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Artificial Intelligence: What is at Theological Stake?

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INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is ubiquitous in the land, and covers a wide range of phenomena. In asking what is at theological stake in reckoning with it, I am allowing theological concerns to dictate what in AI is of interest, rather than attending dispassionately to everything that it comprehends. Of itself, this scarcely narrows the area we might cover; in all its diversity, AI proffers plenty of material for theological consideration. Still, it is profitable to ask whether there is something at or near the heart of this sprawling but distinct phenomenon of AI, from a Christian point of view. In what follows, I pursue a train of thought which does *not* seek to be a balanced and dispassionate evaluation of AI. It explores an angle.

The global portent attending the military use of AI makes us ask if what is theologically at stake must be one with what is humanly at stake. It is no commendation to be born a human being and die a theologian, and while David Hume is not obvious candidate for helping us to cultivate the relevant self-awareness, his reminder is well taken: 'Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.'[1] Pride of place amongst public causes for military alarm doubtless goes to Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), which introduce the possibility of human decision-making being replaced by AI. However, there are other military aspects to consider, and attending to one of the most important gives us a direct route into theology. The Bundeswehr Office for Defence Planning in Germany and the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre in the Ministry of Defence jointly produced a document on *Human Augmentation – the Dawn of a New Paradigm*.[2] Human augmentation is 'the application of science and technologies to temporarily or permanently improve human performance' (18). Under consideration is the use of AI to augment human capacities, that is, AI used in the service of IA: Intel-

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[1] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in P.H.Nidditch ed., *Hume's Enquiries*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 9.

[2] This is accessible on the government (www.gov.ac.uk) website. From now on, I shall often incorporate page details into the body of the text of this article.

ligence Augmentation. We are solemnly assured that such augmentation is a dangerous and unethical tinkering with our humanity. Nonetheless, while our ethical scruples bid us desist from it, other nations will proceed with it. Accordingly, responsibility for national security forces us to devise an ethical framework which justifies our giving human augmentation positive consideration.

Theology appears in the wings with the observation that '[h]uman augmentation may challenge or offend religious views and appear to give credence to other belief systems, such as transhumanism' (58). In a footnote, transhumanism is defined (in a standard way) as the belief 'that humankind can and should eradicate ageing as a cause of death, and that humans and machines should be merged to enhance the human condition'. Later, reference is made to 'the transhumanistic thinking model' (85). Immersed in weighty military concerns, we are thus directed both to the centrality of the question of what it is to be human and to the religious stake in that question. Adverting to human augmentation is not an excuse for skipping lightly over the admission that the ethical issues immediately surrounding LAWS are vital and urgent, and that theological ethics must engage with them specifically. Rather, the appearance of transhumanism on the military scene suggests that it does not betray massive and leisurely social and political complacency if we place the broader question of AI and humanity, with all its social, cultural, technological, and intellectual sweep, at the centre of our theological interest.

Perhaps I have wielded a miniature sledgehammer to crack a little nut; it is a truism to note the centrality of the question of what it is to be human in connection with AI. Secular and religious thinkers alike bear witness to that. For example, Max Tegmark, professor of Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and president of the Future of Life Institute, wrote *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of AI*.[3] Life 3.0, yet to appear on Earth, is life that can 'dramatically redesign' life, changing what it is to be human, and succeeding 'simple biological' life (1.0), and cultural life (2.0) (26). Tegmark concluded that we need to humble ourselves, rebranding ourselves *homo sentiens*, because AI renders the claim that *homo sapiens* is the summit of human evolution embarrassing (314).

Tegmark is not alone in telling us that 'the age of AI' compels the deflation of human pride. More recently, Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt (formerly CEO of Google), and Daniel Huttenlocher (Schwartzman College of Computing at MIT) produced *The Age of AI*.[4] The authors varied

3   Tegmark, *Life 3.0* (London: Penguin, 2018).
4   Kissinger et al, *The Age of AI and Our Human Future* (London: John Murray, 2022).

somewhat in their mix of optimism and pessimism about AI, but together focussed on a sobering challenge: AI is overthrowing the hegemony of reason which, since the Enlightenment, we have identified as the supreme instrument of knowledge. Since the Enlightenment, 'choice based on reason has been…the defining attribute of humanity' (25). AI knows things which humans not only do not, but also cannot know. When Alpha Zero plays chess, it not only metaphorically hammers its human protagonists, it plays chess in a different dimension, making some impossibly bizarre moves in our dimension. It certainly did not learn any of them from humans. It was simply taught the objective and the rules of chess.

