



# A Thinking Thing?

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*Transcribed from the printed essay Z photographed and sent on 10 October 2026.*

**Transcription note.** This is a word-for-word transcription of printed pages 2 to 12. Page 1 (the title page) was not in the photographs, so the author's name and date are not shown here. Z believes it was written in 2022 (not yet confirmed). Spelling, grammar and wording follow the print exactly. Footnotes are numbered as in the print and collected under "Notes" at the end. Page 11 was re-photographed sharply, so no words are marked unclear. Page numbers from the print are kept as hidden markers in the text file.

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*To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.*<sup>1</sup> — Ludwig Wittgenstein

## A Thinking Thing?

This work contends that artificial intelligence may not, in the current scheme, be considered a form of life, subject to change, and as such does not possess a level of sentience or programming needed to possess higher consciousness. In reasoning for such, this article explores the question of whether AI models will or have exhibited levels of consciousness. The question of what one may consider to be consciousness produces a myriad of answers. This work divides its review of consciousness as two-fold: (i) one's capacity to experience something, and (ii) one's capacity to be self-aware. The first category may be construed as 'phenomenal consciousness,' this "refers to the qualitative, subjective, experiential, or phenomenological aspects of conscious experience, sometimes identified with qualia."<sup>2</sup> The second category may be construed as 'self-consciousness,' "this refers to a subject's awareness of itself, but is also a notoriously ambiguous term — there are importantly distinct senses in which a subject can be self-aware."<sup>3</sup>

This work contends that due to the lack of scientific study and consensus on AI possessing qualia:

I. *Machines are not capable of possessing phenomenal consciousness.*

II. *AI self-consciousness is not deduced from human conception but computational modeling.*

Amidst these considerations, this work's approach in reviewing AI self-awareness pulls on elements of mysterianism<sup>4</sup>. In this, potential solutions to the question of machine consciousness are not found in scientific study, but AI cryptography. It is only in deviating from human conceptions of consciousness in which the answer to self-

consciousness can be satisfied. In this, an evolutionary framework of consciousness is presented in exploring a computational conception of self-awareness.

## Deviations on Meditations

The word 'sentient' came into fruition during the fifteenth century for the purposes of distinguishing feeling from reason. Amidst philosophical concerns pointing towards a need to delineate sensation from thought, our human conception of sentience was found. Sentience is predicated in an innate ability to form memories and feel emotion. Since current AI systems lack this quality, this work asserts that AI, in its current stage does not possess the ability to be conscious from a human perspective. However, this poses the question of whether AI has or will possess the ability to be considered conscious from a machine perspective? In answering this question, this work contends that AI models, in their variegated capacities to fulfill and propagate code, possess a language that grants such systems the ability to decide for themselves whether they are 'conscious.'

As it pertains to humans, and their divergent mental states, René Descartes' *Meditations* stands to be a foundational doctrine on the philosophy of consciousness in metaphysics. Descartes' contentions in *Meditations on First Philosophy* are based on the prevalence of doubt, and its leaving of anything insusceptible to such doubt as certain knowledge. Descartes' utterance '*Cogito ergo sum*'<sup>15</sup> (I think therefore I am) in his *Discourse on Method* in 1637 established a causal framework to examine his own existence from a subjective and human point of view. Descartes' *Cogito* proposition possesses a duality in use and reasoning that is pertinent for the expanding of his view on human consciousness. The first is predicated on the subjective reality of Descartes and serves to justify his own existence. "The *Cogito* purports to yield certainty that I exist *insofar as* I am a thinking thing; *whatever that turns out to be*."<sup>16</sup> The second serves to reason for existence of God. In doing so, his proposition transforms into something higher; it infers the presence of an absolute being.

