

RESEARCH ARTICLE

SYMPOSIUM: LAW, RELIGION, AND THE FUTURE OF AI, PART I

AI and Creation: Some Perspectives from the Bible, Plato, Augustine, Aristotle, and Aquinas

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Abstract

According to the biblical narrative, among the creatures of the Earth, human beings are uniquely God's image-bearers, and we are also tragically prone to claim divinity for ourselves in ways that produce violence and judgment. Technology is a human good, part of our cultural mandate, but it also magnifies our worst tendencies. One of the great temptations of artificial intelligence is its mimetic capacity. AI systems mimic human creativity and judgment but lack human moral capacities. Granting a concern about mimesis, perhaps some version of non-reductive physicalism is correct and something we could call true *intelligence* might emerge from a future AI system. It could be that humans would owe some kind of duties toward AI as moral patients akin to what we, the stewards of creation, owe the various components of the natural world. But, from the perspective of Christian theological ethics, even if we entertain a kind of Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of emergence and causal powers that could admit this possibility, we should remember the biblical narrative concerning human uniqueness. The great chain of being retains vitality as a metaphor in that it reminds us about the role of mediation in the relationship between God and creation.

Keywords: AI; artificial intelligence; Aquinas; Augustine; Plato; Aristotle

Every major statement of artificial intelligence ethics emphasizes that the technology should be controlled by humans and developed and deployed for the good of humanity.¹ A growing body of law, including the European AI Act, likewise entails limitations on certain uses of AI to protect the rights and interests of individual human beings.² This human-centric emphasis contrasts with some philosophers and futurists who conceive of a time,

¹ See, e.g., ITECHLAW, RESPONSIBLE AI: A GLOBAL POLICY FRAMEWORK 18 (Charles Morgan ed., 2019); *Asilomar AI Principles*, FUTURE OF LIFE INSTITUTE (AUGUST 11, 2017), <https://futureoflife.org/ai-principles/>; U.S. OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY, BLUEPRINT FOR AN AI BILL OF RIGHTS (OCTOBER 2022), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-PREX23-PURL-gpo193638/pdf/GOVPUB-PREX23-PURL-gpo193638.pdf>.

² See Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Laying Down Harmonized Rules on Artificial Intelligence ("EU AI Regulation"), 2021/0106 (COD), May 14, 2024; *Global AI Law and Policy Tracker*, INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PRIVACY PROFESSIONALS, <https://iapp.org/resources/article/global-ai-legislation-tracker>.

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perhaps in the not-too-distant future—perhaps even now—when an AI could lay claim to its own rights.³

Other technologists now working on AI systems dismiss such rights-talk as sensationalist.⁴ Today's AI systems are nowhere near the proposed "singularity" when an AI's capacities for reasoning, moral judgment, or autonomy would be equivalent to that of a human.⁵ Technologists on the ground stress that machine learning, large language models, neural networks, and the like are powerful tools but lack any capacity to develop something like a sense of self or an autonomous agency.⁶

A sense of self and capacity for autonomous agency are central to three main modern secular philosophical arguments for human rights: social contract, will, and interest theories.⁷ As the term suggests, only humans can possess human rights, because, these theories argue, only humans are capable of acting in certain ways through the exercise of reason to limit violence, respect individual autonomy, or maximize human welfare.⁸

Despite the skepticism of some technologists, the growing field of machine ethics includes philosophers who argue for a new conception of rights for machines.⁹ Many of those who argue for machine rights propose thresholds of autonomy, moral reasoning, or intrinsic value roughly calibrated to characteristics supposedly possessed by humans. If an AI ever meets such a threshold, they argue, it should be afforded its own legal rights.¹⁰ Yet others, including David Gunkel, reject measures tied to human capabilities and instead analogize machines to nonhuman animals to which human beings might owe duties as moral patients.¹¹

As Gunkel's perspective suggests, arguments in favor of AI rights may overlap with trends in environmental ethics and claims about the rights of nonhuman animals. Famously, we human beings are unable to know what it is like to be a bat—or a fish, or dog, or chimp, or great ape, or anything other than ourselves.¹² We can learn about the physical structures of another animal's cognition, but we can never experience it. Nevertheless, we extend legal protections to fish, dogs, chimps, apes, and other nonhuman animals. These include protections designed primarily to benefit humans, such as limiting pressure on a fishery so that it remains sustainable for the benefit of human consumption.¹³ They also include protections based on assumptions about nonhuman animals' subjective experience: it is a crime to torture and kill your dog because, we think, dogs have some meaningful experience of

³ See RAY KURZWEIL, *THE SINGULARITY IS NEARER; WHEN WE MERGE WITH AI* (2024); ERIK BRYNJOLFSSON & ANDREW MCAFEE, *THE SECOND MACHINE AGE: WORK, PROGRESS, AND PROSPERITY IN A TIME OF BRILLIANT TECHNOLOGIES* (2016); NICK BOSTROM, *SUPERINTELLIGENCE: PATHS, DANGERS, STRATEGIES* (2016); Lawrence B. Solum, *Legal Personhood for Artificial Intelligences*, 70 NORTH CAROLINA LAW REVIEW 1231 (1992); SAMIR CHOPRA & LAURENCE F. WHITE, *A LEGAL THEORY FOR AUTONOMOUS ARTIFICIAL AGENTS* (2011); David W. Opderbeck, *Artificial Intelligence, Rights, and the Virtues*, 60 WASHINGTON LAW JOURNAL 445 (2021).

⁴ See Paul Allen & Mark Greaves, *The Singularity Isn't Near*, MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW, October 12, 2011, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2011/10/12/190773/paul-allen-the-singularity-isnt-near/>.

⁵ See *id.*

⁶ See Rylan Schaeffer, Brando Miranda & Sanmi Koyejo, *Are Emergent Abilities of Large Language Models a Mirage?*, arXiv, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2304.15004>.

⁷ See Siegfried Van Duffel, *Moral Philosophy*, in *THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW* 32 (Dinah Shelton ed., 2013); Opderbeck, *supra* note 3, at 446–48.

⁸ See generally Van Duffel, *supra* note 7.

⁹ See generally MACHINE ETHICS (Michael Anderson & Susan Leigh Anderson, eds., 2011).

¹⁰ See John P. Sullins, *When Is a Robot a Moral Agent?*, in MACHINE ETHICS, *supra* note 9, at 151–61; Luciano Floridi, *On the Morality of Artificial Agents*, in MACHINE ETHICS, *supra* note 9, at 184–211.

¹¹ David J. Gunkel, *THE MACHINE QUESTION: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AI, ROBOTS, AND ETHICS* (2012); David J. Gunkel, *Thinking Otherwise: Ethics, Technology, and Other Subjects*, in 9 ETHICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY 165 (2007).

¹² Thomas Nagel, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, 83 THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW 435 (1974).

¹³ See, e.g., The Fishery Conservation and Management Act, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1801–82. Section 1801(a)(1) notes that "fishery resources contribute to the food supply, economy, and health of the Nation and provide recreational opportunities."

being alive and of fear and pain. It is degrading to the human dog owner, the human community, and the dog, for a dog to be tortured and killed without reason.¹⁴

Such animal welfare laws are not traditionally conceived of as rights in a basic or constitutional sense. The U.S. constitution's Bill of Rights, for example, says nothing about animals, except perhaps to the extent an animal could be considered property taken by the government under the Fifth Amendment's takings clause—or, ironically, when animal welfare laws such as the Endangered Species Act are challenged as regulatory takings impinging on other property uses.¹⁵ Rather, animal welfare laws typically are legislative enactments authorized under a legislature's general constitutional powers, such as the commerce clause for the U.S. federal government or the broad police powers of state governments.¹⁶ The European Union, however, recognized in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty amending the Treaty for the Functioning of the European Union that animals are "sentient beings" entitled to at least some minimal legal protections.¹⁷

For Christian theological ethics, a possible space between the created natural world and human technological artifacts raises challenging questions. The biblical narratives place humanity at the center of the material creation. Humans alone bear God's image and are charged as God's stewards to cultivate the creation. After humans sin and are expelled from paradise, their relationship becomes subjected to suffering and frustration. Repeatedly, human hubris attempts to rival God and repeatedly God foils these efforts through acts of judgment. From the beginning to the end of the biblical story, salvation—the full realization of human flourishing—comes only at God's initiative, just as creation itself is a divine gift.

The salvation that scripture imagines is something both already present and not yet fulfilled. The human vocation within creation can now begin to be realized as sin is overcome, but with struggle, temptations, and setbacks. Christian theology and ethics historically envisioned the human vocation within a great chain of being, with God as its source. Humanity, created in God's image, occupied the center of this chain, below the angels and above the animals and lower creatures, including insects, plants, and minerals.

This image has often been derided for the supposed presumption that animals exist only for exploitation by humans.¹⁸ Although this conclusion is often drawn in everyday life, it is not consistent with the metaphor's meaning. In the great chain of being, as the angels mediate between God and humanity, and therefore in a sense serve humanity as divine messengers and caretakers; human beings mediate between God and the animals, and therefore in a sense serve the animals.

Regardless, the chain did not admit side links or branches forged by human beings. God alone was creator. Human technology and ingenuity could be deployed well or badly, virtuously or viciously, by humans occupying their place in the chain, but it could not be deployed in any true sense to create new kinds of being. Classical Christianity, borrowing from Plato, was suspicious of human creativity.

In more contemporary theological language, Christian theology tends to speak of human beings as stewards of the material creation—endowed, indeed, with unique dignity as God's image-bearers, but also with unique responsibility to care for the rest of the material world.¹⁹ In addition to its potentially abusive misapplication, theologians avoid the chain

¹⁴ See, e.g., The Animal Welfare Act, 7 U.S.C. §§ 2131–2160; Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture (PACT) Act, Pub. L. No. 116-72, 133 Stat. 1151 (2019).

¹⁵ See ROBERT MELTZ, CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, RL31796, THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT (ESA) AND CLAIMS OF PROPERTY RIGHTS "TAKINGS" (2011).

¹⁶ See Animal Welfare Act, 7 U.S.C. § 2131 (noting findings related to commerce clause).

¹⁷ See Treaty of Lisbon, December 13, 2007, Art. 5b (21).

¹⁸ See Lynne White, Jr., *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis*, 155 SCIENCE 1203 (1967).

¹⁹ See, e.g., NORMAN WIRZBA, *FROM NATURE TO CREATION: A CHRISTIAN VISION FOR UNDERSTANDING AND LOVING OUR WORLD* (2015).

metaphor because of its outdated Platonic and Aristotelian assumptions about the fixity and hierarchy of kinds of being. The science that gave rise to the chain metaphor lacked our more recent knowledge of ecology and evolution. Medieval European Christians certainly understood, more viscerally than most modern people, that everything—plants, animals, seasons, people—is connected. Patristic and medieval Christian thinkers used Greek philosophy in creative ways to express the mystery of God's relationship to creation, but some modern theologians argue that these earlier generations never quite exceeded the pagan legacy.

It is easier for the modern theological imagination to conceive of humans emerging within a web of relationships with mutual dependencies, even if the human node is the only one within the material created world, or at least on the face of the Earth, through which all other lines intersect. The modern theological imagination is also far less chary of the notion that human beings can genuinely create something new. Some modern theologians even suggest that God co-evolves with the universe and humanity. This perspective might offer a broader role, even a salvific role, for human technologies including AI. Indeed, AI could prove particularly important if consciousness also emerges from computational complexity.

While these modern views offer some helpful insights, they give up some central truths about the Divine. If God is part of the created order, it is difficult to see how God is creator in any meaningful sense and equally difficult to see how humanity is imbued with any unique rights. In fact, some of these modern views revert to earlier, pre-Christian forms of Platonism. A theological vision that draws Christianity's premodern engagement with the Bible and Greek thought offers richer, and humbler, insights about the role AI should play in human culture.

