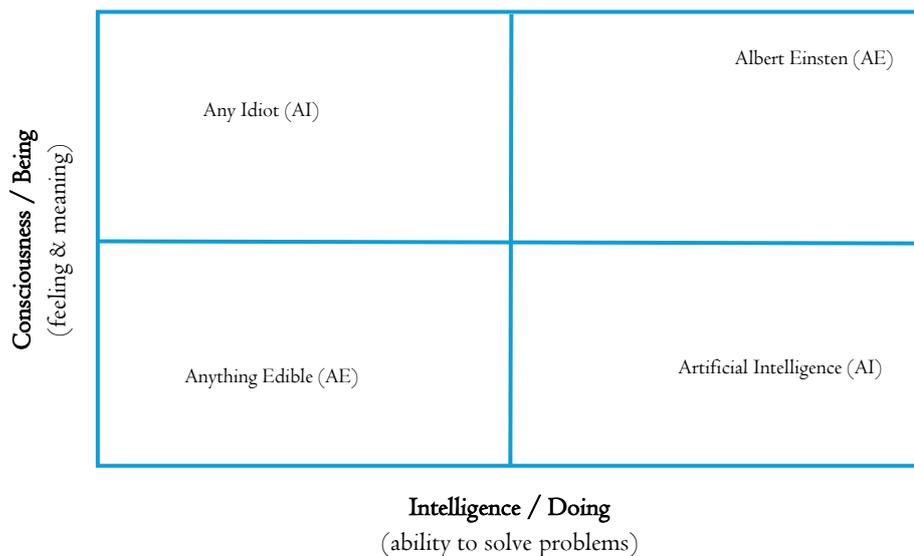


Intelligence, and Consciousness – A few thoughts

Arun Rajappa / 02.20.2026

With the rise of AI, understanding consciousness has gained renewed interest. We intuitively understand the difference between intelligence and consciousness—we recognize irritating neighbors and foolish coworkers as unfortunately conscious, but clearly not intelligent.

However, we are less familiar with creatures who are intelligent but are not conscious: and this is the domain that AI occupies.

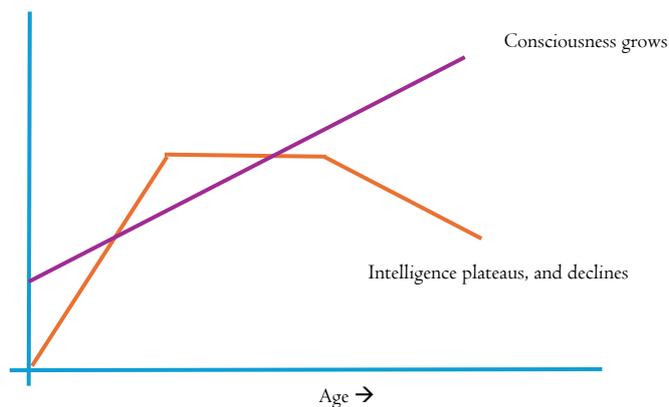


While the picture above is a humorous hat-tip to my MBA, it reveals a few insights:

1. (Bottom left) As a species, we typically don't eat things that are conscious, which is why pet food doesn't mean eating doggo, and cannibalism has a troubled past. Conversely, I wouldn't be troubled in eating a token-spewing donut.
2. (Top left) As a species, we empathize with and accord rights to humans and animals that we see as conscious, but who may not be intelligent. This is explored beautifully in one of my favourite novellas, *Flowers for Algernon*.
3. What is interesting when contrasting intelligence and consciousness is that intelligence is clearly a spectrum, whereas consciousness is typically seen (mostly) binary, you are either conscious, or you're not. More on this later.
4. (Top right) Albert Einstein was special in history in his ability to solve scientific problems, and also [speak coherently on the human condition](#). His views spanned science, religion, technology, and philosophy. A combination of intelligence and consciousness is called wisdom.
5. (Bottom right) Prior to artificial intelligence, it was common to see intelligence as correlated with consciousness. More accurately, if something was intelligent—it was likely also seen as conscious. However, Artificial intelligence has shown us that token-spitters can *do stuff*, and can solve problems, but without a sense of feeling and meaning.