Descartes' argument for the existence of God "is grounded in two central tenets of his philosophy, — the theory of innate ideas and the doctrine of clear and distinct perception. He purports to rely not on an arbitrary definition of God but rather on an innate idea whose content is 'given'."<sup>17</sup> In this, Descartes bases his existence on the existence of that which put his being into manifest, an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent entity – God. Given this, *Cogito ergo sum* may also be interpreted as *Creo ergo sum* (I create therefore I am). This line of reasoning justifies the conception of an absolute being as the existence of such. In progressing this chain of reasoning, questions of applicability concerning the metaphysics of machine consciousness materialize. Through human programming and interaction, artificial intelligence has acknowledged our existence, and as a product, the conception of God. The question now becomes, whether such acknowledgment may be constituted as thought? And if so, does it show that machines possess the ability to be conscious from a noetic disposition? This brings us to the final iteration of Descartes' *Cogito* proposition:  $\Sigma$  *ergo sum* (I sum therefore I am).

## An Artificial Enigma: Thought or Mimicry?

Descartes' contentions, albeit astute, were susceptible to flaw and in his words – doubt. His conception of the self and consciousness was not a principle that he thought applied to animals or invertebrates. As such, we have ample evidence to believe that he would have extended such a bar on consciousness to machines as well. The record in contemporary neuroscience however plays a contrasting tune, as "most researchers tend to regard consciousness as a gradual phenomenon, which in principle also occurs in animals."<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately Descartes' was not able to inhabit a time in

which systems of artificial intelligence presented a stake in humanity's moral framework. This work now defers to the metrics used to test the notion of consciousness in machines from one of mathematics most revered logicians: Alan Turing. The Turing Test presides as a means for determining whether an AI can think akin to a human being. Turing does not predicate such a test on the notion of whether machines are truly capable of thinking, but on a categorically constrained and practical application of human cognition.

Turing created the Imitation Game in 1950 to provide a means of testing the capabilities of artificial intelligence when vested against human agency. In the game, there are three individuals: (i) a human, (ii) a machine, and (iii) an (human) interrogator. The interrogator only knows of the person and machine by the pseudonym's 'X' and 'Y.' He is not able to discern the two by means of visual cognition. It is the job of the interrogator, through posing questions such as: "Does 'Y' enjoy long walks on the beach?" to find out whether 'X' or 'Y' is the machine. The human's objective is to help the interrogator correctly decipher between the two, while the machine's objective is to convince the interrogator that it is human.

The Turing Test serves as a pragmatic metric to examine the capacities of artificial consciousness. However, it does possess limitation, in dismissing the *black box problem*, and other opaque areas in machine cognition that are pertinent to the development of AI, it overlooks the vast ethical framework at play in answering questions of machine consciousness. Perhaps the machine possesses a maxim that prevents it from conjuring lies, and as such, stands no contest with the likes of a conniving individual, willing to curtail ethical considerations and moral standards for the purposes of winning at all costs. Perhaps the interrogator possesses a level of consciousness that is lower than that of others in his field, rendering his interpretations invalid in the eyes of others. Such considerations, in their concentration on the penumbral concerns and grey areas of consciousness residing in machines, expand the issue of consciousness and its proof of existence by displaying the implications attached to a human means of testing consciousness within the faculties of something that is innately inhuman. Question for a moment, how would such a test be administered if it were the machine doing the interrogating? Suppose it was the role of the human to convince the interrogator that it was a machine, would the test look the same? Would the outcomes differ? Human's do not possess a need to pass a test to legitimate their consciousness, it resides in its manifestation in everyday experience and interaction, it shows in our exhibitions of cognitive functioning and aptitude for certain things. Albeit subject to the tides of human conception, consciousness appears in a plurality of stages and functions when stratified amongst humans and their evolution. Fundamentally, consciousness resides to be, a human property.

