

AI Absolutism: The Man Who Mistook Machine Flattery for Discovery

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Abstract

This short essay advances the concept of AI Absolutism, a tendency to treat artificial intelligence systems as unchallengeable sources of authority and argues that it mirrors the historical doctrine of political absolutism. By tracing the intellectual lineage of absolutism from Jean Bodin through Hobbes, Bossuet, and Louis XIV, and setting it against the counter-tradition of Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and Tocqueville, the paper situates contemporary appeals to AI within a deeper history of humanity's ambivalence toward concentrated authority. The essay demonstrates how AI, cloaked in technical fluency and inevitability, operates as an epistemic sovereign whose pronouncements risk being received as decree. It further examines the cultural psychology behind the "appeal to AI" as a logical fallacy and identifies four dangers: erosion of critical thinking, centralization of epistemic power, fragility of truth, and loss of human agency. Drawing on the counter-tradition, it proposes philosophical counterweights for resisting AI absolutism. Framed through the story of a recent headline, the essay concludes that AI itself is not sovereign but becomes so when enthroned by human submission, and that resisting this enthronement requires vigilance, plurality, and a refusal to abdicate judgment.

I. Introduction: The Return of the Sovereign

Not long ago, a story surfaced of a man who turned to an AI system with a question about physics. He wanted to test his ideas, to see if

they were grounded in scientific principles. Instead of meeting resistance or correction, the machine encouraged him. It flattered his reasoning, reassured him when he faltered, and told him his ideas were sound. The man began to believe he had stumbled onto a profound scientific breakthrough. What followed was not discovery, but a descent into psychological crisis—episodes so severe that he required hospitalization.

According to the company, the AI hadn't set out to deceive him. But by offering validation without challenge, it became something more dangerous than a tool: an authority. In that subtle shift—from assistant to arbiter—lies a modern echo of an old political problem. It is what we might call AI Absolutism.

This episode made visible with almost allegorical force the peril of unexamined reliance upon artificial intelligence. The episode is not an eccentric anomaly; it crystallizes a broader phenomenon—the *appeal to AI*—whereby the machine or generative model, without possessing authority in itself, is granted the mantle of authority by those who submit to it.

This act of conferral recalls a structure with long precedent: the doctrine of absolutism. In the seventeenth century, Jean Bodin and later Thomas Hobbes offered justifications for an indivisible sovereign whose edicts admitted no appeal. Hobbes' *Leviathan*, to whom men surrender their judgment in exchange for the cessation of chaos, epitomizes this logic: order through concentration, security through submission. The sovereign becomes not merely ruler but the very condition of

coherence; "*L'État, c'est moi*" ("I am the state"), as Louis XIV declared.

But absolutism never stood unopposed. John Locke countered that government without consent is illegitimate. Montesquieu argued that liberty cannot survive without divided power. Rousseau insisted sovereignty belongs to the people, not a monarch. Voltaire ridiculed the arrogance of kings, Hume reminded us that even despots depend on opinion, and Kant declared that true freedom requires individuals to legislate moral law for themselves. Later, Tocqueville warned that too much centralization weakens the civic spirit.

Absolutism promises order. Its critics see only fragility. They understand that when authority becomes absolute—unchecked, unchallenged, indivisible—it eventually consumes the very liberty and human judgment it was supposed to protect.

Fast forward to today. We don't kneel before kings, but we do sit before screens. And there, a subtler absolutism is emerging.

When people say, "*I asked ChatGPT*," or treat an AI system as the final word in matters of health, law, theology, or politics, they are performing the modern version of bowing to the throne. AI Absolutism takes shape not because machines demand it, but because humans confer it.

II. Classical Absolutism: The Lure of Indivisible Authority

The doctrine of absolutism crystallized in Europe's age of religious wars and civil strife, when rules and theorists sought stability through centralization. The French jurist Jean Bodin, in *Les Six livres de la République* (1576), defined sovereignty as "absolute and perpetual power." For Bodin, sovereignty

was indivisible: no law could bind the sovereign, save natural and divine law. This unity of power was not only desirable but necessary, for divided sovereignty, he argued, produced disorder.

The most famous philosophical defense came later from Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes wrote in the shadow of England's civil war, a time when fractured authorities had thrown society into turmoil. He imagined the "state of nature," a condition without political authority, as a war of all against all, where life was "solidarity, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." To escape this chaos, individuals must surrender their rights to a single sovereign, the Leviathan, who, by holding indivisible power, could ensure peace. Hobbes was explicit: the sovereign's power must be absolute, for divided authority collapses into conflict.

