

DEFINING HUMANITY DOWN: THE IRONY OF AI AND HUMAN ANTHROPOLOGY

by Jason Thacker*

Introduction

Amid the ongoing conversations surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) today, there seems to be a common thread that permeates so much of the current discourse of where we are heading as a society and the role AI ought to play in our lives. No matter what side of the debate one may fall on with these tools, it seems that most people recognize that things are changing at lightning speed and that our society doesn't seem to be ready for what is taking place. It seems like every day we hear about another innovation in this space, how yet another company is rebranding itself as an AI company, and how AI is already radically shaping our society both for good and ill. From wall-to-wall media coverage to bold predictions of what will take place just in the next few years with dream of human-level AI, it is nearly impossible to keep these discussions at arm's length any longer. Many now wonder how best, if at all, to use these tools in the academy, healthcare, business, industry, government, warfare, and even the church itself with recent controversy surrounding a defrocked Catholic AI "priest."¹ AI is everywhere and, despite much of the cultural hype, its use in society is growing at an exponential rate. But there seems to be little widespread consensus of what it is, where we are headed, and what we ought to use these tools for.

In our age centered on efficiency and convenience exacerbated by our technological innovations, we rarely slow down enough to ask the hard questions and think holistically about the power these tools have over our lives. Wisdom flowing from a distinctly Christian worldview calls us to think deeply about these tools and how they are shaping our pursuit of loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. We must

ask ourselves: Is technology merely a neutral, valueless tool we simply use for convenience and efficiency's sake, or does it represent something more that is deeply shaping every aspect of our lives for both good and ill? Is it possible that we think we are simply using these tools, but that they are actually using us instead? Could these AI tools (and all technologies for that matter) be shaping our perception of the world and our values including some of the fundamental ideas we hold about what it means to be human?

AI is not a neutral tool, but rather one that is radically altering how we perceive reality, especially the value of humanity even for Christians who rightly understand that humanity is uniquely made in the *imago Dei*. We must first recognize the non-neutrality of technology before understanding the nature of AI and how it affects our beliefs about the value of humanity, which is not found simply in what we *do*, but rather in who we *are*. As Christians engaging these conversations and consequential decisions about the role of AI in society, we must keep human dignity at the center of our ethic and ask the ever-prevalent question of *should* we do something, rather than simply the question of *can* we. In a world that pushes us to go faster and be more efficient in every aspect of life, it is good and wise for us to take time to slow down and ask some of the hard questions about AI and how these machines are shaping our view of the world. We must reconsider how we often define humanity down in an age of advanced machines.

The Non-Neutrality of AI

Most are familiar with the adage "when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail." This saying rings true whether you are a child with a toy

* Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, Boyce College; Senior Fellow, The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

¹ For more on the AI "priest" from Catholic Answers, see Gina Christian, *AI 'Priest' Sparks More Backlash than Belief*, NAT'L CATHOLIC REP. (Apr. 25, 2024), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/ai-priest-sparks-more-backlash-belief>.

hammer or a grown adult. When someone picks up a hammer, we all instantly know that it is designed to hit things—whether those things are actual nails or not. All tools have a particular purpose, design, and telos by design. Media theorist Neil Postman extends this truism and notes that “[t]o a person with a pencil, everything looks like a sentence. To a person with a TV camera, everything looks like an image. To a person with a computer, everything looks like data.”² Theologian and ethicist Jacob Shatzer adds here that “when you’ve got a smartphone with a camera and the ability to post something online, everything looks like a status update.”³ And we can extend that again to say that to a person with access to powerful AI tools, humanity itself begins to look like a mere machine. Postman argues that those truisms call to our attention the fact that every technology has a prejudice, purpose, or design both with intended and unintended consequences. He explains, “embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another.”⁴ He goes on to state that “[n]ew technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop.”⁵ We are often so blinded by the formative power of technology that we fail to clearly see many of these values and prejudices.

