

Debunking the Hype of Artificial General Intelligence

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Mike Egnor. In this podcast, I have the privilege of interviewing Bill Dembski. Bill is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture. He's also a distinguished fellow at the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence. And Bill is a prolific author. He's authored or edited over twenty-five books, including the Design Inference that has a new edition out that I highly recommend, and he has a great chapter in Minding the Brain Models of Mind Information and Empirical Science by the Discovery Institute Press. In this podcast, I wanted to talk to Bill actually about an essay that he wrote that is on his website that I think is absolutely fascinating. And the title of the essay is Artificial General Intelligence as an Idol for Destruction. And Bill, I wanted to find out what's the essay about and could you tell our listeners about Artificial General Intelligence and Idols?

Bill Dembski:

Yeah, let me just give a little bit of context. I've been following the field of artificial intelligence for over 40 years. I remember as a grad student even sitting in on an artificial intelligence course, and I think in the last year and a half or so with these large language models, ChatGPT and others, this has been the biggest development in artificial intelligence that I've seen in my lifetime. So I think there's a lot of exciting stuff that's happening, but I think there's also now, there's this sense that artificial intelligence is poised to take over the world and match and then ultimately exceed us in our own human intelligence. And so there've been people pushing this line for years now. I was moderating a session with Ray Kurzweil, who's perhaps one of the main proponents of this view. He wrote a book in 1998 or 1999 titled The Age of Spiritual Machines.

He followed it up with the Singularity is Near, he's got this year, a book, The Singularity is Nearer, has not arrived, but the singularity is going to be when humans finally meet their match with machines. So AGI is this, I think it used to be called strong AI, but I think AGI, artificial general intelligence is now the term of use to describe this capability of machines where they're going to match and exceed us. And this has not been achieved. And what I argue in this paper is that it is in fact unachievable and that this hope or delusion in thinking that AGI is around the corner is something that's very destructive and is actually proving to be an idol because in a sense, we're seeding our humanity and ultimately even divinity to a mechanical device. And I think we're better than that. And so I look at the implications of all of this in the article.

Michael Egnor:

It's fascinating. I feel that the idea that the singularity is nearer and now it's nearer is like Zeno's paradox that just keeps getting closer and closer, but never actually comes, but it certainly does sell books. You mentioned a concept from Noam Chomsky that I find absolutely fascinating and just a beautiful way of looking at that, that Chomsky used in his destruction of behaviorism back in the 1950s when he talked about the poverty of the stimulus, the idea that there simply wasn't enough information, you might say, available to a child who's learning a language to allow or to account for all that the child can do with that language, that there's something inherent to it that's not in the stimulus. And it's a wonderful analogy to AI that is that there are things that human beings do that it doesn't seem that a computer, no matter how much stimulus the computer was given, could ever figure out. So could you elaborate on that?

Bill Dembski:

Yeah, I mean, what I actually focus on is cases where the computers are doing quite well, but it's that they're getting massive amounts of information beyond anything that we as humans do. So for instance, humans are able to drive just fine, fully automated level five driving has not been achieved. Tesla is a big player in that field, but Tesla, in order to try to get to fully self-automated driving, is feeding its computers 160 billion frames of information. This is Tesla automobiles driving the roads of the world, and so those images are being sent back. So you've got over a trillion frames of images that are being processed every week. The fact is, humans, we learn to drive without anywhere near that much information. This is a world of big data, big tech, and that's what's making AI work. And we see that also with large language models where you've got with ChatGPT 4, over a trillion nodes, hundreds of billions, minimally, hundreds of billions of words that they've processed from the internet.

But humans learn this, learn language, with much, much less. And so I think what should give us pause about human intelligence is that we do so much more with so much less. And that also suggests that how we do it, what our intelligence is, is a fundamentally different scale of being than what we're dealing with with artificial intelligence as we know it now. And this is artificial intelligence at its best, and this is not even AGI. Artificial general intelligence would have to somehow coordinate all these functionalities, all these abilities, into a single intelligent being. We can drive, we can talk, we can do lots of things, but if we're driving, we can also fly a helicopter. But all the data, those trillions of frames from driving scenes that Tesla is analyzing, that will do nothing to help pilots to do automatic piloting of helicopters or name any number of other things.

