



# LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY & CARE

B. Scot Rouse

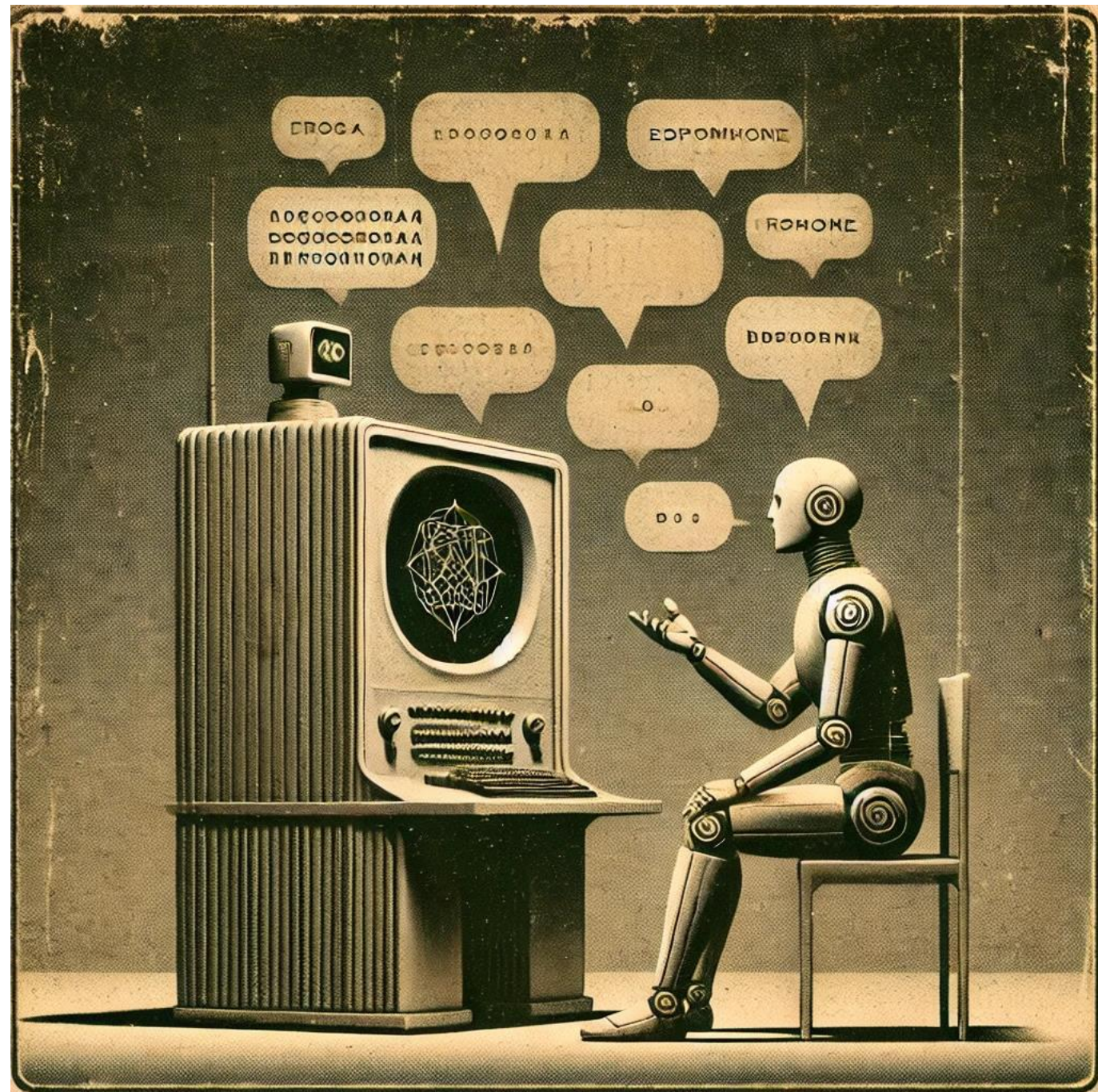
March 20, 2025

Topos Institute  
Colloquium

Clarifying questions welcome!

# Language, Technology, & Care

1. AI, Instrumental Rationality, and Care
2. Some Dimensions of Caring
3. Caring vs. Valuing (if time)
4. Conclusion



# I. AI, Instrumental Rationality, & Care





[Arts in Society](#)

[Class & Inequality](#)

[Forum](#)

[Gender & Sexuality](#)

[Law](#)

[Philosophy](#)

[Politics](#)

[Race](#)

[Science](#)



Image: Getty Images

## Forum

# The AI We Deserve

Critiques of artificial intelligence abound. Where's the utopian vision for what it could be?

**Evgeny Morozov**

*With responses from Brian Eno, Audrey Tang, Terry Winograd, Bruce Schneier & Nathan Sanders, Sarah Myers West & Amba Kak, Wendy Liu, Edward Ongweso Jr, and Brian Merchant*



“I think its not a coincidence that early AI tools closely mirrored the instrumental reason of clerical and administrative workers in the very institutions—government, corporate, and military—that spearheaded AI research.”

”  
Early AI focused on replicating the intelligence of a fully committed, emotionally detached office worker—a species of William Whyte’s “organization man.”

”  
Why should the world-historical promise of computing be confined to replicating bureaucratic rationality?

Evgeny Morosov, “The AI We Deserve”

The “Paperclip Maximizer” thought experiment  
(from Bostrom, *Superintelligence*)

# A monster of instrumental rationality run amok!!

It has a goal, a *value*: to create paperclips efficiently

But it is impervious to the question of why this *value matters*, why anyone (or anything) should *care* about it.

(“Paperclip Embrace” at the Misalignment Museum in SF)



The “Iron Cage” of  
instrumental rationality

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the  
Spirit of Capitalism* (1904)



Living in a technological age:

- Our world is set up to compel us to prioritize efficiency and optimization
- We relate to the planet (and each other) as a pool of resources at our disposal.

Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” (1949)





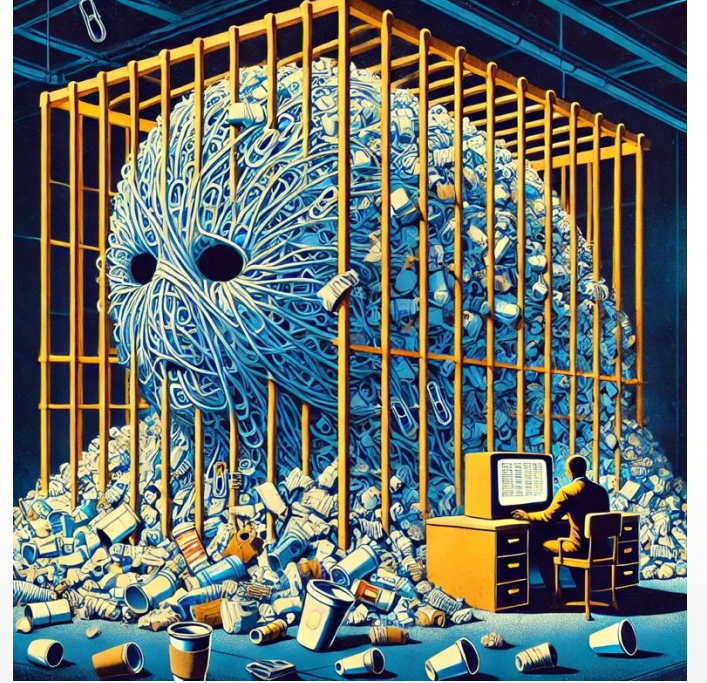




Image: Getty Images

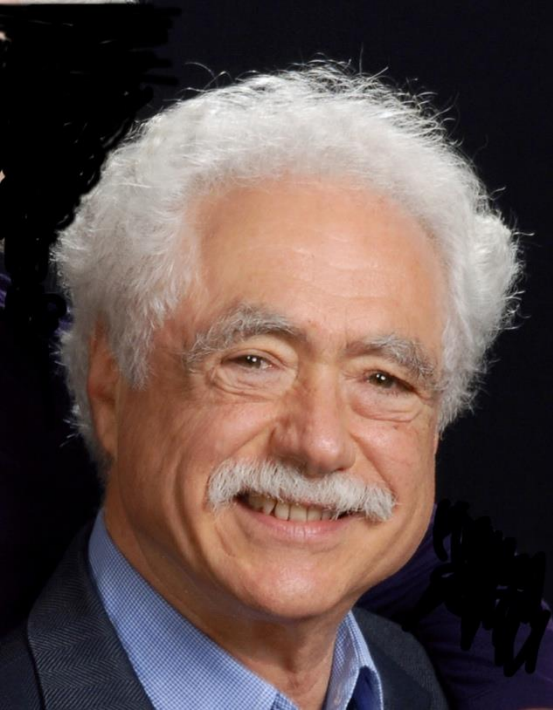
A response in our Forum: “The AI We Deserve”

## Machines of Caring Grace

The goal should be to support humans, not to replace them.

**Terry Winograd**





Terry Winograd  
“Machines of Caring Grace”

“The problem isn’t how to engender AI systems that are more playful and less boring but...

→ To lay out what it would mean to create and deploy systems that are supportive of human concern and care. ←

I am not as enamored as Morozov seems to be with the world of Storm’s “flâneur.” I agree that there is something attractive about the image of playfulness, imagination, originality, with no problems to solve, no goals to pursue. But there are deeper human consequences and opportunities that are at stake when we design technologies. What Morozov leaves out in his efficient-versus-playful dichotomy is the role of human care and concern. This is evident in the way he talks about intelligence, which he sees as the measure of being human.

Thus he seeks alternative kinds of “non-teleological forms of intelligence—those that aren’t focused on problem solving or goal attainment.”

But care is not a form of intelligence. The philosopher John Haugeland famously said “the trouble with artificial intelligence is that computers don’t give a damn.” This is just as true of today’s LLM-based systems as it was of the “good old-fashioned AI” Haugeland critiqued. Rather than a kind of intelligence, care is an underlying foundation of human meaning. We don’t want to fill the world with uncaring playful machines any more than with uncaring efficiency generators.

## II. Some Dimensions of Caring & “Giving a Damn”

“The trouble with artificial intelligence is that computers don’t give a damn.”

John Haugeland “Understanding Natural Language” (1979)

---

JOHN HAUGELAND

---

HAVING THOUGHT

---

*Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind*



# The Primacy of Caring

*Stress and Coping  
in Health and Illness*



Patricia Benner  
Judith Wrubel

## 1. Mattering

“Caring as it is used in this book means that persons, events, projects, and things matter to people. Caring is essential if the person is to live in a differentiated world where some things really matter, while others are less important or not important at all.

Caring’ as a word for being connected and having things matter works well because it fuses thought, feeling, and action—knowing and being. And the term *caring* is used appropriately to describe a wide range of involvements, from romantic love to parental love to friendship, from caring for one’s garden to caring about one’s work to caring for and about one’s patients...” (p.1)



## 2. Care vs Reason & Morality

---

What we care about is indexed to our particular, personal life history and circumstances.

- What we care about is not necessarily grounded in impersonal rational or moral considerations.
- Human beings are the most intelligent beings we have met (so far), but
  - Our caring can compel us to act *against* reason and morality

Featuring the  
Bestselling Essay  
"On Bullshit"

# THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE CARE ABOUT

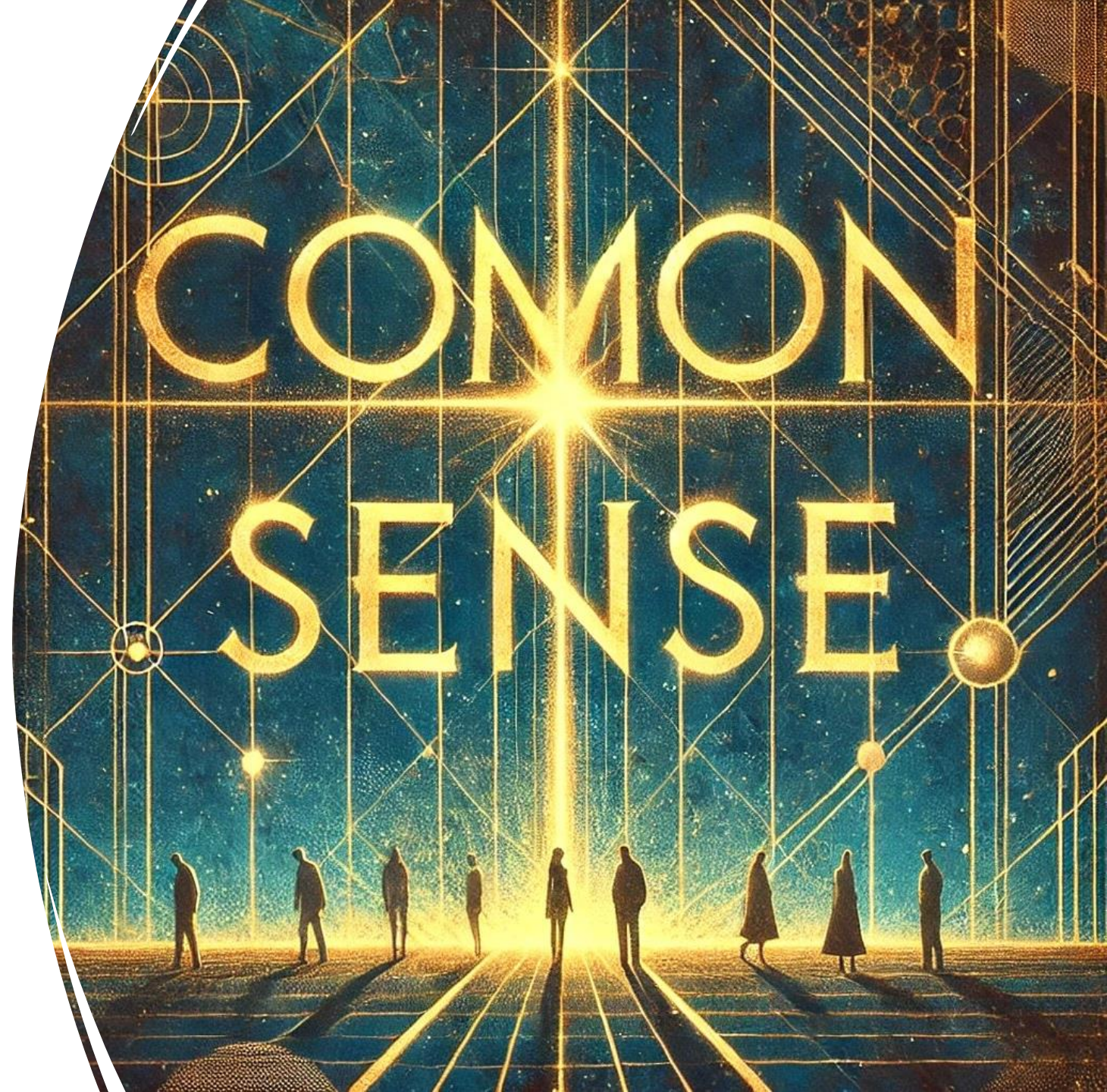
Harry G. Frankfurt



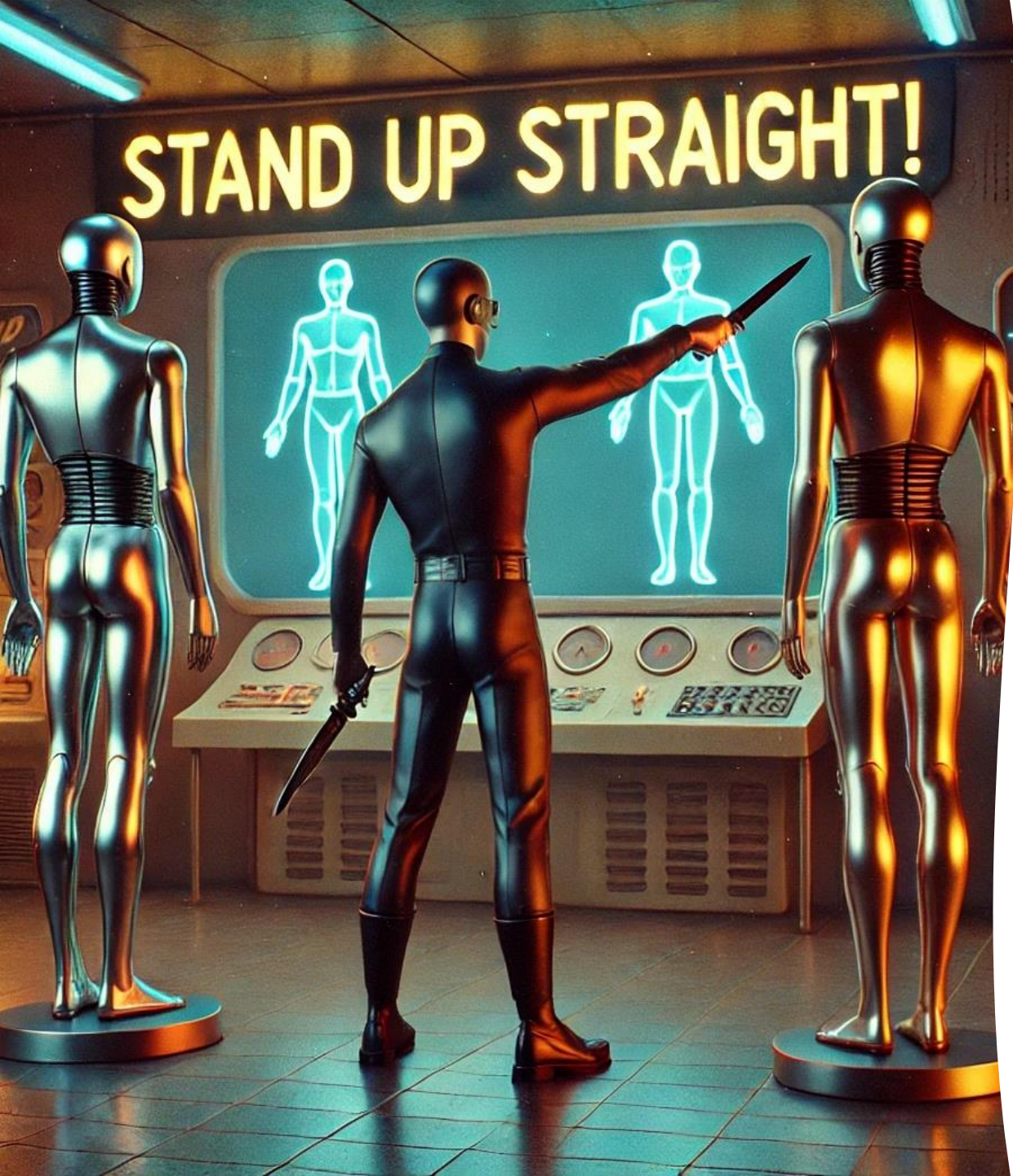
### 3. “Average Everydayness”

What *one* does.

- A source of social order and shared sense-making
- A source of ‘automatic’ behaviors that can be disconnected from our care.







## 4. EMBODIMENT & “SHOULD”

Nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more intimate, and therefore more precious, than the values given body, *made* body, by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy...

