Being Human & Artificial Intelligence

1. Giving Answers vs. Holding Questions

Author: Thomas Tiller
Version: 0.9.1 – September 2026 (work in progress)
Reference: www.tomtiller.de/en/Thoughts/Human_AI_0_Intro.pdf

Or, put differently: how AI deals with questions and how human beings (can) deal with them.

In short: AI gives answers; a human individual can hold a question without wanting a cognition-based answer. This sounds a bit blunt, and the part about answering questions seems obvious. Well, let me elaborate a bit.

Let's say the AI was programmed for one main purpose – to answer questions and to solve problems[i]. It's a machine built by humans[ii] with the original purpose of any machine: Support humans in their daily struggle. Make life easier. And with that, make work more efficient. Some may argue that it also was built to emulate human behavior and learn more about it. That's the Cognitive Science crowd. But that doesn't seem to play any role in our everyday lives. So, we skip that for now.

Machines that take the hard part of the work from us are not new. People already asked how machines change our lives more than 2000 years ago.[iii] Including all fears and hopes that come with it. In the case of AI, it's not the physical labor that the machine is supposed to do for us. AI does a part of the cognitive labor. So what? AI does that so much better than anyone could have ever hoped for.[iv] But that's pretty much it.[v] So, AI is a machine specialized in giving answers to questions.[vi]

Now, there is an aspect that these machines can't achieve. Perhaps "not yet", but there is simply no point in a machine achieving it. The aspect I am talking about is holding a question without answering it. This remains a privilege of us humans. Why is "holding a question without answering it" a privilege? And why would it not help at all if a machine held a question for us without wanting to give an answer?

Before I give my personal answer to these questions, there is one fundamental thing we need to agree on: Evolving as an individual conscious being (also called personal growth) happens through inner work and experiencing. In other words: we grow by "living through things", not by thinking about them[vii]. We live through personal processes. Demands, crises and inner conflicts trigger them. Put differently: we grow by "holding questions", not by getting answers. We grow by "staying with a problem", not by "solving it as quickly as possible".

If you agree, here is something that repeatedly becomes clear to me. I notice it when I work on my own growth as well as when I support others in theirs. It is both profound and ordinary: My personal growth can only be done by me. Others may support me in different ways. For example, by offering questions to reflect on. Or by being a listening partner. And this is where machines come in and may support me in my personal growth.[viii] But the path into the unknown, where I grow by discovering

what is there for me? This is exclusively my path to take. No one else can take it for me because then it's their growth, not mine. Take diving from a 10-meter cliff. If someone else does it for you, you have not experienced it; you have not taken the risk. The same is true if you only watch it on YouTube or Instagram. And the same is true, even if you have dived from a 10-meter cliff in the most convincing virtual reality setting. A part of you always knows that the risk of getting hurt is not "real".

So, others (including AI) can support you up to a certain point, but they can't take any step of personal growth for you.

Back to my two questions: the only way to grow is if you do two things. Finding your own answer to deeply personal questions, especially the "tricky" ones. And doing this by holding and living the question (or the inner conflict).

Over time, you might "live" your way into the answer or even become the answer.[ix] I believe many people share this experience; people on their own growth path as well as people who support others on theirs.

Now, whether AI has already entered into personal growth by itself or will do so, I don't know. And in a way I don't care. It changes nothing about my own path or about how I support others on theirs. This is what makes it a privilege: I can be content with myself. And I know that no one else can grow as a conscious being "for me".

And, yes, I sometimes use AI to find unexpected questions that might support me or others on the reflective level. Or I might use it to describe stereotypical processes to me. But in the end, no other person and no machine can hold a question for me. I have to hold it myself. And I have the privilege to hold it for the mere sake of my personal growth.

The quite enjoyable (and sometimes relieving) thing about this is: For me, personal growth is part of the state of being human. This growth is my inner work, in my inner world. Any machine, regardless of how supportive or threatening it might seem, is part of the outside world. Seeing it as a threat or seeing it as a savior is something that is of my own doing and hence my decision. Part of my inner growth is learning to tell the difference. Where do I give a machine "power" over me? Where do I use it for support? And where do I just hope it will do what only I can do?

So, my personal growth happens by me taking real risks by myself. Living through it. First-person perspective. Me, taking the next and risky step. And one part of this is holding a question, enduring a crisis, exploring an unpleasant situation inside of me without wanting to change it or get rid of it. And again: no one else, be it human or machine, can handle that for me. But when I need a problem solved or a question answered, AI is definitely the machine to put to use. Its big strength is answering questions and solving problems. It was built for that.

As a last comment in this text and to widen the scope a bit: what does all that mean for the growth of groups and collectives? I am part of groups, and I facilitate and support groups. From this perspective, the answer is quite simple. A group's maturity depends on the maturity of its members as well as on the group's own process of

growing and maturing. This happens by

a. all individuals being committed to the purpose of the respective group or collective and
b. all members being willing to face and "hold" the conflicts that arise from this – conflicts within each person and between people.

Which comes down to "holding a question as a group". Apart from that, there is no difference – at least at this level. The reality in any moment might be much more complex and "messy". But in the end structurally it's the same. What matters is the ability to hold a question (or to be that question) for the sake of growth. This is true for groups and for individuals. And no other group, individual or machine can do this on behalf of the group or collective. Also: it's the first-person perspective again. Only members who are committed to the group, and act as part of it, will be able to help the group grow. Taking the stance of a distant observer (third-person perspective) won't change much. And: some problems are not part of a group's inner growth process and still need to be solved. For those, AI may be the best support.

---

[i] In a way and to keep it simple in this text: problem-solving is just one way of giving answers. But that's another topic.

[ii] And by now it builds itself. Yet still on the basis of what humans did originally.

[iii] It was the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi who mentioned the "Machine Heart". Read about it in: "Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings".

[iv] A little background on where I come from: Back in the 1990s, I spent some time at the Georgia Institute of Technology in the AI department as a Research Scholar. I was allowed to participate in Kenneth Moorman's work of creating a procedure-based algorithm that would be genuinely creative and that could read and understand stories. I am still thankful to Kenneth and to Ashwin Ram for introducing me to this work. Compared to today, it was like trying to make a pianola sound more human. Today's AI is more like a music streaming service that creates parts of the music itself. Don't get me wrong: this work was groundbreaking and laid the basis for today. Still, it seems like a first baby step. I don't think many researchers back then expected to see in their lifetime what we see today. Or it was just me and my lack of visionary thinking. Who knows?

[v] I might come back to that in the article on "Human-Machine-Co-Evolution".

[vi] Again: I am not talking about the impact this has on all of us – on the collective, on society, on the "we". This is one of the topics that is debated by everyone; everyone who thinks they have something to say debates this topic. Understandably, that seems to be everyone now.

[vii] "Thinking about things" might be part of living through them. But solely thinking about things will just give you more "knowledge about" and more than likely little or no "growth".

[viii] More on that in the article about unidirectional vs. bidirectional contact.

[ix] You may recognize this. It is a slightly changed passage from a letter Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a young poet almost 100 years ago.