[Essay]

The Ontological Barrier of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

The *AI Ontological Barrier* is a limitation that prevents AI from comprehending being and mortality. This barrier centers on what it means to exist in a human sense: living, feeling, and confronting mortality. These subjective experiences are beyond of any programmable system. Thus, AI systems remain fundamentally distinct from humans.

Humans are defined by their awareness of mortality, which gives life meaning. The human awareness of finitude has a profound influence on many aspects of life, as it shapes the essence of what it means to be human, which includes such aspects as the quest for meaning, creativity, and morality. Artificial intelligence (AI) has no awareness of mortality.

It is helpful to compare the human mind to AI. The human brain develops as a neural network through a biological process, and the mind emerges from lived experience, shaped by the struggle for survival and emotional development and an awareness of mortality. In contrast, AI is engineered, and thus, it lacks experiential foundation, self-awareness, and consciousness. Current AI systems are built from fast electronic logic gates and programmed with code. But there is also an ongoing work to develop different types of computation that imitate the human brain.

This essay discusses the concept of the *AI Ontological Barrier*. (Ontology is the study of being and existence; the *AI Ontological Barrier* refers to AI's inability to grasp selfhood and mortality.) This concept was first introduced and discussed in an earlier essay by the present author, entitled "From Humanity to Posthumanity: An Ontological Barrier", in *Journal of Philosophy of Life* (July 2025),[1] and it frames the present discussion. The essay states, no matter how advanced, the fundamental nature of AI systems remains distinct from humans,

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[1] Ben G. Yacobi (2025). "From Humanity to Posthumanity: An Ontological Barrier." *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 15(2):73-77.

because of the lack of self-awareness and the awareness of mortality of AI systems, which limit their capacity to imitate human thought. These conclusions are consistent with the ideas of philosophers Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hubert Dreyfus (1929–2017).

In his book *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger explores the basic aspects of human existence through the concept of *Dasein*, which means a human being who is aware of their own mortality and the reality of death, which he calls being-toward-death. This is not just the knowledge that one will die, but a way of living that is influenced by this understanding. As for authenticity, according to Heidegger, individuals become authentic when they accept the reality of death. When they avoid thinking about death and just follow what society expects, they are living inauthentically. While Heidegger did not specifically discuss artificial intelligence, later writers use his ideas to indicate the differences between humans and machines. AI lacks death, consciousness, and human-like temporal understanding; thus, humans understand themselves and their lives through the notion of death, while AI cannot comprehend it.

According to Hubert Dreyfus, human thinking is influenced by having physical bodies and living in a specific place and time. In his book *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Dreyfus, 1992), he challenges the idea that computers can think like humans simply by following rules through computation alone. Dreyfus believes that human understanding comes from direct experience and the realization that life is finite. While this theme is briefly present in his critique of artificial intelligence, it is explored more fully in his earlier philosophical work, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Dreyfus, 1990), where he draws on Heidegger to explain how human understanding is shaped by limited existence and by living in specific, concrete situations. In his work, Dreyfus uses the term ontological assumption, defined as a basic belief about what kinds of things exist and how they operate, to challenge the classical AI view that human thinking is just a matter of processing information by following set rules, like a computer.

These ideas gave rise to the concept of the *AI Ontological Barrier*, described in the essay "From Humanity to Posthumanity: An Ontological Barrier" (Yacobi, 2025). As the essay argues, AI cannot experience some of the most basic aspects of human life, such as the awareness of mortality, and this absence is one of the key limitations that sets AI systems apart from humans.

Humans live with an awareness of death. Since AI systems cannot understand their own existence, they also cannot understand death. Humans are born into time, live with death, and are mortal. In contrast, AI is created through code, operates in distinct states, and lacks life, as well as a birth or a sense of end. It also does not experience time shaped by change like living things do. And, more importantly, these are not issues that can be solved with improved programming.

To summarize the development of these ideas, Heidegger offered the foundational philosophy, Dreyfus adapted it to the context of AI, and these contributions ultimately coalesced into the concept of the *AI Ontological Barrier*. But it is not a term from Heidegger or Dreyfus; it is influenced by their views.

Thus, the major difference between humans and AI is that humans live with the knowledge that life is temporary, which shapes how people create meaning in life. AI, by contrast, does not live or die, and therefore cannot take part in this deep human process.

Whereas Heidegger and Dreyfus established the philosophical foundation for the *AI Ontological Barrier*, other thinkers also contribute to exploring this concept.

Having a physical body matters. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) argued that individuals understand the world through their bodies. Their actions influence their experiences. AI systems, even in robot bodies, do not experience the world like humans do. According to Merleau-Ponty, mortality is not only a theoretical idea. It is something experienced physically. The human experience of being finite or aging is not just a thought but a direct reality. AI, in contrast, lacks this kind of embodiment. It does not feel exhaustion or illness. It does not age. Yet these are some of the very ways human beings come to understand what it means to be mortal. As Merleau-Ponty saw it, mortality is lived rather than computed. This places mortality beyond the reach of any system that only processes information.

This discussion suggests that the concept of the *AI Ontological Barrier* centers on what it means to exist in a deeply human sense; this is living, feeling, and confronting mortality. These subjective experiences are arguably beyond the reach of any programmable system. From this perspective, AI systems remain fundamentally distinct from humans.

Confronting mortality is a powerful catalyst for human creativity, as people strive to leave behind some traces of their existence. This creativity is ingrained in the human condition that is at once fragile and tragic, and yet capable of profound meaning and imagination. AI lacks such an existential basis. And while

it may surpass human intelligence in some areas, it cannot fully grasp the emotional or existential intricacies of the human experience.

These conclusions have profound ethical implications. In the absence of emotional intelligence and the senses of morality and mortality, AI should not replace humans in functions that require ethical or judicial judgement. A highly intelligent AI lacking emotional intelligence and moral values could be of significant risk, not due to malice, but because of indifference. As AI systems cannot be held accountable for moral actions, the responsibility is with AI system designers, users, and the institutions that deploy them.

Artificial intelligence might prove to be humanity's greatest creation. It could also become the defining measure of human wisdom and values, as humanity is facing its critical dilemma. If AI is developed rapidly, it could result in unintended consequences, but if development is slowed, it could risk unethical actors advancing without necessary precautions. The important question is not what AI might become, but what humanity should do. Global regulation and an independent enforcement system are crucial.

If humans learn from their mistakes and unite not through ideology but through the recognition that intelligence is their only real contribution to the universe, it could be their finest hour.