As opposed to a simple tool-based, neutral view of technology, these tools are shaping every aspect of our society and culture toward convenience, greater efficiency, and speed—at any cost.⁶ As computer scientist Derek Schuurman highlights, technology is thus *value-laden* and never neutral.⁷ No technologies exist simply as

neutral, isolated tools, but rather as tools that represent the values of our larger culture and in particular an often truncated and bastardized view of the human person based on what we *do* rather than who we *are*. This push of efficiency often leads to an incomplete view of the human person, toward an instrumentalizing of humanity. These tools are deeply altering and shaping every aspect of our lives including our view of God, ourselves as human beings, and the world around us. This is especially true in how these tools fool us into thinking we are more powerful than we really are and how they shape our view of our neighbors who are made in the very image of God.

Defining AI

One of the ways we can see how AI is shaping us is through the language we use to even define it and our visions of where we are heading as a society given the ever-expanding access to and development of AI. From referring to our AI assistants as she/her or he/him to our dreams of conscious, human-like machines, we tend to anthropomorphize these machines in ways that are deeply concerning for human anthropology. Artificial intelligence can be defined as non-biological intelligence, where a machine can perform various tasks that were once reserved for human beings. AI represents an aspect of the broader field of computer science, which comprises several foci such as machine learning, deep learning, natural language processing, robotics, machine vision, speech recognition, and much more. AI has in recent years become a major topic of discussion across industries given how it can automate, streamline, and augment various aspects of our lives—and is increasingly being explored for use in medical applications, where the challenge

2 Neil Postman, *Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change* (Mar. 28, 1998), <https://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/materials/postman.pdf>.

3 JACOB SHATZER, *TRANSHUMANISM AND THE IMAGE OF GOD: TODAY’S TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP* 7 (2019).

4 NEIL POSTMAN, *TECHNOPOLY: THE SURRENDER OF CULTURE TO TECHNOLOGY* 13 (1993).

5 *Id.* at 20 (emphasis original).

6 For more on a Christian philosophy of technology, see Jason Thacker, *Simply a Tool? Toward a Christian Philosophy of Technology*, in *THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE: CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN A TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY* (Jason Thacker ed., 2023).

7 DEREK C. SCHURMAN, *SHAPING A DIGITAL WORLD: FAITH, CULTURE AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY* 22 (2013).

of an instrumentalizing view of the human person is all too common.⁸

Most of the public discussions about AI tends to focus on the future of AI and what might be possible in the coming years, including debates over the possibility of human level or superhuman AI systems.⁹ But the only form of AI that has ever been created—and that many believe is possible—is called narrow AI. These narrow AI tools have specific use cases and applications. These tools are already revolutionizing every aspect of our society and growing more advanced each day, often outperforming humanity in narrowly focused tasks such as a recommendation algorithm on social media, online shopping, or entertainment. They also often control various aspects of our home and work life through automation like smart devices, communications, and even banking. While the use of these tools is becoming quite ubiquitous as they often operate behind the scenes in our personalized digital experiences, these tools are mere objects that do not *know* or *understand* what they are doing despite us giving them names, faces, and wondering if they will become like us one day. As Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann notes, “Even today [computers] are in many respects ahead of the intellectual feats that humans perform. Yet it is not pointless to say, ‘the computer does not think.’ It means that it does not know it is thinking. And it means that it does not experience thinking. There is no ghost in the machine.”¹⁰

The next type of AI is highly debated and likely not even possible given the complexities and unique nature of humanity as more than a simple material being. Broad or general AI is often described as human level intelligence, where a machine not only is able to meet or surpass humans in narrow ways but in a much broader sense. Many have long debated in both computer

science and philosophy if achieving human level AI is even possible given that humanity is not simply a material being, but also a spiritual one. Recently, tech leaders like Elon Musk joined the fray stating that within the next year or two, we will have AI that is smarter than humans or what is often deemed artificial general intelligence (AGI).¹¹ AI companies like OpenAI already have public plans and states goals for AGI systems despite widespread disagreement if these tools are even possible.¹² Some predict that humanity will even be able to achieve a superhuman type of intelligence, also known as artificial super intelligence (ASI) or a God-like intelligence.¹³ This type of AI not only outperforms humanity in all aspects of life and gains consciousness, but also takes on a transcendent role in human affairs. Often these debates over the future of AI and what is possible are rooted in a naturalist/materialistic philosophy that is completely at odds with a Christian vision of reality, truth, humanity, and the good life that recognizes that humans are not mere material beings or the sum of our parts.