There is a more dramatic example. When AI undertook a hitherto unsuccessful human search for an antibiotic to kill bacteria strains, it spotted molecular attributes which exceed the capacity of the human mind to spot. Moreover, it identified molecular relationships that might be humanly indescribable, let alone humanly detectable. AI forces us to posit a knowable realm out there that is not knowable by humans. Human reason can never access it. AI, which can and does, operates on terms that transcend reason (187). Since we have come to view reason as the pinnacle of who we are, we have to re-think who we are, not just re-think reason. 'Human perception and experience, filtered through reason, has long defined our understanding of reality' (131). AI transforms our experience of reality. No other technology has so altered how we 'humans understand reality and our role within it' is transformed (17). Our authors are untroubled by our humanly relative perceptual shortcomings; bats or bears tuned into sonic frequencies outwith our range cause no sleepless nights. Reason outdone is the problem.

I am using this as a springboard into the ensuing discussion of the image of God as the (predictable) focus of what is at theological stake with AI. As worthy springboards do, it will send us briefly underwater before the image comes to the surface, but the trajectory will be clear.

FROM DIGNITY TO IMAGE

Those who believe that God knows things about the created order that humans, certainly in this life, cannot, are unlikely to be fazed by their belief. Perhaps nothing in their view of reason leads Christians to suspect *a priori* the kind of limits on human reason which AI has revealed to be the case in relation to the created order. Even so, they are surely not emotionally averse to or find spiritually disturbing the possibility that there are constitutionally elusive molecular relationships. Perhaps this is too cavalierly tossed out by the non-scientist, and we must reckon with the conviction that humans are beings borne along by 'the pure desire

to know' everything there is to be known.[5] Still, many of us will stolidly remain unfazed.

In the literature, AI is commonly described as 'knowing' things, even when it is denied or doubted that it possesses conscious knowledge, the language being commonly used in a loose and operational, not a studied and philosophical, way. That said, the supposition that there exist material realities unknowable to human beings should command our interest.[6] Kissinger and his colleagues' account alerts us to the possibility that the prospect of material realities or existences eternally imperceptible by a knowing mind dismays the human spirit. Those vaguely aware of Bishop Berkeley's reputation for claiming that 'to exist is to be perceived' might prick up their ears, and wonder if it is coherent to suppose that there are material realities which are categorically imperceptible. For Berkeley, it was impossible for anything to exist without being perceived, because there is nothing that is not perceived by God. Translated into the idiom of AI, Berkeley's God is a conscious, uncreated super-intelligence. 'Uncreated' marks the incontrovertible distinction between God and AI, as there are some who believe that the creation of a conscious intelligence or super-intelligence is at least conceivable.

Although cultural responses to AI 'knowledge' beckons us along an important theological path, our three authors encourage us to strike out on another, and I shall keep faith with them. Adjusting to the age of AI, they propose that '[t]o make sense of our place in this world, our emphasis may need to shift from the centrality of human reason to the centrality of human dignity and autonomy' (196). They do not develop their proposal, but they set a theological agenda which theologians might comfortably adopt. In regard to this trio of concepts, Descartes surely sounded the fanfare of modernity, studiously assigning to human reason its central place precisely because it is the epistemological efflux of the spiritual autonomy which constitutes human dignity.[7] (I mention Descartes because he will return later.) Perhaps theology has nothing new to say about autonomy in relation to AI that it has not said in other contexts. This should be qualified: from a disability perspective, we have to ask what is presupposed

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5   So, for example, Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1983), XII.1.

6   Such realities might be knowable to imagined post-humans, enhanced beyond humankind in their intellectual, as well as physical, capacities.

