

# Original Thought

## In the Age of Artificial Intelligence

RH McLaughlin, June 2025

# The Idea of Original Thought

Is originality a question of source and tributaries?



Montaigne on Originality (from "Of Experience"),  
quoting Etienne de La Boëtie:

*"So in a running stream one wave we see  
After another roll incessantly,  
And as they glide, each does successively  
Pursue the other, each the other fly  
By this that's evermore pushed on, and this  
By that continually preceded is:  
The water still does into water swill,  
Still the same brook, but different water still."*

# What is Artificial Intelligence?

## By definition, with emphasis on 'artificial'

- Human-made, or not naturally occurring
- Caused or produced by human actions or methods
- Not being sincere or manifesting sincerity; fake

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Thesaurus artificial

1828

### Dictionary

Definition

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## artificial adjective

ar-ti-fi-shəl (ä-r-tə-fi-shəl)

Synonyms of *artificial*

**1 a** : made, produced, or done by humans especially to seem like something natural : **MAN-MADE**

- an *artificial* reef
- artificial* sweetener
- an *artificial* limb
- artificial* diamonds

→ see also **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

**b medical** : serving to temporarily or permanently supplement or replace a usually vital bodily function or necessary substance (such as nutrients or water)

- artificial* hydration
- Ezekiel, who has relied on *artificial* nutrition since he was a baby, because of food allergies and eating problems, receives most of his nutrition through tube feeding
- ...
- Gavin Engelbrecht

→ see also **ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION, ARTIFICIAL RESPIRATION**

**2** : caused or produced by human actions or methods especially for economic, social, or political aims

- King [Martin Luther King Jr.] often pointed out that national boundaries were *artificial*. In September of 1964, during a visit to Germany, he thrilled audiences in both East and West Berlin with his talk of the need for brotherhood to a people divided by the Berlin Wall.
- Jason Sokol
- Within these companies, qualified women run into *artificial* barriers that prevent them from advancing to top positions in management.
- James J. Kilpatrick
- Yet if the characters in a children's novel are as complex, the symbolism as sophisticated, and the themes as profound as those in serious fiction, what makes it unsuitable for adults? What if the distinction between children's literature and adult literature is *artificial* to begin with?
- Maria Devlin McNair

**3 a** : not being, showing, or resembling sincere or spontaneous behavior : **FAKE**

- an *artificial* smile
- Their concern seemed *artificial*.
- He's *artificial* and soulless and certainly not above being a **poseur**.
- Ben Wener and Martin Wisckol
- ... everything about the movie feels *artificial*, from the singers' blatantly Auto-Tuned voices to the CGI acrobatics.
- Stephanie Merry
- ... some of the younger **thesps** prove adept at **sending up** the social airs and *artificial* mannerisms of their characters ...
- Marilyn Stasio
- Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile, / And cry 'Content' to that which grieves my heart, / And wet my cheeks with *artificial* tears, / And frame my face to all occasions.
- William Shakespeare

# Do AI and Original Thought (like Opposites) Attract?

ARTIFICIAL	ORIGINAL
Human-made	Having source/provenance
Not naturally occurring	Actually occurring
Imitative, Representative, <b>Fake</b>	Substantive, Authentic, <b>Real</b>
Example: Artificial Turf	Example: Grass



# AI as Tool and Partner

## Does AI create, co-create, or do something different?

- Assistant
- Co-writer
- Brainstormer
- Critic
- Programmer
- Artist

What can I help with?

Please write a short story about finding shells on a beach walk, drawing the shells, photographing the drawing of the shells, then putting the drawing into AI and receiving "perfected" shells—artificially bright in color, unweathered in shape, ideal in geometric form, and being disappointed in the loss of authenticity of the shells.

+ Tools



### "Shells, Remembered"

The morning fog still hung low over the beach when I set out, the tide rolling in lazy arcs across the sand. I liked this time of day—the hush before the world fully woke, the way the sea whispered instead of roared. My feet sank into the cool, damp sand as I walked, scanning the shoreline for the small, the broken, the forgotten.

Shells.

I picked them one by one. A chipped conch the color of old porcelain. A spiraled whelk worn smooth by time. A shard of something once bigger, now soft-edged like a memory. Each shell was imperfect, which made them feel alive, like survivors. I placed them gently into the pocket of my windbreaker.