While we have always had various forms of technology, today's advancements in narrow AI can seem quite daunting given how complex and powerful they are becoming. These systems are performing a wide array of tasks that were once solely reserved for humans and pose an entirely different set of ethical questions for us to consider. But at the core of these seemingly novel questions is the reality that technology isn't really causing us to ask new questions of life per se, but rather to ask perennial questions that we have long asked as humanity in light of new opportunities. These tools are challenging long-held assumptions of human anthropology and are expanding our moral horizons. So, if these tools and some of the questions we are asking now aren't all that new per se, why the alarm over AI and why now?

⁸ For more on the instrumentalizing of humanity in medicine, see JEFFREY P. BISHOP, *THE ANTICIPATORY CORPSE: MEDICINE, POWER, AND THE CARE OF THE DYING* (2011).

⁹ I write more about these types of AI in chapter 8 of my book, *THE AGE OF AI: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY* (2020).

¹⁰ ROBERT SPAEMANN, *PERSONS: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'SOMEONE' AND 'SOMETHING'* 42 (Oliver O'Donovan trans., 2017).

¹¹ Elon Musk (@elonmusk), X (Mar. 12, 2024, 10:25 PM), <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1767738797276451090>.

¹² For more on plans for AGI from companies like Open AI, see *Planning for AGI and Beyond*, OPENAI (Feb. 24, 2023), <https://openai.com/index/planning-for-agi-and-beyond/>.

¹³ THACKER, *supra* note 9, at 174-75.

The Dehumanizing Irony of AI

One of most ironic things about this age of AI is that we tend to humanize our machines and dehumanize ourselves in the process. Humanity tends to develop and use these tools in ways that cause us to ask questions about what these tools might become, seeking to humanize our machines through anthropomorphic language, and even treat these machines as if they are our companions or worse: soon-to-be gods with dreams (nightmares) of artificial super intelligence.

A recent example of this phenomenon can be seen in the announcement of the Friend AI-empowered pendant worn around your neck that promises, not to help you be more productive per se, but to keep you company as a close companion and friend. This tool is always listening and communicates with the wearers through text messages and push notifications to a smartphone.¹⁴ Yet while we humanize these machines with names, faces, and even misconceived ideas of real companionship, we also dehumanize ourselves, seeing each other as merely the sum of our parts and capacities in a materialistic framework devoid of human uniqueness and exceptionalism. It seems that one of the main reasons many in society find themselves both amazed and fearful about these tools is that AI is fundamentally challenging what we have long held of what it meant to be human. These advanced AI systems have fundamentally challenged much of what we have assumed about the uniqueness of humanity because for generations humanity has often assumed that what it meant to be human was simply a capacity or attribute including the ability to think, create, use language, make weighty decisions, and perform certain complex tasks. But AI systems are performing many of those tasks that in the past were solely reserved for humans, thus forcing us to question some of our anthropological assumptions. In truth, these tools are *imitating* and *mimicking* human behaviors that we have long assumed were only possible for other human beings to emulate.

Christians often rightly employ the language of the image of God, *imago Dei*, when

speaking about the unique nature of humanity and for good reason. As Genesis 1:26-27 states,

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Definitions of the image of God have long been debated within Christianity, with each generation often defining the image based on the contemporary challenges they face in society. A robust biblical anthropology is central to all of life, especially in Christian ethics, and is vital for navigating the complex opportunities and challenges before us in this age of AI. Better understanding what it means to be human can function as a robust moral apologetic as we seek to give a defense for the hope within us and to engage others with both gentleness and respect amid today's challenging technological questions.

Traditionally, the church has recognized three prevailing views of the image that emphasize a particular capacity or attributes as the defining factor of humanity. The first view is known as the substantive view of the image, which focuses on a capacity or attribute related to reason, rationality, creativity, or even the use of language. This has been a dominant view throughout church history, and a structural understanding of human value is widely held in philosophical anthropologies as well. In a Christian perspective, we see that God created us with the unique ability to reason or have the capacity for rational thought that is different and more advanced than other aspects of creation. Humanity does indeed often manifest a higher level of rationality, as opposed to other forms of life in creation. Though, theologian Ryan S. Peterson notes that the image of God "should not be interpreted by comparing humanity to other creatures, identifying

