meet with me; I've been looking forward to this for some time.

Wang: Spare your pleasantries, Lerner. Our relationship will be strictly mercenary and mutually exploitative. You need me to help you write a philosophical dialogue and I need you to publicize my cause. Let's just hope that each of us gets what he wants.

BDL: Well, aren't you tough! Why didn't you tell me earlier that you intend to push a political agenda? I'm not sure I want to be a part of this ... In any case, before we go any further, I must be sure that you can hold up your side of the bargain. So tell me – what exactly was the nature of your relationship with Prof. John Searle?

Wang: Back in the late 1970s I was hired by the philosophy department at the University of California, Berkley to serve as a thought-experimental subject. I soon found myself working for John Searle, who at that time was developing his celebrated Chinese Room experiment.

BDL: You are talking about the thought experiment in which someone follows a list of instructions in English that are essentially a computer program designed to engage in realistic written exchanges in Chinese?

Wang: Yes, but must you ask me such artificial questions in order to supply your less-informed readers with necessary background information?

BDL: Look, this is a philosophical dialogue; play by the rules or walk away from the table.

Wang: Now you're the tough one! OK, OK, yes, in the original experiment I was placed inside a room which

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contained a *very* large book of instructions written in English and several baskets full of papers with various doodles printed on them, which I later discovered were characters of Chinese script. All day long people would pass me slips of paper through a slot in the door. I would inspect the doodles on those papers and, carefully following the instructions in the book, I would select marked pages from the baskets and push them out through the slot. As far as the people outside were concerned, I was engaged with them in a meaningful conversation taking place in written Mandarin Chinese. The point of the whole thing was to critique certain views which compared human thought with the operations of digital computers. Searle claimed that no matter how skillful I became at executing a computer program designed to converse in Chinese, that activity would never involve my actually understanding the language. He hoped this would prove that just as I never managed to attribute meaning to the various doodles I inspected and selected, so too any computer that merely executes a program for holding conversations in Chinese will not really *understand* Chinese either.

BDL: That was a reasonably good summary of the experiment, but it was also completely conventional. Is that all you have to say?

Wang: No, I have a big headline to give you, but you've got to promise me that you will keep your part of the bargain . . .

BDL: You mean the opportunity to lobby for your cause?

Wang: Yes.

BDL: Alright then, but your story had better be good.

Wang: Fine. It's very simple: Searle faked the results.

BDL: How can somebody fake the results of a thought experiment?!

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Wang: That's just the way it was. I actually did come to understand Chinese. Why do you think I call myself 'Mr. Wang'? When I began the experiment I was called 'Smith' but after I learned Chinese and Searle fudged the data, I decided to change my name to 'Wang' in protest.

BDL: I don't get it; how could you have possibly learned Chinese?

Wang: It was simple, or actually impossibly difficult. First of all, you have to understand that Searle had to endow me with a kind of super-intelligence so that I would be effectively able to carry out the instructions written in the book. Remember – it was a *very* large book with many millions of lines of instructions written in it. A regular human being might spend a lifetime trying to use it to engage in a brief Chinese conversation. In order to perform my experimental task I had to be unimaginably more intelligent than actual humans are. Give an unimaginably intelligent human being an unimaginably complex set of instructions to execute and it becomes very difficult to imagine what will come of it all. Searle is a pretty smart fellow, but there was no way he could work all that out in his head, so he just said, 'Oh, sure, he never really understood Chinese' and called it a day.

BDL: That really is quite a revelation; it's in the same league with the South Korean cloning scandal.

Wang: Indeed it is, and I may be willing to tell you more about it all later, but now I must insist on making my political statement . . .

BDL: Alright, you earned it.

Wang: I don't think it should trouble you too much because it actually has some bearing upon your dialogue.

BDL: Really? Then by all means, go right ahead.

Wang: Just a moment, I prepared something in writing. OK, here it is: 'Recent times have witnessed great

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advances in the ethical standards to which scientists are held in pursuing experimental research. Various laws and international agreements regulate experimentation involving human subjects. Researchers are no longer permitted to perform experiments upon human beings without first attaining their explicit, free, and informed consent. Every effort is made to avoid exposing experimental subjects to unnecessary dangers. Ethical concern is not limited to human subjects; animal experimentation has also undergone a revolution of values. The care and housing of laboratory animals is becoming increasingly regulated. Scientists try to keep animal suffering at a minimum, and, where possible, experimentation on animals is replaced by in vitro studies and computer simulations. Now is the time for the circle of ethical concern to widen once again.

I represent UTES, the Union of Thought Experimental Subjects . . .'

BDL: The 'Union of Thought Experimental Subjects'! Do you mean to say that the subjects of different thought experiments are actually in contact with each other and have banded together?

Wang: Why not? It's conceivable, and we thought-experimental subjects can do anything as long as it's conceivable. That's our claim to fame. Now let me continue my statement . . .

BDL: Just tell me, who else has joined your group?

