

FUQ L-ERA
DIGITALI



Fuq l-era digitali

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Editorjal

Fuq l-era diġitali

Fr Raymond Gatt OP

Matul l-Istorja tal-bniedem wiehed jista' jitkellem fuq tliet rivoluzzjonijiet kbar li sehew mal-medda taż-żminijiet. L-ewwel tigi r-Rivoluzzjoni *Agrikola* (c.10,000-8,000 q.K) meta l-bniedem ma baqax nomadu jiġġerra minn post għall-iehor, imma hass il-htieġa li jissettija u jibda jaħdem l-art u jiddomestika l-annimali biex jgħinuh fil-hidma tiegħu. It-tieni rivoluzzjoni li biddlet il-mod ta' kif il-bniedem jgħix kienet dik *Industrijali* (c.1760-1840) fejn bdew jiġu ivvintati l-magni permezz tal-iżvilupp teknoloġiku li beda jsehħ fl-Ewropa u permezz t'hekk bdew jitwaqqfu l-fabbriki li bdew jipprovdu l-mehtieġ għall-hajja tal-bniedem. It-tielet l-ikbar rivoluzzjoni hi dik imsejha *Diġitali* (c.1950's/70's-2019) li gabet bidla ohra kbira fil-hajja umana f'diversi setturi.

L-Era Diġitali hija kkaratterizzata mill-avvanzi teknoloġiċi u xjentifiċi li saru f'dan l-aħhar żmien u li huma bla precedent. Dan nistgħu narawh fejn tidhol il-komunikazzjoni tal-bniedem. Ġisem il-bniedem ġie estiz permezz tal-*mobiles*, *tablets*, *internet* u l-modi diversi kif tidhol fil-midja soċjali. Fejn jidhol ċertu xogħol żdiedet l-effiċjenza u l-perfezzjoni bil-*computers* u *robots* imhadmin bl-Intelligenza Artifiċjali. Fejn tidhol is-sahha, il-kliniċi u l-isptarijiet ġew mghammin bl-aħhar teknoloġija anki fejn jidhlu interventi kirurġiċi diffiċli li illum isiru bir-*robots*. Fejn jidhlu sistemi ta' sigurtà, *business*, trasport u ġbir ta' informazzjoni, hemm iktar preċiżjoni permezz tal-Intelligenza Artifiċjali. Fejn jidhol il-logħob u r-rikreazzjoni permezz ta' mezzi teknoloġiċi jistgħu jirrilassaw persuni ta' kull età.

Meta illum wiehed jew wahda thares madwarha żgur li se jixref minn kull naħa xi tagħmir teknoloġiku u diġitali li sar parti mill-hajja tal-bniedem fis-seklu 21. Dawn il-mezzi teknoloġiċi daqskemm huma ta'

siwi li l-bniedem ma jistax jgħaddi mingħajrhom, daqshekk iehor jistgħu jkunu ta' manipulazzjoni u saħansitra ta' qerda. Illum kulhadd jaččetta li t-teknoloġija għandha użu tant bżonjuż għall-bniedem imma daqshekk iehor tista' tkun ta' detriment għall-ħajja umana. Għalhekk hemm bżonn ta' etika fl-użu tat-teknoloġija diġitali biex b'hekk it-teknoloġija tkun għall-użu tal-bniedem u mhux viči-versa.

F'din il-ħarġa tar-rivista *Knisja 2000* għandkom issibu diversi artikli (miktubin bl-Ingliż minħabba ċerti termini li kien diffiċli li jiġu tradotti bil-Malti) li jittkellmu fuq l-aħħar skoperti fejn tidhol it-teknoloġija diġitali. Tissemma fuq kollox l-użu tal-Intelliġenza Artifiċjali u kif din trid tiġi regolata biex tkun dejjem ta' ġid fl-isferi kollha li fihom tintuża. Il-Knisja wkoll għandha sehem f'dan kollu għax il-messaġġ tal-Evangeliu wkoll irid jiġi mwassal permezz tat-teknoloġija tal-lum għan-nies, speċjalment it-tfal u ż-żgħażaġh li huma frott il-kultura diġitali. Fl-aħħar nett ringrazzjament speċjali jmur għal Dr Gege Gatt li kien ta' għajjnuna kbira fil-loġistika ta' din il-ħarġa tar-rivista.

* * *

We are living in the digital age, in which every aspect of our lives is profoundly being affected by the digitalisation of data: how we communicate and socialise; how we work, learn, play, stay healthy and participate in politics, religion, culture and the economy. New digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) are being developed very rapidly. By the passing of time society is changing, sometimes for the better but certainly not always is the case. Digital transformations are characterised by similar narratives of promises and fears, but they share complex questions of, for example, participation, responsibility, security and surveillance.

The virtual world and the digital media are not only a new means of communication or a globalised social platform but are in fact a new way of life. The Catholic Church needs to have a strong presence in this digital culture and because all Christians have a responsibility for the Church's mission, they all have the duty to use these new technologies to share their faith. As Pope Francis maintained, "*Man's creativity and intelligence are astonishing, but they must be positively directed to the integral good of the person from birth and throughout life.*" (Address to Technology Specialists, Rome, Sept. 27.2019).

The pervasiveness of the digital world

Dr Gege Gatt

‘Thinking’ has morphed. We traditionally defined it as a neural function strictly within the brain, in which we had the capability (and consciousness) to think about our own thoughts. **Aquinas** calls this capacity ‘*reditio completa*’ meaning that the human intellect is capable of ‘returning’ to its cognitive act and placing such act as the object of the intellect.

However, in a society that is so dependent on its tools (a 2016 research revealed that we touch our smartphones around 2,617 times a day¹. When the study was repeated in 2018 researchers² found that most users now ‘never stop touching [their] phones, even when they’re off’), technology has become a neural extension of ourselves. ‘Thinking’ therefore, is not something we merely do biologically in our brain, but rather an act which we complete with the extended tools attached to it. This ‘fusion’ of man and machine has altered our epistemological self-awareness to the extent that research demonstrates that digital users conflate their own knowledge with that available to the tools they use,³ and rarely develop their own wisdom.

Therefore, the proliferation of devices is not merely an economic condition to be observed but one that changes profound societal bonds, perceptions and structures. Thus, since technology filters our experiences and often shapes how we live, it has enormous ethical significance. It is for this reason that the pervasive reality of the digital world must present a key area of interest to the Church.