7   Peter Schouls' rewarding study of *Descartes and the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989) encourages me to put it this way.

about embodiment and intelligence in the ideal underlying AI, and the question of autonomy might be freshly addressed in that context.[8]

What about human dignity? Gary Kasparov, then world chess master, remarked that in his match against the computer, Deep Blue, he was there to 'help defend our [human] dignity'.[9] Robert Song identifies the question of dignity as lying at the heart of a theological response to AI.[10] He discourages a defence of human dignity in the face of AI that takes the form of highlighting human uniqueness. His argument goes like this. If intelligent machines threaten human uniqueness, they do not thereby threaten human dignity. Human dignity does not consist in the possession of distinctive characteristics, and does not require us to posit human uniqueness. The reason why we should be concerned about human dignity, rather than human uniqueness, is because the philosophy undergirding AI is prone to downgrading human dignity. It is the philosophy of naturalism. For naturalism, what is matter is matter only, so human beings are mere matter. For Christians, human dignity properly consists in the fact that we are not mere matter. This reality shapes our human vocation; that vocation is the stamp of our God-given dignity; and we are not robbed of our dignity by the possibility that we cannot specify characteristics, such as our intelligence, that make us unique.

Song's observations on the naturalistic assumptions characterizing philosophies which typically undergird AI are well taken, but we must demur from his conclusion. Granted, we should not operate *a priori* with a rather abstract or untested presumption that human dignity is only protected as long as we protect human uniqueness. However, when we read in Genesis of humankind made in the image of God, we read of that wherein it is unique, and if we import the language of dignity in order to do theological work in connection with this unique order, must not human dignity either reside in or include what uniquely character-

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[8]   There are important practical questions about the relation of AI to disability. In correspondence, I have learned of the difficulty that can be encountered in AI-powered interviews when an applicant with disability is judged to have fallen short in the areas of eye contact or vocal enthusiasm. AI algorithms may be so devised that no account is taken of this, even though the law requires that reasonable accommodation should be made for applicants with disability.

[9]   Quoted in Noreen Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), p. 4.

[10] 'Robots, AI and human uniqueness: learning what not to fear', in John Wyatt & Stephen N. Williams, *The Robot Will See You Now: Artificial Intelligence and the Christian Faith* (London: SPCK, 2021), pp. 107-20.

izes human being.[11] ('Include' simply takes into account features humans share with the animal and even wider creation.) Robert Song takes Genesis seriously for theology today. If so, unless AI possesses the capacity to be in the image of God – or, more cautiously, at least partakes of whatever it is about the image which marks out human uniqueness – human uniqueness is ingredient in human dignity.[12]

Does or can AI possess or partake of that capacity? It neither does nor can. To get at why not, I refer to an early theological engagement with AI, where Noreen Herzfeld addressed the question of what has driven people to create it.[13] Herzfeld described its goal as being 'to create an "other" in our own image' (ix). She detected parallels between the major historical interpretations of the image of God and the reasons for creating AI in the image of humans. Three such historical interpretations were identified: the image of God has been understood as something (a) substantial - humans are intelligent or rational, (b) functional - the gift and responsibility of dominion, or (c) relational – in regard both to God and to others. In devising AI in the image of humans, the substantial, functional and relational have all featured: we have sought to make AI (a) with the property of intelligence - the substantial aspect, or (b) capable of performing certain tasks - the functional aspect, or (c) to which we can relate and perhaps can relate to us - the relational aspect. (Some combination of the three is possible.) Herzfeld returned briefly to this in a recent volume, where she characterized the creation of AI in our image in corresponding terms of 'mirror', or 'servant', or 'friend'.[14]

This is an instructive thesis, but there is also an instructive omission. Omitted is a fourth view of the image that has been historically influential, one espoused by many in the Protestant tradition, though present in the early church. It interprets the image as a moral quality, a moral

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[11] For an attempt to connect image and dignity, see John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Mi/Cambridge: 2015), especially Part II. Those who believe that humans have forfeited the image can still accept the substance of all that I argue, although they will reformulate some sentences. So, most recently, Brian Brock, *Joining Creation's Praise: A Theological Ethic of Creatureliness* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Mi: 2025), chapter 4.

[12] We are concerned only with the connection between human uniqueness and human dignity germane to human vocation on earth. The question of what the connection would look like if we compared humans to angels or to hypothetical forms of extra-terrestrial intelligence is not on the table.

[13] See above, n.10.

[14] *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationship in a Robotic Age* (Minneapolis, Mi: Fortress, 2023), p. 9.

excellence: to be in the image of God is to be righteous, so it is a moral quality suffused with religious substance. Unfortunately, others writing on AI have followed Herzfeld.[15] What is interesting is less the fact than the significance of this omission in her account. Had she reckoned with this fourth view, she would not readily have found a parallel with the creation of AI in the image of humankind. True, there is talk of moral AI and of religious AI, but the production of an intelligence for the sake of moral excellence *coram Deo* has not motivated or driven the creation of AI. That is the case even where creators of AI incorporate an essential moral component into the substance of its intelligence, the exercise of its tasks, or its relational aptitude.