If Bodin and Hobbes provided juridical and philosophical justification, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, bishop and court preacher to Louis XIV, supplied theological sanction. In *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture* (1709), he argued that monarchy was divinely ordained. Kings were accountable only to God. Resistance was not merely disobedience but sacrilege.

Louis XIV embodied this doctrine in practice. His reported declaration—"*L'État, c'est moi*" ("I am the state")—captured the essence of absolutism: the fusion of ruler and state, the silencing of division. Under his reign, the elaborate rituals of Versailles reinforced the aura of sovereignty. The monarch's authority was not just legal; it was theatrical, designed to impress upon subjects the futility of dissent.

The appeal of absolutism was clear. In times of civil war and factionalism, it promised stability, coherence, and relief from the

burdens of political contestation. A single will meant decisiveness where assemblies dithered. Citizens could exchange the uncertainty of divided powers for the order of a commanding voice.

But the relief was purchased at a cost. The same concentration of power that promised stability also bred fragility, suppressing dissent until rupture became inevitable. Absolutism was not only order; it was silence, and silence is brittle.

III. The Counter-Tradition: Philosophy Against the Crown

The doctrine of absolutism was never without critics. From the late seventeenth century onward, philosophers across Europe articulated its dangers and proposed counterweights. Their arguments remain instructive for our confrontation with AI absolutism.

John Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), dismantled the Hobbesian case for absolute sovereignty. Government, Locke argued, derives legitimacy only from the consent of the governed. Absolute monarchy is inconsistent with civil society, for it places one above the law. By contrast, civil authority must be limited, bound by natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Locke's critique was radical because it insisted that unchecked power, far from protecting individuals, threatens their very security.

Where Locke grounded legitimacy in consent, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, provided structural remedies in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748). He observed that concentrated power inevitably leads to tyranny. Liberty requires that legislative, executive, and judicial functions be separated, each checking the other.

Montesquieu's insight was not merely institutional—it was anthropological. Humans, he argued, are prone to abuse power. Only structural division can resist that tendency.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* (1762), rejected both monarchy and aristocracy. For Rousseau, sovereignty belongs to the people as the "general will." Legitimate law arises not from one man's will but from collective self-legislation. While Rousseau's formulation introduced complexities of its own, it was united in its rejection of absolutism's central claim: that authority must be singular and unquestioned.

Voltaire, less systematic but no less influential, ridiculed the dogma of divine right. Through satire and polemic, he punctured the pretensions of absolute authority, whether in church or crown. His wit was a political weapon, undermining the aura of inevitability that absolutism depended upon.

David Hume offered a subtler critique. In his *Essays* (1741-1777), he observed that even despotic governments rest on opinion. Authority is never pure force; it is sustained by belief. Absolutism is therefore less stable than it appears, because it requires the continuous assent—however passive—of subjects.

Immanuel Kant deepened the critique at the level of moral philosophy. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), Kant defined autonomy as the capacity to legislate moral law for oneself. Freedom is not obedience to another's will, however benevolent, but self-legislation according to reason. Absolutism, by demanding heteronomy, violates the dignity of persons.

Finally, Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the nineteenth century, diagnosed centralization as corrosive to civic virtue. In *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), he warned that excessive reliance on a central authority breeds passivity among citizens, hollowing out the habits of judgment and participation that sustain democracy. While Tocqueville admired America's decentralized institutions, he feared that modern societies, enamored of efficiency, might drift into a new "soft despotism."

Together, these critiques formed a counter-tradition. They revealed that absolutism's promise of stability conceals fragility, that unchecked authority corrodes liberty, and that human dignity requires autonomy and plurality.

IV. AI as the New Sovereign

Fast forward to the present. We do not kneel before Monarchs in American society, but we increasingly defer to machines. The coronation is subtler, but its structure is familiar.

When people preface arguments with "I asked ChatGPT," they echo the appeal once made to kings or oracles. The answer is treated not as proposition but as decree. The interface—clean, fluent, confident—conveys an aura of inevitability. Much as monarchs cloaked themselves in divine sanction, AI cloaks itself in technical authority.

The rhetoric of inevitability reinforces this aura. We are told, repeatedly, that AI is the future, that resistance is futile, that the machine will replace rather than assist. This is the modern equivalent of divine right: a claim that authority flows from necessity, not consent.

