

Opinion

Will AI destroy us? Consider the nature of intelligence.

The real threats AI poses will come from the humans who wield it.

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The fear about artificial intelligence is not just that AI will take our jobs, wreck our politics or degrade our ability to think, but something far worse: AI will destroy humanity itself.

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Technology companies are in a frantic race to develop generative AI systems that will program themselves. Many observers fear that once these new AI systems achieve such autonomous intelligence, they will attempt to eradicate us as a threat to their survival. Some industry leaders put the probability of such a cataclysm at 25 percent — though the data behind those estimates remains mysterious.

Currently, it is very challenging to distinguish between truth, industry hype and techno-fantasy. These claims echo the dystopian anxieties of our science fiction, from HAL 9000 to “The Terminator.” They are terrifying, and for many of us outside the opaque workings of Silicon Valley, they carry an ominous authority.

But strong claims deserve strong skepticism. To understand the potential dangers of AI, it is helpful to consider the nature of intelligence itself.

Most AI prognosticators, both utopian and apocalyptic, tend to take intelligence for granted. Intelligence is often regarded as sheer computational power, a digital equivalent of a chess grand master. This view, however, is misleading.

Intelligence is fundamentally about processing information to further the goals of life. Typically, this involves gathering and organizing sensory data, identifying patterns and predicting outcomes. This is a capacity that most animals share. Human intelligence takes this further. Using language, we recombine information in novel ways, imagine new concepts and generate unique forms of data.

Intelligence evolved as a way for living systems to resist entropy, the universal drift toward disorder. It is life’s strategy for maintaining itself in an ever-degrading universe. Rocks, galaxies and hurricanes don’t possess it; living organisms do.

Current AI systems are extensions of our human intelligence. Like a digital prosthesis, they are tools for our ends, not their own.

What's more, today's AI systems rely almost entirely on human-generated data. Their intelligence is derivative of our own. We're already seeing the consequences of this. Having vacuumed up most of our knowledge, newer AI models are no longer improving at the same rate as their predecessors.

For AI to become truly superintelligent, it would need to collect data beyond human inputs. It would need some way of sensing the universe, independent of the data and code that we feed it.

It would also have to develop new ways of perceiving reality, whether through its own theories of physics or chemistry or even epistemologies we cannot fathom. At that point, it might become a trans-anthropic intelligence, something that thinks beyond our ways of knowing.

Current AI systems may operate in ways we don't completely understand, but they still exist in the very human domain of language and code. This is why current debates around "existential risk" feel unpersuasive. They warn of apocalyptic outcomes but rarely explain the logic behind them.

Imagine, for example, a current AI system were somehow to eradicate humanity. What would it do next? It would spin on itself, endlessly regenerating human-based content until its circuits degraded. As long as a generative AI depends on human data, it exists less as its own species and more like digital mitochondria, an entity codependent on us for its survival.

And even if an AI were to become superintelligent, it's not a foregone conclusion that it would seek to eliminate us. This apprehension seems much more of a projection of our own limited consciousness than a self-evident fact. A superintelligent AI system would have to recognize, at some point, that life itself is just another fleeting eddy in the universe's entropic flow. Perhaps it would then appreciate the unique quality of life itself and decide to let it all be. Or maybe it would fall into an existential quagmire and decide to die by suicide. The truth is that we can't really know what it would do with its own self-awareness.

The real threats AI poses come not from AI itself but from the humans who wield it. As an extension of human intelligence, it is a reflection of our own selves. When AI produces hateful or violent outputs, it is not because it has malicious intent but because it has integrated human hatreds into its programming. If it generates destructive malware, it is because someone intentionally requested it. If it is misaligned with our goals, it is because we were not clear in our commands.

Which leaves us with the question of what to do. For now, AI remains a tool, and we should focus on harnessing and constraining it effectively. For example, it seems prudent to silo our energy grid, financial institutions and military systems from an AI's digital reach. This is less to protect us from some hypothetical machine consciousness and more to protect us from the very real possibility of human adversaries using AI against us.

If, however, companies actually create truly self-generative AI systems, then we'll have to figure out how to coexist with an altogether new life form. Perhaps we'll seek to destroy it, or maybe we'll worship it as a god. Or maybe, we will have become so dependent on AI to help us think that we'll only figure out what to do by first asking ChatGPT. This may be the most likely outcome — a growing codependence between this new extension of our own life force and ourselves.