



Epilogue

We began this book with the question: *To what extent is it possible to model intelligence as an information processing activity that can be carried out by a machine?* This epilogue restates and summarizes the most important views and arguments relevant to this *computational hypothesis*, and examines whether it is possible to construct an “intelligent machine” that can function in the world. A discussion of the possibility of a robotic entity is appropriate because such a device would have to draw on the entire range of intelligent capabilities, from reasoning to language to vision, and the problem of integrating these capabilities brings to the fore many of the deep questions that arose in the individual chapters.

The human brain, a three-pound lump of biological tissue, is perhaps the most amazing object in the universe—it sees, hears, thinks, creates, and even seeks an explanation for its own existence. Can it really be the case that in spite of its remarkable properties the brain is simply a “machine” that carries out complex computational procedures? This question has been the basis of the intellectual quest that we have pursued in this book. An affirmative answer seems to degrade the concept of humanity to a point unacceptable to most people despite the fact that we are generally willing to accept the idea that other living creatures may indeed be very sophisticated machines. If we refuse to accept the computational hypothesis, then only mysticism is left, a situation unacceptable to most scientists.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND CONCEPTUAL QUESTIONS

In this epilogue we deal with major questions raised at various points in the book, some of which reflect a basic concern about the brain as a machine, some that concern the machine as it affects society, and some about the field of artificial intelligence in general. For each question we will first summarize our beliefs and the points of view of others in the field, and then indicate the impact of the question on the possibility of creating a humanlike autonomous robotic device.

Because we are dealing with ultimate limits of an intelligent machine, we quickly find ourselves delving into rather deep philosophical questions that concern such topics as understanding, consciousness, language, and mind. These questions arise when the behavior of a machine causes us to ask, "Does the *behavior* of the machine mean that the machine is *really* capable of X," where X is understanding, consciousness, thinking, etc. Some of the questions that have been discussed for thousands of years have taken on a new interest and importance due to artificial intelligence (AI).

True Understanding

Can a machine truly understand?

One point of view concerning machine understanding is stated by Simon [Simon 81]: "At the root of intelligence are symbols, with their denotative power and their susceptibility to manipulation." Such symbol manipulation can be carried out by a brain or by various forms of computers. Simon therefore sees no reason why machines should not be capable of human forms of understanding the world. In Chapter 6 we discussed the strongest attack on this point of view, Searle's Chinese room metaphor [Searle 84], which asks whether one can ascribe "understanding" to mere symbol manipulation. An important point of the Chinese room metaphor is to show that when we limit a person's role to strict symbol manipulation, this activity adds nothing to the person's ability to truly understand the task at hand. Although Searle makes no attempt to supply an operational definition of understanding (or even a set of necessary conditions), what makes the metaphor so powerful is that we ourselves would not require or attain an understanding of Chinese if placed in this situation. If we, as conscious thinking creatures do not exhibit understanding in the presence of such formal symbol manipulation, how can a machine?

Even though he does not make the explicit point, Searle appeals to the idea that consciousness plays a prime role in human understanding. (In a slightly modified way, this is Descartes' mind-body problem again; see Chapters 1 and 2.) Consciousness seems to be some coherent *whole* that cannot be decomposed into electronic switches, or computer instructions, or even subsystems, and thus is not subject to the type of reductionist analysis often used in science. Why do we have the introspective ability called "consciousness?" Minsky [Minsky 68] believes that the evolutionary role of consciousness has been to give access to otherwise inaccessible modules, so as to debug, reprogram, or retrain them. He suggests that an organism would be better able to sur-

vive if it has a model of itself. Dennett [Dennett 84] imagines the development of consciousness as follows. People found that they could get advice on future actions by asking other people. At some point it was found that even if nobody is around, a person's problem solving activity is aided by asking questions out loud. Gradually, it was realized that the same effect can be achieved by internally asking the questions,

Under what conditions would the activity of asking oneself questions be useful? . . . Crudely put, pushing some information through one's ears and auditory system may stimulate just the sorts of connections one is seeking, may trip just the right associative mechanisms, tease just the right mental morsel to the tip of one's tongue. One can then say it, hear oneself say it, and thus get the answer one was hoping for.

