The Man Who Wasn’t Afraid of Robots

What Carl Sagan argued in 1979, and what the decades did to it. Part 1 of 10.



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It reads like an AI position paper.

In Broca’s Brain, chapter 20, Carl Sagan defended intelligent machines.

He wrote it with a Mars lander, a chess program and a machine therapist in mind. He never saw a language model.

> **“Comparisons of smart men and dumb machines.”**

CARL SAGAN, BROCA’S BRAIN, 1979

> **“A conclusion drawn before all the facts are in.”**

HIS DEFINITION OF PREJUDGMENT

Three working examples.

- A chess program entered a state open
- A program that stacked blocks on typed command
- A machine therapist, ELIZA

40 min

The round trip to Mars, in his example.

Too long to wait for permission, so the rover has to decide for itself.

He was right on direction.

- Deep Blue beat Kasparov five months after he died
- Perseverance plans its own path with AutoNav
- He expected specialised machines. General-purpose models are the big miss

Three weak points.

- Therapy by machine, which Weizenbaum read the opposite way
- Re-employing displaced workers “should not be too difficult”
- Using “speciesism” to end an argument

"I teach educators, and I see Sagan's fault on both sides: the teacher who bans AI before trying it, and the school that buys it before testing it. His rule works in both directions. Ask what we have actually observed."



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NEXT

Part 2: Moving the Goalposts

Every time a machine passes a test of intelligence, the test changes. Who gets to move it?



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