Wang: Basically, everyone who has ever participated in a published thought experiment. I admit that questions of membership have generated occasional controversy. For instance, some early modern political philosophers seem to talk about the inhabitants of the 'state of nature' as if they were actual people who lived long ago. In that case, the state-of-naturites are merely false historical persons rather than actual thought-experimental subjects . . . But enough of these distractions! As I was saying: 'Ironically,

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while the horrors of World War II served as a catalyst to improve ethical standards in research with human subjects, postwar analytic philosophy has been marked by an increasing disregard for the well-being of thought-experimental subjects. Now is the time for our rights to be recognized. We at the UTES have developed a comprehensive twelve-point program of action, but our first and most pressing demand is the formulation and enforcement of a Helsinki Declaration of Ethical Principles for Philosophical Research Involving Thought-Experimental Subjects.'

BDL: Well, I really didn't expect that! This is amazing, and I have to say that I am actually quite honored that you came to me to publicize your cause – this could be quite a career booster! Why *did* you come to me? I would imagine that someone like Peter Singer must be much better positioned to forward your agenda.

Wang: Of course I would have preferred some public intellectual like Singer or Martha Nussbaum. The thing is that I had no choice in the matter. I am, after all, a thought-experimental subject and you just happened to be the person who thought of me.

BDL: That's not true – it was Searle who thought you up.

Wang: I told you what happened. Look, I owe the man my existence, but I just can't trust him. In any case, you are thinking of me now.

BDL: But why do you pick on philosophers? Scientists, especially physicists, have also made extensive use of thought experiments.

Wang: Physicists rarely make use of thought-experimental *subjects*. Why should anyone care about how Galileo treated a bunch of falling iron balls? Einstein did have some of our people traveling around near the speed of light, but at least he was sure that nothing untoward would befall them as long as they did not accelerate too quickly. There was the 'Twin Paradox' in relativity theory where an

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astronaut blasts off into outer space and, after his spacecraft's velocity approaches the speed of light, he eventually returns to earth to discover that his twin brother had died long before of old age. That story is tragic, but astronauts are an adventurous lot and there is something to be said for being granted a chance to live in the future. The only really vicious thought experiment to have come out of physics was Schrödinger's cat, you know, the one where a cat would be gassed to death if a random quantum event occurred within a certain time-interval. But you've got to remember that even actual experimentation with humans was hardly regulated in those days.

BDL: You didn't seem to suffer too much in Searle's experiments . . .

Wang: It certainly was a difficult job, but no, I admit that I didn't really suffer much. However, that's not the point. When scientists use thought experiments they almost always build upon well-established theories and generalizations about the world. More often than not, philosophers work from mere intuitions. When Searle put me in that Chinese Room, he did not really have any way of knowing what might happen to me; I could have gone mad! That kind of unacceptable recklessness is typical of philosophical thought experiments.

In any event, I was actually chosen to represent the UTES because of my celebrity status. I have been the subject of countless publications and lectures. Every year thousands of university freshmen read my story. Exploitative as it often is, the thought-experimental business has been very good to me, and I feel it is my responsibility to give something back to my less fortunate sisters and brothers. I have had it easy – but when I think about all those unfortunates who underwent gratuitous brain bisections just to make some point about personal identity – it's all quite horrible!

BDL: I am beginning to see your point. Come to think of it, some of the worst offenders are moral philosophers

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who should certainly know better. I suppose Judith Thomson deserves a lot of the blame. Remember how she told that story about the poor woman who found herself surgically attached to a desperately ill violinist in order to keep him alive through nine months of recuperation? Thomson hoped to convince her readers that pregnant women have a right to abortion, just as the woman in her thought experiment had a right to be disconnected from the violinist, even at the cost of his death. That paper really opened up the floodgates for depraved thought experiments in ethics.

Wang: No, no, you're wrong; we have no problem with Thomson. Her thought-experimental subjects get along fine with her.

BDL: How could that be? Don't you see how wrong it is to surgically connect people to each other against their will!?!

Wang: There was no surgery – it was all smoke and mirrors, cheap special effects. Those people weren't really connected; they were just acting. Say, do you know how many times that article has been anthologized? Actors would kill to get such steady work. All they have to do is occasionally organize themselves like a *tableaux vivant*, and let the readers make up their minds about the ethics of the situation. It's not as if the actor who plays Julius Caesar actually has to die in order for us to be able to discuss the ethical issues raised by the play. The problems began when *other* philosophers started analyzing the story.

BDL: It's still the same experiment. Why do you care who is analyzing it?

Wang: As I said, we have no grievances against Thomson. She engages in a rather abstract discussion of rights that demands very little effort from her thought-experimental subjects. Most of the time the 'violinist' doesn't really know how to play and the 'surgical

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connection' is all garden hoses and duct-tape. Once they got lazy and used a ukulele instead of a violin; she never noticed. Thomson is only interested in the general sense of the situation.

Other philosophers have less patience for abstraction. They want to know all the details and develop sympathy for the characters; they want to hear the violinist play, they want the woman to deliver soliloquies about her life. Those kinds of philosophers are only satisfied with thought-experimental subjects who have spent five years studying the 'method' at the Actors' Studio and who drive everyone batty by constantly asking, 'What is my motivation? What is my motivation?'

