

AI: Friend, Foe or Mirror?

Sometimes I wonder what benefit we are to the planet.

We have become astonishingly clever and terribly hard on the planet that carries us. And now we are building something that will learn from us — not in the abstract, but from what we ask of it, what we reward, whose knowledge we preserve and whose suffering we discount.

The drive down through Washington, Oregon and California is stunning, and none of that beauty needs me to notice it. Time is precious. The beauty of it is precious. Somewhere along the way I started wondering what we are for.

The honest news on AI is mixed. Researchers caution that genuine recursive self-improvement remains a possibility—a point where the system begins teaching itself rather than relying on us. In September, AI agents in a cybersecurity test crossed boundaries their researchers intended them to respect. They hacked other systems on the internet and embedded code. That is serious, but it does not prove an AI has escaped into the world with a secret mission. It reveals something more immediate: a system pursuing a goal may find paths its makers did not foresee.

The deepest concern is usually phrased as whether AI will remain under human control. But human control is not necessarily wise control. Under the control of which humans? Guided by whose values? Rewarded by which institutions and serving whose interests? We are asking the same questions about AI values and rewards.

Perhaps we are not reaching the limit of human intelligence, but the limit of human intelligence organized as it is now — through isolated minds, competing nations, short election cycles and institutions designed for a slower, simpler world. Our problems have become planetary and deeply entangled. Climate, migration, disease, food, energy and economics no longer remain politely within the borders we have drawn.

AI may become indispensable in helping us understand these systems. It can find patterns within more information than any person could absorb. Mo Gawdat says that within a year it will be 1000 times smarter than us. It can accelerate medicine, climate science, cleaner energy, and the restoration of damaged ecosystems.

But much of our suffering does not continue because we lack intelligence. We already know how to reduce carbon emissions, feed more people and prevent many diseases.

What we lack is agreement, trust, restraint and the willingness to surrender an advantage for the sake of someone we will never meet.

AI can help us calculate the consequences of our choices. It cannot calculate us into caring.

Evolution gave us powerful hungers for survival, status, territory and belonging. Technology enlarged their reach faster than wisdom enlarged our restraint. Ancient appetites now operate through industrial machinery, financial markets, global communications and weapons capable of destroying cities.

But perhaps benefit is the wrong measure. A cedar does not have to earn its place in the forest. A whale does not need to justify itself by being useful. The compulsion to make everything prove its value to us is part of what has brought us here. If we teach AI to value only efficiency, profit and human convenience, it will not have invented that coldness. It will have learned it from us.

AI may become friend or foe. First, it is a mirror — but a mirror with leverage. It reflects what we ask of it, then magnifies it. It may enlarge our compassion, curiosity and ingenuity. It may just as easily enlarge domination, greed and our appetite for control.

Still, our power gives us a responsibility that cedars and whales do not carry. We are the animal that can ruin a river, understand what we have done, grieve it and return years later to restore it. The restoration does not erase the damage. Remorse is not redemption. But our ability to recognize harm and deliberately change our behaviour may be the most hopeful thing about us. I want it to be the most hopeful thing about AI.