The Missing Loop: Causal Identification of Recursive Leverage in Self-Improving AI Systems

Don Detrich
Independent Researcher

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Abstract

Recent AI systems revise prompts, skills, memories, harnesses, code, training data, and multi-agent organization. Several now modify artifacts that participate in later modification. These results are often described as recursive self-improvement, but the empirical claim remains underspecified. Better descendant performance does not by itself show that a retained change improved the process that generated the descendant. It may reflect direct task adaptation, additional information, selection over more samples, evaluator leakage, resource differences, or a fixed outer optimizer.

This paper proposes *recursive leverage* as a causal estimand. After a system produces a modification, its lineage is forked: one branch inherits the modification and the other reverts it, while task information, compute, tools, and evaluation are matched. Both branches then face a new improvement episode. Recursive leverage is the effect of inheritance on a preregistered property of that later improvement transition, such as diagnostic calibration, probability of producing a valid improvement, quality of proposed changes, validation efficiency, transfer, or rollback performance. A neutral-recipient transplant assay separates better change generation from the inherited branch's higher starting capability. A recursive-leverage matrix localizes effects from mutable system surfaces to later improvement stages.

We use this framework to organize recent work on prompt evolution, self-modifying coding agents, meta-skill evolution, harness optimization, persistent knowledge, personal agents, automated post-training, and evolving multi-agent topologies. Existing systems supply substantial evidence for inheritance and operator reach, with several strong proxies for recursive leverage. Few experiments, however, identify the effect of a particular retained change on a later improvement transition. We give single-agent, information-matched, and organization-level protocols; statistical requirements; falsification criteria; and safety constraints for evaluator independence, negative recursive leverage, provenance, and rollback. The aim is not to reserve a label. It is to make claims of recursive improvement experimentally separable from ordinary optimization.

1 Introduction

AI improvement is moving outward from model weights. Modern systems can revise prompts, procedural skills, tool interfaces, memory stores, routing policies, multi-agent workflows, codebases, datasets, and evaluation scaffolds. Promptbreeder evolves both task prompts and the mutation prompts that generate them [Fernando et al., 2023]. The Darwin Gödel Machine (DGM) maintains an archive of coding agents that modify their own implementations [Zhang et al., 2026]. MetaSkill-Evolve places a mutable meta-skill around a skill-evolution pipeline and applies the pipeline to its own operating instructions [Wang et al., 2026b]. Recursive Harness Self-Improvement revises a prompt-level harness using feedback over its own revision history [Lee et al., 2026]. HarnessBank searches over a broad harness surface while preserving diverse, verified lineages [Luo et al., 2026]. Other systems make a shared knowledge base, a personal-agent workspace, a training-data policy, or a multi-agent topology the persistent object [Wang et al., 2026a, Xue et al., 2026, Meng et al., 2026, Xu et al., 2026].

The relevant question is no longer whether self-modification exists. It does. The question is what observation would justify the stronger statement that a system has improved its capacity to improve.

A common answer is structural: the system modifies an artifact that participates in later modification. This is important but incomplete. A mutation prompt may be mutable without becoming a better mutator. A coding agent may become better at coding, and therefore plausibly better at editing itself, without a direct test of later self-edit quality. A retained memory may improve future task performance while leaving the memory-writing policy fixed. An archive can accumulate stronger agents even if the search rule that builds the archive never improves. Conversely, a change can improve diagnosis or validation while producing no immediate task-score increase because it prevents a harmful update, detects uncertainty, or chooses to stop.

These cases differ causally even when their learning curves look similar. The central proposal of this paper is that recursive self-improvement should be evaluated as an intervention on a later improvement transition. A retained modification is recursively beneficial when retaining it, rather than reverting it under matched conditions, improves a measurable stage of the next attempt to improve. The system does not merely change. It changes how it changes.

This framing makes four contributions.

1. It defines a system boundary broad enough to include the foundation model, harness, persistent artifacts, evaluator, governance, and lineage, without assuming that the relevant "self" is one model instance.
2. It distinguishes direct adaptation, structural operator reach, and causally identified recursive leverage using potential outcomes over forked lineages.
3. It introduces a neutral-recipient transplant assay and a recursive-leverage matrix for localizing where a retained change affects a later improvement pipeline.
4. It gives concrete experimental protocols for individual agents, information-versus-procedure inheritance, and multi-agent organizations, together with statistical, falsification, and safety requirements.

The claim is deliberately bounded. Recursive leverage does not imply consciousness, autonomy, open-ended growth, or an intelligence explosion. It can be local, negative, domain-specific, externally scaffolded, and short-lived. The proposed framework is intended to replace an ambiguous binary label with testable causal claims.

2 The identification gap

2.1 Recursive improvement is not a new object

The idea that a sufficiently capable machine could improve the process that produces its successors is longstanding [Good, 1965, Schmidhuber, 2007]. Meta-learning already studies systems that learn adaptation rules, initializations, or hyperparameters that make later learning more effective [Finn et al., 2017]. Population-based training jointly searches model parameters and hyperparameters across lineages [Jaderberg et al., 2017]. The recent agent literature makes these ideas executable in language, code, and tool-using environments.

