



Being authentically human in a digital age: Some reflections



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'What is humanity that you are mindful of it, what are mortals that you care for them?' Centuries ago, the author of Psalm 8 asked a similar question to the one we are asking today: How do we understand being human in a digital age? How do we sum up humanity? Are we reflectors of the divine image; accidents of evolution; bearers of the selfish gene? And as we stand at the cusp of virtualisation, of cyborgisation, what exactly does it mean to be human, authentically human in a digital age?¹

In this article, I want to start with Psalm 8, but then move on to make some further considerations about what makes us human, and finally offer some pointers for maintaining that humanity in an increasingly digital world. I do want to avoid the suggestion that there is an either/or answer. We don't need to see digital as a disembodied alternative to real, physical, life. We don't need to argue that relationships involving proximal physical presence and mutual contact are the only relationships of importance. We would not even begin to argue that only those with full access to all their faculties, senses, capabilities in a fully articulated adult form are the only proper humans! Therein lies delusion. What we need to do is to look at the world in which we live, right now, and find a place to be authentically human, to be the people that God has called us to be in that world.

Psalm 8

Psalm 8 begins with a declaration of God and to God, a naming of God ('O Lord, our Lord ...') who is to be praised. It establishes an awareness that it is God who places praise in the voices of babes and infants as a defence against the enemy. God's name is to be learned, to be

acknowledged, to be praised before we can look inside and ask who we are. Indeed, when we do look around at the vast array of all that is made, who are we? The starry skies challenge us; infinity seems to laugh at us at our temporality, at how the human life is.

The psalmist's call to God, his wonder at God's creation, turns his thoughts toward self-reflection: to question human identity in relation to all the wonders of the world in which we live. He becomes aware that despite our apparent insignificance and transience, God has given special attention to humanity: that God cares for us. Whereas in contemporary evolutionary theories, humanity seems to be an inconsequential blip; or in science-fiction-driven notions about the coming singularity, we melt away into the virtual existence of silicon digitality, the psalm asserts that this is not God's plan for humanity. He shaped us with his hands, crafted us from the earth and made us a little less than the heavenly beings (a little less than God himself – 'elohim' is the word), crowned us with honour and glory, with dominion over other living things – we are the (fragile? evanescent? mortal?) peak of God's acts of creativity: created not be the slaves of the gods, but to live in an intimate relationship with God.

Reflecting God into his creation

Humanity exists not only to live in relationship with God, but to reflect his glory, to be a sign of his glory and honour to the rest of creation. The language is reminiscent of God's own glory, and of the coronation of the king,² an image that surfaces elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, not least in Ezekiel 16 and Isaiah 61–62. The sense of human transience, even fragility, is blown away by the sense of

God establishing humanity almost at the very peak of the created order, as vice-regal humanity! What is humanity, the psalmist asks, but a reflection of the creator: the visible glory of the creator on earth.

Commentators warn us to be careful not to overstep the mark, of course. God is still the touchstone of this glory; God remains the subject of the verbs, the agency behind the coronation; God is the reality, God the platonic ideal of glory of which we are but the shadow on the cave wall. Indeed, they are quick to suggest that this is all about faith: this is about humanity in relationship with the divine. If they are to be followed, we are left with the strange suggestion that there are two human natures – a nature without God, an *a-theist* humanity, *god-less* humanity, left in the desolation of the universe, confined to the footnotes of history, a *dead* humanity. Alternatively, there is a humanity full of God's life when the faith light is turned on, when humanity discerns its vocation to walk with God in the Garden, when we live in a relationship with the divine, then suddenly humanity becomes the pinnacle of creation, crowned with glory and honour, vice-regent of God upon the earth!

I think the psalmist is more generous in his understanding of human nature than some of the commentators. I understand the argument that the human person can be fully understood only from a theological perspective, that being human is defined, even determined by our relationship with God. But does this really mean that those who decide not to follow God are not human? Or does it mean that human identity, human nature, is essentially theological whether as humans we accept it or not? Is human 'being' a shared universal attribute regardless of our faith disposition, a gift from God to all humanity regardless of our response, our capacity to respond? Surely the *a-theist* is as human as the *theist*.

Representing God?

