



MyEthics.net

Conscious Life vs Technology

MyEthics.net Newsletter 2-10, May 7,
2026. [Archive](#).

[Subscribe](#)



Upcoming Events

Moderated by [David Gleason](#)

Roundtables:

- **"Conscious Life vs
Technology"**
May 13, 27
- June: TBD

**Artificial Intelligence: What
it Means for You**, May 20,

7pm, Town Hall

All are Open to the Public

Happy first Thursday in May!

Last month, we explored how mindful attention—shaped by values, intentions, and compassion—helps develop qualities like clarity, integrity, and wisdom. These habits determine who we become over time.

This month we dive into the differences between conscious life and technology and address the categorical differences between living beings and artifacts.

Bottom line: AI is not conscious in the sense we mean it about ourselves (or our pets).

Instead, technology does what it's told... by people. The intentions behind it make all the difference.

Please lmk your thoughts!

-David

Intro: The Difference Makes All the Difference

We are living through a moment of genuine technological wonder. Artificial intelligence can diagnose cancers, translate languages in real time, and design

chips to optimize itself. But it is also putting poets, programmers, and researchers out of business.

In all the excitement, a seductive myth has taken hold: that AI is not merely a tool, but something approaching consciousness. Some even speak of it reverently, devotionally: "this time, technology has crossed a threshold" – that we have built a god.

We have not, and confusing tech's capabilities with our own living, embodied, and social existence becomes deadly when, for example, we cede to AI autonomous control over weapons.

The difference between conscious life and technology is not a matter of degree. It is categorical – understanding why matters enormously for how we build, regulate, and relate to the systems now reshaping civilization.

Living Beings

Every animal, from the simplest creature to the most complex human, has something that no machine possesses: a subjective inner life. There is an *experience* of being a dog frightened by thunder, a child delighted by a gift, or a person grieving a loss.

Philosophers call this sentience. It is the reason we regard cruelty to animals as wrong, and why harm to a person is categorically different from destroying a machine. Technologies feel nothing: they process data and materials, and produce output. That output's value lies in its utility to conscious people with goals in mind.

Ethically, living beings have intrinsic value – they matter in and of themselves, not merely for what they produce. A person is not an object to be used. Neither is a dolphin, an elephant, or a sparrow. Living beings exist as ends in themselves.

By contrast, technology, however sophisticated, exists only as a means. The ends can improve the quality of life or cause harm, depending on intent. Altruistic or nefarious, how we use it is a choice.

Finally, failed computers can be replaced with identical ones. The loss of a person is unique and irreversible. No backup restores what is gone.

Versus Technology

Technologies are tools, and always have been. They are practical applications of scientific knowledge and techniques to solve problems. Ranging from the monk's candle illuminating a manuscript to the data center storing humanity's

accumulated knowledge, separated by centuries but united by purpose, the medieval library and the modern server farm both extend human capability.

But they do not replace human judgment, responsibility, or conscience. Instead, they amplify the intentions of those that build and use them.

Cautionary myths have warned against technological hubris for millennia. Prometheus stole fire and paid for it with his liver. Icarus flew too close to the sun and fell. The Golem, fashioned from clay to serve its creator, became dangerous precisely because it was powerful without wisdom. Frankenstein's monster was created in hubris – the same that sunk the Titanic.

These stories share the moral that technology subsumes the decisions of its designers. It does not exercise conscience, it executes intention, industrializes implementation, and intensifies the consequences for good or ill.

The Ethics of Living Beings vs. Technology

At its core, the ethical divide between humans and technology turns on moral status, sentience, and agency. Living beings are *moral subjects*; technology is a *moral object*—judged not for what it is, but by what it does.

- **Intrinsic vs. Instrumental Value** — Animals matter in themselves; technology only matters for what it does for others.
- **Sentience** — Animals can suffer and experience; technology has no subjective inner life.
- **Agency** — Animals have drives and preferences; humans add reason and consent; technology has neither.
- **Accountability** — Humans bear full moral responsibility; animal agency is partial; technology is ethically inert.
- **Rights & Protections** — Law and ethics protect people because we are irreplaceable as individuals. Conversely, technology must be regulated and controlled.
- **Intentionality** — Animal behavior flows from internal drives; technology's "goals" are externally assigned.
- **Replaceability** — Every animal is a unique, irreplaceable individual; technology is designed to be redundant.
- **Our Obligations** — We owe animals welfare and dignity; we owe technology users responsible design and safe use.

Why Confusion Is Dangerous

When we mistake a tool for a subjective being, we make two serious errors:

1. We overestimate what the tool can do — we look to it for wisdom it cannot provide. And then we abdicate the human responsibility to think, judge, and choose.
2. We underestimate what it actually does: concentrate and amplify the values, biases, and interests of the people who built it. An algorithm is never neutral. It reflects decisions made by someone, for some purpose, serving some set of interests.

The question we must always ask is not "what does the AI think?" but "whose intentions are now running at scale?"

Right now, those intentions are too often shaped by the pursuit of profit, power, and dominance — forces that technology amplifies just as readily as it amplifies health care solutions. The result is systems optimized for engagement over truth, for extraction over enrichment, for the few over the many.

This is not an argument against technology. It is an argument about who controls it and toward what ends.

Practical Strategies

Keeping consciousness and tech distinct requires a moral framework. Here are some guidelines:

- Probe whether an AI has intrinsic value — whether it matters in and of itself
- Determine whether an entity can suffer to help separate conscious beings from tools (AI can only *simulate* pain).
- Trace any technology you use back to the humans whose intentions it actually serves.
- Test for irreplaceability: a restored backup loses nothing; a lost life is gone forever.
- Assign accountability — moral responsibility always flows to persons, never to systems alone.
- Finally, avoid applying words like “thinks,” “feels,” and “wants” to software: they smuggle in false assumptions.

Technology becomes unaccountably dangerous precisely when we assign it the agency that actually belongs to the people behind it.

In Sum

The stakes of getting this right have never been higher. AI tools are orders of magnitude more powerful than anything that's come before. Decisions embedded in their architecture about what to optimize, whose data to use, and

who bears the risk, will shape lives for better and worse. Mistakes made at this scale have consequences at this scale.

That is precisely why pluralistic, collaborative, and accountable decision-making has never been more critical. Not because technology demands it, but because we do. We are the ones with moral status. We are the ones who can suffer, who have rights, who bear responsibility for the world we leave behind. Technology is a mirror — it shows us, magnified, how we choose to be.

While we are all wondering “what will AI do to us,” we should instead be asking: “what do we choose to do with AI?”

Read More

- [*Don't Stand So Close to ChatGPT*](#) By Glenn Harlan Reynolds, WSJ, 5/3/26
- [*Consciousness and Technology: The Importance of Intentions*](#) by Dakin Sloss, Medium, Jan 22, 2021
- [*Nina Schick*](#), Tamang Ventures: "[*Industrial Intelligence*](#)"
- [*Is there consciousness beyond the brain?*](#) | *Philip Goff* | *TEDxNewEngland*
- [*The Attention Economy and the Collapse of Cognitive Autonomy*](#) by *Rai Hasen Masoud* at *Georgetown Law*, 7/15/25
- [*A World Appears - A Journey Into Consciousness*](#) (book) by Michael Pollan (2026) -- [challenging and rewarding, see esp the introduction]

[Subscribe](#) to this newsletter



MyEthics.net

Copyright © 2026 by David H. Gleason

This email was sent to {{ contact.EMAIL }}.

You've received this email because you are are subscribed to the newsletter.

[Unsubscribe](#)