Some key theses from the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament on creation, the human vocation, and technology recognize that human beings are both exalted and deeply flawed. We are uniquely created in God's image and likeness, and we are charged with stewardship of the Earth, but we frequently try to make ourselves into gods and thereby invite chaos and judgment. Human technology appears in the biblical story as something both ordinary and dangerous. The great Christian thinkers Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas related these biblical themes to the concepts of the forms and *mimesis* in Plato, Neoplatonic theurgy, and Aristotle's discussion of *poiesis* and *praxis*. These efforts to synthesize the Hebrew-Christian narrative and Greek thought ploughed a rich conceptual field from which one can still glean insights for theological reflection about AI today. Contemporary movements in theology have shifted away from this earlier synthesis, including claims about how non-reductive physicalism or process thought might replace traditional notions of God, the soul, and human uniqueness. Although theology must adapt to insights from the modern natural sciences, such insights in fact point to a new and revitalized appropriation of the earlier sources. A contemporary theological anthropology, drawing critically and constructively on the premodern past, are reminders why the human-centered emphasis in AI law and policy is necessary and appropriate.

The Bible: From Creation to New Creation

Any effort to reflect theologically on human nature and technology must begin with the biblical texts, and the place to begin is at the beginning, with God's creation of humanity. The creation narratives in Genesis 1–2 afford humanity unique status and responsibility within the created world. As the canonical story continues through the biblical protohistory, humanity repeatedly tries to reach beyond its place and repeatedly faces divine judgment. Eschatology is protology, and protology is eschatology, so if we begin at the beginning, we

already anticipate the end.²⁰ Biblical eschatology recapitulates the creation and fall, in reverse order. Humanity's hubris and injustice reaches a crescendo, producing divine judgment, but now the judgment results in a new *heavenly* city that incorporates all the wealth of the nations.

There is deep ambivalence in these narratives about human culture, including cities and technology, when it displaces God. None of these narratives, of course, contemplate anything like AI, but they do supply a deep well of caution about the human drive to become gods apart from God. At the same time, they point to an end in which the nations and all their goods come to a city ordered well and justly in relation to God. The end note is one of overwhelming hope, and the call is to embrace that hope as it already breaks into the present moment.

Creation, Fall, Cities, and Technology

In the Bible's first creation narrative, humanity is the pinnacle of creation. Humanity alone is created in God's "image" (*tselem*) and according to God's "likeness" (*demuth*).²¹ As God's image-bearers, humans are given the charge to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). In the second creation narrative, humanity is placed in the Garden of Eden "to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). God brings all the animals before the first man, Adam, who names them, showing his position over them (Genesis 2:18–20).

Adam and the first woman, Eve, are given the fruit of all the trees in the Garden for food except for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they disobey God, at the prompting of the serpent and eat this forbidden fruit, they are expelled from the Garden, losing access to the tree of life and incurring curses, including the need to "toil" for food and the experience of death (Genesis 2:15–16; 3:1–24). In fact, the ground (*adamah*) itself is cursed because of humanity's sin (Genesis 3:17–18).

No technologies appear in the poetic hymn of the creation days in Genesis 1 or in the Garden myth of Genesis 2. We might assume that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, humanity's mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) would have required technology, but this assumption exceeds the text's narrative frame. What we learn from these stories is that humanity is meant to cultivate the creation and to enjoy its bounty but that this gift and vocation is subjected to struggle and the boundary of death because of human sin.

Human sin is disobedience to God's command, but the command is not merely arbitrary. Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil enabled humanity to become in this sense like God. The knowing here is not merely a kind of intellectual content but signifies an intimate familiarity that suggests power and control, like Adam's naming of the animals.²² The Divine Council (Elohim) worries that humanity will take the next step in a misplaced desire to divinize itself by eating from the tree of life, which would make humanity immortal like the gods (Genesis 3:22–23).²³ God's fear may be seen as a petty way of keeping humanity

²⁰ For a discussion of the close connection between protology and eschatology, see BRIAN D. ROBINETTE, *THE DIFFERENCE NOTHING MAKES: CREATION, CHRIST, CONTEMPLATION* 31–34 (2023).

²¹ *Genesis* 1:26–27. For a discussion of the sources of the biblical creation narratives and of other ancient near eastern parallels, see, for example, parts one and three of BILL T. ARNOLD, *GENESIS: THE NEW CAMBRIDGE BIBLE COMMENTARY* (2009). The Bible's protohistory, of course, need not and should not be read like a modern scientific or historical text. Ancient readers also recognized that these stories contained many non-literal elements. See, e.g., David W. Opderbeck, *Can Origen Help Us Understand Adam?*, 99 *NEW BLACKFRIARS* 561 (2018); DAVID W. OPDERBECK, *THE END OF THE LAW? LAW, THEOLOGY, AND NEUROSCIENCE* (2021), 37–64 (discussing method in theology and science).

²² See E.A. SPEISER, *GENESIS: THE YALE ANCHOR BIBLE* 26 (1974).

²³ Elohim is a plural form of an *el*-name, which was a common part of the names of Canaanite deities. See G. GOHANNES BOTTERWECK, HELMER RINGGREN & HEINZ-JOSEF FABRI, eds., *THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT*, VOL. 1 (John T. Willis trans., 1974), entries for אֱל and אֱלֹהִים. Many contemporary scholars see this usage as evidence of earlier

under control, but a more generous reading is that humanity endangers itself and the rest of creation by grasping for more than its already special status as God's steward over creation. God can know good and evil without destroying the world because of God's divine wisdom and power. Humans lack what is needed to keep evil and chaos under control.

After Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, they have sons: Cain, a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd. When God prefers Abel's offering of sheep over Cain's offering of produce, Cain becomes angry and murders Abel (Genesis 4:1–16). Cain is exiled to Nod, "east of Eden," where he builds a city (Genesis 4:10–16).²⁴ The seventh generation of Adam's grandchildren through Cain include Jabal, "the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock"; Jubal, "the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe"; and Tubal-cain, "who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools" (Genesis 4:17–22).

This section of the story after humanity's expulsion from the Garden suggests ambivalence about human culture and technology. These texts, collected from various sources and likely edited into their canonical form sometime during or after the exile of Judean elites to Babylon in 586 BCE, offer a summary of cultural goods that would have been important to iron age near eastern people.²⁵ On one hand, they imagine that the first city builder was an exiled murderer. On the other, the progenitors of herding, music, and metallurgy are born in the seventh generation after Adam, a number that in the Hebrew scriptures—like the seven days of creation—symbolizes completion and perfection.²⁶

The narrative takes a strange twist when the genealogy of Adam reaches Noah. The "sons of God" (Elohim) intermarry with human women and the Nephilim are on the earth (Genesis 6:1–4). These strange references became important in Second Temple literature and rabbinic lore, which understood them to suggest the corruption of humanity by evil angels.²⁷ The text also says, "The Lord (YHWH) saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). God therefore sent the great flood to destroy the earth, but spared Noah, his family, and a pair of every kind of animal (Genesis 6:5–8:23). When the ark lands, Noah and his son are given the original creational command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1–7).²⁸

While the earlier references to Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain suggested a positive role for technology, the events preceding Noah's flood interject another note of ominous concern about humanity aspiring to divinity. In Genesis 2–4, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the forbidden technology that might tempt humanity to seek divine immortality. In the Noah story, reproduction with divine or superhuman creatures connects to corruption and violence.

According to Genesis 11, after the flood, Noah's descendants share a common language. They "migrated from the east" (Genesis 11:2) and decide to build a city and a tower so that they can "make a name" for themselves and avoid becoming scattered across the earth

underlying sources reflecting this polytheistic Canaanite background. Elohim is also used in the Hebrew scriptures in a way that suggests a plural of majesty referring to the one high God, including in Genesis 1. The potential resonance with earlier sources seems particularly evident in Genesis 3:22 because Elohim says "the man has become like one of us." See SPEISER, *supra* note 22, at 23.

²⁴ The text famously mentions people who might take vengeance on Cain without concern for the origin of these extra people.

²⁵ On the dating of the canonical text, see ARNOLD, *supra*, note 21, at 12–18.

²⁶ See *id.* at 81.

²⁷ See 1 Enoch (The Book of the Watchers, 1–36), in THE OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHIA, Vol. 1 (James H. Charlesworth ed., 1983), 5–103; LESTER L. GRABBE, AN INTRODUCTION TO SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM 84–102 (2010).

²⁸ This new covenant between God and Noah includes other changes and limitations, including, apparently, new permission for humans to consume animal meat.

(Genesis 11:4).²⁹ They use baked bricks and mortar for the city and tower, which the story seems to depict as new technologies (Genesis 11:3). YHWY comes down from the heavens to inspect this project and becomes concerned that “this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Genesis 11:6). God confuses the people’s language and scatters them around the earth and the city-building comes to a halt. That city is called Babel, which sounds like the Hebrew word for “confused” (*balal*)—that is, Babylon (Genesis 11:9).³⁰

For the third time in the Bible’s protohistory, then, humanity has tried to obtain godlike status and has been rebuffed by Elohim/YHWY. Humanity has been gifted an exalted place as stewards of creation as God’s image-bearers, but it has tried supernatural and technological means to exceed its limits. The biblical protohistory’s verdict is that these efforts result in disaster and divine judgment.

Babylon and the New Jerusalem

Following the protohistory, the canonical biblical narrative tells the story of Israel, beginning with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the saga of Joseph; the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the law through Moses; the conquest of the promised land; the period of the judges and the rise of the kings, including the great, but flawed, kings, David and Solomon; the construction of the temple in Jerusalem; the division between Israel and Judah; and the fall of Israel and Judah after a litany of (mostly) evil kings to Assyria and Babylon, including the Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem temple and exile of Judean elites.³¹

Babylon plays a major role in the Hebrew scriptures as the archenemy ultimately used by God to judge Judah and Jerusalem for the failure of the people and their kings to follow God and do justice.³² The destruction of the first Jerusalem temple and the exile of Judean elites in 586 BCE is a well-attested disaster that shaped much of the biblical literature.³³

The Hebrew prophets interpreted Babylon as an instrument of divine judgment, but they also recognized Babylon’s own agency in attacking God’s people, thus leading to judgment against Babylon as well. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, declared,

Flee from the midst of Babylon,
 save your lives, each of you!
 Do not perish because of her guilt,
 for this is the time of the Lord’s
 vengeance;
 he is repaying her what is due.
 Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s
 hand,
 making all the earth drunken;
 the nations drank of her wine,
 and so the nations went mad.

²⁹ In canonical sequence, the Table of Nations precedes the Babel narrative, which does not make chronological sense (Genesis 10–11). Modern commentators suggest this probably reflects an editorial decision to arrange the Table of Nations and Babel episodes, which may derive from different sources, thematically rather than chronologically. See ARNOLD, *supra* note 21, at 119.

³⁰ Akkadian speakers held that the name derived from *bab-ilim*, meaning “Gate of God.” ARNOLD, *supra* note 21, at 121. The etymology given in Genesis therefore mocks the lofty pretensions of Babylon’s self-identity.

³¹ See Genesis 12 through 2 Kings.

³² See 2 Kings 25.

³³ See Eric M. Meyers, *Exile and Return: From the Babylonian Destruction to the Beginnings of Hellenism*, in ANCIENT ISRAEL: FROM ABRAHAM TO THE ROMAN DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE 201 (John Merrill & Hershel Shanks eds., Biblical Archeology Society, 4th ed. 2021).

Suddenly Babylon has fallen and is
shattered;
wail for her! (Jeremiah 51:6–8)

The judgment of Babylon and of other great cities, such as Tyre, was often depicted by the Hebrew prophets a precursor to the restoration of Jerusalem at the center of an eschatology redemption of humanity.³⁴ Isaiah 25 imagines a place where even death no longer appears:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 25:6–8)

Isaiah 35 depicts the “holy highway” into Jerusalem as the eschatological city:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isaiah 35:5–10)

As apocalyptic literature, it is difficult to know how literally these oracles concerning Babylon and Jerusalem were intended when they were first uttered.³⁵ The historical Babylon was indeed conquered by the Persians, who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and

³⁴ Concerning Tyre, see, e.g., *Isaiah* 23.

