



Reviews

THE ARTIFICE OF INTELLIGENCE: DIVINE AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN A ROBOTIC AGE, by Noreen Herzfeld, Minneapolis: MN. Fortress Press, 2023. 208 pages. \$34.00.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is everywhere these days. It is used to complete independent tasks, like scrutinizing resumes and judging creditworthiness. Robotic companions connected to AI-enabled systems comfort the elderly in nursing homes, play with children, and operate reception desks in Japan. In 2018, Dallas made headlines as the first city to receive a permit request to open a robotic brothel. The widespread impact of AI on many societal and cultural fronts means that it is a contemporary phenomenon that cannot be ignored or left unexamined. For Christians and others who want to understand the contemporary developments and research in the field of AI as well as some of its theological and philosophical implications more fully, Noreen Herzfeld, Reuter Professor of Science and Religion at St. John's University, Collegeville, MN and senior research associate with ZRS Koper, has provided a lucid, wide-ranging, and accessible resource.

Herzfeld arranges the work into seven chapters with an introduction by Ted Peters. Chapter 1 lays out the argument. Drawing on twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth's relational understanding of the *imago Dei*, Herzfeld examines humanity's relationship with AI and, through it, with one another. Adopting philosopher Martin Buber's terminology, Barth contends that there are four criteria for an authentic "I-Thou" encounter: 1) we must "look the other in the eye;" 2) we must "speak to and hear one another;" 3) we must "render mutual assistance;" and 4) such assistance and help must be grounded in freedom and "offered gladly" (18–19). In the following four chapters, Herzfeld explores Barth's criteria for authentic relationality and examines how a relationship with AI might or might not fulfill them.

Chapter 2 deals with the reality of human embodiment and the need to “look the other in the eye.” Various AI entrepreneurs and transhumanists call for separating the mind from the body and overcoming our embodied existence in favor of a more ghost-like existence (29–34). However, the uploaded or manufactured brain such futurists desire would likely be able to calculate but would lose consciousness and the ability to feel, thus becoming more zombie than ghost (38). In contrast, Herzfeld draws on Barth and Emmanuel Levinas, who posit that physically looking the Other in the eye and seeing the face of the Other is fundamental to the moral life and is necessary for an authentic vision of humanity rooted in mutuality (44–45).

Chapter 3 discusses Barth’s second criterion: “speak to and hear one another.” New technologies and mediums are reshaping how humans interact. Various tech corporations and governments are working to develop direct brain-to-brain interfaces that bypass the need for verbal communication (55). Social media platforms filter and mediate speech through AI to control the viewer’s attention (59–62). Mediating communication primarily through media or digital technology causes us to miss what is conveyed in face-to-face communication and lose the ability to recognize emotion, embody it, and mirror it to express empathy and connection (67). Losing these things means we will struggle to draw near into the presence of the other and hear the still, small voice of God (68–69).

Chapter 4 reflects on Barth’s injunction that we must “render mutual assistance.” Undoubtedly, AI can solve certain problems, but does AI possess agency or autonomy? Herzfeld contends that currently, AI does not, at least not in a way comparable to humans (80–82); however, AI poses the possibility of computers becoming autonomous agents, which raises important questions about lethal autonomous weapons equipped with AI (82–95). Humanity has always created tools to augment human ability, yet as AI continues to grow more and more influential, human creatures must work to exercise control over their tools rather than letting those tools supplant them (96).

Chapter 5 explores Barth’s criterion that assistance must be grounded in freedom and “offered gladly.” This raises questions about intention, intentionality, and emotion. AI assistants such as Siri and Alexa are programmed to recognize emotional cues in our voices and language choices and respond accordingly; however, while these systems can recognize emotion, they cannot generate it (113–116). The reality that humans can feel an emotional connection and intimacy with robots raises questions

about sexual encounters with robots (118–125). “Replacing relationship with a human with relationship to a machine is ultimately a form of idolatry,” Herzfeld writes, “a substitution for the living with something made, and thus controlled, by our own hands” (126).

Chapter 6 analyzes the role that AI has played in the development of transhumanist and posthumanist ideologies. Seeking to overcome human finitude, frailty, and death is at the heart of the transhumanist religion; however, we must consider what humans would lose if we abandoned or transcended our embodied, finite, limited existence (136–137). As a result, our age must recover the humility to consult our collective wisdom and to pray (153).

Chapter 7 concludes the work and points to the necessity and goodness of embodiment for a holistic Christian theological vision as evidenced in the Son of God’s bodily incarnation and resurrection. Contra the transhumanists who seek to separate the mind from the body, Herzfeld refers to the research of cognitive-linguistic scientists who argue that “The mind is inherently embodied” (160–161). Herzfeld calls readers not to personify nor deify AI (x–xii; 174–179) but to recognize it as a good tool that can be used with care, even as we recognize that what makes life worth living is not information encoded into things, but an embodied love made manifest for us (1 John 1:1–4).

Herzfeld’s work is an excellent resource for scholars, pastors, and students looking to understand AI’s theological and philosophical implications better. While it does not hinder the work, readers should be aware that Herzfeld does not explore the ins and outs of how AI works in terms of programming, coding, or algorithms. As I read, I wondered if calling AI a “tool” or “machine” was sufficient, given that generative AI is quite different than a screwdriver or an assembly line. Readers might quibble with some of Herzfeld’s theological frames, but this interdisciplinary work provides an insightful resource to help Christians wrestle with what it means to be a human creature in God’s good creation in an increasingly digital, virtual, and robotic age.

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