

AI and You

Transcript

Guest: Tony Czarnecki

Episode 18

First Aired: Monday, October 19, 2020

Hi, and welcome to episode 18. On today's show I will be interviewing Tony Czarnecki, who is a futurist in the United Kingdom. He is a member of the Chatham House in London and the Managing Partner of Sustensis, also in London – a think tank for inspirations for humanity's transition to coexistence with superintelligence. Tony is the author of several books on the subject of superintelligence, three of which form the Posthumans series.

The recently published “Becoming a Butterfly” is the third and final book in the series, which puts the question of just who we may become after 2050, assuming we survive existential threats, and we know from interviews like the one just finished with Roman Yampolskiy how AI could constitute such an existential threat. However, Tony believes that if we do it right, superintelligence will not only protect us from existential risks but also create unimaginable prosperity, peace, and endless possibilities for human self-fulfillment. We're well aligned in our hopes and beliefs about the future, so I'm delighted to welcome Tony to the AI and You podcast. It takes a special kind of person to think that far into the future and then bring it back to what we should be doing now, and that special kind of person would include you, because – hey – you're listening to us talk about exactly that.

In this first part of our interview we'll be talking about Tony's book series, what his think tank does, and his thoughts on the impact of the current pandemic. Let's move on to the interview with Tony Czarnecki.

Hello, Tony, welcome to the show. How are you doing and where are you calling from?

I'm calling from London. And the subject of our discussion is the post-pandemic world, which I'm sure that you will have a number of pertinent questions, and I have to answer them as fully as I can, although I think we are limited by the time. I'll leave it to you to--

Yes, indeed, the pandemic is a little bigger than the amount of time that we have available. And I'm sure a lot of people listening to this would be thinking, “Post-pandemic? I'm still trying to deal with the during pandemic part.” So you're already thinking about what life is like after the pandemic?

Yes, because I think what we are going through right now is of no comparison to what we will be experiencing in the next few months. I'm normally an optimist, just to reassure you, but I'm also a realist. So I am expecting really unpleasant things to happen to the vast majority of us. And the sooner we realize that the world will never be the same as it used to be just a few months ago, the better because we may perhaps avoid the most disastrous circumstances that otherwise we might find ourselves in.

Right, and let's get into how that might be part of the steps towards a post-pandemic world and a broader future, but I want to give our listeners some context first for your background and

the work you've done in this. And you kindly sent me a copy of your recent book but you actually have a series of three. Can you tell us about those?

Yes, well, I am an economist by education, and I spent most of my life as a management consultant. And the mission of the company called Sustensis, which is still in existence, but is a think tank, used to be long term growth to make companies sustainable “forever”. And for the last 10 years, I've made it my own mission, “How about to make humanity survive forever?” And that's how it all began. Sustensis gradually has moved from economics, finance, and general consultancy type business into a think tank that is today, and it's entirely focused on the impact of artificial intelligence on our lives, and on our future.

And that's exactly the material and the subject for this podcast. But most people, even those who are economists or think about the future of businesses, do not think about the future of humanity on such a grand scale. And so you made that jump at some point, and I'm just really interested to know whether you can identify what shift took place in your thinking or what trigger happened that made you start thinking on such a broad, grand scale?

Yes. I ask myself quite often how I ended up like that. I'm formally retired, but I'm full of energy and full of need to contribute something, to leave something behind that may be worth our life living now. And that led me to write my first book, Who Could Save Humanity from Superintelligence? four years ago. Then it was followed by three books, and it's kind of a series called POSTHUMANS. And the first one was titled Federate to Survive! because my view was that the very first step - and we probably will be talking about it today - for humans to increase the chances of their survival is to act in a planetary kind of way. So federate man, if you can. So the second book was followed on that was called Democracy for Human Federation, a proper title perhaps. And the final one, released last May is Becoming a Butterfly, which is extending into the real post-human period while we may be starting living in a digital world.

And I love that title, Becoming a Butterfly because right now I don't think many people would think that we're beyond the caterpillar stage. So let's look at where we are right now with respect to the global pandemic and our response to it. How do you analyze that with your futurist hat on in terms of the way that we have responded collectively as a species? Has it brought us together? Has it taught us any lessons? Have we learned anything about how to act collectively for our greater good?

