

Religion in the Digital Age

Part 3: *Virtual Technologies as a Foil for Religious Reflection*

In the last video I explored what religion has to offer digital natives: how it can serve its traditional role as a refuge from ordinary life, now a life distributed across a diverse array of persona adopted on a plethora of online platforms. I further argued that religion must also upload itself online, to offer resources for combatting new threats to a blessed life of meaning and purpose that virtual technologies can unleash.

In the next couple of videos I turn the question around to ask how the emergent world of virtual technologies raises new questions for religious reflection. In this video I explore how the technological quest to transcend our all too human limitations relate to the longing for religious transcendence; how advances in our technological power can serve as a foil against which to better appreciate the costs of scientific progress. In the final video following this one, I then turn to speculate on how we might translate traditional religious doctrines, formulated in the literate categories of Hellenistic and later transcendental thought, into the new virtual language of nodes and networks, actants and personae.

As a foil, it is hard to top transhumanism. Transhumanists argue that virtual technologies are beginning to enable us not merely to transform nature, but to transform our own human nature as well. The limitations of the human condition have often been seen by religious thinkers as “fallen,” by secular writers and philosophers as “tragic.” But what if we could transcend our physical, cognitive, and affective limitations? What if we could eliminate physical illness, even mental illness? What if we could create not just cognitive enhancements such as caffeine and Aderall, but neural implants giving us access to the internet telepathically, enabling us to download complex skills and whole fields of knowledge effortlessly and instantaneously? What if we could not just extend human life expectancy (which has already doubled in the last century) but extend the human lifespan itself, eliminating aging so as to live indefinitely with the vitality and vigor of twenty-somethings. CRISPR is opening the door to relatively cheap and easy gene editing. We are on the cusp of literally rewriting the human genome. If that does not portend a new axial age in the history of our species, I don’t know what could.

Transhumanism can be a powerful foil for religious thought in part because it stands the problem of evil on its head. An elderly Jesuit once confided to me, “Tim, aging is a bear, but it beats the alternative”. Transhumanism puts all human limitations on the table. Death too is a bear, but does it beat the alternative? Evil is thought to be a problem for belief in God only if we think that God could have done a better job. Indeed, that if we were God, we would have done a better job. In presenting the elimination of any given evil as a realistic option, transhumanism prompts us all to think more carefully about what we are wishing for. Like death. Death is often held up as the ultimate evil. Christianity does not even attribute human death to God’s design, but counts it as part of our “fallen” nature consequent upon the Original Sin of Adam. But now that radical life extension may actually be a target for research funding, would such money be well spent? Would it really be better, more meaningful, if we never died? Similarly it leads Christians to think more critically about our own hope for immortality. If the notion of eternal life is to express our ultimate hope for salvation, how need it differ from simply living on and on and on?

Both technology and religion deal with transcendence. For technology is about transcending human limitations and thereby minimizing, if not eliminating evil. On the other hand, transhumanism’s utopian technophilia makes only too clear that religious transcendence is not about protecting us from evil but rather redeeming it, drawing meaning and purpose from pain and suffering through communal ritual and individual prayer. Religious transcendence is not about transcending the evils of the human condition but transcending a narrow, ego-centric understanding of the self as set apart from others and the world around us. By identifying with more than what lies bound within the confines of our own skin, religion inspires the kind of generosity and compassion that can heal wounds and transform our curses into blessings for others and wisdom for ourselves. Transhumanism’s expansion of individual power and control serves to remind us by contrast of the meaning and value that religion can draw out of human contingency, dependence and vulnerability. Religion calls upon us to surrender the need for full control and rely on the grace that comes from working with rather than against others and our world. So too the expansion of our scientific knowledge only makes the religious importance of wisdom more exigent.