

## **Bromley Humanist Group**

A report of the meeting of BHG held on Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2023.

The meeting considered some Conundrums, or Ethical Questions, posed by Mike Flood, Chair of Milton Keynes Humanist Group in his “Challenging Conundrums.”

What follows is based on the notes I took of the answers to the conundrums at that meeting.

Answers to Mike Flood’s Conundrums.

### **Conundrums on Artificial Intelligence.**

#### **1. How do we distribute the wealth created by machines?**

Answers.

- a. It was felt that AI will be very useful for research.
- b. I (Ken) spent last Saturday (17/6/2023) at the Imperial College Science Fair. There seem to be two versions of AI. One is a very fast counter and good at comparing and contrasting images and documents, and the second version where it can act and make decisions on its own. The first version can read DNA samples very fast and can absorb a lot of diagnostic information. It can, for instance, scan mammograms incredibly fast and more accurately than a human, and in the latter, it can absorb huge numbers of medical cases, more than any one Doctor can absorb, and then, when symptoms are fed into it, produce a diagnosis hyper-quickly. Other examples I was shown include how AI had found the faulty gene on a chromosome in those suffering from Sickle cell Anaemia and Thalassemia and how AI had found bits of DNA from various diseases in the genome of patients with Dementia. All this would have been very difficult without AI. AI is currently being used to develop “scissors” to cut the rogue chromosome out of the gene of a Sickle cell or Thalassemia patient. It is in this second version, where it can act independently from human actors, that causes many people concern. Most of the scientists I spoke to were largely unconcerned about scenarios where AI takes over the world and bosses us around, regarding it as a fear largely fuelled by Science Fiction. They do, however, agree that AI has to be well programmed and monitored.
- c. There is concern amongst educationalists that AI can produce reasonably good essays. I was told of one AI system that, when fed a huge number of academic scientific papers, produced papers that experts found interesting. Others thought that the papers produced by AI were interesting, but that they could see problems with some answers. A bit like some people find when reading “Sapiens,” but no-one had suggested that Sapiens had been written with the use of AI. Clearly, AI can absorb more scientific papers than a person can be expected to read. How many people chase up all the references of an article or a book and/or read the bibliographic list at the end. Very few, but these can be fed into AI, which can then be interrogated.
- d. It was felt, by some, that we are not doing a good enough job looking after Planet Earth, and that, therefore, AI might have a role in saving the Planet, but only by telling us what to do, bossing us about, and acting as a Dictator, as a God. There was an element in the meeting that approved of this authoritarian approach.

- e. It was felt AI would cause a lot of people to lose their jobs, without replacement employment becoming available, and with this resultant loss of income would come the problems of destitution and homelessness. Clearly, we agreed, that society would have to find a different approach to Capital and to the Economy, to cater for this problem. For instance, if AI produces the goods where will the wealth come from to buy those goods. We did not explore questions of changes to Capital and to the Economy. Perhaps we should return to them. Perhaps we need a Communist government and economy. Perhaps we have been socially conditioned against such solutions. If AI were to consider Communism, or Socialism, the best solution to our problems, it will be interesting to see how it goes about the business of opinion changing considering that socialist parties have been trying to do this for over a hundred years. It does seem strange, however, worrying about the effect of AI on the future of Liberal Democracy when we have not been able to solve the problems caused by Liberal Democracy, and when AI has been created by that same failing Liberal Democracy.

## 2. How do machines affect our behaviour and interaction?

### Answers.

- a. There was a concern that, if machines took over our work, what would we do with the time saved?
- b. There was a suggestion that not working, not doing things, would lead to a loss of intelligence. However, it might be said that that has already occurred, that we are in a box that we cannot see out of. Perhaps AI will help us to look over the sides, perhaps by forcing us to listen to those who have been “crying in the wilderness.”
- c. It was asked if AI might develop its own sense of self defence, even trying to defend itself against human action. The group found this very concerning. However, it is also true that we have no control over our current defence or foreign policy strategy.
- d. We were instructed by Jana that the word “Robot” is derived from the Czech word “Robota” which in Czech means “slave, forced labour” or “serf” and was used in Karel Capek’s 1920 Science Fiction play “R.U.R.” R.U.R. stands for “Rossum’s Universal Robots.”
- e. We also discussed Isaac Asimov’s “Three Laws of Robotics,” and how useful they might be in controlling AI.
- f. By its nature AI is international. Means of controlling AI must, thereby, be agreed internationally. If the world’s population becomes controlled by these International AI systems one might refer to it as “International Feudalism.”
- g. We questioned whether some of the things written about AI was not “Fake News.”
- h. We remarked that a lot of people lost their jobs because of automation, that more would lose their jobs because of AI, and we asked if this would lead to a form of Luddism.
- i. We suggested that if the use of AI became widespread a form of National Wage would have to be introduced.
- j. We agreed that there were some good things about AI: AI is good for communications: for research; for medical diagnosis; has been shown to be able to design medicines to treat anti-biotic resistant diseases.
- k. We all agreed that we would not like to travel in self-driving vehicles or planes, but that it was probably too late to be anxious as AI was now a common part of these machines.
- l. We all felt that it was important that we had to know who is programming these machines, that AI has to be checkable and monitorable, that AI had to be programmed to be benign to humans. A fear was expressed that left to its’ own devices AI might introduce a eugenics programme.
- m. However, it might be that these answers show that we have a Science Fiction based understanding of AI rather than one based on Computing and Science.

