In a screen, darkly

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Human distinctiveness has begun to unravel in recent years as various technological, scientific and philosophical developments begin to blur the different lines we have drawn to distinguish ourselves from other beings in the world. It's less clear than it used to be that we can point to the fundamental characteristics that distinguish us from animals; and as machines encroach more and more onto jobs which we once thought could only be done by humans, the question of what it is that marks us out from machines comes to seem ever more pressing. I want to explore here the different ways in which Christians have used the Genesis 1 account of the creation of the world — and particularly the idea that human beings were made in the image of God — to think about what makes us human, and to point to some of the ways in which changes in technology and contemporary culture fit into those debates. Most of all I want to suggest that perhaps the crucial question when it comes to thinking about the image of God in a digital age is not — what does it mean? — but — why does it matter?

According to Genesis 1, human beings are the last creatures to be made; and of all the beings in the newly fashioned heavens and earth we are the only ones to be described as being 'in the image of God'. There's no one way to understand what this means, but interpretations of this passage have generally fallen into three main categories: those who locate the image of God in some essential characteristic of human beings; those who find it in the relationships between humans and with God; and those who locate it in the role God gives to human beings in relation to the rest of creation.

What we are in ourselves

One way to understand the Genesis narrative, is to connect the image of God to whatever it is that makes human beings unique within creation. The only problem is that it's not always entirely clear what makes human beings unique, and Genesis doesn't exactly spell it out. Perhaps — as for Maximus the Confessor — human beings are unique not because they are different from creation but because we are, uniquely, microcosms of the created world as a whole, bringing together in ourselves all of the differences that make up the world God made. Perhaps — as for Thomas Aquinas — the image of God is found supremely in humans' rational capacity: not just our ability to think logically or scientifically, but our capacity to reflect, to reason, to understand and to choose. Perhaps — as for Karl Rahner — it is that we, more than anything else in the whole of creation, have the capacity to give ourselves up to God in love, to empty ourselves so that God might fill us. Perhaps — as for James Cone — it is human beings' capacity to creatively resist the systems and structures of oppression which damage our humanity.

However, the problem with this kind of reading is that it is all but impossible to point to any human characteristic which is actually unique to us. As Felipe Fernández-Armesto points out, 'Throughout recorded history, almost every supposedly distinguishing feature by which humans have identified and differentiated themselves from other creatures, classed as non-humans, turns out to be mistaken or misleading.'[1] What happens to accounts of human existence when we recognise just how blurry are the distinctions between human and animal

cognition; between human and machine processing? What happens when we begin to recognise the way in which human thought, human feeling, human identity is ultimately inseparable from the technology, the animal and plant life, the basic material elements which constitute the world we live in?

The sociologist Nathan Jurgenson recently wrote about the film *Blade Runner*, which features a test designed to distinguish between real humans and cyborgs. But the point of the test, Jurgenson points out, isn't to work out whether the replicants share crucial characteristics with human beings; it isn't about finding out whether they are conscious, whether they have feelings, whether they have souls. Instead, 'the test merely exists to delineate which type of sentient being to exterminate. The concern isn't philosophical, but the banal evil of managing and disposing of slave labor. Unlike the Turing Test, at stake isn't if you are alive but instead if you will be put to death.'[2] Here the question of whether or not a being is human is important purely as a way of deciding who gets to live and who has to die. When we talk about new technologies and how they are changing us, when we explore theoretical questions of how we might relate to technology if it becomes self-conscious, it's very easy to forget that we already live in a society that distinguishes between those who get to live and those who have to die. We are already more able to recognise the image of God in some human beings than in others, and we continue to divide the world up along lines of race, gender, and class in ways that deal death to some and life to others.

Our relationships to other human beings

Other readings of Genesis have focused on the second half of Genesis 1.27, which says that God created human beings not only in his image but, specifically, 'male and female'. Just as accounts of the image of God which focus on some unique distinguishing characteristic of human beings tend to tell us more about the reader than they do about the text itself, so too here it is easy to see the ways in which readers' understandings of gender and its significance for human life more broadly shape the way in which they read this text.