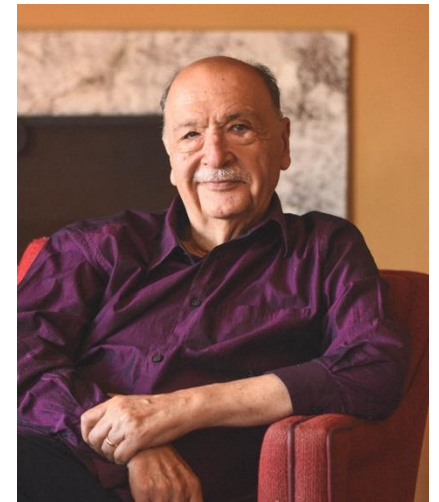
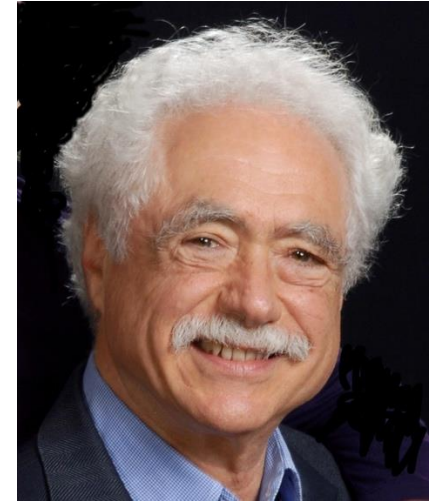
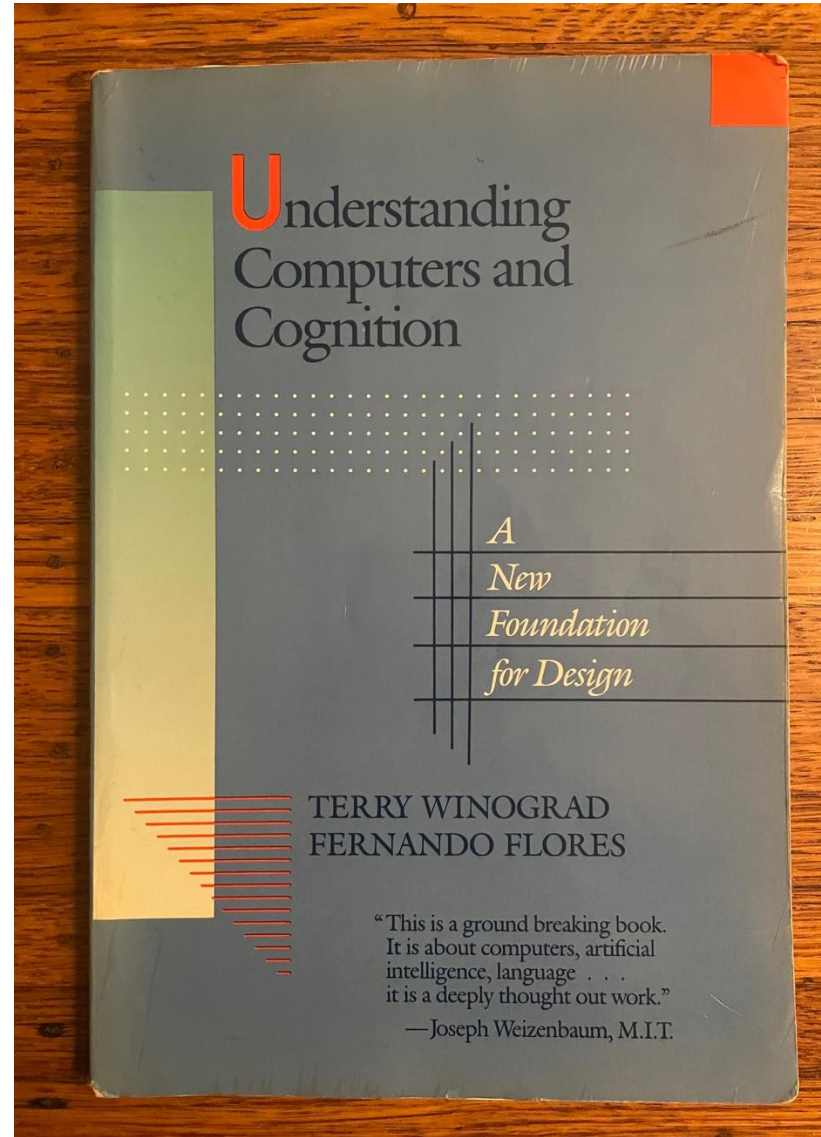
Capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, [and] a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight” or “don’t hold your knife in your left hand.”

Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977)

## 5. LANGUAGE & COMMITMENT

Communication is not just pattern matching and transmitting information: it is the coordination of commitments

- Assertions
- Declarations
- Requests
- **Offers/Promises**



# COMMITMENT

СОММУНКА РЕЕРИНИТИ



## Promises! (with first-person commitment)

- Not mere sequences of words uttered mechanically
- Setting a stake in a possible future and guiding subsequent actions (with others) *to take care of the underlying concern.*
- An expression of my stand in the world, **what I care about**, the kind of person I project myself to be.
- A social practice, a dance! A way of being involved out in the world, with others
- Trust, distrust; gratitude, resentment; flattery, condescension  
→ “*Reactive attitudes*”



OPINION

Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

## Can Machines Be in Language?

Large language models brought language to machines. Machines are not up to the challenge.

