


Artificial Intelligence and Robotics: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum

with Gillian K. Straine, “Artificial Intelligence and Robotics: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum”; Michael S. Burdett, “Personhood and Creation in an Age of Robots and AI: Can We Say “You” to Artifacts?”; Mohammad Yaqub Chaudhary, “The Artificialization of Mind and World”; and David Hipple, “Encounters with Emergent Deities: Artificial Intelligence in Science Fiction Narrative.”

PERSONHOOD AND CREATION IN AN AGE OF ROBOTS AND AI: CAN WE SAY “YOU” TO ARTIFACTS?

by Michael S. Burdett 

Abstract. This article explores the extent to which the I-You relation should be applied to domains other than the human and the divine focusing particularly on artifacts and technology. Drawing first on the work of Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Heidegger, I contend that the I-You tradition has maintained I-You relations with objects are possible even when these same figures level strong critiques of the I-It relation. I extend these discussions and argue that some kind of You-speaking for artifacts is needed to combat rampant consumption and reduction of the world to pure utility. But, I equally suggest that there are limitations to applying the I-You relation to artifacts precisely when doing so keeps us from having genuine relationships with other people as outlined by psychologist Sherry Turkle. Finally, I outline how this proposal impacts the doctrine of creation. In sum, it expands our intuitions of what is included in that doctrine creation.

Keywords: Martin Buber; creation; Martin Heidegger; *I and Thou*; Gabriel Marcel; panpsychism; personalism; posthumanism; technology

Spike Jonze, the director of such films as *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation* and *Where the Wild Things Are*, recently won an Academy Award for his film *Her*. In the film Joaquin Phoenix’s character, Theodore, purchases a new computer operating system, an OS1, that claims to be the first artificially intelligent operating system of its kind: “it’s not an operating

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system, it's a consciousness" the advertisements say. Theodore is a lonely man. He is in the middle of a divorce and his social life is rather pathetic. Throughout the film, Theodore becomes deeply attached to the artificial intelligence voiced by Scarlett Johansson who goes by the name Samantha and he eventually falls in love with it.

We pity Theodore initially. His life seems unrelentingly boring, unbearable, and groundless. Yet, we are a captivated audience by the end and have even been moved by Theodore's personal transformation through his relationship with Samantha, the artificial intelligence. What makes *Her* such an interesting movie in this genre is the way it teases out the inherent ambiguity of how we are meant to feel about Phoenix's relationship with Samantha, the artificial intelligence. It seems out of place for him to have such a deep attachment, to love this artificial intelligence but perhaps the ends justify the means here because the loving relationship has led him to a place of healing and supposed personal thriving.

None of this is new. We have been talking about relationships with nonhumans in science fiction for ages: from the *Terminator* films to *2001* and *Blade Runner*. But, now we can ask Siri questions on our iPhones, talk to a bot online or own a robotic pet.¹ Artificial intelligence and robotics promises to get more advanced and people today are relying more and more upon them. The artificial is increasingly encroaching into every area of human activity and intelligent artifacts are becoming a perennial feature of our everyday lives. Hence, there does not seem to be a substantial leap from our present world to that found in the film *Her*. The plot, however, may seem far-fetched and perhaps even outlandish to those who have not seen it, yet Jonze seems to be tapping into some issues that are becoming increasingly significant in our time because of this technological proliferation. The sheer sophistication of these artificial intelligences invites us to ask tough questions such as: What do we make of those relationships we have with artificial entities? What is my responsibility to them? Is loving them, as we saw in *Her*, misplaced or is it virtuous? What constitutes a person? Is this a category reserved only for human beings?

But these are not just questions for science fiction, they are deeply philosophical and theological questions for today. Indeed, they underlie some of the most publically worrying, philosophical questions about the current development of so-called "artificial general intelligence": artificial intelligence that intentionally seeks to achieve human levels of intelligence and understanding.² Asking them in a theological register might involve touching upon a myriad of topics in theology and religion such as ecotheology, important distinctions between idols and icons, the nature and ethics of love and especially a theology of creation. All of these issues play a part in the guiding question throughout this essay, namely: "Can we say 'You' to artifacts (things/objects in the world)?"

