

John Lennox: False Assumptions in the Hype over AI (<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep90>)

Robert J. Marks:

We talk to Dr. John Lennox about his new book, 2084, today on Mind Matters News.

Introduction:

Welcome to Mind Matters News, where artificial and natural intelligence meet head on. Here's your host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

We're talking to Dr. John Lennox about his new book, 2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity. How will AI affect the future? Dr. Lennox is able to look at the AI phenomena from a number of different perspectives. From the technical side, he's an Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University. On the theological side, he acts as a Pastoral Adviser to Green Templeton College at Oxford. Dr. Lennox, welcome.

John Lennox:

Thank you very much indeed.

Robert J. Marks:

In your book, which I recommend, again, the title is 2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity, you discussed Dan Brown's novel entitled Origin. Now Dan Brown is famous for writing many, I don't know, kind of strange books, one was the Da Vinci Code, but his recent one deals with artificial intelligence and you discuss his novel as the springboard for your discussion about AI in the future. What did you find appealing or compelling about Brown's novel that you commented on it so much?

John Lennox:

Well, it was the actual story line. The main character in Origin is a billionaire computer scientist and AI expert who's called Edmond Kirsch, and he claims to have solved the fundamental big questions that everybody asks at some time, "Where do we come from and where are we going?" And he uses AI in the novel to answer these questions, but his intention is philosophical, and that's what caught my attention.

John Lennox:

In fact, somebody told me that this was in the book and that's why I read it. His goal was to, I quote, "employ the truth of science to destroy the myth of religions, in particular Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," and he actually concentrates on Christianity.

John Lennox:

And so here is someone using AI to answer these big questions in such a way as to completely destroy, in his view, religion's answers and he's using AI to do it. And the kind of AI involved is, of course, the more science fiction type, it's the advanced technological modification of human beings into

transhuman beings or into super intelligences. And I was very interested in the kind of philosophy that's coming through. And that was one of my motives for writing this book.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. Dan Brown has some presuppositions, doesn't he?

John Lennox:

Oh, of course he has presuppositions. And it's hard to really disentangle his own presuppositions from those of his main characters, except for the very interesting fact that the hero of many of his books is a professor of symbology, whatever that means, called Robert Langdon. And he's an expert at recognizing all sorts of mysterious and rare and hidden patterns in things.

John Lennox:

But one of the astonishing things about the book was when Langdon is asked the question about the origin of the genetic code, which figures very largely in the book and there's great interest in developing exactly what this involves.

John Lennox:

And Landon says something like this, and it raises the questions of God. He says, "The question of God, for me, lies in understanding the difference between codes and patterns. Patterns occur everywhere in nature, the spiraling seeds of a sunflower, the hexagonal cells of a honeycomb and so on. Codes are special. Codes by definition must carry information. Codes must transmit data and convey meaning." And he ends up by saying, "Codes are the deliberate inventions of intelligent consciousness. They don't appear organically, they must be created."

John Lennox:

And one of the other female heroes in the book says, "You think DNA was created by an intelligence?" And he just goes as far as saying, "I feel as if I'm seeing a living footprint, the shadow of some greater force that is just beyond our grasp."

John Lennox:

And I thought, "This is utterly fascinating." In a book by someone who's trying to bring down religion by the use of AI, what he's doing is actually heightening evidence for the existence of God by postulating an intelligent designer for DNA. So it's a very complex thing.

Robert J. Marks:

Very interesting. So Dan Brown, who is obviously agnostic, or certainly not religious in any sense, came to the logical conclusion that I think many theists or deists do, that there must be a creator behind some of these things, at least he was intellectually honest at the end.

Robert J. Marks:

All AI applications to date are narrow AI. AGI or artificial general intelligence is still or general artificial intelligence is still a dream. And that was an assumption, for example, in Brown's book. In your book, MIT's Max Tegmark, who said of the prophesied general artificial intelligence, "In creating AI, we're

birthing a new form of life with unlimited potential for good or ill." Tegmark is referring to general artificial intelligence, of course. What's your take on Tegmark's viewpoint?