¹⁴ For more on the Friend AI pendant, see Boone Ashworth, *Wear This AI Friend Around Your Neck*, WIRED (June 30, 2024), <https://www.wired.com/story/friend-ai-pendant/>.

the differences, and positing the differences as the definition of the image.¹⁵ There are a number of challenges to this traditional view of the human person, but the most consequential one seems to be that if reason is seen as the defining factor of the image and of human dignity, then supporters of this view must address questions of the dignity of human beings who may not exhibit such common rational capacities or are incapacitated for various reasons. To counter these challenges, some philosophers have developed concepts such as the “privilege of the normal” or even identified reason as a “range property,” which was famously articulated by political philosopher John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice*.¹⁶

A second view tends to focus on the capacity or attribute of social interaction and relationships with God and others. The relational view tends to focus on our ability to form and maintain relationships with God and our fellow image bearers. Again, this view, like the one above, rightly sees this capacity and attribute as being uniquely manifested in humanity, but then one must again ask if this is the defining factor of the image and human dignity. This approach to human value and equality may fall prey to similar critique as the earlier substantive interpretation of the *imago Dei* because it tends to reduce the image down to a mere capacity for relationships—both with God and others—which are obvious implications of the text and the whole canon itself. But this view seems to fail to account for human dignity for those human beings who do not exhibit this attribute or do so at lower levels than traditionally associated with being human.

Lastly, the third view is centered on how humanity functions as representatives of God through our roles and responsibility. This vice-regency or representative view of the image sees the image primarily manifested in the capacity to perform certain functions or jobs and to represent God as His image bearers in this world. The royal interpretation is the idea that because we are created according to God’s image, humanity functions as His representatives

or vice-regents on earth by exercising dominion and stewardship over all of creation on behalf of God. This view rightly emphasizes humanity’s shared moral responsibility and moral agency as God’s image bearers. As Carl F.H. Henry correctly notes, this emphasis on taking dominion as a representative of God made in His image and likeness is “clearly an aspect of the Genesis teaching.”¹⁷ While being a main thrust of Genesis 1, Peterson notes this view tends to equate human identity and function, which are not “necessarily identical even if they are mutually dependent.”¹⁸ Similar to the critiques of the previous two views, this view tends to equate one’s dignity with what one *does* rather than who one *is* by nature of being biologically human.

Not all human beings have high levels of intellect, emotional and relational IQ, or function in particular ways that we often see manifest in and associate with being human. This can be due to cognitive or physical disabilities, age, or even stage of development in the case of our preborn neighbors and the most vulnerable in our society, including young children. How we define what it means to be human has vast implications for all of life, including how we think about emerging technologies that are beginning to mimic or imitate attributes that we have long thought were exclusively human. In short, it is far too easy today to assume that our value and dignity—and that of our neighbor—is simply based on what we *do* or on what we can *contribute* to our society. But the Christian ethic reminds us—especially in an age of emerging technologies like AI—that the value and dignity of humans isn’t rooted in what we *do*, but rather in who we *are* as unique image bearers of our creator. God made us in His very image and nothing—not even the most advanced AI systems—will be able to change that unique status given to us by our Creator.

While all three of the previously mentioned views are clearly implications of the image and are manifested properly in most human beings in varying degrees, there is a fourth and all-encompassing view of the image that isn’t direct-

15 RYAN S. PETERSON, *THE IMAGO DEI AS HUMAN IDENTITY: A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION* 33 (2016).

16 JOHN RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* 444-46 (Belknap Press rev. ed. 1999).

17 CARL F. H. HENRY, *GOD, REVELATION, AND AUTHORITY* 139-40 (1976).

18 PETERSON, *supra* note 15, at 41.

ly tied to a particular attribute or capacity, but rather is seen as an ontological status as a biological human being made in God's image. This status is inalterable, unchanging, and something bestowed upon us uniquely by our Creator. As theologian Richard Lints rightfully points out, the *imago Dei* "does not appear as a place marker for an otherwise long list of human traits and qualities," meaning that while the image of God obviously has several implications and external manifestations in the lives of humanity, it isn't reducible down to our traits, attributes, or qualities alone.¹⁹ Spaemann notes something similar by stating that "human beings have certain definite properties that license us to call them 'persons'; but it is not the properties we call persons, but the human being who possess the properties."²⁰ He later notes that "there are, in fact, no potential persons. Persons possess capacities i.e. potentialities, and so personhood may develop. But nothing develops into a person."²¹ A person in Spaemann's framework is *someone* (a subject) rather than *something* (an object), meaning regardless of one's capacities or attributes they are persons by simply being a member of the human species. He writes that "there can, and must, be one criterion for personality, and one only; that is biological membership of the human race."²² Human beings are a specific kind of creature who do indeed exhibit certain characteristics and attributes in unique ways, but our dignity is based upon the mere presence of those attributes or capacities.