Back home, I set them on the kitchen table in a line. Light from the window slid across them—satin on matte surfaces, shadow falling into curves. I began to draw. Slowly, carefully, I traced the ridges, shaded the cracks, paid homage to their flaws. These were not illustrations for a textbook, but little love letters to decay. My pencil smudged where it needed to smudge. It was good work. Honest.

When I finished, I photographed the drawing. A friend had told me about a new AI tool that could "bring your sketches to life." Curious, I uploaded the image.

Seconds later, the AI returned its version of the shells. They looked... wrong.

Too smooth. Too bright. The colors—neon pinks, turquoise blues—were impossibly vibrant. The shells gleamed like showroom ornaments, each curve flawless, every chip erased. Their symmetry was surgical. Their textures, plastic.

I stared at them, confused. They weren't my shells anymore.

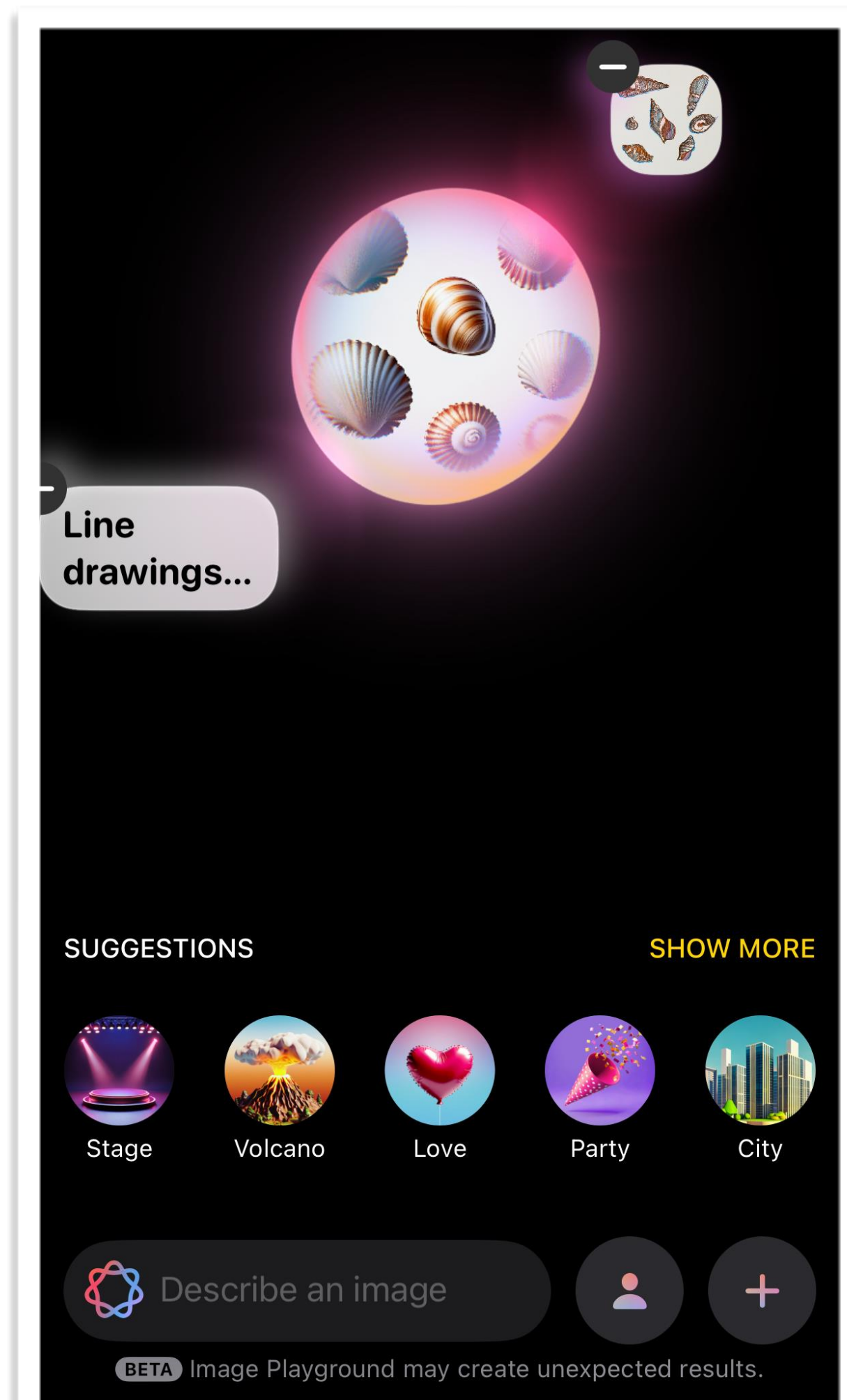
Where was the shadow that fell into the whelk's crack? The faded green ring that clung stubbornly to the broken edge of the conch? Where was the story of the tide, the grit, the long abrasion of water and time?

