

Artificial Intelligence: How Long Before the Robots Take Over?

Excerpt from *God and the Paranormal*
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The completely physical concept of a computer “brain” has always tried to stretch its cyber-tentacles into the spiritual realm. We tend to flirt shamelessly with the notion that our Pinocchios can become real boys that know us and maybe even have feelings for us. I believe the supernatural context of artificial intelligence (AI) originates in our innate sense that our own souls are partly supernatural.¹ Surely if we can make a machine that communicates with us and seems to understand, it must be verging on paranormal, right? Isn’t there some way to push it beyond the natural?

In 2016, Hanson Robotics activated Sophia, a state-of-the-art “synthetic human.” Sci-fi nerds across the world went ballistic. Finally, we have a robot woman who can converse, make facial expressions, joke, and do just about anything a long-awaited android should do. Sophia instantly became the sweetheart of the media. The Saudis even gave her full citizenship. So, is she the real deal?

The answer depends on the question. Can she act like a human? Of course. That’s why she was built. Is she conscious like a human? Facebook’s AI guru Yann LeCun isn’t convinced...

...many people are being deceived into thinking that this (mechanically sophisticated) animatronic puppet is intelligent. It’s not. It has no feeling, no opinions, and zero understanding of what it says. It’s not hurt. It’s a puppet. ²

Essentially Sophia is a very expensive, well-interfaced computer (or more precisely, a computer program that can operate some really fancy hardware). Just like Siri, Alexa, and all their cousins, Sophia’s program can calculate and run a lot of IF/THEN statements very quickly. But AIs like these do raise some worldview questions.

We should probably distinguish between *intelligence* and *consciousness*. On one level, brains and computers are similar in the way they process data. Neuroscientists believe the brain has an incredible number of pathways for handling data, just as a computer has circuits. If this is what is meant by “intelligence,” then yes, Sophia has intelligence. She and Siri are actually “thinking” in a basic sense. And it’s conceivable that computers could be (and probably already are) smarter than humans. Does Sophia *know*? Does she possess *artificial consciousness*?

The question now becomes “What is consciousness?” Science has revealed much about how the brain functions, but precious little about how human consciousness comes about. We discussed earlier that the biblical view of our human “self” is that we non-physical spirits residing in physical

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:11

² Noel Sharkey, “Mama Mia It's Sophia: A Show Robot Or Dangerous Platform To Mislead?” www.forbes.com, 17 Nov 2018.

“tents” (2 Corinthians 5:1-7). This is known as *substance dualism*—part of us is natural and part is supernatural. The opposing view is *non-reductive physicalism*, or that the soul somehow emerges from the physical workings of the brain. A few Christians embrace this belief, but it does seem to have many theological problems.

A naturalistic, evolutionary worldview, though, *requires* physicalism as an explanation for consciousness. There is no other viable choice for naturalists. It’s easy to see how many scientists (and the culture at large) are in anxious expectation of a fully sentient AI since most accept naturalism. If human consciousness is physical, then it’s simply a matter of time until neuroscience can synthesize it in a machine. On the contrary, the biblical worldview sees consciousness as “breathed into” humans. Our “self” is a nonmaterial entity connected to, yet not dependent on the physical body. Thus, true consciousness can never be attributed to a manmade physical machine.

Several paranormal concepts are related to the idea of human “modification” or “re-creation.” These ideas fall into the category of *transhumanism*, the merging of humans with non-human technologies. We see this at a low level with embryo selection and artificial body parts, but the die-hard transhumanist is much more ambitious. If non-reductive physicalism is true, then the sci-fi enthusiasts’ sky is the limit. Elon Musk and his crew will be able to live forever, moving their physical “souls” into robots. We can inject a college degree into our kid’s head instead of going into debt. (But on the downside, our android servants will eventually turn on us and form their own army.)

I’ll state it again: *Worldviews have consequences!* How we deal with AI and other transhuman concepts will depend on how we regard the supernatural. Unfortunately, many decisions are being made today under the assumption that physicalism is equated with total reality. There is no place for a transcendent, immortal, supernatural spirit. What a sad and empty legacy for our young people. On a personal note, I have no fear of an AI takeover in the future. Machines may be able to think more/faster/clearer, but they will never be able to consciously will/ponder/dream. And if perchance I’m wrong—we only need to wait for the next “blue screen.”

The Real Thing

Despite the multitude of erroneous beliefs, most of us with a Christian worldview readily accept the idea that there truly is a consciousness that transcends death. The Bible is quite clear about the continuity and destination of human souls. Indeed, that is the hope of Christianity! Our point of contention concerns the *nature* of the afterlife. In one of the clearest descriptions of our supernatural composition, present and future, Paul settles some of our deepest concerns...

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life... We know that while we are at home in the body we are away

from the Lord... and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:1-8).

Paul says that I inhabit my body just as I might dwell in a tent. I am not simply a physical machine as Darwinian evolution would predict. Only my “tent” is earthly. Whatever electrochemical mechanisms are at work in my brain, and however they interface with my real, conscious self, that “me” isn’t totally equated with my physical body. In other scriptures, that nonmaterial component is identified as a soul or spirit. *I don’t have a soul, rather I am a soul who lives in a body.*

Then Paul mixes in an even more intimate metaphor. I am *clothed* with a body. And it’s conceivable that I could remove the “clothing” and still be a conscious entity. He quickly adds, though, that that would not be the ideal situation. Although God and his angels may exist as pure spirit, he has made my spirit to best reside in a body.

If it concerns you that your physical body might not have a very long shelf life, not to worry! In the future, our painful, deteriorating “clothing” will one day be replaced with new apparel. Although we can’t fully understand the details, our new suits will be of an immortal type, fit for eternity.