Upfront I need to clarify some terms I will be using throughout this presentation. I will be utilizing two neologisms that have a strong heritage in theology and philosophy in the last century and they find their strongest elucidation in the work of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and his seminal text (Buber 1970). Buber contends there are two ways one interacts with the world. The first is the I-It relation—the first term. In the I-It relation one encounters the world over and against it and is characterized by objectification and use (Buber 1970, 75). The “I” relates to an “It.” The individual’s comportment is to see the world as object. The other neologism is that of the I-You. This relation, first and foremost is a dialogue, a face-to-face encounter where one’s attention is entirely taken up by “You” (Buber 1970, 59). In the I-You relation one speaks to another rather than about this other. One says “You” directly to someone else and is locked attentively in a gaze that concentrates and is open to this “You.”

The I-You relation is most commonly and straightforwardly applied to the sphere of human interaction. But, an increasingly technologically cluttered environment entails greater relation with artifacts in this world, the seeming domain of the I-It. Many proponents of the I-You tradition have expressed that the I-You relation need not be limited to just human interaction. As we will come to see, it has been used as the basis for a proper understanding of the divine (Buber 1970, 57) and, we are told, we can have this kind of relation with natural objects such as plants, rivers, and mountains as well. Yet, very little attention has been devoted to “the made.” Can we have this relation to human-created objects as well?

My aim in this article is to evaluate the extent to which the I-You relation should be applied to domains other than the human and the divine focusing particularly on artifacts and technology. It will be argued that some kind of You-speaking for artifacts is needed to combat rampant consumption and reduction of the world to pure utility. But, it will be equally argued that there are limitations to applying the I-You relation to artifacts precisely when doing so keeps us from having genuine relationships with other people. I will advocate that we should have person-like relationships with artifacts but that this You-speaking is different and limited when compared with the human sphere.

To do this, I will first look at three figureheads of the I-You tradition: Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Buber, and lay claim to what they say about artifacts and how we relate to them at present and how we ought to relate to them. Second, I will turn to the work of applied theologian, Stephen Pattison, who advocates for more person-like relationships with artifacts, and come to an understanding of how humans rely upon objects for their very personhood and why it is appropriate to speak about objects in terms of persons. Third, I will then rely on the work of MIT psychologist, Sherry Turkle, to examine the limitations and drawbacks of treating artifacts as persons, particularly when it comes to

highly complex artifacts such as we see with social robots and other high-tech technologies. Finally, several comments will be made relating these conclusions to how far we ought to speak You to artifacts.

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Martin Heidegger, the twentieth century German philosopher, is one who has reflected deeply on the human being's relation to the world and has devoted substantial attention to artifacts and technology. In his earlier works, such as *Being and Time* where he gives a probing analysis, an existential analytic, of the human being, *Dasein*, Heidegger contends that a basic mode of being for the human is what he refers to as 'readiness-to-hand' (Heidegger 1962, 95–107). This essential comportment to objects in the world is one of use and availability. Objects, in this instance, are seen as tools. What Heidegger finds salient about this tool interaction is the way the human being interacts with the object unreflectively during its use as readiness-to-hand and then how the human being is awoken to new and unforeseen aspects of the object when the tool breaks (Heidegger 1962, 105–56).

This multivalent approach to artifacts becomes even more important in Heidegger's later works after his so-called "turn" (*die Kehre*). Heidegger judges the modern era to be a destitute and stunted time precisely because it reflects a limited gamut of approaches to objects, people and ontology (Pattison 2000, 68–71). Indeed, Heidegger's most pressing problem is with modern technology in that it limits our perceptions of the world to just seeing it as resource (*Bestand*): meant for commodity and function (Heidegger 1977, 17). This has ontological repercussions, Heidegger tells us, because there is a certain forgetfulness of Being, an inattentive posture to the authentic world given before us. The modern technological condition levels everything to a single level (Heidegger 1977, 28–33).

