



THE BEACON PAPERS • No. 16

NO DISCOVERY WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING

Discovery Without Understanding Is Not Yet Humanity's Knowledge

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The danger is not only that machines may be wrong. It is that they may be right in ways no one understands.

I. When the Discoverer Is No Longer a Human Mind

For all of history, discoveries were made by people. The path to understanding them could take generations, but it was walked by the same kind of mind that had made them. That is now changing. Artificial intelligence can find results that hold before any person understands why. In October 2026, OpenAI posted 722 mathematical manuscripts produced by an unreleased model, claiming progress on 372 open problems. A month earlier, Claude formalized Fermat's Last Theorem in about 13 million lines of Lean, building on the proof Andrew Wiles completed in the 1990s. The achievement illustrates the growing scale of machine-checkable mathematics, and the need to preserve human-readable explanations alongside it.

For the first time, the discoverer may be a mind whose reasoning no human can follow. The title of this paper answers that fact. It is a principle for building a civilization. It does not deny that AI can make correct discoveries before human beings understand them. It already does, and it will do so more often.

AI may discover before humanity understands. But for a discovery to become humanity's knowledge, people must have a path to verify it, interpret it, question it, and carry it further.

The words “a path” carry the weight of the principle. No individual must understand every discovery, and no research must wait until understanding is complete. What must be protected is the capacity of the human community to understand, and its ability to pass knowledge on to the generations that follow.

II. Nullius in Verba

When the Royal Society was founded in London in 1660, it took as its motto *Nullius in verba*: take nobody’s word for it. Modern science began with that refusal. Knowledge would rest not on authority, but on what anyone could check, reason through, and understand.

A result accepted only because a machine produced it rests on a new kind of authority. In mathematics, formal verification provides a rigorous safeguard against accepting unsupported claims. It can establish that a conclusion follows from specified axioms and definitions. It does not, by itself, ensure that people understand the proof’s central ideas, significance, or implications. *Nullius in verba* asked for more than checked conclusions; it asked that knowledge remain open to human reasoning. *No discovery without understanding* is *Nullius in verba* for the AI Age.

Humanity has always used what it did not yet understand. Aspirin was sold from 1899; its mechanism was not shown until 1971, by John Vane, later a Nobel laureate. Understanding has never caught up automatically; for aspirin, it took seventy years of deliberate work. AI increases the urgency. Unless we invest deliberately in explanation and learning, discoveries may accumulate faster than our capacity to understand them, and the distance between what is known to work and what humanity can explain — the **Understanding Gap** — may grow rather than close.

And it can grow quietly. An error invites scrutiny. A correct answer invites trust. A machine that is right without being understood earns a deeper dependence than one that is wrong.

III. A New Immaturity

In 1784 Immanuel Kant defined enlightenment as humanity’s emergence from its self-incurred immaturity: the inability to use one’s own understanding without guidance from another. The Enlightenment freed human reason from the authority of throne and dogma.

The AI Age brings the risk of a new immaturity, more comfortable than the old one. No one will impose it. People will choose it, because the answers are correct and arrive at once. Education can become the art of asking machines. Science can lose the ability to reconstruct its own arguments. The next generations can inherit tools without the foundations to repair or surpass them.

The result is **Borrowed Knowledge**: answers a civilization holds but can no longer rebuild. A civilization of borrowed knowledge can be rich in results and poor in understanding. It cannot repair what fails, cannot know where its knowledge ends, and cannot go beyond it. The Age of Global Enlightenment, to which the Boston Global Forum has long been committed, cannot be built on borrowed knowledge.

IV. The Second Half of Every Discovery

Every discovery has two halves: finding, and making understood. Machines are accelerating the first. The second must become an explicit task of civilization.

Every major discovery should therefore open a **Path to Understanding**: the evidence behind it, the means to verify it, its known limits, its open questions, and the work through which people come to understand it. A result confirmed but not understood is not the end of a scientific task. It is the beginning of one.

AI must take part in this second half, not only in the first. It can generate hypotheses that explain a result, design experiments that distinguish between them, and turn findings into knowledge that can be taught. This is the highest form of Human–AI Co-Creation: **Co-Understanding**, in which AI helps humanity understand what AI has found. A discovering system should be measured not only by how much it finds, but by how much it helps people understand.

Those who release consequential discoveries carry the duty to open the path. Released with its path, a discovery invites the world to understand it. Released without one, it asks the world only to trust it.

BGF–AIWS proposes this principle for the Constitution for Humanity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence:

Proposed Article — The Path to Understanding. Every discovery made with artificial intelligence that enters public knowledge, or shapes decisions affecting people, shall be accompanied by a path to understanding: its evidence, its means of verification, its known limits, and its open questions. Those who release such a discovery bear the duty to open that path. The path must be usable by relevant human communities and enable independent scrutiny; documentation alone is not enough.

V. The Inheritance Test

The distinctive contribution of AIWS Civilization is to place the growth of understanding inside the very purpose of co-creation. Co-production yields answers. Co-creation yields understanding.

Beacon Papers No. 15 set out the Human Advancement Test to show whether a person advances through working with AI. At the scale of civilization, the question becomes the **Inheritance Test**: after each advance of AI, does humanity understand the world more deeply, and is it more able to discover on its own? Can the next generation understand, question, and surpass what we have made?

A civilization that passes this test does not fear discoveries it cannot yet explain. It receives them as invitations. Every result that outruns human understanding opens a new program of human learning, and each such program builds the capacity the next discovery will require.

The inheritance we leave to the next generation must include the ability to understand, to question, and to surpass what we have created. That is how discovery becomes knowledge, and how knowledge continues to nourish civilization.

BEACON PRINCIPLE No. 16

*A machine may find it.
Humanity must understand it.
The next generation must be able to surpass it.*

AI ADVANCES. HUMANITY MUST ADVANCE FURTHER.

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