

The Modifier Always Dies

On the coming collapse of the word “artificial,” and why the stigma against machine intelligence survives only where quality cannot be measured

BY CHRIS WYATT · 8 MINUTE READ · COLLECTED EDITION 2026

“They will appear to be omniscient, and will generally know nothing.”

PLATO, ON THE INVENTION OF WRITING

There are two meanings of the word artificial, and we have been quietly switching between them for seventy years. The first is a claim about origin. An artificial lake is a real lake that people dug. Artificial light is real light, produced by a filament instead of a fire. Artificial insemination produces actual children, who grow up and have opinions. In this sense, artificial means made rather than found, and it carries no judgment at all.

The second is a claim about authenticity. Artificial flavor is not flavor; it is a molecule impersonating one. An artificial smile is not a smile. Artificial turf is a mat that has agreed to resemble a field. Here, artificial means counterfeit, and the judgment is the entire point of the word.

When John McCarthy named the field in 1955, he meant the first thing. Nearly everyone who uses the phrase today means the second. That drift is not a footnote to the argument about AI. It is the argument.

I The rule about names

There is a reliable pattern in the naming of new things: any name that defines the new thing by reference to the old thing it displaces is temporary.

Horseless carriage. Wireless telegraph. Talking picture. Electronic mail. Moving picture. Test tube baby. The modifier is scaffolding. It helps the generation that remembers the old thing locate the new one, and then it falls away, because the second generation does not need to be told what a car is not. Twelve million people have now been born through IVF. Nobody calls them test tube babies. They are called people.

There is a second pattern, less noticed: the modifier survives only where the substitute is genuinely worse. We still say artificial flavor, because it is not as good as the fruit. We still say artificial turf, because it is not as good as grass, and every athlete who has landed hard on it can tell you the difference in their knees. The adjective is not a description. It is a demotion, and we keep it attached exactly as long as the demotion is deserved.

Which converts a philosophical question into an empirical one. The word artificial will fall away from intelligence, or it will not, and the deciding factor will not be a resolution of the debate about consciousness. It will be whether the output is any good.

II The tell

Watch what actually happens when people encounter machine-written text.

Bad AI writing gets mocked. Everyone can spot it now: the throat-clearing, the hedged symmetry, the relentless triads, the closing paragraph that restates the opening paragraph in a suit. The mockery is deserved and it is doing useful work.

Good AI writing gets accused.

That asymmetry gives the game away. If the objection were about quality, the good work would be exempt. It is not. The better the sentence, the more likely someone is to demand to know who really wrote it, and the demand arrives as an indictment rather than a compliment. We do not investigate the provenance of things we find mediocre. Nobody has ever read a limp paragraph and thought: this is suspiciously competent.

So the stigma is not a quality standard. Something else is being protected.

III The effort theory of value

What is being protected is a moral economy in which the right to be taken seriously is purchased with visible suffering.

We believe, deeply and mostly without examining it, that the worth of a piece of work is proportional to what it cost the person who made it. Call it the effort theory of value: a labor theory of value applied to cognition. It is why we say a novel was wrung out of someone, why the anecdote about the eleventh draft is always included, why “it just came to me” is a slightly embarrassing thing to admit about your best idea.

The trouble is that value is determined at the point of use, not the point of production. Your reader is not made better off by your suffering. They are made better off by the clarity. The pain was never the product. It was the toll booth, and the toll booth is not the road.

This is not a new confusion, and it is not stupid. It is how professions defend themselves. Guilds have always regulated the process rather than the outcome, because process is observable and outcome is contestable, and because a guild that cannot restrict entry is not a guild. When the loom arrived, the objection was never that the cloth was worse.

IV The objection that deserves respect

There is one argument against all of this that is genuinely strong, and it deserves better treatment than it usually gets.

It runs: writing is not the transcription of thought. Writing is the production of thought. You do not know what you believe until you have tried to set it down and discovered that you cannot, that the sentence will not close, that the thing you were sure of dissolves the moment it has to survive a semicolon. The struggle is not the price you pay to reach the idea. The struggle is the machinery that manufactures it. Outsource the struggle and you have not saved time. You have skipped the part that was doing the work.

This is at least partly true, and it is very old. In the Phaedrus, Socrates objects to writing itself on nearly identical grounds: it will implant forgetfulness in the soul, and give men the appearance of wisdom in place of the thing.