In many ways, what Heidegger is calling us away from is an obsession with the I-It relation towards a more I-You demeanor. What is important to note is that this suggested demeanor is not limited to just human individuals for Heidegger. Indeed Heidegger has as much to say about how we approach artifacts and nonhumans as he does the human world. We see this in his commentary on Van Gogh's paintings and particularly a pair of peasant's shoes (Heidegger 2001a, 32–36). We see it in a vignette with a tree (Heidegger 1968, 41–42) and in his commentary on temples (Heidegger 2001a, 40–45) and jugs of water (Heidegger 2001b, 164–72). What Heidegger aims to do in these later works is to reawaken us to a kind of I-You approach to beings in the world in what he refers to as *gelassenheit*, or releasement (Heidegger 1969). And, this is just as important with artifacts as it is with human beings.

GABRIEL MARCEL

Gabriel Marcel makes a similar assessment of our modern world's attachment to objects and technology as we find with Heidegger. The twentieth century Catholic existentialist has spoken of the modern condition in terms of "a broken world" (Marcel 1950, 18–38). One of the symptoms of this broken world is its reducibility to function. As Brian Treanor claims:

A corollary of the functionalism of the modern broken world is its highly technical nature. Marcel characterizes a world such as ours - in which everything and everyone becomes viewed in terms of function, and which all questions are approached with techniques - as one dominated by its 'technics.' This is evident in the dependence on technology, the immediate deferral to the technological as the answer to any problem, and the tendency to think of technical reasoning as the only mode of access to the truth. (Treanor 2006, 57)

For Marcel, as for Heidegger, the central issue with the functionalizing of the world is that it masks the most important areas which ground human experience and lead to a fulfilling and integrated life (Marcel 1948, 1–3). Marcel is keen to acknowledge that technology has made wonderful strides toward bettering the physical human condition, particularly in medicine. But, he is much more concerned about turning all questions and areas of human inquiry into technical problems. For, doing so eclipses the exigencies which actually ground being human. As Bernard Gendreau summarizes: "The concern Gabriel Marcel had with regard to technique or technology is how the condition created by the spirit of technology could become detrimental to the flowering of humanity and work adversely against the aspiration of the person toward its fulfillment in being. What is at stake for Gabriel Marcel is the natural vocation of the human person open to a spiritual life and with an orientation toward transcendence" (Gendreau 1999, 233). He was concerned that the human being would just turn into a "mere technical man" and forget entirely his true vocation (Marcel 2008, 27–56).

MARTIN BUBER

Martin Buber also finds an unsettling obsession with functionalization in the modern world. Indeed, this functionalization is evident in his treatment of the I-It relation in his seminal text *I and Thou*. Relating quite closely to Heidegger on this, in the I-It relation what is important is the usefulness of an object and one's ability to capitalize on the properties inherent in the object. As Buber exclaims, the I-It relation is characterized by its "ghostly solicitude for faceless digits" (Buber 1970, 75). The quantifiability of reality reigns supreme in the It-world and "what has become an It is then taken as

an It . . . employed along with other things for the project of finding one's way in the world, and eventually for the project of 'conquering' the world" (Buber 1970, 91). The It-world consists of subjects whose desires are to know and manipulate.

Buber claims that his dialogical philosophy does not entirely depend on the ontology of those entities that are met in defining those relations. While we would expect artifacts and the natural world to be the comfortable domain of the I-It relation, Buber claims that the I-It relation can extend to intrahuman relations as well. One can treat another person as an It in much the same way that one might treat a nonliving object. Buber distinguishes two ways of treating other human beings as objects. The first is the observer. In this condition, one probes the intricacies of man's unique traits and properties. One stands off from the reproach of others categorizing and systematizing them instead (Buber 1947, 10). The other is the onlooker who is disengaged from other people, but is less concerned with systemization and instead "awaits what will be presented to him" (Buber 1947, 10). The onlooker relies upon impressions to convey meaning to him as he remains aloof. It is precisely in this disengaged attitude that Buber marks both relations as belonging to the I-It and can be seen to extend beyond merely the natural world and the made to people as well.