Social Connectivity

Malta’s own connectivity to digital social media channels is well above the EU average. We are now able to tell the world what we’re eating,

what we're seeing, what we're wearing (or not wearing), at all times. This underscores the idea that everything personal is shareable; but should it be?

We are witnessing the development of a self-centred world-view which can radicalise us into an echo-chamber culture in which we rarely listen to anyone that disagrees with us, or rarely listen at all. Pariser⁴, indeed argues that we're speaking (and listening) to less people than we were before the Internet. This begs the question; is social really social?

Privacy: The Victim of Social Connectivity

And as social platforms encourage the sharing of that which was not previously considered fit for public consumption, data footprints from every selfie, like, share or re-tweet define our online lives.

Social scientist Shoshana Zuboff coined the term 'surveillance capitalism' in 2014⁵ to denote a "radically disembedded and extractive variant of information capitalism" based on the commodification of "social reality" and its transformation into behavioural data for analysis and eventual commercialisation. This evolution of the capitalist theory requires the Internet to act as a distributed and largely uncontested expression of power, the cheerful use by millions, and the acquisition of personal data assets - often without explicit consent.

Behavioural patterns extracted from use of 'free' platforms create 'prediction products' that anticipate present and future user-needs and thus become tradable assets on a futures marketplace. Zuboff argues that this notion challenges the political bases of self-determination itself and debases the individuality of the human as a consumer.

On Being Present, as a Christian

Within this endless stream of change and digital activity, it stands to reason that there exists a Christian way of being present in the digital world. To practice a form of a communication which is honest and open, responsible and respectful of others seems to be a representation of values which have stood the test of time. These notions, in turn, are underpinned by the search and respect of the '*truth*'.

This truth which we long to share does not derive its worth from its "popularity" or from the amount of attention it receives. We must make

this truth known in its entirety and with integrity, instead of seeking to make it acceptable or diluting it. It must become daily nourishment and not a fleeting attraction⁶. We require a communication which is at once respectful and sensitive, which stimulates the heart and moves the conscience; one which reflects the example of the risen Jesus when He joined the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). By His approach to them, His dialogue with them, His way of gently drawing forth what was in their heart, they were led gradually to an understanding of the mystery.

Truth Within a World of Confusing Facts

The role of choosing and filtering stories for us to read has moved from the hands of an educated editor to the algorithmic muscle of the channel we most commonly use Facebook. As we abdicate this selection to commercially driven third parties, we become more susceptible to disinformation and fake-news which may thwart us into a specific way of thinking, seeing and being.

Most digital platforms have vowed to limit false news through better fact-checking. This commitment results from a growing concern that digital disinformation is impacting democracy and re-defining politics.

Politicians and political campaign teams are often the victims (or perpetrators) of such confused fact activity (also known as ‘trolling’). A Harvard study from 2017 found that the Chinese Government orchestrates 448 million troll social posts a year, with a view to distract and confuse⁷. It’s terrible when disinformation is sowed by business but when this is done by Government (or for a Government) it takes an entirely different (and worrying) angle. The relationship between an elected Government and its citizens is largely shaped by the ongoing communication between the two, so when this space is digitally manipulated it is a matter of global concern as it affects the Hobbesian notion of a social contract.

On Consciousness

In its basic (and biological state) consciousness is the state of being sentient, that is aware of and responsive to one’s surroundings. Traditionally philosophers have used the term ‘consciousness’ to

describe four main areas: (i) knowledge in general, (ii) intentionality, (iii) introspection (and the knowledge it specifically generates) and (iv) phenomenal experience.

In the analysis of these four areas we also seek to describe the derivative forms of consciousness such as the various contingent emotional states, or ‘raw’ intelligence. The pressing question technology poses today is whether it will attain such levels of human consciousness. Subsequently, how will the Church reflect on its role within this new eco-system? The matter isn’t inconsequential as it touches on the realms of morality and how such relates to immortal human existence. The following four areas illustrate this quandary:

Can technology be self-aware?

Human beings know that they know, while less complex animals don’t seem to share that awareness. But can a machine be the subject of its own thought and think about itself? Computer software can be written so that it can report on its own internal states (such as a debugger program which finds errors in itself). Though arguably self-awareness presumes more capability; such as ascribing meaning to the present state, considering the contextual nature of one’s existence now; how it compares to past states or plans for the future. Thus, one would argue that technology can’t presently be fully self-aware.

Can technology be creative?

The English mathematician, logician and computer scientist, Alan Turing famously reduced this question to “can a computer surprise us?” Technology is remarkably capable to understand, represent and combine ideas in new ways (which is often the basic workflow of the creative human process). We have seen technology used to write film scripts or devise graphic artwork, or even develop new culinary recipes. In 2009, scientists at Aberystwyth University in Wales and the UK’s University of Cambridge designed a robot called Adam that they believe to be the first machine to independently come up with new scientific

findings (on gene discovery) without human involvement. Thus, one may state that technology can be independently creative and original.

Can technology gain intentionality?

Can a machine “deliberately” set out to do harm and thus express intention? Intentionality – or the ability to be purposive towards some object or person – goes back to the very fundamental concept of consciousness.

Almost a decade ago, the Asilomar Conference of 2009 in Monterey Bay, California, established that some machines have acquired forms of semi-autonomy, including being able to find power sources on their own and being able to independently choose targets to attack with weapons. Indeed, some computer viruses can evade elimination and have achieved ‘cockroach intelligence’. This is semi-intentional or semi-autonomous capability which will change and improve through further scientific advancement in technology.

Is technology intelligent?

If intelligence is understood as pure, algorithmic computation there’s no reason to believe technology can’t be as intelligent as humans. Indeed, it is often more intelligent than the average human.

However, if intelligence is elevated to contain consciousness on intelligence (thinking about intelligence) then technology cannot be defined to be intelligent. Consciousness has subjective, first-person causal powers and consciousness is not inherently computational the way computer programs are. The human mind has a number of *intrinsic* characteristics, such as subjectivity, intentionality, teleology and rationality, which a computer can only simulate. Subsequently machines do not have access to the metaphysical nature of reality. Mirroring reason is not the same as reasoning. And reasoning is not the same thing as consciousness.

