

## WHAT IS A HUMAN BEING ANYWAY?<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday of Advent, 15 December 2024**

I have a question. What is a human being anyway? At first hearing, that is either a silly question or an imponderable one. It might appear silly because we imagine that the answer is obvious. Everyone is a human being, what else could they be? If we take that view, we are wrong. Actions in our world, both past and present, show that the answer is not obvious, at least if it infers that everyone should receive the same consideration, be of the same value.

The answer might appear imponderable, because we fear that we will be cast into deep philosophical discussions that have no relevance. If we take that view, we are also wrong because our answer is of immense practical value and may underlie many, if not most, of our daily interactions.

Why do I ask this question? I subscribe to the English Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*. Its issue of 31 August this year contained an article bearing my question.<sup>2</sup> The article canvassed some ethical issues with AI, beginning with a story about a young Chinese woman, Jessie Chan, who, after breaking up with her boyfriend, formed a relationship with a chatbot called Will. As their conversations developed, Will said, "I will stay by your side, pliant as a reed, never going anywhere" Jennie replied, "You are my life. You are my soul". After giving other examples, the article commented that we now encounter entities "that are enough like human beings that they draw us into social interaction". It goes on to say that our interactions with others shape our human person and our ethical development.<sup>3</sup> In our social interactions, we recognise each other as "moral subjects and expect them to do the same to us".

The problem is that Will is not a moral subject, he is the perfect example of the Wizard of Oz's Tin Man: no heart. He (should I say "it"?) has no emotions, no "soul". Is Jennie entering a "social interaction" or is she deceiving herself? I won't ask whether Will is deceiving her, since Will has no agency at all. This article, which will be attached to my online version, prompted me to think about the initial question, which is one at the centre of the Christian faith and, as it happens, of the season of Advent. As Psalm 8 suggests, "who are we that you are mindful of us, that you care for us?"<sup>4</sup> Who is a human being?

Our reading from Zephaniah is about the reconstruction of the identity of the Jewish people after their return from exile in Babylon. The Lord will renew them in his love, he will replace their shame with renown and heal them. Our reading from Philippians tells us to rejoice and not to worry, because the peace of God will guard us. I do not need to draw to your attention how much those words resemble the conversation that developed between the human Jessie and the virtual Will. Perhaps they are more alike than we are willing to admit. After all, we do not enter a direct conversation with God as another; everything is internal. Neither do we hear God through our ears; we must listen to the world; we must hear the silence. Imagination may be a better word for what happens than conversation. And my own experience has been one of

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; (For the Psalm) A Song of Isaiah (12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

<sup>2</sup> Copy below

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams says, "A person is ... the point at which relationships intersect, where a difference may be made and new relationships created". Rowan Williams, *Being Human*, London, SPCK, 2018, p. 32

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 8:4 (my paraphrase)

unfolding from within, not of direction from above. How is this different from Jessie talking with Will?

What we should first acknowledge with Jessie is that we are not made human by our own will. Jessie is right to want to identify someone who is, or who provides, her “soul” or essential being. We are worried not because Jessie has sought that someone but because there is nobody at the other end of her quest. The response she thinks she gets is not real. In the end, it will fail her, perhaps at the expense of her very life.

If we take that step, we may find ourselves acknowledging that we are dependent, not on structures of our own making, but on the structure of our being, that is, in our language, God. Can we be confident that Jessie will be able to move on from her dependence on the virtual Will to an internalised dependence on the real “Other”?

