

Intelligence

John David Stone

August 29, 2003

The purpose and structure of this course

Good morning. This is Computer Science 261, “Artificial intelligence,” a course about the realization of an ancient dream of humankind: the construction of artificial beings who are, or appear to be, at least as intelligent as people. In the middle of the last century, the invention of programmable general-purpose computers changed this dream, which was previously a whimsical fantasy, into a long-term research-and-development project that arguably has a chance of succeeding, though not quite in the form envisioned by the fantasists.

Intelligence

Let’s first spend some time getting clear on the nature of intelligence. Would anyone in the class care to offer a definition of this term?

Here’s the one I propose to use: Intelligence is a sentient organism’s ability to respond quickly and successfully to new situations, using reason and experience to discover appropriate courses of action. Does anyone have any reservations about using the term in this exact sense?

Since computers aren’t sentient organisms, it’s clear from this definition that the term ‘artificial intelligence’ has the same slightly oxymoronic flavor as ‘artificial flowers’. Just as an artificial flower is not really a flower, but a more or less successful mock-up of a flower that serves some of the same purposes, so artificial intelligence is a *simulation* of intelligence, not an implementation of the real thing.

This fact actually makes AI, considered as the subject of a research program, much more tractable. Real intelligence, as we encounter it in human beings, appears to be very closely tied up with biochemical structures and processes of the human body, particularly the brain, and with other psychological phenomena, such as emotion and volition, that are very imperfectly understood. Constructing artificial beings with real intelligence, therefore, would involve constructing artificial organisms. This is still a fantasy.

Using a computer to *simulate* intelligence is much more straightforward, because we can modularize its operations and abstract them from their biological and psychological context. Though our implementations will still be more helpful and more interesting to psychologists when the algorithms that we use correspond to patterns of events in the brains of human beings performing the same operations, we aren't required to design that correspondence into our simulations. In fact, a more straightforwardly computational approach often turns out to be more effective, because we can take advantage of the greater speed and accuracy of computers and their relatively rich instruction sets, while avoiding the limitations imposed by the fact that most computers are not massively parallel, as human brains (considered as computational devices) are.

Working with simulations of intelligence, rather than trying to produce the real thing, also simplifies some of the ethical issues related to AI programming. If we could construct an artificial being that was really intelligent, we would (it seems to me) have moral obligations towards it that we do not have towards computer programs.

Approaches to artificial intelligence

There are two general approaches to research in artificial intelligence, reflecting different philosophical perspectives about the nature of intelligence and the limits of our understanding.

One perspective is that intelligence is an *emergent* property of systems that are sufficiently regular, complex, and interconnected. To construct a simulation of intelligence, therefore, one creates a simulation of such a system – a neural network, for instance – and then trains it by exposing it to various inputs, rewarding appropriate responses to those inputs while penalizing inappropriate ones. Eventually, the system “learns” how to respond.

The alternative is to prescribe rules for responding to inputs, or (on a

higher level of abstraction) rules for creating rules for responding to inputs, and to require the simulation to follow those rules.