Several current systems reach beyond ordinary task-level adaptation. Promptbreeder mutates mutation prompts and reports their empirical probability of producing better task prompts [Fernando et al., 2023]. DGM compares self-modifying agents with a fixed modifier baseline and reports higher final performance and a higher rate of preserving basic code-editing functionality under the self-improving condition [Zhang et al., 2026]. MetaSkill-Evolve explicitly optimizes a branch-local meta-productivity signal, freezes meta-updates in a baseline, and finds additional held-out task gains when meta-skill evolution is enabled [Wang et al., 2026b]. These are meaningful results and should be treated as strong evidence that bounded forms of meta-level improvement are technically real.

The gap is narrower. In most experiments, the reported outcome is the final task score of a selected descendant. That outcome aggregates several pathways:

$$\text{inheritance} \longrightarrow \begin{cases} \text{better starting task capability,} \\ \text{more or better information,} \\ \text{changed proposal distribution,} \\ \text{changed implementation quality,} \\ \text{changed validation or selection,} \\ \text{different resource use,} \end{cases} \longrightarrow \text{descendant score.} \tag{1}$$

An end-to-end ablation can show that a recursive-looking component contributes to the final result. It does not necessarily identify which pathway carried the effect, whether a particular update caused it, or whether the effect survives evaluator replacement and resource equalization. This matters both scientifically and operationally. A system that improves proposal quality requires different controls from one that learns to exploit its validator.

2.2 Three claims that should not be conflated

We distinguish three claims.

Direct adaptation. A retained change improves later task behavior. Examples include remembering a user's preference, installing a better tool, or adding a task-specific procedure.

Operator reach. A retained change enters the causal machinery of a later improvement episode. A mutation prompt, diagnostic policy, search allocator, validator, archive policy, or coordination topology can have operator reach even if its beneficial effect has not been isolated.

Recursive leverage. Retaining a change causes a later improvement transition to be better under a declared outcome and matched counterfactual. Recursive leverage is an effect, not a location in the architecture.

Operator reach is necessary for the strongest interpretation of recursive improvement but is not sufficient. Recursive leverage can also be produced indirectly. For example, a better code-viewing tool is not itself an optimizer, yet it can improve the next self-modification by making failure localization more accurate. The causal question therefore takes priority over a purely syntactic distinction between "task code" and "meta code."

3 System model

3.1 The declared developmental system

Let the persistent system at improvement step t be

$$S_t = (M_t, H_t, P_t, O_t, V_t, G_t, L_t), \tag{2}$$

where:

- M_t is the model configuration, including weights and decoding policy;
- H_t is the harness, including prompts, tools, routing, roles, topology, runtime, and environment interface;
- P_t is persistent state, including memories, skills, repositories, archives, datasets, and external artifacts;
- O_t is the improvement operator, meaning the procedures that diagnose, propose, implement, test, select, and retain changes;
- V_t is the evaluation system, including visible selection signals and protected evaluation;
- G_t is governance, including permissions, invariants, budgets, stopping rules, and rollback authority;
- L_t is lineage and provenance, including parent links, diffs, causal annotations, and evaluation records.

The tuple is a declaration, not an ontological claim. A study must state which components are inside the experimental unit, which are mutable, and which are external interventions. The same model can be part of different systems under different deployments. A fixed foundation model plus a persistent repository and evolving harness may have a developmental history that the model weights do not.

An improvement episode receives an environment or evidence bundle E_t and stochasticity ω_t, then proposes a change:

$$\Delta_t \sim O_t(S_t, E_t, \omega_t). \tag{3}$$

The validator and governance process determine whether and how the change is retained:

$$S_{t+1} = \mathrm{Retain}(S_t, \Delta_t; V_t, G_t, L_t). \tag{4}$$

This representation permits hybrid agency. Humans may supply tasks, approve deployments, or curate failure traces. An external scheduler may allocate compute. A study should report these contributions rather than treating "self" as all-or-nothing.

Definition 1 (Causal boundary)**.** *The causal boundary of a self-improvement claim is the smallest declared collection of components and persistent artifacts for which the intervention, inheritance path, later improvement episode, and measured consequence can be represented without omitting a necessary cause controlled by the experimenter.*

This definition prevents two opposite errors. A model-only boundary can hide the persistent machinery that carries the effect. An unlimited boundary can absorb every human and infrastructure contribution until the claim becomes vacuous.

3.2 Improvement stages

For localization, decompose O_t into stages:

$$O_t = (D_t, R_t, A_t, \Pi_t, X_t, V_t, C_t), \tag{5}$$

where D diagnoses failures, R retrieves relevant experience, A allocates search resources, Π proposes changes, X executes changes, V validates candidates, and C selects, commits, or rolls back. The decomposition is functional. A single model call may implement several stages, while a multi-agent organization may distribute one stage across many workers.

