

Machine Intelligence: An Awakening Awaits Us

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Recent reflections on machines building machines capture a phase-changing moment in the evolution of AI. The bottleneck is no longer execution. Code generates code. Models refine models. Systems design systems.¹ But abundance has never been the end of the story. It merely shifts the locus of constraint. When building becomes easy, the harder question emerges: what should be built, and why? And who decides?

The moment is best understood in the arc of what came before. The printing press made it a device for reproduction and pushed intelligence toward interpretation. The industrial revolution made it a labor-amplifying apparatus and elevated intelligence as coordination and control. Computer science made it a rule-executing system and recast intelligence as logic and problem solving. Now, agentic AI pushes both further. The machine becomes a builder and consumer inside its own design loop. Intelligence becomes less about what humans can directly command, and more about what can be delegated, evaluated, and recombined across systems that no longer center the human user.²

That shift is already visible in everyday systems. Search no longer simply ranks pages. It selects sources. Different AI systems draw from different ecosystems, weighting signals in ways that are neither fully visible nor stable. What appears as an answer is the result of layered selection, not neutral retrieval.

Machines are not only building other machines; they are beginning to choose among them. They select models, route tasks, weight signals, and determine which data sources to trust. Intelligence is becoming layered, recursive, and interdependent. This is a shift from production to selection. And history suggests that selection systems shape outcomes more profoundly than production systems.

Yet an equally consequential shift is unfolding alongside this transition. As machines build and choose, humans are increasingly accepting. Not co-piloting. Not deliberating. Accepting. Outputs are taken as given. Recommendations are followed. Judgments are deferred.

Empirical evidence points to a pattern that is difficult to ignore. When individuals rely on AI systems, they often improve when the system is correct, but degrade when it is wrong, while confidence continues to rise.³ The danger is not error alone. It is error accompanied by confidence. What emerges is a form of cognitive surrender, unexamined acceptance.

The trajectory is no longer simply build and choose. It is build, choose, and accept. And acceptance, when it occurs without judgment, alters the meaning of intelligence itself.

This brings us back to an older understanding of intelligence. Early thinkers such as Alfred Binet defined intelligence as judgment, practical sense, and the capacity to adapt under uncertainty.⁴ Over time, definitions shifted. Turing reframed intelligence as performance.⁵ McCarthy defined it as the engineering of intelligent machines.⁶ Legg and Hutter formalized it across environments.⁷ Now, another shift is underway.

The modern cognitive architecture reflects this fundamental shift. What was once bounded by human attention is now amplified by machine output. Deliberation becomes optional, and what is optional erodes. The risk is not that machines perform better, but that humans stop thinking. Acceptance without judgment is not intelligence, but its quiet abdication.

As generation accelerates, coherence debt accumulates. Coherence debt is the gap between what is produced and what is grounded in reality. Machine intelligence increases the rate of generation, but without a corresponding increase in judgment, systems drift.

This is why co-evolution is an imperative. As machine intelligence expands across building and choosing, human intelligence must specialize in judgment, imagination, and governance.⁸ The purpose is not to outproduce machines, but to mitigate coherence debt, every step of the production and selection.

Systems must therefore introduce friction and incentives into acceptance. Machine interfaces must become dialectic, requiring justification from both human and machine. Because responsibility requires awareness, and awareness requires engagement.

Presence not Sleepwalking

An AI awakening awaits us. But what kind? Faster systems, or clearer minds? We speak easily of intelligence. But do we mean prediction, or understanding? Or the power to shape what counts as knowledge itself?

We have entered a new phase in the evolution of intelligence. Machines are not only building but also choosing what to build, and humans are accepting their choices without demur. Acceptance without judgment is misguided intelligence. Responsibility without awareness is dangerous. Darwin, not Watt, explains the long-term trajectory.

The future, therefore, is not a simple transfer of capability, but a co-evolution with responsibility. We need co-pilots in the true sense of the term, not autopilots. Systems must introduce friction into acceptance, requiring justification from both human and machine. And the time to govern machine intelligence is now.

References

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