Critical Thinking and Contemplation

The technical devices we use are laden with meaningful content: photos, family messages, books, prayers, and songs. Research⁸ reveals that as smartphones evoke more personal memories, users extend more of their identity onto their smartphones. The evolution of devices and their use has happened so quickly (partly fueled by decreasing hardware prices), that many of us have not yet understood how to govern the relationship with our devices and consequently capitulate to them. However, this capitulation has a causal tie to our own decision making as shifting the onus of thinking affects our ability to think. Thus the better Netflix becomes at recommending movies to us, to less interested we are in making our own selection. The better Google becomes at predicting our questions, the less able we are to form them. We once searched Google, but now Google searches us and provides the answer before the question. In 1854 with a fair amount of foresight, Henry David Thoreau, wrote⁹ that man has become ‘the tool of [his] tool’.

Yet perhaps in this cacophony of endless activity the antithesis is also the antidote: *silence*. The restless human being, endlessly searching for information, may find it hard to develop meditative and profound meaning. In contemplative silence, we can discover the possibility of speaking with God, on God, and the meaning of human existence. This silent contemplation leads to a powerful presence of awareness in which the plan of salvation and our own history may be sensed.

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Humans, Machines, Law and Ethics

Dr Mireille M. Caruana

“The first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make – *provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control.*” I. J. Good, 1965

What does it mean to be a human? What does it mean to be a machine?

Sentience. Consciousness. These terms, the subject of interdisciplinary research in the cognitive sciences, are not the subject of common and clear understanding or definition. The understanding that animals are ‘sentient’ creatures (understood as the ability to feel) is what led to the development of animal rights. Are humans ‘special’ and in what way(s)? Will machines one day assume a kind of sentience, or humanity? Is it possible for them to ever be sentient, or conscious, and thus the subject of **legal rights**?

What distinguishes humans is arguably the ability to think. At law only a natural person has (certain) rights, protections, responsibilities, obligations and legal (civil, tort and/or criminal) liability. This is because laws are founded on the notion and experience of **human agency**.

In modern positive law, there are two types of **legal subjects**: (1) natural persons and (2) legal persons. Human beings are considered to be ‘natural persons’. Legal subjectivity (understood as the quality of being a legal subject) is attributed by positive law, just like subjective rights (the rights of legal subjects) depend on objective law. Apart from human beings, the law can and does attribute legal personality to other entities, for instance to companies. However, while human beings are legal subjects under private, public (constitutional) and criminal law, this

is not necessarily the case for legal persons. Human rights, understood as reflecting special moral entitlements of all persons arising by virtue of their humanity, are rights declared and protected under certain international, supranational as well as national human rights law instruments, for example the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.¹

Legal subjectivity is by definition attributed by law and cannot be assumed, while the **legal capacity** of legal subjects can be restricted by positive law (for instance in the case of minors, or in the case of guardianship). In principle, positive law can attribute legal personality to whatever entity, depending on whether the legislature deems such an attribution necessary to protect legally relevant rights, freedoms and interests.

When speaking about agency, **moral agency**, generally understood as the capability to engage in intentional action, is distinguished from **legal agency**, generally understood as the capability, attributed by law, to act in law and to be liable for one's actions (legal subjectivity); There is a second meaning of the concept of legal agency, which refers to the capability, attributed by law, to act on behalf of another (acting as a proxy, a representative).

With regard to artificial agents (machines), it seems that moral personality is contingent upon autonomous agency. Should therefore autonomous computational systems, capable of autonomous decision-making, be granted legal personality? Would it make sense to impose legal responsibility and/or liability (criminal or tort liability) upon machines? Would it make sense to impose criminal punishment upon machines? Or should humans, as responsible agents, bear responsibility for machines (that they have designed, directly or by using AI techniques to optimise that design), as they would for the harmful actions of an animal they own? With regard to the principle of **legal liability**, the problem of unforeseeable damage may rule out the liability of whoever employs the agent.

To decide whether an artificial agent qualifies for legal personality would involve a political decision. The European Parliament has indeed proposed to consider attributing "electronic personality" for certain types of artificial intelligence.²

A discussion of what it means to be human, and what it means to be a machine, could not ignore the concept of the ‘Singularity’, the merging of human and machine, or so-called ‘transhumanism’ – also defined as “the proposed point in time at which machines become more intelligent than humans.”³ At this notional point in time, would it make sense to grant machines constitutional rights, and would it be problematic not to do so?

Machines, AI and Robots: disambiguation

The European Commission’s Communication on AI defines AI as follows:

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to systems that display intelligent behaviour by analysing their environment and taking actions – with some degree of autonomy – to achieve specific goals. AI-based systems can be purely software-based, acting in the virtual world (e.g. voice assistants, image analysis software, search engines, speech and face recognition systems) or AI can be embedded in hardware devices (e.g. advanced robots, autonomous cars, drones or Internet of Things applications).⁴

The High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence (HLEG) defined robotics/robots (used interchangeably) as:

Robotics can be defined as “AI in action in the physical world” (also called embodied AI). A robot is a physical machine that has to cope with the dynamics, the uncertainties and the complexity of the physical world. Perception, reasoning, action, learning, as well as interaction capabilities with other systems are usually integrated in the control architecture of the robotic system. In addition to AI, other disciplines play a role in robot design and operation, such as mechanical engineering and control theory. Examples of robots include robotic manipulators, autonomous vehicles (e.g. cars, drones, flying taxis), humanoid robots, robotic vacuum cleaners, etc.⁵

A robot has alternatively been defined as ‘a man-made object capable of responding to external stimuli and acting on the world without requiring direct – some might say constant – human control.’⁶

In this article we are primarily interested in machines (robots, robotics) that use AI to take autonomous decisions. Such autonomous

decision-making may also involve moral judgment, or taking moral decisions; consider for example the so-called ‘trolley problem’, or any of its variants,⁷ in which a choice needs to be made which, by action, would result in the death of one person, rather than five:

To make the parallel as close as possible it may rather be supposed that he is the driver of a runaway tram which he can only steer from one narrow track on to another; five men are working on one track and one man on the other; anyone on the track he enters is bound to be killed.⁸

Do nothing and kill five, or act and kill one? What is the right thing to do? A similar decision may for example be required to be taken by an autonomous vehicle in the event of an unavoidable collision that would require a decision regarding who or what to hit.

Humans and Machines

As we outsource more and more decision-making to machines, do we begin to rely blindly on these machines to the point that machines may pose a threat to our very humanity? Does, therefore, delegation lead invariably to relinquishment, and does this include relinquishment of responsibility? (A reading of Kahneman⁹ leads one to posit that this is likely in view of how the human psyche is set up.)

