

Humanity's future and AI—bright or Orwellian?

2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity

John C. Lennox

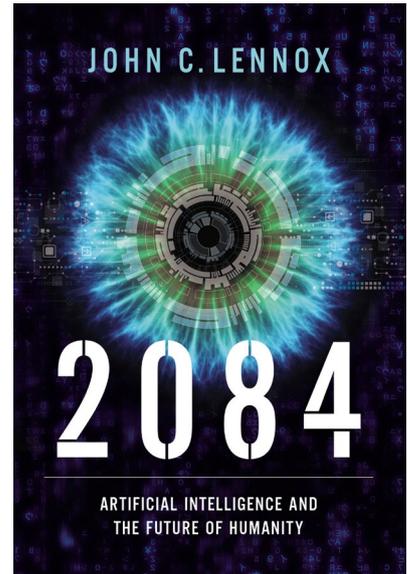
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John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics (emeritus) at Oxford University (figure 1) has written many books of interest to biblical creationists, such as his valuable *God's Undertaker: Has science buried God?*¹ Frustratingly, his adherence to deep time and concomitant compromise on the days of creation sometimes mars his writings.² Happily, this is not the case with *2084*.³ Lennox tackles his subject with enthusiasm and his lucid and accessible writing style makes for an engaging read.

Without doubt, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is both a rapidly expanding field and a burgeoning industry: “between 2011 and 2015 China published 41,000 articles on AI, nearly twice as many as the US with 25,500”, and in 2018, the UK signalled its intention to spend £1.3 billion, funding one thousand Ph.D.s in AI (p. 54).

However, AI is calculated to conjure up a multitude of images and ideas in people's minds, some positive but others quite negative. Is such advanced technology a cause for unbounded optimism regarding future human flourishing? Or else, should we be wary of the possibility of machines taking over our lives, even controlling us? What about the spectre of totalitarian states using AI to eviscerate citizens of their basic freedoms and human rights? Is the field of AI moving in a



direction that is at odds with the teaching of Genesis 1 and related passages regarding the sanctity of human life? What about transhumanism?⁴ Lennox does well in covering all these issues and more in 13 interesting chapters.

Parts of the book grapple with such weighty considerations as AI's intersection with human nature, morality, and ethics. Aside from the concern of AI potentially abetting power-hungry authoritarian governments, there is the consideration that such technological advances might one day be detrimental to overall human well-being. A 2016 study by the University of Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute concluded: “Overall, A.I. should be better than humans at pretty much everything in about 45 years” (p. 65). People wonder how long it might be before robots take over.⁵

Lennox has certainly researched his subject well. He references a wide variety of authors, some of whom he engages critically at length, notably Dan Brown (chapters 1–3) and Yuval

Noah Harari (chapters 6, 7, 9, and 11)—and to a lesser extent, Max Tegmark (chapter 7), John Gray, and C. S. Lewis (chapter 6).

A brave new world?

Lennox’s book title is an obvious allusion to George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949; figure 2). Many terms from that book have passed into common usage, such as “Big Brother”, “double-think”, and “thoughtcrime”, and this taps into the worrying prospect that AI might eventually be employed to control and subjugate the populace. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931) was in a similar vein. So, Lennox begins his book here but he quickly moves the reader on, to consider much more upbeat associations and benefits of AI: computer algorithms for helping select the best applicant for a job, and AI applied to enhance the energy efficiency of buildings, improve cancer diagnosis, optimise galactic surveys, enable driverless cars, facilitate facial recognition, and so on (pp. 22–23). But are all these impressive results of machine intelligence really analogous to human intelligence? Many scientists are sceptical but popular-level writers and novelists are often less cautious.