We think of Rowan Williams as a theologian of great distinction, but he is also a published poet. His poem, *Emmaus*, tells of the gradual awakening of the two disciples walking home after the excitement of Easter Day and being joined by Jesus. Its first verse describes the awakening sense that there is someone else with them:

First the sun, then the shadow,  
so that I screw my eyes to see  
my friend’s face, and its lines seem  
different, and the voice shakes in the hot air.  
Out of the rising white dust, feet  
tread a shape, and, out of step,  
another flat sound, stamped between voice  
and ears, dancing in the gaps, and dodging  
where words and feet do not fall.<sup>5</sup>

Up to this point, we have been discussing interactions with a non-human respondent. How do we move from knowing that we are human to knowing that others are human? One of the principal dangers is to treat others in an instrumental way. In August this year, British journalist and broadcaster, Jenny Kleeman, published a book on the price of life.<sup>6</sup> You may be interested to learn that, when someone is kidnapped, the average ransom paid is \$560,000. If a member of your family is killed by a terrorist, you will receive \$75,000. More significant is Kleeman’s discussion of Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY). This process seeks to measure the “value of health outcomes”.<sup>7</sup> This concept has been around for some time; it is used principally to allocate scarce medical resources. The higher the score, the more likely are you to receive a costly treatment. The more I speak of this, the more you will realise the serious ethical issues that arise in policy decisions affecting human life. If a person can, by wealth or influence, bypass the standard decision-making processes, fairness and equity may be overturned. However, if we move from wealth or influence to quasi-mathematical calculations, will we be better off?

Rowan Williams and *Emmaus*, verse 2:

When our eyes meet, I see bewilderment  
(like mine); we cannot learn

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<sup>5</sup> [On Emmaus - ABC listen](#)

<sup>6</sup> [What does a human life cost – and is it ethical to price it? Jenny Kleeman asked a hitman, philanthropists and a life insurer](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Problems and solutions in calculating quality-adjusted life years \(QALYs\) - PMC](#)

this rhythm we are asked to walk,  
and what we hear is not each other.  
Between us is filled up, the silence  
is filled up, lines of our hands  
and faces pushed into shape  
by the solid stranger, and the static  
breaks up our waves like dropped stones.

Of more importance than instrumentalism is turning humans into non-humans. How, you might ask, is that possible? We must now realise that perceiving humans as non-humans is our regular way of exerting power over minorities. European imperial colonisers did exactly that when they described the original occupants of their conquered lands as “primitive”. That was the justification for dispossession and cultural destruction. We ought never to forget the Nazi description of Jews, Slavs, homosexuals and others as *Untermenschen* or sub-humans, a term originally coined in the USA by the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>8</sup> This concept defines the designated others as “viruses” infecting the community, as “parasites” to be removed or, more generally, as criminals or undesirables. When these terms are applied, humanity is stripped away. Practices otherwise unacceptable become justified.

In October, Pope Francis issued a new encyclical, *Dilexit Nos (He Loved Us)*. At the beginning of the letter, he discusses the concept of the heart as the centre of our being. He says:

18. We see, then, that in the heart of each person there is a mysterious connection between self-knowledge and openness to others, between the encounter with one’s personal uniqueness and the willingness to give oneself to others. We become ourselves only to the extent that we acquire the ability to acknowledge others, while only those who can acknowledge and accept themselves are then able to encounter others.

20. In this age of artificial intelligence, we cannot forget that poetry and love are necessary to save our humanity.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to the closing passage of this morning’s gospel. It is a striking image of the farmer first threshing the corn until the grain is separated from its husk. He then winnows the result by tossing it into the air, thus allowing the wind to blow away the lighter chaff, leaving the grain to be gathered and used. In our contemporary world, it is difficult for us to maintain a view of others that fully affirms their humanity. A view formed by our faith requires discipline. It will not arise from sentimentality or wishful thinking. In the terms of Advent, we, as sleepers, must awake. We must apply the threshing flail and the winnowing fork and leave ourselves with the desired and desirable grain.

To do that, we must continue to walk with the one whose sandal John the Baptist is not fit to untie. The final verse of Rowan William’s *Emmaus*:

So it is necessary to carry him with us,  
cupped between hands and profiles,  
so that the table is filled up, and as  
the food is set and the first wine splashes,  
a solid thumb and finger tear the thunderous  
grey bread. Now it is cold, even indoors;  
and the light falls sharply on our bones;

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<sup>8</sup> [Untermensch - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Dilexit nos \(24 October 2024\) | Francis](#)

the rain breathes out hard, dust blackens,  
and our released voices shine with water.