This points to the importance of considering the social, political, ethical and legal effects of new technologies. As Fromkin has noted, ‘Robots have great potential to take on unpleasant, difficult, or boring tasks, but they also present real risks that require careful planning by designers and by policy-makers.’¹⁰

For example, many AI systems process huge amounts of data, which data may be erroneous, or non-representative (biased), thus leading to erroneous and/or biased results and/or discriminatory or otherwise prejudicial effects. In the EU, we have begun to grapple with these challenges within data protection legislation which targets the implications of automated decisions: ‘The data subject shall have the right not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing, including profiling, which produces legal effects concerning him or her or similarly significantly affects him or her.’¹¹ In the case of a decision based on automated processing that is necessary for a

contract or a decision based on consent, the law mandates the need for ‘suitable measures to safeguard the data subject’s rights and freedoms and legitimate interests, at least the right to obtain human intervention on the part of the controller, to express his or her point of view and to contest the decision.’¹² The relevant article is supported by recital (71) which states that:

such processing should be subject to suitable safeguards, which should include specific information to the data subject and the right to obtain human intervention, to express his or her point of view, to obtain an explanation of the decision reached after such assessment and to challenge the decision.

The ‘right to an explanation’ might otherwise be termed ‘explainable AI’.¹³ The risk/fear lies in the situation portrayed in the sketch comedy ‘Little Britain’ where a public-facing organisation employee consults a computer and unquestioningly relies absolutely on its output to make a decision: “computer says no”. The humour of course serves to draw attention to the potential severity of the lack of transparency and/or potential bias.¹⁴

We can however also program machines to follow laws, should we want to. This has been termed ‘legal by design’; an enhanced version of which is ‘legal protection by design’, e.g. in the GDPR, the mandatory provisions regarding the carrying out of data protection impact assessments; data protection by default and design; and the provision on automated decisions discussed above.¹⁵ Should we program machines to follow laws and, if so, what laws are appropriate for machines?

Humans, Machines, Law and Ethics

How should we regulate machine intelligence? Is our concept of regulation blindsided by ingrained notions of human agency, such that manufacturers, programmers, users etc are ultimately presumed responsible and/or liable for any misconduct or harm caused by a machine/robot? Shouldn’t we rather legislate for robots as equals, granting ‘robot rights’ (along similar lines as ‘animal rights’)? The very notion of legislating ‘for’ robots already implies that in our current cognitive framework, we believe our thinking to be of a higher order than that

of robots – otherwise, robots would pass laws for themselves, pretty much as humans pass laws to regulate their own societies. Are we rather, therefore, at least in the current state of technological development, considering robots as we do children, to be ‘raised’ well? Will things change *if* and when robots acquire human-level machine intelligence (otherwise termed ‘Artificial General Intelligence’ or ‘AGI’)? Moreover, should we fear the day robots will surpass us, and thus legislate for human self-preservation, rather than ‘robot rights’? Is it however morally wrong to create a ‘permanent silicone underclass’¹⁶ and would it constitute a modern form of slavery? Would this fly in the face of progress achieved in the wake of the civil rights movement?

Some (naturally intelligent) humans (such as writers) have long considered the need for laws of robotics. The world maestro of science fiction, Isaac Asimov, provided a set of laws for robots:

The Three Laws of Robotics

First law – A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm;

Second law – A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law;

Third law – A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

Handbook of Robotics, 56th Edition, 2058 A.D.¹⁷

Asimov later added a Zeroth Law – ‘A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.’¹⁸

A further two laws were later proposed by other writers: Fourth law – A robot must establish its identity as a robot in all cases;¹⁹ Fifth law – A robot must know it is a robot.²⁰

It is worth bearing in mind that law is not just a system of rules; it is a normative, value set. Murray²¹ believes the application of Asimov’s laws can be seen as a common framework document for human–machine shared normative values. To suggest specific laws for ambient intelligence at this stage is pointless, as we would be legislating for unknown future technological developments. Murray rather suggests a normative model which can be used to develop specific laws; in other words, normative principles for the legal system to latch on to as these laws are developed.²²

According to Boden et al, ‘Asimov’s laws are inappropriate because they try to insist that robots behave in certain ways, as if they were people, when in real life, it is the humans who design and use the robots who must be the actual subjects of any law.’²³ Basing themselves on the premise that ‘Robots are simply tools of various kinds (...) and the responsibility of making sure they behave well must always lie with human beings’,²⁴ the authors devised five ethical principles as a basis for responsible robotics (‘General Audience’ version):

1. Robots should not be designed as weapons, except for national security reasons;
2. Robots should be designed and operated to comply with existing law, including privacy;
3. Robots are products: as with other products, they should be designed to be safe and secure;
4. Robots are manufactured artefacts: the illusion of emotions and intent should not be used to exploit vulnerable users;
5. It should be possible to find out who is responsible for any robot.

The need for a cross-discipline conversation

Effective consideration of the social, political, ethical, and legal effects of new technologies requires a cross-disciplinary conversation and the bridging of disciplinary gaps. One needs to consider in particular law, ethics, and computer code, and understand the distinctions, interrelationships and interaction between the three.

Acting early means affording the opportunity to alter the technology to design around the problem (rather than shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted). There is the need to craft a legal environment that balances competing and possibly conflicting interests. Lawyers and computer scientists, social scientists and philosophers, need to work together on a common legal framework. This requires an extended conversation that must cross disciplines if it is to be informed and useful.

Hildebrandt advocates the importance of an understanding of how law and the Rule of Law protect what is crucial to constitutional democracy and how that is pertinent to computer scientists (and others).²⁵ The task is for lawyers and computer scientists to team up and develop a plurality of solutions in close collaboration with those who will suffer and/or enjoy the consequences of the new architecture.