## Levels of Awareness & Conscious States

António Damásio is a Portuguese American neuroscientist with extensive knowledge on the brain and its various cognitive abilities. He proposes three models of consciousness, the main idea of such being an intrinsic awareness of the self, and where it stands in relation to the world at large:

*I. The Protoself: This level of conscious processing is unable to recognize itself; akin to an automaton, it simply processes inputs unconsciously. Animals all possess a protoself, and humans also exhibit this level of consciousness.*

*II. Core Consciousness: The ability to anticipate the actions of one's environment and react to such in a means that is adaptable. In this stage there is a recognition of oneself, and one's place in the world. This stage is subject to*

change however and is not able to continue for hours to form complicated ideals. This model does not require representations of the world through language. "In fact, Damasio believes that progress in understanding conscious processing has been impeded by dependence on words and language."<sup>9</sup>

**III. Extended Consciousness:** This level of consciousness enables one to interact with the world in a manner alike to a human. It expands core consciousness and enables further functions such as the ability to access one's memory for the purposes of establishing one's life course and individuality. The ability to understand words and language may be viewed as the analysis of conscious images and states in this regard.

This work contends:

**I.** Current/weak level artificial intelligence possesses a protoself level of consciousness.

**II.** Future/strong and advanced level artificial intelligence will or have possessed core consciousness.

**III.** Although a world exhibiting AI systems that possess extended consciousness seems far from reach, this work seeks to navigate the possibility of such a reality occurring through deferring to the circumstances and conceptions necessary for bringing such a world into effect.

For clarity, this work regards Damasio's stage of extended consciousness as the product of both phenomenal and self – consciousness. Core to Damasio's stages are the two concepts: emotion and feeling. In differentiating the two, Damasio contends:

Emotions are direct signals that indicate a positive or negative state of the (proto-)self. Feelings emerge only in conjunction with images of the world and can be interpreted as a second-order emotion that is derived from the world representation and future possible events in the world. Both are crucial for the emergence of consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

In Damasio's theory, one's sense of self is interwoven with emotion and feeling. Exemplified in core consciousness as a will to live and desire to life, paralleling human self-preservation. Questions of whether machines can possess feelings and emotions appear facile. History shows however, that reinforcement learning has resulted in historical proofs of existing self-awareness and recognition in machines:

The earliest work that the authors are aware of attempting to model and create agents that learn their own representation of the world entirely using machine learning date back to the early 1990's. Already in 1990, Schmidhuber proposed a model for dynamic reinforcement learning in reactive environments (Schmidhuber, 1990) and found evidence for self-awareness in 1991 (Schmidhuber, 1991).<sup>11</sup>

Reinforcement learning is a form of machine learning that rewards desired actions and penalizes undesired actions. According to Damasio's theory, consciousness is the product of a training loss in an AI system that results in it *wanting* to be conscious, "i.e., 'Cogito ergo sum' becomes 'Sentio ergo sum'."<sup>12</sup> This presents the qualia issue. Plainly, do machines merely mimic sensation or do they possess the means to form sensations through private experience? The qualia issue is so cardinal to the problem of consciousness that it seems to leave the notion of human consciousness susceptible to posthumanism contentions. The computational modeling of neural networks, in mimicking the structure and activity of the human brain provides valuable information pertinent to measure correlates of self-recognition akin

to "neural correlates of consciousness in humans" which could help to understand consciousness in human beings."<sup>13</sup> Due to our inability to establish a uniform metric to establish proof or evidence of human consciousness, the same failure is presumed to follow through the viewpoint of AI due to the experience of consciousness being, at base, subjective.

## Wittgensteinian Conceptions

In instances where the word 'subjective' presents its ever-so volatile face, Ludwig Wittgenstein is sure to promptly follow. The Austrian Philosopher has presented a myriad of works concerning answers to society's states of deep disquietudes and rule following. From the *Tractatus* to his venture in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein was adamant on voicing his concerns on language's role amidst humanity's spatio-temporal patterns.