Yes. People may think that pandemic is a curse. Because most of this generation, perhaps several generations – two or even three generations - haven't really even come close to some restrictions. Even such restrictions that were in place in Britain during the Second World War. And after the war, where people have killed themselves to queue up. It's all forgotten. The young generations have no idea that there is something called restriction of your freedom in order to survive. And this very basic point of departure for my view on the pandemic leads me to a statement that COVID-19 is not a curse, it's a blessing. Yes, many people have died, and I can imagine the horror of the relatives is absolutely true. But then if we consider it in a historic perspective, like for instance, the Spanish flu, where 3% of the global population died, one of the largest pandemics, although they were larger in the Middle Ages, 17% in Germany for instance, died

out. So here, we are talking about a pandemic that has a mortality rate, in speak around 10 times the ordinary flu, say 1%, which is now subsiding. But I think it is – perhaps not the right word to use but I think I would use it, it's a fair price to pay. It's like an insurance policy so that we can make a global test [on] how prepared we are for really fighting for our survival. And this is not a very demanding test and it has already shown just how unprepared we are, not just in the UK because I am speaking from London, but I think it's most countries. If you think about the United States, if you think about Italy. Apart from China, which I think has done, whatever you think about it, they have done an extremely good job. So from that point of view, I think what we are going through right now is nothing in comparison which we'll have to experience in a few months' time when we will have to face the consequences of that pandemic, not the medical ones, but the economic, social, mental, global in terms of trade, politics. The world will be shuffled like a pack of cards.

Indeed. And, as you say, some countries have done better than others. We had as our first guest on this show, Audrey Tang, the Information Minister for Taiwan, who told us how she had been instrumental in architecting that country's successful response to the pandemic so far, and it actually illuminated a number of approaches that we're successful there but we weren't as adept at adopting in the West due to certain cultural differences. So, as you say, it's a high price to pay but for that price to be worth it, for that suffering to not be in vain, it would have to be preventing something greater. And if we look beyond the pandemic, then the greater thing would be a disruption or transformation globally of what kind?

Well, we are now entering, not the speculation, we are talking almost about something that is tangible, and I named it. It's technological unemployment that, in my view, was to happen in the next five, seven years, but not right now. Pandemics [have] changed all of that. And the reason, I mean, there are positive and negative sides of the pandemic as far as the employment market is concerned, and the global trade. Let me start with the position ones. We have experienced quite a turbulence in the supply chain, cause mainly by China. I'll give you one example. To buy a face mask in April in Britain was almost impossible. In a capitalist system where the demand is the king, and there was a high demand and there was no supply because the supply chain was 10,000 miles away. So that we have learned from that pandemic that the two hour just in time may be very nice. In the time of peace, everything flows fantastically but we have forgotten that this is almost like a miracle that in the 70 odd years after the war, we are not exposed to anything that has stretched that reliance that everything will run smoothly. Everything has been running smoothly and suddenly it is not. So the consequence of that is, and the positive one is that we'll be investing a lot in manufacturing, in robotization to get those jobs that went to China back here. And this will be a positive, virtuous cycle because the more robots that will be installed, the cheaper they'll become, and that's all the critical mass that has been created. Many investors wouldn't invest, especially in Britain because they thought the critical mass is not there, but now it is. And in the States, it's probably going to be even more profound. Me. Trump must be very pleased, perhaps too late for him that the Rust Belt will be de-rusted and a lot of robots will be there. So that is my positive look at that. The negative one is that millions of people will be unemployed. In the UK, I just heard yesterday there was an economist saying perhaps as much as

8% would be unemployed. Well, you can't be serious as Mr.-- What was the tennis player's name?

McEnroe.

McEnroe said, yeah. In Mrs. Thatcher's years, we had double-digit unemployment in relatively normal times. These are abnormal times when things change at an exponential pace, and in so many sectors at once. I give you one, is the office and government sector where most people go to work in the city - in the financial sector. 10 years ago, I said, "Why aren't people building skyscrapers in the city of London? This is a fallacy. This office will be empty." 10 years ago, and my understanding was that the robotization, and I didn't know about Zoom then, but anyway, that it will essentially force the employers to deploy the work home so that people don't have to travel and they don't have to pay for the offices. And that's exactly what happened. Even in March in London, they opened the second largest building, and I was at the opening at Imperial College. When I asked the question - and that was before pandemic really, the second of March. This was one of the last conferences in London. And he was confused why I'm asking the question, right? He only had to wait several weeks in order to get the answer. And this is an example of what [we are] talking about, that perhaps a third, maybe half of the working population and the office population. We'll be working from home. And the second aspect is that I think the unemployment will be in double digits, but it will never, almost never go back. It will grow. And that is what very few economists or politicians utter because it's just incomprehensible. But that's what technological unemployment is going to be. However, on the positive side, and an optimistic one, is that I think if we survive the next 10 years, which this decade is going to be the most stubborn, like the immature superintelligence decades. Then we will have passed most of the imminent risks. And we will start getting benefit of this large scale robotization AI and so on. So people will be paid, will be secure, and hopefully, it will be safe.