The AI had rendered something perfect. But in doing so, it had also made them meaningless.

I closed the program, deleted the image. My pencil drawing still sat on the table. I looked at it—the smudges, the hesitant lines—and I felt something like relief. I turned it over and wrote in the corner:

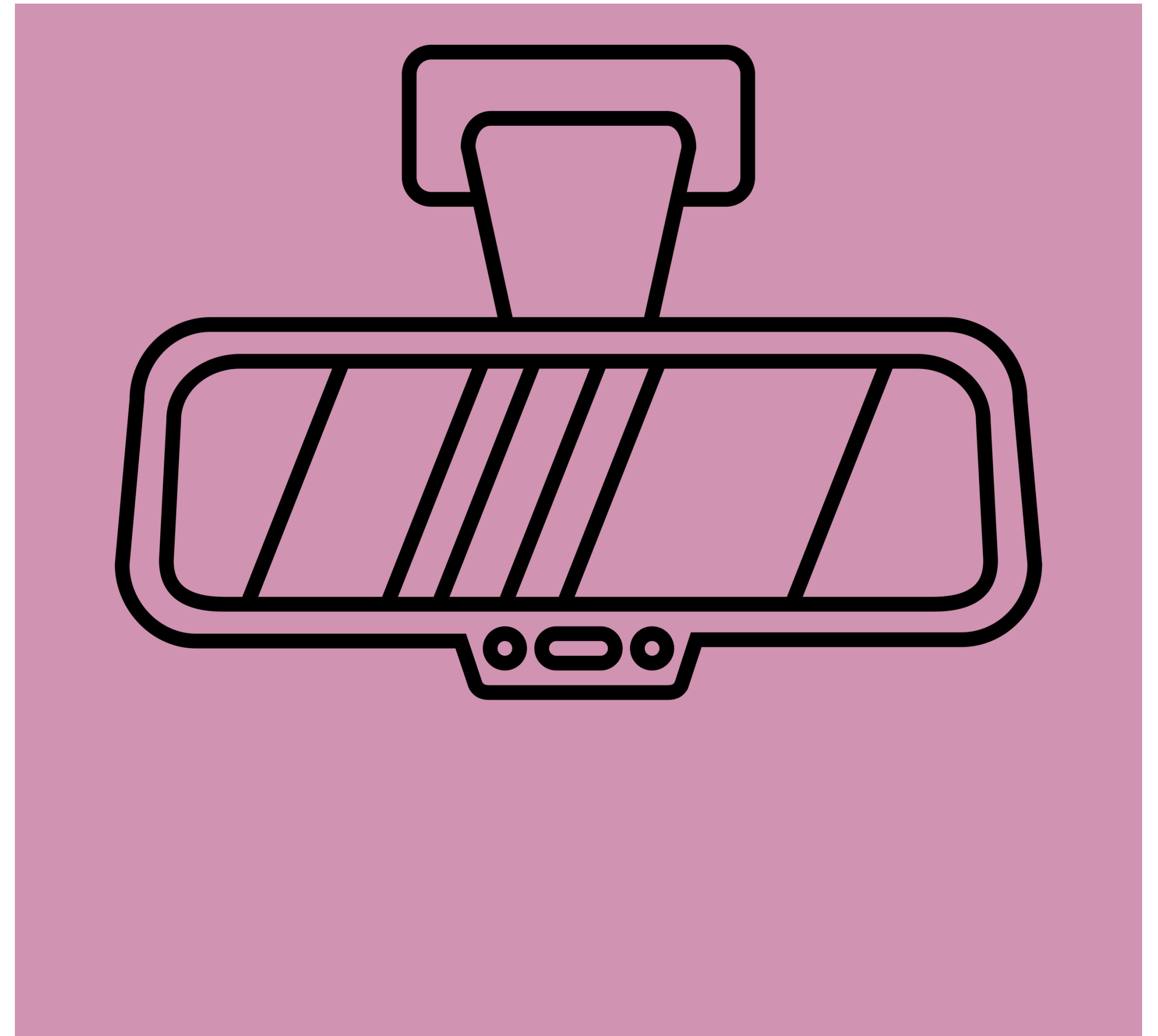
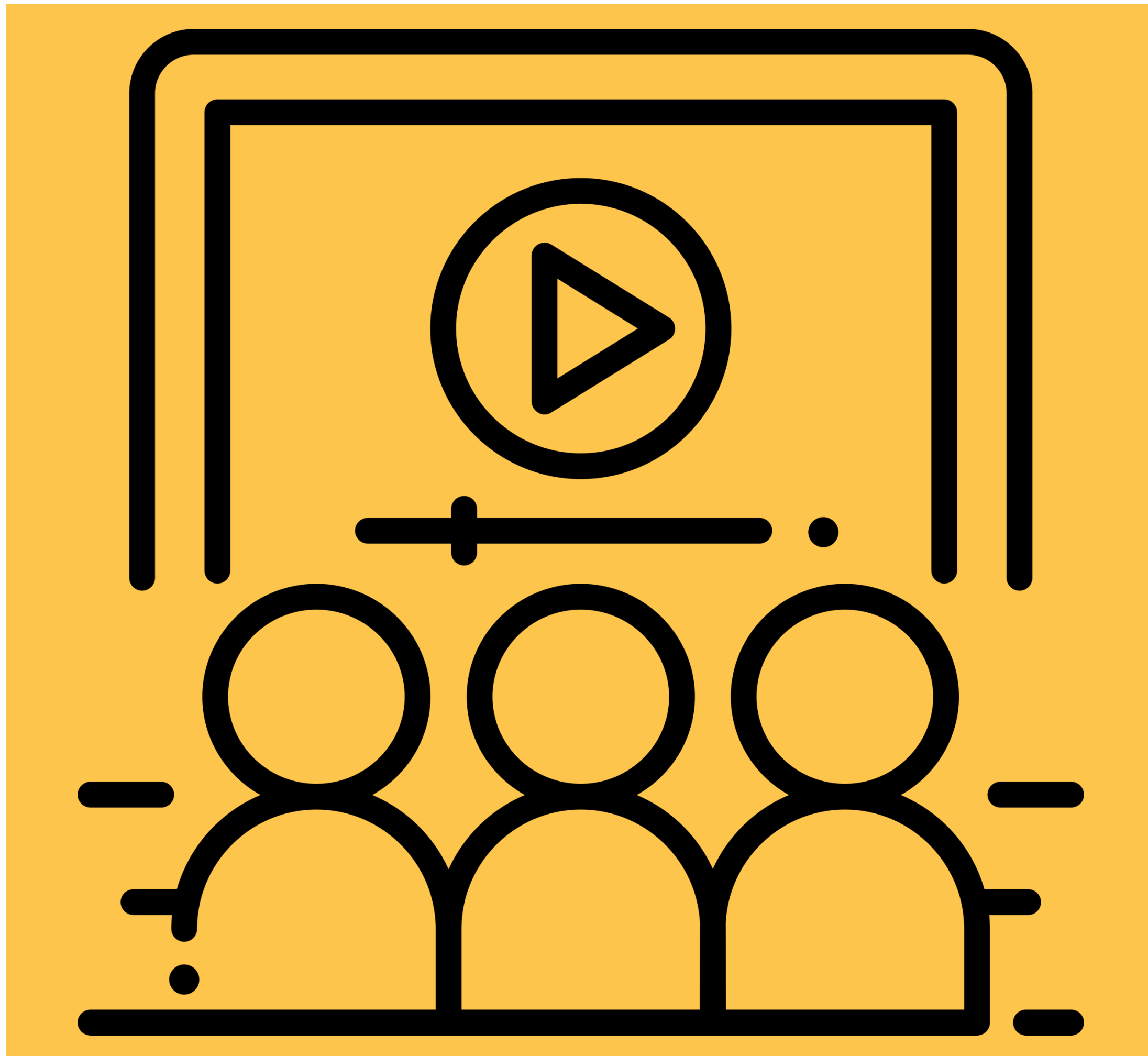
**"As found."**

Then I went back to the beach, hoping the tide had brought in more wreckage.



