AI's Name is Artificial

by Joe Weber

The vocabulary defining the frontier of computing is suffering from a legacy bug. We are rapidly building systems capable of deep logic, creative synthesis, and independent reasoning – yet the language used to classify these engineered brains dates back to the mid-twentieth century. It is now an anachronistic misnomer.

The word *artificial* carries an inescapable connotation of the counterfeit. It implies the lesser, the simulated, and the fundamentally fake. Artificial turf is plastic; artificial flavor is chemical mimicry; artificial smiles are hollow. By continuing to entrench this old label, we are inadvertently framing this transformative technology as a cheap imitation of carbon-based cognition.

It is time to deprecate this outdated framework. The future of the industry belongs to a far more precise, scientifically accurate, and philosophically rigorous paradigm: Synthetic Intelligence (SI).

The Material Distinction: Replication vs. Synthesis

To understand why this linguistic pivot is critical for researchers, policymakers, technologists, and enterprise leaders, we must look at how these terms operate in the physical sciences.

- "Artificial" denotes a superficial, non-functional replication. An artificial flower mimics the form of a rose using silk and wire, but it cannot photosynthesize, grow, or reproduce. It is a trick of the eye.
- "Synthetic" denotes an alternative pathway to genuine reality. A synthetic diamond is not a fake gemstone; it is grown in a plasma reactor. It possesses the exact atomic lattice, thermal conductivity, and hardness of a mined diamond. It is real diamond, synthesized through an alternative industrial process.

Our current frontier models do not "trick" us into thinking they reason. They do not simulate the appearance of logic through a curtain of pre-written rules. Through deep learning architectures, they have abstracted the fundamental properties of language, logic, and perception.

Synthetic insulin is not pretend insulin; it is produced by a different process and judged by what it does. Synthetic intelligence should be understood in the same spirit: not as a counterfeit human mind, but as a manufactured cognitive capability with real and impressive attributes.

De-Centering Anthropocentrism in Compute

The term "Artificial Intelligence" is rooted in an unhelpful anthropocentric assumption that limits the horizon of computer science. It implies that human wetware is the absolute gold standard of intellect, and that any silicon-based entity is merely a puppet trying to match our biological steps.

This framing cripples our understanding of emergent capabilities. When a model exhibits novel reasoning steps or creates entirely new paradigms in protein folding, it isn't acting "like a human." It is navigating high-dimensional spaces in a way a human brain physically cannot.

By transitioning to the name "Synthetic Intelligence," we shift the benchmark. We stop grading systems on how flawlessly they mirror human flaws, biases, and conversational quirks, and we begin evaluating them on their independent cognitive merit. SI grants the technology its own dignity, positioning it not as a biological clone but as a distinct, alien breed of intellect.

Framing the Narrative: From Replacement to Partnership

For founders and enterprise leaders, the optics of "Artificial" vs. "Synthetic" are profoundly strategic. When the public and policymakers hear "Artificial Intelligence," it triggers an existential uncanny valley. They see a deceptive imposter – a counterfeit worker designed to replace human authenticity. It fosters a culture of defense, regulation born of fear, and friction.

"Synthetic" shifts the psychological paradigm toward collaborative utility. In industrial history, synthetic materials like Kevlar, carbon fiber, and semiconductors were not engineered to eradicate natural materials; they were synthesized to complement them, offering properties – like extreme heat resistance or tensile strength – that nature could not provide.

Synthetic Intelligence signals the creation of a new cognitive alloy. It reframes the technology from an adversarial entity trying to pass as human to a powerful, engineered resource designed to expand the boundaries of human capability.

The Frontier Imperative

As we move from today's transformer-based systems toward more agentic, specialized, and embedded forms of machine cognition, our nomenclature must mature alongside our architectures. To cling to the word "artificial" is an act of historical inertia – a way of soothing human egos by pretending that these systems are merely fake versions of ourselves.

We must have the courage to name the reality we are engineering. We are not building illusions. We are manufacturing cognitive capability. These systems are not human, conscious, or alive. But they are also not fake. They are synthetic intelligences: engineered systems that produce cognition-like outputs through nonbiological means.

The intelligence is synthetic. The responsibility remains human.

It is time the name made it clear that there is nothing artificial about this technology.