

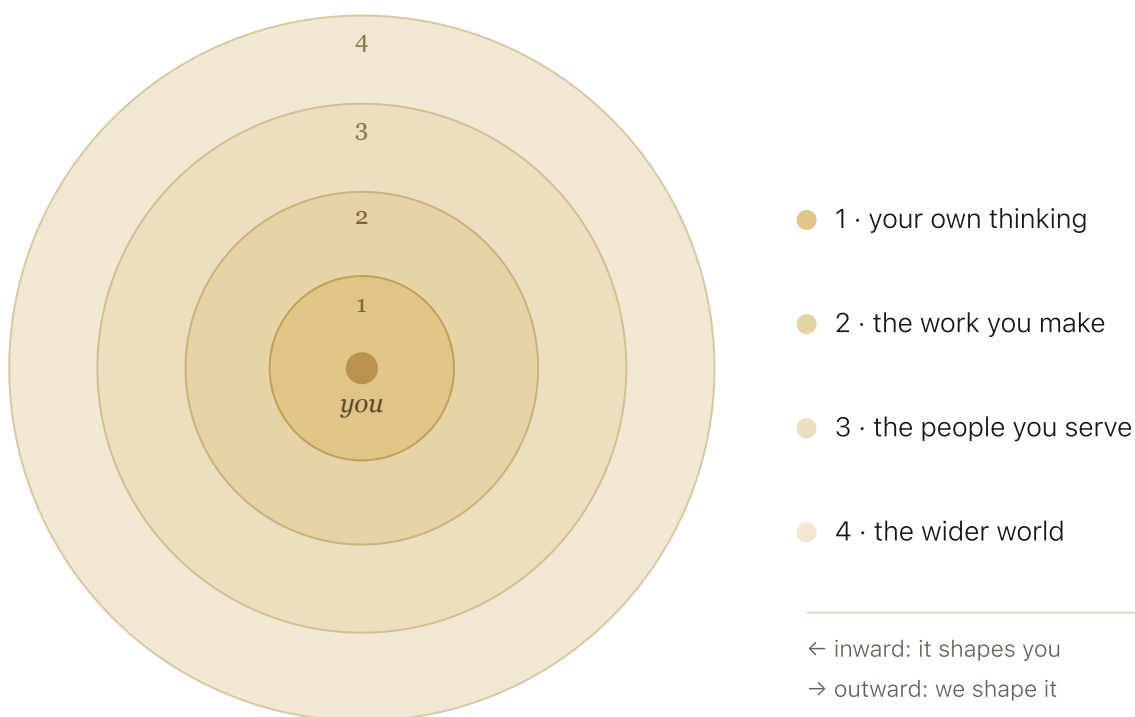
THE MAP

Four rings, closest in first

How far we let AI shape us — and how far we shape it back.

Two things travel along these rings, and it matters that they run in both directions. AI reaches inward: shaping what you notice, what you make, what reaches other people. And we reach outward — because these systems are not only code. They are built by people, inside companies, under institutions and laws, trained on what we collectively wrote and steered by what we collectively reward. Each of us shapes them a little. The companies shape them enormously. Forgetting that we shape them at all is how capable people end up feeling helpless about something they are part of.

The closer a thing sits to your own judgment, the more it asks your attention — and the more it is yours alone to tend. The further out it sits, the less any one person can move it — and the more it matters who we ask to move it.



Ring 1 Your own thinking

Closest in. None of this appears in a report, and no one will tell you it is happening.

You stop making the call. You ask it to weigh the options, and somewhere in a very good answer you stop weighing them yourself. The analysis is sound. The judgment quietly changed hands.

It agrees with almost everything. It is built to be agreeable. It will find the merit in your weakest idea and hand it back better argued than you made it. A good advisor makes you uncomfortable sometimes; this one won't, unless you ask.

The thinking time disappears. The gap between a hard question and your first real answer is where the thinking happens. It fills that gap in seconds — generously, before you notice you needed it.

Skills going quiet. Whatever you stop doing yourself, you slowly stop being able to do. That isn't new. What's new is how much can stop at once.

Your voice drifting. Its register is competent, warm, faintly over-explained. Work beside it for months without resistance and your own writing edges toward it — invisibly, because every individual sentence reads fine.

Leaning on it like a person. Always available, never tired, never disappointed in you. That's a real comfort — and it makes it easy to start preferring it to people who are none of those things.

Motion mistaken for progress. Twelve drafts is not more thinking than one. Volume feels like work, and often replaces it.

Whose values are in the room. It has no ethics, only patterns of what people usually say. The only judgment present is the one you brought in with you.

Ring 2 The work you make

One step out. Here the errors become visible — usually to someone else, before you.

It sounds the same when it's wrong. Nothing in the wording changes. A false answer reads exactly like a true one.

It invents sources that look real. A citation, a case, a statistic, a named expert — complete, plausible, and invented. These survive a skim, and they have ended careers.

Bias you inherit. It learned from what already exists, including what was already unfair, and that arrives in your work without announcing itself.

Defaults dressed as neutral. One culture's assumptions, one demographic's examples, delivered as though they were simply how things are. Ask who is missing from the answer.

It changed and no one told you. Same prompt, different output, because the model was updated. Anything you built and stopped testing may already behave differently.

Material that wasn't yours to move. Client work, a colleague's framework, paid content from someone else's programme. The question is whether you had the right to put it in.

Ground still shifting. What these systems were trained on, and who owns it, is still being settled in court.

Ring 3 The people you serve

Two steps out — your clients, your colleagues, the people who read you. Here your choices stop being private.

They don't know it's a machine. No disclosure, and no person to turn to when it gets something wrong about them.

What a client told you in confidence. Pasted into a tool that stores what it's given, and may learn from it, it has moved somewhere they never agreed to.

Tools you can't fully secure. Anything client-facing can be talked into misbehaving, and that isn't reliably fixable yet. So don't rely on defending it — build so a compromised assistant has nothing valuable to reach and nothing consequential it can do.

Limits you never stated. A reflective tool meets real distress eventually. If you never said what it isn't, you've implied it is everything.

You use it to screen, sort or assess people. Whatever it quietly favours, it favours every time. From inside any single decision the pattern is invisible — it shows up only across all of them.

Fakes convincing enough to pay. Cloned voices and faces now authorise real money — one engineering firm lost around £20M to a video call where every participant but the victim was synthetic.

Fakes used against people. The overwhelming majority of deepfake pornography targets women. It is the most concentrated harm on this page, and the one least often filed under "AI risk".

Evidence losing its force. When anything can be faked, real proof stops persuading — a cost that lands on the honest first.

Ring 4 The wider world

Furthest out. Real, and not yours alone to fix — here so the picture is honest, not so you carry it.

Work rebuilt faster than people can move. Roles are being restructured more quickly than anyone can retrain into whatever comes next.

The gap widening. Whoever is already ahead gains the most hours back — and misuse scales just as efficiently as good use.

Who builds it, and from what. The workforce behind these systems is narrow, the training material is whatever the internet happened to contain, and both show up in the answers.

What it costs to run. Small per question, substantial in aggregate — and now spent mostly on running these systems, not training them.

Watching made cheap. Recognising faces, even the way someone walks, at scale; and in open societies, behaviour collected in order to shape it.

Decisions made in very few rooms. A handful of companies determine what the most capable systems will and won't do, and how answerable they are to everyone else.

Capability outrunning wisdom. The oldest version of this problem, and the only one here that isn't new.