The sceptics abound (I consider myself to be within their ranks) regarding whether humanity will achieve singularity, alternatively termed Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) or Artificial Superhuman Intelligence (ASI), or not, but one thing is certain: the dangers that may flow from AI machines are real, and it is not before time to seek to achieve AI safety and ethical AI, and to ‘focus research not only on making AI more capable, but also on maximizing the societal benefit of AI’ and to pursue ‘expanded research aimed at ensuring that increasingly capable AI systems are robust and beneficial: our AI systems must do what we want them to do.’²⁶

Notes

1. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union [2012] OJ C 326/391.
2. European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 with recommendations to the Commission on Civil Law Rules on Robotics (2015/2103(INL)): “Calls on the Commission, when carrying out an impact assessment of its future legislative instrument, to explore the implications of all possible legal solutions, such as: (...) f) creating a specific legal status for robots in the long run, so that at least the most sophisticated autonomous robots could be established as having the status of electronic persons responsible for making good any damage they may cause, and possibly applying electronic personality to cases where robots make autonomous decisions or otherwise interact with third parties independently.”
3. Margaret A. Boden, *Artificial Intelligence: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP 2018).
4. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Artificial Intelligence for Europe, Brussels, 25.4.2018 COM(2018) 237 final. This definition is expanded on in High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, *A Definition of AI: Main Capabilities and Disciplines*, 8.4.2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/definition-artificial-intelligence-main-capabilities-and-scientific-disciplines>.
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10. Froomkin (n. 6) xiii.
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14. See e.g. Tom Simonite, *Algorithms Should've Made Courts More Fair. What Went Wrong?* (2019) <www.wired.com/story/algorithms-shouldve-made-courts-more-fair-what-went-wrong/> accessed 14 September 2019.
15. See Mireille Hildebrandt, *Law for Computer Scientists* (2019) <<https://lawforcomputerscientists.pubpub.org/pub/gfzd6k0g?>

readingCollection=626b449d>: “Legal protection by design (LPbD)(...) does not aim to guarantee enforcement of whatever legal norm, but rather aims to ensure that legal protection is not ruled out by the affordances of the technological environment that determines whether or not we enjoy the substance of fundamental rights.”

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20. Nikola Kesarovski, *The Fifth Law of Robotics* (1983).
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Artificial Intelligence and the Manipulation of the Truth

Prof. Fr Philip Larrey

Many thinkers suggest that we are living in a “Post-Truth Society”, meaning that it is no longer relevant to inquire about the “truth” of events because it cannot be ascertained to a reasonable degree. Due to advanced technologies and specifically of artificial intelligence (AI), the line between truth and falseness is becoming even more blurred. The following article will attempt to explore these issues from a philosophical point of view in order to arrive at a better understanding of the issues involved, and to consider possible remedies to the abandonment of truth.

1. Truth Theories

Over the past century, with the development of symbolic logic and the formalization of logic systems, two theories of truth have dominated the philosophical scene: a correspondence theory of truth, and a coherence theory of truth. Truth as correspondence arises from the classical notion of truth which stems from common sense and direct experience: a sentence is true when what is stated *corresponds* to how things are. Aside from the controversy plaguing such a characterization within the analytical tradition, we hold a correspondence theory of truth as adequately describing the relationship between language and reality. The truth predicate, i.e., “is true”, is used to describe reality as it is. According to Aristotle, truth can be described in the following way: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”¹ When we use the truth predicate in a common-sense framework, we certainly mean what Aristotle describes in his work. Plato also embraces a nearly identical meaning of truth in his writings.²

The second most popular conception of truth is the coherence theory of truth. Such a conception arises from the writings of Alfred Tarski, especially his enormously influential paper, “The Semantic Conception of Truth: and the Foundations of Semantics”.³ In his article, Tarski asserts that Aristotle adequately described what we normally mean by the truth predicate. However, Aristotle did not *define* the truth predicate for ordinary language. In order to arrive at an adequate *definition* of truth, we must resort to a meta-language and utilize a recursive definition of truth. His well-known example is the theory of disquotation, as in the phrase: “Snow is white” if and only if snow is white, where the first utterance of the sentence is placed between quotation marks, introducing the meta-language whose object is not reality but rather the sentence itself.

By using the coherence theory of truth, we are not interested in empirical reality *per se*, but rather the coherence of the system itself (usually a formal logical system). The theory states that a system cannot contain contradictory assertions: rather, it must be consistent throughout; it must be coherent. For the recursive definition of truth, Tarski does not tell us what is the color of snow, but rather he offers us a way to detect the truth values of the sentences in the system.

Aside from its usefulness in formal systems, the coherence theory of truth is not very helpful to find out *what is true* in a common-sensical framework. “Is it true that Facebook sold our data to Cambridge Analytica?” represents a significant question that we all want answered. We want to know if the phrase is true or not; we want to know if what is said *corresponds* to the reality of things. This is the reason why the correspondence theory of truth is the most common type of truth theory in our everyday life.

2. Fake News

Thanks to emerging technology and sophisticated software, we are now witnessing a large-scale divulgence of the phenomenon of “fake news”. Before we had “Fake News”, its precursor was unreliable information. As the internet was becoming global, it seemed that anybody could write anything and publish it on the World Wide Web. When

asked to support one's claims with proof or backed-up evidence, a naive interlocutor would say, "I read it on the internet". Nowadays, such a phrase is tantamount to ignorance. However, there was a time when such a justification was considered serious. As a response to such naivete, a group of very intelligent and savvy students from the University of Wisconsin came up with the idea of publishing overtly false and made-up stories which seemed true. Their paper was called *The Onion* and later they went online with the website TheOnion.com. It continues to delight readers even today. When it first came out, people referred to the articles posted there as actually true, much to the delight of the creators who knew that the articles were all invented to be satirical or ironical. What convinced readers of the truthfulness of the articles was the way they were written: they *seemed* to be accurate because they were written so well. In fact, the writers were skilled journalists, with the exception that the content was all made up. *The Onion* coincided with the global expansion of the Web.

Even today we can see examples of very good writers posting articles with no truth content whatsoever. "Nothing on this page is real" captures one's attention from the start: who would readily admit such a thing? His name is Christopher Blair who sits at his desk and spews out completely fictitious rubbish day in and day out. He leads a team of 100 like-minded liberal bloggers who come up with completely outlandish un-realities which then go viral and are believed by on-line America. As described by Eli Saslow writing in the *Washington Post*: "A new message popped onto Blair's screen from a friend who helped with his website. 'What viral insanity should we spread this morning?' the friend asked. 'The more extreme we become, the more people believe it,' Blair replied."⁴

Blair's project is *The Onion* on steroids. One small but not insignificant difference is that thousands (if not millions) are sharing Blair's stories as if they were true. "In the last two years on his page, *America's Last Line of Defense*, Blair had made up stories about California instituting sharia, former president Bill Clinton becoming a serial killer, undocumented immigrants defacing Mount Rushmore, and former president Barack Obama dodging the Vietnam draft when he was 9."⁵

If the phrase, “I read it on the internet” no longer is a reliable way of answering the question, “How do you know that is true?”, the opposite implication, i.e., that *nothing* read on the internet is true, is also not accurate. In this sense, the mere fact of being present on some website out in the ether does not constitute the determining factor of truthfulness. What matters nowadays is *trustworthiness*. We all now ask ourselves, “Is what I am reading trustworthy?”