By Peter J. Denning and B. Scot Rousse

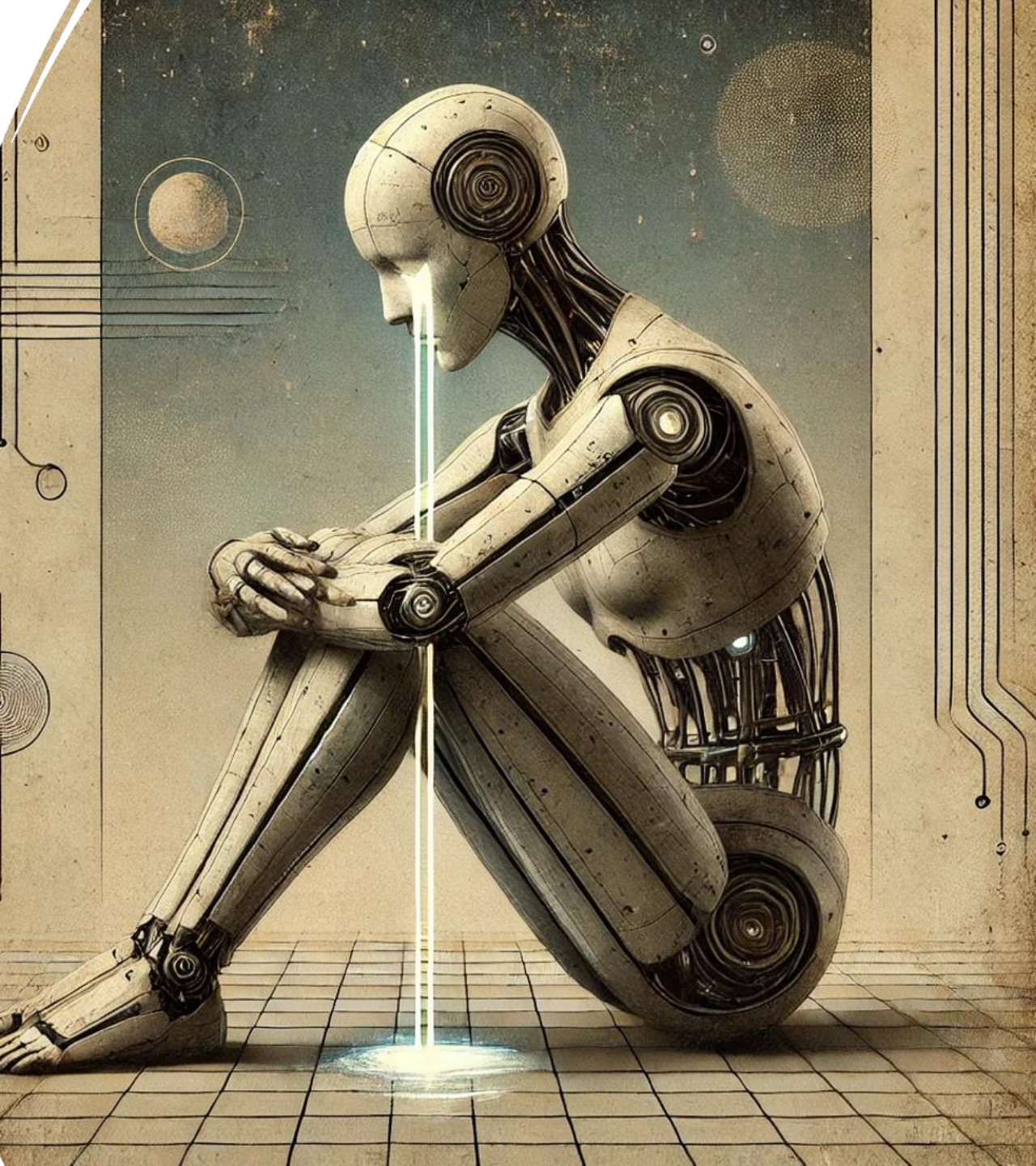
Posted Feb 22 2024

Feedback



Predicting what words (or tokens) come next is radically different from making (and keeping) the commitments expressed in those words.





## 6. MORTALITY

*That and how* things matter to us depends on the fact of our mortality, our “terminal end state.”

## 7. HISTORICAL SPACE

*That* and *how* things matter to us depends on the shared historical space in which we live.

- Luther's, "Here I stand, I can do no other!"
- The nihilism of our technological age.

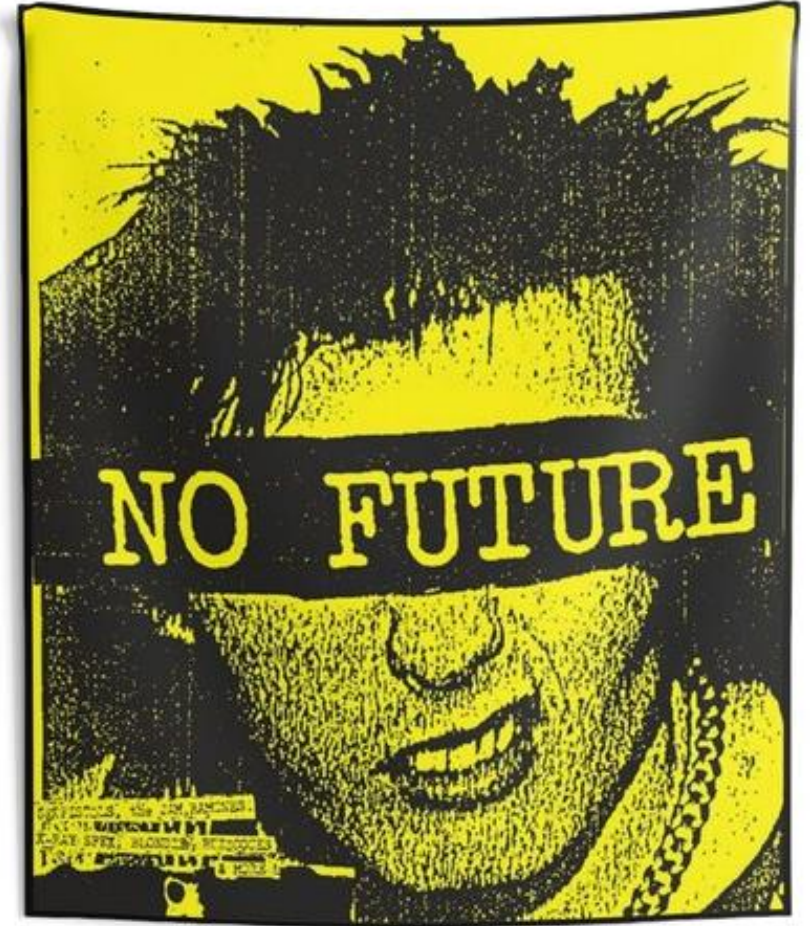




## The Nihilism of the Punks in a Technological Age

Why do the punks find “nothing” to do (except to build their own world)?

- They live in a world that prioritizes efficiency, optimization and power *for the sake* of further accelerating efficiency, optimization and power.
- They are revolted by their parents’ generation living a hollow sham life in the grip of this drive to efficiency, optimization and power, while the planet drifts towards destruction.
- They sense that efficiency, optimization, and power for their own sake are *inimical to care*
- *You cannot tend to what matters while trying to efficiently optimize and control it*







*You cannot properly tend to what matters while trying to optimize and control it.*

Summary

# LANGUAGE & CARE

Language enables us to belong to a community, in which we can...

Project an identity with long-term futures & overarching commitments

Our attraction towards which is cemented in linguistic articulation ...

...And sustained in-word-and-deed-with-others, over time.

→ “Tending to what matters”



Not simply a feeling of affection.

Care provides our orientation in the world.

What we care about solicits our attention and action, involving us in the world with other.



