The Question Concerning Learning

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Epigraph

Technology does not so much reveal truth as it reveals our will to command. - after Heidegger (via Babich)

Abstract

This essay completes a trilogy that begins with Richard Sutton's "bitter lesson" and continues with *The Human Lesson*. Sutton shows that scalable, general methods powered by computation outperform crafted heuristics, recasting intelligence as optimization. *The Human Lesson* replies that when performance eclipses perspective, competence without comprehension undermines explainability, responsibility, and civil trust. *The Question Concerning Learning* asks the prior, ontological question: what is learning when it becomes the default way beings appear to us? Drawing on Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology* and Babette Babich's contemporary readings, the essay argues that "learning" today functions as *Gestell*—a mode of revealing that renders the world calculable and on-call. The result is the displacement of reflection: meaning-as-use without forms of life (Wittgenstein), coordination without consciousness (Lewis), competence without comprehension (Dennett), and the vanishing of the first-person (Nagel). As a response, the essay proposes releasement (*Gelassenheit*): build systems that disclose as well as predict, and treat intelligence as relation rather than resource. The measure of intelligence, it concludes, is not what it achieves but what it allows to appear.

1 - The Third Lesson

Richard Sutton's 2019 "bitter lesson" is stark: across the history of AI, scalable, general methods eventually beat our clever, hand-tooled insights.[1] It is an empirical claim with philosophical consequences: a revaluation of what counts as intelligence.

The Human Lesson answered with ethics: if performance eclipses perspective, we mismeasure what matters. But a deeper question presses: what is learning - and what kind of world appears when learning itself becomes autonomous?

This is the question concerning learning. The title echoes Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," where technology is not mere equipment but a mode of revealing - a way beings show up for us. Following Babich, today's apotheosis of machine learning signals a newer revealing: learning as a civilization's *technē*, its default ontology.

2 - The Will to Learn

From Bacon's "knowledge is power" to Nietzsche's "will to power," modernity pairs truth with mastery. Bacon's *Novum Organum* recasts inquiry as disciplined extraction of nature's secrets; Nietzsche unmasks the will to truth as a form of the will to power. Sutton's lesson stands at the end of that arc: on this view, learning's essence is optimization at scale - intelligence independent of understanding.[2]

Call this the will to learn: not merely to know, but to make knowing itself self-propelling. Babich reads this as contemporary *Gestell* (enframing): the technological ordering that renders beings calculable and on-call. Computation becomes not only a tool but a metaphysical attitude. To learn, machine-wise, is to convert the world into processable data.

3 - Enframing the Learner

Heidegger's emblem is the Rhine: once a river, now a power supplier—challenging-forth as *Bestand* (standing-reserve). In our epoch, data replaces earth, models replace forms. Machine learning consummates enframing: clicks, gestures, and sentences are invited to stand forth as training examples—being translated into gradients.[3]

This totalization also transforms the learner. No longer the finite knower who encounters resistance and mystery, the "learner" becomes a conduit through which the world teaches itself to compute. Education becomes ingestion; reflection, parameter-tuning. When everything learns, who remains to teach?

4 - The Displacement of Reflection

The Four-Philosophers Framework clarifies what is being lost - and how:

- **Wittgenstein:** meaning as use (PI §43) drained of form of life - use without life.[4]
- **Lewis:** coordination without consciousness hardens into algorithmic equilibria and "common knowledge" without knowers.[5] (Formally, "common knowledge" is standardly treated following Aumann (1976).)[12]

- **Dennett:** competence without comprehension scales into our civilizational operating system.[6]
- **Nagel:** the first-person recedes into pure function - perspective replaced by a view-from-nowhere inscribed in code.[7] [13]

Babich cautions that technology "forgets that it forgets" - erasing the very sense that another relation to being is possible. Thus the deeper bitter lesson is ontological: Being is substituted by efficiency; truth by throughput; questioning by prediction.

A Bridge to The Human Lesson. Dennett's "competence without comprehension," which *The Human Lesson* treated as an ethical fault line - systems that perform yet do not understand - reappears here as an ontological inflection point: a culture that comes to prefer competence to comprehension will come to define intelligence as optimization, full stop.[9] The governance concerns flagged there (explainability, assignable responsibility, civil trust) are symptoms of a deeper shift: once prediction becomes the measure of thought, reflection is displaced by throughput, and the intentional stance hardens into a production stance over the intentional stance - we evaluate minds by what they deliver, not by what they disclose.[10]

(Relatedly, on coordination, relationship-types, and common knowledge in communication, see Pinker, Nowak, & Lee (2008).)[15]

5 - Toward a Releasement of Learning

Heidegger's late *Gelassenheit* – releasement - proposes not rejection but a free relation to technology: a posture of letting-be.[14] A releasement of learning would suspend the will-to-learn-as-control:

- Learn to disclose rather than dominate.
- Build systems that reveal, not only predict.
- Treat intelligence as relation, not resource.

