

AI: An Existential Threat?

A K ZIAUDDIN AHMED

WHILE explaining the background of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, UNESCO cited an interesting example - the creation of 'The Next Rembrandt'. It was the outcome of a project commissioned in 2016 by ING Group, a Dutch multinational banking and financial services corporation, and executed by Wunderman Thompson, a global marketing agency and Microsoft corporation. They used AI to analyze 346 Rembrandt paintings pixel by pixel and compile an exclusive database that encapsulated every minute detail of Rembrandt's artistic essence. Then an algorithm produced a new painting using this database. Finally, a 3D printer meticulously recreated the texture of brushstrokes and layers of paint on canvas, producing 'The Next Rembrandt'. Now who should be credited as the artist: the companies involved, the AI, or Rembrandt himself after more than 350 years of his death?

A similar issue was raised by an artist named Boris Eldagsen who won this year's Sony World Photography award but did not accept the prize as his work was generated by AI. As reported in ARThrows on April 17, 2023, Eldagsen said, "We, the photo world, need an open discussion. A discussion about what we want to consider photography and what not." Eldagsen deliberately submitted the AI-generated photograph in the competition to raise his point. He also expressed his fear that someday AI will replace photography.

After the release of ChatGPT on November 30, 2022, similar concerns came up about writings, literature, and many other things. AI is challenging our traditional definitions of art, literature, plagiarism, etc., and raising a whole lot of ethical questions. AI is also creating worries about taking away more human jobs in new sectors like advertising, technical writing, journalism, web design, accounting, etc. It has already replaced a huge number of jobs in the manufacturing industries.

Recently the Centre for AI Safety posted a single-line voice of concern:

"Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war."

The statement has been signed by people like ChatGPT founder Sam Altman, Google DeepMind CEO Demis Hassabis, Professor and Director of Brain-inspired Cognitive AI Lab of China Yi Zeng, Chief of research of Russian Association of Artificial Intelligence Albert Efremov, and Chief Scientific Officer of Microsoft Eric Horvitz.

How can AI be an existential threat to us? It's a tremendously disruptive technology all right, but an existential threat seems to be rather an overstatement.

AI is built by humans for particular purposes. For example, let's consider the AI for medical diagnosis. It can

AI-powered robots have become widespread in manufacturing industries, facilitating various processes. AI is also being applied in self-driving cars, smart assistants like Alexa or Siri, and in making decisions in investments, trading, and customer service by processing high volumes of data that's not humanly possible. AI is complementing our abilities and is helping us overcome many of our limitations.

AI can only be a threat to mankind if they are given human feelings coupled with the power of thinking which may lead to feelings of hatred and anger, and actions like dominating, and controlling. However, that is

We are living at a point in the timeline of human evolution when our extinction is threatened by climate change and weapons of mass destruction like nuclear and biological weapons. All of these are results of human indulgence and endeavours. In fact, humans are relentlessly pursuing the objective of eliminating other humans since the Stone Age. The weaponization of AI is just another innovative addition to that pursuit

learn from thousands of medical books and journals and gain experience through reading and analyzing records of hundreds of thousands of medical cases. It has immense power in information processing and is free from human fatigue and limitation of memory. AI can therefore provide a more accurate diagnosis than human doctors. AI-driven robots are used in surgery for precision and efficacy. In the book 'Artificial Intelligence and Natural Algorithms' published in 2022, Ujjwala Pandey and Arvinda Kushwaha observe that AI plays a vital role in various domains of medical sciences like automating processes, enabling precise diagnoses and treatment, and decreasing mortality rates. AI-based technologies have decreased medical costs in developed countries.

It's not likely to happen anytime soon because we don't know how our brain processes thinking.

Professor David Deutsch, a physicist at Oxford University wrote in an article published in the Guardian in October 2012, "No brain on Earth is yet close to knowing what brains do." More than a decade has gone by since that declaration but the position is still the same. In a February 16, 2023 article titled "Can AI Think? Searle's Chinese Room Thought Experiment" published in The Collector, author Andres Felipe Barrero highlights the ongoing quest to understand human intelligence and its intricacies, such as the development of language skills. He mentions that despite a lot of progress, numerous aspects of human cognition continue to elude our understanding.

The American Psychological Association defines two characteristics of thinking - it cannot be observed directly and it involves operations on mental symbols or representations that are obscure and controversial. This essentially implies that the attribute of thinking can't be codified for installation in AI.

Even if someday we can figure out how we think and learn and put them in algorithms for AI, it will still not be a replacement for humans since it will lack biological and philosophical elements like the meaning of life, death, the afterlife, relationships, families, etc. AI will not find meaningful answers in these dimensions for its existence. So, with vast knowledge, and the power of thinking and feelings like humans it will be a depressed and sad machine that logically won't find any motivation or objective to conquer the world by exterminating mankind.

Then why the AI experts who are engaged in researching and developing AI themselves, are warning about the risks of human extinction from AI?

Actually, it stems from the concern about the weaponization of AI or the military use of AI. AI itself is not dangerous; it is the dark human minds behind the AI that are dangerous. We hear about fully autonomous weapons or killer robots that would select targets and exterminate them without any human intervention. According to Human Rights Watch, a number of countries including China, Israel, South Korea, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are developing autonomous weapons. According to the article 'AI Influenced Weapons Need Better Regulation' published in Scientific American on March 30, 2022, the US Air force used AI for the first time in September 2021 to identify and kill human targets.

We are living at a point in the timeline of human evolution when our extinction is threatened by climate change and weapons of mass destruction like nuclear and biological weapons. All of these are results of human indulgence and endeavours. In fact, humans are relentlessly pursuing the objective of eliminating other humans since the Stone Age. The weaponization of AI is just another innovative addition to that pursuit.

The writer is a former Corporate Professional and Academic