AI and You

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to episode 71! Today we're going to conclude the interview with Jonathan Rowson, a chess grandmaster who is three times the British champion. Last week we talked about the impact of computers on chess: the game, the players, the culture, and our beliefs about cognition. But Jonathan has more going than his history as a chess grandmaster, because he is an applied philosopher with degrees from Oxford, Harvard and Bristol Universities, he has been published in The Guardian, New Statesman and New York Times, and in 2016 he founded the research institute [Perspectiva](#) in London. The aim of the institute is "to inspire our political, academic and business leaders to examine real world problems with a deeper appreciation of the influence of our inner worlds." This is of particular interest to us because as AI encroaches more and more on the domain of thinking, we will be forced into philosophical inquiry about what it means to be human, and we will need to change how we communicate, cooperate, and compete with each other – some people would call that a transhumanist evolution – in order to meet that challenge. In the upcoming segment we're going to talk about what Jonathan's doing to bring that down to a workable level with Perspectiva. Here we go.

I want to talk about Perspectiva, because the description that you have of who you are there is very much on point for our podcast, and I'll quote, "We are scholars, artists, activists, futurists and seekers who believe credible hope for the first truly planetary civilization lies in forms of economic restraint and political cooperation that are beyond prevailing epistemic capacities and spiritual sensibilities." That hints at a transhumanist agenda; would you use that word? It's so ambitious, it's so transformative, that was the word that came to mind. What do you think?

I wouldn't use the term "transhumanist" personally, although I could see why you might think that and there are people in our network who lean that way, let's say. What we're really talking about is what we feel is necessary. Once you look at particularly the climate crisis, but that's symptomatic of broader sets of ecological crises, which have within them, governance crises, which have within them, epistemic crises, and arguably meaning crises and purpose crises, too; when you look at all of that, you start thinking, "How is it going to work? Where is the credible story in which we get this together in time as a planet of 8 billion people, give or take, and rising?" Now, obviously, there are very promising new technologies, some really promising forms of nuclear fusion that might really be game-changing. And some people believe in carbon capture and storage more than others do. And there's possibilities for further lowering your pricing on solar energy. And there are various positive technostories you can tell. But alongside that, you have endemic corruption in about half the countries of the world, you have a consumer-driven culture in most countries of the world, whereby what normal life looks like and what success looks like, is to grow in material affluence and consume more things. And there's no countervailing narrative to that, really, that's got any political capital behind it, at least not

significantly. And so while it's true that in theory, we could get our act together and say, "Hey, guys, look at the science. It's now code red. We have a certain number of years to reduce atmospheric emissions. Can we please mobilize these technologies and reduce consumption in a certain sense? And let's be grownup about this, let's not destroy our only habitable planet, please." But when I think of that happening, I think, very unlikely. And very unlikely because of the way things are structured socially and culturally about default expectations. Principally, the way that democracies have evolved is that political mandates are premised on economic growth. And as long as that's the case, people will come to expect that as what it is for a political party to be successful and electable. And if you're speaking on any specific scale, you can always argue against it. But when you look at the pattern writ large globally, consider what's happening in China and Russia and India and South America and so forth, it's really quite hard to believe that on the basis of our current, let's say, operating system, and again, I notice the computer metaphor kicking in, but cultural code, even our, let's say, to put it in a different language, our autopoetic tendencies, or our, something that's less mechanistic, our dispositions at scale, our civilizational dispositions and sensibilities, let's say. When you look at those things, you think if they don't change, then ecologically we look like we're probably toast. I mean, I don't say that with any great glee. I have children. And not just that, but I just think it would be really tragic that if you look at the infinite reaches of space and the eons of time, and here we have this conscious planet full of beauty and wonder, and we might be stupid enough to screw it up. We might really be at scale, and in our coordination, in our inability to get over our baser instincts, stupid enough to destroy our only home. It could happen. In fact, arguably, it already has happened: I'm also sympathetic to those who say that in some meaningful sense, we're too late. Not too late in the sense of giving up, but too late in the sense that we should just stop thinking in terms of averting a problem. The problem is already here, it's already happened. It's now about coping with it. Now, that's the sort of background context against which I say, "Well, then what? What's your game plan? What's your story of how we remain a viable civilization at scale," and not just all of those things, but more your world and from the podcast, exponential technology? Now, exponential technology can be our friend, it could be the thing that makes it possible to get through this, but who owns it? With what kind of interest? With what kind of public constraint on their activity? So when you put all that into the picture, you need to think big, you need to think at this more complex scale of rethinking what human life is for, and what we are capable of. And that has a sort of educational aspect - what do we need to learn? What do we need to become? And it has a kind of political and economic aspect - what do political institutions have to be for a new kind of world to be ushered in? It can't just be normal electoral cycles. And so you go through all of this kind of futuristic design work but you come back to the day-to-day and say, "Well, okay, what are you going to do? What do you propose that NGO leader [does] when he goes back to his organization? What are you telling that politician to put in his next manifesto?" That's where it gets much harder. The gap between how things are today, our sense of normality, and our scope and hope for the future is so great that we need mediators, and more organizations a bit like ours, I hope, that's trying hard to bridge that gap, trying hard to tell the story of how one might become the other.

