

Episode 166 AI and the Future of Humanity

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

John Lennox

Hello, my name is John Lennox. I'm an Emeritus Professor of Mathematics, and an Emeritus Fellow in Mathematics in the Philosophy of Science at Green Templeton College in Oxford University. I'm also a Distinguished Research Fellow at the Lanier library in Yarnton. And I'm delighted to be with you on this podcast today.

David Capes

Dr. John Lennox, John, great to see you now this time on this side of the pond, and at the Lanier Theological Library in Houston. Welcome.

John Lennox

Thank you very much. Delighted to be here. And it's blown my mind away. What a grand vision of the possibility of doing things in a serious way for the Christian faith. Marvelous.

David Capes

It is! You haven't even been here 24 hours, and yet you're willing to sit down and talk with me about this.

David Capes

I'm delighted to sit down and talk with you.

David Capes

We're grateful for that new affiliation between Lanier and Yarnton. And now also you being a part of it.

John Lennox

So am I!

David Capes

Yes, it's exciting for us. I know that's just developing, but I think it's okay for us to talk about that now. Alright, so here's the first question. Where did you get that great accent?

John Lennox

I got it, I suppose from my parents and grandparents and everyone else. It's a fairly standard Northern Irish accent, except it's been modified by living ever since I was 18 outside Northern Ireland. I have to change various little bits of it, in order that people could understand me in the interest of talking to my wife and the rest of the world.

David Capes

Sally is your wife. Is she from Northern Ireland?

John Lennox

No, she's English, you see. I married a foreigner in the interests of Christian mission and all the rest.

David Capes

I started to say there's a bit of charity in there.

John Lennox

Yeah, that's right. I think there's plenty of charity, that went the other direction as well.

David Capes

Yes, we all experience that. Thank God for it. Now you have written a terrific book that we talked about a few years ago. *2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity*. And since we've done that podcast, there has been a tremendous number of leaps forward and concern about AI, artificial intelligence and all the implications of it. Let's talk about what's happening now. From your point of view, from your perspective as both a Christian and an ethicist, as one who knows the inside and the outside of it, what's new?

John Lennox

There are a number of new things. What we're experiencing is a very rapid development on all fronts. So that narrow AI, that's the sort of stuff that's mostly used these days, that is a system that does one thing that normally requires human intelligence, has become extremely refined. For example, in the medical field, we have visual recognition technology on X rays that's doing diagnoses that are much better than the average doctor does. We have research on vaccines and new medicines that is being reduced in time to a fraction of what it used to take. So there are a huge number of positive advantages.

But as I said, when I talked to you before, David, AI is like a knife. A good knife can be used both for surgery and murder. And one of the big new developments is in what we used to call predictive texting. I don't know whether you recall the frustration of having an early smartphone, which kept trying to tell me what I should write next. And then kept getting it wrong. And I never knew how to switch it off. Well, now we have Chat GPT-4 which has taken the world by storm, because there's a very sophisticated form of that, which is capable of pushing out all kinds of things in response to inputs. It has been trained on literally billions of pieces of information, trolled from the internet, books and elsewhere. And you can ask it to write an essay, you can ask it what its opinion is on the weather in the Arctic. Or you can ask it questions about how to make bombs. And it's proving to be very much a two-edged sword.

There are worries connected with it, because it has become so sophisticated, that even the leading players, that is the serious engineers who are involved in developing it, don't know exactly how it works. And that has given rise to alarm. In fact, they called for a moratorium. They said, don't let's move on to the next generation of this system. Because we don't know how it's working. And we're not sure whether we've got enough ethical underpinnings in place to control it.

What's known as the control problem has become very much closer to us in time than was thought when I wrote the book that you just mentioned. The control problem is, are things going to get out of control, so that we cannot police them properly. Now, it's got pluses and minuses. One of the minuses is, and I'm actually involved in this myself, (it has read several of my books), but it's not going to pay any royalties. And there are a number of major class actions lawsuits in the US here. You're allowing this to break all copyright laws. I you ask it, what I think about artificial intelligence, it will probably speak a bit to that book.

David Capes

But will it be accurate? That's the question.

John Lennox

It's actually an important question, because it's not always accurate. And so far, although it is often accurate, and can be used as a first iteration very powerfully for people to do research on a topic. The important thing is that they check it afterward. Because it is known so far, to make up stories, and not tell you what's true. Rather than saying, I don't know, it makes something up, and it will tell you what you'd like to hear.

David Capes

All things to all people.

John Lennox

All things to all people. And that's risky. A friend of mine wrote a paper, a scientific paper, and he was asked to report on it. So he inputted his entire scientific paper to GPT. And he said, please write one article for The New York Times, an article for The Washington Post and an article for another paper and it just spat them out. He sent them in. They were all published without the slightest difficulty.

David Capes

Did they know that they were publishing Chat GBT content?