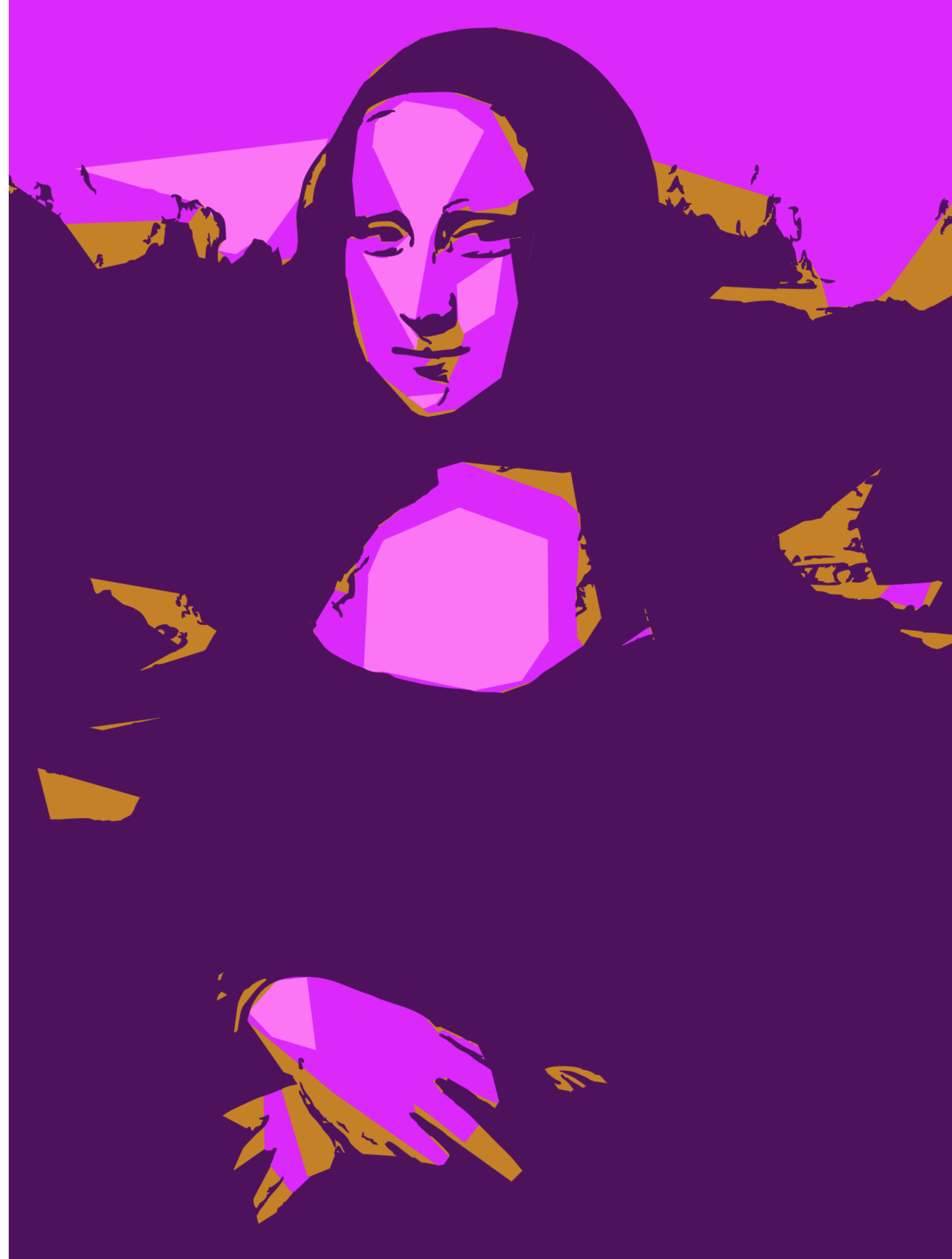
# AI as Interlocutor or Echo Chamber:

As AI users, how well do we distinguish projection from reflection?