It's possible to read the reference to gender as setting out both a binary view of gender and heterosexual marriage as fundamental to human life and to the human capacity to reflect God. Other readings of the text take the reference to gender more broadly: perhaps, some have suggested, it indicates that it is only by considering men and women together that we are able to see the image of God in human nature. Perhaps we can bring to the text the 'experiences of transgender and non-binary gender people, and suggest that the division into male and female be read as implying that there is something fundamentally human about maleness and femaleness not as a system for categorisation but as a question: how do we position ourselves in relation to gender and sexuality? Perhaps we could suggest that, just as the persons of the Trinity are distinguished not by any essential characteristics but by their relationship to one another, so too are human beings characterised

by our capacity for relationships with one another? Or perhaps we can see the reference to gender simply as a synecdoche for human differences more broadly and argue that it is only by considering humanity in all its

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multiplicity and variation that we can come to understand what God is like. But just as with the question of what human beings are fundamentally in ourselves, it is hard to see what role the idea of an image of God plays here except as validation of the assumptions about human relationships that we already bring to the text.

Jurgenson's comparison of *Blade Runner's* Voight-Kampff test with the Turing Test is interesting because the Turing Test originated not as a way to establish whether computers could act convincingly like human beings but as a parlour game where party guests tried to see if they could tell the difference between men and women. This gendered history re-emerges in the recent film *Ex Machina*, in which a computer programmer, Caleb, is brought to a secret location to meet an android, Ava, and see if she can convince him that she is really a person. It quickly becomes clear that for Caleb, the question of whether or not Ava is really a person is all but inseparable from the question of whether Ava is developing feelings for him.

Where fictional depictions of male or masculine AIs or androids (HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Data in *Star Trek*) tend to focus on their rationality and intelligence, depictions of feminine AIs or androids (Ava in *Ex Machina*, Samantha in *Her*) often focus on emotions, desire and sexuality as that which makes artificial intelligence believably human. This tells us something, perhaps, about the changing frontiers of automation. Where once the jobs most threatened by the rise of the machines were the classically masculine roles of manual labour and logical calculation, increasingly it is also the feminised labour of caring and service work that is the focus of new technological developments, from robot seals for care homes[3] to self-checkout machines. But this shift in focus in turn reflects changes in the nature of work in the industrialised Western world, as we move from a primarily manufacturing economy to what might be described as post-Fordism, that is, an economy which relies increasingly on service and white-collar work, and on workers' performance of immaterial qualities like 'authenticity'. If you're working on a factory line it doesn't matter what mood you're in as long as you do the work you're paid for; if you work at Pret A Manger your mood is part of what you're paid for: fall short of the Pret demand to 'create a sense of fun' and you put at risk not only your own pay but that of your co-workers.[4] In a recent article, Rob Horning quotes Peter Frase's suggestion that automation is not really the problem; rather, 'the truly dystopian

NOTES

1. F Fernández-Armesto, *So You Think You're Human?: A Brief History of Humankind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 12.

2. 'Notes on Bladerunner', 7 November 2015 http://nathan jurgenson.st/ 132746075895/notes-on-bladerunner

3. E Worthington, 'Fluffy robot seals comfort dementia patients in nursing homes', ABC News, 20 November 2013 www.abc.net.au/ news/2013-11-20/ robot-seals-help-dementia-patients/5104582

4. www.lrb.co.uk/v35/ n01/paul-myerscough/ short-cuts

5. R Horning, 'Do the Robot', in *The New Inquiry* (12 August 2015); available online at http://thenewinquiry. com/blogs/marginal-utility/do-the-robot/

5. Most famously, Lynn White's book *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* (Loose Leaf, 1967).

7. Anna Tsing, 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species' in Environmental Humanities 1 (2012), p. 144; http://environ mentalhumanities.org/ arch/vol1/EH1.9.pdf

prospect is that the worker herself is treated as if she were a machine rather than being replaced by one.' As Horning comments: 'Even more dystopian is the prospect of being treated like a de facto machine while being expected to express boundless "human" joy about it.'[5] If the image of God is located in our relationships with one another, what happens when those encounters are formed by the unequal relationship between employer and employee; when it is not just our bodies but our souls that are put to work?

