Editorial

Problems of Personhood
in Human Beings, Artificial Intelligence, and God

Like other social sciences, sociology's object of study is people. It is not trees and rocks and all living and non-living physical entities of the non-human world examined by the natural sciences. True, sociology's focus is on society, but microsociology's attention is on interpersonal interaction, and ultimately on the individual interactant – the person. After all, individuals only encounter other people as persons, not as creations of the macro social structures that both enable and constrain them. The conception of personhood is therefore foundational to sociology. But is it limited to humans? God, Christians say, is also a person. And is the day coming soon when robots will also be persons? Well, what is a person?

Perhaps the most definitive and detailed sociological answer has been provided by Christian Smith (2010). Human personhood, according to Smith, is the combined product of thirty "causal capacities," all residing in the human body, and mostly in the brain. Listed from lowest to highest, they include existence capacities such as consciousness, primary experience capacities such as volition, secondary experience capacities such as emotion, creating capacities such as identity formation, and highest order capacities such as truth-seeking, virtue formation, and love. In sum, "A person is a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who – as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions – exercises complex capacities for agency and inter-subjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the non-personal world" (Smith 2010:61). Notably, personhood is emergent from the interactive combination of these capacities; it is not merely the total sum of them. Nor can personhood be reduced to any one or several of them.

Therefore, the instant a human male sperm fertilizes a human female egg, the single cell zygote thus formed is a new, potentially autonomous human life. But every living human cell is also human life, as dependent as it may be, including the blood that dies in lacerations or is donated to another human body. Nevertheless, a zygote is still far from a fully functioning multicellular organism, much less a person, not yet possessing any of the capacities of personhood. Indeed, personhood does not reside in any single cell, combination of cells, or even organ. Just as personhood is more than a sum of causal capacities, it is also more than the sum of biological parts. Moreover, what of people living on donated blood, or with one or more

transplanted organs? Are they the same person? What of people living with mental disabilities, who are simply incapable of one or more of Smith's causal capacities? Are they not really full persons? And at the end of life, what of people kept alive by life-support medical technology and no longer even conscious? Have they lost personhood? Is personhood really defined by capacities?

In contrast, theological anthropology has traditionally conceived of persons as comprised of body, soul, and spirit in some combination (body + soul + spirit = trichotomism; body/flesh + soul/spirit = dichotomism; indissoluble unity = holism). Furthermore, humans are seen as made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), rooted in the Trinitarian theology of the Godhead comprised of three persons in one. As such, humans are not separate, autonomous individuals, but are inherently social, defined by their relations with others. In *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons*, Rowan Williams (2018) first argued that human consciousness is more than a machine, because it does much more than solve problems extraneous to itself. He then asserted that each person stands at a unique intersection of relations with both God and other humans. "It's in virtue of this that Christians are able to look at any and every human individual and say that the same kind of mystery is true of all of them, and that therefore the same kind of reverence or attention is due to all of them" (2018:32). More specifically, to be a person made in the image of God is to be made to love, to be created from and for the other.

The recent rapid rise of human-like entities created not by God, but by humans, – artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics – has raised questions about whether they too will soon qualify as persons. For example, beyond their factual knowledge, decision-making capacity, and ability to act, will they also actually acquire emotional intelligence (Coleman 2019)? Ten years ago, in "Artificial Intelligence and the Soul," Russell Bjork (2008) questioned whether there is a conflict between AI and biblical teaching about the origin of the human soul, and whether biblical teaching about personhood had any implications for AI.

Two years ago, Jonathan Merritt (2017) asked more pointedly, "Is AI a Threat to Christianity?" More specifically, can we ask Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, or Microsoft's Cortana to pray for us? Does God hear prayers spoken by any intelligent being, or just prayers uttered by humans? What if robots develop the ability to make ethical decisions? And what if robots become fully sentient, rational agents — beings with emotions, consciousness, and self-awareness? Could they also acquire a soul? Would they also be in need of salvation? Should Christians seek to evangelize them? Could they too believe in and establish a relationship with God? Should they be baptized? Does Jesus' death in fact redeem "all things?" In *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*, Kevin Kelly (2017) argued that there will soon be a spiritual dimension to AI and robotics, and advocated for the development of a catechism for robots. "In fact, AI may be the greatest threat to Christian theology since Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*" (Merritt 2017).

This spring, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention responded by releasing a document entitled "Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles" signed by over sixty evangelical leaders. It consists of twelve articles, each offering affirmations and denials mostly about ethical implications of AI, such as its use in medicine, work, governance, war, and sexuality (sex robots). Only Article 1: Image of God addressed personhood directly.

> We affirm that God created each human being in His image with intrinsic and equal worth, dignity, and moral agency, distinct from all creation… We deny that any part of creation, including any form of technology, should ever be used to usurp or subvert the dominion and stewardship which has been entrusted solely to humanity by God; nor should technology be assigned a level of human identity, worth, dignity, or moral agency.

Article 5 affirmed that "AI will be inherently subject to bias," and that humans must ensure that AI will "treat all human beings as having equal worth and dignity," though the document itself occasionally employed the gender-exclusive, generic masculine. Article 5 also insisted that AI not "be used in ways that reinforce or further any ideology or agenda," as if the document itself did not. And as for moral agency, self-driving cars, also known as autonomous vehicles, are already programmed to make moral decisions in road emergencies, though the moral responsibility rests with the programmers. What about autonomous weapons?