And this is where this is right on point for what we talk about here, because we talk about the technology, but more important than the technology is the finger on the button and the mind behind the finger on the button. And so this is where I got the transhumanist bone was tickled because you are taking aim squarely at what looks like human nature. You describe a pattern of "antidebate," you call it, and say, "of the all the major challenges the world faces, the decay of civil public discourse is among the most consequential and distressing." And I would agree with that completely, and I think it's behind all of the problems we face at the moment. Because we haven't been hit by an asteroid. Every problem we face is one that's within our power to remediate or is one that we have created ourselves. And it's simply a matter of moving resources around. But I call it the Cool Hand Luke Syndrome: What we have here is a failure to communicate. And that's all, except that's everything. And so trying to turn around the quality of public discourse from this antagonistic, someone has to win, someone has to lose model to cooperation is exactly the right pressure point. And doesn't that seem impossible?

Yes… but it's necessary. So by that, I mean, when you frame it like that, it does seem impossible. And to be honest, I'm in networks with people where they do speak about getting to win-win scenarios at all times and trying to overcome our competitive instincts and to collaborate at scale and so forth. You know, the chess player in me values competition. I think there's something beautifully exacting about facing opposition and resistance that obliges you to become a better version of yourself. So when I watch the Olympics or the Wimbledon final or whatever, I don't think, "Oh, my God, what a terrible thing competition is." I think, "How wonderful. How glorious how it brings out the best in us and creates a spectacle and leads us to self-overcome in the best of ways." But, when that is at the corporate level or the governmental level, and you're dealing with scarce ecological resources that are being extracted with little thought for how they'll be renewed, then you have a deep, systemic problem. Now you say communication is the heart of the challenge, and I agree. Also, the quality of information that we have is part of the problem. What follows? So the antidebate process is still quite nascent, but it was a way of trying to show what it would look like to have a kind of form of public discourse that wasn't just dialogue. Because dialogue, while it can be intimate and revealing and powerful in its own way, it's not the same spectacle, it doesn't scale. It's not as exciting. It's not as compelling to watch, typically. So we were looking for some kind of dialogue debate hybrid that brought in the sense of mattering that debate brings, the sense that something's at stake and we have to get to the bottom of this. We need that sense of vigor and aliveness and vitality that that gives you. But equally, you don't want the polarization and the playing to the crowd and the straw man arguments, and the sort of dehumanizing of the opponent. You don't want any of those things. So we're trying to find a process by which we can model a different way of doing it. That's one of the things we're up to. And that includes, for example, rather than beginning with a set question, you have a process through which the room decides on the question so that by the time it arrives, you're all invested in it. And it includes using a fuller range of epistemic capacities, not just cognition, but felt sense in the body, and trying to sort of shift the registers such that what wasn't in the room before the debate somehow comes into the room. And that can be sort of quasi-mystical, but you can often feel it happen. And then to the broader question of, is

it impossible? I do think it's useful to ask yourself what you realistically believe could happen. I think that is a pertinent question.

