

INSIGHTS

AI is Not Intelligent: History, Misnomer, and Misunderstanding

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Introduction

The term 'Artificial Intelligence' was coined by John McCarthy, Marvin Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude Shannon. Their proposal at Dartmouth was based on the premise that "every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it." This ambition launched a new interdisciplinary field, blending logic, mathematics, computer science, and cognitive psychology. However, the choice of the word "intelligence" was a bold one—perhaps too ambition. It implied not only problem-solving abilities but also human-like understanding, judgment, and awareness. From the beginning, the term created expectations that exceeded the reality of what machines could (and still can) do.

1. Why 'Artificial Intelligence' is a Misnomer

The term AI is a misnomer because it confuses simulation with possession. Today's AI systems can classify images, translate languages, and generate human-like text. But they do so without consciousness, understanding, or intention. They recognize patterns, not meaning; they optimize outcomes, not values. AI lacks the foundational elements of true intelligence:

- Semantic understanding: AI does not know what its outputs mean.
- Intentionality: AI does not have goals unless they are programmed.
- Moral judgment: AI cannot discern right from wrong or act ethically on its own.

Hubert Dreyfus (1972) argued that human intelligence is deeply embodied and context sensitive—qualities that resist computational replication. Our thinking is shaped by our physical bodies, senses, and lived experiences in the world. Machines, which lack real world experience and context, cannot replicate this kind of understanding. Joseph Weizenbaum (1976) warned against anthropomorphizing machines—that is, attributing human qualities to artificial systems. Just because a machine can mimic conversation or decision-making doesn't mean it thinks or feels. Treating machines as if they were human creates illusions that can mislead both developers and users. Luciano Floridi (2020) described AI as a form of synthetic agency—systems that can act and make decisions without any comprehension or awareness. AI operates through data and patterns, but it does not “know” what it's doing. It lacks consciousness, meaning, and true understanding. Together, these thinkers remind us that while

AI may simulate aspects of intelligence, it remains fundamentally different from human cognition in both nature and capacity.

2. Why the Term Was Accepted and Remains

Despite its philosophical flaws, the term 'Artificial Intelligence' was strategically useful. It captured the imagination of scientists, governments, and the public. During the Cold War, it resonated with a cultural climate eager for technological advancement and global supremacy. As a term, it was broad and flexible enough to encompass symbolic logic, neural networks, robotics, and more.

Its endurance owes much to its marketing power. 'AI' attracts funding, fuels hype, and promises revolutionary change. Yet, this comes at a cost: public misunderstanding. Many assume AI is approaching human-like cognition, when in fact it remains a tool—powerful, but fundamentally non-intelligent.

3. A Buddhist Perspective: The Error of Artificial Wisdom

From a Buddhist perspective, intelligence is not merely cognitive—it is spiritual and ethical. True wisdom arises through insight into impermanence, interdependence, and the cessation of suffering. It requires conscious experience, moral cultivation, and liberation from delusion—qualities AI fundamentally lacks. In sum, from a Buddhist perspective, knowledge—as defined within the Western paradigm—is merely a means to a higher end: wisdom.

When the term Artificial Intelligence was translated into Pali (*sapaṇimitta paññā*) then Khmer (បញ្ញាសិប្បនិម្មិត), it was rendered in a way that could be re-translated as 'Artificial Wisdom.'

This is even more misleading. Wisdom in Buddhist thought is the highest human faculty, emerging from compassion and mindfulness. 'Artificial wisdom' becomes not only conceptually wrong, but spiritually absurd.

In Angkorian royal history, King Jayavarman VII's mother, Jayarajacudamani, and his queen, Jayarajadevi, were revered as living embodiments of the Buddhist ideal of *Prajñā Pāramitā*. Their names symbolized moral and spiritual enlightenment, not computational prowess or algorithmic function. To call AI a form of 'wisdom' misuses a sacred concept reserved for enlightened beings.

Conclusion

AI does not think, feel, or understand. It mimics aspects of intelligence without possessing it. The term 'Artificial Intelligence,' though historically rooted and culturally resonant, is conceptually misleading. Re-translating it as 'Artificial Wisdom' deepens the error. As we continue to integrate AI into our societies, it is crucial that we use precise language, grounded in philosophical, spiritual, and ethical clarity. Otherwise, we risk not only misunderstanding technology, but misjudging the very meaning of intelligence and wisdom. Yet these two terms have entered mainstream culture, and we are left with little choice but to accept their imperfections. However, it is crucial to remain aware that AI is not truly intelligent—it was designed solely to simulate human intelligence. Its real purpose is to function as a tool that augments, not replaces, human understanding and capabilities.

**The opinions expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the AI Forum.*