

“Surely computers cannot be intelligent—they can do only what their programmers tell them.” Is the latter statement true, and does it imply the former?

Computers definitely do what their programmers tell them. This a 100% true statement. The conclusion is a bit premature.

There seem to be ways to skip the details required to solve a task and turn the problem around, in which case the programmer is actually describing a meta task that solves the intended task.

For example, to solve the problem of image classification, one could describe in a lot of detail how to go about detecting corners, edges, various shapes, faces etc. It turns out it is possible to flip this problem around and bypass describing such details explicitly by reformulating the task as an optimization problem. This ML approach doesn't involve any sort of description of faces, edges etc. but is exceptionally good at solving the classification task.

Such an approach seems to be applicable to a wide range of problems and in fact the only practical way currently known to solve some problems.

Now with this possibility in mind, i.e., computers do only what their programmers tell them to do albeit programmers can rephrase the tasks and pose a meta-task solving which also solves the original task. Are computers still unintelligent?

As long as computers can solve complex tasks well, they should be considered intelligent. It is only a matter of time when programmers find a way to describe the "grand meta task" solving which will result in solving a wide range of tasks that are considered to require intelligence.