

## New Scientist and Greenpeace Science Debates

**Science, technology and our future: the big questions**

**Technology: taking the good without the bad**

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**Brian Aldiss, Writer**



**Brian Aldiss:** I'm going to try and be a little more cheerful than Ian was, although it's true that not all technical advances are advantageous. We all know that feeding food designed for carnivores to herbivores, in the name of production, is plainly dangerous. We've seen the disasters recently. I think that the annoyances caused by cell phones far outweigh their real use.

There was a time when the latest in contraception was the IUD, the intrauterine device, supplanting, I believe, the Dutch cap. I have a lady friend who was fitted with an IUD once, the very latest thing, and there was a time that it picked up BBC2. She said, the sound was fine but the vision was a little fuzzy. Decisions about babies... We all know what difficulties babies have. For instance, the age-old problem humans have with walking. We have a technical term for something between crawling and walking. It's called toddling. It's a technical term for the difficulties: the riddle of the sphinx. Well, that was not only a comment about the human race but it was a reflection on the amount of importance we place on walking. Many of the technologies, at least the technologies that science fiction has talked about, have

been to do with mobility and improvements on walking – the spaceship being one example, the time machine being another.

It's possible that you could inculcate a baby to go through that toddling stage much more simply, not to fall over, not to blunder into things. Well, we know that technology brings social change. That's one of the good things about it. The computer has changed everyone's life. Baby, him or herself, is going to need modernising. Whilst still in-utero he can be prepared for the music and the language of the exciting world that has become and so healthier and more stable babies should presumably lead to healthier old people. Alright, our life spans are going to be extended but is our health going to be extended too? Well, we hope so.

I long ago mooted that the extended leisure of the aged should include at least one compulsory holiday a year in a third world country, to assist the countries financially and also to assist the understanding of the former. I mean, a good bet would be Uruguay where I was recently. A beautiful, peaceful country, it has 450 miles of continuous beach and is pleasantly warm down there at Christmas, when it's freezing in the northern hemisphere. Unfortunately, compulsory holidays don't quite have the attraction that voluntary ones do but that's something we'll have to work out.

On the question of sex – I hoped I'd come to that – Viagra and other expedients prolong sexual life and so we're seeing marriages with great age differentials. Joan Collins and her toy boy; there are decades between them. Does this create better human understanding? Well, possibly it does. Certainly, intermarriage between races might seem to help, although they were plenty in the old days when Serbs, Bosnians, Turks and Croatians all intermarried under the banner of the communist credo. I'm afraid it counted for little when the crunch actually came.

So, is it possible that love itself might be made firmer? Cosmetics can do much but they're only skin deep. Maybe an empathy device? We have commercial applications; so that you were more closely bound to the one that you had, way back when, loved. Anyone familiar with the arcane art of looking to the future knows there's something that can't be accounted for and this is something that we're all up against. Those were well expressed by Harold McMillan when he was Premier. He was asked what he feared most and he said, "events". Events can't be foreseen. We didn't foresee 11<sup>th</sup> September. Nor can we foresee, when we look into the future, the actual area of time we're talking about. Some developments that we speak of, that Ian was speaking of, may come about within the next 5 or 10 years but others

may be more distantly placed. The trouble is there's no mountain we can climb on where we can get the perspective of what is near and what is further ahead and so these phantoms all jostle together in the present.

Well robots are already at work in our factories and consign themselves to Picasso if you believe the commercials. They have no need to ape our rather ungainly, human form. One use of human technology attracts many – the interest in androids of human shape was promoted by the Kubrick-Spielberg movie, *AI*. I don't think that these electronic intelligences are inevitable by any means in them, certainly not if you think you're going to get to artificial intelligence simply by speeding up a computer. That's not going to work. There has to be a new way; Ian will tell you about that. Nevertheless, don't you think an android would be hard to replace, despite all the pleas of Greenpeace? If you saw one in Harrods window, would you want it as a sheer curiosity? And yet, wouldn't you just love to have an android stomping around the house? The early models at least would give off fumes. They'd be ghastly, like a smelly old motorcar. They'd, of course, be liable to walk into mirrors. They'd fall over and be unable to regain their balance. Parts would rust if you left them outside. They'd be noisy. I clank, therefore I am. They'd need constant recharging unless, of course, they were nuclear-powered, not a feature to prove a turn-on in the commercials. But you would be able to talk to them, just as you could talk to your dog and they would be able to talk back and no conversation, however inane, is boring. But they could finally destroy family structures. Ancient though the family is, and often faulty, we've as yet nothing better to replace it and with all this talk of technology we're going to have to think about what's going to happen to the family of the future, which seems to be already under some stress.

You see, I think that evolution would be at work among android species, just as it is among humans and it's proved to be among automobiles. When I was a child, the front doors of cars used to open that way instead of as now, that way. So that if you timed your walking by, ladies getting out would show a lot of leg. It's very instructive when you're a schoolboy. Well, now of course these things have evolved and I suppose that the first androids are going to be asexual beings. They will walk and talk and that will be spellbinding enough but from this early, non-specific sexuality, I believe that commercial competition will be such that robots will be developed with female or male features and such developments could spell the final break-up of the family because familiar groupings might form according to sexual predilections or to age groups.

Pharmaceuticals in 50 years' time will have introduced the extended orgasm, including the terminal orgasm. The terminal orgasm is the best way to go, as it says in the commercials. Androids I think will be popular about the apartment just as pianos were once, in part at least, as status symbols, but the western world is already in a state of confrontation, or almost, with the world of Islam. Islam decrees that representations of the human face and body are against religion. Their response to human-like androids is therefore predictable. Muslims won't like it, not one bit. So I don't imagine for one moment that Greenpeace is going to like androids. Somehow, there's a pressure when something can be done, it is done. It's like the old saying about Everest. Why did you climb it? Well, because it was there. Why will people make androids? Well, because it will be possible to do so and we haven't quite managed to solve that problem. Why do we make children? Because we can, no matter how difficult the circumstances in which they are reared.

So the question about the future is, of course, as we all know, not only technological; it's human as well. Thank you.