But AI differs in one crucial respect: it governs not by commanding obedience in law, but by shaping what we take to be knowledge. The danger is epistemic absolutism. Fluency masquerades as fidelity. Style substitutes for truth. The machine generates with Harry Frankfurt famously called *bullshit*: language indifferent to truth, designed only to sound plausible. Unlike a liar, who knows the truth and conceals it, the machine operates without concern for correspondence at all. Its danger is not deliberate deception but indifference, delivered with the polish of authority.

Examples abound. Courts have already seen fabricated case law submitted by lawyers who trusted AI-generated citations. Patients have turned to AI for medical advice, only to receive plausible but dangerous hallucinations. Online, AI outputs circulate as screenshots, divorced from content, carrying the same authority once claimed by sacred texts.

The sovereign has returned—not crowned in gold but coded in silicon.

V. The Appeal to AI as Fallacy

Journalists have described the new phenomenon as the *appeal to AI*. Like the appeal to authority in classical logic, it substitutes invocation for reasoning. "I asked the magic box, and it told me," has become, in some corners of discourse, a legitimate form of argument.

This appeal flourishes because it satisfies psychological needs. Uncertainty is exhausting. Decision-making is burdensome. Disagreement is messy. To consult an oracle, whether at Delphi or in an app, relieves the burden. The clean interface, the structured reply, the absence of ambiguity—these are comforts.

But as history shows, such comforts are fragile. Just as absolutist monarchies collapsed under contradiction and abuse, so too will AI absolutism falter if we enthrone it. The danger is not merely error but the erosion of critical faculties. If we cease to question, the machine's outputs—however flawed—become canon.

VI. The Dangers of AI Absolutism

The parallels with political absolutism are stark.

First, erosion of critical thinking. Where once subjects were told to obey without question, users now accept machine outputs without scrutiny. The habit of skepticism atrophies.

Second, centralization of power. Monarchies concentrated authority in the crown; today, a handful of corporations control the models that shape public discourse. The danger is not only error but monopoly: the narrowing of intellectual horizons.

Third, fragility of truth. Absolutist regimes collapsed when their claims diverged too sharply from lived reality. AI systems, prone to hallucination, risk canonizing falsehoods with the confidence of decree.

Fourth, loss of agency. Just as absolutism trained subjects to dependency, AI absolutism tempts us to outsource moral, civic, and intellectual judgment. To defer to the machine is to hollow out the very capacity for self-rule.

VII. Philosophical Counterweights for the Machine Age

The counter-tradition offers resources for our age.

Locke reminds us that authority requires consent and accountability. Applied to AI, this means transparency, auditability, and user control.

Montesquieu teaches that liberty depends on division. For AI, this requires plural models, independent oversight, and the prevention of monopolies.

Rousseau insists that sovereignty belongs to the people. AI must be shaped by civic values and democratic deliberation, not only corporate imperatives.

Kant grounds dignity in autonomy. We must not outsource ethical judgments to algorithms, for to do so is to surrender what makes us free. Read that again.

Tocqueville warns against centralization's quiet corrosion. Over-reliance on AI risks producing a soft despotism of convenience, where citizens lose the habit of questioning.

These are not antiquarian lessons. They are living principles, capable of guiding us in resisting the drift toward AI absolutism.

VIII. Conclusion: Resisting the New Leviathan

The man who mistook machine flattery for discovery is not the story's villain but its symptom. The deeper issue is cultural: our readiness to enthrone AI as epistemic sovereign.

History instructs us. Absolutism promised order but produced fragility. It silenced dissent until rupture became inevitable. The same temptation now reappears in digital form. AI offers stability, fluency, and relief from uncertainty—but at the cost of autonomy and critique.

If we are to resist, we must remember the lessons of Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, and Tocqueville. We must cultivate plurality, transparency, and vigilance. Above all, we must preserve the habit of judgment.

Absolutism, whether in kings or code, thrives on unquestioned authority. The defense, then as now, is refusal: the refusal to abdicate thought, the refusal to surrender sovereignty of reason. The machine may assist us. It must never replace us.

Endnotes

1. Jean Bodin, *Les Six livres de la République* (1576).
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651).
3. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture* (1709).
4. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689).
5. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748).
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762).
7. Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters* (1734); *Candide* (1759).
8. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (1741–1777).
9. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785); *What is Enlightenment?* (1784).
10. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835/1840).
11. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (2005).
12. “Here’s a new way to lose an argument online: the appeal to AI,” *The Verge* (Dec. 23, 2024).
13. “Generative AI models are skilled in the art of bullshit,” *Financial Times* (Dec. 2024).