So there's a universality to our intelligence that is absent from artificial intelligence as we know it. So it ends up being, in my view, a pipe dream, just a massive amount of overselling and hype to say that AGI is around the corner. I would say the evidence is not there at all. And this notion of poverty of the stimulus, it seems gets at least at one aspect of how our intelligence is fundamentally different from what we're seeing and with artificial intelligence.

Michael Egnor:

I think that there's an aspect of truth to all of the commotion recently about artificial intelligence, but I think there's a big aspect of falsehood as well. The truth is that it's a profoundly powerful thing that will change our culture in ways that we can't even imagine right now, in much the same way that the printing press changed Europe in the 13th and 14th century or the 14th and 15th century in ways that they couldn't imagine at the time. And this is the printing press magnified a million times. But I think in terms of Pogo's famous cartoon that said that we've met the enemy and he is us, we've met AI, and AI is us, that is that everything in AI is human, and AI is simply a tool that we use to express ourselves. The expression can be profound and can be labyrinthine, it can be intricate.

There can be aspects of it that we didn't predict, but it's still all us. There's no mind in there. The only mind is our mind. So I think AI will profoundly change the way we live, I suspect much for the worse in many ways. But the key is to understand ourselves and what we're doing with AI. And unfortunately, I don't see that happening. I don't see a lot of introspection about how AI is going to magnify human evil, but I think it is going to.

Bill Dembski:

Yeah, I mean, I think as with any technology, there are going to be temptations for abuse, but I think there are also opportunities for good use. I think one of my favorite professors at seminary was somebody named Diogenes Allen. He wrote a beautiful book called Spiritual Theology, and in it he describes Hugh of St. Victor in the 12th century, I believe it was, where he looks at technology and says

that technology is a blessing from God to help overcome the effects of the fall. And we don't eliminate the effects of the fall, that's going to require new heavens and a new earth, but technology can have that role. And so I think there is... I look at, for instance, chess, computers now play much stronger chess than humans. In fact, your computer program on your iPhone is going to be stronger than the strongest world champion.

And yet that hasn't stopped chess from thriving. I mean, when I was following Bobby Fischer's striving for the World Championship in 1972, there were about 80 grandmasters. Now there are, I think about 17, 1800 grandmasters. Computers have made human chess players better because they've just raised the bar. So I think there is that aspect to it. I use ChatGPT to look things up. I have to be careful because it can hallucinate, that's now becoming a common term where it just makes stuff up, but it's useful for what if I need to find some things quickly, often that's a good way to go.

So I have a friend who's a professor of physics, and he's finding that just about all the physics problems he's giving his undergraduates, ChatGPT can solve. Now, I think that's not a bad thing as long as we make the students also be able to stand on their own feet and do the problems without the props. But to have, as it were, a tutor that knows exactly what's going on, you can prompt these large language model in different ways, "Give me a hint. Okay, give me the full solution." There are all sorts of things you can do. But I think there is going to be a big temptation, which is to cede our humanity to these machines and to just bend in on ourselves, look to these machines and miss human connections and miss who we are. I mean, I was actually at a conference where Ray Kurzweil spoke and I spoke, this was in Seattle or just outside of Seattle, a tech conference in October, November.

The sense you get from him is that technology has made us all so much smarter, and that the implication was that these people who didn't have technology in the past were intellectually substandard. And I think to myself, how much people in the past were able to accomplish, how much they were able to memorize. There's a wonderful book, I think it's Robert Green on Mastery. And he'll look at, for instance, how South Sea Islanders were able to master the oceans on these little ships and populating islands like Tahiti and Hawaii. How did they do that? I mean, these are vast oceans, and they didn't have GPS. They didn't have technology. So I think there's something to be said about the ingenuity of humans who do, again, more with less.