Last year, the OpenAI project (co-founded by Elon Musk and now directed by Silicon Valley guru Sam Altman) shook the world of journalism by having their text generating AI (“GPT-2”) make up a story about Brexit. The engineers fed the text generator 1,300 written stories concerning Brexit and instructed the AI to come up with an article on the subject. The completely fictitious story was published in the well-known British journal, *The Guardian*, but only in the paper edition and not on-line, because Elon Musk feared too many people would consider it real and valid. In fact, the OpenAI people shut down the text generator for fear it would be used for malicious purposes.⁶ A limited version of the tool has since been released to the public.

One of the journalists of *The Guardian*, Hanna Jane Parkinson, wrote an article describing the feat and lifting the disguise of the OpenAI text.⁷ She states in the article: “But, oh my God. Seeing GPT-2 ‘write’ one of ‘my’ articles was a stomach-dropping moment: a) it turns out I am not the unique genius we all assumed me to be; an actual machine can replicate my tone to a T; b) does anyone have any job openings?”⁸ She is actually considering looking for another job, because she fears an AI can do her job better than she can.

In addition, I recall mentioning this text generating AI to my colleagues at the University, asking if they had heard about it. All but one said no, they had no idea that this was possible. I further asked the following question: what if our philosophy students got a hold of this software and fed it professional articles concerning Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* or Kant’s categorical imperative? Could they not then simply ask the AI to draft a written paper on the subject and turn it in as their own work? Most of the professors replied that they would know how to tell the difference. When I showed them how well the Brexit article

was written, they began to become nervous and were unsure how to respond. Fortunately, in our Philosophy Department we still have oral exams, where GPT-2 would be of little help to savvy students.

3. Deep fakes

Critical thinking becomes even more urgent when we turn our attention to “Deep fakes”. Deep fakes are videos produced by an app (which you can download for free, although it is not as easy as it is portrayed to be), where you make someone say and act as you want. The most famous “Deep fake” to date is that of Barak Obama who calls Donald Trump a “dip sh*t”. It was produced by comedian Jordan Peele and is quite convincing.⁹ As the app has developed, newer software allows us to fabricate completely false videos which are even more convincing. Months ago, you needed 5 minutes of original footage from the person you want to make say and act as you wish, and a recording of your own voice. Presently, completely false videos can be made with a mere still image of the person, although these videos do not come with sound.¹⁰

As a person with a certain amount of “street smarts” would already imagine, the vast majority of deep fakes on-line are pornographic. Perhaps one of the most famous deep fakes is that of actress Scarlett Johansson, who has now given up on trying to get rid of the videos, falsely depicting her in an adult movie.¹¹ According to a Deep Trace Labs report in September of this year, 96% of all deep fakes are porn, and they have received over 134 million views.¹² What is worse, it could happen to anyone (similar to on-line identity theft, or theft of one’s on-line bank account). When I asked a professional hacker why my bank account has not been hacked, he did *not* say: “Because your bank has great cyber security”, but rather, “Because professional hackers are not interested in your account”. Once they become interested in you, it is simply a matter of time.

As Ms. Johansson states in her interview, the only realistic solution to the problem of deep fakes is to trust people’s good sense, that the video they are watching is not a true one. Another possible solution to the problem is to utilize artificial intelligence in order to detect the

presence of manipulated videos.¹³ Perhaps we may be forced to use AI in order to beat AI. If that sounds paradoxical, it is because it is.

Another example of deep fake recently struck a major multi-national corporation. The episode was the subject of an in-depth study by the *Wall Street Journal*.¹⁴ Professional thieves used deep fake audio software to convince a high ranking manager to order the transfer of funds to their special bank account: “The CEO of a U.K.-based energy firm thought he was speaking on the phone with his boss, the chief executive of the firm’s German parent company, who asked him to send the funds to a Hungarian supplier. The caller said the request was urgent, directing the executive to pay within an hour.”¹⁵ The thieves eventually made off with € 220,000. Not bad for a couple of minutes’ work.

The fascinating aspect of this heist is that the thieves were able to have a conversation with the U. K. manager. The deep fake audio was not simply a recording, but rather a *convincing* conversation, imitating the voice of the German boss. And yet, all they needed was a decent computer and appropriate software which altered the thief’s voice in real time. It would seem that the multinational’s insurance company covered the cost of the theft, but as far as we know, they have not found the culprits.

4. Conclusion

The distortion of reality and all-out spreading of falsities to a vast public is not a new phenomenon, but AI and machine learning have made it incredibly easy and very convincing to achieve. One effect of purposely manipulating reality through sophisticated technologies is cynicism: we no longer truly trust what we read or hear through news outlets. We are constantly asking ourselves whether what was reported is actually true. Think about the news item a couple of months ago alleging that President Donald Trump wanted to purchase Greenland. I was sure that this was “fake news” because it sounded preposterous. However, it was actually true. Cynicism can work both ways.

Another effect of the continual manipulation of information is an increase in critical thinking. We now demand more than one source for information; we look at only reputable and trustworthy sources; we

cross-reference information to verify that what is being reported is very likely to be accurate. This second effect is certainly positive, because it means that we will become more intelligent each day, without completely ignoring what we read or hear, but reading and hearing in a critical way. This is the reason why I, as a professor of epistemology, am optimistic about humanity entering in to this new digital revolution. As in the past, we will figure things out... with the machines.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b25.
2. Plato, *Cratylus* 385b2, *Sophist* 263b.
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6. For a recent update on the project, see <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/ai-artificial-intelligence-dangerous-text-gpt2-elon-musk-a9192121.html>.
7. See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/15/ai-write-robot-openai-gpt2-elon-musk>.
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9. For a very brief overview and how these videos are produced, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMF2i3A9Lzw>.
10. As can be witnessed by video of the Mona Lisa, Leonardo Davinci's famous painting hanging in the Louvre. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2uZF-5F1wI>.
11. See a very insightful interview with Ms. Johansson here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/12/31/scarlett-johansson-fake-ai-generated-sex-videos-nothing-can-stop-someone-cutting-pasting-my-image/?noredirect=on>.
12. See <https://deeptrelabs.com/archive/>.
13. There is now a plug-in for one's web browser available to do this automatically called "Reality Defender". See <https://aifoundation.com/responsibility/>.