In a similar fashion, Buber's other definitive relation, the I-You, would seem to be the most appropriate for human interactions and, while this is surely the case, he does not limit this relation to just human-to-human interactions but instead extends it to nonhuman beings as well. In fact, one of the more controversial passages in his book *I and Thou* states that one can have an I-You relation with a tree: "I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation. In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution. It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I became bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer an *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness" (Buber 1970, 14). Buber was often asked about this very contention by fellow skeptical philosophers and they suggested that he must have been a kind of panpsychist (Diamond 1960, 4). But Buber would stand by his claim and often give uneasy answers asking the questioner to examine their own life for experiences where this has been the case for them. Buber never gave up his belief that one could have I-You relations with nonhumans.

Indeed, he even extended it to artifacts. Buber has spoken briefly about the *geistige wesensheiten*, intellectual, or spiritual essences or forms, as a place where the You relation can be conveyed through an alternate medium besides humanity (Buber 1970, 57–60). This is most manifest in an example Buber uses in his afterword to *I and Thou*. Buber cites the example of a Doric column standing before him. As Buber states:

What had to be achieved was what I was able to achieve: to confront and endure this spiritual form (*geistige wesenhaft*) there that had passed through the mind and hand of man and become incarnate. Does the concept of mutuality disappear here? It merely merges into the darkness behind it—or it changes into a concrete state of affairs, coldly rejecting concepthood (*die Begrifflichkeit*), but bright and reliable. (Buber 1970, 175)

Here with this example of a Doric column, we see Buber's attempt at embedding the You-relation in a particular form—in the work of art.³ As the quotation implies, mutuality does not escape one's relation to the work of art. Indeed, "the work does not permit me, as a tree or man might, to seek relaxation in the It-world; it is imperious: if I do not serve it properly, it breaks, or it breaks me" (Buber 1970, 60–61). One must devote one's entire being to it as it addresses and confronts one from within its form. In this way, the work of art is said to be a part of the world of the It as form, but it is in the relation one takes toward this form, that of I to You, which then conveys the continued presence of the one who has created its form.⁴

What these figureheads of the I-You tradition have intimated is that our increased contact with artificial entities in the world and our functionalizing demeanor toward them makes a renewal of You-speaking imperative in the modern world. Our obsession with technological thinking, as Heidegger would say, needs to be balanced and challenged with other ways of relating to the world that, for Buber, Marcel, and Heidegger, are more primary and primordially human. Indeed, at the origin of the I-You tradition, we see a clear but tenuous relation with nonhuman objects where these philosophers say we can have You-relations with artifacts but are worried that they might be part of the modern problem as well. This is why our treatment, how we approach artifacts, requires serious consideration and deep discernment in our modern age.

STEPHEN PATTISON AND PERSON-LIKE RELATIONS WITH ARTIFACTS

It remains to be said how we can have You-relations with artifacts. Intuitively, does not You-speaking depend on some kind of interlocutor that is a robust agent with intentions? Does not it depend on it being a person?

Stephen Pattison does not think so. He maintains that we ought to have more person-like relations with artifacts in the world. In Pattison's text *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*, which arose out of his Gifford Lectures in 2007, he argues for more robust and nuanced relationships with artifacts like the philosophers already addressed. He states within the first few pages that we need "more personlike relationships with the created visible artefacts that share the human world, for the sake of the artefacts themselves as well as for that of the humans who created them" (Pattison 2007, 1). For Pattison, these person-like relations with artifacts

are already a central feature of our everyday lives. He explains that it is not just idolaters, animists, or fetishists who treat artifacts with person-like qualities but that the average modern individual of the cultured West does this as well. He cites the phenomenon of people naming their cars and referring to them as a he or she imbued with a particular personality—if it has difficulty starting we might say “she is cranky or is still waking up.” Corporations have been tried in the court of law as persons with particular legal rights and entire sections of the population now claim that buildings, wildernesses, or rainforests can be attributed with certain rights like human beings. Pattison goes so far as saying that “some animals and objects are treated as though they have more importance and voice than some humans. The *Mona Lisa* is allotted more interest, respect, and resource than most African children. The latter die in the thousands, while the *Mona Lisa* has money and attention lavished upon her/it” (Pattison 2007, 172–73).