Where did we come from? Where are we going? Lennox tackles these big questions of life by critiquing the fictitious professor Edmond Kirsch from the novel *Origin*, by Dan Brown. This AI expert ‘solves’ the problem of abiogenesis using virtual reality, but real-world expert chemists (such as James Tour of Rice University, Houston) are justifiably disdainful of such ideas.⁶ Lennox shows that there is no getting away from the need for a Creator: “I put it to [Richard] Dawkins: ‘You believe the universe created you. Who, then, created your creator?’ I have waited over a decade and still no reply” (pp. 35–36). Dan Brown’s Kirsch is intent on establishing science



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Figure 1. Christian apologist, John Carson Lennox

as a new religion; if only this were science fiction. Kirsch also employs AI to simulate humanity’s future evolution—a strange ‘post-biological’ vision where humanity gets upgraded:

“New technologies ... will forever change what it means to be *human*. And I realize there are those of you who believe you, as *Homo sapiens*, are God’s chosen species. I can understand that this news may feel like the end of the world to you. But I beg you, please believe me ... the future is actually much *brighter* than you imagine [emphases in the original]” (p. 46).

Lennox suggests that Brown’s character may have been inspired by Google’s director of engineering, Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil’s book *The Singularity is Near* advances the idea that, maybe just 30 years from now, “AI robots will overtake humans in their intelligence and capabilities” (p. 44). But does that mean AI could develop a will of its own? The late Stephen Hawking thought so, but the likes of American business magnate Bill Gates and internet entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg are sceptical of this Orwellian view, as are many neuroscientists for that matter (p. 49).

Narrow AI and artificial general intelligence

Lennox distinguishes between narrow Artificial Intelligence (what has actually been achieved) and artificial general intelligence (AGI), ideas of a higher-level fusion of humanity and machine, birthing a new form of life with unlimited potential. Many of the uses of narrow AI are uncontroversial. We are already familiar with digital assistants like ‘Siri’ and ‘Alexa’, real-time language translators, AI-enhanced medical diagnostics and surgical procedures, and autonomous vehicles (chapter 3). Other examples of the use of narrow AI require more wisdom in their implementation and certainly have their dark side; for example, in the job market (unfair discrimination during recruitment), in surveillance (especially its use in countries with ‘anti-social’ governments), in the production of military weapons, and transhumanism (chapters 5–6).

Leading players in AI do recognise ethical concerns (pp. 76–78) but these may fall short of those held by Christians for they are seldom founded upon the biblical teaching of the sanctity of human life. Atheistic assumptions feed a radically different view of humanity; Lennox quotes physicist Sean Carroll⁷ from his recent book, *The Big Picture* (p. 98):

“We humans are blobs of organized mud, through which the impersonal workings of nature’s patterns have developed the capacity to contemplate and cherish and engage with the intimidating complexity of the world around us ... The meaning we find in life is not transcendent.”⁸

Ostensibly, then, human cognitive abilities, however impressive, have sprung solely from evolutionary processes. So, with the benefit of foresight, we ought easily to achieve similar or better outcomes using AGI. Secular AI perspectives do tend to be overly optimistic or wildly imaginative. For example, MIT physicist Max Tegmark

envisages a powerful AI system called Prometheus which eventually manages and controls the entire planet—but is this perfect totalitarian regime really utopia? Lennox discusses this idea at length (pp. 105–111) but we will overlook it here because a detailed review of Tegmark’s book, *Life 3.0*, was recently published in this journal.⁹

A bright future for humanity?

The second half of *2084* (from chapter 8 onwards) shifts to a more biblical and theological focus. Lennox points out that AI is not entirely dominated by atheists and some of its thought-leaders are professing Christians; e.g. Donald Knuth and Rosalind Picard (p. 113). Much of what Lennox writes will have the biblical creationist nodding in wholehearted agreement, for example:

“There is an irony here in that those who are seeking to create a superintelligence do not realise [refuse to believe] that there is good evidence that a superintelligence, *the* superintelligence, already exists: God the Creator and Sustainer of the heavens and the earth” (p. 117).

“... you do not, in spite of what naturalism asserts, get from the inorganic to organic without an external input of information and energy from the Creator: ‘And God said ...’ Compare with this the goal of AGI to get from inorganic silicon to inorganic silicon-based life by *human* intelligent design” (p. 119).

Indeed, information can only arise from an intelligent source, so Lennox is quite justified in highlighting the disconnect in the minds of atheistic AGI researchers.