One additional function that consciousness appears to serve is that of a high-level executive, or even an external observer, who monitors the performance of the body in relation to its high-level goals, and makes appropriate suggestions, e.g., as in the case of a runner verbally "telling himself" to go faster (See Box 2-3).

Sometimes if we know the structure of a machine or the background of a person we can make a decision concerning the nature of the understanding involved. For example, suppose we know that we are dealing with a person who has been blind from birth and has never experienced color. He has been provided with an instrument that senses color and communicates the results in Braille. The person can point the sensor at objects, and can then report color as well as a sighted person. No matter how good his operational performance is, we still feel that he has no understanding of what it means to see the world in color.

Sloman [Sloman 85] would not agree with the above point of view. He argues that there is no clear boundary between things that do, and things that do not understand symbols. He feels that our ordinary concept of "understanding" denotes a complex cluster of capabilities, and different subsets of these may be exhibited in different people, animals or machines; to ask "Which are necessary for *real* understanding?" is to attribute spurious precision to a concept of ordinary language. Thus, in the example above, Sloman would say that a congenitally blind person may attach meanings to color words not too different than a sighted person, because much of the meaning resides in the rich interconnection with concepts shared by both.

The potential role of "consciousness" in a robotic device is uncertain. Certainly, it is possible for each subsystem of a robot to signal its status and goals to other subsystems and to attain the external appearance of conscious behavior, but what have we lost by implementing the *appearance*, but not the *substance*, of conscious awareness? For example, is it imaginable that such an implementation would be capable of autonomously conceiving of, and printing, the message "I think (compute?), therefore I am"?

The issue of understanding is a crucial one in the robotic domain, since it brings to the fore the basic question as to whether "true understanding" is required to achieve high levels of performance, i.e., to give explicit shape to high-level goals in an uncertain environment, and whether robotic devices are responsible enough to take their place in society, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Societal Aspects

Can a machine take a role in society as if it were a person?

Suppose we reach a point in time when a robotic entity can be placed in a position to carry out decision making in government, banking, medicine, law, or the military. Could the robot perform as if it were a person. No! answers Weizenbaum [Weizenbaum 76], who points out that knowledge about a society "is acquired with the mother's milk and through the whole process of socialization that is itself so intimately tied to the individual's acquisition of his mother tongue. It cannot be explicated in any form but life itself." Thus, an American judge, no matter what his intelligence and fairmindedness, could not sit in a Japanese family court. His intelligence is simply *alien* to the problems that arise in Japanese culture. "Whatever intelligence a computer can muster, however it may be acquired, it must always and necessarily be absolutely alien to any and all concerns." This question is not a theoretical one, for we already have medical and business decision making programs in use that affect human health and welfare.

Weizenbaum and many others believe that true understanding can only be gained by actually experiencing the world and thereby developing an internal database that represents these experiences. A child builds up knowledge of the world by exploring and learning. Similarly, it is necessary for a robotic device to build up its database of world knowledge by learning about its environment, since manual entry of sufficient relevant information about the world is impractical. While present-day machine learning consists merely of determining the specific parameters and relationships for a representation that has been chosen by the designer of the machine, we have no reason to suspect that machines are inherently incapable of the more powerful forms of learning needed to counter Weizenbaum's criticisms.

If we change the question in this subsection to, *Can a machine play a useful role in society?* rather than requiring the machine to function as a person, then the strict requirements for deep understanding of the society indicated by Weizenbaum can be relaxed. The designer has a much simpler task, and quite useful devices can be constructed. Weizenbaum would still feel that society must carefully control the use of such devices, and avoid applications where the consumer might ascribe more intelligence to the device than is warranted.

The Frame Problem

How can a computer focus its attention on just those aspects of a given problem that are relevant to its solution?

This is the *frame problem*: How can an intelligent system, in trying to solve a problem or carry out an action, know what information in its database should be ignored, and what is relevant to the problem at hand? The question, "What was Benjamin Franklin's telephone number?" given in Chapter 3, is a relevant example. Somehow people know

that they must invoke the relevant information of Franklin's date of birth and the date of the invention of the telephone to solve the problem.