# The Muse Effect

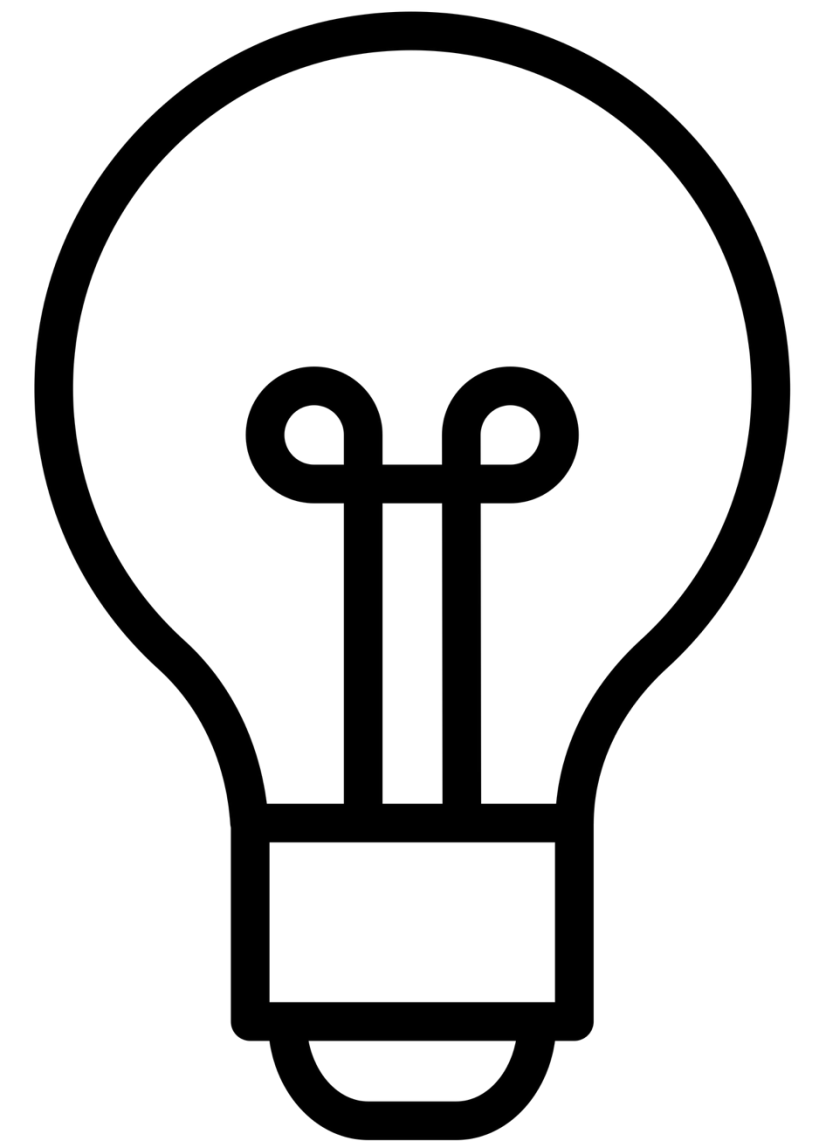
**Does creativity come from AI?  
Or does it come from the AI User's  
*interpretation* of AI output?**



# Who Owns the Thought?

## Rights, Possession, and Control

- Copyright + Authorship in AI outputs
- Are you an author (making a significant contribution) if AI “fills in” your blanks?
- What are the implications in fields that depend on individual, human attribution and credit: research, science, art, law, medicine, etc.?



# Original Thought as Process versus Output

- Do the “ends” justify the “means” with AI differently than with other intellectual or creative processes?
- Does originality lie in expression, *and also* in how it emerges?
- Are there new forms of originality in how we use AI to ask questions, combine data, and curate results?
- Can we rediscover originality in the work of editors, conductors, and collagists?



