

# ***Technology, Theology and the Human Person: The contribution of theological anthropology to the philosophy of technology***

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## **Introduction**

When I was an engineer I began asking questions that engineering could not answer, questions about my social responsibilities regarding the societal impact of the technologies I was developing, ethical questions, but also concerns about how technologies shape social relations. I turned to philosophy and discovered that others had been asking similar questions for some time. I pursued further studies and ended up teaching philosophy of technology courses to engineers in an interdisciplinary centre. Then I began asking questions that philosophy struggled to answer, questions about the ultimate purpose of technologies in a world damaged by unintended consequences that seemed inseparable from technical progress, questions about the viability of culture and the dignity of the human person. So I turned to theology and discovered theological anthropology, which traditionally holds that human beings are created in the image of God to be like God. Here I found the basis for understanding the responsibility and the dignity of the human person. In this paper I present three examples of questions by way of which I believe theological anthropology has potential to make a contribution to the philosophy of technology. I also present an illustration by way of a theological approach to transhumanism.

## **From the Social to the Anthropological Question**

The first question deals with how to resolve the seeming dichotomy between philosophical theories that hold that technologies are morally neutral (Samuel Florman), which means that they are good or bad depending upon the intentions of the user, and theories that hold that technologies are ambivalent (Jacques Ellul), which means that technologies are good and bad regardless of the intentions of the user.

In the twentieth century, Catholic social teaching addressed technology by way of the social question, namely, concerns regarding industrialization and the moral order of society. In the 1960s Church documents portrayed an overall sense of optimism with regards to social progress and technological development. Given the ontological goodness of creation, theologians tended to treat technologies as morally neutral instruments and popes simply insisted that ethical steps be taken to ensure that technical progress contribute to the common good. The shift of emphasis from the social to the anthropological question corresponds to a shift from seeing technical progress as morally neutral to recognizing it as also technologically ambivalent.

These assumptions about the moral neutrality of technologies are evident in the writings of the Second Vatican Council. In 1965, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, On the Church in the Modern World, technical progress is presented as morally neutral whereby its benefits are expected to be ensured by a social order that respects the human person and promotes the common good (25). Technologies are seen to exhibit moral neutrality in the hands of public authorities whose responsibility it is to make decisions for the good of humanity. There is no sense that the technologies themselves maybe problematic despite the best of moral intentions. Although there are glimpses of

an appreciation that technical progress may not necessarily be inherently beneficial to humanity when concerns are raised about the way the mass media can affect youth, appropriate implementation of these technological changes is considered strictly a moral problem.

The Second Vatican Council also called for openness in the Church to the methodologies and discoveries of the human and natural sciences. By endorsing the use of sociological research, *Gaudium et Spes* expressed a new understanding regarding the relationship between the Church and the world, one that called for Christians to merge morality with studies in the social sciences and keep pace of scientific and technological progress (62). Thus, the Church's social teaching must integrate social analysis with theological reflection. The challenge is similar to that faced by Catholic biblical theology when the historical-critical methods were first being integrated into scriptural exegesis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the sciences, however, where theories can be debunked, theological doctrines are not disposable. While in philosophy theories may be debated and discarded, theology must appropriate and re-appropriate the teachings of the past. In a manner of speaking, theology must be true the past, present and the future, while science, and to an extent, philosophy, is only accountable to the present. Thus, as the Church's social teaching began to appropriate technological ambivalence, it did not discard moral neutrality.

The sheer complexity of globalization challenged the Church to take into account traditional issues of morality as well as new issues concerning the ambivalence of technical progress. Pope John Paul II recognized that globalization is ambivalent but did not fully appreciate the implications of technological ambivalence (John Paul II).

In the twenty-first century, the encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI have expressed concern that social progress is being reduced to technical considerations that compromise the dignity of the human person. Moreover, Benedict acknowledges the ambivalence inherent in the deployment of communications technologies and the development of biotechnologies. His analysis represents a change in emphasis in Catholic social teaching from the social question to the anthropological question, namely, concerns regarding competing visions of the human person in society. Nevertheless, in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, Charity in Truth, he expresses concerns for the social order in terms that acknowledge the moral neutrality of technologies and concerns for the human person that acknowledge technological ambivalence without giving into the temptation that human agency is powerless to shape technological development (Benedict XVI). Because theology is inclined to appropriate new theories rather than reject old theories, I see potential here for turning to theological anthropology as a way to reconcile neutrality with ambivalence such that the importance of moral responsibility is upheld along with the recognition that technologies can be unintentionally detrimental to a world that was created good yet marked by sin. Moreover, Benedict's theological commentary on technology implicitly acknowledges that both technological determinism and social constructivism have their place in understanding the interactions between society, technology and the human person.