To fully represent the conditions for the successful performance of an action, an impractical and implausible number of qualifications would be required. McCarthy [McCarthy 80] gives as an example the many qualifications that would have to be supplied for the simple act of a boat crossing a river—the oars and oarlocks must be present and unbroken, the boat cannot have a hole in it, cannot be filled with rocks, etc. Since many other qualifications can be added, the rules for using a rowboat become almost impossible to apply unless some focusing mechanism is available.

The frame problem is of crucial importance to an autonomous robot. It must “think before it leaps,” coming up with reliable but not necessarily foolproof expectations of the effects of its actions. This process must be carried out in an acceptable amount of time, taking into account everything in its database that is relevant to the proposed action. The big problem is knowing what is indeed relevant, since the time constraints will not permit examination of the implication of every fact in the database. Many AI systems have the unfortunate characteristic that increasing the amount of knowledge in their database degrades, rather than improves, their performance.

There are currently several approaches that try to deal with the frame problem. One scheme uses the attention-focusing ability of stereotypes, such as the Schank script approach described in Chapter 6. A script attempts to define and organize all of the relevant information for a given situation, but there is still the problem of knowing which of many possible scripts is relevant to a complex situation. McCarthy has proposed [McCarthy 80] *circumscription*, a form of nonmonotonic reasoning augmenting ordinary first-order logic as a mechanism that can be used for “jumping to appropriate conclusions.” Circumscription conjectures that the only entities that can prevent an action are those whose existence follows from the facts at hand. Loosely speaking, it is a “don't-go-looking-for-trouble” approach. In the example of the boat, if no lack of oars or other circumstance preventing the use of the boat has already been deduced, then conclude that the boat is usable. A program must contain heuristics for deciding what circumscriptions to make and when to withdraw them.

It may be that the frame problem is an artifact arising from the symbolic representations used in AI. Such representations eliminate the implicit connections that exist between objects in the world, and much effort is required to “put Humpty Dumpty back together again.” In particular, the logic formalism does not capture the implicit relationships between things in the world nor permit the type of approximation that seems to be required for everyday reasoning [Pentland 83]. The seriousness of the frame problem is stated by Dennett [Dennett 84a]:

It appears at first to be at best an annoying technical embarrassment in robotics, or merely a curious puzzle for the bemusement of people working in AI. I think, on the contrary, that it is a new, deep epistemological problem—accessible in principle but unnoticed by generations of philosophers—brought to light by the novel methods of AI, and still far from being solved.

The frame problem is closely related to the decomposability question discussed below.

Decomposing Intelligence

Is intelligent behavior decomposable?

As indicated in Chapter 3, most formal analysis begins by decomposing a problem into manageable portions (see also the discussion of the partitioning problem in Chapters 8 and 9 and the necessity for the independence assumption in both formal and probabilistic reasoning, Chapter 4). We often assume that the whole is made up of its parts and that such decomposition can be carried out for even the most complex of situations. But suppose, in fact, that much of intelligent behavior is not decomposable, and that in partitioning behavior for mechanization purposes, one is incorrectly making an assumption of independence of the parts. Until we are able to deal with the entire unpartitioned problem, we would not be able to achieve human performance for such tasks. Dreyfus [Dreyfus 79] has stated,

... all aspects of human thought, including nonformal aspects like moods, sensory-motor skills, and long-range self-interpretations, are so interrelated that one cannot substitute an abstractable web of explicit beliefs for the whole cloth of our concrete everyday practices [p.54] ... Since intelligence must be situated it cannot be separated from the rest of human life [p.62] ... If one thinks of the importance of sensory-motor skills in the development of our ability to recognize and cope with objects, or of the role of needs and desires in structuring all social situations, or finally of the whole cultural background ... the idea that we can simply ignore this know-how while formalizing intellectual understanding as a complex system of facts and rules is highly implausible [p63].

In a more intuitive sense, the naturalist John Muir noted that everything in the universe is attached to everything else. If it turns out that it is not possible to decompose many of the processes required for an entity to function in the world, then non-learning robotic devices will be limited as to the type of reasoning and problem solving they can carry out (because of practical limits on what can be designed into them). In particular, if intelligence is not decomposable, it is not incrementally achievable: the idea of building a partially intelligent robot would make as much sense as digging half a hole.

Again we must stress that we are talking about highly intelligent entities. Once we relax that criterion, then it is surely possible to develop useful devices based on reductionist principles.

Language and Thought

What is the relationship between language and thought?

