

2025 Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Forum: “AI: The Hope and the Hype”

Closing Session¹

Hugh Durrant-Whyte, NSW Chief Scientist & Engineer

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This is one of a series of events that the Royal Society of NSW has hosted over 11 years. They’ve always been amazingly challenging, bringing together a great diversity of people. It’s just a fantastic place to be, and I have to thank the governor, Margaret Beazley, because she offers her House, she offers her venue, the wonderful gardens, and everything else to really top off an event like this in the sense of making everyone come together and for everyone to value, I think, everyone’s opinion. That’s been great.

I will say I have a personal love-hate relationship with AI. I think I might just mention this. My previous employees laugh at this, because I have spent 40 years essentially working in AI, building some of the most advanced robotics and autonomous systems there ever been. The Pilbara, Port Botany, you name it. Basically, I’ve been involved in all of these things.

Yet, people who know me well know that I do nothing at home that has anything to do with AI. I don’t even own a smartphone. I never use Google. In fact, I spent half an hour yesterday removing Copilot from Windows. (And I will tell you how to do it if you ask.) I have deep suspicions about that kind of intervention in my life.

I read books. I talk to people one-on-one. And I think I’m getting a bit old in some sense, old in the mind — not about AI itself,

the technology, because I think applications and science and everything else — but old in the sense that I’m just not someone who really enjoys the human condition. One thing I’d leave you with — and I think this came out in the last talk — is that the technology will genuinely assist and build a better humanity going into the future. But we do need to work on making sure that happens. We need to make sure that the benefits in education, in health, and law, and all of these other areas that have been discussed today, are genuinely realised.

We need to understand the role that AI will play and the role that it won’t play, in areas like mentorship, reading a book, or even trying to edit the document I’m writing. We need to basically understand how that happens. In the end, discussions that we’ve had today are critical for us all understanding what’s possible, what perhaps is not possible, and what shouldn’t happen, as well. I think that’s important.

I think it has been a fantastic day all round in doing that. I want to end by thanking a few people. I’ve got to thank Sally Cripps first, my wife, who has been talking about this to me on and off for the last year and how it’ll all be fine on the day. And it has been all fine on the day, as it always is whenever Sally’s involved in these things.

I also want to thank all the other people who have been part of the committee, Lindsay, Vince, and Graham Town. There’s

1 This is a transcript of a presentation, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOBgg7YzT_g&t=20s

a lot of work that goes into organising these events and making sure that it all happens. I want to thank Pascal for coming back to Australia all the way from Atlanta for us to benefit from your wisdom. I'm so sorry that we lost you in the first place. It's one of those things that we really should say. I want to thank again the governor, Margaret Beazley, again for letting us use this wonderful venue that really makes all the difference to these events. Thank you everyone also for coming.

Christina Slade

I again thank the governor, and thanks, Hugh, who as the chief scientist has actually helped fund the event, as well as lending us his wife and running those fantastic panels at the end, which were very, very dynamic. I want to thank Lindsay Botten and the team, Vince and Graham, and particularly Davina as well. People have been working very hard, and I think it has been an extraordinary day.

Just trying to think our way through it: we began with Her Excellency, placing a quite wise set of understandings about how we need to think about governance in this space. We've almost come full circle. Victor Dominello urging us to move faster, particularly in government. Pascal made this remark, which really struck me. He said he wouldn't, as an academic or a corporation, have released ChatGPT. Nobody commented on it at the time. I asked him about it later and he said he meant it: it was not ready.

These large language models, which we've now heard critiqued and thought about quite a lot, are a bit of a worry. We're moving helter-skelter towards where we're going.

But we have to think; we've listened to the legal panel, which was a fantastic panel, as Pascal said, and somebody commented that to have a group of women talking about the law was quite extraordinary. We got to that notion, which Sally raised quite sharply in her session, about the human. If you recall, Jill Bennett talked about Gwenda, the dementing woman, who was so reliant on her AI robot. After all, what human could do that?

What's so great about being human? We've got to this point now where we have to think through what it is that's great about being human and how it's going to work out. And also what's left of being human, if, after all, the programs, the algorithms know more about our own likely intentions and future actions than we do ourselves. Not only do they know more about our bodies, they know about what we're going to do next. It is a very difficult space. I think we've had positive news: EduChat, the banks working very hard to help us. We've heard about agriculture, really exciting, and we've heard about how it can go wrong. I'm not in quite such despair as Judith about the loss of the human in humanities, but I think we've got to do some pretty hard work thinking about what being human is now.

I want to thank you too and everyone who spoke, thank you very much and for everyone's attention. It has been an extraordinary day, Sally, and I hope you're actually going to get away and have a weekend at the farm with your husband, because I fear that you might not have had one for a while. Thank you all very much.

