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Project Debater is IBM’s first attempt at tackling the extremely complicated field of ethics and morality with an AI, with the specific goal of showing how AI can help humans make more informed decisions[[1]](#footnote-1). They did this by training debater to, well, debate. Heavily simplifying, IBM Debater works by first combing through a database of around 400 million articles, selecting ones which are relevant, classifying the claim, evidence, and stances, and then forming these into themes and constructing an argument around these[[2]](#footnote-2) [[3]](#footnote-3). It also listens to responses and finds the key points and arguments and constructs an appropriate response. To do all of this it needs extremely advanced language processing, something that is far outside the comfort zone of AI development.

Can we call this process strong AI? IBM themselves define strong AI as “an intelligence equal to humans; it would have a self-aware consciousness that has the ability to solve problems, learn, and plan for the future.”[[4]](#footnote-4) using this definition it’s hard to be exact, but debater should not qualify as a strong AI. Human level intelligence is an easy one to disprove as it was beaten by expert debater’s, in particular Harish Natarajan[[5]](#footnote-5). There is also no system in Debater’s architecture that is responsible for self-awareness and is not a vital part of Debater’s success. This isn’t proof against self-awareness though as we have no idea what such a system would look like, and it is more likely that self-awareness is an emergent property from many separate advanced systems. Despite Debater having exceptionally advanced systems, there is no reason to assume self-awareness would emerge. Looking at its performances it gave no indication of it and, despite being a very complex process, the process still has a clear direction and is achievable without sentience. Debater can certainly learn and solve problems, and likely has some ability to plan for the future (albeit this would be rather limited) it can do these things only within the scope it has been trained in and is reliant on human input and data. On top of this, IBM’s article on strong AI was realised in August 2020, over a year after the debate with Natarajan in February 2019, and they stated that strong AI “only exists today as a theoretical concept” making no mention of the possibility of Debater being such an AI. One would think that if they had any possible chance of claiming Debater as such, they would take it; firstly, due to IBM’s large focus on transparency, and secondly, due to the enormous boon it would be for their company. So, the fact that its own creators don’t even consider the possibility is quite telling that Debater shouldn’t be considered a strong AI.

It is certainly an AI though; the paper has descriptions of neural networks used which itself is sufficient for claiming a deep learning algorithm, a subset of Artificial Intelligence. Debater should be classified as an extremely intelligent, but still weak AI.

As stated earlier, the intention of Debater isn’t really to win debating competitions, it’s to help humans make more informed decisions, and it will absolutely succeed at this. Misinformation is a huge issue in today’s society and this problem will continue to grow if it is unchecked. Something like debater is an incredibly useful tool to combat this. There are many deep topics we face and need to make informed decisions on where a google search isn’t close to sufficient, such as political leanings, or what to personally do about climate change. To immediately have a wealth of organised reliable and ordered information available would cut through so much of the fake news that gets spread. As debater evolves it could even begin to tackle Ethics and morality directly, although this is possibly unachievable with how debater currently works, as despite it being able to sound emotive, debater is totally reliant on studies and facts. Debater’s extraordinarily advanced language processing is very exciting, she was able to listen to an entire speech curated for humans and glean all of the important ideas to respond to properly. This is applicable all over the AI space as it’s a current bottleneck with the advancing usefulness of AI systems, improving AI assistants like Siri and Amazon first comes to mind.

1. IBM Cloud Education, “Why is Project Debater important?”, IBM Research, https://research.ibm.com//interactive/project-debater/importance/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IBM Cloud Education, “How does Project Debater work?”, IBM Research, https://research.ibm.com//interactive/project-debater/ how-it-works/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Slonim, N., Bilu, Y., Alzate, C. et al. An autonomous debating system. Nature 591, 379–384 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03215-w [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. IBM Cloud Education, “Strong AI”, IBM Research, 2020, https://www.ibm.com/cloud/learn/strong-ai [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. IntelligenceSquared Debates, *IBM Project Debater. YouTube,* 27 Feb. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3\_yy0dnIc58 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)