Whether or not any of these four ways is actually true to Genesis or Scripture more widely, the generic capacity for religious relationship with God, which God has established in the human creature, and in which moral agency is embedded, is biblically and theologically at the heart of the dignity of humans made in the divine image. Such a capacity is clearly not essential to AI, but why pronounce that its acquisition not even possible? Christianity views the religious relationship between God and humans in both generic and in particular terms: generic, in that humankind is constituted for that relationship; particular, in that the relationship of discrete individuals to God is constituted variously, and variously incorporated into the history of humankind. Humankind is incapable of creating AI that has this relationship. It does not have a clue how it could be done generically, has no control over the relationship into which God enters with any particular being, and cannot integrate AI into a corporate religious history.

Question: if a relationship with God of the kind humans enjoy cannot be engineered, could not God, to the best of our knowledge, sovereignly enter into a relationship with products of the human hand which may closely resemble his relationship with humans? Discussion of this question has to negotiate the hurdle of AI consciousness. Is there a theological stake in discussion of the possibility of AI consciousness? Not necessarily. The possibility of AI possessing some form of consciousness is rather a matter for neuroscience or philosophy than for theology. Indeed, if we thought that AI consciousness could or was likely to come about, we should have to reckon theologically with that, in the same way that we reckon theologically with anything scientifically learned or technologi-

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[15] So in the most recent theological treatment of AI, Ximian Xu, *The Digitalised Image of God: Artificial Intelligence, Liturgy, and Ethics* (New York, NY/ Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), pp. 18-25. In contrast, throughout *Dignity and Destiny*, Kilner identifies the four views.

cally devised. But Donald Mackay, one-time Research Professor of Communication and Neuroscience in the University of Keele, was surely right to deny that we are directly committed theologically to a position on the possibility of AI consciousness.[16] This is not to presume brightly that it is intellectually open season as regards the possibility of conscious AI. It is a question of the grounds on which we come to our conclusions. In a parallel way, Christian faith does not directly commit us to a belief that the earth orbits the sun, but Christians will not for that reason regard it as an open question.

However, even if theology does not directly outlaw the possibility of AI consciousness, I have claimed that it denies the possibility that any such hypothetical consciousness could replicate or significantly resemble that of humans created in the image of God. Admittedly, when public life is in view, we might wonder if Christians can afford the luxury of being non-committal on AI consciousness in general, while restricting its possible forms. Should robots or electronic persons acquire political and legal rights? If the church aspires to contribute to public discussion of this question, must it not form a theological opinion on the possibility of AI consciousness in general? Again, not necessarily. Robot rights are discussed against the backdrop of human rights, and human rights are the rights of beings made in the image of God. Christians will thus have their own reasons for denying that robots can be accorded social and political rights in a way redolent of human rights. They may also have non-religious natural-scientific, social-scientific, ethical, or philosophical reasons for reaching conclusions on the matter of robot rights, and advance them in the public square. I conclude – rather tentatively - that there is no specifically theological stake in the possibility of some form of AI consciousness.

CHANGING THE ANGLE

We have broached the question of AI consciousness on the back of the question of the image of God. Should this whole discussion not have been aborted at take-off by observing that Christians should agree with secular thinkers who insist that consciousness is essentially embodied? Noreen Herzfeld is a good example of those who incorporate non-religious thought into their reasoning here. A chapter in *The Artifice of Intelligence* on 'Why We Need Bodies' treats the difficulty of uploading a mind onto

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[16] Donald M. Mackay, *Brains, Machines, and Persons* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 62-65. Mackay talked in terms of a 'biblical' commitment, but that seems to comprise a 'theological' commitment.

a computer. Brains are more than neurons; the brain is only part of our neurological system; the enteric system (the gut), with its multitude of neurons, has been called 'a second brain'. There are scientific difficulties with the idea that brain can be so dissociated from the rest of the body as to enable a computer simulation of mind. She also talks about the spirituality of the body in relationships, the importance of face or of touch, and the psychology of non-relational isolation.