This summer, the academic journal *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* produced a theme issue on AI written mostly by experts in the field, not by pastors and theologians. To them, AI is all about the algorithms, computations, and "deep learning" of learning machines. The lead article by Schuurman (2019) overviewed optimistic predictions about the capabilities of AI, including ultimately a Godhead based on AI, and its potential to solve even the problem of death. It also summarized "warnings about the dark side of AI," such as "the Frankenstein narrative in which technology turns on its human creators and threatens their existence" (2019:77). As just the beginning, Schuurman cited research from Oxford predicting that 47% of American jobs are at risk of being replaced by AI. Furthermore, "[T]he questions that frequently arise in AI cover the range of philosophical questions: what is really real? (ontology), how do I know? (epistemology), what is right and good? (ethics), and what does it mean to be human? (philosophical anthropology)" (2019:78).

On the question of ontology, Schuurman asserted that "a Christian perspective recognizes that reality extends beyond the physical world to include a spiritual realm. This ontological starting point will reject the reductionistic notion that humans are simply complex biochemical machines" (2019:79). But it leaves unanswered the question of whether AI will at some point also be more than simply complex learning machines. In the same issue, Scott Hawley (2019) identified three "Challenges for an Ontology of Artificial Intelligence," the final being "the unavoidable human tendency to anthropomorphize, which yields a cognitive bias

that can manifest in ways such as projecting moral agency and/or patiency toward machine intelligences… [T]he over-identification of human attributes with AI is likely to evolve" (2019:90).

When pondering the potential personhood of AI, the question is whether it has the requisite thirty sociological capacities and three theological components to qualify as a person. However, when we ponder the potential personhood of God, the questions are not about causal capacities, which by any theology God possesses, but rather about the finiteness and mortality of personhood, which also by any theology God does not possess. Yet whether the entity under consideration is AI, God, or our pets, we humans do unconsciously project our human personality onto them. We do inevitably anthropomorphize them. Indeed, that may in itself be an evidence of the finiteness of our human capacities and personhood. We seemingly cannot imagine causal entities radically different from ourselves, and let them be what, not who, they are.

When at the burning bush God sent Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, "Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'" (Exod 3:13–14). God refused to be named, or even personified, insisting simply that "I will be who I will be." Yet we humans likewise insist, contrarily, on having at least a word and preferably a name for God, because our minds require the symbol system that is language in order to function (Mead 1934). Without language, we cannot think. And without language, we are incapable of even an idea of God, despite how feebly insufficient our language for, and ideas about, the totality of infinite, immortal God may be.

All we humans have are analogies and metaphors for God, figures of speech that are used to make comparisons between God and things we know more adequately with our reason and/or senses. Among the early metaphors for God in Genesis are wind and spirit. Like God, wind is constantly moving around us, filling every space, animating the air we breathe, and thereby giving us life. But unlike the empirical nature of wind, God is more like the non-empirical character of spirit. Wanting to make God more comprehensible, relatable, and accessible, we therefore prefer the metaphor of personhood. God, we say, is a person, and not just any person, but a specifically male person, and not just any male person, but a father. Historically, the metaphor of God as father communicated most effectively to its original audience in the context of their ancient near-eastern social norm of *pater familias*, which was their social construction of family. They deemed a father to be all-knowing and all-powerful, having the power of life and death over wives and children. Needless to say, the metaphor of father does not convey those same characteristics and powers to us today.

Not unintentionally, the Christian institutionalization of the metaphor of God as father has come at the expense of God as mother, despite numerous mother metaphors in the biblical text. Patriarchal bias in translation has systematically obscured those mother metaphors. But of

course, in overall essence, surely God is neither the binary of exclusively male father nor exclusively female mother. God is both, and more. The concept of God conveyed by Christian metaphors for God are narrowed and entrenched further by the patriarchy also implicit in the concept of the Trinity. But in overall essence, surely God is neither exclusively father, mother, person, wind, nor even spirit—metaphors all. God is I AM.

Moreover, in the Kabbalah of Jewish mysticism, God is not even a noun; God is a verb (Cooper 1998). Just as functional definitions demarcate religion by what it does, in contrast to substantive definitions which demarcate religion by what it is, so too God in this sense is an action, not an object. "I AM" is an infinitive of the English verb "be," just as Yahweh is an infinitive of the Hebrew verb for "be." In this sense it is more accurate to say that "God happens" than to say that "God is a thing, or more specifically a person." God is what God does. When we humans strive to comprehend the supreme divine, the Great I AM, we understandably exercise all our capacities to their fullest extent, but we inevitably anthropomorphize even God. Who would dare claim that they can positively affirm all that God is, much less know God fully, or personally?

In the end, it seems best to conclude that AI is less than a person, God is more than a person, and only we humans are somehow persons. Just because AI may one day be able to check all thirty capacities of a person does not mean it will have the emergent quality of a person. And just because God can check all the capacities of a person does not mean that God is not also incomprehensibly more than a person. Together with all creation, when we human persons have acknowledged the finite limitations of our knowledge and our personhood, we must bow in silence before whatever infinite, unfathomable God may be.

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