This question has been discussed for thousands of years, and the final answers have still not been found. In many myths about the creation of man, language is taken to be one

of man's inherent characteristics like vision or hearing.¹ Some of the many theories about the relation of language and thought include:

1. *Thinking is a form of subvocal speech.* John B. Watson, the father of the psychological school known as behaviorism, believed that all thinking was a form of motor behavior that had been conditioned to stimuli. When challenged that no motor behavior can be seen while thinking, he claimed that thinking was subvocal speech i.e., motor behavior that could not be noticed. Thus, people who were engaged in thinking activities were just softly talking to themselves [Watson 30]. This point of view was discredited in 1947 by an experiment in which a subject was able to think despite complete paralysis of his musculature [Smith 47].
2. *Language influences a person's thinking and his perception of the world,* the Whorfian hypothesis [Whorf 56]. This hypothesis was discussed in Chapter 6. No definitive experiment has proved or disproved this hypothesis because it is difficult to design an experiment that is not subject to the many cultural and environmental factors that bear upon language. Thus, each experiment that supposedly proves or disproves Whorf's hypothesis can be attacked by opponents who cite confounding factors such as the environment in which the subjects grew up, possibility of misunderstandings of the experiment by the subjects, or similar performance by an entirely different type of subject.
3. *Language is shaped to fit the prelinguistic thoughts that are to be communicated,* a point of view argued as long ago as Aristotle. In the seventeenth century John Locke wrote that man's organs were fashioned to "form articulate sounds" and he was given the ability to "use these sounds as signs of internal conceptions and make them stand as marks for the ideas within his own mind." This view says that thinking comes before speech, and that our language is shaped by the thoughts that we want to convey. Studies that support this theory attempt to find a structural commonality in language structure among the world's languages that would indicate that language is shaped by thought. For example, Greenberg [Greenberg 63] showed that for 98 percent of the world's languages the subject precedes the object—an indication that in constructing linguistic structures, we use a word order that first establishes what the sentence is about.
4. *Language mechanisms of the brain are unlike those of any other cognitive skill,* has been an important theme in Chomsky's work. This theory says that language, like vision, uses genetically determined special neural structures [Caplan 82, Lenneberg 67]. Since language is species-specific to man, it is not possible, as in vision, to carry out animal experiments to gain insight as to the relation between linguistic stimulation and neural structure. Therefore, the advocates of this position must reason from the following basic facts: (1) children rapidly learn language by being immersed in a linguistic environment, (2) modern linguistics has shown how difficult sentence comprehension really is, and (3) children will learn the particular

¹The history of the biological basis of language by Otto Marx, given in Appendix B of E. H. Lenneberg's *Biological Foundations of Language* [Lenneberg 67] makes fascinating reading.

language of their environment. Thus advocates postulate special brain structures for language that somehow have the power to deal with the complexity of language, and yet have the *plasticity* so that there is no bias toward any one particular language. Opponents feel that learning a language is a special case of very general cognitive ability, and that language learning is merely the application of general learning procedures to the special case of learning to talk [Anderson 80]. At the present time the conflict is not resolved. As Marshall states: "We just do not know whether the neurons, synapses, transmitter substances, patterns of connectivity, and so forth in the language area of the brain differ in important respects from those characteristic of other parts [Marshall 80]."

It is interesting that most of the discussions about thought and language give short shrift to thought and image. If it turns out to be the case that thinking involves languagelike processes, as suggested by Luria [Luria 73], then our present-day approach to robotic reasoning based on symbol manipulation would be justified. Yet, there is the nagging thought that animals, who do not have the language facility of humans, are obviously able to reason, survive, and to achieve goals. Can it be that they are using image-based reasoning? A discussion of the "representation of thought" question is continued below.

Representation in the Brain

What is the nature of representation used by the brain?