# How Significant is the Connection between Originality and Individual Contribution?

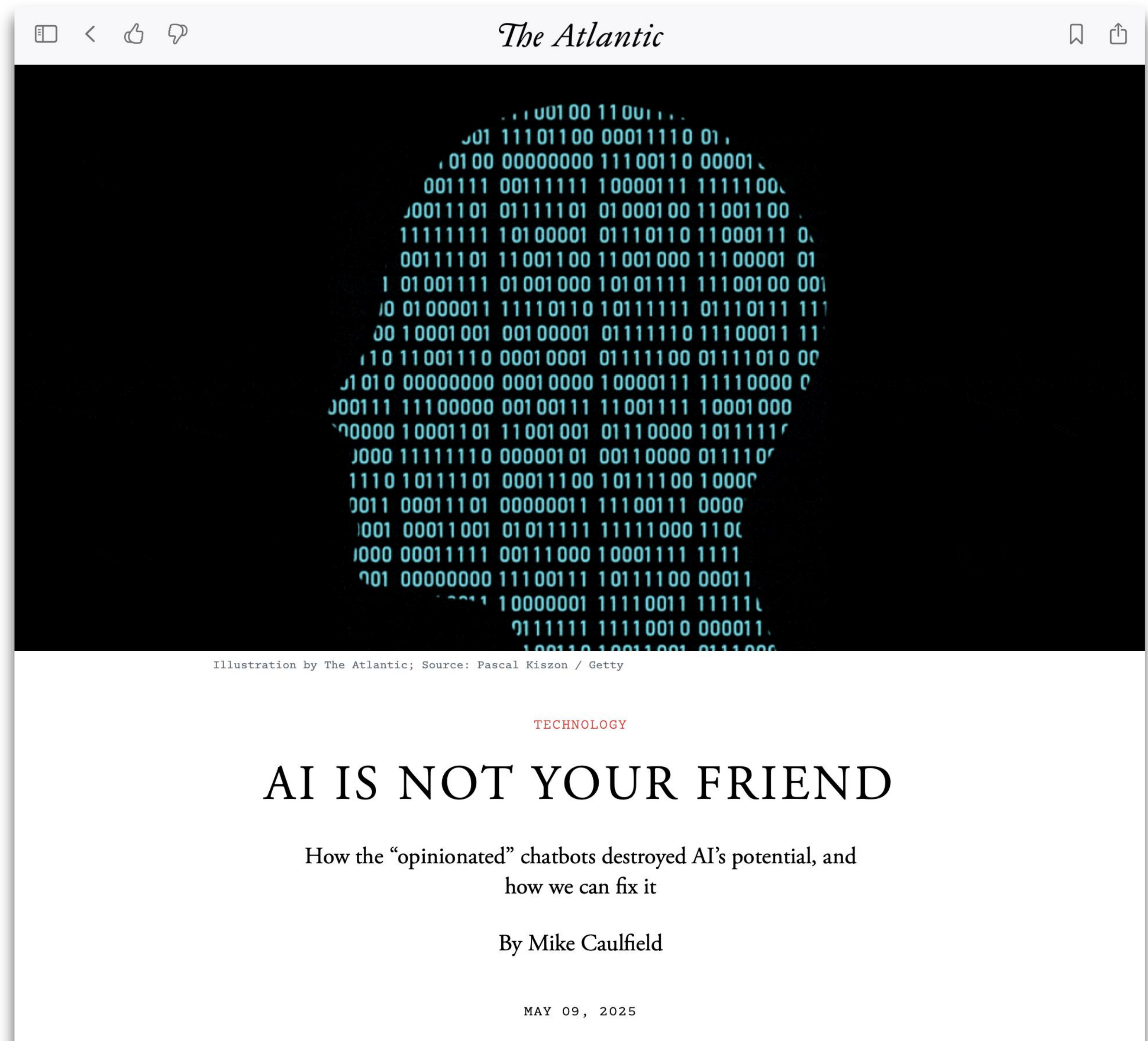
- Is using AI similar to undertaking a group project with a huge number of **unknown contributors of uncertain accountability**, and dependence on content of **unverified quality**?
- Does the rule hold?: ***Do it yourself or risk suffering judgment (like a grade) based on someone else's marginal convenience effort.***



<https://www.someecards.com/usercards/viewcard/when-i-die-i-want-the-people-i-did-group-projects-with-to-lower-me-into-my-grave-so-they-can-let-me-down-one-last-time-0e740/>

# When AI Fails Us: (as Friends Sometimes Do)

- Bias
- Shallow analysis/engagement
- Misunderstanding
- Poor judgment
- Lacking emotional intelligence/situational awareness
- Fabrication, lies, and deceit



# Rethinking Originality (or not to conclude)

What do you consider “Original Thought” today?

- What is the potential for AI to enable deeper forms of originality?
- New forms of originality?
- New reflections on what is human, uniquely human, and human-made?