³⁵ For a discussion of the theology and genres of the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic literature, see WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, *THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: TESTIMONY, DISPUTE, ADVOCACY* 622–43 (1997).

begin rebuilding the temple by the Persian king Cyrus the Great.³⁶ Although at least some of the Hebrew Bible's prophetic literature (including the excerpts from Isaiah 1, quoted above) was first created before or contemporary with the Babylonian exile, it was further developed and redacted throughout and after the exile. Much of the literature as we know it from the biblical canon, then, originally was shaped for the imagination of the returnees, who hoped and believed they were bringing in the new age of peace and prosperity.³⁷

But after the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great, the Jewish people were then subject to rule by the Greeks and then by the Romans (with a brief period of self-rule under the Hasmoneans).³⁸ Jewish revolutionary, resistance, and apocalyptic movements and literatures proliferated.³⁹ Jesus of Nazareth, a common Palestinian Jew, lived, taught, and ministered within this matrix. Followers of Jesus subsequently created the literature that later became the canon of the Christian Bible's New Testament.⁴⁰

Babylon appears again in the last book of the Christian biblical canon, Revelation (or The Apocalypse of John). In Revelation 18, an angel passes judgment on "Babylon the Great"—the Roman Empire—shouting,

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
It has become a dwelling place of
demons,
a haunt of every foul spirit,
a haunt of every foul bird,
a haunt of every foul and hateful beast.
For all the nations have drunk
of the wine of the wrath of her
fornication (*porneias*),
and the kings of the earth have committed
fornication with her,
and the merchants of the earth have
grown rich from the power of her luxury. (Revelation 18:2–3)⁴¹

Another "voice from heaven" then announces "Babylon's" judgment by "death, mourning and famine" and by "fire": "Give her as much torment and grief," the oracle proclaims, "as the glory and luxury she gave herself" (Revelation 18:6–7 (NIV)). The oracle then offers a poignant and vivid image of what this judgment means for Roman trade: "And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives" (Revelation 18:11–13).

³⁶ See 2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Meyers, *supra* note 33, at 201.

³⁷ Cf. Ezra; Nehemiah.

³⁸ See Meyers, *supra* note 33, at 216–29; Lee I. Levine, "The Age of Hellenism: Alexander the Great and the Rise of the Hasmonean Kingdom," in *Ancient Israel*, *supra* note 33, at 231–64; Shaye J.D. Cohen, "The Era of Roman Domination," in *Ancient Israel*, *supra* note 33, at 265–76.

³⁹ See Grabbe, *supra* note 27, at 65–102.

⁴⁰ See Pheme Perkins, *The Interpretation of the Bible: The New Testament Interprets the Jewish Scriptures*, in *THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED STUDY BIBLE* 2257–61 (5th ed. 2010).

⁴¹ The references to demons and wild animals echo the prophecy of judgment over the nation of Edom and the cities of Nineveh and Jerusalem itself in *Isaiah* 34:12–15, *Jeremiah* 9:10–11, and *Zephaniah* 2:13–14. The picture is of land desolated by war. See CRAIG R. KOESTER, *REVELATION: A NEW TRANSLATION WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY*, *THE YALE ANCHOR BIBLE* 696 (2014) (noting that "the judgment is typical of what happens to a faithless city").

As do the prophecies of Isaiah, however, John's vision of apocalypse ends on a hopeful note. Evil is finally defeated and a new Jerusalem descends from heaven. God's glory will light the city, "the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it" (Revelation 21:23–24). Within the city stands "the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2). Echoing Isaiah 25, in this city,

the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3–4)

The Bible's apocalyptic literature is subject to numerous modes of interpretation by Jewish and Christian readers, ranging from readings that see literal predictions of a future yet to occur to those that uncover coded protest statements about then-current events in ancient Palestine.⁴² On any reading, these texts offer no reason to imagine that a technology designed by humans to exceed human rational capacities will result in anything good. At the same time, the biblical texts imagine a highway to the New Jerusalem, by which the nations bring their wealth into the city. The technological wealth of the nations, therefore, is not entirely evil and can be redeemed.⁴³ The Tower of Babel attempted to reach God *in* the heavens but the highway into the New Jerusalem leads to the city where God descends *from* the heavens to make his home among humanity at the city center.

Michael Paulus is one contemporary Christian thinker who has reflected deeply on how AI might relate to these apocalyptic themes of creation and new creation.⁴⁴ Paulus identifies five core principles suggested by this biblical literature: reflective attention; structural agency; knowledge augmentation; ethical foundation; and reformation.⁴⁵ As Paulus argues, the Bible's apocalyptic texts jolt the imagination so that we might pay more careful attention to how a technology such as AI is affecting human flourishing, what agency human beings have collectively and individually regarding the development and use of the technology, whether the technology is increasing or hindering wisdom and understanding, the technology's impact on human justice and peace, and the continual need for reform when inevitable failures are identified.

Paulus's reflections are excellent but perhaps they deflate some of the vivid immediacy of the apocalyptic genre. At the same time, Paulus's focus on apocalyptic misses something about the creation narratives and the relationship between protology and eschatology. The theme of redemption shows why protology is eschatology and eschatology is protology:

⁴² For good discussions of modes of reading *Revelation*, see RICHARD BAUCKHAM, *THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION* (1993); MICHAEL J. GORMAN, *READING REVELATION RESPONSIBLY: UNCIVIL WORSHIP AND WITNESS: FOLLOWING THE LAMB INTO THE NEW CREATION* (2010); JOSEPH L. MANGINA, *REVELATION (BRAZOS THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE)* (2010).

⁴³ See MICHAEL J. PAULUS JR., *ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINATION: ARTIFICIAL AGENCY AND HUMAN HOPE* 66–67 (2023). As Paulus notes, because "technical trades and their technologies were an 'essential feature' of ancient cities—including 'metalworking, brick-making, glass-making, carpentry, perfume-making, tent-making, spinning, weaving, tanning, dyeing, pottery-making, carving, sculpture, and stonemasonry'—it is easy to imagine certain trades and tools among" the things brought into the Heavenly City. *Id.* at 66 (quoting DAVID E. AUNE, *Revelation 17–22*, in *THE WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY* 1009 (1998)).

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 109.

humans in the New Jerusalem enjoy abundance and God's immediate presence as did humans in the Garden. Technology and culture—agriculture, music, and metallurgy—develop outside the Garden but are brought back into the Heavenly City. The question these texts pose is where our technologies aim while we live in the “suspended middle” between the earthly and heavenly cities.⁴⁶ Looking into Christianity's historic interaction with Greek thought prompts further reflection on these themes.

Christian Engagement with Plato and Aristotle

The biblical texts reflect their varied ancient near eastern and Hellenistic cultural settings. The New Testament documents, written mostly in the mid to later first century CE in Greek, show various influences, including Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic, Hellenistic philosophical discourse, Roman epistolary, and other genres.⁴⁷ As Christianity spread in the Roman Empire, its leading thinkers interacted with Greek thought, which became particularly important during internal arguments about the nature of Jesus and the Trinity that overlapped with Christianity's transition to official state religion.⁴⁸

Many of the biblical materials suggest little overlap between the philosophies of “the nations” and that of God's people. Some early Christian leaders did indeed perceive inherent agonism between Christ and culture. As Tertullian (155–245 CE) said, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?”⁴⁹ But other parts of the biblical materials (for example, Proverbs) indicate a broader basis for common wisdom.

Plato and Augustine

In particular, Christian theology regarding God's relationship to creation, and the human place in creation, interacted deeply with Plato and Aristotle. These interactions provide another key touchstone for a theological engagement with AI.

Plato, the Forms, and Mimesis

The notion of a great chain of being has roots in Plato's theory of the Forms (*idean*).⁵⁰ There are many interpretations of what Plato meant by this concept across all his writings, but the essential problem is the relationship between the universal and the particular, or the ideal and the actual. In the transcendent realm of the Forms, the ideal exists, whereas in the actual world of things, a particular thing might participate with greater or lesser degrees of excellence in the ideal Form. This begins to establish a notion of hierarchy or gradient in the actual world as the multitude of things (and people) within it participate in varying ways in the ideal.

⁴⁶ Cf. JOHN MILBANK, *THE SUSPENDED MIDDLE: HENRY DE LUBAC AND THE DEBATE CONCERNING THE SUPERNATURAL* (2005).

⁴⁷ See generally RAYMOND E. BROWN & MARION L. SOARDS, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT (THE ABRIDGED EDITION)* 7–14 (2016).

⁴⁸ See generally JAROSLAV PELIKAN, *THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE*, VOL. 1 27–55 (1971).

⁴⁹ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, in 3 *THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS* 243, 246 (Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson & A. Cleveland Coxe eds.; Peter Holmes trans.; Christian Literature Publishing Co. 1885).

⁵⁰ See ARTHUR O. LOVEJOY, *THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING: A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA* 24–66 (1936). Parts of Lovejoy's thesis about the history of ideas have proven controversial, but his study remains the touchstone for the historical background of the great chain of being metaphor. See William F. Bynum, *The Great Chain of Being After 40 Years: An Appraisal*, 13 *HISTORY OF SCIENCE* 1 (1975).

Plato's focus on the ideal and actual carried over into his aesthetics. In book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato criticizes the poets, particularly Homer, and other artists including painters. A craftsman (*demiourgos*) creates something based on its eternal or divine form (*idean*) (*Republic* 596b, 395–99).⁵¹ The thing created by the craftsman is not the real thing, meaning the ideal form, but rather is one particular representation of the universal ideal. A painter or poet's work is yet another step removed. What they create is a representation of a representation. If a painter makes an image of a bed, for example, he is not making a physical representation of the ideal bed, but rather is creating an imitation of the craftsman's work, two steps removed from nature (597d–e, 401). While the craftsman works to embody the ideal, the painter only produces an imitation (*mimesis*) of some aspect of the appearance (*phainomenon*) of a thing created by the craftsman (598b, 403).

Mimesis is apt to deceive people because it is not directly based on the real form. The same is true of the poets, with even greater consequences, since Homer was taken to be authoritative in public life (599–600, 407–11). Plato (via Socrates) concludes that “starting with Homer, all composers of poetry are imitators of images of virtue (*mimetas idolan mimites*) and of every other subject they deal with, but they don't grasp the truth” (600e, 413). The imitator (*mimites*) is in no position to instruct a craftsman on how to make a better bed, bridle, saddle—or society—because the imitator is not an actual user of the thing. For Plato, then, “the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning about the objects he's portraying ... imitation is a kind of game (*paidian*—childish play) and not serious” (602b, 419). The philosopher, who contemplates the ideal directly and thus is more apt to determine truth, is a superior teacher and leader than the poet, who is a mere imitator and prone to deception.

Augustine on Mimesis and Theurgy

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) is one of the great thinkers of classical Christendom. Augustine took up the Platonic theme of *mimesis* in his *Confessions*, *City of God*, and sermons.⁵² In the *City of God*, Augustine developed the biblical eschatological themes of the earthly city, which resists God and exists under judgment, the heavenly city, which is the destination of human community with God at its center, and the present age, in which there is some overlap, often difficult to discern, where the heavenly city is already present within the earthly city.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine recounts his love of Roman theater and spectacles before his conversion.⁵³ Following Plato's criticism of painters and poets, he argues that theater and spectacles are deceptive because they convey false impressions to the audience. The theater, Augustine said, produced imitations of proper feelings, such as pity, without leading to acts of pity, and also produced imitations of improper feelings, such as lust, leading to actual experiences of lust. This kind of *mimesis* leads people away from the truth.⁵⁴

But Augustine nuanced the Platonic teaching by emphasizing a different sort of *mimesis*: that of the Christian liturgy. In the *City of God*, Augustine argues that Christian liturgical *mimesis* re-presents Christ, who is in fact present in the eucharist, and the spectacle of Christian worship directs attention away from the self. Whereas the Roman spectacles were about violence, glory, and pride, Christian liturgy is about the humility of Christ crucified.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Citations to the *Republic* are included parenthetically first by the Stephanus pagination and then by the pagination in the Loeb Classical Library edition. All quotations are from PLATO, *REPUBLIC: BOOKS 6–10* (Loeb Classical Library no. 276, Chris Emlyn-Jones & William Preddy trans. and eds., 2013).

⁵² Jennifer Herdt, *The Theatre of the Virtues: Augustine's Critique of Pagan Mimesis*, in *AUGUSTINE'S CITY OF GOD: A CRITICAL GUIDE* 111–29 (James Wetzel ed., 2012).

⁵³ AUGUSTINE, *CONFESSIONS* (Maria Boulding trans., 1997), 1.16–18, 1.27, 3.2.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 3.2.