## Conundrums on The Internet.

- 1. Should “Big Tech” be broken up to increase competition and encourage innovation; if so, how?**

### Answers.

- a. It is not clear how breaking up “Big Tech” will lead to competition and innovation. Might it not lead to cartels within the industry broken up? The justification for competition and innovations is that they drive profitability. Why cannot “Big Tech” be profitable and innovative? The drive for profits has already led to harmful effects on the public, for instance, low wages, which leads to a string of social ills.
- b. Breaking up Companies will require the will of Parliament and International agreements.
- c. Breaking companies up might lead to a flight of capital to safer investment areas.

- 2. How should the internet of Things/Bodies be regulated so that it is not used by the State or bad actors for surveillance/intelligence gathering or criminal activity?**

### Answers.

- a. There was a discussion about why this was important. It was pointed out that the state is already involved in mass surveillance of the population, from facial recognition to constant telephone and internet monitoring. We agreed that it was important that ones’ identity was not stolen, up to and including bank details.
- b. Chris made some interesting legal points: the 1998 Human Rights Act does not prohibit surveillance.
- c. Denis pointed out that his, very religious, family home featured a religious quotation which stated that God was always watching, so that he felt that he was always under surveillance.
- d. There was concern that State Surveillance could be used to prohibit and stop political change. In this regard Chris quoted the Public Order Act of 2023 stopping public demonstrations and used during the recent Coronation of Charles III.
- e. Surveillance of the internet allowed a State to collect, what they considered to be, incriminating information on an individual.

## Conundrums on the Climate Crisis.

- 1. How fast should countries/communities aim to reduce their greenhouse gas emission to net zero, and what are likely to be the opportunity cost of doing or not doing this?**

### Answers.

- a. We felt that countries/communities should very quickly reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero. The costs of not doing so outweighed any opportunity costs, for what is thought to be at risk is the survival of humanity. Whilst the degradation of the atmosphere of the planet might destroy humans, it will not kill off all life. Bacteria and much insect life will flourish, and it is possible, if not probable, that new forms of life will evolve. It is also possible that, after the demise of man, that the environment will gradually revert to something like it was prior to industrialisation. If we are to save Planet Earth, we will not do so without some form of controlled industrialisation.
- b. Of this latter we talked about two forms of electricity generation: nuclear generation and green generation. Those supporting nuclear energy thought that it was the clear favourite to provide clean energy. Answers to questions about storing waste nuclear material, from the nuclear electricity generation process, sounded, to many listeners, as akin to perpetual motion, and we were not convinced. Storing nuclear waste for future generations to manage seems unkind and a financial burden to them. Most members thought hydrogen gas to

power cars and aircraft etc., did not seem safe or inexpensive. Most of those present seemed to favour a combination of green energy production including wind, both on land and at sea, wave, solar, hydro-electric, and geothermal electricity generation.

- c. All were agreed that the main problem was that the amount of energy expended in producing electricity had to be substantially less than the amount generated. This in itself almost sounds like perpetual motion.
- d. There are cost to the nuclear and green generation of electricity. Care and thought has to be put into the disposal of nuclear waste, as well as ensuring that the public are not additionally charged with the disposal of that waste. There is a similar problem looming with the disposal of wind turbine blades and solar energy panels.
- e. The problem of food production was raised as both a climate and an energy problem. Nearly everyone thought food should be rationed for everyone. This would ensue that everyone had sufficient food to eat. The problem of using pricing as a mechanism to reduce demand is that it will work for the poor, but not for the rich.
- f. It was felt that we should eat less meat of all sorts, thus increasing per capita the number who could be fed per acre. Despite this the UK is an importer of food, but an increase in the number of vegetarians would have financial benefits: imports of food could be reduced, thereby helping with inflation, and the population would become less obese, which would mean that the NHS could use the money saved on other areas of Health Care. We also felt that there would also be health benefits to both humans and animals in the concomitant reduction in size of factory farming.
- g. Flying was discussed. It was mentioned in debate that aircraft fuel, at least jet fuel, was not taxed. The first course to be taken to limit flying was, therefore, to tax jet fuel. It was agreed by most that long distance flying should be limited to one long flight distance flight, there and back, per year. However, we did not discuss how that would be policed, whether the rich would manage to find a way around such legislation, and what the airlines would think about the reduction in their operation and, thereby, their profits.

Ken MacGowan,  
Chair, BHG  
21<sup>st</sup> June, 2023.