

Artificial intelligence and artificial religious faith



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

My AI “assistant” told me this morning there are 38 active wars in the world today. Not pleasant information to start the day.

As I was contemplating all the suffering, the high cost of these conflicts on humankind and the environment, I also thought of the automated weaponry, all the drones now carrying destruction back and forth across (artificial?) borders. How many of these battle-grounds are now directed and managed by computers? If there are intelligent decisions being made, how many are actually made by human beings? Strange we even have to ask!

We can't escape the fact that our lives are being shaped by machines we have created. We toss around this word “artificial” which means: “made or produced by human beings rather than occurring naturally, especially as a copy of something natural.” While playing god, in a sense, how much do we allow these creations to control us, to make those decisions for us? So many questions crossing the screens of our minds.

A person can be artificial too, in the sense they may be “insincere” or “unnatural.” I suppose the fundamental issue boils down to: Is it Nature or not? And we're compelled to ask a closely related question: Is it Human or not? When it comes to religious faith: Is this made by humans, or something else?

Who am I to say that someone's faith is artificial or

unnatural? Yet, what if it is clearly unreasonable? Reason seems a basic guide for what is natural or not. What is intelligence anyway? Once again, a quick scan of the dictionary gives us a place to begin: “the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills.” If someone doesn't have broad knowledge about something – say, the world of religious experience – and hasn't learned the skills – such as critical thinking – what happens with the development or practice of intelligence? When intelligence is applied to religious faith, doors either open or close. Productive discussion, or argument.

This is the point where a distinction must be made between intelligence and wisdom. Acquiring knowledge is essential, yet the practice of wisdom makes it possible for that knowledge to be balanced, reasonable and meaningful. Wisdom provides the questions necessary to manage the knowledge. A shorthand way of saying this is that Religion needs Philosophy, or at least the philosophical (search for wisdom) toolbox. I would suggest the wise approach to faith is to divide the artificial from the natural. All too often, in my opinion, faith is “rooted” in the super-natural – that is, the unnatural – instead of the naturally grounded experience where knowledge, reason and wisdom can function. There is no room for any “artificial intelligence” when it comes to matters of ultimate concern and life guidance. Wisdom can never be artificial, but as natural as our own brains and bodies.

Consider something we think of as “progress” in technology. “Hands-free” driving might lead to “human-free” driving, or flying, or anything else. If we don't hold on to the steering wheel, that is, our humanity, our senses, our sense of compassion, as well as our

ability to make rational decisions, what will be lost? What, or who, will be driving us, and where will it take us? Can we lose our very nature? I hope that's not possible, but choices in matters of faith raise serious problems.

Earlier I spoke of the destructive power of AI drones in current warfare. Does faith have anything to say about these technologies? Can a belief in a good god stand silent while humans release responsibility for lethal conflict to machines with a “mind of their own”? Sure, we program them and guide them to some extent, while never having to meet an adversary eye to eye to witness the death and suffering. The further we buffer ourselves from the real, natural and human impact of our tech, by hiding behind our creations – drones and bombs and screens – the further we get from natural intelligence, the acquisition of knowledge, the practice of true wisdom.

Drone warfare, self-driving cars and all the expanding uses of AI in everyday life, lead me to the serious influence this is having on religion as a natural aspect of our humanity. We want to believe in something or someone greater than we are. While we invent (literally, breathe into) hardware and software to manage our lives, we have an opportunity to learn organic lessons from the natural world, to hold to our flesh and blood humanity. Our machines can make our lives easier in some ways, even as they present perhaps the greatest challenge of human existence: Will we use our natural intelligence to evolve into machines, or will we use our reason and wisdom to choose Nature as our instructor?

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).