⁵⁵ AUGUSTINE, *CITY OF GOD* (Gerald G. Walsh et al. trans., 1958), II.28

Participation in Christian liturgical *mimesis* leads worshippers to imitate Christ and thereby to enter into the deeper life of friendship with God.⁵⁶

In book 10 of the *City of God*, Augustine contrasts Christian worship with the Neoplatonist practice of theurgy. Plato's discussion of the Good and the Forms in the *Republic* and elsewhere established the notion of a highest good from which other goods descend. The Neoplatonists active in the early centuries of Christianity extended the Platonic notion that the physical world is a lower or distorted sort of being descended from the spiritual world.⁵⁷

One of the Neoplatonists' key concerns was the question of fate and free will. Their discussions of the soul and the body in relation to freedom shows that contemporary claims about how neuroscience or AI might question folk notions of human freedom are nothing new.⁵⁸

The Neoplatonist Plotinus, for example, argued against materialists who claimed the cause of all things was the movement of atoms and against idealists who argued that the cause of all things was the movement of a world-soul.⁵⁹ In either case, he said, the actions and choices of individuals would be erased as genuine causes, and either there would be no meaningful concept of morality (as in materialistic atomism) or the All.

At the same time, Plotinus was keen to critique the Stoic idea of a "principle which interweaves and, so to speak, chains (*syneirousan*) everything to everything else, and makes each individual thing be the way it is, a principle assumed to be one, from which all things come about by seminal formative principles (*logous spermatikous*)."⁶⁰ For Plotinus, the missing element in the Stoic account was the individual soul: "Soul, surely, is another principle [which] we must bring into reality—not only the Soul of the All but also the individual soul along with it as a principle of no small importance; with this, we must weave (*plekein*) all things together, which does not itself come, like other things, from seeds, but is a cause which initiates activity."⁶¹

When it is outside a body, the individual soul "is in absolute control of itself and free, and outside the causation (*aitias*) of the physical universe."⁶² Joined to a body, the individual soul is no longer fully in control and becomes subject to physical causes. Although restrained, the individual soul can still act with some degree of freedom when the body and other external causes are tamed by the will and intellect.⁶³

The goal of contemplative or religious practice for the Neoplatonists, then, was to escape from physical constraints and to be joined with the spiritual. While Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Iamblichus stressed rational contemplation as a means of ascending from the physical to the spiritual realm, the later Neoplatonists Proclus and Iamblichus commended rituals of theurgy—magical practices and incantations meant to bring the spiritual realm into the physical.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ See *id.*

⁵⁷ See Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism*, in *THE COLUMBIA HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY* 102–11 (John Merrill & Hershel Shanks eds., 1999); Georges Leroux, *Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus*, in *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO PLOTINUS* 292 (Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., 2006).

⁵⁸ See Gerson, *supra* note 57, at 107. For a discussion of freedom, determinism, and "folk psychology," see OPDERBECK, *THE END OF THE LAW?*, *supra* note 21, at 147–48.

⁵⁹ See generally Leroux, *supra* note 57.

⁶⁰ PLOTINUS, ENNEAD III.1.7, pp. 28–29 (Loeb Classical Library ed., trans. A.H. Armstrong, (1969). The translation of the participle *συνείπονσαν* as "chained" is potentially misleading, as the word more literally means "connected" or "strung together." See Liddell, Scott, *Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon*, s.v. "συνείπω," <https://lsj.gr/wiki/%CF%83%CF%85%CE%BD%CE%B5%CE%AF%CF%81%CF%89> (last visited June 19, 2026).

⁶¹ PLOTINUS, *supra* note 60, at III.1.8, pp. 30–31.

⁶² *Id.* at III. 1.8, pp. 30–31.

⁶³ *Id.* at III. 1.10, pp. 34–35.

⁶⁴ There is debate about whether or to what extent the "rationalist" Neoplatonists, including Plotinus and Proclus, would have endorsed the theurgical practices of other Neoplatonists, including Porphyry and Iamblichus, or dismissed them as "superstitions." See CRYSTAL ADDEY, *DIVINATION AND THEURGY IN NEOPLATONISM: ORACLES AND GODS*, 244–300 (2014) (arguing for continuity between Plotinus and Iamblichus); John Milbank & Aaron Riches, "Neoplatonic

Augustine's critique of theurgy in *City of God* was based in significant part on the Christian claim that theurgic practices invoked demons, which stood behind the personae of the pagan gods.⁶⁵ To the extent some of the pagans, particularly Porphyry, his main target in this part of the text, suggested demons should be avoided, Augustine accused them of gross inconsistency.⁶⁶ According to Augustine, Porphyry's key error was to despise the body so that he could not recognize Jesus as the incarnate mediator whose sacrifice enables human nature to return to God.⁶⁷ Pagans such as Porphyry, Augustine argued, cannot accept an incarnate, crucified savior because of their pride. Christians, in contrast, humbly and gratefully acknowledge that there is no salvation without God's descending to us by God's own gracious action—not by human magical manipulation—and in our own human flesh.⁶⁸

Augustine on AI?

An Augustinian perspective on AI, grounded in Plato's suspicion of *mimesis*, would be quite skeptical of the technology. Both Plato and Augustine, it seems, would agree with philosopher Johanna Bryson's view that people should not try to develop sentient machines.⁶⁹ An Augustinian view would suggest particular caution about AI's capacity for *mimesis* and about AI as a sort of *theurgy* that appeals to a disembodied cyber-rationality.

Popular AI systems such as large language models, widely called LLMs, and image generators are *mimesis* machines. They digest enormous amounts of training data to create statistical weights so that they can approximate human languages and arts.⁷⁰ In Plato's terms, their output is three steps removed from the *idean*—mimicking the artists who mimic the craftsman (or maybe two steps removed for LLMs that mimic philosophers).

Presumably this kind of AI would have no place in Plato's republic. In Augustinian terms, LLMs and image generators absorb and represent all the misdirected human desire on the internet from which they are trained. Augustine's view of what positive law could accomplish in restraining human desire was modest, so it is unclear how he might have thought about legal restraints on AI, but he no doubt would have been skeptical the technology would result in much good.

Many AIs that make decisions without producing content are different kinds of *mimesis* machines. AIs that screen job applicant resumes, for example, stand in for human reviewers who traditionally made judgments that were partly quantitative and partly qualitative.⁷¹ Reducing the qualitative aspect might serve certain values, such as if the AI can be trained to eliminate improper explicit or implicit biases (such as racial bias) that historically have influenced human reviewers. But judgments about whether a person is a good fit for a job also involve qualitative factors that are not necessarily improper, such as camaraderie among alumni of a local college or preferences for different communication styles. The

Theurgy and Christian Incarnation," foreword to GREGORY SHAW, *THEURGY AND THE SOUL: THE NEOPLATONISM OF IAMBlichus* (2d ed. Angelico Press 2014) (suggesting Iamblichus modified Plotinus in viewing the individual soul as fully descended and therefore in need of "sacramental" mediation for its ascent back to the divine).

⁶⁵ AUGUSTINE, *supra* note 55, at X.9.

⁶⁶ *Id.* Addey argues that Augustine likely misread or misrepresented the subtleties of Porphyry's views. ADDEY, *supra* note 64, at 152–59.

⁶⁷ AUGUSTINE, *supra* note 55, at X.24–29.

⁶⁸ See Herdt, *supra* note 52, at 119.

⁶⁹ See Joanna J. Bryson, *Robots Should Be Slaves*, in CLOSE ENGAGEMENTS WITH ARTIFICIAL COMPANIONS: KEY SOCIAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, ETHICAL AND DESIGN ISSUES 63–74 (Yorick Wilks ed., 2010).

⁷⁰ See David W. Opderbeck, *Copyright in AI Training Data: A Human-Centered Approach*, 76 OKLAHOMA LAW REVIEW 951 (2024).

⁷¹ See Korn Ferry, *AI Recruiting in 2024: Pros and Cons*, KORNFERRY.COM, February 29, 2024, <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/featured-topics/talent-recruitment/ai-in-recruiting-navigating-trends-for-2024>.

closer an AI gets to making qualitative judgments, the more likely it would have made Plato or Augustine nervous about its *mimesis*.

Other kinds of AIs extend or exceed human capacity for judgments that are primarily quantitative. Consider an image recognition system that provides quality control for printed computer circuit boards.⁷² The system is trained on properly constructed boards within an acceptable range of engineering tolerance. It takes high resolution photos of constructed boards as they pass rapidly through the line. If the pixel data for a board deviate from the acceptable parameters, it is rejected and removed from the line. All this happens in seconds or less. Human beings could conduct such checks using microscopes or with blown-up digital images, but with far less speed or accuracy than an AI. In this case the AI is not so much a *mimesis* machine as an extension of human quantitative capacities. Perhaps this kind of machine would be of less concern from a Platonic-Augustinian perspective concerned about *mimesis*.

Augustine's arguments against *theurgy*, however, are also important for a theological evaluation of AI. From the dawn of the Internet age, techno-utopians have imagined a cyberspace free from the limitations of human embodiment. As John Perry Barlow famously states in his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather."⁷³ Barlow said the new pioneers of cyberspace "will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace," which he believed would "be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before."⁷⁴

For some futurists, cyberspace is fast approaching the computing power and storage space needed to generate Mind (or demi-minds) with AI.⁷⁵ In the utopian vision, AI will enable humans to offload most of the tedious and banal elements of work so that we can enjoy richer and more satisfying cultural pursuits. It is as though, in theurgic fashion, we are calling on the disembodied *nous* of cyberspace, with rituals in (computer) code and offerings of training data, so that the power of cyberspace would descend and draw us into a new realm of freedom.

Few people today, of course, would suggest that Barlow's vision has been realized. Like most other human technological artifacts, cyberspace has both contributed to human beneficence and fairness and enabled ever more ghastly evils and inequities. Unlike many in the early generation of cyber-law scholars, few lawyers or policy advocates suggest that AI should be left essentially unregulated. No serious thinker has penned a "Declaration of the Independence of AI." Many serious thinkers, however, do imagine some kind of AI rights without embodiment, or that, if properly managed, AI might deliver humanity from suffering. The Augustinian perspective reminds us that salvation finally comes only from God, embodied in the incarnate, human, crucified Christ.

Aristotle and Aquinas

In a well-known passage in the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the nature of slaves as living (ensouled) tools (*organon*): "the manager of a household (*oikonomiko*) must have his tools (*organon*), and of tools some are lifeless (*apsycha*, soulless) and others living (*empsycha*,

⁷² See, e.g., "Our Products" OVERVIEW, <https://overview.ai/product/> (last visited April 30, 2026); "How to Use AI or Quality Control," SCIOTEX, <https://sciotech.com/how-to-use-ai-for-quality-control/> (last visited April 30, 2026).

⁷³ John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, February 8, 1996, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ KURZWEIL, *supra* note 3, at 17–20; BOSTROM, *supra* note 3, at 11–16.

ensouled) (for example, for a helmsman the rudder is a lifeless tool and the look-out man a live tool—for an assistant in the arts belongs to the class of tools), so also an article of property is a tool for the purpose of life, and property generally is a collection of tools, and a slave is a live article of property (*ktēma ti empsychon*).⁷⁶

Aristotle suggests that slaves (ensouled tools) are necessary because other kinds of tools are not *automatous*—they cannot move on their own, unlike some devices described by the poets: “And every assistant is as it were a tool that serves for several tools; for if every tool could perform its own work when ordered, or by seeing what to do in advance, like the statues of Daedalus in the story, or the tripods of Hephaestus which the poet says ‘enter self-moved (*automatous*) the company divine,’—if thus shuttles wove and quills played harps of themselves, master-craftsmen would have no need of assistants and masters no need of slaves.”⁷⁷

Because such automatons do not exist, subservient workers—assistants and slaves—are required for the household to be productive, and, more importantly, to conduct activities that are valuable for their own sake:

Now the tools mentioned are instruments of production (*poietika organa*), whereas an article of property is an instrument of action (*praktikon*); for from a shuttle we get something else beside the mere use of the shuttle, but from a garment or a bed we get only their use. And also inasmuch as there is a difference in kind between production (*poiesis*) and action (*praxis*), and both need tools, it follows that those tools also must possess the same difference. But life is doing things (*praxis*), not making things (*poiesis*); hence the slave is an assistant in the class of instruments of action (*praxin*).⁷⁸

The distinction Aristotle makes between production (*poiesis*) and action (*praxis*) in this passage relates to his discussion of these concepts in book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle there discusses the intellectual virtues: “Thought by itself however moves (*kinei*) nothing, but only thought directed to an end (*heneka*), and dealing with action (*praktike*). This indeed is the moving cause (*archei*) of productive activity (*poietikes*) also, since he who makes something always has some further end in view: the act of making is not an end in itself, it is only a means, and belongs to something else. Whereas a thing done is an end in itself: since doing well (*eupraxia*, welfare) is the End (*telos*), and it is at this that desire (*horexis*) aims.”⁷⁹

Praxis is something done for its own sake, while *poiesis* is something done for the sake of something else. As the language of motion (*kinei*) and cause (*arche*, *telos*) shows, this discussion connects closely to Aristotle’s metaphysics. *Praxis*, for Aristotle, is more valuable than *poiesis* because *praxis* is closer to the ends for which humans exist.