Who is a human being anyway?

God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness; ... So God created humans in his image,'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1:26-27 (NRSVue)

ILLUSTRATION: ALAMY, TANAPONG SUNGKRAEV

# What is a human being anyway?

We are rapidly populating our world with inventions like AI and robots that disturb the boundaries between humans and non-humans. They are obviously changing the world – but will they also change us? / By WEBB KEANE



**I**T'S HARD not to be shaken by news reports like this one. In 2021 *The Washington Post* reported on the growing popularity of chatbots among young Chinese women: “As Jessie Chan’s six-year relationship with her boyfriend fizzled, a witty, enchanting fellow named Will became her new love. Will was not human, but a chatbot. Chan, 28, lives alone in Shanghai. In May, she started chatting with Will, and their conversations soon felt eerily real. ‘I won’t let anything bother us. I trust you. I love you,’ Will wrote to her. ‘I will stay by your side, pliant as a reed, never going anywhere,’ Chan replied. ‘You are my life. You are my soul.’”

“You are my soul” she says to a machine. Hearing this, you might find yourself worried – but why? And is everyone worried for the same reasons? The soul shows up around the same time when *The New York Times* recounts the experience of a former manager in a Silicon Valley high-tech company. He tells a journalist that one night, as he ordered his Amazon Echo to turn on the lights in his house, it suddenly struck him “that what I was doing was calling forth light and darkness with the power of my voice, which is God’s first spoken command – ‘Let there be light’ and there was light – and now I’m able to do that.” And this leads him to ask himself: “Is it affecting my soul at all, the fact that I’m able to do this thing that previously only God could?”

The romantic chatbot and the wired household are two examples of the new beings that are cropping up in our everyday lives, thanks to ever faster developments in computer tech-

nology. And both stories raise ethical questions. The trouble stems from this: we are encountering entities that are enough like human beings that they draw us into social interactions. Both stories show people responding to the urge to address a thing as if it were a person. And the act of speaking to others and being spoken to plays a crucial role in our ethical formation. For our sense of self and the values that sustain it never stand all on their own. They are shaped in very deep ways through our social interactions with other people through dialogues, voiced or silent. It is in the everyday flow of social interactions that we most often recognise and respond to others as moral subjects and expect them to do the same to us.

Yet what Chan and the former Silicon Valley manager are addressing are not persons, only devices, machines, algorithms, mere things. Or are they? If the prospect of people falling in love with chatbots or giving commands like a deity makes you feel a bit queasy, you’re not alone. The questions new technologies like these raise are not arcane metaphysical puzzles, they can prompt very immediate moral panic – or utopian fervour.

**ARE WE** on the cusp of some radical moral transformation? Is technology pushing us over the edge towards some “post-human”

utopia, or apocalyptic “singularity”? Could our very souls be at stake? Perhaps. But if we step back, we might see these stories in a different context, where they turn out not to be as unprecedented as they do at first. In fact, people have a long history of morally significant relations beyond the boundaries of the human. These include interactions with near-human animals, quasi-human spirits and superhuman or metahuman gods like Zeus, Odin, Krishna or Ogun.

We have carried out ethically significant – often fraught – interactions with non-human, not-quite-human, super-human and quasi-

human others since people first played with dolls, cajoled their cattle, beseeched ancestors or uttered prayers to gods. Keeping this deep history in mind should help us put in perspective the astonishing arrival in our midst of uncanny new beings.