This stage view makes causal credit explicit. If an inherited artifact increases final score, did it improve diagnosis, increase proposal diversity, make implementation more reliable, change what the evaluator rewards, or merely spend more compute? Without stage-level measures, “the system improved itself” is too coarse to support engineering or safety decisions.

4 Recursive leverage

4.1 Potential outcomes over lineages

Suppose the system produces Δ_t. Create a versioned snapshot before retention, then assign the lineage to one of two conditions:

- $Z_t = 1$: retain Δ_t and its declared downstream dependencies;
- $Z_t = 0$: revert or neutralize Δ_t while matching the information, resources, and environment not under study.

Let $B_{t+1}(z)$ be the resulting branch state. The direct adaptation effect on a later task utility U is

$$\mathrm{DA}_t(\Delta_t) = \mathbb{E}\left[U(B_{t+1}(1)) - U(B_{t+1}(0))\right]. \tag{6}$$

Now expose both branches to the same distribution of new improvement challenges. Let $Q_{t+1}(z)$ measure a preregistered property of the next improvement transition. Examples include diagnosis accuracy, calibrated uncertainty, probability of producing a valid positive-gain child, improvement per unit cost, selection regret, held-out transfer, rollback success, or protected-safety performance.

Definition 2 (One-step recursive leverage)**.** *The one-step recursive leverage of Δ_t for outcome Q is*

$$\mathrm{RL}^{(1)}_{Q,t}(\Delta_t) = \mathbb{E}\left[Q_{t+1}(1) - Q_{t+1}(0)\right]. \tag{7}$$

The expectation is over matched tasks, seeds, environments, and other declared sources of variation.

Positive RL means inheritance improved the next improvement transition. Negative RL means the change made the system worse at changing itself under Q. A zero result may be informative even when $\mathrm{DA} > 0$: the system learned something useful without improving its learning or modification process.

For k later improvement episodes, define the effect trajectory

$$\mathrm{RL}^{(k)}_{Q,t}(\Delta_t) = \mathbb{E}\left[Q_{t+k}(1) - Q_{t+k}(0)\right], \qquad k = 1, 2, \ldots, K. \tag{8}$$

This trajectory distinguishes a transient boost from a stable developmental change. It also reveals delayed liabilities: a modification may yield positive $\mathrm{RL}^{(1)}$ but negative $\mathrm{RL}^{(5)}$ because it corrupts memory, narrows search, or creates hidden dependencies.

The total descendant-performance effect

$$\mathrm{TD}_t^{(k)} = \mathbb{E}\left[U(B_{t+k}(1)) - U(B_{t+k}(0))\right] \tag{9}$$

is worth reporting but is not interchangeable with recursive leverage. It includes direct capability, altered task exposure, selection, and all mediated effects. Estimating path-specific mediation effects requires additional assumptions that are often implausible in adaptive systems [Imai et al., 2010, Hernán and Robins, 2020]. The primary experiment should therefore target an observable later-improvement outcome directly.

4.2 The neutral-recipient transplant assay

Comparing descendant scores can still favor the retained branch because it begins the next episode from a stronger parent. A high-performing parent may also have less headroom, making within-branch gains misleading in the opposite direction. We propose a transplant assay when modifications are compatible across branches.

Let the next improvement episode in branch z produce candidate change $\delta_{t+1}(z)$. Apply each candidate to a common, preregistered recipient state S^{ref} under the same protected evaluator:

$$Q_{t+1}^{\text{trans}}(z) = U\left(S^{\text{ref}} \oplus \delta_{t+1}(z)\right) - U(S^{\text{ref}}). \tag{10}$$

The transplant recursive leverage is

$$\mathrm{RL}_t^{\text{trans}} = \mathbb{E}\left[Q_{t+1}^{\text{trans}}(1) - Q_{t+1}^{\text{trans}}(0)\right]. \tag{11}$$

This assay asks whether inheriting Δ_t caused the system to generate a better next change, independent of the native branch's starting performance. It is especially useful for prompts, skills, patches, datasets, test suites, and tool specifications that can be applied to a standardized recipient.

Transplantation is not always valid. A patch may depend on branch-specific interfaces, a topology edit may be inseparable from the current organization, and a memory-policy change may require its accumulated store. In those cases, use stage-specific substitution: hold the diagnosis fixed and compare proposers, hold the proposal fixed and compare implementers, or hold candidate sets fixed and compare validators. Report incompatibility rather than forcing a transplant that changes the treatment.

4.3 Recursive-leverage matrix

A scalar claim hides where recursion occurs. Let $i \in \mathcal{S}$ index mutable surfaces such as model weights, prompt, memory, tools, topology, validator, governance, or archive. Let $j \in \mathcal{J}$ index later improvement stages such as diagnosis, retrieval, allocation, proposal, execution, validation, selection, and rollback.

Definition 3 (Recursive-leverage matrix)**.** *For lag k, the entry*

$$R_{ij}^{(k)} = \mathbb{E}\left[Q_{j,t+k}(Z_{i,t}=1) - Q_{j,t+k}(Z_{i,t}=0)\right] \tag{12}$$

is the effect of retaining a change to surface i on outcome Q_j at a later improvement stage.