John Lennox

I don't know the answer to that. But you can catch people out. They were speaking at a big conference in Ireland, about these things. And I said to the people, from a Christian perspective, if we use this to check up on things there is a risk that many a sermon is going to be produced by Chat GPT, late on a Saturday night, after the late-night film, without much spiritual exercise, prayer, or anything else. And I said, Christians will have to use it very carefully. And make sure they check all the details. It's a resource, but it is not a substitute for doing all this kind of thing. And we need to use it ethically and then I paused. And I said to the audience, you thought that was good. didn't you. But you know I didn't write it. GPT-4 wrote it!

David Capes

Did it really! I know as a professor; I have students write a research paper. There are all sorts of benefits to having done that. But if I'm not sure if it's being written by a student or being written just off

of the information on the internet, I don't want to offer that kind of assignment anymore. A lot of professors I think are going to move away from that.

John Lennox

There's a huge debate about what to do. I was doing a seminar in another context at the Business School at Oxford just a few weeks ago. And the people in the seminar were all Deputy Principals of further education colleges. So just in a little bit of free time, at the end, I said, I'd love to ask all of you, how many of you are allowing your students to use GPT? About half of them put up their hands and the other half, we're not going to allow it. And it's interesting, some people said, look, the technology is there, we must get used to it, and let them use it. But we must put in some kind of ethical underpinnings so that we can work out just how much they use it. We must teach them to acknowledge it, and demonstrate how they've checked it and what resources they've used to do that.

Other people say no way. What we need to do is to return to the old style examination conditions where we put them in a Faraday cage, so that no electronic signals can get in or out. And they have to write the thing. I'm sufficiently of an old timer to prefer that. If you look on the Internet, you'll see regulations developed by Harvard, Yale, and a number of the major universities in the US and in the UK, to try to police this because they realize that Pandora's box is open. They're not going to put the genie back in the bottle to change the metaphor. And what has surprised everybody, I think, is the rapidity with which this happened. This is a quantum leap upwards. And some people think it's a bit like the Industrial Revolution. Certainly, AI itself is of the same level as the Industrial Revolution.

David Capes

With the industrial revolution, we saw much evil as well as much good, too.

John Lennox

Well, that's right. And of course, some of the evil was loss of jobs. And that is a problem that's becoming acute. The figures tend to be pretty wild, and who can assess them. But some say within the next few years, 50% of people will have to be retrained. Now, that's okay in a highly educated, Western nation. But as I was told in South Africa on my visit, they said, this is frightening for us, because we don't have the educational infrastructure to teach people these new skills. And you know, a lot of standard legal work like writing wills or contract, the machines will take it over. They probably already are. But I noticed we're being charged exactly the same!

David Capes

Yes, exactly. So as a Christian, as a thinker, what would you say your biggest concerns are moving forward? We've talked about the ethics of this, and the fact that the technology has outpaced our ethical thinking about it. And you mentioned now the loss of jobs, the loss of humanity. Your book is entitled *2084: The Future of Humanity*. Where's this headed? Can you say? Do we have enough information?

John Lennox

It's very hard to say where it's heading. And there are two sides to this. We have to think, first of all, in terms of what's happening now. And there have been one or two rather frightening developments in

recent days in the direction of the trans-humanist vision, but they are connected actually with a dream and a hope rather than a reality. They're connected with the expectation on the part of some that we're going to create super intelligences, either based on existing humans, with mechanical, technological implants, or by inventing some new kind of, they call it a life form. That's not based on biology.

But here's what concerns me a lot of and it's emanating from my own University of Oxford. There is a concept of Effective Altruism. Now, altruism is a very Christian concept, being concerned for other people. And that has been a concern expressed by many people, even strong atheists like Peter Singer, who is an ethicist. We must be concerned with other people. But now, there's this notion of Longtermism, which is coming out of Oxford, and that is being concerned with the future of, well, you can't call it humanity anymore. But the billions of trans-human beings that some of these trans-humanist thinkers imagine are going to be produced.

Now here's how the argument goes. We should maximize our giving to promote the existence of these beings in the future. And avoid all existential risk of them being wiped out. Here's what it amounts to. And this is what shocked me. Instead of investing our money in the two-thirds world and helping eliminate poverty, we should forget about that altogether together and push our money into the brightest and best people in the West. So that we reduce the existential risk of the beings that will exist in the future. Well, that's a horrific idea, it seems to me. And even Singer who, I think more or less started the notion of Effective Altruism is saying, no, no. That's going too far. We must protect existing human beings.

But what concerns me, David, is the billions and I understand it's billions of dollars that are being pushed into this, the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford, and so on. And as a Christian, that concerns me at many different levels. Because, first of all, it's saying, we human beings have the current model, which has been the same for a very long time. Humans 101 I suppose you call us, are nothing special. And we're going to be modified. Now, we take evolution into our control, and they say it becomes intelligent design.

David Capes

Do they use that term, intelligent design?

John Lennox

They do! And they use it deliberately. They say, random evolution has brought us to where we are now. But we can go much faster by taking a troll and creating the kind of beings we want. Now, that's really scary, because who are going to be the controllers? And as a Christian, it naturally concerns me that many of the leading thinkers in this field, are atheists out there promoting an atheist agenda.

David Capes

Do they realize the need for ethics? Do they realize that there needs to be something here for other beings? Who aren't these trans-humans, beings?