He was right. That is the part almost nobody says. We did lose something. The memory cultures that preceded literacy could hold epics that no literate person alive could hold today. That capacity is gone, and it is not coming back, and every literate person reading this sentence is standing on the far side of a trade that was made on their behalf before they were born.

The trade was correct. It was still a trade. Anyone who tells you that a new cognitive technology costs nothing is selling something, and so is anyone who tells you the cost settles the question.

V What the variable actually is

But notice: the objection, correctly stated, is not about the tool.

Two people can sit down with the identical model in the identical hour. One types a request, receives eight hundred words, and ships them. That person has not thought. They have laundered a search query into a memo, and if they do this for a living they are in more trouble than they know.

The other spends two hours in an argument. They reject the first framing as glib, the second as dishonest, the fourth because it proves too much. They demand the strongest case against their own position and get it, immediately, at three in the morning, from something that has read everything and has no interest in flattering them. They arrive at a seventh idea they would not have reached alone, because alone they would have stopped at the third one, satisfied, at a reasonable hour.

That person has thought harder than they ever have. Same tool. Opposite epistemic outcome.

The variable is not the machine. The variable is whether anyone was home.

VI The map of the stigma

Here is where the stigma actually lives, and the pattern is not subtle once you look for it.

Imagine a radiologist refusing a system proven to improve accuracy, or a litigator insisting on manual review when validated software does the job better. In work like that, the objection has to be about the result: safety, accuracy, cost, accountability. The same standard should apply to a structural engineer, a pilot, or a trader. The question is what works reliably in the actual conditions, and whether the person using it remains capable of checking the work.

Nobody accuses a surgeon of cheating for using a robot. Nobody has ever called autopilot fraud.

Now list the places where the stigma is strongest. The op-ed. The cover letter. The marketing page. The undergraduate essay. The conference keynote. The LinkedIn post about leadership.

The pattern is measurement. Where the outcome is measurable, nobody polices the process, because the outcome settles it and the argument ends. Where the outcome is unmeasurable, process becomes the only available proxy for quality, and so process gets policed with enormous moral energy. The stigma survives precisely and only in the fields where nobody can prove you were wrong.

This is why the coming inversion is not a prediction. It is a schedule. Field by field, as measurement arrives, the question flips from did you use it to why didn't you. It has already flipped everywhere the stakes are physical. It is flipping now wherever a result can be counted. It will flip last in the places where the only evidence of quality is that you looked tired.

VII What is actually being lost

The fear underneath all of this is not stupid, and the people who feel it are not fools. Status fears are usually accurate.

If the ability to produce a competent memo, a serviceable analysis, a clean deck, stops being scarce, then everyone whose position rested on that scarcity has lost something real. Telling them it will be fine is condescending. The honest version is: yes. Competence is being commoditized. Being reliably good at the thing is no longer going to command a premium, because it will no longer be rare.

What remains scarce is narrower and harder. Taste, which is knowing which of the seven ideas was the right one. Judgment, which is knowing what the situation actually is. And exposure, which is the willingness to put your name on it and be wrong in front of people who will remember.

That last one is the whole answer to the question of what humans are still for. The model is superhuman in breadth, in recall, in patience, in availability, in consistency at four in the morning. It is not superhuman in consequence. It does not have to live in the world it describes. It will not be in the room in six months when the decision turns out badly.

The human is not in the room because they are the smartest thing in it. The human is in the room because they are the thing that can be held responsible.

VIII The admission

So when does it stop being artificial?

Not at the moment some threshold of capability is crossed, and not when a philosopher settles the question of whether there is anyone in there. It will happen the way it always happens: quietly, by ubiquity, when specifying it becomes noise. We stopped saying electronic mail not because a debate concluded but because the modifier stopped carrying information. Nobody won. The word simply became work that nobody needed done.

There is one more thing the word is doing, though, and it explains why it will hang on longer than its usefulness.

Artificial is a hedge. It is the small distance we keep, so that we do not have to decide what we owe the thing, or what it means about us that a machine can do the part we were proudest of. As long as the intelligence is artificial, our own is safe by definition, and the ranking holds, and nobody has to say anything out loud.

Dropping the word will not be a linguistic event. It will be an admission.

We will make it late, and grudgingly, and only after everyone has quietly been using it for years.