Critics of this view may be dissatisfied with speaking of the value of humanity as a kind of ontological status instead of a specific attribute or capacity to be identified, but, as C.S Lewis reminds us, "you cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it."²³ Questions of the ethical development and use of AI should be centralized on an understanding of human dignity as an unchangeable status rather than simply what one does, especially with pow-

erful machines that can now imitate or mimic particular human attributes in varying degrees. Thus, one of the ways we love God is by loving our neighbors as ourselves,²⁴ recognizing their dignity and value as image bearers of the Almighty God is not tied to what they *do* but who they *are*. These realities will refocus our approach to AI development and use—centering them on human dignity.

Moving Forward

There is a massive push to adopt new technologies like AI, often without adequate reflection on how these tools inevitably shape our view of the human person and the world around us. While advanced AI tools may mimic or imitate certain human characteristics, they are mere objects and machines, never subjects like you or me. It may sound trite given the challenges we face with AI today in society, but we must ask ourselves: Are these tools helping us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves or are we sacrificing those things in the pursuit of increasing the bottom line or building ourselves up at the expense of another's dignity? We must consider how these tools are affecting other people who are made in the very image of God, not just what is profitable or productive. Christians developing and interacting with these tools need to ask the question of *should we* vs. *can we*, which is at the very core of wisdom and the path forward for thoughtful Christians in this age of AI. It is far too easy for us to become enamored with these tools—to give into worldly hype and simply assume we should use something just because we can. Instead of just adopting new technologies because everyone is talking about them or trying to sell them to us, we must begin thinking about their potential use, how they are shaping our perspective of the world, and the possible risks and dangers associated with these tools—especially as it relates to the dignity of our fellow human beings.

As Postman points out, we must enter with our eyes wide open and recognize that new tech-

19 RICHARD LINTS, IDENTITY AND IDOLATRY: THE IMAGE OF GOD AND ITS INVERSION 60 (2015).

20 SPAEMANN, *supra* note 10, at 236.

21 *Id.* at 245.

22 *Id.* at 247.

23 C. S. LEWIS, THE ABOLITION OF MAN 81 (Harper Collins 2001) (1943).

24 *Matthew* 22:37-39.

nologies are not additive but ecological as they change everything about an environment when used. He employs the illustration of adding a drop of red dye to a bowl of clear water, noting that you don't end up with a bowl of clear water plus a drop of red food coloring. You end up with bowl of pink water as everything is changed by the inclusion of the drop.²⁵ Similarly, technology, especially AI, radically alters everything in our lives, including a view of God, ourselves as human beings, and the world around us—whether we realize it or not. One of the greatest temptations when faced with complex or challenging ethical questions with technology is the rush to a position of uncritical adoption or rejection of these tools. Wisdom, which is at the core of the Christian moral tradition, calls us to slow down and to think deeply about the nature of these tools, as well as the myriad of its uses.

As the influence of technology continues to increase throughout our society, Christians need to be reminded that we have a robust ethic centered on loving God and neighbor in the daily engagement of current issues from a place of hope and faith rather than debilitating pessimism or even unbridled optimism. AI isn't going anywhere, and Christians need to think deeply about how these tools are shaping our perspective of God, ourselves, and the world around us. As AI continues to fundamentally challenge what we have long assumed it means to be human, that does not alter how God made us in His image, as well as His deep and abiding love for us. As the church has historically done amid challenges, we must articulate even more precisely what we believe and “contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints”²⁶—no matter what challenges AI may bring. We have a steadfast hope, even in the midst of an uncertain future, because we know that God is, above all, sovereign over history and all of humanity, and that nothing will ever supplant how God made us in his very image, not even the most advanced AI system.

²⁵ Postman, *supra* note 2.

²⁶ *Jude* 3.