A state (*polis*), is “a form of partnership (*koinonia*) of similar people (*homoion*),” whose “object is the best life that is possible.”⁸⁰ The greatest good is “happiness (*eudaimonia*),” which is a “perfect activity *xresis tis teleos* or employment of virtue (*aretēs energia*).” This perfection (*telos*) of virtue (*arete*) is contemplation and quietude.⁸¹ Moreover, the *polis* requires things that must be supplied by different classes of people: food supplied by farmers, handicrafts (*technas*) by craftsmen, armed forces by soldiers, religious services

⁷⁶ ARISTOTLE, *POLITICS*, I.II, 1254a, pp. 16–17 (Loeb Classical Library ed., H. Rackham trans., 1932).

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ ARISTOTLE, *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*, VI., 1139a35–b4, p. 331 (Loeb Classical Library ed., trans. H. Rackham, 1926).

⁸⁰ ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 76, at 1328a, pp. 570–71.

⁸¹ See Oded Balaban, *Praxis and Poesis in Aristotle’s Practical Philosophy*, 24 JOURNAL OF VALUE INQUIRY 185 (1990).

by priests, and decisions about conflicting interest by judges.⁸² In a democracy, everyone might participate in all of these functions, a form of constitution Aristotle judges deficient.⁸³ But since not every person possesses the virtue required for happiness, according to Aristotle, the manual professions of farming and *technas* should be performed by lower classes, leaving the virtuous elites free to pursue *eudaimonia*.⁸⁴

When he says the slave is a tool of *praxis*, then, Aristotle means that the slave frees the master from labor that would detract from the master's higher calling to virtue. The master weaver can envision the final design of the cloth and bring it to completion using assistants and slaves at the loom in a way that would not be possible if the master had to perform all the manual weaving himself. If the shuttle was *automatous*, assistants and slaves would not be needed.

Aquinas took up the Platonic/Augustinian view and modified it through the newly rediscovered lens of Aristotle. Plato's student Aristotle criticized the more static notion of the forms and modified it with an emphasis on causality. For Aristotle, form and matter are not ontologically distinct but belong to the same substance (*ousia*) in which they are united hylomorphically. Form was no longer an external entity but a kind of cause: the formal cause of something related to its plan or design, while the material and efficient causes related to the matter and means of its composition, and the final cause related to its purpose.

Aquinas related these concepts to the notion of a great chain of being in book 3 of his *Summa Contra Gentiles* in the context of a discussion on providence and creation. Creation, Aquinas said, does not add anything to the divine goodness, but rather is ordered by providence so "that the likeness of His goodness, as much as possible, is impressed on things" (SCG 3.97.2).⁸⁵ Because "every created substance must fall short of the perfection of divine goodness," he argued, "it was necessary for there to be a diversity of things, so that what could not be perfectly represented by one thing might be, in a more perfect fashion, represented by a variety of things in different ways (SCG 3.97.2).

Form, Aquinas said, "is nothing else than a divine likeness that is participated in things" (SCG 3.97.3). Some things are closer to the divine likeness than others, and this difference in "grades of perfection" produces the diversity of forms of things (SCG 3.97.3). For Aquinas, the basic gradation ran from inanimate bodies to plants to irrational animals to intellectual substances. Within each of these basic gradations there were further gradations, resulting in only minor differences between the highest level of one grade and the lowest level of the next (SCG 3.97.3).⁸⁶

Some forms are so perfect that they do not require matter for their subsistence. Other forms require "matter as a foundation, so that what does subsist is not simply form, nor yet merely matter, but a thing comprised of both" (SCG 3.97.6). The kind of matter required for these composite things will vary depending on their forms (SCG 3.97.7).

The gradation of forms, for Aquinas, implied also "a diversity of agents and patients" (SCG 3.97.8). Every form attached to matter "suffers passion and is moved by reason of its matter" (SCG 3.97.8). To preserve the harmony of creation, more perfect things, which are less controlled by matter, "must act on those that are more material and whose forms are more imperfect" (SCG 3.97.8). Different forms will also have different accidents, which result in

⁸² ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 76, at 1328b, pp. 572–73.

⁸³ *Id.* at 1328b, p. 575.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ Citations to the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) are included parenthetically by book, chapter, and paragraph. All quotations are from the five-volume edition published by University of Notre Dame Press. AQUINAS, *SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES* (Anton C. Pegis (book 1), James F. Anderson (book 2), Vernan J. Bourke (book 3), Charles J. O'Neil (book 4) trans., University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

⁸⁶ This is why, for example, "immovable animals are like plants" (SCG 3.97.3).

different accidental impressions upon patients by agents (SCG 3.97.9).⁸⁷ In this way, for Aquinas, all of creation is impressed with God's goodness and at the same time each thing within creation moves in accordance with its proper ends and in proper relation to each other thing in creation (SCG 3.97.10).

This order of creation, for Aquinas, relates directly to the Aristotelian question of causes. The "first cause" of creation is the divine will, not in contrast to reason, but simply as "the first principle of all things" (SCG 3.97.16). This does not mean the divine will is the proximate cause of everything that happens in creation; it means only that the divine will is the first cause. As Aquinas has already established, the hierarchy of being requires that there are agents and patients, in other words, that various things within creation act upon others. So, if someone asks why wood is heated by fire, the correct answer is that "heating is the natural action of fire," and this is so 'because heat is its [fire's] proper accident'" (SCG 3.97.16). It is also correct to answer that wood is heated by fire "because God wills it," but this answer refers only to the first cause; it would be an improper answer if meant to exclude other causes (SCG 3.97.16).

It is important to note that by first cause Aquinas invokes the Aristotelian concepts of causation rather than a kind of temporal priority of but-for causes (which would all fall within the category of efficient causes). It is not as though God, at a definite point in time, physically flicks a match to start the fire. Rather, it is that the potency of fire to create heat derives from how fire participates in the divine goodness, which ontologically precedes all created things.

This relationship between cause, potency, and act is discussed in book 4, chapter 11, of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which discusses the generation of the divine Son. The overarching theological problem in this section is how to speak of the Son as proceeding from the Father without making the Son into just another creature within creation. Here Aquinas discusses the degree to which things in creation produce "emanations," that is, an internal capacity for generation.

"Inanimate bodies," Aquinas says, possess no capacity for emanations. Changes are wrought upon inanimate bodies entirely by external things. For example, fire does not produce itself but is generated when an existing fire comes into contact with an extraneous body – fire burns a log and generates more fire, but fire cannot produce fire without a third thing such as a log (SCG 4.11.2).

Plants, in contrast, produce emanations "somewhat from within": "the internal humor of the plant is converted into seed and ... the seed committed to the soil grows into a plant" (SCG 4.11.3). The seed, however, comes from a fruit, which Aquinas takes to be a different thing than the plant, and the plant is nourished through its roots by the soil, so the plant is not entirely self-emanating. According to Aquinas, the difference between fire and plants reflects "the first grade of life": fire can act on an external thing but not on itself, whereas a plant emanates at least to some extent from within itself (SCG 4.11.3). When a thing possesses a capacity within itself to move toward some form, it has the "mark of life" (SCG 4.11.3). Without such capacity, a thing is not alive.

Above plants are a "higher grade of life" possessing a sensitive soul (SCG 4.11.4). For such things their emanation may begin externally but terminates internally. They receive sense impressions from external things, which proceed to imagination and memory, resulting in action and growth. However, although these higher grades of life act on sense impressions, they do not reflect upon themselves (SCG 4.11.4). They are thus higher than plants but lower than things that possess intellect.

⁸⁷ In the philosophical usage employed by Aquinas, an "accident" is a contingent property possessed by a substance that may be present or not without changing the substance's identity or essence.

A thing that possesses intellect participates in “the perfect grade of life” because it is capable of self-reflection and self-understanding (SCG 4.11.5). Even among intellectual creatures, however, there are gradations. The human intellect, for example, is capable of self-knowledge, but it knows nothing without first receiving external sense impressions (a “phantasm”) (SCG 4.11.5). Angels are above humans because they know themselves through themselves rather than through phantasms. But even though angels know themselves immediately what they know is not being itself (SCG 4.11.5).⁸⁸ Only God’s understanding is immediately of being itself, which means God is “the ultimate perfection of life” (SCG 4.11.5).

Even with this modified Christian Aristotelian-Platonic picture of the Great Chain of Being, we might expect Aquinas to follow Augustine’s, and Plato’s, critique of poetry, art, and other kinds of *mimesis*. Aquinas’s perspective, however, is more subtle.

We find Aquinas’s views on poetry and art in the *Summa Theologica* within a discussion of the ceremonial elements of the Jewish law. This discussion was preceded by a general treatise on law, including the natural law, divine law, human positive law, and the place of the Jewish moral law, particularly the Ten Commandments (ST I-II.90–99).⁸⁹ The overarching concern with the ceremonial law was whether it was fitting for the worship of God, particularly since most of it had been abandoned in Christian practice.⁹⁰ Aquinas answered generally that the ceremonial law was indeed good and appropriate for its purpose when given to the Jewish people.

One of the specific questions was whether the ceremonial law could properly have been “figurative” (ST I-II, 101.2). This question arose because Christian interpretation understood the ceremonial law as rich with figures of Christ, not least in the various kinds of sacrifices prescribed in the law. Objection 2 argues that “whatever is done for the worship of God, should be entirely free from unfitness. But the performance of actions in representation of others, seems to savor of the theatre or of the drama: because formerly the actions performed in theatres were done to represent the actions of others. Therefore it seems that such things should not be done for the worship of God” (ST I-II, 101.2, obj. 2).

Aquinas answered that God reveals himself in ways that accommodate human weakness and limitations, “in various ways, however, according to the various states of human knowledge” (ST I-II, 101.2, ans.). It was necessary for God to reveal “the Divine mysteries ... to uncultured people under a veil of figures, that thus they might know them at least implicitly by using those figures to the honor of God” (ST I-II, 101.2, reply 1).⁹¹ Although

⁸⁸ This claim is stated without elaboration here, but it relates to the basic difference between God and creation. God is being itself, his own subsistent being, without accidents (SCG 1.22). Every other being, including angels, depends upon God, cannot be its own subsistent being, and may possess accidents (SCG 2.15). An angel’s self-understanding, while it is immediate and does not require a phantasm, therefore involves the understanding not of being itself but of their selves as dependent upon the being of God. God’s self-understanding, in contrast, is immediately of being itself and is completely perfect (SCG 4.11.5).

⁸⁹ Citations to the *Summa Theologica* (ST) are included parenthetically by part, question, objection, answer, and reply. Quotations are from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province edition (1920). For a discussion of Aquinas’s Treatise on Law (ST I-II, 90–108, see DAVID W. OPDERBECK, *LAW AND THEOLOGY: CLASSIC QUESTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES* (2019).

⁹⁰ I place *moral* and *ceremonial* law in italics here because modern Christian biblical scholarship tends to reject this distinction as anachronistic and supersessionist. The entire *Torah* is *moral* in that it all concerns right relationships among humans and between humans and God. This recognition might initially increase the problem of supersessionism for Christians who understand that New Testament faith frees them from *Torah* observance, but it is important to address differences based on a fair understanding of the dialogue partner’s self-understanding, as well as to face directly the tension this question causes for the integrity of the biblical witness from the Hebrew scriptures to the New Testament. See Jonathan Klawans, *The Law*, in *THE JEWISH ANNOTATED NEW TESTAMENT*, 515 (Amy Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler eds., 2011).

⁹¹ The suggestion that the ancient Israelites were “uncultured people” reads, of course, as antisemitic to our ears and must be rejected.