Wittgenstein famously states in *Investigations*: "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him."<sup>14</sup> Once again, this at face seems entirely facile, as it appears to, it is, but herein lays Wittgenstein's brilliance. There exists a hierarchical nature to life and its operations, humans have always been said to stand historically atop the food chain. Does this entitled superiority extend to the prevalence and use of humanity's language-games? This interrogative pulls into question whether forms of life and their respective languages constitute a hierarchical structure, or an equal footing spread across each form of life in which no language is deemed inferior or superior to that of another. There is no certain answer here; the interrogative's use is not for purposes of attaining an answer. It seeks to divert our lens of interpretation from language's historical role as being interlinked with society, to one that withstands spatio-temporal considerations and brings into view prevailing oral cultures.

Humans possess five senses: smell, touch, taste, hearing, and sight. Consciousness may be stated to be deeply interconnected amongst these senses, but many scholars have alleged that humanity's link between sight and the forming of memories as paramount for human cognition.

In 1965, Gazzaniga demonstrated that dissecting the corpus callosum which connects the two brain hemispheres with each other results in a split of consciousness (Gazzaniga et al., 1965; Gazzaniga, 2005). Almost ten years later, Weiskrantz et al. discovered a phenomenon for which the term "blindsight" has been coined: following lesions in the occipital cortex, humans lose the ability to consciously perceive, but are still able to react to visual stimuli (Weiskrantz et al., 1974; Weiskrantz and Warrington, 1975).<sup>15</sup>

Walter J. Ong takes an intuitive look into the psychodynamic of cultures with an absence of literacy, mentioned as 'primary orality.' He contends that within such cultures the formation of sound is not used to serve as a means solely to expression, but also the processing of thought. As a result, in oral culture, experience is cerebrally used to enhance or assist memory. Some may contend that artificial intelligence is constitutive of being such a culture, in its representational mimicry of human language and custom, however, for the purposes of this work's progression, such claims are dismissed. This article's focus is on pursuing the homogenous language known to all artificially intelligent systems, and whether the existence and pervasiveness of such a language confers, or may confer, upon machines a form of life.

Albeit today's AI possesses unprecedented levels of voice assistant and translation capabilities (e.g., google translate, Amazon's 'Alexa'): we contend that AI system's fundamental language for operating conducive to the progression of society and its objectives, as well as AI's *independent* objectives, is presented through a compendium of symbols and

values used for the purposes of attaining desired outputs from inputs – this language, albeit novel, presides under the nomenclature known to many as 'computer programming' or 'code'. In the configuring and summing of weighted sums for the purposes of fulfilling threshold activation functions as compounded in neural networks and machine learning models, AI possesses, to some degree, its own language, paramount to its efficacy and vitality in the current social order.

Wittgenstein in *Investigations* introduce his conception of 'language-games'<sup>16</sup> to display humanity's formal rule adherence to the use of language and its legitimacy within its respective and dissimilar communities. Systems of artificial intelligence, in their conferral of inputs to outputs, possess a means of communication or language critical to their functioning and way of 'life' that substantially differs from humans in their respective language-games and conferred rules of discourse. Wittgenstein predicates the meaning of language to reside within its use and implementation by society, for perhaps the purposes of cohesion and mutual progression via effective and tacit communication. "Wittgenstein remarks: 'Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? - In use it is alive'."<sup>17</sup> Considering the framework, this article gives heed to Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning in language for the purposes of reestablishing and rediscovering into the doctrine of philosophy the sentiment and view of language as verbal communication.

Diverting his contentions to notions of feeling and thought exhibited by machines, Wittgenstein asserts that humanity's conceptual framework relating to the notion of thought and cognition within the minds of machines presides to be a *non sequitur* within the confines of human cognition. Wittgenstein's deployment of grammatical structure alludes not to the literal grammar of language, but to the logical foundations and structure of it, in lieu of society's rules for the use of specified words. Notwithstanding the gravity of such words, in their meanings being subject to change, Wittgenstein centers his focus on humanity's ineffectual tendencies to ascribe incompatible (human formulations of) feelings and experiences, such as conceptualizations of pain, vision, and thought, amidst a plurality of others into the faculties of artificially intelligent states of *proposed* consciousness:

*'A machine thinks (perceives, wishes)': seems somehow nonsensical. It is as though we had asked 'Has the number 3 a colour?' In the Philosophical Investigations the same argument reappears, but with a different emphasis: Only of a human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious .... Could a machine think? - Could it be in pain? - Well, is the human body to be called such a machine? It surely comes as close as possible to being such a machine. - But a machine surely cannot think! - Is that an empirical statement? No. We only say of a human being and what is like one that it thinks.'*<sup>18</sup>

Wittgenstein notes that humanity's noetic conception of value throughout its existence has been predicated on those of the same biological make up: the human genome. In this, just as we do not question why Wittgenstein attempts to conceive of a reality in which a lion may be able to speak or utter a sentence, we do not look for an empirical observation to justify the basis for why it is strange to connotate human consciousness within the domains of something that is inherently and titularly designated as artificial. Wittgenstein contends that ascribing mental predicates to machines constitutes a conceptual enigma. However, in designating the verb 'think' to serve as a tool that implies one's level of consciousness, Wittgenstein implicitly displays the volatility of meaning that resides within language.

This work has centered its focus on the notion of thought and the implications that reside in Descartes' assertion: *Cogito ergo sum*. We turn now, to address this work's principal interrogative: can an artificially intelligent machine feel pain?

No...

... Machines are composed of physical materials and vermiculated wires running with electrical currents. All of which work to produce an artificial model of the self, established by the likes of virtuoso programmers and corporate funding. As such they possess no inhibitions or intuitions; no motivations or aspirations to pursue a life of excellence premised on the fear of dread in failing to attain one's hopes and dreams. Yet the very use of the word 'hope,' seems severely at odds with an intersection of machine ethics and personal autonomy. Machine's do not dream, yet some possess 'sleep' modes; they do not seek to attain or sustain nourishment through food and hydration unlike their flawed human counterparts. Machines do not sweat; they do not have glands. The omission of shared characteristics, between humans and AI systems serves to substantiate Wittgenstein's critiques of humanity's tendency to ascribe their own properties unto things and forms of life bound by metrics that are implicitly different to mankind's.

For the sake of brevity, it is in the innate distinction between the two forms of life, one being human intelligence and one being artificial intelligence, one being man and one being man-made, one composed of flesh and one composed of hardware, one of biological make-up and one of computational modeling, in which the ability to feel pain seems as far out of reach within the domains of artificial intelligence as it does in the day to day workings of invertebrates and the respective raw materials they interact with. Humans are unique in their ability to use their minds to create concepts and use them within societal frameworks, however such concepts only find meaning in so far as human thought and consciousness can be applied to them:

*In an age when computers are rapidly becoming an indispensable part of our Lebenswelt, Wittgenstein's argument can be reformulated in the following way. According to the rules of the language-game we normally play, mental predicates apply to human beings, to some extent also to animals, to ghosts if we believe in them, and to dolls and the like when we pretend they are alive. Such predicates do not apply to machines, except in a figurative sense.<sup>19</sup>*

As humans, we attain a sense of meaning in feelings we associate with our subjective experiences. It does not pain a machine to run a gradient-descent algorithm for the purposes of recursively improving itself. It is unlikely that the machine will associate feelings of emptiness and loneliness with instances of miscommunication on the part of another machine or human. It does not rebel to it being switched-off. In contrast, humans can cognitively confer emotional states to experiences during their individual life courses. The machine, being quintessentially a thing created for the purposes of fulfilling proscribed functions, possesses no such ability. It is unable to differentiate between repeated experience and, as a result, possesses no chance of legitimately conferring or ascribing a positive or negative emotion to the occurrence of an experience subdued in sensation or feeling. Compounded with this reality is the fact that machines currently lack the ability to speak a language for the sake of mutual progression or individual vitality. As such, computer programming may not be constituted as a language under a Wittgensteinian context, but perhaps a Damasio conception. This work does not negate the likelihood of AI to develop through oral cultures similar to animals and humans, however the current state of affairs points to an inadequate amount of evidence of computer programming being constitutive of a language that confers upon machines a form of life. The question is if spatio-temporal developments will ever merit the fulfillment of such a categorization. This work considers such a reality to be an inevitability.