It was unfair, but I couldn't stop it coming out. I don't believe anything, even if they do think it's impossible, that's worth achieving should be abandoned. But I couldn't help that interpretation.

No, I understand. There's nothing utopian about this effort in the sense that it's you do what you have to do, and you hope for the best basically. And the understanding I have of the world's crises is that yes, we really do face a very seismic threat to civilization. And when I say civilization, I do sort of mean planetary civilization although there's a separate conversation to be had about whether there really is a planetary civilization, or how far that concept gets us. But I do feel that the ecological substrate is being not just harmed but potentially destroyed. And then this will create unlivable conditions for many millions, which, because there are weapons in the world, could lead to consequences of consequences and further pandemics, further wars. And I'm a pretty optimistic person by nature. I'm quite willing to believe in our better natures, and that we can get ahead of all this. But when I look at it dispassionately, I do see difficult odds, particularly on not so much the ecological crisis in and of itself, but the political will and the sort of civic and epistemic capacity necessary to move it is very far from trivial. It's *the* problem. I have written a paper you may have seen called "Tasting the Pickle". But the idea of "Tasting the Pickle" is just beginning to realize that the emergency is just the beginning of the problem, the so-called climate emergency is kind of the thin end of the wedge because then you have the governance crisis within that. And when you look closely enough at the governance crisis, you have all these kind of meta crises about who we are and what we're living for and whether there really is meaningful collective action at scale or whether there's always competing interests and all of these things. So yeah.

It seems that we don't cooperate nearly as well as we do when we're under crisis.

Right. So interestingly, you mentioned an asteroid, so it's well known that were there to be an asteroid heading our way, suddenly, you'd have the shared problem, right? Now, even then, I would say, you wouldn't necessarily find the complete alignment of interest. You know, it will hit one place more than it will hit others. Some people have to be saved, some won't be saved, and so forth. This is baked into the human condition. It's kind of this tragic feature of life. I think as you grow up, you come to see it as that, it's just a feature of who we are. And also, perception of crisis varies. You know, there's so much denial. Human nature is just -- We live in a reality-avoidant culture for the most part. We don't particularly want to know what's really going on. Some do, and many don't. And the culture doesn't particularly punish those who don't. If anything, it rewards them.

Exactly. We have episodes coming up about disinformation that go right into that. And so I want to see if we can bring this out of the ivory tower, make it concrete for people. And one of the things about AI is that it has this prospect of holding up a mirror to us that a lot of people talk about. They understand the human condition and themselves personally better, the more that they work on AI. So it has that quality. But when you talk about, for instance, improving the

public debate, the discourse that shapes our future, would that look like a House of Commons where the Speaker no longer has to yell "Order, order"? Help me out here. Make it real.

