

The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society May 2023



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Robots May One Day Rule the World, but They'll Never Be Alive

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

What's the biggest news story over the last couple of months? Well, to my mind it has to be the release of ChatGPT¹ to the public. Sure, there are other stories out there, but I think the standard news about elections, trials, war and such are all basically noise compared to the impact that AI (artificial intelligence) is going to have on human civilization. AI will eliminate the need for us to do mundane tasks, and free us up to reach our creative potential. Not only that, but we'll be able to do our work quicker and easier so we actually have time for fun too! When AI brings about the 20 hour work week we'll all be singing the praises of our new artificial overlords.

But there is of course a fair bit of fear around AI as well. What are we afraid of? The central fear seems to be that the AI, despite its programming, achieves consciousness and self-awareness such that it acts against humanity in order to preserve its life. This plays out perhaps most famously in the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey." It's in this movie where the space ship's on-board artificial intelligence, HAL, realizes that the crew is going to shut it down, and as a result starts killing off the human crew. The Terminator and Matrix movies have a similar story where machines rise up to enslave humanity in order to preserve themselves.

But I've always been a bit sceptical of the whole idea of machines having consciousness or life. I think it comes from the fact that I actually have taken a number of computer programming classes back in my day, and throughout my adult life I've always had some friends who are computer programmers, so I feel like I have a clue about how programming works. Can we create a machine that simulates being alive? Sure. But is it actually alive? No. Why not? Well, for starters, a lot of computer programming comes down to what is known as "if – then" statements. "If" [xyz] happens, "then" do [this].

I find this as a useful way to remind myself of what the reality for a machine is. You could buy a pet robot dog and it will recognize you as its master. But it also has all sorts of other programming... "if" you snuggle it, "then" it wags its tail. "If" you say "good boy," "then" it will sit and look at you with adoring eyes. Despite the appearance, the robot dog isn't actually alive.

Ah, "But that's just basic programming" you say! Yes, AI is more sophisticated than that. The key to an AI is the ability for the machine to learn. This is what Tesla is doing with its AI, teaching it not just the basic rules of the road, but programming the ability to learn from experience so that it can do things that weren't explicitly programmed. If you're leaving the AI in charge of driving your car, it needs to be able to handle the unexpected situation. But it is this ability to do that which wasn't explicitly programmed that has people questioning that as AI technology develops, will it turn into life?

¹ ChatGPT Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer — is a chatbot that was launched by OpenAI, an artificial intelligence research and deployment company, in November 2022.

It is a language model that can generate realistic, human-like text.

As you might imagine, I think the Writings offer some interesting ideas for us to consider. Throughout the Writings we are taught that we are “not human except by virtue of his will and understanding, which set him apart from animals. In all other respects man and animals are very similar” (AC 594). Elsewhere the Writings call the will and understanding our “two mental powers.” Can a machine have a “will and understanding?” At first glance it may seem like they can. What’s the difference between your Tesla learning not to run over slow moving pedestrians that are making you late than you learning from your pastor to not run over slow moving pedestrians that are making you late? Either way, the action is the same, right? But there is something more, isn’t there? You may want to run them over, but have to resist, whereas the Tesla just may not have identified the action as bad.

To better understand this we have to dive further into what the will and understanding are, and they are more than I think we usually give them credit for. We’re taught, “The will has been formed so that it may receive spiritual heat, that is, the good of love and charity, while the understanding has been formed so that it may receive spiritual light, that is, the truth of faith” (AC 5194). I think this deepens the idea of what makes the will and understanding, because we see that they’re receivers of spiritual heat and light. It’s not just about an ability to construct an argument or having a purpose or desire to do something. It’s about being able to receive love and wisdom from the Lord. Can a machine do that? Nope.

Now, you might be thinking, “Hang on a moment there! You said the will and understanding make us human, but that doesn’t mean machines can’t be alive. Animals aren’t human, but they are alive.” That’s a good point. Right? Animals are alive, aren’t they? I mean, it’s obvious that they’re alive, and yet... it’s complicated.