Fodor [cited in Miller 83] states: "I suspect that the representational system with which we think, if that's the right way to describe it, is so rich that if you think up any form of symbolism at all, it probably plays some role in thinking." The mind apparently uses two major representations, propositions and images (or at least representations that are isomorphic to images) (see Chapter 1). These two representations have been used in AI, and there are strong advocates of each approach. For example, Nilsson [Nilsson 83] asserts that AI is the study of how to acquire and represent knowledge within a logiclike propositional formalism, and the study of how to manipulate this knowledge by use of logical operations and rules of inference; he does not see a need for additional (iconic) representations. Some feel that this point of view is extreme. Pentland and Fischler [Pentland 83] stress that multiple representations are necessary. Weaknesses in the propositional formalism can sometimes be eliminated through the use of an auxiliary isomorphic representation, since a representation whose structure "mirrors" (is *isomorphic* to) some properties of the domain being represented is able to *implicitly* represent those properties preserved by the isomorphism. "How is it that an isomorphism-based reasoning process can succeed where the theorem-proving approach fails? The trick is that the isomorphic approach makes use of the *semantics* of the problem domain 'built into' the representation to express useful *approximations*, . . . while logical systems admit no such *approximations* [Pentland 83]." However, Fodor [cited in Miller 83] has

observed that one problem about imagery is its limited "expressive capacity," in comparison with language: "There is, for example, no difficulty in *saying* of a man that he is not scratching his nose, however difficult it may be to have an *image* of his not doing so."

The *connectionist* approach of Feldman [Feldman 82] is another possible computational alternative to logical reductionism. The fundamental premise of connectionism is that individual neurons do not transmit large amounts of symbolic information. Instead, they compute by being appropriately connected to large numbers of similar units. This approach employs a representation for expressing local constraints and uses a parallel computational process based on *relaxation* (see Appendix 9-1) to achieve some overall goal.

A robotic device will certainly use both propositions and iconic representations, since each serves best to solve distinct types of problems. However, as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, progress has been slow in understanding how to effectively represent iconic knowledge in the machine.

Future Prospects

What are the future prospects for AI?

We are a long way from having an integrated robotic system that can function in the real world, even at the level of a five-year-old child. Depending on one's level of optimism or pessimism, this can be viewed either as offering much exciting future research potential, or of indicating that "we may never get there from here." A recent paper brought together comments from various experts in the field of AI [Bobrow 85]. Some of these are given below:

Bernard Meltzer: With very few exceptions, all of AI until now has been concerned with what Freud termed secondary processes of the mind, that is, those concerned with logical, rational, reflexive or potentially reflexive, commonsense thinking; it has neglected the primary processes, that is those concerned with apparently non-rational, non-reflexive thinking that results for instance in new metaphors, shafts of wit, jokes, dreams, poems, brain-waves, neuroses and psychoses.

Nils Nilsson: [I predict] better understanding of the relationships between perception and reasoning, codification of a large and useful store of commonsense knowledge, significant progress on such conundrums as the frame problem and nonmonotonic reasoning, and large-scale systems based on the "belief-desire-intention" model of intelligent agents.

Terry Winograd: There are two quite different starting points to define AI—the dream and the technology. As a dream, there is a unified (if ill-defined) goal for duplicating human intelligence in its entirety. As a technology, there is a fairly coherent body of techniques that distinguish the field from others in computer science. In the end, this technology base will continue to be a unified area of study with its special methodology. We will recognize that it is not coextensive with the dream, but it is only one (possibly small) piece. . . .

A SUMMARY

We have completed our intellectual journey. Some might feel that they only retain snapshots as a result of their travels—and that they bring back no coherent story. We could have attempted to provide such a story by organizing all of intelligent behavior under a single theory as the “logic imperialists” have suggested [Nilsson 83, Pentland 83]. Or we might have presented a collection of subtheories, such as those of Marr [Marr 82] in vision, or Chomsky in language [Chomsky 75]. Alas, none of these more encompassing theories are believable in the light of our current knowledge. One might be tempted to use the robot as an integrating framework, but here, again, there is no encompassing theory: robotics at present is an application domain for the computational techniques we have presented, rather than a primary source of intellectual ideas. Therefore in this final chapter we tried to weave together the various separate threads that were examined earlier in the book, using major intellectual questions as a focusing mechanism.

Finally, it should be emphasized that in this epilogue we were mostly dealing with questions of the *ultimate* role of the computer as an intelligent device. Thus there may have been a tone of pessimism in some of the views presented here. However, in the near term, for limited domains and less ambitious goals, we are confident that efforts to achieve these goals will result in advances that will both contribute to and quite likely revolutionize society, even if humanlike robots are not created.



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