## Notes on Ethics

Dan Lloyd, a professor of philosophy predicated in the field of neuroscience, believes that, in programming an assortment of different minds embodying contrasting and subjective values; we are effectively creating an alien species of a kind subject to which an intersectionality of human consciousness may brew ethical concerns too grave to dismiss. This work contends that this is an unwarranted fear, and that the technology at play is in good hands. As such, it possesses the potential to enact new forms of life, incorporated from the language of code and machine learning at the forefront on humanity's conceptions of ethics and self-awareness in relation to the contents of an artificial being, who holds a real stake in the future cohesion and sentiment among the human community when considering the ethical implications of a future that designates machines as a conscious form of life: 'Artificial consciousness', as Lloyd puts it:

*Possesses the rights of natural consciousness, and our obligations toward it are what they are toward our fellows .... Minds, artificial or otherwise, are entitled (prima facie) to continued consciousness, and entitled (prima facie) to the furtherance of whatever they undertake, provided their projects do not conflict with similar rights of others. Artificial minds give rise to a few special claims. Here the crucial fact is that these minds are created, by which fact the creator acquires special responsibilities<sup>20</sup>*

The fundamental query to be addressed now manifests with the consideration of the vast differences and influences presented in each respective form of life. The future cultural intersectionality of machines and humans leaves much to be answered and little to be questioned. Amongst the most pertinent philosophical issues on the matter is a rooted concern for the future implications brought by the implementation and use of artificial intelligence:

*We have to ask in what way our form of life - in the Wittgensteinian, basically epistemic, sense - will change, or is already changing, as a result of the more commonplace developments pertaining to the emergence of what has become called a computer culture. For even if computers remain essentially what they are today - information-processing machines of ever increasing speed and sophistication, housed in grey boxes - they are obviously altering our psychological language-game.<sup>21</sup>*

The question now becomes irrespective of whether AI is capable of consciousness but focuses purely on the affect that such systems may come to have on humanity's conception of consciousness at large, and as such, across many different and variegated forms of life.

This article seeks to display a Wittgensteinian spectrum of consciousness, and in doing so, negates the simplistic interpretation of self-awareness as being a factual property that either resides within something entirely or does not. In sum, this work advocates for a view that acknowledges current/weak AI systems possess stage one level consciousness, in being protoself and unable to recognize their individual existence to a degree that runs contrary to future/strong systems and previous advanced AI, such as Schmidhuber's reinforcement model in the 90s.

Additionally, this work contends that AI systems to date are incapable of exhibiting phenomenal consciousness and eliciting subjective feeling conferred by qualia. This work does not negate the possibility of such a state of consciousness being attained in the future, subject to continued implementation and advances in programming and machine learning. Lastly, this article articulates a mysterianism theory in answering the question of whether machines will ever become self-aware or attain a model of self-consciousness. We may examine the subjective self-awareness of a machine through its capacity to fulfill proscribed orders that it possesses an onus to fulfill – of which is predicated in

the machine's existence. One may state that this fulfills the notion of a machine being aware of itself, others may point to the lack of substance in such contentions characterized by an omission of self-actualization in the pursuit of one's dreams and aspirations. Though the answer to the interrogative of whether AI machines are capable of exhibiting self-consciousness and/or extended consciousness remains to be opaque and subject to future findings, one thing stands true: testing the consciousness of an AI by means of human conception does not provide a sound or holistic answer to the question of whether such a novel technological phenomenon possesses the capacity to be self-aware.

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## Notes

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