Basically what the Writings, and specifically Divine Love and Wisdom state is that the sun of our world is lifeless, and so the light and heat from it are lifeless, and therefore everything that follows on is lifeless. However, then we’re told “[E]ach and every one is nevertheless surrounded by spiritual forces which emanate and flow out from the sun of the spiritual world. If they were not surrounded by these forces, the elemental earths could not have been activated to produce forms of useful service, which are plants, nor forms of life, which are animals... nature appears in people and animals as alive is owing to the life which accompanies and activates it” (DLW 158, 159). With that it actually sounds like everything is alive! It’s not just plants and animals, but “elemental earths” as well. So it would seem rocks and dirt are alive too.

But like I said, it’s complicated. Here’s the next piece: “Since the lowest constituents of nature which form the elemental earths are lifeless, and they are not changeable and variable in accordance with states of affections and thoughts as in the spiritual world, but are inalterable and fixed therefore we find in nature intervals of space and extents of space” (DLW 160).

Here’s how I understand and interpret that: the most basic parts of nature are lifeless, and we can see that because the world around us doesn’t change based on what’s happening in our mind. By contrast, the spiritual world is alive because you change your environment through your thoughts and feelings. In the spiritual world, if you’re sad, probably it rains.

Here, your sadness doesn't create the weather you experience. This is a tip-off that the physical world isn't actually alive. It doesn't respond to our spiritual state.

So can an AI be "alive," even if we say it can't be human? I don't think so. An AI, no matter how fast it can learn, or how smart it may become, just doesn't have a deeper spiritual self and therefore cannot change the environment in the spiritual world, nor be changed by our mental state. Therefore doesn't meet the qualities described as something having life.

Now, you may be thinking that we've just gone down a philosophical rabbit hole that may be interesting, but is really just an academic exercise. Believe it or not, I see it differently. I think this is a discussion and conversation that is going to be hotly debated in the coming years. The civilized world is united in a belief that slavery is a great evil, so what happens when we've created this utopian world where the machines all serve us and we start having ethical debates about whether or not the machines are alive? When we're relaxing on our levitating chairs, with the robots bringing us our margaritas, washing the dishes, and mowing the grass the question will be "Have we just enslaved a new race?" Not if they're not alive.

Of course, this applies to the much feared dystopian scenario as well. If we don't stop bickering over the trivial politics of the day and have this conversation now, we might find ourselves with robots that actually do think they're alive, and next thing you know, Planet of the Apes will turn out to be not a science fiction work, but a prophesy... just with robots instead of apes!

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Regional Meetings Recap

I flew to Seoul for four days of regional meetings with pastors from Korea, Japan, and Australia. You might be thinking, "One of those places is not like the others." Which is true. You would think Australia would be the odd one out, however what we saw is that all three places have the same problems. There's declining church attendance around the world, and Korea and Japan are no exceptions.

The Korean church will probably have an easier time than Japan, as I learned that about 35-40% of Koreans identify as a Christian of one denomination or another, versus only about 1.5% of Japanese are Christian. This of course leads to different strategies for moving forward. The Korean church has plans to create new web-based materials, everything from new websites, new translations of books, video creation, and the like to reach more people. They are early on with these plans, which was one reason it was useful for me to be there and share with them my experience with YouTube and social media.

Japan has a different project underway, where they are creating comic books. Rev Jon Jin put together an article about this that I will hopefully be able to run in the newsletter here next month. It's an interesting approach, and not without precedent of working in Japan. However, since it is run by volunteers, the progress is slow.

Of perhaps the greatest interest to us is a presentation given by Rt. Rev. David Lindrooth on a General Church Outreach program designed to attract new-comers to the church. Now, I'll forgive you if you're thinking, "I've heard that before," and I think even David has guarded optimism about the initiative. However, I will watch with great interest because if it does work, their program is certainly something we could duplicate in Sydney. Essentially it is an advertising program, and the idea is to guide people through steps of contact that lead to actual in-person participation. Dave gave us the big picture idea, including costs and projections, and he suggested that I really need to have a conference call with him and some of the others in Bryn Athyn working on the project to get a better idea of the details. I hope to do that in the not too distant future.

