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When Machines Decide: The Peril of Outsourcing Moral Judgment to AI

 **THE HINDU**

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SCIENCE & TECH**GS3****GS4**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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GS3

GS4

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THE LIFT LINE

An algorithm can compute a decision, but it cannot be held answerable for one. The moment a society lets a machine make the moral call, it does not remove the human from the loop, it removes the human who was responsible.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Artificial intelligence has moved from recommending films to shaping consequential decisions: who gets a loan, which welfare claim is flagged, how a patient is triaged, which resume is shortlisted. This shift is no longer a science-and-technology story alone. It is an ethics story about **moral agency**, **accountability** and the boundary between automating a task and delegating a judgment. For the aspirant, this is where GS3 and GS4 meet on a single page.

GS Paper 3: deployment of AI in governance and the economy, algorithmic bias, the black-box problem, and the need for a **responsible AI** regime. **GS Paper 4:** moral responsibility, the accountability gap, and whether ethical deliberation can ever be outsourced to a system that has no conscience. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021)** was the first global standard-setting instrument on AI ethics; the **EU AI Act** is a risk-tiered regulation; NITI Aayog articulated India's **Responsible AI** principles (the 2021 approach papers on Principles for Responsible AI); and the **IndiaAI Mission** was approved by the Union Cabinet in March 2024 to build compute, datasets and safe-and-trusted AI. For **Mains**, the frame is that AI may assist human judgment but must not replace human values, deliberation and answerability.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The distinction that matters is between **automation** and **delegation**. Automating a task means a machine executes a defined step faster than a person: sorting scans, transcribing speech, flagging anomalies. Delegating a judgment means the machine's output becomes the decision itself, with no meaningful human deliberation before consequences fall on a citizen. The first is efficiency. The second is a transfer of moral authority.

Two features of modern AI make that transfer dangerous. First is the **black-box problem**: deep-learning models produce outputs whose reasoning cannot be fully explained even by their designers, so a citizen denied a benefit cannot be told why. Second is **algorithmic bias**: models trained on historical data absorb historical prejudice, so past discrimination is laundered into a mathematical prediction that looks neutral. When these two combine, an unaccountable and opaque process wears the mask of objectivity.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The accountability gap

Ethics rests on a chain of responsibility: an agent acts, and can be praised, blamed, corrected or punished. A machine breaks that chain. If an autonomous system denies bail, misreads a tumour or rejects a welfare claim, who answers? The coder, the vendor, the official who signed the procurement, or no one? This vacuum is the **responsibility gap**. The remedy is not to make machines moral, which is impossible, but to keep an identifiable human answerable for every consequential decision.

Human-in-the-loop and meaningful human control

The design principle here is **human-in-the-loop**: a competent person reviews, can override and owns the final call. But the phrase is easily hollowed out. If a caseworker faces two hundred algorithmic flags a day and rubber-stamps them, the human is in the loop only on paper. Genuine **meaningful human control** requires time, training, the power to **dissent**, and a record of who decided what.

Automation versus moral deliberation

DIMENSION	AUTOMATING A TASK	DELEGATING MORAL JUDGMENT
What moves to the machine	Execution of a defined step	The decision itself
Human role	Supervises and owns outcome	Absent or merely nominal
Accountability	Stays with the human	Falls into a gap
Ethical risk	Low, manageable	High, values displaced
Example	Flagging a suspicious transaction	Auto-denying a loan with no review

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read every AI deployment through three questions. **Autonomy**: does the system act on a person without a real human decision in between? **Accountability**: can you name the human who answers if it goes wrong? **Moral agency**: is a value-laden choice, one involving fairness, dignity or rights, being made by something

that cannot understand values? Where the answer to the first is yes and to the second is no, the third question exposes a **moral hazard**. AI is a powerful instrument of judgment, never its author.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Human values and deliberation -> AI assists (data, options, speed) -> human decides and owns outcome -> accountability preserved versus AI decides autonomously -> black box + bias -> no human answerable -> responsibility gap

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Keep a human answerable by design.** Mandate meaningful human review for every high-stakes decision affecting rights, benefits or liberty, with a named official on record, not a nominal sign-off.
- ❷ **Enforce explainability and audit.** Require that consequential AI systems used in the public sector be explainable, bias-tested and independently auditable, drawing on the UNESCO ethics principles and NITI Aayog's Responsible AI framework.
- ❸ **Legislate a risk-tiered regime.** Move from voluntary principles toward enforceable rules, learning from the EU AI Act's tiering, so that higher-risk uses carry higher duties.
- ❹ **Build ethical capacity, not just compute.** Pair the IndiaAI Mission's infrastructure push with training that keeps officials competent to question, override and take ownership of algorithmic outputs.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This theme links directly to the ethics paper's recurring concern with the use of technology in governance and to GS3 questions on artificial intelligence. UPSC has asked how technology can be a solution and a problem in administration, and has probed the ethical dimensions of new tools. The novelty here is the accountability gap, a concept examiners increasingly test.

Practice question: "Artificial intelligence can automate decisions but cannot assume moral responsibility for them." In light of this statement, discuss why human accountability must be preserved in algorithmic governance, and suggest safeguards. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: The Hindu editorial page, UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, NITI Aayog Responsible AI, IndiaAI Mission

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