## **The Human Person**

The second question deals with the very notion of what it means to be a human person. Those who propose that the philosophy of technology should maintain a strictly

secular approach that does not acknowledge any contribution from theology will have to reckon with the historical consideration that the idea of “person” as we understand it today originated when theologians debated doctrinal questions about God as Trinity in the third century. Thus, Christian theology bases its understanding of what it means to be a human person upon the idea of personhood as revealed in the divine person of Jesus Christ.

The idea of “person” developed when theologians used the Greek word *prosopon*, which prior to this was used in Greek drama to designate the role a masked actor plays when speaking in a dialogue. The Fathers of the Church interpreted plurality of God expressed in certain passages of Scripture (e.g. Genesis 1.26) to be dialogue among the members of the Trinity. Tertullian was the first to apply the term to address the question of God using the formula “one being in three persons.” Hence, the idea of “person” developed out of a Christian interpretation of the Bible in which God is understood to be a dialogical being. However, the concept of “person” did not mature until about two hundred years later when, in the fifth century, Christian theology articulated the meaning of “God is a being in three persons” by proposing that it be understood as relation. Thus, “personal” means relational, where in God there is total relativity, and with the Incarnation, Jesus’ disciples enter into relationship with God and one another. Hence, with the development of the concept of person there is shift from doctrine about God to Christology and from Christology to anthropology (Ratzinger 439-445).

Theology developed the concept of “person” when addressing questions about God. When it formulated the theological truth of the union of the human and divine natures of Christ it drew upon ontology and at the same time it presented ontology with a new understanding of the concept of the human person.

Today it is important to make a distinction between “person” and “personality.” On the one hand, the meaning of “person” and “personal” is associated with claims about the intimacy, dignity and uniqueness of human relationships. On the other hand, the meaning of “personality” is associated with claims that are the opposite of these qualities. A “personality” is someone who projects an image that is public rather than intimate (Schmitz 27-28).

Although “person” in its original theological sense implies an ontological reality, its later spin off “personality” is a psychological reality. Computer scientists such as Ray Kurzweil (*The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*) and Anne Foerst (*God in the Machine: What Robots Teach Us About Humanity and God*), a self-proclaimed “robotics theologian,” believe that progress in the ability to build machines that simulate human intelligence as well as human psychological behaviour and emotions indicate that one day we will be able create “spiritual machines” that society will have to honour as persons. These technological issues revolve around questions that can be answered by turning to theological anthropology to distinguish between “person” in its original theological and ontological senses as well as its later psychological sense, often identified as the human subject.

## **Scriptural Sources**

The third question deals with how to maintain a holistic understanding of the human person while acknowledging that contemporary technologies tend to reduce the human person to a mind that functions like a computer and a body that functions like a

machine. While some anthropologies reduce the human person to one part of the totality of human existence, Christian anthropology maintains an integral wholeness. Although this wholeness is often identified as a duality of “body and soul,” simply dividing the human person into material and non-material components does not reflect the sophistication of the Christian tradition that is rooted in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Thus, in addition to the commonly acknowledged realities of body, psyche and mind, theological anthropology also takes into account the realities of heart and spirit. In this way, theological anthropology expands the criteria that the philosophers of technology typically consider when evaluating the development, morality and social impact of technical progress. Saint Paul did not explicitly develop a theological anthropology. However, his letters, as recorded in the New Testament, provide theology with an anthropological vocabulary.

Although it has been several decades since it was first published, many theologians insist that Rudolf Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament* is still one of the most important foundational works in this area (Schnelle 494-495). Since Paul sees all of creation in relationship with God, Bultmann asks what gives the human person its specifically human relationship with God. In order to answer such a question, he proposes that we must examine the formal structures of human existence in light of Paul’s use of the Greek term *soma*, translated as “body.” Bultmann explains that Paul’s use of “spiritual” lends itself to being misinterpreted by others to mean the “form” of the body. Bultmann insists that Paul’s general anthropological principle is that human existence is somatic even when it is spiritual, which means that “body” designates the whole person (Bultmann 191).

After presenting several citations from Paul, Bultmann proposes that the only plausible interpretation is that *soma* means the personal, physical presence of the person, not something attached to a person’s “soul” as if it is the real self. Since he equates *soma* with the person’s essence, Bultmann concludes that “we can say that man does not *have a soma*; he is *soma*” (Bultmann 194). It follows that the individual faculties of human existence are found in a person’s *soma* as a whole. The human person identified as *soma* becomes the being which is able to distinguish itself from itself. Since it is the nature of the human person to have a relationship with itself, the self has the possibility of being at one with itself or being alienated from itself (Bultmann 196). Paul calls this alien power *sarx*, that is, “the flesh” and this is why, when the passions of *soma* take over, he says that one is “living according to the flesh” (Bultmann 198).

I propose that Bultmann draws out of Paul’s vocabulary a contemporary theological anthropology that addresses problems we face today regarding the fragmentation of the self due to developments like communications technologies, including the Internet. Although I do not do so here, following Bultmann’s lead, the same consideration can be given to Paul’s use of the terms *pneuma*, *kardia*, *nous*, and *psyche*. Turning to Paul’s anthropological vocabulary overcomes mind/body and body/soul dualisms by understanding the human person as an integral whole formed by spirit, heart, mind and psyche within and not apart from the body.

