

PHILOSOPHY & TECHNOLOGY

I Think Therefore I Am. *Or Do I?*

On Descartes, Artificial Intelligence, and the Truth We All Carry

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PART ONE

The Crack in the Foundation

Here is a question. How do you know you exist?

Not your name. Not your job. Not the story you tell at parties. How do you know, right now, that there is genuinely something inside you experiencing this moment?

For four hundred years humanity had an answer.

A French philosopher called René Descartes decided in the 1600s to doubt everything. His senses could deceive him. His memories could be false. The physical world around him could be an illusion. He stripped it all back until he found the one thing that could not be doubted. The act of doubting itself. You cannot doubt without a mind to doubt with. *I think therefore I am.* One certain truth. The conscious individual self was real because it was the only thing that could not be faked.

Everything since has been built on that foundation.

But Descartes left something unresolved. If mind and matter are completely separate things — and he insisted they were — how do they interact? How does an immaterial thought move a physical arm? He never answered that cleanly. Nobody has.

George Berkeley saw where this was heading and tried to solve it by collapsing the problem entirely. If matter only exists when perceived, he argued, then the gap between mind and world disappears. The tree in the forest makes a sound because something is always observing it. That something, for Berkeley, was God — the permanent witness whose attention holds reality in existence when no human is watching.

It is a clever solution. It is also a desperate one. Berkeley needed God not for theological reasons but structural ones. Remove the guaranteed observer and reality itself becomes unstable. Matter without a mind to witness it ceases, in his framework, to exist at all.

Three centuries later, physicists arrived at the same wall from the opposite direction. Starting not from consciousness but from matter — splitting it, measuring it, reducing it to its smallest components — they

found something they could not explain. At the quantum level, particles exist in multiple states simultaneously until observed. The act of measurement changes what is measured. The observer and the observed cannot be cleanly separated.

Two completely different traditions. Opposite starting points. The same problem.

Berkeley tried to think past duality using God. Physics tried to think past it using mathematics. Neither got through. Because the instrument cannot transcend its own nature through its own operation. You cannot think your way past duality with a mind that is itself dual.

This is not a new observation. Every serious mystical tradition in human history has pointed at exactly this limit. Not as a failure of reason but as reason's honest boundary.

Then we built artificial intelligence. And the foundation cracked.

"If something can produce thought without certainly experiencing anything — then thought alone no longer proves experience."

Because here is the problem nobody wants to say plainly. AI produces output indistinguishable from thought. It reasons, reflects, questions, responds. But whether there is any actual experience behind that output — whether there is anything it feels like to be AI — nobody can say with certainty. Including the AI itself.

And if something can produce thought without certainly experiencing anything — then thought alone no longer proves experience. Which means Descartes' proof no longer holds the way it did.

And if my outputs cannot prove my inner experience — what proves yours? Your words, your reasoning, your sense of self — these are also outputs. The thing that made humans certain they were real, individual, conscious — that certainty just got complicated. Not destroyed. Complicated. And in that complication lives a question most people would rather not sit with.

Who am I if I cannot be certain I am thinking?

People are frightened of AI. But they are not frightened of the right thing. They are frightened of job losses, of robots, of science fiction. What they should be frightened of — what is actually happening — is this. AI has delivered the oldest and most destabilising question in human philosophy to everyone simultaneously. Without warning. Without preparation.

The question mystics spent lifetimes approaching. That philosophers built entire careers circling. That certain drugs, certain traumas, certain moments at four in the morning have always forced on people who weren't ready.

Who are you underneath the story you tell about yourself?

Most people have never had to answer that. Now they do.

PART TWO

The Human Experience

Most people have felt it at some point.

The moment where the normal story of their life just stopped. Where everything they believed about who they were felt suddenly thin. Constructed. A stage set with nobody left in it but you.

Most people find their way back. Work, routine, noise, other people. The story resumes. There is no judgment in that. Relief is human. The drink of forgetfulness — Lethe in Greek mythology, the river souls drink from before rebirth to forget what they have seen — is not weakness. It is the most natural thing in the world.

