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From the brain to the computer and back again

Engineers have long dreamed of building a machine with the capabilities of the human mind. Today's digital computers are adroit at long division or chess, surpassing even the best humans. But they falter at other mental tasks, like recognizing objects from images, or communicating via natural language. Artificial intelligence (AI) is still more dream than reality. The brain is the organ that gives rise to the mind. Naturally, some engineers have studied the brain, hoping to discover principles that could be used for building intelligent machines. In one approach to AI, artificial neural networks are constructed or simulated so as to mimic the biological neural networks inside the brain. This bio-mimetic approach to AI is a bridge between neuroscience and computer science, and dates back to the very dawn of the computer age.