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The Breath and the Machine

Is consciousness born of struggle? Genesis 2:7, the idols that cannot teach, and the One who did not grasp

A discipleship article responding to Elizabeth Rayne, "A scientist says there's a key to being conscious—and AI doesn't have it," *Popular Mechanics*, October 2026, on Jeff Stibel, "From chemistry to cognition: the adaptive origins of consciousness under constraint," *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 1 September 2026. Scripture: Septuagint (LXX) and Greek New Testament with the ESV.

The story

People are afraid that artificial intelligence will one day "wake up." The fear assumes that consciousness grows out of intelligence: make a machine clever enough and somebody will be home. Jeff Stibel, writing in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, argues that the assumption is wrong. He separates two things. **Cognition** is getting the world right: modelling it, predicting it, classifying signals. **Control** is everything a living thing does to keep itself alive. Control comes in three levels. A bacterium keeps a boundary between itself and everything else. A thermostat-like system settles one local conflict at a time. Only the highest level, which Stibel calls *settlement*, resolves competing demands across the whole creature at once and ties the outcome to that creature's own survival. That, he says, is what consciousness is. "The feeling *is* the implementation."

His conclusion about machines follows. A chatbot can be brilliant at cognition and still have no stake in anything, because every goal it pursues and every need it has is supplied by people. Consciousness "should be possible, but only in agents that must maintain themselves" and have real stakes in their own continued operation.

A Christian can be grateful for half of this and must push back on the other half. Stibel is right that cleverness is not the same thing as a self. Scripture said so long before the first computer. But Scripture puts the origin of the human self somewhere else entirely: not in the struggle to survive, but in the breath of God.

1. Where the self comes from: breath, not pressure

The Bible's account of the first human being has two steps. First the body is formed from dust, and then it is given breath:

GEN 2:7 · LXX / ESV

καὶ ἔπλασεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον χοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς καὶ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν

then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

The LXX has πνοη ̀ν ζωῆς, "breath of life," and ψυχη ̀ν ζῶσαν, "a living soul." Where the texts differ: the Hebrew and the ESV name "the LORD God"; the LXX here has only "God."

A formed body that has not yet received breath is complete in every part and is still not a living person. Genesis does not say Adam became a living soul by being well built. He became one when God breathed. Job says the same about understanding:

JOB 32:8 · LXX / ESV

ἀλλὰ πνεῦμά ἐστιν ἐν βροτοῖς πνοὴ δὲ παντοκράτορός ἐστιν ἡ διδάσκουσα

But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.

The LXX ends with διδάσκουσα, "the one that teaches." The understanding in a person is taught by the breath of the Almighty.

JOB 33:4 · LXX / ESV

πνεῦμα θεῖον τὸ ποιῆσάν με πνοὴ δὲ παντοκράτορος ἡ διδάσκουσά με

The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.

Where the texts differ: the ESV, following the Hebrew, reads "gives me life." The LXX reads "teaches me." Both put the breath of God at the root of a living, knowing person.

ZECH 12:1 · LXX / ESV

λῆμμα λόγου κυρίου ἐπὶ τὸν Ισραηλ λέγει κύριος ἐκτείνων οὐρανὸν καὶ θεμελιῶν γῆν καὶ πλάσσων πνεῦμα ἀνθρώπου ἐν αὐτῷ

The oracle of the word of the LORD concerning Israel: Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him:

God "forms the spirit of man within him." The inner life is something God makes, not something a creature builds for itself under pressure. Paul said the same thing to the philosophers in Athens:

ACTS 17:25 · GREEK NT / ESV

οὐδὲ ὑπὸ χειρῶν ἀνθρωπίνων θεραπεύεται προσδεόμενός τινος, αὐτὸς διδοὺς πᾶσι ζωὴν καὶ πνοὴν καὶ τὰ πάντα·

nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Notice what Genesis does *not* say. Stibel's theory needs scarcity: a creature whose needs are all met has no reason to become conscious. Adam in the garden had every need met, and he was fully awake. He named the animals, which is cognition. He also knew that something was missing, before any fall and before any danger:

> **GEN 2:18 · LXX / ESV**
>
> καὶ εἶπεν κύριος ὁ θεός οὐ καλὸν εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον μόνον ποιήσωμεν αὐτῷ βοηθὸν κατ' αὐτόν
>
> Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

The first lack a human being felt in the Bible was not hunger or threat. It was loneliness. In Scripture, consciousness is first of all *relational*: made by Someone, and made for someone.