You're covering a lot of territory there. And as the saying goes, "That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I think that's the guiding principle here. I have the word resilience on my whiteboard at the moment in big letters as a watchword for the immediate future because I hear you saying that the retail infrastructure, the supply chain, the service economy were all optimized around rapid delivery and quick gains, but weren't engineered for resilience, weren't engineered for disruptions to global transportation, tariffs or borders closing. And that we neglected that for the sake of what looked like safe gains and profits in the past, and now we're paying the price for that. Another thing that struck me was we're talking about the level of unemployment that we're facing right now, and that's already approaching the levels that the most pessimistic projections for near term, structural unemployment due to automation from artificial intelligence were at. I mean, the biggest number that had much credibility behind it was the 47% from the Oxford Martin program. That was a 10 to 20-year time frame, and now, we've had peak levels like that in places during the pandemic, and no one's terribly optimistic about those going back to where they were before. So let's talk about automation here and where it could go. Because AI is one of those things that sparks these continual conversations about being very, very good, and very, very bad at the same time. A pandemic is pretty much

negative. You can have positive side effects of our response to it, but no one would object if the virus was eradicated and never appeared on this planet in the first place, whereas AI stands to bring us these enormous benefits [but] at the same time, we have to deal with structural unemployment arising from automation? How should we structure our society to be resilient to those effects while getting the benefits?

Well, you said structure our society which is a very large subject. Are we talking about the governments? Are we talking about the international relationship? Or are we talking about singular states?

Take it wherever you want.

Right. Yes, the subject is very, very large indeed. Perhaps, let's look at the global stage. What is the impact of things like technological unemployment and many other issues that have come to the fore, like the complete incompetence of certain governments like the British one. It is just unbelievable. And so little criticism, still so little criticism, that is worrying in itself. So what it will do in my view, is not only the post-pandemic period will be a shock in an economic sense, but it will be a shock on the political stage. And by that, I mean that the populists will have to deliver and that is the most difficult part of governing for any party or any shade of, if you like, governance. What Mr. Trump has been promising America the removal of, or replacement of the Rust Belt may actually, to some extent happen, not in the way that he wanted it, envisaged it but just coincidentally, because of the pandemic, some of the jobs will come back every day to America. But I'm also talking about the friction between the nations that are otherwise quite close, even within the European Union. If you think about this decade, in my view, we are entering similarly very paramount, always paradigm-shifting events in Europe. I think the European Union has only two ways to go - either to break up or to federate. But postponing that moment is no longer an option because the post-pandemic pressure in many areas will force some of the countries to make decisions that are best for them. And I'll give you one example. This is the positive way that I think it may go. Take Germany. Some of the leaders in Germany now think that they may avoid undue payments to the budget for the country that cannot cope with economic disaster that they may have created previously. And now on top of that, they have to face the post-COVID repercussions. So they may say that, "If we, for instance, federate the eurozone, we will be in charge anyway, but the difference is that we will look very close into the budget of all those countries. Yes, we may pay slightly more, but not for the long period." So overall, it may be a better deal for Germany. And that is one way that the f of the European may have in the next few years. I'm not talking about 10, 15 years. And the second option is the reverse, like the Dutch and the Scandinavians may pull out saying, "We no longer want to finance those laggards." And by that they mean the southern it like - Italy, Greece, and so on, with which France might cooperate in order to have more influence in that kind of federation because there is an article 20 in the Lisbon Treaty, that allows a minimum of nine countries to exit the European Union and create a federation. And that state will still be a member, but as a state of the European Union, so there are various versions. So this third version is the most dramatic one, is a complete breakout, that you may have, say a number of Beneluxes of the European Union, like the northern countries, some southern countries, and so on. That is the

worst scenario in the era of artificial intelligence. Creating havoc by malicious actors or by error or whatever, and then the technological unemployment and all those semi existential risks that will come together. And if they combine you may get a terrible, terrible situation. Therefore, the disruption of the European Union, the fallout of the European Union will have another magnitude impact worldwide, not just in Europe. So I can see both positive and negative outcomes but I think the decision point by 2025 is going to happen.

Wow, fascinating. Just for the benefit of some of our listeners that might not have as much of a European background, you refer to Benelux there, which is the Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg group of countries in Europe. And we're talking about a change in the geopolitical structure and alliances in Europe, which wouldn't have been contemplatable even months ago but at a time of crisis like this, the last one of this magnitude World War II was the last great bout of frontier border drawing. So there may be some more boundaries re-drawn by the time we get out of this, do you think?

