

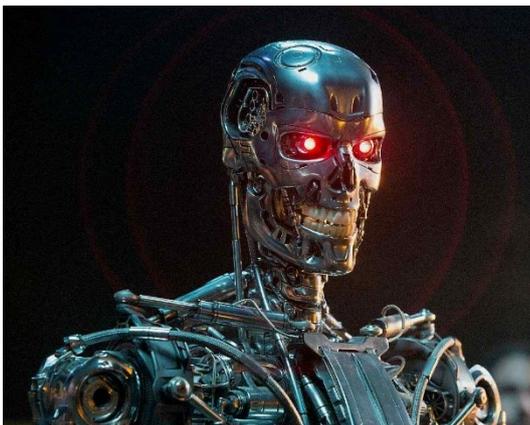
## Where are we heading?



Do you know what's in Room 101? No, I don't mean the BBC TV series! I first read George Orwell's '1984' at school, when its setting was still about 20 years in the future. Along with other so-called dystopian novels depicting scary prospects, such as Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World', it jumped right up the bestseller lists after the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election last year as people tried to imagine what lay ahead.

The question of our direction and where it leads can be asked, not only about politics and economics, but also of modern developments in science and technology, especially in biomedical, genetic and neuroscience research where there has been such rapid progress in knowledge and capability.

A topic of particular concern to many people is artificial intelligence, automation and robotics. A recent article in The Sunday Times points out that robots can already run factory production lines and lay bricks much faster than humans, we're now seeing the development of driverless cars, and drones are becoming commonplace in the skies, but this is just the beginning as automation moves increasingly into shopping, banking, transport and communications – indeed, almost every part of our lives. I remember arriving years ago at a fog-bound Newcastle Airport in one of the first planes to be fitted with an automatic landing system, and what a relief it was not to be diverted, along with all the other flights that day, to another destination. And it's not just the routine tasks: robots have also been shown to outperform skilled surgeons in keyhole operations, and they can make decisions very fast – which is fine as long as they're given the right information.



While there's much to be welcomed here, the threat in many people's minds is to their jobs, while others worry about safety and security: a hacked computer is bad enough, but what about a hacked driverless car – or a drone, especially one fitted with weapons? Are we facing the prospects of a real-life 'Terminator' or 'The Matrix'? The Sunday Times article quotes a large group of technology pioneers – the very people who have been driving these innovations – in an open letter to the United Nations calling for a ban on killer robots: "Once this Pandora's Box is opened, it will be hard to close."

The last in our series of nine 'Big Questions – Any Answers?' talks on topical science issues from a Christian perspective tackles this question: "The rise of the intelligent machines – friend or foe?" You can hear it, and ask your own questions, in Hexham on Wednesday 8 November, and further details are given on our project's website at [bigquestions-anyanswers.org](http://bigquestions-anyanswers.org), where you can catch up on previous topics too.



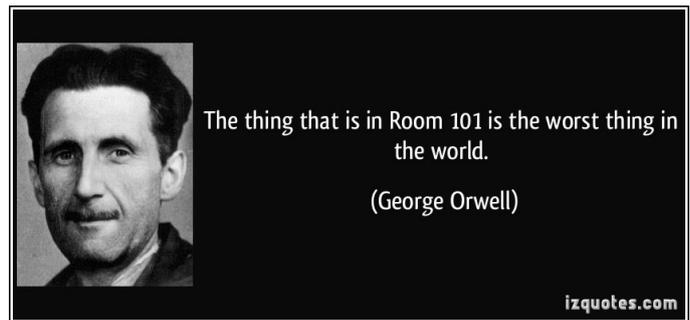


As we come to the end of the funding for this project, we can also ask “Where are we heading?” in the science-faith discussion. There’s been a lot of interest and engagement, and there seems to be much desire to continue in some way. Various approaches are possible, and if you’d like to contribute comments and ideas – or just express your interest – you can do so in a simple online survey: just search for “big questions any answers survey” or go straight to [goo.gl/vhuxTi](http://goo.gl/vhuxTi), and answer

some or all of the ten questions; it will help us in future planning. Or, if you prefer, you can just send me an email: two addresses are given below.

There’s also an opportunity to hear four more talks and join in a discussion on a range of scientific topics of current interest on Saturday 11 November in Kingston Park, in an event I’ve organised with the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion based in Cambridge. This costs £25 (half-price for students), but included in that is lunch as well as other refreshments. Further details are at [goo.gl/Ynu4WU](http://goo.gl/Ynu4WU), where you should register in advance (as soon as possible!) so that we will have enough food. It could be well worth a few hours of your time.

In case you haven’t read ‘1984’ (and if you now plan to do so, skip over the rest of this sentence – and don’t read the quote to the right!), Room 101 contains “the worst thing in the world”, whatever that may be for any individual person; it’s the government’s torture room (called the Re-education Room in 1984 Newspeak), designed to promote submission to Big



Brother. Whether or not artificial intelligence comes into this category for you, there are certainly many modern developments in science, technology and medicine that raise big moral, ethical, and more generally human questions that we must all address and not leave to entrepreneurs and politicians to deal with according to their own interests. The interface between science and Christian faith isn’t just an academic exercise, or a slanging match between militant atheists and fundamentalist Christians; it’s an important and fruitful breeding ground for generating constructive views, practical solutions, and further key challenges relevant to our modern age. It can, and should, make a positive difference, and we want to keep up the momentum of this year’s activities.

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