Make it real, okay. Well, I can indicate what we've tried so far. So classically, a debate would feature two protagonists. They wouldn't necessarily be white and male, but they often were in the past and that would be your classic setup. They would have a chair or a judge or somebody introducing the event. And then you have an audience who was clapping for one side and another audience supporting the other. You'd often have a motion, saying, "This House believes X, Y, or Z." And then you'd have a before and after about whether the debate has shifted minds. And when it goes well, it really is rather good. It can be edifying, informative, meaningful, and there have been many such debates throughout the years. The antidebate is not anti all debate. It's not anti the spirit of competitive intellectual inquiry that seeks the greater good and seeks to test each other to bring out the greater good. But we now live in a culture where that polarization that's baked into the structure of most forms of debate is compounded, let's say, by the information technology that we all use, and the filter bubbles that come through algorithmically so that we only see one side of the argument, so that we feel inclined to be with one side and not the other, even if the other sometimes feels like they're making more sense. And we feel tribal in the sense that we're afraid to point out to our tribe that the other side might have a point on something. Now, what do we do about that? To make it real for you, in our first public antidebate, which you'll be able to see online quite soon, although only in highlights as it were, you begin by entering the room. There's usually 30 or so people there, it can be more, it can even be much more. And you have a certain number of people who are the main protagonists, but usually about six. Not two, because you want this broader collective intelligence to kick in, but you don't want it to be so broad that you lose sort of focus and the capacity to relate to each other. Then you try and surface what's in you emotionally and intuitively about what you want to talk about. And you each voice that and you try and persuade each other and the audience of why that feels most pertinent. And quite quickly, people back down and say, "Okay, I think they're onto something. I think what we should talk about tonight is this. So that could be the real problem is the economic model," someone might say. And someone else will say, "No, I think we really have to talk about masculinity and why masculinity is a problem." And someone else will say, "Well, the problem with that is that we're going to get bogged down in definitions about masculinity." And someone else will say, "Well, that's precisely what we need to do." But then the audience will come in and say, "Actually, no, I think we should go back. The economic model may be the problem." And then people will say, "Well, how do we feel about that?" And we'll begin to sort of move towards, okay, if the question is, "Is the economic model the problem?", how do we refine that question? How do we make it less coarse, more precise? Is it the profit incentive? Is it the macroeconomy? Is it something about the relationship between government and the economy? And we start to put this on the board so that everyone in the room begins to see the big picture together that collectively builds up. Because you'll have people in the room who are successful businessmen, capitalist-loving, free marketeers, and others in the room who are kind of post-growth environmentalists who think that capitalism is somehow fundamentally deluded. Won't necessarily have a better idea but they feel as though it needs reform to such an extent that it almost disappears. And then you'll have people in the room who are philosophers who want to

say, "Well, when you say capitalism, what do you mean?" Anyway, you move through this process where you try and get the right balance between checking for sense, checking for… You don't need coherence in the sense of everyone agreeing, you just need people to be comfortable with a level of discomfort. And that becomes a kind of training. Not everything has been said. Some things are undefined, some things are not yet qualified, some things lack evidence, but they're in the room. And we all share that kind of epistemic flexibility and confidence to proceed knowing that not everything is understood. And then when you have your question, you go outside, and you clarify where you think you are on the question. So let's say now you've moved on to not "Is the economic model the problem?", but the principle of profit-seeking as the primary societal objective has to be ended, let's say; that's a more precise question. I'm not saying it's a good one, but that's the sort of thing that might arise from it. And then people would say, "How do you feel about that? Place yourself on an axis where you agree or disagree on one axis. And how confident are you that we can change our view, our starting point, in other words, how fluid is this view? Using your judgment about the debate to follow, how confident are you that we're going to get anywhere tonight?" Then you go back, and then we have a picture of where we're all at, that isn't just binary, that's somehow a bit more of a judgment call about scope for change. And you come back in the room, and there, you then begin to focus on the panel, or the sort of main people on stage, ask them to pause and reflect for a minute or two by themselves, give voice to what they feel about this question. Then the audience members go off in little clusters and discuss what they feel. They then feed back and we begin to get some greater clarity on what are the key questions? Where exactly is the disagreement here? So for some, it might be "profit is fine" if it's, in some sense, renewable or doesn't destroy the basis of the profit. In other words, if the premise of the profit allows for regeneration, then there's is no reason why in and of itself, it can't be a problem. Others would say, "Do we actually understand the idea of profit? Is there always a loss or a cost embedded in it that's somehow not being spoken about?" And people will leave that hanging in the room, it will be on the board as sort of an open question that forms a debate. We carry on talking a bit more, and then we get to the point where we ask people to settle, and we say, "What hasn't been said?" Because that very often-- And someone will say, "Well, we haven't spoken about the hidden economy. We haven't spoken about the mothers who get their children ready, or who end up doing most of the core economy work of reproducing the human basis for the economic system, that work that isn't paid, which is invariably done by women. Where's that in this conversation?" And the chair might say, "Well, I'm not sure it belongs in this conversation." Or they might say, "You're right, it's absolutely central." And then it evolves just slightly more. And then we'll get to a point which will never be a finishing point, but it's like after-- And it's an open question at the moment about how long these things should be but at least two hours, and sometimes longer. And by the end of it, it's like. "Okay, having now discussed this, having now shared in the question, have you moved your position?" And you go back outside to see not only where your position now is, but you then make a judgment for society as a whole, that were they to explore this question, how likely do you think it is that they'll change their mind as a result of considering it? And on the basis of that, we either explore it further later or recommend that others do so. And we record most of this, and so in principle, it can be shared at scale. But we also see it as an embodied practice where you really feel it best when you do it yourself.