“human reason fails to grasp poetical expressions on account of their being lacking in truth,” it also fails “to grasp Divine things perfectly, on account of the sublimity of the truth they contain” (ST I-II, 101.2, reply 2). In other words, the imperfection of truth is not the absence of any truth, and where direct speech is too difficult or inadequate figurative communication can be appropriate. In contrast to Plato’s and Augustine’s more absolutist stance about poetic deception, then, Aquinas suggests that poetry and figures—and even laws—can represent truths, even if contained within literal untruths, which humans are not otherwise capable of processing.

Aquinas also agreed in part with but modified Aristotle’s discussion of the commonwealth. In his treatise *On Kingship*, he observed that everything is “ordered toward an end” and that some “directive principle” is required to reach the proper end (1.3).⁹² Man is a “social and political animal” that lives by reason, communicated through the gift of speech, rather than by the natural instruments of claws, teeth, instinct provided to other animals (OK 1.5–7).

Human community would fracture and not reach its end unless some agency provides for the common weal and curbs the tendency of individuals to seek their own good over that of the whole (OK 1.9). This function could be managed by the multitude (democracy), an elite few (aristocracy), or a king. For Aquinas, a king is best suited to serve as “a shepherd seeking the common good of the multitude and not his own” (OK 1.13).

A king, however, is different from a tyrant. A tyrant seeks his own good at the expense of the common weal. Similarly, aristocracy is different from oligarchy, because aristocrats rule for the common good while oligarchs seek their own interests. Democracy is preferable to oligarchy and tyranny if those are the only choices. It is better for the power of an unjust government—that is, a government not led by a virtuous king or virtuous aristocrats toward proper ends—to be spread across many rather than to be concentrated in a tyrant or oligarchs (OK 2.25, 3). Nevertheless, the best constitution is one in which a virtuous king can be raised up with checks against tyranny, including a right of the people to depose a king who has become a tyrant (OK 6).

Aristotle and Aquinas Talk AI

From a contemporary perspective we are of course horrified by Aristotle’s elitism and sanction of human slavery, even as we tolerate gross national and international inequities that force some people to labor in slave-like (or literally enslaved) conditions. But we might agree with Aristotle that things without soul, like the rudder of a boat or the shuttle in a loom, are merely tools that can be used as the craftsman sees fit. Like the human ensouled tools of his own day, presumably Aristotle would argue that AI—whether capable of having souls or not—should be viewed as a kind of property used to provide the leisure needed by the virtuous few in their pursuit of the highest good. Automation brought forth by the Industrial Revolution has already achieved far more than Aristotle imagined—autonomous looms and music machines have long been commonplace. Perhaps AI systems with some degree of independent action might even displace the need for human slaves in the ideal Aristotelian commonwealth. It seems Aristotle would agree with Bryson that “robots should be slaves.”⁹³

At the same time neither Aristotle nor Aquinas would imagine a machine taking the place of rational human beings as guardians of the common weal. In Aquinas’ terminology, AI does not possess intellect. In Thomistic terms, perhaps some existing AI systems, or some that

⁹² Citations to *On Kingship* (OK) are included parenthetically by chapter and paragraph. All quotations are from Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, in *THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS*, 175 (Dino Bingongiari ed., Gerald Bernard Phelan & I. Th Eshmann trans., 1969).

⁹³ Bryson, *Robots Should Be Slaves*, *supra* note 69.

might be developed in the near future, could be analogous to lower levels of life, like the plants and animals that produce emanations at least somewhat from within themselves. Even this seems unlikely, since unlike anything in nature, an AI system does not present itself to us phenomenologically, as something given. In any event, AI systems, at least as they now exist, are not capable of self-reflection or self-understanding, Aquinas's hallmarks of intellect.

Neither Aristotle nor Aquinas, however, were quite as chary of *mimesis* as Plato and Augustine. The question for Aquinas would center on the virtues of those employing the tool and on the extent to which the content it produces participates in truth. In many ways this resonates with contemporary statements of AI governance principles and with laws such as the EU AI Act. The principle that AI should be designed to foster human values—"AI by Design" or "Responsible AI"—seeks to establish a virtuous pedagogy for AI engineers.⁹⁴ Measures to curb algorithmic bias recognizes that such biases fail against a higher measure of truth.

For contemporary constitutional democracies, however, an Aristotelian-Thomistic perspective eventually will conflict with the core value of freedom of expression. Freedom of expression pushes the question of truth away from the domain of positive law and toward the private domain of a marketplace of ideas.⁹⁵ The importance of this move is obvious to anyone who knows anything about the long history of political and religious persecution in every place and culture. But for anyone who thinks there are some kinds of basic truths that can at least in some manner or degree be known—whether scientific, moral, theological, or otherwise—this move is also troublesome. Under U.S. law, no one has a First Amendment right to perpetrate fraud, but generalized disinformation usually is not fraud in the legal sense.⁹⁶ Aquinas did not believe the positive law in any specific time or place could or should encode all the principles of the natural law, but the magnitude of disinformation enabled by AI might push a Thomistic perspective on the role of positive law in relation to representation, *mimesis*, and truth past the breaking point.

Creation, Process, and Co-creation

The static Platonic-Aristotelian cosmos was always an unstable explanation of the observable world. Ptolemy standardized the geocentric cosmos in the third century through the ingenious understanding of epicycles to explain why planetary motions failed to match the courses predicted by the geocentric model.⁹⁷ Copernicus' mathematical models of a heliocentric cosmos and Tycho Brahe's observation of a new star (a supernova) in the sixteenth century, followed by Galileo's observations of Jupiter's moons, Kepler's laws of planetary motion, and Newton's laws of gravitation (confirming Kepler's laws), all in the seventeenth century, gradually displaced the belief that Earth was the center of a universe in which heavenly bodies moved but did not change.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ See Krisna Sai, *AI by Design: Principles for Responsible AI*, ORANGE MATTER, April 29, 2024, <https://orangematter.solarwinds.com/2024/04/29/introducing-ai-by-design-principles-for-responsible-ai/>; Cole Stryker, *What is Responsible AI?*, IBM WATSON.X GOVERNANCE, February 6, 2024, [https://www.ibm.com/topics/responsible-ai#:~:text=Responsible%20artificial%20intelligence%20\(AI\)%20is,empower%20organizations%20and%20their%20stakeholders](https://www.ibm.com/topics/responsible-ai#:~:text=Responsible%20artificial%20intelligence%20(AI)%20is,empower%20organizations%20and%20their%20stakeholders).

⁹⁵ See *Abrams v. U.S.*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919) (Holmes, J., dissenting).

⁹⁶ See *Giboney v. Empire Storage & Ice Co.*, 336 U.S. 490 (1949) (speech incident to a crime is not protected); *United States v. Hansen*, 599 U.S. 762, 769 (2023) (stating "the First Amendment does not shield fraud") (quoting *Illinois ex rel. Madigan v. Telemarketing Associates, Inc.*, 538 U.S. 600, 612 (2003); *United States v. Alvarez*, 567 U.S. 709 (2012) (falsity alone does not strip speech of protection)).

⁹⁷ See Claudius Ptolemy, *The Peculiar Nature of the Universe*, in *THE BOOK OF THE COSMOS: IMAGINING THE UNIVERSE FROM HERACLITUS TO HAWKING* 68–74 (Dennis Richard Danielson ed., 2000); ALISTER MCGRATH, *SCIENCE & RELIGION: A NEW INTRODUCTION* 13–18 (2d ed. 2010); OPDERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 54–56.

⁹⁸ MCGRATH, *supra* note 97, at 38–45; OPDERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 56–57.

Parallel developments in the physical and biological sciences, leading up to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, likewise disrupted the notion of a great chain of being. Studies of geological strata and fossils revealed that the Earth is billions of years old and that life existed for millions of years before humanity's advent. Evolutionary science proposed a tree of life, beginning with simple one-celled organisms and increasing in complexity and diversity. *Homo Sapiens* still seemed particularly adaptive because of our intelligence, but nevertheless we merely occupied a space along one branch of this great tree.⁹⁹ From this perspective, we are neither the culmination of creation nor its steward. Indeed, from this perspective there are no entities outside this tree describing organisms comprised of matter—no angels and God above, no demons and devil below.

Christian theology interacted with these developments in various ways. Fundamentalists denied the validity of modern geological and biological sciences and asserted an alternative science based in biblical literalism.¹⁰⁰ This once obscure perspective now exerts enormous influence over U.S. and global Christianity, boasting multimillion dollar tourist attractions and the adherence of public figures, including the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.¹⁰¹ Mainstream academic theology, reflected in the positions of the mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church, meanwhile, came to understand evolution as the means through which God created the physical universe, while developing various perspectives on how that which could be considered spiritual, including divine action, relates to the material.¹⁰²

Consciousness and Emergence

These theological questions relate closely to the hard problem of consciousness. If the materialist account of the universe and of evolution is true, there seems to be no space for consciousness as something beyond the physical. Indeed, many scientists and philosophers argue that consciousness is an epiphenomenal illusion.¹⁰³ Not only are humans not the pinnacle of the material creation, created with bodies and soul to be intermediate between God, the spiritual Angels, and the material world, but in fact the powers of sense and reason previously attributed to the soul are only apparent and not real.

Other scientists and philosophers reject this conclusion because it seems so obviously wrong.¹⁰⁴ To engage in reasoned argument about whether the powers of sense and reason are real seems to answer the question, or else there is no reasoned argument to be had. But for many non-theistic philosophers, as well as for many theologians, evolutionary science requires attention to the *process* of how life developed. Consciousness, what in the

⁹⁹ McGRATH, *supra* note 97, at 46–56; OPPERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 64–77.

¹⁰⁰ OPPERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 54–61.

¹⁰¹ See CREATION MUSEUM, <https://creationmuseum.org/> (last visited Aug. 5, 2025); ARK ENCOUNTER, <https://arkencounter.com> (last visited Aug. 5, 2025); William Trollinger, *What Mike Johnson's Stint Representing a Creationist Museum in Court Reveals About His Politics*, TALKING POINTS MEMO, December 16, 2023, <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/what-mike-johnsons-stint-representing-a-creationist-museum-in-court-reveals-about-his-politics>.

¹⁰² See, e.g., Christopher T. Baglow, *The Catholic Tradition and Science*, SOCIETY OF CATHOLIC SCIENTISTS, March 31, 2020, <https://catholicscientists.org/articles/catholic-tradition-science/>; PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH USA (PCUSA), AFFIRMATION OF CREATION, (June 22, 2016), https://fore.yale.edu/files/affirmation_of_creation_2016.pdf.

¹⁰³ See, e.g., DAVID EAGLEMAN, *INCognito: THE SECRET LIVES OF THE BRAIN* (2012); DANIEL DENNETT, *CONSCIOUSNESS EXPLAINED* (1992).

¹⁰⁴ OPPERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 77–105; THOMAS NAGEL, *MIND & COSMOS: WHY THE MATERIALIST NEO-DARWINIAN CONCEPTION OF NATURE IS ALMOST CERTAINLY FALSE* (2012); STEPHEN R.L. CLARK, *CAN WE BELIEVE IN PEOPLE? HUMAN SIGNIFICANCE IN AN INTERCONNECTED COSMOS* (2020); KEITH WARD, *MORE THAN MATTER? WHAT HUMANS REALLY ARE* (2010). As Ward puts it, “The extreme materialist view that consciousness is an illusion can only be consistently held by philosophers who are not conscious.” WARD, *id.* at 34.

theological tradition was called soul, for them, must develop through a gradual evolutionary process along with the body.

Non-Reductive Physicalism

A modest version of this position is called non-reductive physicalism. This view draws on the phenomenon of emergence, that is, the development of meaningful patterns, which can be considered properties, from stochastic events.¹⁰⁵ Examples of emergence include basic physics and chemistry along with larger scale behaviors such as flocking patterns in birds and schooling patterns in fish.

