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“OUR FINAL HOUR: A SCIENTISTS WARNING” BY
MARTIN J. REES—REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER L.
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The book is a very worthwhile read and deals with the very large-scale problem of "Will Humanity Survive?". In doing so, Rees gives a fairly convincing set of arguments that there is high risk of not surviving the current century. His analysis includes biotechnology, nanotechnology and cybertechnology (slightly) relative to the terror threat and he correctly casts terrorism as much wider than the serious issue of Muslim fundamentalism. In this regard, he argues that some of the technologies being developed could in the future threaten the entire human existence if a single disgruntled, knowledgeable individual acted in a destructive way. He also notes the serious nature of environmental concerns and that the human institutional system is not able to BEGIN yet to address this seriously. Thus, in general he is arguing that the technical/scientific system humans have invented is going to fail spectacularly and one could think he is saying (but it would not be his words) that engineering is about to be a fatal flaw in human development. He also deeply considers whether human development is "mundane" (i. e. exists at a similar cognitive level in many worlds) or is "unique" (in the universe). His obviously knowledgeable review of the relevant facts on this issue concludes that we cannot yet conclude and we will probably not know very soon either way.

Thus, he strongly argues that we must do something now to preserve the knowledge developed or all of us are wasting our time. What he proposes doing about the problem is to me the disappointing part of the book. As a solution, he proposes space (moon and Mars) settlements and even gives some reasonable engineering and economic discussion of how this could occur. There are many difficulties with this but my greatest one is why humans living elsewhere would not destroy themselves just as effectively as those on earth if the knowledge and its use is the basic problem. For example, he implicitly has the Ellison and Gates' colonies on Mars living on peacefully while the earthlings destroy each other. It seems just as reasonable to me that these space settlements could hasten the end of humanity as it is to assume that a little dispersion is the effective way to preserve what is worthwhile about humanity. He does not discuss any other possible solutions.

I believe the book makes a good case for a "disappearing platform" and sets forth a potential problem that should not be ignored in places like MIT (or ESD). I believe student (and faculty?) brainstorming about other possible solutions (ASSURED EXTENSION OF THE FINAL HOUR TO MEGA-YEARS) would be instructive and possibly valuable. In my opinion, the solutions with true potential would have profound implications for scientific and engineering practice as well as human motivation and thus political structure.

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