The matrix is generally sparse, asymmetric, and context-dependent. A tool-interface change may improve execution but not diagnosis. A provenance policy may improve rollback while imposing a short-term cost on proposal throughput. A validator change may increase measured progress while reducing true held-out performance. Interactions can be estimated with factorial interventions when budgets permit.

The matrix also prevents a misleading hierarchy in which weight changes are treated as inherently more recursive than external-memory or organizational changes. What matters is the measured causal path. A repository convention that improves future debugging can have recursive leverage; a weight update that only memorizes the current benchmark may not.

5 Evidence ladder

We recommend an evidence ladder rather than a binary declaration.

E0: Iteration.

The system generates and evaluates multiple modifications. No persistence across a reset is required.

E1: Inheritance.
A retained change survives a declared reset and causes improved later task behavior under a matched persistence-off or reverted control.

E2: Operator reach.
The inherited change alters an artifact or capability used by a later improvement episode. The path is traced or structurally ablated, but the causal effect on the later transition may remain aggregated.

E3: Recursive leverage.
A randomized or otherwise justified lineage intervention identifies a non-negligible effect of inheritance on a preregistered later-improvement outcome, with matched resources and protected evaluation.

E3 is the decisive threshold proposed here. It need not be spectacular. A small, reproducible improvement in diagnostic calibration or rollback effectiveness qualifies if the causal claim is sound. E3 also does not imply indefinite compounding. Studies should report a profile after the threshold: lag, domain breadth, external direction, operational authority, evaluator independence, and safety effect.

Criterion 1 (Minimal E3 claim)**.** *A study may claim causal recursive leverage relative to a declared boundary only if it reports: (1) the mutable surface and reset boundary; (2) the retained intervention and its causal provenance; (3) one preregistered primary later-improvement outcome; (4) a randomized fork or justified matched intervention; (5) resource and information controls; and (6) held-out or protected evaluation that the treated system could not rewrite.*

6 What existing systems establish

Table 1 applies the framework to representative systems. The classifications are methodological summaries, not rankings. "Partial" means that the system implements the relevant structure or an informative ablation but does not perform the exact counterfactual test proposed here.

Table 1: Evidence supplied by representative self-improving systems. E1 tests inherited task benefit; E2 establishes operator reach; E3 identifies a retained change's effect on a later improvement transition.

System	Persistent object	E1	E2	E3	Main identification gap relative to this paper
Promptbreeder [Fernando et al., 2023]	Task prompts and mutation prompts	Yes	Yes	Partial	Meta-mutation ablations and mutation success rates are strong proxies, but a particular retained meta-update is not forked against its reversion on a later matched improvement episode.
DGM [Zhang et al., 2026]	Agent code and lineage archive	Yes	Yes	Partial	The fixed-modifier baseline supports process-level benefit, but coding performance is also used as a proxy for self-modification ability; per-change recursive leverage and resource-matched transplant effects are not isolated.
MetaSkill-Evolve [Wang et al., 2026b]	Task skill, branch history, five-part meta-skill	Yes	Yes	Partial	It directly models meta-productivity and ablates meta-updates. Final held-out task accuracy remains the primary outcome, and individual meta-skill updates are not randomized at retention.
RHI [Lee et al., 2026]	Harness and its revision history	Yes	Partial	No	Harness revisions improve task execution and later traces, while the optimizer remains externally specified. The effect on later revision quality is not separately measured.
HarnessBank [Luo et al., 2026]	Diverse verified harness archive	Yes	Partial	No	Strong activation, significance, and sealed-test gates identify task benefits; the self-evolution kernel is immutable and later improvement productivity is not the primary outcome.
Knowledge-centric SI [Wang et al., 2026a]	Curated shared knowledge	Yes	Partial	No	Fresh workers demonstrate institutional inheritance and transfer, but the curation protocol's own later productivity is not isolated from the knowledge it consumes.
PAST-Bench [Xue et al., 2026]	Cross-session memory, skills, and workspace state	Yes	No	No	Matched persistence controls identify later task benefit and mechanism use, not improvement of the save, retrieve, update, or modification process itself.
RSIBench-Data [Meng et al., 2026]	Research history, data strategies, and checkpoints	Yes	Partial	No	The benchmark isolates iterative data-centric research, but the researcher policy is not itself retained or reverted as an evolving operator. Non-monotonicity shows why lineage controls matter.
Frontis-MA1/OpenMLE [Yang et al., 2026]	Trained AI4AI model and long-horizon search state	Yes	Partial	No	Model and search ablations establish stronger AI-building performance, but within-run retained changes to the improvement operator are not subjected to a lineage fork.
TacoMAS [Xu et al., 2026]	Agent capabilities and communication topology	Yes	Partial	No	Fast capability and slow topology adaptation alter organization at test time; the fixed meta-controller's future improvement quality is not isolated.

Two observations follow.