While theologians properly invoke all this, a degree of caution is in order when agreeing that anything resembling human intelligence is essentially embodied. The apostle Paul envisaged a transformation of the physical into a spiritual body, one not constituted of flesh and blood, and countered scepticism about the resurrection by emphasizing the discontinuity between the present and future forms of human embodiment (1 Corinthians 15:35-50).[17] Being human does not entail having flesh and blood. Yet, eschatological embodiment is not *creatio ex nihilo*. Its possibility is the possibility of succession to and mysterious connection with our earthly bodies composed of flesh and blood. Accordingly, if the eschatological prospect shows that human intelligence is not necessarily embodied in the form of flesh and blood, that does not *per se* establish the possibility of a positive connection between human intelligence and AI. AI does not manifest a form of eschatological succession to the temporal.

AI brings to distinctive expression the widespread Western cultural supposition that humankind is not essentially religious, that is, constituted in its very being in relation to God. AI is undergirded by two salient beliefs. One is that, if we describe humankind in biological or, species terms, *homo sapiens sapiens* is not, scientifically speaking, essentially religious, despite its contingent religious evolutionary history. The other is that an intelligence which is not essentially religious is not for that reason lacking in some desideratum. These two beliefs have important consequence for those who think in terms of higher and lower, superior and inferior forms of being. In theological perspective, if these terms are accepted, AI would here count as a lower form of created entity than the human, constitutionally related to God in its unique way. This judgement applies to enhanced humans too, and to the transhumanist project, just as long as religious existence is regarded as something just contingent.

To say that what is at theological stake in reckoning with AI is the significance of humankind in the image of God may be trite, but we are surely in danger of minimising its significance. It is a significance

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[17] In speaking about our future spiritual bodies, Paul never indicates the pre-ascension resurrected body of Christ, where there is a continuity between his earthly flesh and blood and resurrected body.

more effectively shown than said, or most effectively said only when first shown. In his impressive adumbration of inter-personal neurobiology, Dan Siegel forcefully expounds the nature of mind, laying out scientifically 'the interconnections among the body and its brain, the mind, and our relationships with people and the planet'.[18] He demonstrates how the human brain is wired to human community. If the church is the divinely ordered optimal form of earthly human community, then must we not conclude that the human brain is wired to the church? At first blush, the question, let alone a positive answer, registers somewhere on the scale of risible to preposterous. Let the blush be spared. A positive answer is just a specific, considered application of inter-personal scientific neuro-biology. However, until this proposition about the church is undergirded by its existing and visible reality, set in a biblical mould, it will indeed loll about comfortably in the domain of the risible or preposterous.

Here, in the context of AI, we are sounding a wearily familiar ecclesiological note. The religious formation off Descartes is instructive here. Descartes is a rewarding figure to study in connection with AI.[19] His whole century is stacked with intellectual background to AI, featuring Thomas Hobbes, the 'grandfather of AI', credited with 'prophetically launching' it, Gottfried Leibniz, 'the patron saint of cybernetics', and John Locke, who scared the living daylights out of orthodox Christians by asking whether or not God could attach to matter the power of thought.[20] If Descartes belongs to their century, he seems not to belong to their company: for him, mind is immaterial, and what is material does not have the power of thought and cognition. His dualism seems antithetical to AI. However, not one respondent to the work in which he set out this position most influentially, the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, was convinced by his

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[18] Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY/London: Guilford, 2020), p. 6.

[19] I have attempted a superficial and preliminary account in 'Artificial Intelligence in the Shadow of Descartes', in *Faith and Thought*, 77 (2024), pp. 3-19.

[20] For Hobbes, see John Haugeland, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), p. 23; for Leibniz, see Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass: Technology Press, 1948), p. 20; for Locke, see *An Essay on Human Understanding*, ed., P. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), IV.3.6. For contemporary relevance of the connection between cybernetics and AI, see the introduction in John Brockman, ed., *Possible Minds: 25 Ways of Looking at AI* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2019).

arguments.[21] So vigorously did he expound a redoubtable, uncompromising, and austere mechanicity in relation to the human body that his critics found inexplicable the exemption of mind from such a comprehensive materialist account set out on the terms that he did. The impetus which Descartes gave to the 'machine-mindedness' which informs AI is arguably second to none in modern philosophy.[22]