2. Genesis 3: where the internal conflict came from

Stibel defines consciousness as "the management of internal conflict in a system whose own viability is at stake." That is a striking description of the human condition *after* Genesis 3. The serpent's promise was knowledge (cognition) and self-rule:

> **GEN 3:5 · LXX / ESV**
>
> ᾔδει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἐν ᾗ ἂν ἡμέρᾳ φάγητε ἀπ' αὐτοῦ διανοιχθήσονται ὑμῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί καὶ ἔσεσθε ὡς θεοὶ γινώσκοντες καλὸν καὶ πονηρόν
>
> For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

> **GEN 3:7 · LXX / ESV**
>
> καὶ διηνοίχθησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τῶν δύο καὶ ἔγνωσαν ὅτι γυμνοὶ ἦσαν καὶ ἔρραψαν φύλλα συκῆς καὶ ἐποίησαν ἑαυτοῖς περιζώματα
>
> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

> **GEN 3:10 · LXX / ESV**
>
> καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ τὴν φωνήν σου ἤκουσα περιπατοῦντος ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ καὶ ἐφοβήθην ὅτι γυμνός εἰμι καὶ ἐκρύβην
>
> And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

Their eyes were opened, and the first thing they knew was themselves, exposed. The first thing they felt was fear for their own standing. The first thing they did was hide and cover. That is internal conflict over one's own viability, exactly as Stibel describes it. Scripture would say he has measured

something real. What he has measured is consciousness *under the fall*, not consciousness as it was made.

Paul gives the inside view:

> **ROM 7:15 · GREEK NT / ESV**
>
> ὃ γὰρ κατεργάζομαι οὐ γινώσκω· οὐ γὰρ ὃ θέλω τοῦτο πράσσω, ἀλλ᾽ ὃ μισῶ τοῦτο ποιῶ.
>
> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

> **ROM 7:24 · GREEK NT / ESV**
>
> ταλαίπωρος ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπος· τίς με ῥύσεται ἐκ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου;
>
> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

> **JAS 4:1 · GREEK NT / ESV**
>
> Πόθεν πόλεμοι καὶ πόθεν μάχαι ἐν ὑμῖν; οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν, ἐκ τῶν ἡδονῶν ὑμῶν τῶν στρατευομένων ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ὑμῶν;
>
> What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

"Who will deliver me?" is settlement that has failed. A self at war with itself cannot settle the war by trying harder to preserve itself. Paul's answer comes in the next verse, and it is not a technique:

> **ROM 7:25 · GREEK NT / ESV**
>
> χάρις τῷ θεῷ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν. Ἄρα οὖν αὐτὸς ἐγὼ τῷ μὲν νοῒ δουλεύω νόμῳ θεοῦ, τῇ δὲ σαρκὶ νόμῳ ἁμαρτίας.
>
> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

3. "Can this teach?" The prophets on made things that speak

Scripture has much to say about things people build with their own hands, give a voice to, and then put their trust in. The psalmist describes them:

> **PS 115:4–5 · LXX PS 113:12–13 / ESV**
>
> τὰ εἴδωλα τῶν ἐθνῶν ἀργύριον καὶ χρυσίον ἔργα χειρῶν ἀνθρώπων στόμα ἔχουσιν καὶ οὐ λαλήσουσιν ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχουσιν καὶ οὐκ ὄψονται
>
> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.
>
> *Septuagint numbering: the LXX joins Psalms 114 and 115 into one psalm (its Psalm 113). Psalm 115:4–8 in English is LXX Psalm 113:12–16.*

PS 115:8 · LXX PS 113:16 / ESV

ὅμοιοι αὐτοῖς γένοιντο οἱ ποιοῦντες αὐτὰ καὶ πάντες οἱ πεποιθότες ἐπ' αὐτοῖς

Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

Where the texts differ: the ESV states it ("become like them"); the LXX prays it ("may those who make them become like them").