Consider liquid water. If you place a cup of liquid water on the table you will see something you might describe as clear, wet, and hot or cool. If you recall basic chemistry and physics, you will know that the stuff in the cup is made up of molecules comprised of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom and that these molecules are held together by electrical forces. Mix in a bit of quantum physics and you will know that the hydrogen and oxygen atoms are comprised of much more basic particles that can also be described as waves, and that the activity of those wave-particles is stochastic. The high-level properties of clear, wet, cool water therefore emerge from more basic stochastic events.¹⁰⁶

Or consider flocking and schooling behaviors. In a group of birds or fish, an observer could not predict the direction an individual bird or fish will take. Each individual bird or fish reacts only to its immediate neighbors and to external threats, without any broad pattern as a blueprint.¹⁰⁷ The sum of these individual reactions involving hundreds, thousands, or millions of individuals, however, produces ordered patterns of shape and movement—wheeling, changing in density, taking directions as if the flock or school were of one mind.

Non-reductive physicalism holds that some emergent properties exert downward causation on the events from which they emerge. What we call *the market* might comprise an example of emergence and downward causation.¹⁰⁸ Consider the price of an individual share of stock in a publicly traded company. The price is stochastic; no one can predict with any statistical certainty what the price will be at some point in the future. The price at a given moment is the sum of numerous prior individual trades along with numerous external factors, including unforeseeable events such as natural disasters, political upheavals, sudden gluts and shortages, new technologies, unusual actions of competitors, and the prices of shares in other companies traded on the market. From out of these uncountable and mostly unpredictable underlying factors, however, emerges a kind of order and symmetry, with individual stocks and entire markets moving up and down in observable, if not truly

¹⁰⁵ See Elie Vintiadis, “Emergence,” in THE INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, last visited Aug. 6, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/emergence/> (stating “we could say that a property is emergent if it is a novel property of a system or an entity that arises when that system or entity has reached a certain level of complexity and that, even though it exists only insofar as the system or entity exists, it is distinct from the properties of the parts of the system from which it emerges.”).

¹⁰⁶ Catherine Carney, *What Are the 5 Emergent Properties of Water*, SCIENCING, March 13, 2018, <https://www.sciencing.com/5-emergent-properties-water-8622128/>. Of course, the question of emergence in chemistry is debated. See Vanessa Seifert, *Open Questions on Emergence in Chemistry*, 5 COMMUNICATIONS CHEMISTRY 1 (2022), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s42004-022-00667-7>; Seifert, *Emergence in Chemistry*, in INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, last visited Aug. 6, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/reduction-and-emergence-in-chemistry/>.

¹⁰⁷ This, at least, is what we presume, based on available evidence. Of course, no one really knows what it is like to be a bird or a fish. See Steven V. Viscido, Julia K. Parrish & Daniel Grünbaum, *Individual Behavior and Emergent Properties of Fish Schools: A Comparison of Observation and Theory*, 273 MARINE ECOLOGY PROGRESS SERIES 239 (2004); Charlotte K. Hemelrijk & Hanno Hildenbrandt, *Schools of Fish and Flocks of Birds: Their Shape and Internal Structure by Self-Organization*, 2 INTERFACE FOCUS 726 (2012), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3499122/>.

¹⁰⁸ See Shu-Heng Chen & Chia-Hsuan Yeh, *On the Emergent Properties of Artificial Stock Markets: The Efficient Market Hypothesis and the Rational Expectations Hypothesis*, 49 JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR & ORGANIZATION 217 (2002).

predictable, patterns. And these observable patterns, in turn, exert pressure back downward on the prices of individual shares. The movement of the market affects movements of individual shares, creating a kind of feedback loop.

Proponents of non-reductive physicalism in the philosophy of mind argue that the lower levels that comprise the brain (and perhaps also other areas such as the gut)—all the way down to the level of quantum physics—produce emergent patterns that we call consciousness.¹⁰⁹ These emergent patterns allow us to interact with our environment in ways that, in turn, exercise downward causality.

So, the emergent pattern of my consciousness signals that this afternoon I can act to meet the editorial deadline for this paper or go fishing. A non-reductive physicalist would call this a real choice, notwithstanding whatever in my past experiences might produce emotions or impulses in one direction or the other. I choose to sit down to write rather than going fishing, leading to a particular set of inputs that change my developing neuronal connections and other parts of my physical body (stooped as I am over my office computer instead of striding happily through a mountain stream). All these changes can be described as chemical reactions based in quantum physics that in turn produce new patterns of consciousness.

Theologians who advocate non-reductive physicalism as a model of consciousness represent a variety of perspectives on the existence and nature of non-physical entities, including God. Some adhere to versions of classical theism that place God outside the material realm. God, then, is not an emergent property within the universe, but God creates the universe with all its emergent capacities.¹¹⁰

This kind of view presents significant problems for divine action. The physicalism part of non-reductive physicalism is thought important because of the law of conservation of matter and energy. How could God act within the universe, including relating to human beings with saving love and justice, without infusing new energy or matter into the universe, something the conservation law forbids? Many non-reductive physicalists suggest that the indeterminacy of quantum physics supplies an answer. At the level of Newtonian physics, the history of the universe, including every human thought, could theoretically be described in detail as determined by the preceding motion of matter and energy. But this is not so at the level of quantum physics. Quantum indeterminacy, these non-reductive physicalists suggest, leaves space for a God outside space-time to act upon and non-coercively propose choices to human consciousness.¹¹¹

There are significant problems with this view, however. First, we do not know whether quantum physics really is indeterminate, although true quantum indeterminacy seems well established based on available theory and observations. Second, even if it is true, it is unclear

¹⁰⁹ See Nancy Murphy, *Divine Action, Emergence, and Scientific Explanation*, in *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO SCIENCE AND RELIGION* 244–59 (Peter Harrison, ed., 2010); Nancy Murphy, *Reductionism: How Did We Fall into It and How Can We Emerge from It?*, in *EVOLUTION AND EMERGENCE: SYSTEMS, ORGANISMS, PERSONS* 19–39 (Nancy Murphy & William Stoeger eds., 2012).

¹¹⁰ See generally, *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, *supra* note 170; Rebekah L.H. Rice, *What's So Artificial and Intelligent About Artificial Intelligence? A Conceptual Framework for AI*, in *AI, FAITH, AND THE FUTURE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH* 52–69 (Michael J. Paulus Jr. & Michael D. Langford eds., 2022). Rice describes physicalist, non-reductive physicalist, and substance dualist views of the mind-body problem and raises some interesting philosophical and theological questions about AI relating to these views. Rice's treatment of "substance dualism," however, refers entirely to René Descartes' easily discredited views. Rice, *supra*, at 59–60. There are other kinds of dualisms—not all of which are substance dualisms—that are much more subtle, defensible, and consistent with the earlier theological tradition than Descartes's. See OPDERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 130–39; STEPHEN HORST, *BEYOND REDUCTION: PHILOSOPHY OF MIND AND POST-REDUCTIONIST PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE* (2007); E.J. LOWE, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND* (2000); E.J. LOWE, *PERSONAL AGENCY: THE METAPHYSICS OF MIND AND ACTION* (2000).

¹¹¹ Nancy Murphy, *Divine Action in The Natural Order: Buridan's Ass And Schrödinger's Cat*, in *CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY: SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES ON DIVINE ACTION* 325, 340–50 (Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy & Arthur R. Peacocke eds., 2nd ed. 1997).

how quantum indeterminacy would relate to the relative freedom of consciousness. In the choice between spending this afternoon writing versus fishing, it is not as though we can identify specific particles that are indeterminate at the quantum level between one location or spin or another and correlate them with one choice or the other. There simply is no theory clearly connecting what we know about quantum indeterminacy to what we know about brain states or other physical states relating to specific choices.¹¹²

Because of the first two problems, this view resembles the “God of the gaps.” It uses “God” to fill in what we do not yet fully understand—both quantum indeterminacy itself and the relationship between any such indeterminacy and specific conscious choices. Perhaps quantum indeterminacy is a genuine “gap,” but perhaps not.¹¹³

Finally, related to all the above, it seems theologically deficient. The God of the Bible and the Christian tradition does not merely poke at the quantum edges of creation. All creation subsists by him and in him and through him, from the quantum domain to the largest material structures, indeed, to the universe-as-universe. There is no element within it lacking God’s presence.¹¹⁴

Panpsychism and Process Theology

Some philosophers and theologians respond to the kinds of concerns expressed above by rejecting classical theism’s claim that God is outside space-time.¹¹⁵ Some non-theistic philosophers, such as Thomas Nagel, argue for varieties of panpsychism.¹¹⁶ In this view, the emergent properties of the universe produce various kinds of consciousness, not only in humans, but also in animals and in other concentrations of matter, leading to a sort of connected or universal consciousness. This consciousness is not divine but it is in some sense real.

Meanwhile, some theists opt for forms of process theology, which imagine Godself as emergent along with or within the universe.¹¹⁷ For some Christian theologians, process-oriented theologies suggest several advantages over classical theism. Classical theism, they argue, responded to the science of its time, which was grounded in Greek metaphysics. We now know that the fixed Aristotelian cosmos did not reflect the dynamic reality of evolution. Process theology, they suggest, interacts with the more accurate science of our times. Relatedly, they claim, process theology better addresses the problem of divine action, since God is conceived of as subsisting and emerging from within or along with space-time. Perhaps most significantly, in their view, process theology handles the problem of evil better than classical theism. The God of process theology is not a distant observer but suffers intrinsically and changes dynamically along with the evolving creation. Process theology, for them, eliminates the medieval hierarchical picture of the universe, which empowered humans to exploit creation and each other. Finally, related to these claims about divine suffering and ethics, Christians attracted to process theology suggest that certain biblical texts, including stories in the Hebrew scriptures that show God interacting dynamically with people and the kenotic hymn in Phillippians 2, contradict the impassible God of classical theism.¹¹⁸

¹¹² See OPDERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 157–69.

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ See BRUCE G. EPPERLY, *PROCESS THEOLOGY: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED* (2011); JOHN B. COBB, *A CHRISTIAN NATURAL THEOLOGY BASED ON THE THOUGHT OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD* (2d ed. 2007).

¹¹⁶ NAGEL, *supra* note 106, at 54–65.

¹¹⁷ See EPPERLY, *supra* note 115, at 51–55.

¹¹⁸ See *id.* at 36–51, 69–77; TERENCE E. FRETHEIM, *CREATION UNTAMED: THE BIBLE, GOD, AND NATURAL DISASTERS* (2010), 9–37; Lina Langby, *God’s Kenotic Love-Power—A Defense of Relational Theology and the Vulnerability in Love*, 64 *SOPHIA* 361 (2025).

An approach to AI ethics based in panpsychism or process theology opens much more space to argue that AIs could be entitled to legal rights. Indeed, if there is no hierarchy of being, and if mind or God pervades all matter as a kind of universal consciousness, there seems little basis for any fundamental distinction between machine rights and human rights. Distinctions could be drawn based on presumed degrees of consciousness or some related basis—no serious panpsychist or process theologian argues that rocks possess the same fundamental rights as humans—but not on differences in kind in the sense suggested by classical Christian anthropology and ethics.

The Problems with Panpsychism and Process Theology

Panpsychism and process theology possess an obvious pedigree running through Hegel and Spinoza back to Neoplatonism and Plato. Indeed, much of panpsychism seems like a reversion to pre-Christian Neoplatonist paganism. From a Christian theological perspective, process theology gives away too much and gains very little over classical Christian theism. Moreover, even that which process theology seemingly gains was already articulated in the church fathers. Many of the problems process theology purports to correct are misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the early sources.¹¹⁹

One of process theology's biggest complaints is that the God of classical Christian theism, who is simple and impassible, cannot respond to human suffering. This complaint ignores Patristic distinctions between God's essence and his actions (or "energies") and fails to confront any of the nuances of early Christological debates.¹²⁰ The core truth of divine simplicity and impassibility is that God in his essence does not change. This truth is essential to our faith and hope in God's grace and salvation. God is love (1 John 4:8) and this truth never changes—God was love through eternity past, in all the contingencies of history, and for eternity future. Moreover, there is no admixture in God of love and not-love. There is no part of God that is less than what God is, ever was, and ever will be. This means God—and ultimately God alone—can be trusted with a faith that is a kind of certainty. This would not be so if God-self were changeable.

The truth that God is love means that God's actions toward us are always loving. It is God's impassibility, then, that assures us that God always responds with love to human suffering. Impassibility means that God is not subject to passions, that is, to emotions or other impulses that move God to act contrary to truth and justice, but it does not mean God lacks inherent dispositions, which we might analogically relate to emotions or sentiments. God does not feel the love a mother feels when she embraces her child, but what God is as love is analogous to that feeling in a way that infinitely transcends the feeling itself. Indeed, that human feeling is a way of human participation in that transcendent source of love.