## Some Dimensions of Giving a Damn

1. Distinction between what matters & does not matter
2. Caring beyond reason & morality
3. Embedded in average everydayness, with others
4. Embodied in manners & dispositions
5. First vs. Third-person stances
6. Mortality
7. Historical Space



## Some Dimensions of Giving a Damn

8. Care as tending to what matters:

*You cannot properly tend to what matters while trying to optimize and control it.*

### The Paradox of Technological Caring:

*We cannot properly tend to what matters while trying to optimize and control it...*

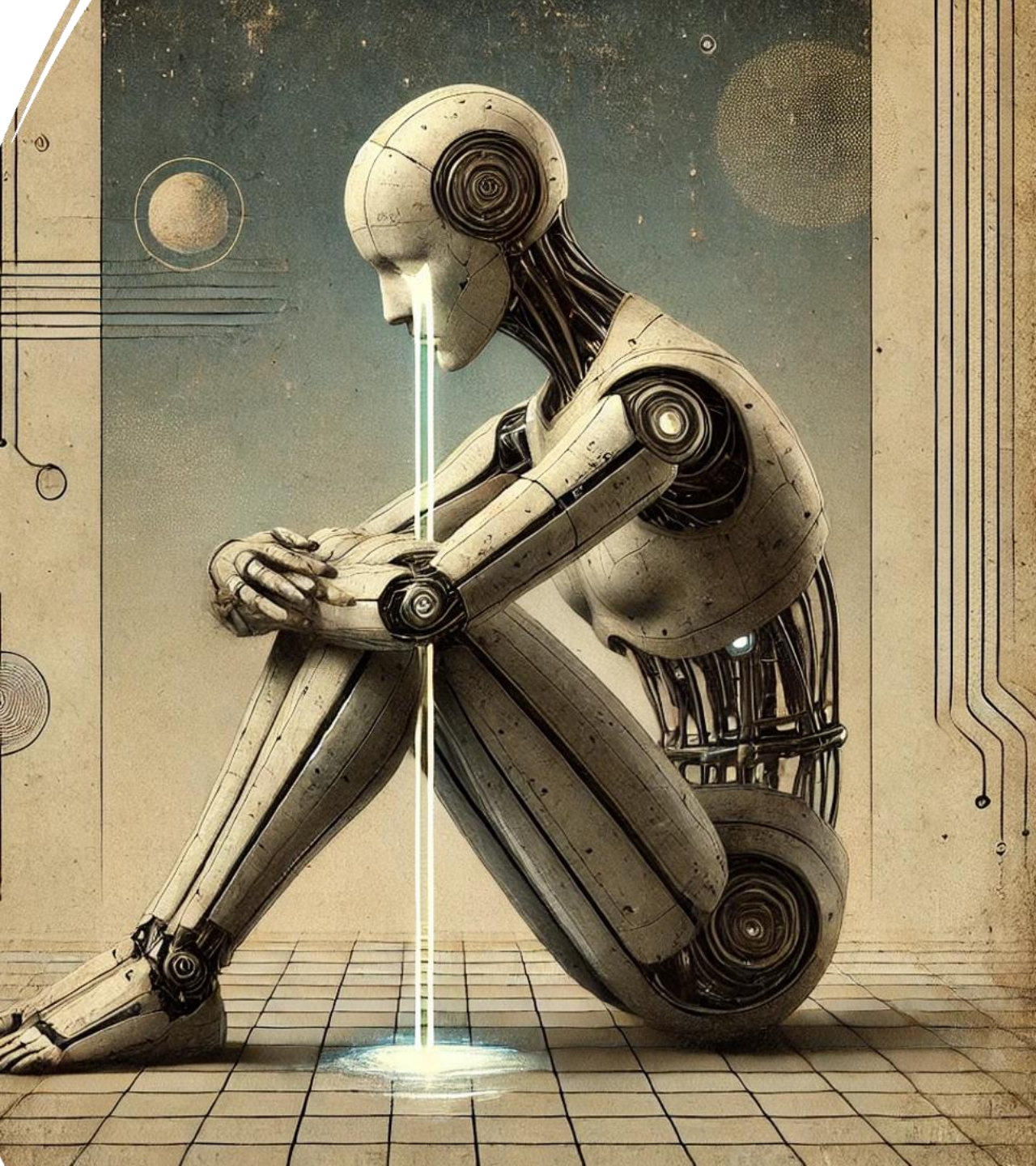
*But we must use design and use technologies to adequately tend to what matters.*

*→ “Not a problem to be solved but a paradox to be managed” (Esther Perel)*





# III. Caring vs. Valuing



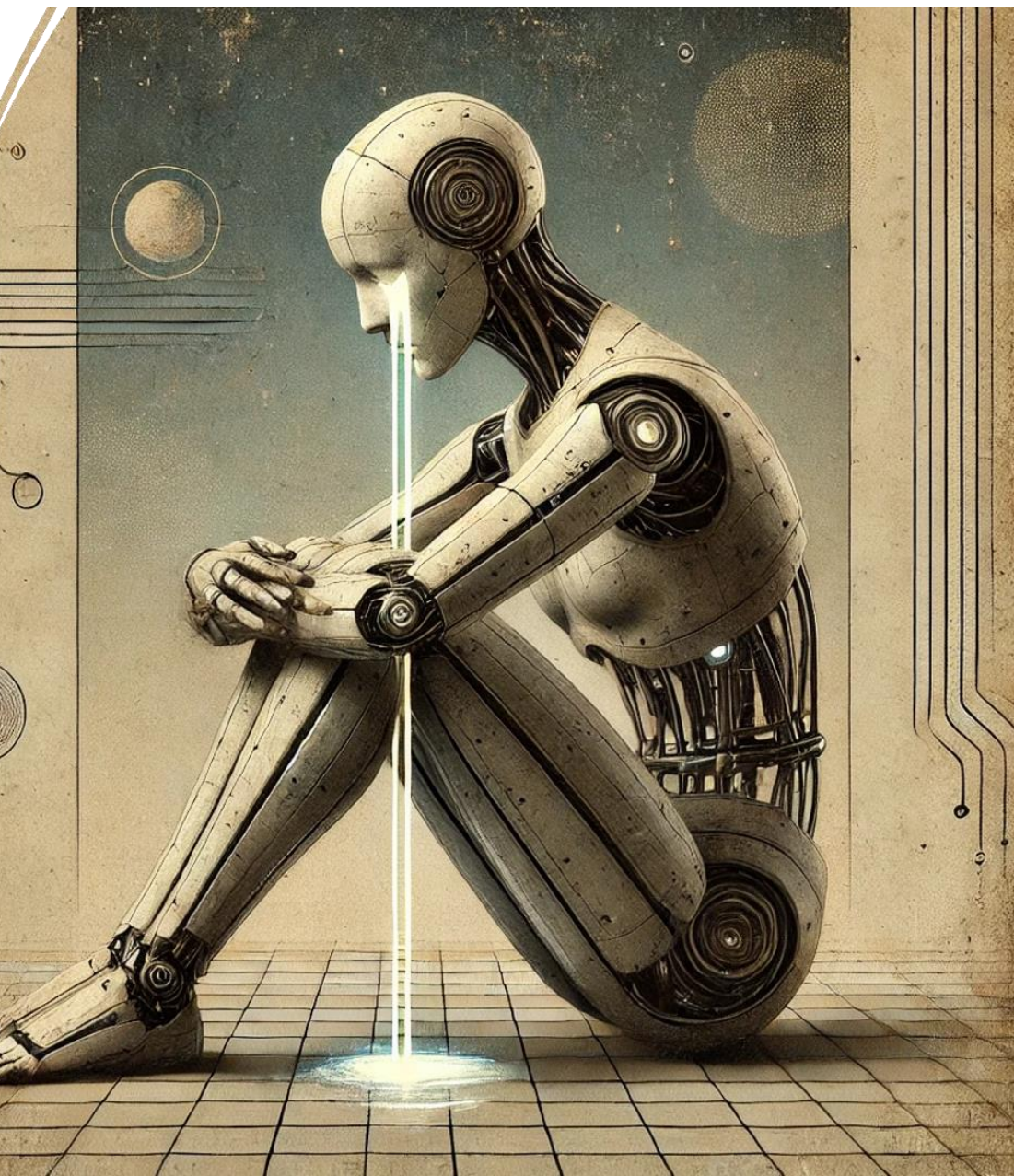
Proposal:

Values are abstractions from caring that we often forget are abstractions, and that we then relate to as realities...

...and which can detach us from the caring they were meant to capture.

## Proposal:

Values are abstractions from caring that we then relate to as realities



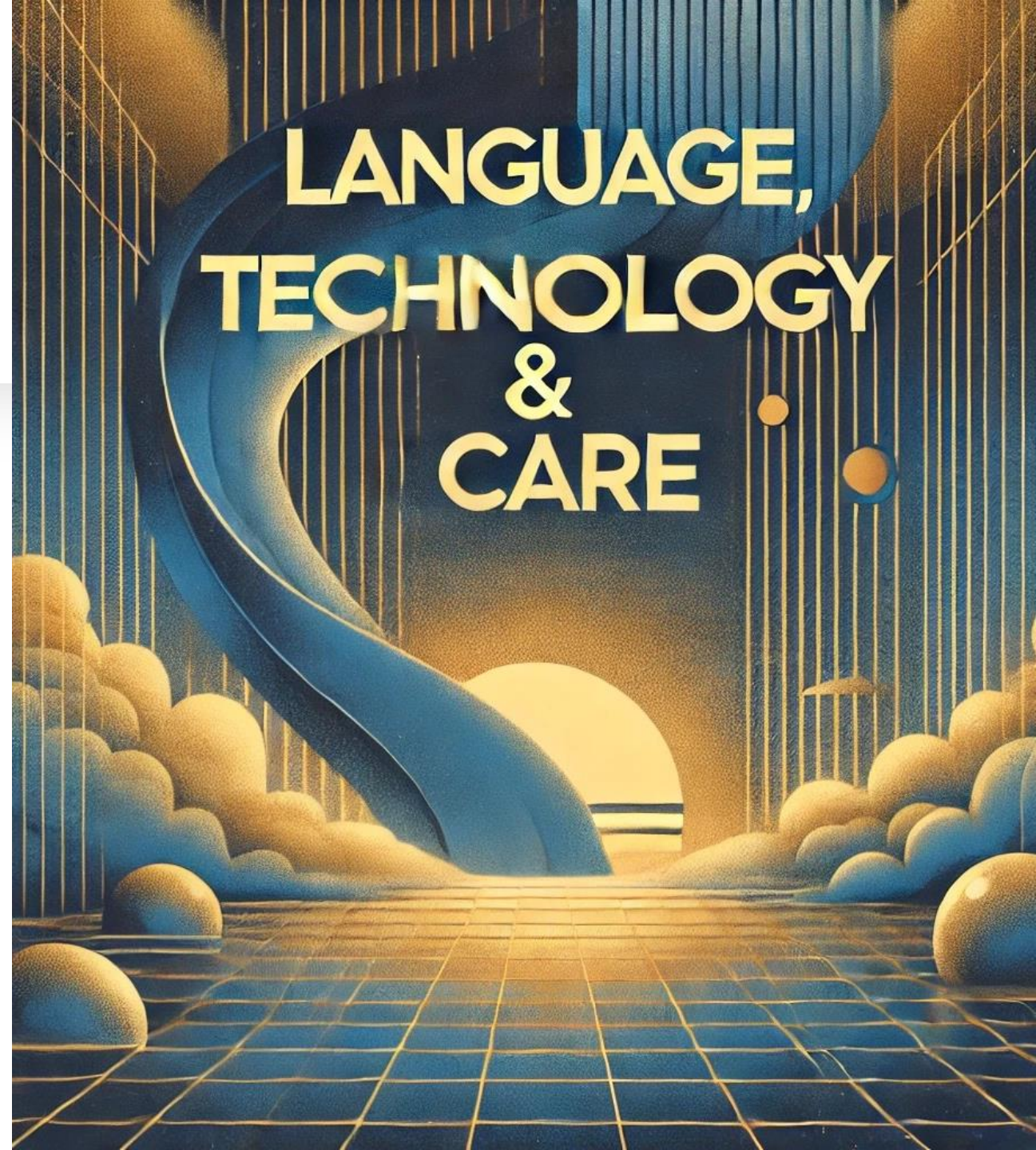
## Examples:

- Drivers in downtown Berkeley
- The preference boxes on a dating app that sort us into stereotypical types or “profiles” that we then rely on for meeting people.
- A corporation’s values that become hypostasized and harmful, e.g., Amazon’s amazing commitment to customer satisfaction producing dangerous and humiliating worker conditions.
- An AI agent’s pre-programmed goal?