## The Human Condition

In order to illustrate the sophistication with which theological anthropology can deal with technological dilemmas, consider the claims of transhumanists that machine-

body augmentation technologies (e.g. cochlear implants, artificial eyes, and thought-controlled prosthetics) developed for people with disabilities should be implemented to improve the lives of people in general and “fix” the human condition.

This posthuman understanding of the human person postulates that human dignity is to be found in our determination to modify and enhance human nature by means of technologies like genetic engineering, nanotechnology, cybernetics and reproductive cloning. They insist that there is no human essence to preserve, and that there is no need to draw a natural line limiting our use of technologies to modify ourselves. Hence, the debate between transhumanists and their critics is often characterized as a battle over the future of human nature (Post 1458-1459).

Theologian Karl Rahner’s essay *The Experiment with Man: Theological observations on man’s self-manipulation* presents the importance of theological anthropology while appreciating that not everyone will recognize its significance. He begins with the observation that we have always manipulated ourselves through activities like drinking wine, shaving and educating by means of imposing knowledge. However, the situation (in the 1970s and now) is radically different. Plans are being put forward to change not just parts of the human person but to change the human person as a totality, indeed, to change humanity. As he puts it, “Man is discovering that he is ‘operable’” (Rahner 207). This observation is followed by an investigation into what he calls, “the workshops of the factory of new human beings,” by which he means the fields of biology, biochemistry, genetics, psychology and sociology (Rahner 208).

Although one might expect Rahner to rage against the transhumanist position concerning self-manipulation, he simply says, “Man is fundamentally ‘operable’ and legitimately so” (Rahner 210). Thus, Christians should not condemn self-manipulation as such. Moreover, he says we should also not lament the loss of what we consider to be “natural” (Rahner 211).

Rahner explains that he is drawing upon theological anthropology when he claims that the human person is the being who manipulates oneself and that God created the human person to be free to do what one wills with oneself (Rahner 212). It follows that the essence of the human person is not permanent and complete like a thing, but is open and incomplete until he or she freely fashions it through their actions. Although Rahner is speaking in the first instance theologically, there are ontological implications for how we react to transhumanists who claim they are free to enhance their bodies. He proposes that today’s possibilities bring to light that the breadth of the freedom of the human person is not limited to the spiritual and intellectual dimensions but extends to the physical, psychological and social dimensions as well. It follows that the claim to freedom concerning the use of new technologies, as expressed by the transhumanists, not only corresponds to the freedom of the human person as understood by Christianity; it is also a product of the Christian understanding of human freedom (Rahner 214).

Rahner rejects the notion that human nature is absolutely fixed as well as the notion that it is completely fluid. Instead, he proposes that the human person is a being with an essential nature that must be respected while at the same time the human person is a being that forms its own nature through culture (Rahner 216).

Since evil is ultimately the desire for what is impossible, the proper moral concern should be to show humanity that it ought not to act when it would be pointless to do so. Rahner encourages Christians to dialogue with transhumanists by pointing out that, while

we may identify the same problems, we propose different solutions. Transhumanists long for transcendence and transformation through the use of technologies. Instead of arguing that they ought not to pursue these technical solutions because humans ought to restrict technologies to natural limits, it is incumbent upon Christians to convince them that what they ultimately desire is impossible to achieve through technical transformation but is possible to achieve through spiritual transformation. From the perspective of theological anthropology, it is impossible to achieve true immortality by technical means. Transformation in Christ is not exclusively spiritual; it concerns the whole human person, who is body. Before we insist that transhumanists heed the truth of our moral theology, Christians would do well to invite them to see the beauty of our theological anthropology. The human condition cannot be fixed by us, but it can be redeemed by God. In light of conference theme concerning the problem of insecurity, the question can be asked whether it is possible to achieve security by technical means, or whether the solution may actually be more cultural, social and spiritual rather than purely technical.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, theological anthropology can sort through dichotomies, dualisms and dilemmas by recognizing the wholeness of the human person as created by God. Charles Taylor demonstrates in his book *A Secular Age* that many aspects of contemporary society considered to be secular are actually manifestations of developments from within Christianity. Even professed atheists such as Alain Badiou (*Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*) and Slavoj Žižek (*The Parallax View*) are turning to the Judeo-Christian scriptures to help them address the question of what it means to be human. Those philosophers of technology who are concerned about technological trends that reduce the human person to particular realities (e.g. a body, mind or psyche) are invited to dialogue with theologians about what contribution theological anthropology might make to the philosophy of technology, especially when it comes to the need for appropriate limitations on the use of technologies for the sake of integral human social development that respects the dignity of the human person. Moreover, those who are Christians are invited not to be afraid of the world to come.

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