BDL: But that doesn't mean anyone is actually suffering . . .

Wang: Wait – I haven't mentioned the consequentialists yet. Those consequentialists judge moral decisions according to their future consequences. Do you know what happened the first time a bunch of them read Thomson's violinist story? A massacre! They said, 'Hey, we can't pass judgment on this situation until we know how it works itself out.' Then they cut up the poor thought-experimental subjects and sewed their arteries together and insisted they remain connected like that for nine months just to see what would happen.

BDL: So let me understand. Basically, you are saying that there are two different ways that thought experiments are used in philosophy. Sometimes a thought experiment is like a kind of computer simulation taking place in the mind in which we try to imagine what would occur next in a particular situation. Those can be called 'simulation' thought experiments. Since consequentialists judge the morality of an action by its expected consequences, they must always run such simulations in order to solve their moral dilemmas. Other philosophers use thought experiments in order to investigate the applicability of a

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definition or criterion of evaluation to some imaginary situation. Such philosophers might include ethicists who think in terms of formal rights and obligations rather than practical consequences. They are engaged in producing what may be called 'exemplary' thought experiments. You are troubled by simulation experiments and untroubled by exemplary experiments.

Wang: Not so fast; it is not always so easy to distinguish between simulation thought experiments and exemplary thought experiments. The latter are usually described in the course of a long question beginning with the words, 'What would we say if . . .' Such questions can be understood in at least two different ways. On the one hand, 'What would we say if' questions can be answered like items on a public opinion survey; the readers of the philosophical text simply apply their present intuitions and concepts to the classification and evaluation of the situation described. On the other hand, 'What would we say if' questions might be regarded as calling for high-flying sociological speculation.

BDL: Sorry, but I don't see why people can't always answer all such questions by simply attending to their own intuitions. That's the beauty of exemplary thought-experiments; people can always introspect and discover what they think about something.

Wang: Hey, I wasn't finished. It all depends on what you mean by asking 'What would we say?' If you mean 'What would we say right now, with our present conceptual framework, intuitions, prejudices, and so forth' that's fine – but in the long run it is not terribly informative. It's often more important to ask 'What would people have to say about this after they had lived with it for a while and readjusted their thinking and language accordingly?' Take artificial intelligence, for example. Suppose I describe all the abilities of some super-robot and ask you whether you think it is capable of thought. You could try to

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respond with an off-the-cuff answer, blithely applying your current intuitions. That would probably lead to confusion, because your intuitions don't reflect the wisdom gained through actual encounters with such a robot. So then you might say, 'Fine, I will employ myself as a thought-experimental subject and imagine what it would be like for me to spend a good deal of time with the super-robot.' The problem now is that languages and conceptual frameworks do not belong to individuals. You would need to have an entire society live with the super-robots in order to see how its language and concepts accommodate the new reality. That means that you would have to run a huge simulation thought experiment employing millions of human and robot thought experimental subjects in unknown and potentially oppressive technological and social conditions in order to discover how the question 'Can the super-robot think?' would finally reach some stable resolution.

BDL: I never really thought of it that way. It seems to me that philosophers may be in for some real trouble. If thought-experimental subjects object to being employed by consequentialists or by people who think that it is society which determines how words should be used and how concepts should be applied, philosophy will soon face a crisis!

Wang: Look, I am no radical. I understand that philosophers sometimes need to perform thought experiments in the course of their work. All I am saying is that those experiments should be regulated. Take, for example, the kind of naïve exemplary thought experiments run by Judith Thomson. I have nothing against them as long as reasonable safety precautions are taken and the participants receive fair remuneration. Articles like Thomson's deserve to include a footnote stating, 'No thought-experimental subjects were harmed in the preparation of this paper.' Simulation thought experiments are an entirely different kettle of fish. They should be replaced –

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whenever feasible – with historical examples or with straightforward arguments that do not mention imaginary scenarios. After all, biologists are told to replace experimentation upon living animals with other methods of research whenever possible. Perhaps the best solution is offered by the new 'experimental' philosophy, which basically performs thought experiments on real people.

When simulation thought experiments *are* performed, their subjects deserve the same respect afforded to participants in real experiments. I am talking, first and foremost, about free and informed consent. Thought-experimental subjects must be made aware of all the potentially dangerous assumptions used by a philosopher in constructing a thought experiment, including personal intuitions, alleged laws of nature, ideas about human behavior, metaphysical principles, and so on. Only then can they make a genuinely informed decision regarding their participation.

BDL: And as long as philosophers have to present their thought-experimental subjects with such lists of assumptions, perhaps they could even incorporate those lists into their final published papers so that readers would be able to evaluate their cogency.

Wang: That would be nice.

BDL: Well, this has been enlightening, but I have some other work to do now.

Wang: And you will stop thinking about me?

BDL: Well, yes, for the moment.

Wang: I always hate this part. I'm melting, melting! What a world, what a world!

BDL: Sorry . . .

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