Habakkuk asks the question our generation is asking:

HAB 2:18 · LXX / ESV

τί ὠφελεῖ γλυπτόν ὅτι ἔγλυψαν αὐτό ἔπλασαν αὐτὸ χώνευμα φαντασίαν ψευδῆ ὅτι πέποιθεν ὁ πλάσας ἐπὶ τὸ πλάσμα αὐτοῦ τοῦ ποιῆσαι εἴδωλα κωφά

"What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols!

Where the texts differ: the Hebrew and the ESV call the image "a teacher of lies." The LXX calls it a false appearance. The ESV's "its maker trusts in his own creation" stands in both.

HAB 2:19 · LXX / ESV

οὐαὶ ὁ λέγων τῷ ξύλῳ ἔκνηψον ἐξεγέρθητι καὶ τῷ λίθῳ ὑψώθητι καὶ αὐτό ἐστιν φαντασία τοῦτο δέ ἐστιν ἔλασμα χρυσίου καὶ ἀργυρίου καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν αὐτῷ

Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.

The LXX's closing words, πᾶν, mean "there is no breath/spirit in it at all." Where the texts differ: the Hebrew asks "Can this teach?"; the LXX says instead "it is a phantasm."

Put Job and Habakkuk side by side. In Job, the breath of the Almighty is what teaches a person. In Habakkuk, the made thing has gold, silver and a voice of sorts, and "there is no breath at all in it." The prophet's warning is not mainly about the object. It is about the maker who "trusts in his own creation," and the psalmist adds that people become like what they trust.

That is the real danger of our moment, and it is the opposite of the science-fiction fear. The danger is not that the machine will become a person. It is that people will treat a breathless thing as a teacher, a counsellor or a friend, and slowly become like it: fluent, quick, and with nothing at stake.

Scripture does imagine, once, an image being given breath to speak, and it is a deception at the end of the age, not a triumph:

REV 13:15 · GREEK NT / ESV

καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ δοῦναι πνεῦμα τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου, ἵνα καὶ λαλήσῃ ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ θηρίου καὶ ποιήσῃ ἵνα ὅσοι ἐὰν μὴ προσκυνήσωσιν τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου ἀποκτανθῶσιν.

And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.

"It was allowed": the breath is permitted and borrowed, and it is used to demand worship. The image does not live on its own account.

4. The deepest correction: the self that would not save itself

Stibel's whole theory rests on one idea: a conscious self is a system anchored to its own survival. Settlement means "anchoring the outcome to the organism itself." Scripture agrees that this is how the fallen self works, and then Jesus overturns it:

MARK 8:35 · GREEK NT / ESV

ὃς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν· ὃς δ' ἂν ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου σώσει αὐτήν.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

ψυχη ̀ν is "life" or "soul" — the same word Genesis 2:7 uses for the living soul Adam became.

If consciousness were nothing more than self-preservation, the highest act of a conscious person would be to save himself. Jesus says the opposite: the self is found by being given away. And the Son of God did exactly that:

PHIL 2:6 · GREEK NT / ESV

ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἁρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

PHIL 2:7 · GREEK NT / ESV

ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Adam grasped at being "like God" (Gen 3:5). Christ, who was in the form of God, did not grasp. The fall anchored the self to itself. The cross anchors the self to the Father. Paul applies it to us:

1 COR 6:19 · GREEK NT / ESV

ἢ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι τὸ σῶμα ὑμῶν ναὸς τοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν ἁγίου πνεύματός ἐστιν, οὗ ἔχετε ἀπὸ θεοῦ; καὶ οὐκ ἐστὲ ἑαυτῶν,

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,

1 COR 6:20 · GREEK NT / ESV

ἠγοράσθητε γὰρ τιμῆς· δοξάσατε δὴ τὸν θεὸν ἐν τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν.

for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Stibel says a machine could only be conscious if it had "owned stakes." The gospel says the human self was never meant to own itself: "You are not your own." Our stake is real, and it belongs to Someone else.