Our ecclesiological interest lies in remarks which Descartes makes in what has been regarded as the founding document of modern philosophy, usually referred to under the abbreviated title of *Discourse on Method*.[23] Here, he provides an account of how he prosecuted his intellectual enterprise. Dissatisfied with his intellectual training, he appointed reason to be his guide in a long search for truth, which famously proceeded by razing to the ground any philosophical edifice not built on the presumption of universal doubt. While a house is being re-built, Descartes reminds us, its occupant must live somewhere. Accordingly, he resolved to live by a provisional moral code, suited to a 'place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress' (122). Comfort matters. The first rule in a code he devised for the maximization of happiness is to 'obey the law and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood…'

Well, Descartes was nurtured in the faith of the (Catholic) Church. The religion in which he was instructed, and the code inculcated into him from childhood, should accordingly have been grounded in the truth that the human individual at core is constituted as an embodied being-in-relationship, fulfilled in love. It is a religion and code that should have been transmitted by example, and not just by precept. Had this been done, Descartes would both have experienced as existential reality and held provisionally as a theological tenet that humans are destined not for individual self-possession, but for relationships and love. Of course, once embarked on the philosophical seas, he might have chucked it all

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21 See in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, trs., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

22 'Machine-mindedness' is a central preoccupation in Iain McGilchrist's monumental study of *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmasking of the World*, 2 vols, (London: Perspectiva, 2022). Descartes is prominent here, as he was in McGilchrist's earlier *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, Ct/London: Yale University Press, 2012).

23 See in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, trs., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

overboard, or, to stick to his terrestrial analogy, torn down his temporary ecclesial abode and provisional religious scheme. Who knows? What we do know is that his provisional code did not incorporate ecclesiology or ecclesial life.[24] The barren ecclesial design of his temporary abode was scarcely crafted in a community of love.

We might boldly venture a further connection between theology, Descartes and AI. The most comprehensive contemporary resource for adjudging AI in a wider, civilizational context is provided by two books authored by Iain McGilchrist: *The Master and His Emissary*, and *The Matter with Things*.[25] McGilchrist's thesis is that the two hemispheres of the brain approach the world differently, approaching it properly only when the left, which is analytic and piecemeal in its approach, plays servant to the right, which should be incorporating the findings of the left into its own integrative, intuitive, whole-picture approach. Unfortunately, the left has usurped the right, the emissary the master, with the result that our world-view is being dramatically misshapen. This role-reversal means that we take for reality what is really the left hemisphere's distorted take on reality. Consequently, our civilization is under serious threat.

Descartes is omnipresent in McGilchrist's work. It is hard to exaggerate much the significance and prominence of his profile. He is the only philosopher mentioned in the 'Introduction' of *The Master and His Emissary*, which sets out the neuroscientific thesis advanced in bot volumes, and the first major one to be introduced in its first chapter. Things take a dramatic turn when McGilchrist cites David Levin's comments on the passage in Descartes where Descartes supposes that, when he looks out of the window and sees people crossing the square, he sees only 'hats and coats which could conceal automatons. I *judge* that they are men.'[26] In both his works, McGilchrist is keenly interested in schizophrenia and madness. Levin comments: 'What could be a greater symptom of madness than to look out of one's window and see (what might, for all one knows, be) machines, instead of real people?...This kind of vision is what the rationality he [Descartes] has embraced leads to.'[27] Influenced by the work of Louis Sass, McGilchrist capitalizes on the connection between

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[24] We might infer that from some other features in his provisional code too; see *Discourse*, pp. 123-24.

[25] See footnote 23.

[26] So Descartes in his second *Meditation*, p. 21.

[27] *The Master*, p. 333. McGilchrist alludes to this passage again on p. 439. In *The Matter with Things*, this passage in Descartes turns up in the account of 'Zombies', pp. 1113-14.