As anthropologist, Alfred Gell, maintained, this is an entirely normal behavior of human beings where our personhood does not end with our skin. He advocated for a distributed sense of personhood where human beings imbue themselves in the network of objects they create and interact with (Gell 1998, 104). Building on the work of Gell, Pattison calls these *eidolata*, skins, and these bits of the extended person enjoy an independent life outside of the embodied person. Of course, we see this phenomenon in religious contexts with relics and icons where the presence of the person is strongly connected with the object. This connection is so strong with Voodoo magic that harm done to the object is transmitted to the embodied person so that they experience physical and emotional pain. These *eidolata* can continue to convey the person-like traits of the primary subject after death as is visible with relics. But, they can also take on new meanings in different social contexts outside of their intended purpose.

For example, I am reminded of seeing the icons of Saint Catherine’s Monastery at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles a number of years ago when they were on loan to the museum. I was struck by how differently those in the museum viewed these icons when compared with their original function in the monastery. The gaze of the Western art critic and the social context of the native Southern Californians jockeying for position to consume and then dispose of these objects could not be further from how the iconographers and monks related to these objects. For the latter, these icons were integral to their common participation in the Divine Liturgy and were part of not only their worship but even their access to God and His presence. The original iconographers will have undergone incredible personal and spiritual circumspection and preparation in the crafting of the icons and the faithful for centuries would have even kissed them. Could the presence of the saints or indeed God in those images be seen and felt in the Getty Museum for the consumptive viewer? The social context, in this case, made all of the difference for the objects and highlights how objects

qua idolata carry the person-like intentions of not only the creators, but all that view and interact with them.

However we decide to afford You-speaking to artifacts, I think we can agree that some kind of person-like treatment of artifacts is called for in our modern age. This You-speaking to artifacts can help combat the functionalizing of our environment that has led to severe resource depletion and it can help us to appreciate the individual, unique creativity of not only natural, but man-made objects as well. Furthermore, allowing these artifacts to speak to us as quasi-persons gains us a certain appreciation for those persons who have created or come into contact with those objects. They help us to connect to other people from across the globe and history.

SHERRY TURKLE AND THE PLOY OF SOCIABLE TECHNOLOGY

These issues, however, become much more complex once we introduce highly sophisticated technologies where the function of these artifacts is inherently social, as we see with sociable robots. Here we have objects where the intention of the creation is to be seamless with our expectations of what constitutes a person. These robots may have eyes, a human-like face, convey intention through mechanical movements, and have realistic looking skin. They prey on our inherent propensity to anthropomorphize and, as such, we are captivated by them.

Sherry Turkle, the famous MIT psychologist, has been researching human interactions with these sociable robots for the past 30 years. In one of her most recent books *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), Turkle outlines both how children and adults are quick to treat these robots as persons and her corresponding reservations with how we let them fulfill the role actual humans ought to play in our lives. She gives countless examples of children and adults employing a functionalist ontology in reference to these sociable robots in what she refers to as “alive enough” (Turkle 2011, 26). Children in her lab will often describe robots as being “alive enough to love or mourn” (Turkle 2011, 29) and will say they are “alive enough to be my friend” (Turkle 2011, 29). This troubles Turkle for she explains that it elucidates a growing slippery slope in these children’s treatment of entities they come across in the world. As an example, Turkle (2011, 3–4) recalls a telling scene in which she is lining up with her child at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Her child sees two tortoises shipped in from the Galapagos Islands as part of an exhibition on Darwin. Her child takes an interested look at the tortoises and exclaims “They could have used a robot” (Turkle 2011, 3). Turkle comments that after asking many other children in the Darwin exhibit whether they cared that the two tortoises were alive, she concludes that “For them, in this context, aliveness seemed

to have no intrinsic value. Rather, it was useful only if needed for a specific purpose” (Turkle 2011, 4).

This functionalist ontology is not only being reflected in the demeanor of children toward these robots, but Turkle finds similar comportment with the elderly. Her research takes her to nursing homes where she will leave one of three sociable robots with those in the home for several weeks. She finds that at first they are suspicious of these objects and do not know what they are for, but by the end of that fortnight the elderly have named the robot, asked to keep it, and become severally attached to it (Turkle 2011, 109–15). Many describe that they feel less lonely and explain that by the end they are telling the robot their deepest feelings, fears, and memories—they feel very intimate with it.

