

# Book Reviews

That said, the book is an empirical rather than a theoretical work, and an excellent one at that. The data are rich enough for readers well versed in the secularization debate to incorporate them into their own hypotheses. The primary message, supported by a wealth of rigorous data, indicates that global scientists are more religious than we often realize, and that narratives around science and religion in the US are not the only ones requiring our attention.

*Reviewed by Blake Victor Kent, Westmont College Department of Sociology, Santa Barbara, CA 93108.*



## TECHNOLOGY

**MASTERS OR SLAVES? AI and the Future of Humanity** by Jeremy Peckham. London, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2021. 256 pages. Paperback; \$31.99. ISBN: 9781789742398.

Will humans maintain their status as masters of their own creation or will they inevitably become slaves to these creations? Jeremy Peckham's book is another Christian analysis of the progress in artificial intelligence (AI) and a warning to the world of the dangers AI poses for the individual and for society at large. Peckham believes that the unregulated research and development of AI coupled with the laissez-faire usage of AI systems will result in humanity's degradation.

In the first chapter, Peckham captures the reader's attention by presenting a short fictional account of the Jefferson family starting their day in a world saturated with computer technology. This introductory story highlights the new technological reality in which we need to seriously explore AI's influence on humanity. In chapters two and three, Peckham presents a quick historical overview of computer and AI development. Chapter two begins with how computers and AI started as simplistic number-crunching machines that went from "winters" of technological disappointment to rapid progress with massive global impact. With this rapid evolution of AI, a necessary change is needed to determine whether AI can be considered morally neutral.

To address the growing danger and influence AI has on humanity, Peckham builds his argument in chapter four on the foundation that there is something special and unique about humanity. Humans are not only flesh and blood creatures but also bearers of

God's given *imago Dei* ("image of God"). This *imago Dei* is what separates humans from other nonliving and living things. In addition, as part of the *imago Dei*, Peckham affirms that humans have true freedom of choice. While Peckham does not provide a comprehensive examination of various philosophical stances regarding free will, he suggests that the ability of human beings to make choices freely is crucial to understanding how they are created in God's image. Beginning with the foundation of human's *imago Dei*, Peckham develops a Christian critique of AI by examining technology's effect upon this most important aspect of humanity.

Following his chapter on humanity's *imago Dei*, Peckham's main argument is further developed in chapters five to ten where he identifies six key areas of technology which threaten or have the possibility of threatening the *imago Dei*. In chapter five, Peckham is concerned that the continued reliance on AI to make decisions based on the premise that AI is unbiased is dangerous. Trusting AI technology in this manner further distances our relationship with other humans and elevates AI "reasoning" to human-like levels. In chapter six, human relationships with chatbots and digital assistants are the focus. Here, Peckham fears that the increasingly human (and often female) personification of digital assistants will lead to a distortion of emotional attachment and even to the illusion that we owe these artifacts ethical treatment. In chapter seven, Peckham considers whether the increased convenience and perceived general safety offered by state-controlled AI is worth the cost of restricting individual freedoms. For Peckham, the cost of individual freedom is too high a price to pay for the convenience which the state or the "Big Tech" companies now wield with substantial power and influence over the individual.

Chapter eight highlights the moral dilemma of whether an autonomous machine (such as a self-driving car) should be held morally responsible for its actions. Peckham believes that moral responsibility must ultimately remain with a human rather than placed on a machine. In chapter nine, Peckham addresses the growing concern that continued AI progress will result in fewer jobs available or in jobs that require higher technological proficiency. To address this growing concern, Peckham briefly explores the possibility of a UBI (universal basic

income) and encourages a reexamination of a theology of work. Finally, Peckham's last critique of AI centers on its implementation in video games and virtual reality. Peckham fears that these digital realities present a slippery slope for users who will be unable to differentiate between true reality and digital reality.

In the final two chapters (eleven and twelve), Peckham considers a Christian response to AI progress along with developing a Christian manifesto toward AI research and usage. Rather than utilizing AI technology mindlessly or carelessly, Peckham exhorts the reader to seriously consider the substantial influence AI has upon the individual and how AI development should be regulated moving forward. To properly consider and regulate AI, Peckham argues that a Christian worldview provides the best framework with which to understand humanity and our relationship with technological artifacts. Thus, his brief Christian manifesto serves to introduce how Christians can have a voice in the AI conversation.

Peckham's educational and vocational background in computer technology serves him well in writing this book. He has worked on computer and AI technology in both the government and commercial sectors. With his background in various AI technologies, Peckham understands how AI technology is built, how it functions, and the intentions behind the design. This is a strength of the book since many Christians who discuss AI often lack the requisite training and expertise.

Although Peckham does understand AI technology well, he does not examine the ontological considerations of AI. Peckham looks mostly at the effects of AI technology and then tries to develop a critique of that technology rather than relying on more philosophical arguments. Peckham's critique throughout the chapters would be stronger if he considered an ontology of AI or provided a more detailed explanation of what AI is before presenting his critique. At several points throughout the book, Peckham implores the reader to consider the harmful consequences of AI technology, but he does not look into the deeper fundamental philosophical presuppositions.

In addition, chapter ten, addressing video game AI and virtual reality technology, comes across as outdated, restating many of the traditional Christian

arguments against video games. While Peckham does helpfully highlight the new AI technologies used in video games (such as augmented and virtual reality), his criticisms of video games ignore the numerous variations of games as well as the communities built around video games. By presenting a familiar Christian critique, Peckham risks dismissing some of the more-recent developments in the video game industry as well as alienating readers who are active within that community.

Overall, *Masters or Slaves?* is a welcome addition to the growing Christian literature on AI. In comparison to other recent Christian publications on AI, such as Jason Thacker's *The Age of AI* or John Lennox's *2084*, Peckham's contribution has a stronger technical foundation due to his extensive background in the technology. Peckham expresses moral concerns similar to those of other authors about the development of AI, while covering a large number of areas that AI currently, or will inevitably, affect. Although Peckham could certainly provide even more background on specific AI technologies, his book serves as an excellent introduction to a Christian response to AI.

*Reviewed by Eddy Wu, IT Operations Manager and PhD student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC 27587.*

**THE ALIGNMENT PROBLEM: Machine Learning and Human Values** by Brian Christian. New York: W.W. Norton, 2020. 344 pages. Hardcover; \$28.95. ISBN: 9780393635829.

The global conversation about artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly polemic—"AI will change the world!" "AI will ruin the world!" Amidst the strife, Brian Christian's work stands out. It is thoughtful, nuanced, and, at times, even poetic. Coming on the heels of his two other bestsellers, *The Most Human Human* and *Algorithms to Live By*, this meticulously researched recounting of the last decade of research into AI safety provides a broad perspective of the field and its future.

The "alignment problem" in the title refers to the disconnect between what AI does and what we want it to do. In Christian's words, it is the disconnect between "machine learning and human values." This disconnect has been the subject of intense research in recent years, as both companies and academics