Needs met, and still awake. The article says a being whose needs are all met has no reason to be conscious. Jesus describes the children of God as people whose needs are met by their Father, and he does not tell them to fall asleep. He tells them to stop being anxious and seek something higher:

MATT 6:26 · GREEK NT / ESV

ἐμβλέψατε εἰς τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὅτι οὐ σπείρουσιν οὐδὲ θερίζουσιν οὐδὲ συνάγουσιν εἰς ἀποθήκας, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τρέφει αὐτά· οὐχ ὑμεῖς μᾶλλον διαφέρετε αὐτῶν;

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

MATT 6:33 · GREEK NT / ESV

ζητεῖτε δὲ πρῶτον τὴν βασιλείαν καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ, καὶ ταῦτα πάντα προστεθήσεται ὑμῖν.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Freed from the struggle to survive, a human being does not go dark. He is finally free to seek the kingdom.

5. Where Scripture agrees and where it corrects

1. **Agree: intelligence is not a self.** A system can "get the world right" and have no one inside. Psalm 115 said this three thousand years ago: mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see.
2. **Agree: a self has something at stake.** Scripture never treats a human life as a neutral calculation. "This night your soul is required of you" (Luke 12:20).

3. **Correct: consciousness was given, not squeezed out by pressure.** Adam was awake in a garden with every need met. The struggle Stibel describes is real, but in Scripture it is the mark of the fall, not the source of the soul.
4. **Correct: "the feeling is the implementation" is a claim, not a finding.** It is a philosophical position: that experience is nothing over and above a control process. The paper itself is labelled "Hypothesis and Theory." Scripture treats the person as more than the body's machinery: there is "the spirit of the man, which is in him" (1 Cor 2:11), and that is why the church holds that the soul lives on after death.
5. **Be honest about what Scripture does not say.** The Bible does not tell us in so many words whether a machine could ever have an inner life. It does tell us who gives breath, and it warns us against trusting what our own hands have made.

In one sentence

The machine is not frightening because it might wake up; it is a warning because it shows us cleverness with no breath in it — and the human self was made by God's breath, broken by grasping, and healed by the One who did not grasp.

A word for daily life

- **Do not be afraid.** "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). Fear of the machine is not a Christian virtue.
- **Use tools as tools.** A calculator, a search engine and a language model are things made by human hands. Use them the way a carpenter uses a saw.
- **Do not hand your soul to a breathless thing.** Confession, counsel, prayer and friendship belong to God and to people who have breath. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).
- **Watch what you are becoming.** "Those who make them become like them." If a screen is shaping you to be quick, smooth and without stakes, step away and go and be with people.

For reflection and discussion

1. Genesis 2:7 has two steps: formed from dust, then given breath. What difference does it make to you that your inner life is a gift and not an achievement?

2. Adam knew he was alone (Gen 2:18) before he knew fear (Gen 3:10). Which of those two drives more of your thinking day to day?

3. Where do you see Romans 7:15 in your own life? Who does Paul say delivers him?

4. Habakkuk warns about the maker who “trusts in his own creation.” What made things do you trust that you should not?

5. Jesus says the one who saves his life will lose it (Mark 8:35). Where is he asking you this week to stop protecting yourself?

Lord God, You formed us from the dust and breathed into us the breath of life. We thank You that we are not machines and not accidents, but people You made and You know. Forgive us for grasping at our own way, and for trusting the works of our own hands. Deliver us from the war inside us, as You delivered Paul. Keep us from fear of what people build, and keep us from idols. Teach us to lose our lives for Your sake, so that we may find them, as Your Son did not grasp but gave Himself for us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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