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Social Media Experiment/Short Form Video Update

Last month I wrote about a new effort to publish under-60-second videos across the social media platforms of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok . At the time I wrote that Instagram was showing to be the worst of the four, and well, it's amazing what can change over the course of a month. Then, the most views I had on an Instagram video was 160, but now I consider a video with 160 views a bad showing. I've had one get 8,000 views, and another 4,000. Those are outliers, but 500-1000 isn't.

Tiktok on the other hand seems to be trending the other direction, with the last eight videos only getting about 250 views each. Also I'm not getting new followers on Tiktok, versus the Instagram following continues to grow. YouTube and Facebook have been fairly consistent performers. For context, the YouTube channel was getting about 3000-3500 views a month before I started doing the shorts, and now it is up to about 8000-8500.

What I'm interested to watch is seeing if the old shorts will continue to get views, or if they just fade into internet oblivion after a week. At any rate, I'll continue to put these out for the foreseeable future. If you see one, don't forget to like, comment and share it around.

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ANC Dorms Closing

Many of you have sent your children to Bryn Athyn over the years for school. It's been a long tradition that kids as early as grade 10 can live in dormitory housing on the campus of the high school. However, they have recently announced that the high school dorms will be closed for the 2023-2024 school year. The announcement states that this is a "temporary" change, but at this point I have not seen what specifically will have to happen to re-open the dorms.

Why is this happening? Money. Well, really it's about attendance. Low attendance means low money, and ANC was going to be about a million dollars over budget, and closing the dorms would eliminate that deficit. Keep in mind that it isn't just the dorms that close, but from what I understand is that it creates a ripple effect of services on campus that will no longer be needed. For example, do you need the dining hall operating if you don't have students living on campus?

While this is a sad situation, I tend to think that this is a result of the changes in the birth rates around the western world. How many families these days have only one or two children? Compare that to my generation where the only child was very rare, and even two children was a smaller than average family. Plus, when you've only got one or two kids, what are the odds that you're going to send them away at a young age?

Anyway, I'll continue to keep my eyes and ears open for any future developments.

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Two New Books on Spiritual Practice

Two recent books on spiritual practice by Erik Buss are available on Amazon. They explore how to become more loving people and offer the practical activities we should be engaging in to be happier and more peaceful.

There are two versions of this work, both of them full of quotes and footnotes so you can clearly see what revelation teaches. *Walking the Path* is a shorter (128 page) treatment, focusing on the practical applications of these practices. *Exploring the Path* (298 pages) delves deeper into why these things are important as well as spending more time on some practical applications. The easiest way to find it on Amazon is to search for Erik J Buss. And as an extra bonus, Amazon is currently selling the shorter for less than half price!

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Farewell Lenore

Lenore joined her husband John* in the Spiritual World on 19th April. At her funeral service Gaye Heldon read out the following email from Mike and Ginny Gladish. Others gave touching eulogies but this has been chosen because it gives a wonderful illustration of the reality of life after death.



We rejoice with all of you that our dear Lenore has now entered, whole and healthy, into the delights of spiritual life. Of course she will be missed here, and for good reasons! But her spirit lives on, as she herself very well knew from experience.

Some of you may not be aware that John and Lenore's young adult daughter, Victoria, was killed in a car crash when they lived in Hurstville.

Grieving her loss, one day Lenore had a vision of Vicki comforting her and telling her she was alright, and very much alive in the other world. Lenore could hardly believe it, but as proof, Vicki told her where to look for something that no one else could possibly have known, and when Lenore found it she was convinced. Still, she wondered about this life after death.

Meanwhile, one of the Sandows' neighbors was a New Church woman named Mora Fletcher, and when Lenore came to her and asked where her daughter had gone, Mrs. Fletcher told her about the teachings of the New Church. And that was their introduction to what became an enduring commitment to the church and its very specific revelations about eternal life.

. . . So it is, with very fond memories and best wishes for all who knew her, that we join you in prayer for the happiest of reunions for Lenore, John and Vicki on "the other side."

*To read more about Lenore and John here is a link to the **August 2021 Newsletter**

<http://www.hurstvillenewchurch.com/newsletters/2021/2021-08.pdf>

Birthdays

Happy Birthday to **Naomi Heldon** (20th), **Matthew Cooper** (25th), **Daniel Walsh** (27th),
Brian Walsh (31st)

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