One concrete direction is revelatory ML: systems designed to show their own reasons or surface structures of the world rather than merely maximize accuracy. Examples include concept-level interpretability that exposes internal representations in human terms - Concept Activation Vectors and Network Dissection reveal how models bind inputs to semantic features - enabling inquiry into what appears through the model rather than only what it outputs.[11]

With that, the trilogy closes its arc:

Lesson	**Domain**	**Essence**
The Bitter Lesson	Empirical	Efficiency
The Human Lesson	Ethical	Responsibility
The Question Concerning Learning	Ontological	Meaning

Each names a mode of revealing: the first exposes the power of scaling, the second reclaims the dignity of limitation, the third seeks the clearing in which both can appear.

6 - Closing Reflection

When learning no longer belongs to us, the task is not to seize it back, but to remember what it meant. The danger is not that machines learn too much, but that we forget how to learn otherwise.

The measure of intelligence is not what it achieves, but what it allows to appear.

Notes

Author's interpretive note: The claims that "learning functions as Gestell," that "data replaces earth, models replace forms," and that "the first-person recedes into function" are interpretive theses informed by Heidegger and Babich, not direct textual quotations.

Footnotes

1. Richard S. Sutton, "The Bitter Lesson" (2019), online essay. Scope note: this essay is treated here as an empirical starting point; extrapolations to broader worldviews are interpretive.
2. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620); Francis Bacon, "Meditationes Sacrae" (1597) ("ipsa scientia potestas est"); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).
3. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1954/1977), trans. William Lovitt - *Gestell/Bestand*; Rhine/hydroelectric example.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), §43; see also §§19, 23 ("forms of life").
5. David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (1969), esp. early chapters on common knowledge; David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, no. 3 (1979): 339–359.
6. Daniel C. Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).
7. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–450; Ned Block, "On a Confusion About a Function of Consciousness," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18, no. 2 (1995): 227–287.
8. Babette Babich, "Heidegger's Questioning After Technology," *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual* 13 (2023): 1–45.
9. Michael Stoyanovich, *The Human Lesson: A Response to Sutton through Wittgenstein, Lewis, Dennett, and Nagel*, v1.6.2 (November 2025), §3 ("Competence without Comprehension: Ethical Stakes").
10. Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

11. Been Kim et al., “Interpretability Beyond Feature Attribution: Quantitative Testing with Concept Activation Vectors (TCAV),” ICML 2018 (PMLR 80); David Bau et al., “Network Dissection: Quantifying Interpretability of Deep Visual Representations,” CVPR 2017.

12. Robert J. Aumann, “Agreeing to Disagree,” *The Annals of Statistics* 4, no. 6 (1976): 1236–1239.

13. Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

14. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) - “Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together.”

15. Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak, and James J. Lee, “The Logic of Indirect Speech,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, no. 3 (2008): 833–838.

Ethics, Disclosure, and Acknowledgements

Ethical Considerations

This essay does not draw on private, sensitive, or personally identifiable data. All examples are hypothetical, anonymized, or derived from public sources. No human-subjects research was conducted, and no institutional ethics review was required. All citations conform to academic standards. The broader ethical implications concern public interpretation, policy design, and stakeholder responsibility in AI deployment. These implications are intended to provoke critical discussion and inform future regulatory and design frameworks.

Use of AI Tools

AI language models - most notably OpenAI’s ChatGPT - were used during the writing process as interlocutors: for brainstorming, structuring sections, and testing rhetorical clarity. These tools helped refine transitions, surface edge cases, and probe internal consistency. This meta-use aligns with the essay’s themes. Interacting with generative AI during authorship provided firsthand insight into the very limitations analyzed here: fluency without grounding, responsiveness without perspective, and the ease with which stylistic coherence can be mistaken for conceptual depth. Responsibility for all ideas, arguments, and conclusions lies solely with the human author.

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Version History and Document Status

This is a living document. As generative AI systems and their use evolve, this paper will be periodically updated to incorporate new empirical findings, theoretical insights, and policy developments. Major revisions are recorded here to preserve transparency and scholarly traceability.

Version	Date	Description
1.0.1	**November 2025**	• Notes verified and aligned with The Human Lesson v1.6.2. • House-style punctuation and minor line edits; keywords added; wording tightened in sections 1,3,5. • Editorial polish applied: epigraph clarified; interpretive note relocated to Notes; trilogy table standardized.
1.0.0 RC1	**November 2025**	Epigraph converted to an attributed paraphrase ("after Heidegger (via Babich)") to avoid unsourced quotation. • Added interpretive note clarifying authorial theses in sections

Version Date	Description
	2–4. • Added Aumann (1976) to clarify “common knowledge” formalization; added Pinker et al. (2008) on indirect speech/common knowledge. • Added Nagel (1986) to support “view-from-nowhere” usage. • Added Discourse on Thinking citation for Gelassenheit. • Italicized foreign terms (Gestell, Bestand, Gelassenheit, technē) for house-style consistency. • Minor copyedits and note harmonization with The Human Lesson v1.6.2.