

# Stephen Hawking Now a Doomsday Prophet



By Alex Berezow — November 8, 2017



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

Very smart people sometimes fall prey to very bad ideas.

One of those bad ideas is the notion that the Earth as we know it is about to come to a cataclysmic end. Our sins have finally caught up with us, and humans will be subjected to unbearable wrath. To some religious devotees, the wrath comes from God; to some environmentalists, it comes from Earth. In the end, we're all flambé; the only question is who gets the honor of lighting the kitchen torch.

A somewhat recent convert to the secular version of such doomsday prophesying is famed theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking.

Dr. Hawking has made the news twice this week for comments he made at two different conferences. At one, he said that, due to [overpopulation and electricity consumption](#) [2], the Earth would be an uninhabitable ball of fire in 600 years; at the other, he [said](#) [3] that artificial intelligence might be the "worst event in the history of our civilization."

Neither of these statements is rooted in reality. In regard to the former, the world is not overpopulated. As the planet becomes richer, demographers predict that the population will stabilize and eventually decline. (The only outstanding questions are when the population will peak and what the size of that peak population will be.) The justification for that belief is the fact that developed countries have seen their fertility rates plummet. Japan, for instance, is [already shrinking](#) [4] and must grapple with the economic and social consequences.

Likewise, the claim that electricity consumption will burn up the planet is wrong\*. Within 600 years, it is very likely that humanity will figure out how to make solar power more efficient, and we may even have figured out fusion power by then. Even if we don't, nuclear power is a perfectly safe,

carbon-emission-free source of energy. If everybody switched from fossil fuel to nuclear power, we would lower CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere.

And even if we failed to do that, the Earth still won't become an uninhabitable hellhole. Earth is not on track to become Venus. The most alarming climate models do not predict that. Humans will survive, even if Earth is warmer.

Dr. Hawking's warning about artificial intelligence is equally hyperbolic. Let's set aside the fact that humanity has experienced so many dreadful events -- smallpox, the plague, two World Wars, a combined 34 seasons of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* -- that it's difficult to imagine enduring anything much worse. AI has the potential to be problematic, but [AI will only ever be as good as the humans that program it](#) [5]. Because of this flaw, even the cleverest robot can be hacked.

### **So Much to Fear, So Little Time**

Earlier this year, Dr. Hawking repeated these claims and additionally warned that human existence was threatened by asteroid strikes and epidemics. As we discussed then, he was [wrong on all counts](#) [6].

Dr. Hawking's recent turn toward morbid pessimism is unfortunate. He is saying things that, if they weren't coming from him, most scientists would laugh at. It's sad that such a great physicist and science communicator is tainting his legacy with nonsense.

*\*Note: It's unclear if Dr. Hawking is referring to carbon emissions, waste heat, or both. He's incorrect, regardless. That didn't prevent him from showing a [video of Earth being engulfed in flames](#) [7].*

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#### **Links**

[1]

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Hawking#/media/File:Stephen\\_hawking\\_and\\_lucy\\_hawking\\_nasa\\_2008.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Hawking#/media/File:Stephen_hawking_and_lucy_hawking_nasa_2008.jpg)

[2] <https://www.geekwire.com/2017/stephen-hawkings-latest-doomsday-prediction-earth-will-go-hell-2600/>

[3] <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/stephen-hawking-ai-could-be-worst-event-in-civilization.html>

[4] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/02/26/its-official-japans-population-is-dramatically-shrinking/?utm\\_term=.5bad1f3cc037](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/02/26/its-official-japans-population-is-dramatically-shrinking/?utm_term=.5bad1f3cc037)

[5]

[http://www.science20.com/alex\\_berezow/mark\\_zuckerberg\\_thinks\\_im\\_jewish\\_and\\_other\\_reasons\\_not\\_to\\_fear\\_ai-226699](http://www.science20.com/alex_berezow/mark_zuckerberg_thinks_im_jewish_and_other_reasons_not_to_fear_ai-226699)

[6] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/05/04/no-stephen-hawking-we-wont-have-abandon-earth-100-years-11231>

[7]

[http://www.science20.com/robert\\_walker/stephen\\_hawkings\\_rookie\\_mistake\\_predicts\\_earth\\_to\\_glow\\_red\\_hot\\_by\\_260228187](http://www.science20.com/robert_walker/stephen_hawkings_rookie_mistake_predicts_earth_to_glow_red_hot_by_260228187)