

# Artificial Intelligence Response #5

In which I pretend to know the answers to some questions about  
consciousness and intelligence

Andrew Zito

## 1 Can computers be conscious?

Absolutely, unequivocally yes. There is no a priori reason to maintain that a circuit board or silicon neural net of sufficient complexity could not produce the same “consciousness” that we observe in human beings. Of course, what this consciousness *is* is a different question. Regardless of what it is, though, if we can have it, so can a computer.

## 2 What is consciousness?

A question given far more importance than it deserves. As far as I can tell, what we mean when we say “consciousness” is something like “self-awareness and an internal world” or perhaps “an internal experience.” We might turn to the old adage that “there is something it is *like*” to be a conscious thing. Whatever exact wording we use, there isn’t as much confusion as people like to make out over what the concept is that we’re discussing. Rather, the real conflict arises when we try to decide what the nature is of this “internal world,” or more accurately, how it is instantiated.

## 3 Is consciousness real?

Another silly question. Of course consciousness is real, if you mean by consciousness an internal experience of the world and if you mean by real observable by human beings. In fact, according to Descartes, it is the *only* thing that we can be 100% sure is real – and I am inclined to agree with him. Throughout our daily lives, we are constantly facing proof of the existence of consciousness. Every second we experience ourselves as selves, the existence, on some level, of the consciousness phenomena is literally right before our very (internal) eyes. I would go so far as to confidently assert that consciousness is self-evident.

Some people choose to deny this. Perhaps they are philosophical zombies, but I expect that they are simply confused about the entailments of the “existence” of consciousness. To say that consciousness exists does not necessitate that it is some sort of supernatural entity floating around inside our brains. This isn’t a binary between Dennet-style

materialism and dualism. Many things exist in a way which is neither physical nor supranormal. For example, attributes. My bed, upon which I am currently situated quite comfortable, has many properties which are distinguishable from its actual material – bed-shaped-ness, softness, creakiness, etc. Such distinctions are basic philosophy, running all the way back to Aristotle.

## **4 Would turning off conscious computers be murder?**

Turning off a conscious computer would be more like tranquilizing someone without their consent, which is still assault and still very illegal, but not quite as bad as murder. The machine's consciousness, like ours, would be little more than a certain state (albeit a very complicated one) of information. When a human dies, that information is lost, as their brain shuts down and becomes incapable of preserving it. If we shut off a conscious computer, its information is preserved. If we were to wipe its hard-drive (or the futuristic equivalent), though, *that* would be an entirely different story.