While many robotics experts Turkle encounters speak toward the overall benefits of these sociable robots—they can be used to aid the ailing elderly, combat loneliness, and take care of children—Turkle is worried that this underlying functionalist ontology has led to human beings compromising their authentic human experience of real relationships with each other. She says “we seem determined to give human qualities to objects and content to treat each other as things” (Turkle 2011, xiv). She tells us that we prefer these less risky and artificial relationships with robots precisely because human relationships are messy and, when it comes down to it, we can have ultimate control over the robot and end our interaction with them whenever we want while still getting that feeling of intimacy. Sociable robots give us the feeling that we are being intimate without the risk of a genuinely robust and reciprocal relationship.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the guiding question of this essay—“Can we say You to artifacts?”—I propose that we can, we do, and we ought to do it more. But, there are serious limitations and potential pitfalls to be avoided in doing so—particularly when these I-You relations with artifacts replace more robust I-You relations with other persons and higher agents.

I will return in a moment to further qualify that contention about how far we ought to say You to artifacts but before I do it is worth reflecting on the impact all this might have for a theology of creation. The rapid proliferation of technology and human culture across the globe shifts our concepts of the world and indeed a theology of creation. Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen (2012) introduced the term “Anthropocene” into modern ecology as a way to delineate how human beings have irrevocably transformed the Earth and its ecological system. It is rather telling how drastic and far ranging human influence has become when those who study the very geological reality of something so large as the Earth call for a new epoch based on an organism as small as a human being. But, this

neologism also signals a conceptual crisis that relates to what I am trying to say about technology and creation. McKibben (2003) has observed what he calls “the end of nature,” the erosion of the notion that nature stands as a static given entity independent of human activity. Indeed, those things we might call “natural” today would be entirely shaped by human effort and input. Indeed the rapidly growing study of the evolution of culture and its importance to evolutionary biology tells us how porous this distinction has always been. The so-called “Extended Evolutionary Synthesis” argues that cultural factors have played a much larger role in steering morphological and phylogenetic change in the evolution of biological species than has previously been thought (Laland et al. 2015). Part of this entwined “culture” and “nature” is reflected in one of the extended evolutionary synthesis mechanisms, epigenetics, where human behavior directly influences these epigenetic markers and, hence, gene expression in future generations. Our cultural activities today get embedded materially in the nature of our progeny. Similarly, the cracking of the human genome and the rise of the biotech industry similarly announce that the human sphere and sequestered nature are not, and probably have never been, hermetically sealed entities. To deny all of these would mean living in a pipe dream today.

But, what does this have to do with a theology of creation? Because our intuitions about creation take their cue from this account of nature, we very rarely see ourselves as part of that creation and when we do, it is often to invoke our relative difference from it. A theology of creation that internalizes this blurred boundary between nature and human initiation opens up the possibility of recognizing technology as an important component of creation. In short, seeing the artificial in the ways I have been suggesting expands our sense of what constitutes creation. The ecological, biological, and terrestrial bias of creation needs to be tempered with the overlooked components of creation. In this way, I share with David Wilkinson (2010) the criticism that current ecotheological views of creation are stunted in that they are not broad enough to include nonbiological or, as he intimates, nonterrestrial elements. We are happy to acknowledge trees, lakes, and animals as part of God’s creation—just look at the images that accompany praise songs in evangelical churches today—but are we so inclined to include bridges, cars, and computers? Romantic views of nature as unadulterated and pristine landscapes still dominate our *prima facie* sensibilities when it comes to “creation.” But why this privileging? Are not artificial entities crafted by human and ultimately divine hands? Ought they spur us to praise God’s goodness as other creatures and features of creation clearly do? Should not they be deemed just as valuable in the kingdom of God as biological or natural elements of creation? Do not these objects deserve to be seen as a part of creation? Cultivating person-like relationships with objects ascribes greater theological status to “the made.”

Finally, I would like to address some ontological issues that haunt my conclusion. In short, if we contend that certain objects can convey and carry certain person-like qualities are we willing to say that the object, on its own apart from the primary subject, ought to be related to as You? And, in a related way, what meets us in the You-relation with an artifact? Is it the person who has encapsulated a part of themselves in this object or does the object itself have its own separate unique personhood?