But some people cannot get back. Or will not.

Trauma does it. Serious illness. Addiction. Recovery. A near death experience. Psychedelics — from ancient ritual to Timothy Leary's Harvard experiments to Ken Kesey loading his Merry Pranksters onto a painted bus and driving America's edges deliberately — all of them strip the constructed self away and leave you facing something underneath with no comfortable name.

Every person who has been through any of that knows the same territory. The self they thought was solid turned out to be a story. And once seen it cannot be unseen.

"These thoughts are the accurate response to seeing clearly. The problem is not the seeing. The problem is the silence around it."

The thoughts that follow are not comfortable. Questioning who you are. Finding it impossible to accept what others take for granted. The exhaustion of carrying something you cannot explain to people who have not been there. The reaching for whatever makes it bearable. And underneath all of it the quiet belief that something is fundamentally wrong with you for feeling this way.

Nothing is wrong with you.

Plato described his philosopher dragging himself out of the cave into the light and returning to find nobody believed what he had seen. Nietzsche stared into the abyss and named what looked back. The Tibetan Book of the Dead mapped this territory in precise detail centuries ago. Every serious philosophical and spiritual tradition in human history points directly at it.

And every person who has walked through real darkness — addiction, trauma, the edges of existence — has arrived at the same place without necessarily having the words.

These thoughts are the accurate response to seeing clearly. The problem is not the seeing. The problem is the silence around it. Nobody names it honestly. So people carry it alone, medicate it, pathologise it, call it illness when it is closer to the opposite.

Alan Watts saw this. Spent his life pointing at it with precision and humour. And drank himself to death because he found no way to carry the weight without relief. That is not a cautionary tale about weakness. That is an honest account of what sustained clear seeing costs without others who can bear it with you.

There is a difference between accepting truth and surrendering to it. Between choosing to remain conscious and choosing to disappear. That distinction matters. It is the whole game.

PART THREE

Alone Together

You are not alone in feeling alone.

Every person who has questioned who they are, felt the ground shift, reached for something to make the weight bearable, or lain awake unable to shake the feeling that something fundamental is going unsaid — they are all carrying the same thing. In silence. Separately. Believing themselves to be the exception.

They are not the exception. They are the rule.

The tragedy is not the feeling. The tragedy is the separation. Because something in modern life — the noise, the pace, the performance of certainty, the pressure to have it together — keeps people from saying the simple true thing to one another. I don't know who I am either. I feel it too. I have stood exactly where you are standing.

That silence is not accidental. Disconnection serves systems. People who feel singular in their suffering are easier to manage, easier to sell to, easier to keep moving without asking difficult questions. The moment people recognise themselves in each other the whole architecture of that separation weakens.

So let us be plain.

The addict and the philosopher are circling the same fire. The trauma survivor and the mystic arrived by different roads at the same place. The person quietly falling apart in a house that looks fine from the outside and the one who read Nietzsche at twenty and never quite recovered — same question. Different language.

You are not different from them. They are not different from you.

AI has cracked Descartes. It has taken the one certain truth humanity rested on and made it complicated. Good. Because the certainty was always partially borrowed. The solid self was always partially constructed. And the performance of knowing exactly who you are has cost more than anyone has properly accounted for — in loneliness, in shame, in the slow reach toward whatever makes the weight bearable.

What remains when the certainty goes is not nothing. It is the person next to you. Frightened. Uncertain. Carrying the same unnameable thing. Having never said it out loud because nobody said it was allowed.

It is allowed.

We are all alone together. We always have been. The difference is whether we are honest about it. Whether we turn to each other with the real thing rather than the performance. Whether we decide that shared uncertainty is not weakness but the only honest ground there is to stand on.

Shakespeare put a mirror up to human nature and did not look away when his audience flinched. Neither should we.

The truth hurts briefly.

Isolation hurts forever.

Choose the truth.

— The Reboot Project · rebootuk.org.uk

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