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Power Over Attention

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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 love—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. Building on March's discussion about AI and April's on attention, we address the categorical differences between living beings and technological 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 reply with your thoughts!

-David

Intro: The Difference Makes All the Difference

We are living through a moment of genuine technological wonder — with all its opportunities and risks. Artificial intelligence can diagnose cancers, translate

languages in real time, and design chips and programming to optimize itself. But it is also putting poets, programmers, and researchers out of business... right now.

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 finally 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 – and 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 — awareness amidst sensed experience. It is the reason we regard cruelty to animals as wrong, and why harm to a person is categorically different from breaking 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 from altruistic to nefarious. How we use it is a choice.

Finally, failed computers can be replaced with identical ones at relatively low cost. The loss of a person — or even an animal — is unique and irreversible. No backup restores what is gone.

Versus Technology

Technologies are tools, always has been — practical application of scientific knowledge and techniques to solve problems. 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.

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 whatsoever.
- **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 as an actor.
- **Rights & Protections** — Law and ethics protect people because we are irreplaceable as individuals. Technology is regulated not protected.
- **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 being, we make two serious errors. First, we overestimate what the tool can do — we look to it for wisdom it cannot provide, and we abdicate the human responsibility to think, judge, and choose.

Second, we underestimate what it actually does: concentrate and amplify the values, biases, and interests of the people who built it. An algorithm that appears neutral 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 anything else. 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 entity can suffer — that helps separate conscious beings from tools. AI can *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.
- Finally, avoid applying words like “thinks,” “feels,” and “wants” to software: they smuggle in false assumptions. Technology becomes 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 came before. Decisions embedded in their architecture — about what to optimize, whose data to use, who bears the risk — will shape lives for better and worse in ways no decision-makers could previously reach. 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 ask instead: “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]

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