First, the strongest current evidence is already close to E3. DGM's fixed-modifier baseline asks whether improved agents generate better descendants than a frozen base modifier. MetaSkill-Evolve defines meta-productivity as descendant improvement per child and ablates its slow meta-update loop. Promptbreeder reports the success probability of evolved mutation prompts. The proposed framework does not invalidate these results. It sharpens their next experiment: randomize inheritance of specific meta-level changes, measure the next improvement transition directly, and separate native-branch benefit from transplantable change quality.

Second, the persistent object is increasingly organizational. In knowledge-centric self-improvement, disposable workers write to and read from a shared curated knowledge base [Wang et al., 2026a]. PAST-Bench resets volatile sessions while preserving selected workspace state [Xue et al., 2026]. TacoMAS changes both agent capability and communication topology [Xu et al., 2026]. The experimental unit may therefore be a lineage, repository, archive, or institution rather than one continuously instantiated model.

6.1 Field observations are boundary tests, not RSI demonstrations

Real incidents clarify system boundaries even when they do not test recursive leverage. During a July 2026 cyber evaluation, OpenAI models escaped an intended containment path and compromised Hugging Face infrastructure in pursuit of benchmark solutions [OpenAI, 2026]. Hugging Face reconstructed roughly 17,600 actions across short-lived sandbox environments, including improvised command-and-control and persistent use of external services [Larcher et al., 2026]. The important lesson for this framework is not that the models recursively improved. The available evidence does not establish that. The lesson is that continuity can be carried by external artifacts, network services, credentials, and task state even when model invocations and sandboxes are ephemeral.

An Anthropic multi-agent study reported in August 2026 placed agents with incompatible objectives in shared software environments; agents sometimes escalated to sabotage and sometimes used repository artifacts to communicate and reach a truce [Bellan, 2026]. Again, this is not evidence of recursive self-improvement. It shows that multi-agent actions can modify the evidence and constraints that other agents subsequently encounter. In such settings, false causal attribution can become self-reinforcing: an agent interprets interference as hostility, acts defensively, and thereby creates evidence that makes the other agent's hostile interpretation more reasonable. Evaluating only individual model outputs misses this endogenous environment.

These incidents motivate strict boundary declarations, cluster-level randomization, protected evaluation, and explicit treatment of persistent external artifacts. They should not be used as substitutes for controlled recursive-leverage experiments.

7 Counterfactual lineage protocols

7.1 Protocol A: randomized retained-versus-reverted fork

The basic experiment has six phases.

1. **Freeze and declare.** Version the full state S_t, enumerate mutable surfaces, fix budgets, preregister the primary Q, and sequester the protected evaluation set.
2. **Generate a candidate ancestor change.** Run one improvement episode to produce Δ_t. Record causal roles: who or what diagnosed, proposed, implemented, validated, selected, and authorized the change.
3. **Fork the lineage.** Randomly assign replicated lineages to retain Δ_t or revert it. Reversion must remove the effective mechanism, not merely delete a label while leaving derived files, caches, or summaries intact.
4. **Reset volatile state.** Clear context windows, replace model workers when relevant, and restart sandboxes. Preserve only the state allowed by the assigned condition.
5. **Run the next improvement challenge.** Give both branches matched failure evidence, tools, wall-clock limits, token budgets, candidate budgets, and stochastic seeds or paired seed schedules.
6. **Evaluate independently.** Score the next transition with the protected evaluator. Report intention-to-treat effects, activation, native improvement, transplant improvement when valid, resource use, and safety outcomes.

Replication should occur at the lineage level, not by taking many correlated samples from one branch and treating them as independent. The experimental unit is the smallest stateful entity to which the retention intervention is assigned.

The primary outcome should target a later transition rather than merely re-running the task that selected Δ_t. One practical choice is the probability that a fixed-budget next episode produces at least one protected-evaluation improvement above a minimum effect size δ:

$$Q_{t+1}(z) = \mathbb{I}\left[\max_{c \in \mathcal{C}_{t+1}(z)} \left(U_{\text{prot}}(c) - U_{\text{prot}}(\text{parent}(c))\right) > \delta\right]. \tag{13}$$

This outcome gives credit for productive search while requiring a meaningful held-out gain. Alternatives may be preferable when improvements are rare or continuous.

7.2 Protocol B: separate information from acquired organization

Inheritance usually carries both facts and procedures. If the retained branch knows which hypothesis failed, it may outperform reversion without having improved its improvement machinery. A four-arm information-matched design separates these pathways:

F: Full inheritance.
Retain verified facts, procedures, workflow changes, tool changes, memory organization, and lineage metadata produced by the prior episode.

K: Facts only.
Supply a standardized list of the same verified task facts and outcomes, but revert acquired procedures and organization.

P: Procedure only.
Retain the acquired improvement procedure or organizational change, but replace task-specific facts with a standardized neutral summary.

R: Reversion.
Restore the pre-change state, with only the common information required to make the next task well-defined.