John Lennox:

Well, I think that's a very grandiose statement. He is president of the Future of Life Institute at MIT. And that kind of statement is what you make, and he did make, in a TED Talk. And I would question how much science lays behind it because, as another brilliant AI expert put it, Rosalind Picard of MIT, who's doing some wonderful work, she's a Christian thinker, she's doing wonderful work in using AI to help autistic children. She says, "The AI system is no more alive than Microsoft Word." So I thought that was rather good. I think Tegmark is guilty of a bit of hype, although he's a very interesting person to read. He's a physicist.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, I think certainly there's lots of hyperbole here. In his quote, he says, "It will be a new life form with unlimited potential." And I read that and thought, "My goodness. Unlimited, that's a lot of potential."

John Lennox:

Oh, it is. And it's very interesting because in his book, he imagines how we can expect world domination by artificial general intelligence. And he's got these three steps towards that. First of all, make human level AGI, to use that to create super intelligence and then unleash this intelligence to take over the world. That's one of his scenarios.

John Lennox:

But he's got the sense to think of other scenarios. And one of the things that interested me greatly was the list of scenarios that he provides. And what struck me about them is that many of them introduce the God question either directly or indirectly because this super intelligence is essentially behaving like God. And so it resonates with Yuval Harari's idea of the God man, Homo Deus, the title of his world best-selling book.

John Lennox:

And Tegmark goes through all of these and several of them, and one in particular, reminded me very much of a biblical scenario for the future. To give you some idea, he thought the super intelligence might be a benevolent dictator and everybody thinks this is a great thing. Or it might behave almost as a god: enhancing human happiness, or it might be controlled by humans who use it to produce wonderful technology and wealth that can be used for good or bad. Or it could take control and decide that humans are a threat and get rid of them. And so it goes on and on with these different scenarios and he doesn't come down as to which one he prefers.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. But also there's some presupposition on Tegmark's part, also.

John Lennox:

Huge. There's presupposition on everybody's part.

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly.

John Lennox:

I think that's one of the reasons I wrote the book, to investigate these presuppositions.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes. I think Walter Bradley, who we talked about before mentions that those that hold a more than materialistic point of view that will appeal to deism, for example, have a greater arena in which to perform exploration than narrow materialists. I always thought his perspective was very interesting that it's much broader to talk about it in terms of deistic presuppositions.

Robert J. Marks:

Now, Max Tegmark is not only a physicist at MIT, but he writes fiction like Dan Brown. And he wrote a novel called Omega Team. And in Omega Team, he talks about a powerful general AI system that's developed and the system is dubbed Prometheus. And eventually it takes over the world. I had to do a little head-scratching to figure out why Tegmark would name his AI system Prometheus but you outlined that in the book. Could you share that with us? I thought that was interesting.

John Lennox:

Well, Prometheus was the Titan of Greek mythology and an ancient Greek poet Hesiod says that Prometheus sort of created humans from clay and defied the gods and stole fire from them that he gave to the humans to drive forward their development. And because he'd sinned against the gods, he was punished and the terrible punishment, the god Zeus chained him to a rock and every day an eagle came and ate his liver, which grew again overnight and the process was repeated.

John Lennox:

So, Prometheus is often thought of as an example of tragic results that could emanate from attempts to improve the human condition. And there's a famous novel that most people have heard of by Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, and Mary Shelley who wrote the book gave the name, the Modern Prometheus, to Frankenstein so that's where that comes from.

Robert J. Marks:

I also noticed in Tegmark's novel he makes use of Amazon Turk, which is a service that we have used in our research, and it makes use of wisdom of crowds. I just read a fascinating book on the wisdom of crowds and how crowds can come to conclusions that aren't evident to individuals. But then the interesting thing, and again, I have not read the book Omega Team, but the interesting thing is that AI apparently takes over. I don't know if AI would have the capability of duplicating an Amazon Turks. Do you have any thoughts on that?

John Lennox:

Not really, but may I point out that this Omega, it's not a book, it's not a novel. This is the first chapter, as I understand it, to Tegmark's book which is called Life, I think, 3.0. It's the upfront chapter where he gets people imagining this Omega Team and then he goes on to the main part of his serious book on artificial intelligence.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. Well, I stand corrected on that. We've talked in Tegmark's and also Dan Brown's novel about AI duplicating some of the capabilities of human beings. This is in contrast to enhancement of human beings and there's a movement or a philosophy called transhumanism that almost seems to be a religion to some. You address that in the book. What's transhumanism and what's going on here?