14. See <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fraudsters-use-ai-to-mimic-ceos-voice-in-unusual-cybercrime-case-11567157402>.
15. *Ibid.*

The dark side of AI

Prof. Alexiei Dingli

Most of the AI today, is created to assist humans. But what if we develop an AI which is not concerned with humans? A machine which does not exhibit any human feelings and humans are just animate obstacles roaming our world. Even though AI was initially conceived to serve humans, we do not exclude the possibility of eventually having an AI, which ultimately only serves its own interests. If that happens, then we are definitely in big trouble.

Can machines be humane?

Edsger Dijkstra, a computer science pioneer, once said: “The question of whether machines can think is about as relevant as the question of whether submarines can swim.”

Using the same line of thought, if machines exhibit humanity, does that mean that they are human? When Alan Turing, was confronted with a similar question but on the notion of intelligence, rather than identifying a definition for intelligence, he created a test based upon indistinguishability. In this test, commonly referred to as the imitation game (or the Turing Test), he questioned whether machine intelligence can duplicate human intelligence. The problem with this approach is that if we cannot distinguish between human and machine intelligence, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are the same kind of intelligence. Even though the research community accepted this approach for decades, the time has come to find some real answers.

In the movie ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’, it is evident that HAL 9000, the onboard AI, exhibits some humanity with the astronaut Dave. It expresses its sorrow at not being able to execute Dave's commands.

We can see the same happening in the movie ‘Ex Machina’. Ava, the human-like robot exhibits a lot of humanity with Caleb. However, towards the end of the movie, it has no qualms in leaving him trapped in the facility and condemning him to certain death. What is common in both instances is that the humane aspect was completely faked. HAL 9000 didn’t feel any sorrow and Ava didn’t show any empathy.

It is not enough to fake humanity; we must teach AI how to feel real humanity and act accordingly.

How important is intuition?

AI systems are capable of processing and internalising massive amounts of data. If we take a look at driving, every person drives between 4 to 5 years in a lifetime. We would consider that person as an experienced driver. Since self-driving cars share their data, a self-driving car of today has a driving experience of 60 years. No man can ever reach such a level of expertise in a lifetime. The problem here is that experience alone is not enough; we also need intuition.

A big eyeopener is what happened in the early 90s at the University of Pittsburgh. Researchers conducted a study aimed at predicting the risk of complications in pneumonia patients. The goal was to figure out which of the pneumonia patients are low or high-risk. Low-risk patients were sent home and prescribed a cocktail of antibiotics while the rest were admitted to hospital. The system, which was designed around an Artificial Neural Network architecture, analysed no less than 750,000 patients in 78 hospitals across 23 states. Surprisingly, its precision reached around 86%, which is pretty good for such systems.

When the system was tested with actual patients, the doctors noticed a serious issue. Patients with pneumonia who were also asthmatic were classified as low-risk. The doctors immediately realised that this was a serious flaw, so they flagged the problem, and the system was sent back to the drawing board. The software developers analysed it thoroughly, yet they could not find any issues with it. However, when they tried to delve further into how the system was reaching such a conclusion, they immediately faced a wall. The AI used in this case is considered as a black box; we give it an input, we get an output, but we cannot see

how it is working on the inside. This issue made the task of finding an explanation extraordinarily complicated and in some cases, impossible to achieve for a human. To overcome this hurdle, they built a rule-based system on top of the Artificial Neural Network architecture. In so doing, they were capable of reading and understanding the rules which were being generated by the system.

The researchers discovered that according to the data, patients who suffered from pneumonia and were asthmatic had a higher recovery rate than the others. What the algorithm missed was the reason why they were getting better. It was definitely not because they were asthmatic! The explanation was that such patients were automatically flagged as high-risk by the doctors and automatically admitted to intensive care, which eventually resulted in a more effective recovery than regular patients.

This goes to prove two things; first of all, that human intuition is essential since the doctors immediately flagged this issue when confronted with the results of the automated system. Second, it should remind us that correlation does not imply causation.

It is not enough to build a massive knowledge base full of past experiences; we must build AI systems with intuition.

Who adapts to who?

AI has always been there to help us in our day-to-day lives. In most jobs, it is the human who is performing the task, but various AI components assist him. However, the tables are turning.

Industries around the world are moving towards maximum automation, whereby the role of the human is becoming less relevant. Within this context, they are implementing a Lights-out manufacturing methodology. Essentially, this means that the factories operate in total darkness since they are fully automated and thus, require no human presence. In such a workplace, some workers are still needed to move around the raw materials or even the finished products since very few factories are 100% automated. When the balance between humans and machines topples in favour of the machines, the human will have to adjust.

Of course, many might argue that these are isolated cases, that automation is still very much secluded to a few industries and that

humans still reign in the workplace. According to the World Economic Forum, this situation is changing rapidly. Whereas in 2018, the rate of automation was only 29% in the workplace; by 2025, this will go up to 52%. For the first time, people will become a minority!

Even though automation is inevitable, we have to take into consideration the human element and create AI systems which are sensitive to our needs.

Will AI create new inequalities?

In the day and age of today, we can already feel the digital divide. According to the United Nations (UN), more than half of the people on our planet do not have Internet access. Unsurprisingly, men have more access than women in every region. The UN goes further than that and to accentuate the problem; they are referring to the digital divide as the digital chasm.

AI will unleash new possibilities, many of which will come at a cost. It is already creating a new class of citizens, those that can afford AI and those that can't. Just think about a small family business advertising its products on a social platform. Those that can afford to boost their adverts using AI targeted advertisements sell more than those that don't. But this will go even further. Some people might start sending their digital persona to do the work for them while they enjoy life. Others who don't own a digital persona will have to do it the old way, manually! This issue goes beyond the financial aspect, though, because it could also be life-threatening. One of the jobs which will become mainstream in the coming decades is that of Organ Creator. Essentially, it is the crafting of artificial body parts, designed specifically for a particular person. Of course, this will come at a cost. So a person with a malfunctioning heart might be able to commission a new one if he affords it. If not, tough luck!

AI should be used to fight inequalities and not to create new ones.

Will AI control our lives?

To a certain extent, we are already slaves to technology, having our gaze fixed onto digital screens. But to what degree does AI control our lives?