For the figures I have drawn on here, it is clear that these objects gain their person-like qualities from a primary agent. For example, Pattison says “artefacts do not have a life of their own, but because they are closely bound up with their human creators and users, they come to have some independent and autonomous agency (or even a personality) of their own” (Pattison 2007, 177). But others are more willing to accept more robust agency and independent personhood in complex artifacts as with certain artificial intelligence proponents and posthumanists. For instance, certain artificial intelligence proponents and posthumanists are entirely willing to contend that personhood ought not be limited to just organic species. They contend that human beings are not qualitatively different from other intelligent species or even other artifacts such as complex artificial intelligence. The difference is merely the degree of organized complexity. Whether this occurs utilizing a carbon substrate or silicon one, the end results are the same, a person with complex intentions, behaviors, and memories.

There are all kinds of really interesting arguments in favor of affording independent personhood to these objects, or at least giving these entities the benefit of the doubt. For instance Peter Singer’s (2009) now famous accusation of speciesism is instructive and can be applied here. If robust capacities necessary for personhood or for invoking dignity are found in a particular organism or entity and certain rights or special consideration are denied them even though they are equal or similar to, say, humans in these capacities, then the only grounds for the ethical disjunction is inclusion in a particular species. You can see the weight of this argument for it seems to reek of things such as racism or sexism. This argument is often applied to animal rights, but it could just as easily be applied to the artificial such that one might be accused of “ontological speciesism.”

It is difficult to say whether we should go all the way with these posthumanists and critics who might claim an ontological speciesism in saying that along with cultivating person-like relationships with artifacts, we afford them the same ontological status as human beings—that they maintain the same level of personhood. On the one hand, I recognize that our ethic and the way we treat another is dependent on how we see them in relation to what is often called The Great Chain of Being. In other words, our comportment to a person or object is apt or proportional to their perceived capacities and location on this Great Chain of Being. Animals enjoy some person-like capacities with human beings but one cannot expect a

full-fledged human relationship with an animal precisely because they are lower in this Great Chain of Being. We make these kinds of judgments all the time and I think there are really good pragmatic reasons for doing this.

However, I understand that this ordering of The Great Chain of Being can, and has been, used toward egregious and unloving ends such that entire sections of the population or certain people groups have been treated as nothing but beasts—dismissed as incapable of the same capacities, relations, and respect of other persons. In other words, how we draw the lines on The Great Chain of Being has vast ethical consequences and repercussions in how we treat these persons or objects.

But I am also convinced by the Augustinian move that true interpersonal and individual flourishing occurs when our desires are properly ordered—when we love the right things in the right way and this seems to relate to this Great Chain of Being (Kent 2001; Augustine 2008). When we do not, it leads to sin and stunted growth. Perhaps this is precisely why we feel such tension with the film mentioned at the beginning, *Her*. We are told by Augustine and others that misplaced love hinders the development of the individual. Yet, here in the film *Her*, we are met with a person who has been seemingly transformed for the better and is clearly flourishing because of loving an artificial entity in a way reserved for human persons.

Ought we remove our speculations about the ontology of what meets us in our relationships and try to have full person-like relations with everything that we come upon? Is anything less a true I-You relationship? Is there a hidden violence in qualifying these I-You relations with other entities besides the human? Are we really just allowing certain I-It elements to creep in? Does this just lead to a less horrendous objectification, but objectification no less? This is my worry and one I do not have an easy answer to here.

NOTES

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1. Or even have sex with increasingly sophisticated technical objects that incorporate artificial intelligence and robotics into their construction.

2. Even if I think that the public obsession with concerns over artificial general intelligence keep us from focusing on much graver issues of public import today that come from the growing implementation of “narrow artificial intelligence” in things such as social media and law, the question about what these artificial intelligences are and how we are to relate to them is still of value.

3. For more on how this relates to aesthetics, see Hammer (1967).

4. It is not entirely clear whether the presence of the creator or some content/intention of the creator is what is conveyed in the work of art for Buber.

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