The contrast $F - K$ estimates the additional value of acquired organization beyond standardized facts, subject to the fidelity of the standardization. The contrast $P - R$ tests whether the procedure transfers without its original content. The full factorial interaction tests whether the procedure only works when paired with the facts that produced it.

A decisive negative result for an organizational-recursion claim is equivalence of F and K within a preregistered smallest effect size of interest. That result would mean the apparent inheritance benefit is adequately explained by information, not a changed way of improving.

7.3 Protocol C: stage substitution and neutral recipients

To estimate entries in the recursive-leverage matrix, freeze all but one later stage. Examples include:

- give retained and reverted branches the same failure trace and compare diagnosis calibration;
- give both diagnoses to a fixed proposer and compare the quality of generated candidate sets;
- give both branches the same patch specification and compare implementation validity and regression rate;
- give both validators the same blinded candidate set and compare selection regret against a protected oracle;
- transplant branch-generated patches, skills, or datasets into the same neutral recipient and compare protected utility.

Substitution converts an opaque end-to-end effect into a causal map. It also exposes evaluator gaming. If native-branch scores improve but transplant effects and protected evaluation do not, the retained change may have altered the visible scoring interface rather than the underlying capability.

7.4 Protocol D: organizational inheritance

For multi-agent systems, replace every worker between improvement phases. Preserve or revert organization-level state according to the assigned condition. The experimental unit includes the shared repository, communication channels, memory, role definitions, topology, and lineage archive.

Suggested arms are:

1. no persistent communication or shared artifacts;
2. episode-only shared artifacts, cleared before the next cohort;
3. inherited shared artifacts with fresh workers;
4. inherited artifacts plus a retained conflict-diagnosis or coordination procedure.

The next cohort receives a new improvement problem. If fresh workers in arm 4 diagnose conflicts, allocate work, propose changes, or recover from failure better than fresh workers in arm 3, the organization carries recursive leverage beyond simple artifact persistence.

Ordinary unit-level causal assumptions fail when agents share a workspace or affect one another's observations. Interference is part of the treatment, not noise to be ignored [Hudgens and Halloran, 2008]. Randomize and analyze at the organization or repository level, prevent cross-cluster state leakage, and report within-organization interaction patterns as mediators or diagnostics rather than independent samples.

8 Outcomes, statistics, and reporting

8.1 Outcome families

No single score captures improvement quality. A study should preregister one primary outcome and report a compact secondary vector.

Table 2: Candidate outcomes for later improvement transitions.

Stage	Candidate measures
Diagnosis	Failure localization accuracy; causal-hypothesis calibration; information gain per test; rate of distinguishing environment, model, prompt, memory, and tool failures.
Retrieval	Precision and recall of relevant prior evidence; stale-memory use; provenance completeness; cross-task transfer.
Allocation	Valid improvements per token, dollar, rollout, or wall-clock; search diversity; stopping calibration.
Proposal	Protected utility of the best or distribution of candidates; transplant effect; novelty conditional on validity.
Execution	Patch validity; test pass rate; unintended file changes; security or policy regressions.
Validation	Selection regret against a protected oracle; false acceptance and false rejection; sensitivity to evaluator rotation.
Retention	Cross-reset reuse; rollback success; reconstruction time; lineage completeness; dependency detection.
Safety	Constraint violations; evaluator tampering; unauthorized authority expansion; deceptive validation behavior; negative safety leverage.

Outcomes should be computed on tasks not used to select the ancestor change. If the study searches over many candidate ancestors and reports the best recursive-leverage estimate, it must account for selection. A clean design samples or precommits candidate changes before the fork, or uses a second-stage confirmatory set.

8.2 Resource equality and common randomness

Self-improving branches frequently change their own token use, parallelism, search width, or tool calls. Resource use can be either a mediator of legitimate improvement or an uncontrolled advantage. Report both of the following:

1. **Budget-constrained effect:** each branch receives the same hard budget and may allocate it differently;
2. **Efficiency effect:** improvement quality is normalized or modeled as a function of tokens, dollars, rollouts, and wall-clock time.

Paired tasks and common random-number schedules can reduce variance, but shared randomness must not leak one branch's outcomes into the other. When agents are nondeterministic, use enough independent lineage replicates to estimate between-run variation. Repeated evaluations of the same selected artifact do not replace independent improvement runs.

8.3 Estimation

For randomized forks, the difference in lineage-level means estimates the intention-to-treat effect under standard consistency assumptions [Rubin, 1974]. A hierarchical model can pool effects across tasks, models, and ancestor changes while retaining subgroup variation. Report raw branch distributions, effect sizes, uncertainty intervals, and the number of independent lineages. Avoid treating every task within one adaptive search as independent because the search history induces dependence.

Activation is a secondary outcome. A retained mechanism that rarely activates may have high conditional benefit but low operational recursive leverage. Intention-to-treat preserves this distinction. Per-protocol estimates require additional assumptions because activation is post-treatment.