Michael Egnor:

One of my fondest memories of my kids growing up was I was in Hawaii on a family vacation, and I took my oldest daughter, she was about 10, to a little class that was given by a native from the island who was an expert on celestial navigation. His passion was how did the ancient, as you mentioned, the ancient Pacific islanders navigate in the open ocean. So as the sun went down and the stars began to come out, just looking up at the sky, he could name every star in the sky, everything you could see, and he could tell you when it rose and when it set and what time of the year it rose and set. And he could read the sky like you read a book. And it was absolutely amazing. Yeah, AI will give us a great deal more information and allow us to leverage things that we do. I don't know that it... It might make us smarter in a limited sense, I don't think it will impart much wisdom. I think it will probably make us a lot more foolish in many ways.

Bill Dembski:

Could be, especially in so far as becomes an idol. This is where I'm going with AGI. And even though AGI does not exist, and in my view, I make an argument, which I think is quite compelling, that it's in the end unattainable. But that doesn't matter for something to be an idol. It's what we ascribe, the powers we ascribe to it, not the actual powers that it has. And I think that's going to be very deceptive for people

and I think it'll take various forms. I mean, one of the things I deal with in the essay is just are we going to somehow try to highlight our humanity, enhance it, or are we going to make our humanity subservient to the artificial intelligence? So I have a section where I'm looking at putting things on railroads, as it were. So you have the artificial intelligence, these automated driving programs that are still not all that great, but how could we make them work?

I mean, one way that Elon Musk made it work in one instance was by painting lane lines, because we're in a place where his cars were not able to succeed. So we can change the environment to make AI work. But the whole point of AI is to put it in environments where we are operative. But what happens when we start adapting our environments to artificial intelligence and then we have to be in those environments, those artificially made environments, which we were not meant even to operate in? I think that becomes a real temptation and challenge.

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Bill Dembski:

And so I think there is this infatuation with technology, that somehow it's going to do all this stuff. And I think then the danger is that we will lose our humanity. And I see this so much, I mean with people just hunched over their iPhones, the addictiveness of it all, and just sacrificing so much of our time. And the thing is, the big tech companies, that's what they want. They want us suck us into their technology, so we spend the time with them and spend the money there. And so to get that independence, I think it does require, in a sense, a mentality that says, "We need to fast from these things. We need to get some distance." I mean, it's almost the Desert Fathers, we need to get away from these things at times. It's interesting to me, I close the essay even with one of the main schools where people in Silicon Valley send their kids, it's a Waldorf school, which minimizes technology because they see that the most important parts of education are engaging with fellow students, engaging with teachers, engaging with real things rather than virtual things.

So I think maybe part of this is there's just going to have to be a certain amount of bloodletting where we embrace these technologies. They really hurt us, and then we wise up and say, okay, CS Lewis said, "Pain is God's metaphor." And I think we're already seeing some of this with social media people, I mean, seem much more depressed when they're spending inordinate amounts of time on it. The social media, it's not that they try to edify us, it's that they give us titillating images, say things, do things that upset us because that tends to keep us glued to these social media.

Michael Egnor:

And I think the person who I think described dynamics of this nature the most profoundly, at least in modern times that I'm aware of, was René Girard. He was a French literary scholar and philosopher, passed away recently. But he wrote about what he described as mimetic contagion, as the idea that groups of people will catch on to the same idea and try to imitate each other. And it leads to enormous violence and enormous strife, and it can destroy a society. And the typical way that societies survive through the process of mimetic contagion is either by sacrificing a scapegoat that is, they all rather than kill each other, decide to kill someone or something else in place of each other, which relieves some of the tensions and some of the conflict, or they adopt Christianity.