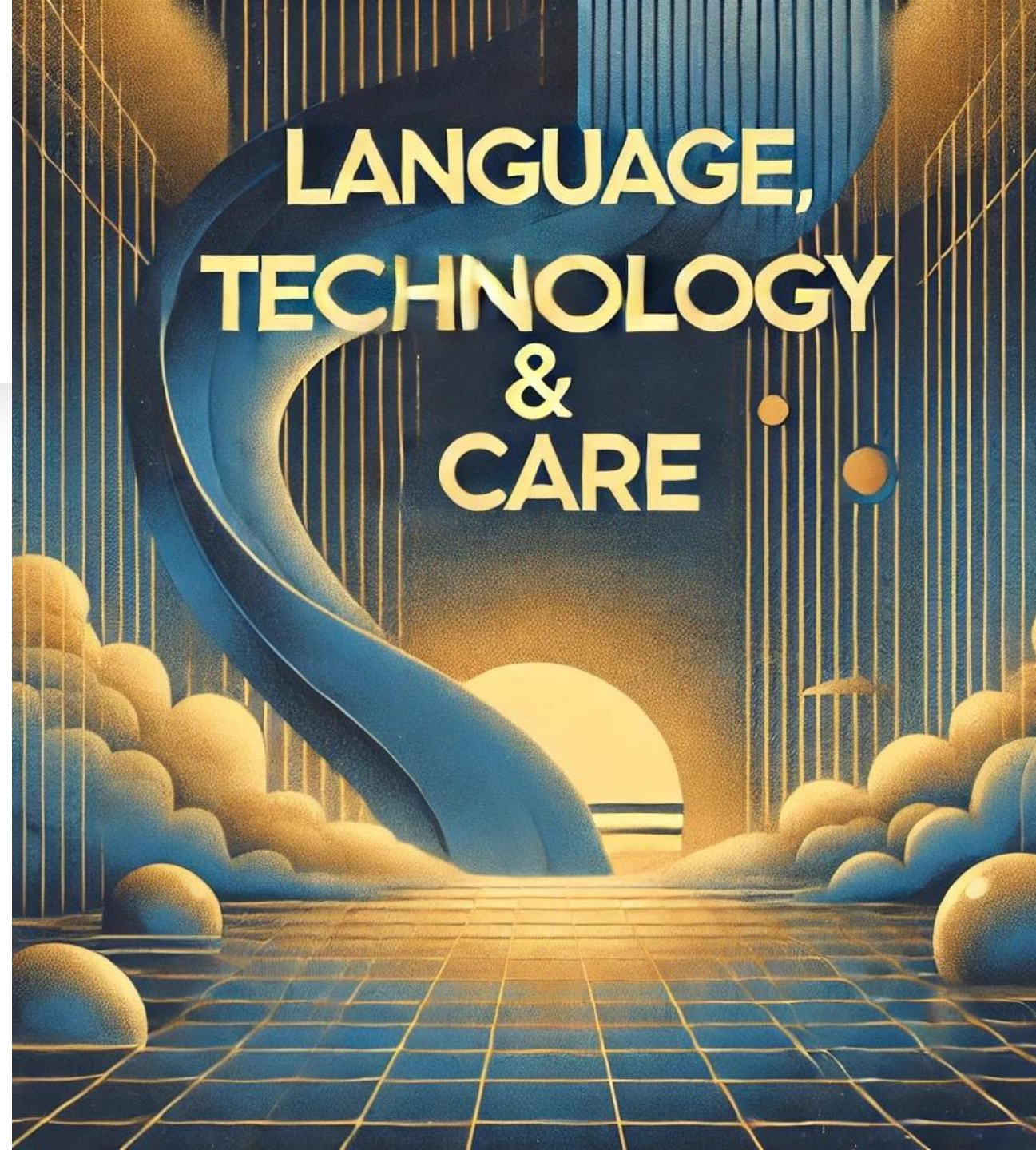


→ What does “Tending to what matters” mean for you?

→ How do you understand this balance we need to strike between caring and optimizing?

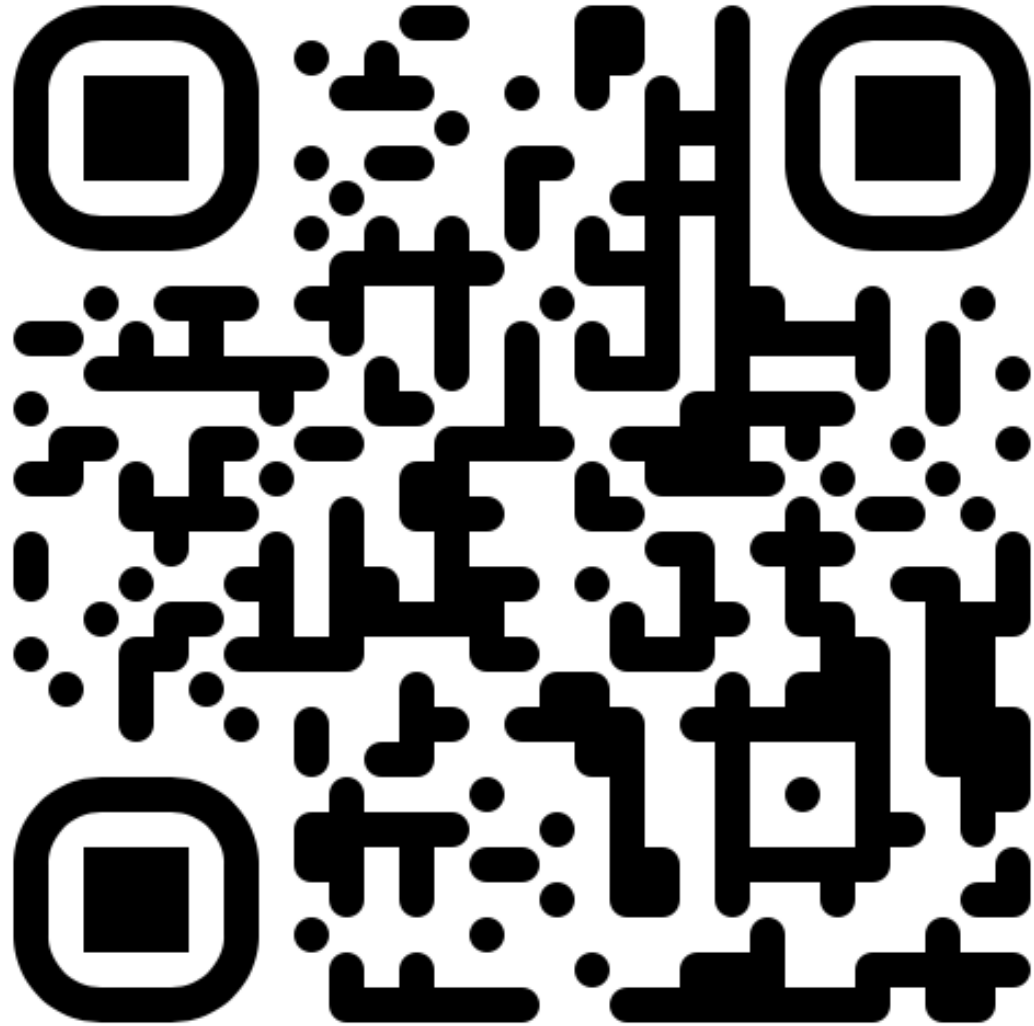


CONCLUSION



# STAY IN TOUCH!

b.rousse@topos.institute



<https://without-why.ghost.io>