For many secular AI researchers, however, the sky is the limit regarding what human creators may achieve in future. But is it really likely that advances in AGI could one day lead to robots with the sort of aesthetic sense

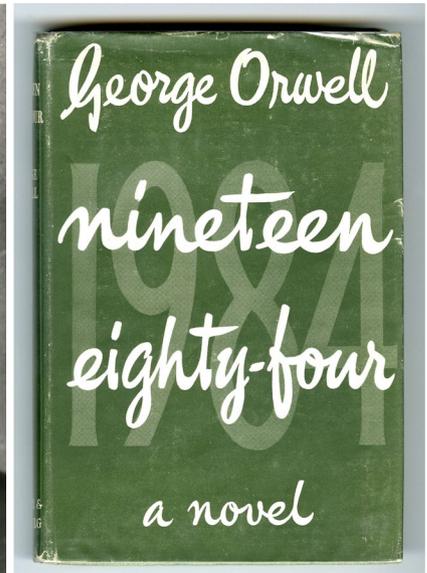
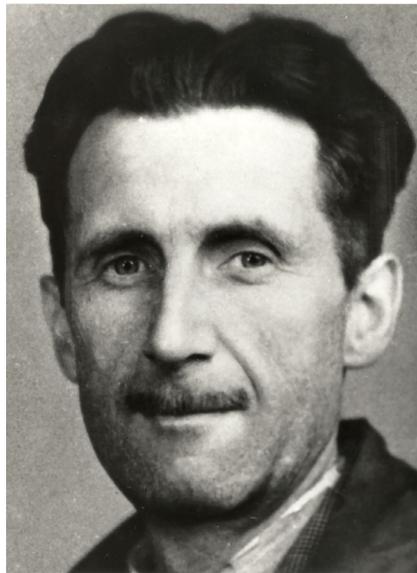


Figure 2. George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is a fictional, dystopian blend of politics and social science; the book cover is of the first edition.

possessed by God’s image-bearers, human beings? Or our sense of curiosity? People like Yuval Harari think so. He believes such features of high-level intelligence can be decoupled from consciousness.¹⁰ However, as Lennox points out, the outworking of this could be rather grim, perhaps future techno-unemployment on a massive scale—something that would be wholly contrary to the biblical imperative of humans flourishing through gainful employment (pp. 128–130).

Lennox reminds readers of the foundational teaching of the Fall of Man in Genesis 3, then discourses on the implications of this for the ethical and moral evaluation of AI in our world today (chapter 9). There are some thought-provoking insights, such as:

“The man and the woman who had enjoyed the joy and friendship of God now felt that God had become their enemy, and they fled to hide from him. We humans have been fleeing likewise ever since—a flight that bears within it all the seeds of dystopia. ... Human history shows that we have used our autonomy to get out of control. That is exactly what drives the fears around AI.

What if our creations get out of control? Will a superintelligent *Homo deus* do to the rest of us what we have done to God?” (pp. 142–143).

Quite. And what if AGI meant decoupling intelligence, not merely from consciousness, but also from conscience? That would lead to ethical decisions based upon moral relativism, which would surely be reflected in worrying ways in the AI machines of the future. Lennox convincingly shows that AI applied to morality is very dubious. For example, how could one programme a computer or AI-robot to avoid prejudice against people of a certain gender or ‘race’? Lennox points out: “If things go wrong because the system amplifies the bias rather than removing it, we cannot blame the conscienceless machine” (p. 149).

Future shock

The final chapters of *2084* are strongly gospel-orientated. Firstly, *the true Homo Deus*, Jesus Christ, is shown to be the Superintelligence with whom every human being must reckon. Sinful rebellion against God brings the penalty of death, both spiritual and

physical. Moreover, physical death is not some technical problem that AI will eventually render obsolete; Christ's resurrection would otherwise become meaningless. Lennox ably employs Scripture (from both Testaments) to demonstrate the vast superiority of Christianity, to the credo of AGI popularisers, in terms both of salvation, and its vision of the future. For example, speaking of Jesus' ascension, Lennox says:

"We pause to contrast this with the hope of AGI that one day we will be able to upload the contents of our minds onto silicon and so 'live' forever. Jesus' mind was not uploaded onto silicon; he ascended bodily into heaven. This claim clashes head-on with the dominant, earth-bound, atheistic naturalism of the Western academy that teaches that this world is all that there is; there is no other world to which one can ascend" (p. 171).

