

Battle of the Brains: Pigeon vs. AI Learning? It's Pretty Similar

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The champions of unclouded thought were recently put to the test in a study that sought to explore if an illogical puzzle could be more easily solved by an animal with the associative learning approach of a computer. It saw researchers put a group of pigeons to the test to investigate their performance in a series of categorization tests compared to that of artificial intelligence (AI). Once those bird brains got going, it became apparent that their “brute force” approach to learning meant that actually, they were pretty closely matched to their coded competitors.

Pigeons are creatures fuelled by simple motivations such as survival, reproduction, and the pursuit of seed. While they might lack the higher reasoning seen among more cognitively complex animals like humans, they've evolved a type of associative learning that sees them develop their knowledge through trial and error. In reality, it's not that different to the approach used by modern AI.

The peculiar test the researchers put their test pigeons through to establish their performance involved solving sequences that logic or reasoning didn't apply to. This effectively meant that there was no option to think through the task but instead only to give it a go and see what happened. Something, it turns out, pigeons are pretty good at.

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For more on this research check out “Myth of the Lightbulb Moment” from the March/April 2023 Observer.