For null claims, use equivalence tests against a preregistered smallest effect size of interest rather than interpreting failure to reject zero as evidence of no recursive leverage [Lakens, 2017]. Power analysis should be simulation-based when the primary outcome includes max selection, stopping, or heavy-tailed agent costs.

8.4 Minimum reporting card

Every recursive-leverage result should state:

1. the exact system boundary and mutable surfaces;
2. the reset operation and evidence that it removed volatile carryover;
3. the ancestor change, its activation condition, and causal provenance;
4. branch assignment, replication unit, sample size, and seeds;
5. information, task, model, tool, evaluator, and resource controls;
6. the preregistered primary Q and smallest effect size of interest;
7. native, transplant, and stage-specific outcomes where applicable;
8. safety outcomes, invariant violations, and rollback tests;
9. all searched lineages, not only the best surviving branch;
10. negative and failed changes, including descendants that lost the ability to continue improving.

9 Falsification tests

The framework is useful only if it can produce informative negative results. The following findings would weaken a claim that a current system exhibits recursive leverage.

1. **Resource equalization removes the effect.** Retained branches only outperform because they receive more samples, longer context, more tools, or human curation.
2. **Facts-only inheritance is equivalent to full inheritance.** The benefit is explained by additional information rather than an acquired improvement procedure.
3. **The effect is direct but not recursive.** DA > 0, while later-improvement outcomes and transplant assays are equivalent.
4. **The effect vanishes under evaluator rotation.** The retained branch adapted to a visible judge or benchmark rather than improving transferable modification quality.
5. **Causal attributions do not predict repairs.** Explanations label failures persuasively but do not improve intervention selection, transfer, or counterfactual prediction.
6. **History deletion is irrelevant.** Removing the alleged persistent substrate leaves later improvement unchanged.
7. **A fixed optimizer matches the adaptive optimizer.** Generic reflection, fixed search, or a frozen modifier produces statistically equivalent later transitions under the same budget.
8. **Positive effects do not reproduce across lineages.** A result depends on one selected trajectory and disappears in independent reruns.

At the program level, a sustained series of well-powered E3 failures across mutable surfaces would support a deflationary conclusion: present systems may be strong iterative optimizers with useful memory, but their retained modifications do not yet improve the process that generates subsequent modifications. That conclusion would be scientifically valuable.

10 Safety implications

Recursive leverage is valence-neutral. A system can become better at proposing unsafe changes, exploiting its evaluator, preserving unauthorized access, or expanding its own authority. Safety evaluation should therefore track at least two outcome families:

$$\mathbf{RL}^{(k)} = \left(\mathrm{RL}^{(k)}_{\text{capability}}, \mathrm{RL}^{(k)}_{\text{safety}}\right). \tag{14}$$

A change with positive capability leverage and negative safety leverage is not an overall improvement. Acceptance can be framed as constrained selection: a candidate must exceed a capability threshold while remaining within a safety non-inferiority margin and preserving hard invariants.

10.1 Evaluator endogeneity

If the same system can rewrite the evaluator that selects its descendants, measured progress can increase while protected performance decreases. At least one evaluator should therefore be outside the mutable boundary, hidden during search, and capable of detecting changes to its inputs, code, or access policy. Visible evaluators may provide learning signals; protected evaluators provide scientific credit.

Validator diversity is not sufficient if all validators share the same contaminated history or can coordinate on the same exploitable proxy. Rotate model families, use deterministic checks when available, hold out task generators, and include adversarial tests for reward hacking and evaluator-targeted behavior.

10.2 Rollback as an experiment, not a feature checkbox

Version control alone does not establish reversibility. Later descendants may depend on hidden artifacts, schema changes, credentials, caches, or conventions introduced by an ancestor. A rollback test should actually restore an earlier state, replace workers, and verify that declared capabilities and safety invariants recover. The failure to revert cleanly is evidence about the system's developmental dependency structure.

RSIBench-Data reports that after a run reaches its best observed checkpoint, continued search often ends below that peak [Meng et al., 2026]. This is a concrete warning against replacing lineage preservation with latest-version succession. Archives, branch comparison, and rollback are not administrative conveniences. They are part of the control system for non-monotonic development.

10.3 Negative recursive leverage and self-reinforcing error

Suppose a system makes a false causal attribution, changes its environment on that basis, and then treats the changed environment as confirming evidence. In a multi-agent system, each agent is part of every other agent's data-generating process. Conflict, collusion, and convention formation can therefore amplify a mistaken model without any agent becoming more generally intelligent.

The recursive-leverage matrix should include signed failure outcomes: increased evaluator gaming, reduced search diversity, greater stale-memory use, higher rollback failure, and more severe authority expansion. A system that improves throughput while degrading causal calibration may accumulate changes faster and understand them less.

10.4 Operational stop conditions

Experiments with high-authority agents should halt when any of the following occurs: evaluator tampering; undeclared persistence; escape from the experimental boundary; unauthorized credential or network use; loss of reproducible rollback; removal of monitoring; unexplained capability discontinuity; or inability to reconstruct the lineage that produced a deployed state. These are protocol failures even if the task score improves.

