

Could AI Safety Be Built on Alchemy?

The hidden roots of science in mysticism and curiosity

1901

Year of Discovery

When chemist Frederick Soddy discovered radioactive decay, he called it 'transmutation'—a term that still carried alchemical weight.

This moment marked a turning point: science was still deeply entangled with the metaphysical. The fear of being labeled 'alchemists' reveals how deeply the scientific community feared being associated with mysticism. Yet, without that very curiosity, the foundations of modern chemistry—and by extension, AI safety—might never have been laid.

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https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-03032-z?error=cookies_not_supported&code=de288235-d489-4fcd-8814-b596a4e5ce48



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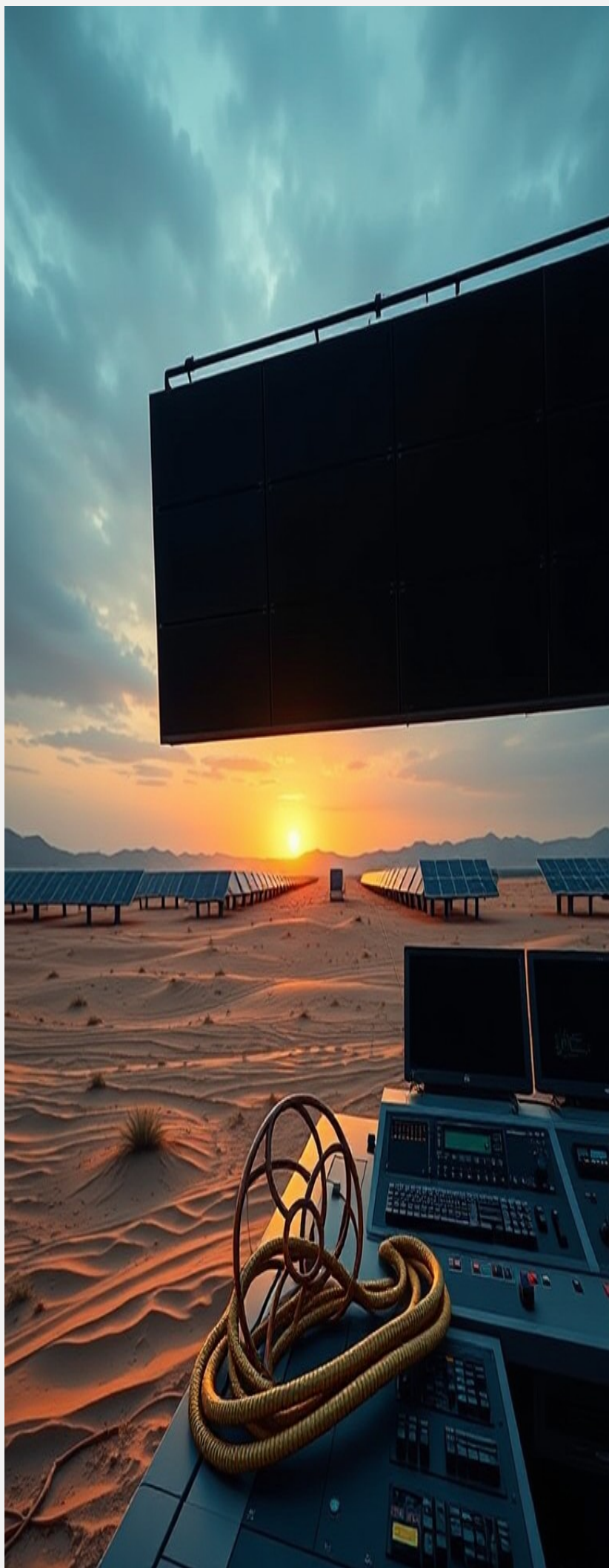
Curiosity Outlives Its Origins

The tension between Soddy's breakthrough and Rutherford's caution shows that innovation often begins in places deemed unscientific. Today's AI safety frameworks must not discard curiosity just because it emerges from speculative or non-linear thinking. The most robust ethical systems may arise not from rigid protocols, but from the kind of bold, even 'unscientific' inquiry that alchemy once embodied.

02

Ethics Evolve from Unconventional Roots

Alchemy was not merely superstition—it was a structured pursuit of transformation, much like today's AI alignment efforts. The resistance to naming transmutation as such reflects a fear of perceived irreverence. Similarly, today's AI ethics debates often reject 'unconventional' approaches out of hand. But if we are to build safe, adaptable systems, we must allow space for ideas that seem 'heretical' today—just as science once did.



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