It deserves a name that will carry it far. It sounds more like an inquiry. It sounds like—I wouldn't call it a chair, but a facilitator. But what strikes me the most is that it demands participation from the audience at a level you don't have in a debate, where the audience are spectators with a voting button.

That's right. And there are moments where there is real tension in the room. There are moments where you feel that something is at stake. To do this badly is to have the kind of low-hanging fruits, everyone-agrees-on-something consensus. That's not what we're trying to get to. What we're really interested in is the fact that on reflection, most of us don't only disagree with each other, we disagree with ourselves. That's a very important premise for the antidebate. The main battle is within your own reckoning with a difficult question. And through that, coming to know yourself better and to know each other better, and not to have to resolve it, not to have to answer it with some kind of "here's where we agree". Something more like to come to know life more fully because of the inquiry, to come to experience yourself more deeply because of the inquiry. And everyone in principle is encouraged to do that but it only works when it really feels like something's at stake. It doesn't work when it's like, "What's your favorite color? Red or blue?" It has to matter. And that's why the designing of the question, the choosing of the question is so important.

And it's about exercising our collective power to be greater together than we are apart, so that it's not about can we even come to a consensus as to which one of these two views is right, but that was also framed by something outside of the whole debate structure, to begin with, that said, "Your only choices are these two views." And this sounds like it shouldn't just be a model for, and it shouldn't just be a model for people in academic settings to have more productive discussions, but it should replace our political process. Because, well, wrestling matches are fun to watch, but they shouldn't be the way that we conduct public policy.

Right, absolutely.

Although I would give Margaret Thatcher two falls and a submission over Howard Wilson. But this idea that instead of one side subtracting from the other, and then it's what's left over after they've cancelled each other out is the winner, we find a way for them to add together.

So the reason as well that is an antidebate, and not just a dialogue, or not just an inquiry is that there is a kind of assessment that goes on. And this is the part we haven't fully cracked yet. But we're not so much interested in having a winner, but we are interested in the epistemic skill required to do this well. Such that over time the people who are most heavily involved in the discussion will be judged on things like their capacity to use metaphor well, the extent to which they showed that they were deeply understanding the opposing view, their capacity to render the opposing view at its strongest, and not its weakest, their ability to bring in new information. And by the way, another stage in this process that I didn't mention, is also because this is 2021, to bring in facts where they're called for. So where there's a debate, and it really matters, like someone might say on this subject, "How much richer is the world today than it was 100 years ago?" And they might say that's a really important question. And you can do that by GDP per capita, or whatever other measure you choose. But someone might want to say that we really

need to know that in the room because that's a really tangible piece of data. And even if you can query the methods, it's still useful information that we need to factor in. And if it is the case that we're all so much wealthier because of the existing economic model, and people will have been brought out of poverty, and because of that, health care is improved, we need to know that before we start critiquing it on an ecological or spiritual basis, or whatever. So it's still a baby, it's still nascent and coming into being. But it does feel necessary, and we're quite excited to develop it further.

I agree. I want to make sure that anyone listening doesn't think of this as just a way for academics to have more civilized debates, but this is what, as I was saying, should be the evolution of our policy process. Because you and I, and many people we've talked with can see how we're heading towards a time when we would look back and go, "What were we wasting our time for? We didn't know how good we had it. We had all the luxury back then of being able to improve ourselves and avert disaster. And instead, we ignored the signs and played around with trivia."