we should be asking what kind of God others would see reflected in our character and in the way we treat those around us

What we are in relation to the rest of the world

In Genesis, God's creation of humankind is followed by the commands to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and 'subdue it', and to 'rule' over other living creatures. In the ancient Near East, kings were seen as the representatives of the gods on earth, ruling on their behalf. So in this sense we might take the idea of human beings as made in the image of God as a radical democratisation of the idea of kingship. Not just one person but every human being is God's representative on earth. Recent years have seen a lot of debate about whether this element of the Genesis narrative is responsible for a particularly utilitarian or domineering attitude to the rest of the created world on the part of Christians. Some thinkers have suggested that this verse is responsible to some extent for the unprecedented environmental degradation caused by recent developments in human technology and industry.[6] This argument is not without its problems, yet the notion of human beings as in some sense rulers of the world clearly resonates in what many environmental thinkers have begun referring to as the Anthropocene: that is, the period of history in which human activity comes to have such a significant impact on the earth as to constitute a new geological period. But here, too, there remains significant room for interpretive wiggling. If human beings have a disproportionate role in managing or otherwise affecting life on earth, what ought this imaging of God on earth to look like? What kind of ruler do we believe God to be: a king? A lord? A servant? If all human beings are called alike to image God does that mean that we all inherit a divine right to power over other creatures; or might we understand the call to image God on earth as a call to imitate Christ in entering wholeheartedly into the world and thereby into entanglement with all other creatures? To understand the image of God as the call to rule over all other living creatures might mean a divine mandate to conquer and control those creatures; or, on another understanding of the nature of divine rule, to imagine with Anna Tsing 'a human nature that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence'; to recognise human nature as 'an *interspecies relationship*'.[7]

The channel 4 show *Humans* depicts a future world in which technology has developed enough to produce lifelike androids and gynoids called 'synths'. Some of the synths are made conscious, and begin to struggle for freedom. In many ways, Humans is not a show about robots at all, but about, well, humans. The jobs that the newly self-aware synths do are the jobs that our society tends to give to those it consistently treats as less than fully human — sex work, agricultural labour, care work, childcare and domestic labour. The synths' physical appearances and their illegal status reflects the association of this kind of work with women, people of colour and migrants. But one of the interesting aspects of *Humans* is its depiction of human beings' relationships with the synths who aren't conscious, who really are (for now!) 'just' machines. One character, George Millican, has a synth called Odi, who has been with him for several years. Both Odi and George are beginning to break down and malfunction. Odi develops strange glitches and twitches; George has a stroke which causes him to lose his memories of his dead wife, who Odi still remembers, at least in part. Odi isn't human, he isn't conscious; and George knows this but he loves him anyway.

Sometimes it seems like we invest a lot of time and energy in thinking about the possible futures of technology and artificial intelligence, posing speculative questions about what our ethical responsibilities might be to these putative future beings who might or might not be human. But we aren't always very good at thinking about our existing relationships with the beings who are already in the world with us. We can only speculate about the possible consequences of the singularity; but we already have relationships with other beings around us which might not be human like us, but which act on us, with us, and around us. What would happen to our thinking about our human identity in relationship with the rest of the world if we took more seriously our desire to yell at our computers, our love of cat gifts, and the particular kind of joy that is only possible on a sunny day? What would happen if we began to realise that we cannot think about what it means to be human, to be like God, unless we take seriously the physical, social and political consequences of climate change; the ethical ramifications of pet ownership and the meat industry; and the role that conflict minerals play in facilitating our Candy Crush addiction?

We live in a world that is changing all the time, that is changing us all the time. In this sense there is nothing that's radically new about digital culture; we are not leaving behind some static order in which everybody knew what it meant to be human. We have always struggled over what it means to be human, over what the God we claim to represent on earth is like. Perhaps we should spend less time asking what marks us out as special, as important, and unique; perhaps we should spend more time asking what kind of God others would see reflected in our character and in the way we treat those around us, enemies and friends, human and non-human, animal and machine.