Neither medical advances nor AI will avail in the face of death. Instead, human beings must all face up to the "future shock: the return of the man who is God":¹¹

"God, ... the divine Logos who was in the beginning, has coded himself into humanity—the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This is not artificial intelligence; this is Real Intelligence—way beyond anything conceivable, let alone constructible, by humans" (p. 187).

True, there are those who have sought to usurp God from his place, and they continue to do so; Lennox discusses in particular the 'man of lawlessness' (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Sadly, however, many human beings suffer totalitarian social control right now. It is not a nightmare from which they can wake up, but a present reality. In such countries, AI is already being misappropriated in ways that contravene basic human rights, and it is not fanciful to assume that this will continue. Is there any reason for human beings to hope for something better?

"How far will God permit humans to go?" Lennox answers his question, first by pointing out that God has intervened in judgement in the past (e.g. in Genesis 3, and at Babel), then by affirming:

"According to the biblical narrative, God will intervene in the future to bring human rebellion to an end" (p. 203).

He posits possible interconnections between AI and eschatological passages of Scripture, such as those that many Christians understand as teaching a future one-world government. One may not share all of Lennox's thoughts about future scenarios, but they make for stimulating reading. He avoids dogmatism and advises that such things may lie in the far-distant future—in which case, of what relevance are such musings for us today? He points out New Atheist demagogues tenaciously seek to advance scientism, while denying that faith in God has any evidential basis. The way would appear to be open, then, for prominent godless individuals to use AGI to implement an atheistic agenda (p. 218).

In spite of the reality of endemic evil (whether in the human heart, or in government structures), Christians should not run and hide, but actively participate in society, embracing the positive aspects of artificial intelligence. In this way Christians should be model citizens, says Lennox, where possibly making positive contributions to narrow AI that will benefit others (p. 224).

In summary, *2084: Artificial Intelligence and the future of humanity* lives up to its title admirably and deserves to be widely read.

References

1. Weinberger, L., Grand undertaking: A review of *God's Undertaker: Has science buried God?* by John C. Lennox, *J. Creation* 23(3):35–38, 2009; creation.com/review-lennox-gods-undertaker.
2. Cosner, L., Who is being divisive about creation? A review of *Seven Days that Divide the World* by John C. Lennox, *J. Creation* 26(3):25–28, 2012; creation.com/review-lennox-seven-days.

3. The only hint of his compromise with millions of years comes when, speaking of "each step in the creation narrative", he writes, "*However long it took*, it was clearly the antithesis of a mindless, unguided process [emphasis added]" (p. 118).
4. Transhumanism overlaps with AI and is a fascinating topic in its own right (discussed briefly in chapters 6 and 9 of *2084*). It is passed over in this review, but the interested reader is referred to: Smith, C., Transhumanism—mankind's next step forward? creation.com/transhumanism, 3 February 2011.
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7. This is Sean M. Carroll, not to be confused with his namesake, biologist Sean B. Carroll, famous for his work on Evo-Devo (Evolutionary Developmental Biology).
8. Carroll, S., *The Big Picture: On the origins of life, meaning, and the universe itself*, Oneworld, London, pp. 3, 5, 2016.
9. Max Tegmark is an example of this, see: Tuinstra, L., AI and the secular vision to redefine life itself, a review of *Life 3.0: Being human in the age of Artificial Intelligence* by Max Tegmark, *J. Creation* 33(2):18–22, 2019.
10. Harari, Y.N., *Homo Deus*, HarperCollins, New York, p. 330, 2017. A short perspective on this book is: Bell, P., Homo Deus and the worship of man: recovering Genesis is crucial, creation.com/homo-deus, 19 September 2019.
11. The title of chapter 11 of *2084*.