While this sets the stage, let us dive deeper. As an aspiring writer, I struggled with a particular problem for many years: the ability to put words to my feelings. It may seem like this is the foundation of writing, but this is not so! I was great with words and sentences, what is called “wordsmithing”—however, I saw other writers who often had bad English, but they were *expressing themselves, capturing a shared feeling, and telling stories*, often in language that was more basic than mine. My problem was the opposite—I could write anything, but I had nothing to write about. I didn’t have original thoughts, I didn’t have stories to tell, and as still a young man who had grown up protected from life, I didn’t have much feeling for the human condition.

Thinking back to the time in college, I wasn’t unique: I had many friends who were very intelligent, but who were barely conscious! What is this consciousness then? Let us explore another picture...



From this, we can explore that consciousness is perhaps not a binary. Consciousness seems to grow with age; intelligence (as defined by mathematics, chess, or science) peaks for most human beings in their teenage or early twenties, then plateaus, and then declines with age.

The historical respect for older people (especially in Eastern cultures) comes from valuing their growth in consciousness over time. As a contrast, the Silicon Valley techbro culture values intelligence over consciousness, and hence ageism and the fascination with everlasting youth. Is it a surprise where AI was birthed?

Before going deeper, let us examine the picture above more critically. There are at least two questions to be asked about it:

1. Are the lines—intelligence and consciousness—continuous? Our intuition is that while intelligence may be continuous (questionable, but possible), consciousness seems much more like a step function. In my lived experience, I found that going to college, falling in love, getting married, having a child, losing my parents: these life events had a sudden impact on my consciousness. With each of these events, I was more aware of the beauty of Life, made even more tender by its limited span.
2. Does wisdom, seen above as the sum of consciousness and intelligence, always grow? Well, no, not necessarily. It is possible for a person not to grow much in consciousness, and so decline in wisdom over time, as their intelligence falls. Put another way, Eastern cultures emphasized that

people should spend time as they grew older on cultivating their consciousness, through service to others, meditation, and study of the scriptures, so that they could grow in wisdom.

And this brings us to Doing v/s Being. Having worked for several years in the tech industry, I found it to be obsessed with “doing”. “High agency”, “Shows ownership”, “Gets things done”, “Problem solver”, “Action-oriented” and other phrases dotted my annual reviews. But what was I doing, and why?! Ah, that didn’t matter too much. Even results were often side-lined in favour of energy, with phrases like “Failures are the stepping stones to success”. To be clear, there is nothing wrong in doing, and I am in favour of trying and failing and learning. However, when the spirit of these ideas is subverted to reward fervent action, something feels “off”. This is perhaps the reason that so much of our modern-day technology seems to not be helpful, but rather be “revenue maximizing for the benefit of shareholders”.

I digress. Being is the realm of feeling, of meaning, of the human condition. Artists and sages have been closer to this “quiet-deep” of being than entrepreneurs and savants. It is likely that language came about because of wanting to communicate with others, not only to coordinate, but also to share. George Eliot, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson help you live other people’s lives; The Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel, and U2 make you feel something, they take you away to a different time; Michaelangelo and Van Gogh evoke emotions you didn’t know you had in you.

The point is simple: in the humanist tradition, as can be seen in all great art, being precedes doing. Outcome and impact cannot be separated from intent; it is the reason that the phrase “the ends justify the means” makes us a little uncomfortable. It is also why AI art, whether painting or music, seems a bit empty—because we have confused the ends with the means, or rather with the “soul”—it is why AI art is often called soulless.

AI art is a good area to study further, since in terms of competence or skill, an artificial intelligence can be as good, or better, than even an accomplished artist. However, for the audience of the work, the “before” and “after” of knowing that it was produced by AI shifts something subtly. We cannot put our finger on it, cannot articulate it in words.

Before knowing it was created by AI, we may praise the work. However, after knowing it was produced by AI, we see it as soulless. What changed? It feels like what changed, what fell, was a sense that this work was not the outcome of human emotion, of human lived experience, of “something real”. Our ability to empathize becomes confused, becomes compromised.

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We are human. We are mortal; we live about a hundred years at best, and many are lost much earlier to disease or accident. We love, we fight, we laugh, we cry, we hurt, we heal. We are human size, between 4 and 7 feet tall for the most part. We are black and yellow and white; we are ruddy or pale. We struggle to talk to each other, and we tear-up when someone finally sees us, truly speaks to us.

We live our lives as though in a dream, doing more, doing more, and rarely pausing to be, and then dying.

This new technology that promises abundance is both an opportunity and an existential threat. We can get seduced further by intelligence and doing, running faster like rats on a treadmill. Or we can use it to

let go, to give up control, and to let the machines do what they do best—so that we can return to who we were once born as...