Marc Cortez argues that we can understand human identity in terms of its role of representing God in creation: 'The image of God can be understood as *God manifesting his personal presence in creation through his covenantal relationships with human persons, whom he has constituted as personal beings to serve as his representatives in creation and to whom he remains faithful despite their sinful rejection of him.*'³

He then offers a summary of what it means to be a human being: modelled on Jesus; part of creation but unique within it; mysterious (present but eschatological); responsible (self-determinating, ethical); relational; embodied; broken.

God's creativity is in my DNA!

One aspect that Cortez does not discuss is the role of co-creativity with God, the sense of working with God to bring his purposes to bear upon the world. As bearers of the image of God, we are called to both reflect God into the world, but also to act like God in the world. We are called both to be human and to act human. Part of reflecting God into the world is also to represent the role of adaptation and co-creativity, of working with God

to make his glory known across the earth.⁴ Indeed, the injunction to till the land, to wrestle creation into order after the Fall, is an integral part of this call for humanity to reflect God's own subjugation of chaos.

Humanity adapts everything it touches. We make use of our self-awareness to interrogate, change, improve, but it is humanity which does this rather than the individual. There will be heroic individuals who do things, who make the breakthroughs, but the point is that they are just the decision points, behind them is the gradual building of knowledge and awareness that has been building up to the 'eureka' moment. It is the connectors within a social matrix who share the good news with those around them and so create more socio-technical memory, more synergy, more progress. In an age of digital connectivity, therefore, we should not be surprised at the speeding up of technological change and the frenetic nature of digital culture. When the human hive or group mind has reached 7bn coprocessors, super-heated digital culture is acting as an incubator for social change – overclocking or speeding up society's adaptive potential.

This means that we need to ask whether we are to some extent now in a different phase of human identity. Is digitality changing who we are and moving us away from the concept of human identity and human nature expounded within theological anthropology? Is hyper-connected humanity changing its identity? Is digitality expanding our human being, breaking the barriers of the flesh, the limitations of the human bodyclad, opening up new worlds, new knowledge, new dimensions? Perhaps we need to think of a fluid humanity, in some way, which still falls within the Psalm 8 definition of humanity and within Cortez's categories of what makes us human?

Can humanity survive the digital age?

However, amidst a potential shift in our understanding of human nature and the superheated cycle of technological development, there is the danger that human resilience to change is in crisis. Human identity may well fracture without proper attention to what it means to be human in the digital age. In the film *Interstellar*, humanity is interpreted as a cancer on the planet – a runaway organism, which the rest of the Earth is now seeking to expel. I don't think that the film is proposing a fully articulated Gaia hypothesis, but it does make the point that if exchange culture feeds technological development which then increases population and the potential for more exchange, then there is a limit to how much the planet can take – I would argue that there is also a limit on what human nature can take.

The big question here is whether humanity decides to break the limits of human nature by creating a cyborg version of itself – by transcending the limitations of the human body. The possibilities of cyborgisation are intriguing. We already have cyborgs – each of us is a self-adapting cyborg, adding bits of technology to every part of our lives and bodies (glasses, hearing aids, pacemakers, clothes, jewelry, wearable tech). However, uploading our minds into a computer seems to be beyond us. There is an increasing tendency among scientists both to query

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1. Intriguingly, in the recently broadcast Channel 4 series *Humans* and in films like *Ex Machina*, *Interstellar*, and even across the *Star Wars* franchise, it is often the androids who represent some of the most human characteristics. Indeed, humanity is often seen in these films in its fallen state – violent, uncontrolled, aggressive, greedy. Stories about androids and cyborgs (*Wall-E* comes to mind) perhaps gives us the opportunity to explore what we wish humanity might be. In *Humans*, Bill, an android who has been given some form of human consciousness, falls on his knees and offers his life to God in return for a solution to the mess that human oppression and fear has put them in.

2. E.g. Ps 21:6; 45:4–5; 104:1; 145:12.

3. M Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 37.

4. As Miriam Swaffield put in a recent address: 'Since my Dad is an artisan, it's in my DNA too!'

5. Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, p. 137.

the proximity of true artificial intelligence and to query whether machine intelligence so constructed will be of the same category as human intelligence.

Human being in a digital age

So, how might we read Cortez' parameters of human identity in a digitally theological anthropology?

