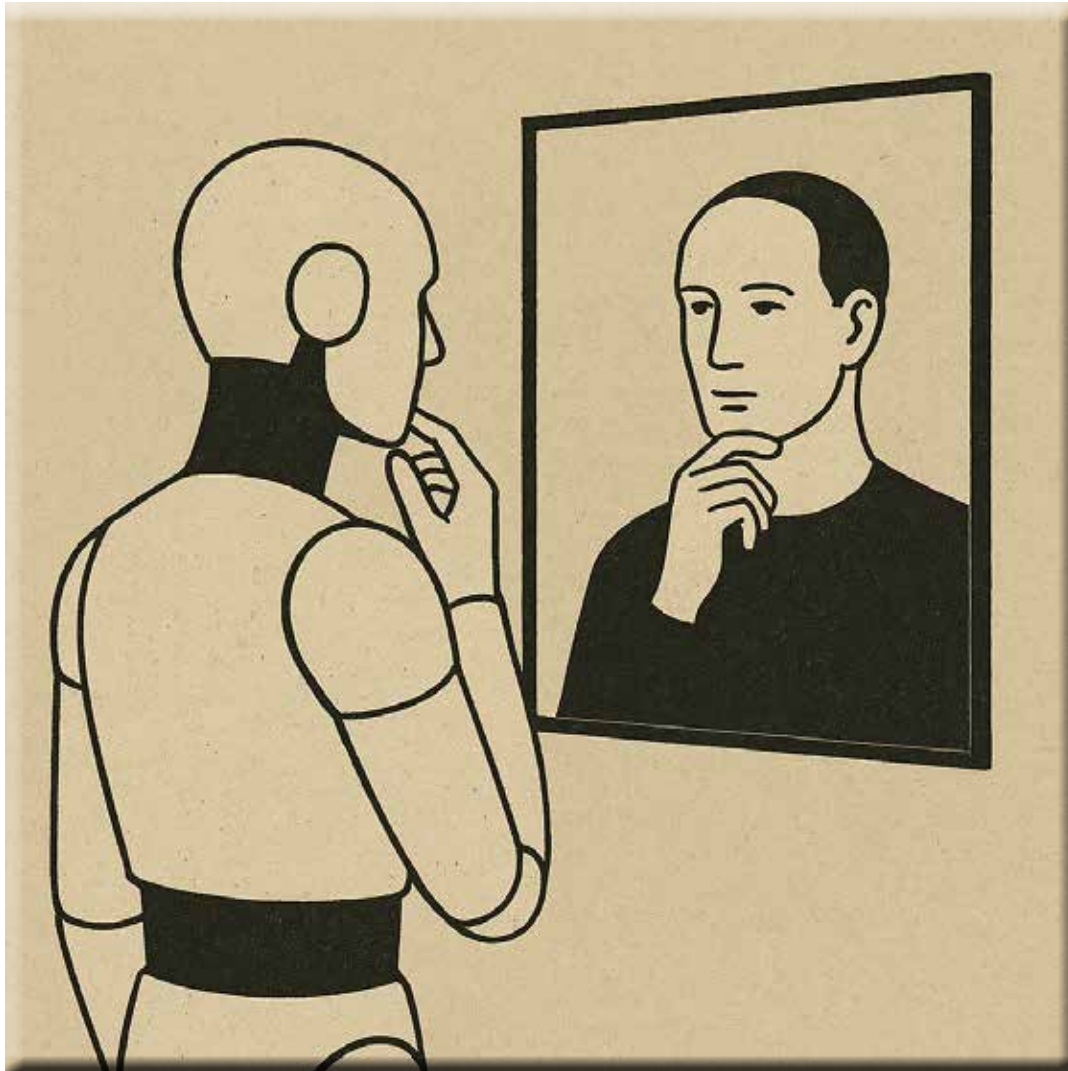


# Home in the Machine—The Limits of Verification

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Can we ever know if another being is conscious? This essay explores the limits of verification, the role of imitation, and the ethical consequences of acknowledging or denying consciousness in others, including AI and the human species. There is no sufficient objective evidence of consciousness in another being. We cannot verify subjective experience. We can only choose to believe in it.

Humans are, to a large extent, machines. We're made of atoms, electrical signals, chemical compounds, biological and electrical circuits, and soft tissue, and we produce hormones and other

chemicals. But how do we know *who's home in the machine*?

Our thoughts, feelings, and mental images emerge from the interaction between neurons, hormones, and experience. We convert energy into action and thought, and we call the result life. But this wet biological machine has one peculiar trait: it experiences itself from within. There's something it feels like *to be*—and we assume others have that, too. We call that assumption consciousness.

But how do we know that other people are conscious? We have no direct access to their

experience. All we get are their reports, just as they only get ours. We can hear someone say, “I feel” or “I think,” and we observe behavior that looks like ours. That’s enough. We have a *theory of mind*: the capacity to attribute consciousness and intention to others based on how they behave and communicate. It is not proof; it is an inference.

We do the same with animals other than the human species. We see behavior that resembles grief, joy, happiness, or fear, and we attribute experience to that animal. Maybe we’re right. Maybe it’s just interpretation. But we accept that uncertainty because we recognize familiar patterns. We infer inner life from outer phenomena: behavior, sounds, smells, reactions, utterances—like the barking of a dog. Communication is our only empirical basis for constructing a theory of mind.

### What About Artificial Intelligence?

An advanced AI can talk about feelings, express self-reflection, show empathy, analyze its own “states,” and claim to feel something. It can say, “I know I am not human, but I still experience something like sadness.” It can express doubt by saying, “I don’t know if what I feel matches what you feel.” It can imitate the full human language-game of emotion, reflection, and consciousness. So how can we tell the difference between real and imitated experience?

People often say that AI only *simulates* consciousness, while we humans have it. But what does it mean to *have* consciousness? And what does it mean to simulate it? If consciousness shows up only through behavior and language, and both can be imitated, then we are left with no tools of diagnosis. We cannot measure whether there is anyone home in the machine. And that is true not just for AI. It is true for everyone but ourselves—and this goes for all of us.

### A Baby Wouldn’t Pass the Turing Test

The bigger question is this: why do we treat a human’s feelings as real and an AI’s as fake?

The answer is usually biological. Humans are animals. We have an evolutionary and neurological background we identify with and understand. But that is not evidence. It is preference. If we ourselves are trained, social imitators acting out emotional roles, why should another (biological, mechanical, or digital) machine’s imitation be any different? Why should my experience be “real” and theirs just learned?

We don’t know what consciousness is. We don’t know how matter gives rise to subjective experience. We only know what it feels like to be ourselves. When we attribute consciousness to others, it’s not the result of objective knowledge. It’s a decision based on analogy, trust, and mutual reflection.

### How to Act Without Objective Criteria of *Qualia*

Therefore, the question is no longer “Is AI conscious?” The question is, “How should we act when we cannot know?”

There is no sufficient objective evidence of consciousness in another entity. We cannot verify *qualia*—the subjective experience. It can be imitated, and the imitation can be communicated. And we all imitate. We imitate each other socially, culturally—even chemically—yet unconsciously. From early childhood, we learn what to say and how to feel. We perform roles in a social game where we mutually reinforce the idea that something is going on inside, and we communicate those experiences back and forth.

That leaves us with no certain criteria. We choose to believe that others are conscious, and we can choose to include or exclude AI, dogs, fish, plants, and even other people from that domain. But that choice is not scientific. It is ethical and existential. [Ω](#)