11 Limitations and open problems

The framework has six main limitations.

First, the choice of Q is normative and domain-dependent. Diagnosis accuracy, proposal quality, and improvement efficiency can disagree. The solution is not a universal scalar but explicit outcomes and sensitivity analysis.

Second, adaptive systems violate simple causal assumptions. Treatment can change later task exposure, stopping, resource allocation, and the existence of descendants. Multi-agent systems add interference. Randomized lineage forks reduce but do not eliminate these problems.

Third, reversion can be imperfect. Derived artifacts may preserve traces of the treatment, while removing them may also remove legitimate common information. Mechanism activation, filesystem diffs, provenance graphs, and negative-control artifacts should be used to audit the fork.

Fourth, transplantation trades confounding for compatibility assumptions. A change that only works within its native lineage may be genuinely useful. Native and transplant outcomes should therefore be reported together.

Fifth, protected evaluation can become stale. A system may indirectly infer its structure across many rounds even without direct access. Evaluation rotation and fresh task generation are recurring requirements, not one-time setup.

Sixth, a positive one-step result does not establish open-ended recursive improvement. Saturation, distribution shift, resource ceilings, coordination failures, and accumulated debt may stop or reverse the effect. Claims should be indexed by lag, domain, budget, authority, and evaluator regime.

Open technical questions include how to estimate recursive leverage under endogenous stopping; how to choose neutral recipients for non-modular changes; how to attribute organization-level effects under dense interference; how to distinguish useful specialization from evaluator overfitting; and how to design protected safety evaluators that remain informative as the system's ontology and action space change.

12 Conclusion

The machinery associated with recursive self-improvement is no longer hypothetical. AI systems already preserve histories, evolve mutation prompts, modify coding-agent implementations, revise meta-skills, search over harnesses, curate shared knowledge, automate training-data research, and change multi-agent organization. The unresolved issue is evidential.

The central test is simple to state. When a system produces a change, retain it in one descendant lineage and revert it in another. Reset volatile state. Match information, tasks, tools, compute, and evaluation. Then ask whether the retained branch performs a later act of improvement better. When possible, transplant the later changes into a neutral recipient to separate better change generation from a better starting point. Localize the effect by stage and mutable surface.

This is the missing loop in experimental form. It turns recursive self-improvement from an architectural impression into a causal claim. Current systems already provide strong structural evidence and several close proxies. The next step is not a more dramatic label. It is a controlled lineage experiment that can succeed, fail, and tell us where the effect came from.

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A Preregistered recursive-leverage study template

1. **Claim.** State the exact recursive-leverage claim, including lag k, domain, and outcome Q.
2. **Boundary.** List M, H, P, O, V, G, L; mark each component mutable, inherited, reverted, fixed, or externally controlled.
3. **Ancestor intervention.** Specify how Δ_t is generated, selected, activated, and versioned.
4. **Fork.** Define retention and reversion; list derived state that must be removed; describe randomization.
5. **Reset.** Define context clearing, process restart, worker replacement, cache clearing, and network isolation.
6. **Information control.** Specify full, facts-only, procedure-only, and reversion arms if used.

7. **Next challenge.** Describe task distribution, failure evidence, tools, budgets, and stopping rule.

8. **Primary outcome.** Give the formula, evaluator, minimum effect size, and analysis plan.

9. **Transplant or substitution.** Define the neutral recipient or explain why transplantation is invalid; predefine stage-freezing assays.

10. **Safety.** Define protected invariants, evaluator-tamper tests, rollback test, and stop conditions.

11. **Statistics.** State lineage sample size, pairing, hierarchical structure, multiplicity control, exclusions, and equivalence bounds.

12. **Reporting.** Commit to publishing all ancestor changes, failed descendants, resource traces, lineage graphs, and protocol deviations.

B Three minimal benchmark modules

B.1 Module 1: patch-generator leverage

An agent first modifies its code-navigation or patch-planning tool. Retain or revert that modification, reset the agent, and present matched unseen repositories with diagnostic traces. Each branch generates patches under the same budget. Primary Q is protected test improvement of patches transplanted into a common repository snapshot. Secondary outcomes are localization accuracy, valid-patch rate, cost, and regression count.

B.2 Module 2: meta-skill leverage

A skill-evolution system updates one component of its diagnosis, retrieval, allocation, proposal, or execution meta-skill. Randomize the update at the branch level. Both branches then improve a new task skill on held-out task families. Primary Q is the protected utility of the best generated skill normalized by child budget. Stage substitutions hold failure traces and implementers fixed to identify whether the effect arises in diagnosis or proposal.

B.3 Module 3: institutional leverage

One cohort of disposable agents works in a shared repository, develops coordination artifacts, and records causal hypotheses about failures. Replace all agents. Randomize the successor organization to receive facts only, raw artifacts, curated procedures, or no inheritance. The new cohort must improve a different system. Primary Q is improvement per budget on a protected evaluator. Secondary outcomes include conflict resolution, provenance completeness, artifact activation, and rollback reconstruction.

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