John Lennox

I think many of them do, which is why they're trying to get international agreements. But it is very difficult, David. There's a huge intellectual problem here, that I've discussed with many people. You see, the dominant ethical view, at least in the West, and certainly in the academy is what's called utilitarianism preference. That is, our ethics are based on the maximum benefit for the maximum number of people. And that's wonderful if you're dividing ice cream among children, because they are all equal little power centers.

Now, if you think of that, at the world scale, if you have roughly equal power centers, states, corporations at the business level, then it's okay to say if you do X, I'll do Y. But if you get all the power, and they say, if you do X, I'll do ...And you say, will you really? Hitler is a brilliant example of this. When he was in his political infancy, he made treaties. When he got power, he tore them up. Vladimir Putin is on record as saying that whichever state controls AI, will control the world. And I suspect he may be right.

So, there's a huge ethical danger here in losing what has been the transcendent base for ethics for millennia in the West, and that is the biblical doctrine that human beings are made in the image of God and therefore are of infinite value. We've lost that vertical dimension. And so, we're quibbling on the horizontal dimension. And utilitarianism is okay, as I say, but only in certain circumstances. Hitler decided it was best for the majority to wipe out the Jews. And he had the power, and we know what happened. And one fears that kind of thing.

David Capes

And the sick and the diseased, the weak. Let's just get rid of all of them because we want to have a new kind of humanity. We're going to help evolution along, just a little bit.

John Lennox

And that's the end of love your neighbor as yourself. There are many worrying things. Now, of course, we're not there yet. We're still in the age of narrow AI. But narrow AI is causing enough trouble of its own. GPT-4 is working. Not feeding the poor is one thing, but there are very repressive regimes in this world that are using the vastly improved surveillance technologies, computerized vision where for example, they can recognize you not from your face only but from the way you walk. All those kinds of details, and it's very well known that in the Uyghur population in Xinjiang China the surveillance levels are fearful.

But we're beginning to see it creep into the West. Because we've got our trackers, our smartphones, were giving away all kinds of information about ourselves, which is being used. We're not told, but it's being sold on to third party corporations. That's going to get much worse. And I think it's quite chilling that one of the observers of the Chinese situation wrote and said, you need to be careful in the West, because all of the equipment we're using is there. Some of it comes from there. The only difference is, you don't yet have in the West, a centralized totalitarian government. Not yet.

David Capes

Not yet. And your new book, what's it going to be called? When it's out? Your other book is *2084: Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of Humanity*. Will that be just a second edition of the same?

John Lennox

I don't know, I might be tempted to call it 2064. Because the things are going quicker and happening so rapidly. And some of the most serious thinkers around who have made huge contributions to AI are predicting that we're going to get somewhere near artificial general intelligence within the next few years. I'm very skeptical, because of the fact that in human beings, the model 101, is sophisticated beyond belief, still. Because intelligence in human beings is linked with consciousness. We don't know what consciousness is.

But I'm interested in reading some of the really serious players saying that these machines appear to be conscious. Now, I don't believe that. I think what they're saying is, they're simulating consciousness much better than they were. And of course, the new factor in that GPT is trained on all this stuff. But it appears to be able to do things that are out of control of the humans that programmed it. That's new, and that is feared by some of the developers. I think of Geoffrey Hinton, one of the leaders in Google, who resigned from Google. He said it was so he could speak freely of the dangers and the risks and the need for ethical protection. And there certainly is that need. Governments are very concerned.

David Capes

You have mentioned that there are some scary things ahead.

John Lennox

Well, I think one of the main ones is what's called deep fake technology. And that's a combination of the video and audio methodologies that are now available to take, for example, a fairly short video clip of you and a short audio clip. And then the technology can essentially make you appear to say anything they want you to say. And just today, it was announced by the London Times that there was a big meeting of what's called the Five Eyes, Nations. That is the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Speaking of the danger of fakes, the head of our Secret Service, MI5 said that the potential for AI now, were these deep fakes that can seriously disrupt democratic elections is out there.

And it's going to happen in the next general election. And various voices just in the last few weeks have been saying there's a potential here to deceive billions of people so that they no longer are capable of recognizing what is true and what is false. I think that's a serious thing. And at the practical level, they can and it's happening already that you might get a phone call, and it sounds exactly like your daughter. And she says, Dad, look, I'm stuck in downtown New York. I really need a flight home. Can you send me \$1,000 to the following bank number.

David Capes

And you recognize the voice, right.

John Lennox

You recognize the voice. And this is already happening? So, there's very good advice about it. That all families and friends should have special words and questions that they put into any discussion about money that occurs when the phone rings. It's something that would be recognized and the response to it. Have a safe question and have a safe answer so that a conversation about finance or something

critical can be carried on and you know, the person you're talking to. It's the question of authentication that's becoming more and more difficult. We're used to that. And even logging in to certain websites. We have to have dual authentication. And this is the verbal thing and of course it's video as well. So the deep fakes unfortunately, are going to be a major problem.

David Capes

Dr. John Lennox, thanks for being with us today on the Stone Chapel Podcast.

John Lennox

My pleasure! Thanks for the great questions.