Actually, he described Judaism and Christianity as anti-mimetic in this sense, the notion that scapegoats are innocent and that what we need to do is to show mercy and kindness and not competition and violence. And one of my concerns with AI is that I see it as kerosene for this mimetic contagion, that if

you light the match, AI can help the stuff spread like crazy where everybody's thinking the same thing. Everybody gets the same ideas, people imitate each other, and it can be ugly stuff. So you mentioned that there might be some bloodletting, and I think there will be bloodletting. And the question is, will there be anybody alive after the bloodletting? And I'm not sure.

Bill Dembski:

Well, I don't think it's going to be though a Terminator or Matrix or a Hell 9,000 where these machines are going to achieve consciousness or become our overlords. I think if there are overlords, it will be people pulling strings. It'll be like a Wizard of Oz behind the curtain.

Michael Egnor:

Oh, yes, yes.

Bill Dembski:

It'll be human being. But yeah, you do wonder, I mean, to what degree? There's seems to be a very Malthusian element in much of the secular elitist thinking that's out there, which is too many people, we need to winnow it down. And it's not clear to me how AGI would accomplish that, or AI, I should say. I could see a good pandemic, for instance, eliminating a lot more people. And I say this not even so much thinking about COVID, but I just remember there was a guy named... What was his name? Piyanka, I don't recall the first name, at the University of Texas, Austin, where he was wishing something like Ebola on the human race so that we can get rid of 80, 90% of the people. And he said this to a crowd of about 500, and he got a standing ovation.

Michael Egnor:

As opposed to being ridden out of town on a rail. Yeah, right.

Bill Dembski:

That's right. Well, this is this mentality. Who is it, Paul? What is it? Ehrman.

Michael Egnor:

Ehrlich.

Bill Dembski:

Ehrlich. That's it. Sorry. But I mean, he's been touting this Malthusian line since what, sixties, seventies, and he's been proven wrong. I mean, Julian Simon proved him wrong, and he's something like Ray Kurzweil. It's near, it's nearer.

Michael Egnor:

What gets me with Ehrlich is when you look at his CV, I mean, the guy has gotten every honor you could possibly imagine, I believe he's a member of the National Academy of Sciences. He's an extremely esteemed scientist who's been dead wrong on everything he's said. I mean, you couldn't imagine somebody being as wrong as he has been wrong publicly, and he's sitting on top of the world. It's a crazy world. It's a crazy world.

Bill Dembski:

It is.

Michael Egnor:

Yeah. But AI is, I think in many ways, the most profound thing that has ever happened to humanity outside of the religious spiritual world. It's like the printing press magnified a million times, and the printing press led to the 30 years war and much of the enormous violence in Europe. And I think AI is going to lead to stuff that's much worse than that. But that's just me.

Bill Dembski:

Interesting. Yeah. I'm not as pessimistic as you are, but I think it certainly bears watching, and I think those who think that AGI machines are going to become conscious and then exceed us in all our mental capabilities, I don't see it happening. But it is interesting to me though that I think one thing that could happen is that AI actually gets used to convince people that AGI exists. I've seen, for instance, on YouTube, there's what looks like a robot playing ping-pong and just tremendous ping-pong player. But it's not... I think it was this one video short that I looked at had a hundred million views, but it's not an actual robot, it's just a CGI robot. It's just put on there. So it's possible to make AI look a lot more powerful than it is by using AI. So I think these deep fakes, that's something that we're going to have to deal with.

Michael Egnor:

Well, I think your point about AGI being an idol is a very salient, very powerful point. And it's an idol that is enormously dangerous because it has the capacity to really simulate a kind of a God, kind of like it knows everything, and it's a very easy idol to worship. It becomes addictive, actually. Scary stuff.

Bill Dembski:

We live in interesting times. What's the Chinese proverb say?

Michael Egnor:

It's the worst curse there is to learn and live in interesting times. So I thank you, Bill. It's been fascinating conversation.

Bill Dembski:

Likewise, I enjoyed this.

Michael Egnor:

Great. Thank you so much. So thank you to all of our listeners. This is Mike Egnor from Mind Matters News. I've had the pleasure of speaking with Bill Dembski, and thanks so much for listening.

Announcer:

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