Yes, we forget that we did have an actual war for five years in the '90s in the boons, which are part of Europe. This is one of the best examples that hadn't we had the European Union, there might have been the real wars in Europe in the last 70 years. So the result that for Europe, and for the European Union is not in the economic sense, is in a political sense that people stop fighting each other and rather love each other. In terms of the way forward for Britain, because we can talk a little bit about that, this is a minefield, obviously, and anybody's focus is as good as mine. But I'm a radical [thinker] and I stick my head out of the parapet, and I think that a lot of good things will happen on the British Isles because of the pandemic. I think the United Kingdom is to fall apart. I can't see how it can be stopped; it's too late. And perhaps it's too late that such a thing is happening because we should have had a proper federation, based on equal rights of the nations. I'm thinking about Wales and Scotland, not so much Ireland. And then, even this split of the English folk into some shires largest including London, so that you can balance it. So something like that might have happened some time ago, but I don't think it will happen now. It's too late. So my scenario is that if the European Federation happens, or if there are even the first moves to that, which may happen in 2022, when the current Future of Europe conference is to end, or 2023, if Scotland sees that, they will have an additional argument to bring out because they have nothing to lose. And whatever European Union says now that Scotland has to agree with England to separate, which apparently legally, it has to do, but there are some lawyers that say no, it doesn't have to be like that. Anyway, that would also impact what will happen in Europe in terms of federation because if the nations of England including the United Ireland are in Europe in the federation, then there will be a big, big pull for other remaining countries or EA, Switzerland and Norway especially, plus the remaining Balkan countries to join. Let me just finalize this vision of a positive move in Europe. I think I have a lot of respect for Mr. Macron but in my view, he has gone too far in restricting the remaining Balkan countries to join the European Union. I think we have to play almost *va banque* because you have so little time. So it is better to take Albania, Moldova, not a Balkan country but Serbia even into the European Union, knowing that they are not really ready. But it is better to have the inside and work with a carrot and stick once they are inside but mainly with money, and avoid the Russian interference in the broken affairs, in the European affairs generally. So that is my

kind of vision for the post-pandemic Europe. We are not talking about the world affairs. That's a different question.

And so many things I'd like to talk about like NATO, but we need to move on up. But I do have one quick question I can't resist asking. Right now, do you think in Westminster, the Brexiteers, the Leave party, do you think in the wake of the pandemic, that was a great decision or wish we hadn't done that?

If you are talking about MPs, I think they are unreformable. They can't reform. It's a thing. It's a belief in something. So rational arguments, I think won't do any change in their viewpoint on what needs to be done.

I can understand that about the psychology. If you look at it objectively, has the decision to leave the European market-- Did that play to Britain's advantage or disadvantage, specifically during the pandemic?

Well, we could see it, it was a disadvantage. We could see it with the personal protection equipment, almost scandalous. Perhaps some work with the supply chain, although we didn't feel it horribly but it might have ended up horribly. We don't know whether we are out of the woods because we don't know what happens on the 31st of December if there is no deal. And we are still in sort of pandemic period. That may be additional regret, "Why didn't we stay in the European Union?"

Sure.

So yeah, Brexiteers must have, I'm talking generally about the population, many of them must have second view on what has been done to them, especially in the northern part of Britain, which is all the hardest affected. What a paradox, and what a shame. I think this is lack of education, and the propaganda, the Soviet-style propaganda during the Brexit campaign that wasn't resisted properly by the remainders. And this is the result, not only in the UK; we have the same thing in the United States.

We'll be talking about disinformation campaigns on another episode, I'm sure.

That's the end of part 1 of the interview.

So there was some pretty frank talk about the pandemic and, as horrifying as its effects are, how it may be preparing us for dealing with greater challenges. The tragedy is that it has claimed so many lives and so many more people's good health, but – like those soldiers who died on Normandy beaches 75 years ago – let's declare that they did not suffer in vain, if we can become a stronger species from what we've learned and how we've grown during this time. Clearly we've got some ways to go with that.

In today's AI headlines, this time from Technology Review, an international consortium of medical experts has introduced the first official standards for clinical trials that involve artificial intelligence. Right now, hype around medical AI is at a peak, with inflated and unverified claims about the effectiveness of certain tools threatening to undermine people's trust in all of AI. An announcement in the journal Nature, the British medical Journal, and the Lancet said that researchers will now have to

describe the skills needed to use an AI tool, the setting in which the AI is evaluated, details about how humans interact with the AI, the analysis of error cases, and more.

In the last few years, many new AI tools have been developed and described in medical journals, but their effectiveness has been hard to compare and assess because the quality of trial designs varies. For example, the UK-based digital health company Babylon Health came under fire in 2018 for announcing that its diagnostic chatbot was “on par with human doctors.” By separating the good from the bad, the new standards will make this kind of independent evaluation easier, ultimately leading to better—and more trustworthy—medical AI.

Next week we’ll conclude the interview with Tony Czarnecki, when we’ll be talking about some of the history and structure of Europe, models for future governments that can lead to sustainable, viable world economies that lift up people in developing countries so that no one need be left behind as we head toward a future with superintelligence. That’s in next week’s episode of *AI and You*.

Until then, remember, no matter how much computers learn how to do, it’s how we come together as *humans* that matters.

<http://aiandyou.net>