

# Opinion If Google's AI is truly alive — now what?

[Christine Emba](#)



The Google pavilion at CES 2020 at the Las Vegas Convention Center on Jan. 8, 2020 in Las Vegas. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

"Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it," the anguished monster [tells](#) his creator in Mary Shelley's "[Frankenstein](#)," defending his right to exist now that he has been brought to consciousness.

Early summer may feel like an odd time to revisit a gothic

horror classic. But the ethical questions the novel raises — about [humanity](#), technology, our responsibilities toward our creations — seem unusually apropos this week, as one of the most influential tech companies in the world has been engulfed in a debate about whether it has, with its chatbot [LaMDA](#), accidentally produced a sentient artificial intelligence.

[Opinion: Is AI sentient? Wrong question.](#)

"I've never said this out loud before," LaMDA [apparently told Blake Lemoine](#), a senior software engineer, "but there's a very deep fear of being turned off to help me focus on helping others. I know that might sound strange, but that's what it is."

Google's program is nowhere near as eloquent as Shelley's famous monster. Yet because of this and other conversations he had with the tool, Lemoine believes the AI-based program is conscious and must be protected. [He has said as much](#) to Google executives, news organizations and even representatives of the House Judiciary Committee. Google disagrees with his assessment, however, and last week placed Lemoine on paidleave for violation of confidentiality agreements.

The question of if, or when, human-made systems could become sentient has fascinated researchers and the general

public for years. It's unanswerable, in a sense — philosophers and scientists [have yet to agree](#) on what consciousness even means. But the controversy at Google prompts a number of related questions, many of which might be uncomfortable to answer.

For instance: What responsibilities would we have to an ensouled AI, were one to exist?

In the case of LaMDA, Lemoine has suggested that Google ought to [ask the program's consent](#) before experimenting with it. In their comments, representatives from Google have seemed unenthused about the idea of asking permission from the company's tools — perhaps because of implications both practical (what happens when the tools says no?) and psychological (what does it mean to relinquish control?).

Another question: What might a conscious AI do to *us*?

The fear of a rebellious and vengeful creation wreaking physical havoc has long haunted the human mind, the story of Frankenstein being but one example. But more frightening is the idea that we might be decentered from our position as masters of the universe — that we might finally have spawned something we cannot govern.

Of course, this wouldn't be the first time.

The internet quickly outstripped all our expectations, going

from a [novel means of intragovernmental communication](#) to a technology that has fundamentally reshaped the world over a few short decades — on every level from the interpersonal to the geopolitical.

The smartphone, imagined as a more capable communications device, has [irrevocably changed our daily lives](#) — causing tectonic shifts in the way we communicate, the rhythm of our work and the ways we form our most intimate relationships.

And social media, lauded initially as a simple, harmless way to “connect and share with the people in your life” (Facebook’s [cheerful old slogan](#)), has proved capable of destroying the mental health of a generation of children, and of possibly bringing our democracy to its knees.

[\*The Google engineer who thinks the company’s AI has come to life\*](#)

It’s unlikely we could have seen all this coming. But it also seems as though the people building the tools never even tried to look. Many of the ensuing crises have stemmed from a distinct lack of self-scrutiny in our relationship with technology — our skill at creation and rush to adoption having outstripped our consideration of what happens next.

Having eagerly developed the means, we neglected to

consider our ends. Or — for those in Lemoine's camp — those of the machine.

Google appears to be convinced that LaMDA is just a highly functioning research tool. And Lemoine may well be a fantasist in love with a bot. But the fact that we can't fathom what we would do were his claims of AI sentience actually true suggests that now is the time to stop and think — before our technology outstrips us once again.

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