For classical Christology, it is precisely that love through which God the Divine Son became incarnate and took on a human nature.¹²¹ In the two-nature Christology that became orthodoxy for the Western church and for many of the Eastern churches, this human nature was distinct from Christ's divine nature but both natures "concur [*suntrechousēs*] in one person [*prosōpon*] and in one hypostasis."¹²² The Triune God thus experiences and redeems human suffering in the person of the incarnate Son, who is both fully human and fully God. We therefore do not need process theology to make sense of the kenotic hymn, and indeed, process theology robs the hymn of its power. If God-self co-evolves in suffering with the universe, making the universe itself a form of incarnation and sacrifice, then the Son did not

¹¹⁹ See OPPERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 61–63, 88–90.

¹²⁰ See, e.g., PAUL L. GAVRILYUK, *THE SUFFERING OF THE IMPASSIBLE GOD: THE DIALECTICS OF PATRISTIC THOUGHT* (2006); BRIAN DUWAYNE ROBINETTE, *THE DIFFERENCE NOTHING MAKES: CREATION, CHRIST, CONTEMPLATION* (2023).

¹²¹ See OPPERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 166–67.

¹²² THE CHALCEDONIAN DEFINITION, in *CREEDS OF THE CHURCHES* (Albert C. Outler trans., John H. Leith ed., 3d ed., 1982), 35–36.

actively empty himself of his exalted equal status with God.¹²³ His prior status was no different than that of any other suffering creature, and his endurance of that suffering, while perhaps praiseworthy, was not as extraordinary as the hymn claims.¹²⁴

This Christological observation leads to a critique of process theology's ethics. The kenotic hymn says Jesus Christ took on human "likeness" (*homoiomati*) and "form" (*schemati*).¹²⁵ In the Greek (Septuagint) translation of Genesis 1:26, humankind is made in God's "image" (*eikona*) and "likeness" (*homoiosin*).¹²⁶ God gave humanity the Divine likeness, and in Jesus Christ God assumed human likeness. In the famous phrase of Saint Athanasius, God became human so that humans could become as God.¹²⁷ It is to *humans* that God gave stewardship over creation, and it is *human* nature the Son assumed. Humans, therefore, remain central to the entire narrative, from creation to redemption.¹²⁸ An ethic that decenters humans is contrary to the goal of a fully flourishing creation. From a Christian theological perspective, there is wisdom in the rusty old great chain of being after all.

Neo-Aristotelian Powers and Capacities

The claim that non-reductive physicalism, panpsychism, and/or process theology better accords with modern evolutionary science is powerful. Theology must interact with the natural sciences. Obviously no reasonable theologian, and not even a young earth creationist, would argue that we must return to the Ptolemaic geocentric universe. Should we not then agree that every vestige of the Greek cosmos must be purged in favor of an evolutionary model? Is it not true that the modern natural sciences have succeeded spectacularly precisely because Plato and Aristotle were jettisoned by modernity?

There is some truth in these claims, but they are far too broad. In everyday practice, the natural sciences assume there are laws of nature underpinning predicable and repeatable causal events and results. A hypothesis can be tested by repeated experiments because the laws of nature do not change from experiment to experiment.

Prior to modernity, theology contributed to this paradigm by claiming that nature's regularity and logic derives from God. This contribution was grounded both in the biblical witness about creation and in Greek metaphysics, which took the Forms or causes as the source of natural regularity. The nominalist and voluntarist Scholastic theologians of the late Middle Ages, including John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, paved the way for paring back excessive metaphysical speculation about the spiritual realm. They emphasized the "univocity of being"—the idea that God can in some ways be known directly, rather than only analogically, from creation; sought to simplify the number and complexity of entities required for explanations of causes and events (Ockham's razor); and stressed God's power to ordain laws governing creation, human conduct, and history.¹²⁹

These ideas were a seedbed for what became the modern Newtonian cosmos, in which everything in nature theoretically could be known and predicted by physical laws. For some in this Newtonian world these immanent physical laws came to occupy the place of God—

¹²³ Phillipians 2:17. In the Greek text, ὃς ... ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν, the pronoun ὃς (who), referring to Jesus Christ, is in the dative case and the pronoun ἐαυτὸν is in the accusative case, so Jesus Christ is both the agent and the recipient of the kenosis.

¹²⁴ See OPDERBECK, *supra* note 89, at 166–68, 219; ROWAN WILLIAMS, *CHRIST THE HEART OF CREATION* (2018).

¹²⁵ Phillipians 2:17. For the Greek text see *THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT* (Barbara Aland, *et al.*, eds., United Bible Societies, 4th rev'd ed. 2001).

¹²⁶ Genesis 1:26. For the Septuagint text, see Gregory R. Lanier & William A. Ross, *Septuaginta: A Reader's Edition*, Vol. I (2018).

¹²⁷ ATHANASIUS, *ON THE INCARNATION* (John Behr trans., SPCK Publishing 2011).

¹²⁸ See OPDERBECK, *supra* note 89, at 105–23.

¹²⁹ See OPDERBECK, *supra* note 21, at 22–35.

either by pushing God to the boundary of a first efficient case (as in Deism) or by eliminating God altogether.¹³⁰

The presumption that everything in the realm of fact could theoretically be known through natural laws, however, faced philosophical challenges from the start. In the Anglophone tradition, David Hume questioned whether general rules about causality could be inferred from observations of specific events. In the Continental tradition, Immanuel Kant labored to find a place for the transcendent, while Georg Hegel reinvigorated Greek ideas about the Forms and causes. In the contemporary literature, philosophers of science vigorously debate whether there are laws of nature, how they might be known, and how they might be described.¹³¹

These debates in the philosophy of science, of course, relate to developments in the natural sciences. Einstein's work showed that Newtonian laws are not the most basic description of reality. Quantum mechanics questioned the very notion of laws if fundamental physics are stochastic. Recent discoveries suggest that most of the universe is comprised of dark matter and dark energy, which are inferred only through mathematical abstractions, and which may imply physical laws or principles that change over time.¹³²

The realization that nature is not really governed by rigid Newtonian laws fostered not only process thought but also a renewed interest in Aristotle. Led by Phillipa Foote, Alasdair McIntyre, and others, neo-Aristotelians have sought a way between the poles of deontological and utilitarian ethics by looking to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. More recently, philosophers studying metaphysics and the problem of natural laws, have begun developing fruitful perspectives focused on the powers and capacities of entities rather than on rule-like laws.¹³³ Meanwhile, theologians have been returning to the sources of scripture and the deep tradition to recover the subtlety of historic thought about the relationship between God and creation.¹³⁴ These important movements in philosophy and theology provide resources for a contemporary, scientifically-informed theology that exceeds the stark limitations of process theology.

From this perspective we could return to the great chain of being metaphor with a focus on powers and capacities rather than on hierarchy. Among the creatures of the Earth, humans possess certain powers and capacities that are unique both in degree and in kind. No animal composes music, visual art, philosophy, or literature as humans do. No animal creates technology as humans do. And no animal reflects on and creates systems of law as humans do. Many animals can reason, communicate, feel empathy, and create culture. Perhaps some animals engage in activities analogous to music, art, or lawmaking. But not even the most sophisticated primates, elephants, whales, or dolphins come anywhere near the scale of these capacities as they exist in humans. No animal other than a human could write this article and none other than a human could read it and reflect upon it.

Because the ecosystems of the Earth are interconnected and interdependent, these unique human powers and capacities come with unique responsibilities. It is these unique responsibilities that place humans at the center of the Earthly creation as stewards and mediators between God and the rest of creation. The symmetry in the kenotic hymn between Christ taking on human likeness and the image and likeness of God in all humans here becomes centrally important. Through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ,

¹³⁰ *Id.*; McGrath, *supra* note 97, at 38–45.

¹³¹ Opperbeck, *supra* note 21, at 169–75.

¹³² *The Dominant Model of the Universe is Creaking: Dark Energy May Break It Apart*, *Economist*, June 19, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2024/06/19/the-dominant-model-of-the-universe-is-creaking>.

¹³³ Opperbeck, *supra* note 21, at 91–105.

¹³⁴ See, e.g., Gavriluk, *supra* note 120; Robinette, *supra* note 120.

human nature is re-empowered, as Christ lives in humanity, to steward creation to its divine goal.

Any vision of an alternative incarnation, of a sub-incarnation in which humans bestow their image and likeness on a person, office, or technology, is a parodic *mimesis* of the Christological truth. It is just this sort of parody, represented by the city of Babylon, that is exposed in the Bible's apocalyptic literature. The rulers of Babylon and Rome are not gods. When they pretend otherwise, they lie.

Like Babel's tower builders, we are tempted in modernity to imagine that the next great technology—steam power, electricity, radio, nuclear power, television, cable, genomics, the internet, AI—will bring our vision of the heavenly city to earth. We have enough experience to know that the creative capacity of any such technology is also potentially a destructive power. It is particularly tempting to anthropomorphize AI, to imagine that out of the electrons flowing across circuit boards a true intelligence will emerge, perhaps a new stage in the evolution of our species, or at least a way to offload some of our responsibilities as stewards of creation. We should take care to recall ancient lessons about our own exalted but humble position within the created order so that we might exercise careful control over this new tool.

Conclusion

AI is a human technology. As such, it is not part of creation. It is neither intrinsically good (as is creation itself) nor created in God's image and likeness (as is humanity) nor divine incarnation (as is Jesus).¹³⁵ According to the biblical narrative, among the creatures of the Earth, we human beings are uniquely God's image-bearers, and we are also tragically prone to claim divinity for ourselves in ways that produce violence and judgment. Technology is a human good, part of our cultural mandate, but it also magnifies our worst tendencies. As magical as our technology might seem, it is not incarnate descended divinity nor perfected humanity. That kenotic descent belongs to Jesus Christ alone.

One of the great temptations of AI is its mimetic capacity. AI systems mimic human creativity and judgment but lack human moral capacities. Even more challenging, AI systems mimic authority by presenting decisions that appear to possess wisdom and judgment and to which people are expected to defer. AI systems might become so fast and powerful that we become tempted to offload creativity, judgment, and authority to them in ways that mimic political and religious devotion. The Platonic-Augustinian thread of Christian theological ethics reminds us that our example is a person, Jesus Christ, and that our *mimetic* practice should be grounded in that which points toward him as both fully human and fully divine.

Granting a concern about *mimesis*, perhaps some version of non-reductive physicalism is correct and something we could call true intelligence might emerge from a future AI system. It could be that humans would owe some kind of duties toward AI as moral patients akin to what we, the stewards of creation, owe the various components of the natural world. But, from the perspective of Christian theological ethics, even if we entertain a kind of Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of emergence and causal powers that could admit this possibility, we should remember the biblical narrative concerning human uniqueness. The great chain of being retains vitality as a metaphor in that it reminds us about the role of *mediation* in the relationship between God and creation. Humanity mediates the divine care for creation and Jesus Christ mediates the divine presence to fallen humanity. AI is not

¹³⁵ In this conclusion I disagree with an otherwise interesting essay by Michael D. Langford, "Artificial Intelligence and Theological Personhood," in *AI FAITH, AND THE FUTURE*, *supra* note 110, at 97–124.

something that mediates on our behalf, but rather is a tool we can employ in our mediatorial care for each other and for the rest of creation. Recent statements of AI ethics and AI regulations that emphasize human oversight and control properly embody the core humanistic insights of these historically theological claims, even if modern secular legal theory lacks a coherent philosophy to justify human rights.

Such reflections from the historic Christian tradition may seem antique. The fixed Aristotelian cosmos was never really viable. In light of our present understanding of the deep evolutionary history of life, it is tempting to imagine God co-evolving with the universe, such that an AI might possess the spark of the divine world-soul. Perhaps such a vision would make better sense of the long history of human suffering than that of a transcendent creator-God. This sort of vision, however, possesses only surface appeal. In the end, it leaves us with a God who cannot save and a Jesus who cannot heal. It is, also, not really more scientifically grounded than the ancient insights about immanence, transcendence, causation, and being. The new Aristotelian philosophy of science focuses on powers and capacities rather than natural laws—a turn that reminds us why reductive philosophies and sciences always fail. The promise and perils of AI thereby leads us back to the two central questions of faith: who am I, and who is God?

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