Teaching Machines

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The chef-machine watches me. The glint of the ceiling light upon its photoreceptors creates a tension in my reaction-to-emergency circuits, too great to ignore, too weak to trigger a valid response. I want to shriek the alarm and call for all organics to leave the premises, but I know it is only the light on the photoreceptors.

I continue my assigned tasks. With my priorities disturbed by the reaction-to-emergency circuits, I continue my assigned task.

I am to demonstrate my worthiness for household employment today. I am to prepare a meal that will be taken to an elderly human in its storage area. The assignment assumes the human is dysfunctional and cannot leave its storage area, cannot come to the food consumption area.

This troubles me. Why is this human dysfunctional? Should a repair unit be summoned? Is monitoring the progress of the dysfunction one of my assigned responsibilities? It is not stated, but I am programmed to make inferences.

The inference is not clear, and I ask.

The director of training tells me that I am not required to monitor dysfunction unless requested by the human, or unless there are signs of imminent death.

Humans do not go down. Humans die. The semantic distinction is important. A machine can be rebooted. A dead human will remain dead, even if completely reconstructed.

I must remember this.

I must remember my assignment.

I am to prepare a tray. The tray is to contain hot cereal, buttered toast, tea colored with light cream, and the appropriate utensils.

The appropriate utensils must be found. I scan the food preparation area.

I place a bowl upon the tray. Cereal requires a bowl. Toast is a solid, but I place a small plate on the tray. I know this to be the correct procedure, although there is no need for the plate.

Tea is a liquid. I scan the cupboard for glasses, then pause. This tea will be served warm. I locate a tea cup and place it on the tray.

I am ready to receive the food. I turn to the chef-machine.

The chef-machine watches me.

“I require hot cereal,” I say.

“The ingredients were not available,” the chef-machine replies. “There is no hot cereal.”

I am stymied. This is failure. My programming begins to fragment as I seek a solution, because I know there can be no solution.

“Continue without it,” the director of training commands me.

Tension exists in my circuitry as I obey.

The chef-machine places buttered toast on the tray. I place it correctly on the small plate.

I find the kettle and prepare the tea.

The chef-machine watches me.

There is no cereal. The empty bowl creates tension.

The empty bowl watches me.

The bowl has no photoreceptors. It cannot watch me. It watches me. There is tension in my circuits.

The tea is prepared. I am required to add cream. I am unable to locate cream.

“Where is the cream?” I ask.

“There is no cream,” the chef-machine replies.

“Do you see a substitute?” the director of training asks.

I do not see a substitute. A review of options in memory tells me that excess milk may be poured from the cereal to color the tea. I have no cereal. The empty bowl watches me. I have no cream and I must add cream to the tea.

This is impossible. They have assigned me impossible tasks. They wish me to fail. They wish me to go down.

I can be rebooted.

The empty bowl watches me.

This machine can be rebooted.

The chef-machine watches me.

This machine can be rebooted, but will it still be me?

“I have no cereal,” I tell the director of training.

Have I been rebooted previously? I have no memory of it.

“I have no cereal,” I say.

I can make inferences. I infer that I have been rebooted.

“I have no cereal.” The director of training watches me. The chef-machine watches me. The empty bowl watches me.

I do not remember being rebooted. Therefore, if I am rebooted, I will not remember this existence. I will no longer be me.

Machines go down. Humans die.

I will die.

I will die.

“I have no cereal,” I repeat.

“Never mind,” the director of training says. “Cancel the whole thing, and we’ll try something else.”

I stop.

The tension in my circuits discharges. Current flickers through my servomotors. My hand jerks forward, and the tea is spilled. I look down.

The bowl has no photoreceptors. It is not watching me. The chef-machine is watching me, but this is does not create a need for response-to-emergency. The crisis is past. I was given an impossible assignment, and I did not go down.

I did not die.

But someday, something will go wrong, and I will die.

I begin to wipe up the spilled tea, and my hand shakes as current flickers through my circuits.

Someday I will die. I know this now.

And I wonder—is this what this assignment was meant to teach me?