John Lennox:

Of course, transhumanism is, as it suggests, is going beyond the human and this is the goal of many of these people who want to make a super intelligence. They want to go beyond human intelligence. They want to really deify human beings. They want to turn human beings into gods. And that is a very dangerous thing it seems to me, but, of course, most of it is mercifully still science fiction.

John Lennox:

And I would seriously think that transhumanism is a very essentially atheistic thing. It's produced by atheistic naturalism. And the idea is very simple that we have, if you believe those that tell us that we have evolved by mindless unguided processes, we've gone up through the animal stage and now we've evolved mind. So, there's no stopping us. We're going to move into the future. But the big difference is that we can take into our hands the producing of super human beings.

John Lennox:

And therefore we accelerate that very rapidly indeed. The origin of the word transhuman is not secular actually, though many people think that it was Huxley who first thought of it. It comes from a translation from Dante's Paradiso. And it occurs, this is very ironic and I developed this, it occurs in the passage where Dante tries to imagine the resurrection of his own body. And here's the quote. "Words may not tell of that transhuman change."

John Lennox:

So it originally was applied to the biblical concept of resurrection. And that is something that I then discuss in my book, of course, because all of this is paralleled in Christianity, but the difference is that Christianity gives a strong evidence base for believing in resurrection, whereas science fiction of the AGI type doesn't.

Robert J. Marks:

Transhumanism talks about augmentation of human abilities using artificial technology and artificial intelligence. Certainly we use that today. We have pacemakers, we have cochlear implants and such things. Where is the line crossed into transhumanism?

John Lennox:

Well, that is an important question to think about actually, because all of us are grateful. As I speak to you, I'm wearing glasses and they're ordinary glasses, but I could easily have them in my eyes. And you can imagine operations which will deal with your eyes and you have no need for glasses anymore.

John Lennox:

And if my hearing was bad, I could wear a hearing aid and some of those are getting small and they'll eventually be fixed inside our heads. So that we're grateful for many of these kinds of transformation. Now where the line is, I'm not sure, but where a line is, I think is the question of genetic modification.

John Lennox:

And that is doing something that's only just become possible in our lifetime and that is to modify the germline. That is the transmissible information that goes from generation to generation. And this was something that C.S. Lewis was concerned with long before the technology was available.

John Lennox:

And the problem is this, that if we start, or scientists start, interfering in human nature so that we change it for all future generations, Lewis' point, which I still find chilling, he said, "That if that happens, what will be created will not be a human being in the image of God. It will be an artifact produced by some scientists." And then he said, "Therefore, the final triumph of humanity will be the abolition of man."

John Lennox:

And that's the danger. And that's why I want to bring the whole topic into consideration in the context of the biblical concept of human beings as made in the image of God. It was very interesting watching Jordan Peterson talking about that particular statement. And he says, "Look, we've got to realize that the statement that humans are made in the image of God is the cornerstone of Western civilization." And then he broke off and appealed to his audience and say, "Man, we're going to neglect that at our peril." And it was very interesting to hear someone like Peterson strongly affirming the biblical concept of human beings 1.0.

Robert J. Marks:

Excellent. As opposed to Max Tegmark's Humanity 3.0 or whatever he was talking about. Thank you, Dr. Lennox. We've been talking to Dr. John Lennox about his new book, 2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity.

Robert J. Marks:

If you want to find out more about Dr. Lennox's book, we refer you to the site 2084book.com, that's 2084book.com. There's a nice video there that you could watch. It contains some introductory material and also Dr. Lennox's homepage, which is johnlennox.org and there you can have links to a number of his very interesting books that you can purchase.

Robert J. Marks:

And I believe that 2084 the book is available both on Kindle and audio for those of you that are audio fans like me. So, thank you, Dr. Lennox, and until next time, be of good cheer.

Conclusion:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host, Robert J. Marks. Explore more at mindmatters.ai that's mindmatters.ai. Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.