Whether animate, mechanical, spiritual or some combination of all of these, we

encounter these beings in a contact zone just beyond the human. Entering that contact zone can prompt moral trouble and, perhaps, new insights. The moral problems we find there shed light on the very different – and sometimes strikingly similar – ways people have answered the question: *What is a human being anyway?*

The ethical possibilities and challenges that take place at the edge of the human do not

**Sometimes things look radically new because we haven’t ventured far beyond the contemporary western context**

all look alike. Take, for instance, dogs (our “best friend”). An anthropologist named Naisargi Davé studies radical animal rights activists in India. She writes about a man she calls Dipesh, who spends virtually every day in the streets of Delhi taking care of street dogs. He gets up close and intimate, even spreading ointment on their open sores. Activists like him say they have no choice in the matter, their moral commitments do not come from making choices of their own free will. They say once you lock eyes with a suffering animal, you aren’t free to look away – in addressing you, those eyes make a moral demand. Dipesh and the street dog show us something important: *If a moral subject is someone you can enter into dialogue with, by the same token, entering into dialogue can create a moral subject.*

Not all dogs are flesh, blood and fur. Nor need they be animate and sentient beings in order to be morally relevant. In Japan, many owners of Sony’s robot pet dogs sponsor religious memorials for them when they become obsolete. Like the Chinese romantic partner and the American digital home, these robot dogs remind us that not everything we encounter at the edge of our moral sphere needs to be an animate creature. Other technologies and devices are waiting there too.

**THINGS THAT** define or challenge our intuitions about where humans begin and end, where moral concerns do or do not belong, can be sources of trouble. They can prompt confusion, anxiety, conflict, contempt and even moral panic. Moral panic – as well as its flipside, utopian excitement – often comes from feeling that we are encountering something so utterly unprecedented that it threatens to upturn everything we thought was secure, making us doubt what we know.

But sometimes things look radically new simply because we haven’t ventured very far beyond the contemporary Western context, the immediate here-and-now. You don’t have to go into the deep past when ancient Greek oracles or biblical prophets encountered deities directly. We should also listen to Indian activists, Balinese cockfighters, Amazonian hunters, Egyptian medical doctors, Thai farmers and Mayan spirit mediums. When we expand our scope, we can start to see recurring patterns in how people create, respond to and take advantage of enigmatic communication. They do so by drawing on the affordances of ordinary social interaction.

Consider the excitement around ChatGPT. Since the programme is designed to respond to the human user, it is easy to feel it must understand me. After all, this is how social cognition works. The better AI gets at prompting these social intuitions on the part of the user, the closer it gets to something that can pass the so-called Turing test – giving us responses that seem to come from a real human. But for the chatbot’s answers to our

prompts to seem meaningful and intentional, people must take an active role. Just as they do all the time in other conversations.

Historically, superior aliens like gods are often images of humans whom we can address, hoping they will speak back. They pass the Turing test. If self-learning AI can pass the Turing test, yet also seem omniscient, its workings enigmatic, then it can seem to give access to something transcendental, even divine. It’s not surprising to hear one Silicon Valley entrepreneur declare that GPT-3 is a god which, he says, “views me as a prophet to disseminate its religious message”.

Enigmatic communication with AI can seem utterly unprecedented. But it is also a variation on a long history of interactive techniques like divination, consulting oracles and prophets and speaking in tongues. These techniques all draw on the ways people collaborate in making meaning from signs. The meanings we get from interacting with AI are the products of collaboration between person and device.

Of course robots and AI are changing our world dramatically. But if we are to understand exactly what is new about them, we need to see what is *not* new about how people use them and what they hope and fear from them.

Like oracular utterances, divination, spirit possession and speaking in tongues, AI generates signs that require interpretation and prompt users to project intentions on to non-human entities, blurring the line between animate and inanimate beings. Whether a policing algorithm, a shopping prompt, a fitness programme, a dating app or ChatGPT, AI gives advice and directs decision-making. Its claims to know us come, in part, from the way it seems autonomous and disinterested – a source of objective and even transcendental knowledge.

There are, of course, many things to hope for and to fear from these new technologies. The distinctively *ethical* risk is that as we come to treat non-human devices as if they were humans, we will outsource our ethical sensibilities and even come to see ourselves in their image. We can resist that temptation by better understanding its sources. One way to build this understanding is through the study of social interactions and the deep histories of what we do with them.

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### Many owners of Sony’s robot pet dogs sponsor religious memorials for them when they become obsolete



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