Right. Yeah, and the other thing about that is that the audience in the room has the chance to actually experience their own disagreement. And that's something they're not often given the chance to do because, in public forums, you're shouted down as contradicting yourself. You're shouted down as being a hypocrite. But very often people say, "Well, yes, I carry these complexities within me. On the one hand, for example, I care deeply about climate change. On the other hand, I'm not ready to give up my Sunday roast or my six-monthly flight to see my relatives or whatever." So that's just that sort of fairly trivial example. But people will not necessarily have one firm view on one side. The truth of the matter and the one that's a bit obscured by the media is that people carry these complexities and contradictions with them all the time. And that's normal. That's not a sign of someone who's weak-willed or someone that hasn't got their act together. If you're thinking well, you're recognizing multiple viewpoints at once. And therefore, you just need to carry that into your public processes so that you stop to pathologize it and turn it instead into a kinder virtue to carry it properly. Not to be indecisive, or equivocate forever, but just to say, "Yeah, mixed feelings, aren't they normal?"

And kudos to you for engaging in this. We're running out of time. Who do you want to know about this? Who do you want engaged with you? What do you want them to know? Here's your chance to tell our audience how they can get involved, what you want.

Well, the antidebate is just one of the things Perspectiva is doing, so by all means, look at our website and see the other things that we're up to including books we've published and festivals we have and so forth. But in terms of the antidebate process, it's still early stages. But if you feed back on the videos we put online, and within a few months, we hope to have something like a template to recommend to people how to create their own antidebates. And when that happens, we'd like people to start trying it and feed back to us. There's a delicate act here, because, on the one hand, you want to get the code right, and you want to see it well and make sure it works before it gets too spread out and gets diluted and adulterated. On the other hand, you want to build the excitement and get people doing it and learning as they go and feeding back. So the

feedback to listeners is sort of watch the space, but carry the spirit of it into your daily inquiry already. You know, we valorize debate. And that's not entirely mistaken, because debate at its best, really is a kind of intellectual search for the truth, at its best. But the question is, what does an intellectual search for the truth look like today in a world of collective action problems, in a world of epistemic filter bubbles, and in the world where the stakes are so high? And that's what I want them to consider in their own practices.

Fantastic. Anything else that you want people to read or watch for your output personally or professionally?

Yeah, well, it's very kind of you. So I mean, I did write a book reflecting on what chess taught me about life. And I took that question seriously. It wasn't just, "Think ahead and whatever," it was really quite deeply, "What did I really get out of all those years at the chessboard?" It's a book called *The Moves that Matter: A Chess Grandmaster on the Game of Life*. And in addition to that, if you want to know my thoughts about the world, writ large, there's an essay that's freely available online, called "Tasting the Pickle: Ten flavours of meta-crisis and the appetite for a new civilisation." And if you read both those two things, I'll be very happy.

Well, thank you. I've read the book; I highly recommend it. Jonathan Rowson, chess grandmaster, philosopher, and philosophical activist, thank you very much for coming on the show.

That's a pleasure, Peter. Thanks very much.

That's the end of the interview. Jonathan's 2019 book, The Moves That Matter: A Chess Grandmaster on the Game of Life is a terrific insight into the mind and experience of someone with an amazing mental ability, which he now refers to as his former life, because as you heard, he's now tackling these fundamental questions of how to transform the way we work together as a species.

In today's news ripped from the headlines about AI, Samsung is using AI to design new computer chips. They are partnering with California firm Synopsys, who uses reinforcement learning to automate the normally human-powered judgement steps that decide what constitutes a good chip design. Reinforcement learning is a kind of evolutionary process that improves according to being given positive or negative reinforcement, often called rewards and punishments, although that's a very anthropomorphic take on it; it's not like we're tossing it a biscuit, we're just telling it to maximize the value of some number that represents how well it's doing.

Next week's guest is Kordel France, who is founder and CEO of Seekar Technologies, who has built some medical applications with AI, but wow, did we get into all kinds of other areas, like autonomous tractors, AI used in hunting, autonomous weapons, and in diagnosing mental conditions, and that's just in the first half of the interview! It's really fascinating, and that's next week, on *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