Cartesian and schizophrenic ways of thinking.[28] Reason is rooted in the body. Descartes' reason is apparently not. Descartes is not sure whether he has a body at all.[29] Meanwhile, Descartes espouses a rationality surpassed in its kind only by the Vienna Circle, which came into existence less than a generation before AI, and whose approach to reason had some early influence on it.[30]

Theologians are no more expert on schizophrenia or madness than they are on general neuroscience or inter-personal neurobiology, but the calamity of human delusion and its ultimate technological end is suggestively described in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Nothing was amiss in Eve's perception that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good for food and a delight to the eyes, but delusion set in when she thought she 'saw' that its fruit was to be desired to make her flourish in wisdom (3:6). Pathologically, sustained delusions can take the form of insanity. The story of Genesis 1-11 is the story of dominion gone awry, culminating in the edifice of Babel, product of the twin fear of dispersal and ambition to make a name (11:4). Commenting on this passage, von Rad remarked that the pride which seeks fame, and, alongside it anxiety, constitute 'the basic forces of what we call culture'.[31] Claus Westermann observed that 'the building of a massive structure that presumes definite technical discoveries and mathematical skills, as well as the common will of a group of people who think it necessary to erect this building… in essence anticipates the possibility of a development that would be realized only in the technical age in a way that would affect the whole

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[28] McGilchrist first introduces this connection in *The Master*, pp. 332-35, though he does not say that Descartes had schizophrenia. His quarry is especially, but not only, *Sass, Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), although this revised edition appeared between the publication of *The Master and The Matter With Things*. In 2019, McGilchrist added a substantial preface to his own volume.

[29] *The Master*, p. 333.

[30] McGilchrist follows Stephen Toulmin here, p. 391, although the link with AI is not explicitly made. However, in the work which McGilchrist cites, among those whom Toulmin mentions in connection with Descartes is Rudolf Carnap; see Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 154. In what is the most widely-used English text-book on AI, the authors, after referring to the Vienna Circle, describe Carnap's *The Logical Structure of the World* (1928) as 'perhaps the first theory of mind as a computational process'; so Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*, 4th ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2022), p. 25.

[31] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1961), p. 145.

of humanity.'[32] There is a number of verbal parallels in Hebrew between the Babel account and the second and third chapters of Genesis, which recount the story of Adam and Eve.[33] Should we not think of Babel as the social and collective expression of the personal and individual insanity which afflicted the parents of the human race?

What has this to do with AI? Genesis 3-11 invites us to reflect on the associated escalations of delusion and power, and we surely cannot avoid asking if AI can be situated within that reflection. To ask it is not to be tacitly committed to an apocalyptic take on AI.[34] It is a question which arises naturally when advanced intelligence is created without acknowledgement of a Creator. Does AI belong in the Babel syndrome?

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this article, I discounted any ambition to provide a balanced theological assessment of AI. Neither have I dwelt on its merits, nor attempted a constructive response, beyond a stratospherically general and perhaps unprepossessingly beige appeal to the life of the church. Perhaps every novel challenge for theology is fundamentally the challenge to shed new light on Christological truth. If there is an inspiration here in relation to AI, Teilhard de Chardin deserves special mention, 'an iconic figure amongst computer scientists and entrepreneurs'.[35] We may reject Teilhard's theology, but our sights should not be set lower than his when he studiously crafted a Christology apt for the reality of evolutionary development.[36] Teilhard's innovative and visionary Christology was the product equally of religious piety and of science. The wide scope of his vision has been compared with that of the Leibniz, whose role in the story of AI has often been noted.[37] Leibniz tried to think through the nature of

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[32] Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg, 1984), p. 554.

[33] See, e.g., Kenneth A. Mathews in his commentary on the relevant passages in *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, Tn: Broadman & Holman, 1995). 'The attempt of the Babelites to transgress human limits is reminiscent of Eve's ambition (3:5-6)', p. 467. Reminiscent of her delusion too, we might add.

[34] For this take on AI, see Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[35] So George Zarkadakis, *In Our Own Image: Will Artificial Intelligence Save Or Destroy Us?* (London: Rider, 2015), p. 245. See also pp. 126-27.

[36] See, e.g., *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1976).

[37] For comparison, see Frank E. and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), p. 410. Also, in general, C. A. van Peursen, *Leibniz* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 25.

mind and of Christology in tandem.[38] In the event, we may not receive much substantively from Leibniz, and exploration of Teilhard's route may be instructive principally as a healthy stimulus to follow an alternative. Still, as we grapple with AI and Christology and the (loosely speaking) modernity of our day, we should remember our precursors' sensibility for locating on a wide canvas what is at theological stake. Global events featuring AI may prove that this is an example of theology idling, a worry flagged up at the beginning of the article. But as long as we train our sights on the question of AI and what it is to be human, we at least assume a point of view from which both the wider phenomenon and the manifold applications of AI are optimally visible.

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[38] See Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Ct/London: Yale University Press, 2007), chapter 3.