1. Modelled on Jesus – Jesus lived in Palestine, engaging in a ministry among people he touched and comforted, with whom he ate and drank; a ministry where he valued physical expressions of human identity. As such, we too will want to value the fleshiness of our existence.

However, Jesus also knew when to withdraw. As such, it will be normal for humans living in a digital age to include a judicious withdrawal, both to be intentionally disconnected and intentionally connected with God – a withdrawal from digital as well as from the human: a conscious and self-determined decision to reject the 24/7, frenetic speed of life and the corporate drive to be constantly available, constantly at work, constantly farmable.

Human being in the digital age will be present to others (both physically and digitally), engaged (both physically and digitally) and judiciously detached (both physically and digitally).

But we might also need to consider whether humanity is modelled only on this physical expression of the triune God? Might we not be still be modelled on Christ as spiritual beings, incorporeal beings, resurrected beings? Is our fascination with corporality, fleshness, just a fascination? Could we think of other forms of humanity, cyborg humans, uploaded humans, silicon-based humans, which retain Christ-centredness?

2. Part of but unique within creation – the psalm is clear that humanity is both part of creation and an important aspect of it. Only humanity is said to bear the image and likeness of God. But as we learn more and more about the nature of non-human animal identity, we maybe need to ask more questions about the uniqueness of human identity. What is our place within creation? What are our responsibilities within it? Might non-human animals have a call upon divine relationship, upon the divine?

3. Mysterious – the transience and translatable nature of human identity will always be mysterious. Humans are imminently present in the here and now but, because of self-awareness and consciousness, always wrapped up in the other and the beyond. And perhaps, as Moltmann argues, if we were able to finally understand humanity, perhaps we would have destroyed what it means to be human at all? Part of a call to fluid humanity might be the next step in this mysterious pilgrimage of being.

4. Relational – here is something really important. Digital culture, with all its advances in communication technology, seems to be cutting us off from one another. I think modernism sets the agenda which technology then implements. Modernity wants to fashion humans as heroic, or, all too often, pathetic individuals. Christianity rightly questions this rampant individualism. We are

called into relationship. This is why social media works so well. But we need to get social connectivity, online and offline, right in order to help reverse the decline of human nature into psychosis and endemic depression. We need a re-alignment of the digital: a bias towards social engagement, social presence and especially proximal social presence (engaging with other humans in the same physical space). We need to use our tech to make more contact not less. Human beings need other human beings to understand what human being means.

5. Responsible – ethical living is not limited to human identity as we see with Asimov's rules embedded within (as yet fictional) robot cultures. But do humans allow machines to be ethical? Do we exploit computers to do our dirty work for us? Will we encourage AI to be responsible and ethical and judicious? Or will our continued reliance upon machines encourage us to act less ethically, less responsible? Will our waging of war, for example, be easier through tele-technology like drones?

6. Embodied – yes, but are there different ways to be embodied, different states in which to be embodied? What do we mean by a body?

7. Broken – or a work in progress? It is interesting what this does to the primitivism of saying God created us thus ... *a homo sapiens semper reformanda* – always needing healing, always needing covenantal relationship with the divine. Why could this not relate to other forms of humanity as well?

Some final thoughts

That's a good process but Cortez also summarises his work in this way: 'The human being is, among other things, a being essentially drawn toward relationship with the other, a psychophysical being both grounded in and yet transcendent over its material nature, and a free being capable of engaging in meaningful and accountable relationships.'⁵

I'm taken aback by the difference between Cortez's definitions. Both describe humanity and are open to pliability, but this second definition sounds much more like a humanity which could embrace the machine. Could we not already envision a machine which is drawn towards relationship with the other, grounded in materiality but transcendent, free to engage in relationship?

If this is the pinnacle of God's creation, this assumption of human identity, then presumably this is something we would want to share with all those capable of fulfilling it – animal or machine. Just as within monophyletic cladism (i.e. where a group of organisms consists of an ancestral species and all its descendants), where there really is no difference between humanity and her fellow apes, perhaps one day we will see that there is very little difference between ourselves and cyborgs. As Shylock, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, queries his accusers' dehumanisation of him as a Jew, I wonder whether a future cyborg, perhaps even a future AI-driven machine, might not read through Psalm 8 and query whether the creator did not mean to include them in his coronation of human identity.