The Chinese government introduced a social credit system. The idea behind it is to rate people according to their adherence to social norms and laws. The system tracks users by using technologies such as drones, more than 200 million surveillance cameras, brainwaves monitors and data mining from online interactions such as chats. Whoever gets a low rating is penalised. In fact, according to media reports, it seems like over 12 million people were affected with travel bans, as punishment for their behaviour so far. Now the problem with any technological system is that no system is infallible. A quick analysis of the camera system used in China shows that the image recognition software is 95% accurate. Of course, one might argue that the system's accuracy is pretty good. However, when one looks at the numbers, 95% means that five people out of every hundred can be misclassified. Considering that China has a population of around 1.4 billion people, this might result in misclassification of approximately 70 million people. This error can have much more severe repercussions than just an annoying travel ban. The Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) in China takes care of monitoring people with abnormal behaviour. It identifies suspects, classifies their behaviour and takes action to prevent potential crimes. This is pretty much what happened in the sci-fi movie *Minority Report* where Precognitives (individuals that possess a psychic ability to see events in the future) predicted crimes. So what was once the domain of science fiction, today it is an element of reality.

Even though the western world is still far from an institutionalised social credit system, we are already subject to various AI influences. If we look at what happened with Cambridge Analytica a few years back, they stole personal data from people on Facebook and used it against them. The US elections and BREXIT were manipulated to suit the aspirations of the people who contracted them. In the Kenyan elections, Cambridge Analytica targeted all those voters in favour of their candidate to vote. Those against were also targeted and urged not to vote. The worse part of their work is, however, the manipulation of the truth. In the US elections, Hillary Clinton was branded as a criminal. In the Brexit campaign, millions of pounds were pledged to help the National Health Services every week. We all know today that these

were blatant lies. However, even though Cambridge Analytica is long gone, there might still be other firms who operate in the same domain. Furthermore, what we see on Facebook, Google, etc. is essentially what the algorithms want us to see. So even today, we might be manipulated without even knowing it!

AI-based systems should be transparent and objective when providing information to users.

What is the value of human life for AI?

Really and truly, human life has no value for an AI system. An intelligent system only avoids harming us because we have programmed it to do so and not because it values human life. Most of today's AI is incredibly good at specific tasks, but it faces some difficulties when handling things beyond the parameters of the job. That is where problems start to occur.

In 2016, a Tesla car on autopilot crashed straight into a van killing its driver. The accident seems to have occurred because its sensors did not detect the obstacle in front of the car. Of course, the system did not exert any extra caution in this case, knowing that a person was entrusted in its care. It was just executing a program.

In 2018, an Uber self-driving car killed a pedestrian while she was crossing the road. The vehicle relied on the information provided by the sensors, which in this case happened to be wrong. Once again, it was just a matter of executing a program.

But our programs must go beyond that. In 1942, Isaac Asimov, the famous science fiction writer, proposed a set of rules which should guide robots when interacting with our world. The three laws were first mentioned in the "I, Robot" book with a Zeroth law introduced at a later stage. These are the following:

The Zeroth Law

A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.

The First Law

A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

The Second Law

A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

The Third Law

A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

If we implement these laws (and possibly others) in our AI as standard, we will ensure that our future autonomous systems are careful when dealing with humans. Just think about autonomous weapons. A missile fired towards a potential threat might notice that it is going to hit some civilians and decide to adjust its course on its own.

AI should be taught to value human life, and specific safeguards should be programmed inside autonomous systems to protect humans.

Can AI evolve beyond our expectations?

The answer is simply a big fat, YES! It has been shown over and over again in various experiments.

But maybe the most impressive is the experiment released by OpenAI where they created an AI which can play hide-and-seek. The AI technique used is called Reinforcement Learning, where Agents (who do not know the rules of the game), are rewarded if they manage to make a good move.

The rules of the game are straightforward; seekers get points when they see the hidiers. The hidiers get some leeway at the start to find a hiding place, and they get points if the seekers cannot find them. They can both use objects found lying around to achieve their goal.

The AI had never played the game before. Initially, the agents started moving at random. The following is what happened.

1. The AI figured the basic rules of the game.
2. The hidiers learnt to build a shelter, and the seekers could not see them.
3. The seekers learnt to build a ramp to breach into the shelter and see the hidiers.
4. The hidiers then learnt a trick to freeze the ramps so the seekers cannot use them.

5. The seekers then learnt that they could jump on boxes, move them closer to the shelter and jump on the hiders.

6. The hiders then resorted to freezing all the moving objects to block the seekers.

Between each step, the AI played millions of games. In total, to evolve through the six phases mentioned above, the AI had to play almost 500 million games. What is impressive is that none of the actions discussed above was taught to the agents or directly rewarded. The rewards were only given for winning the game and not for taking appropriate steps.

As AI systems grow more powerful, we need to ensure that humans still retain control over technology.

Can AI become evil?

Considering that AI can evolve, we can easily assume that it can also turn good or evil. This choice is not necessarily a conscious one since as far as we know, an AI is not conscious. However, the outcome of interacting with any AI can lead to both good or evil deeds.

In 2016, Microsoft released a Twitter chatbot called TAY (Thinking About You). It was designed to mimic a 19-year-old American girl and to learn from the interaction with other humans on Twitter. It was really an experiment in conversational understanding intended to see how the dialogue will evolve. In reality, TAY did not go very far.

Some Twitter users started a conversation with the chatbot, which included abusive messages. TAY responded in the same way since it was learning from the other users. Eventually, online discussions did not remain playful. TAY developed a strong prejudice against women and became a racist-Nazi sympathiser. Microsoft then decided to plug it off almost immediately. This incident teaches us that AI is very sensitive to data, and if we feed it with garbage, we will eventually get more garbage out of it.

One can find various similar cases. The Uber self-driving vehicle that passed through red-lights in San Francisco. The Russian robot called Promobot IR77 that decided to escape from the lab where it was being programmed. And the list can keep on going. To reduce these threats, DeepMind is developing a framework which ensures that AI agents don't learn to prevent humans from taking control.

Most AI systems start from a blank slate, and it is up to us to influence them with positive examples.

Will AI take over the world?

Many people ask this question when they hear about AI. Most probably, the Hollywood blockbusters which we see on TV help to fuel speculation. Some prominent personalities like Bill Gates, Stephen Hawkins, Steve Wozniak and Elon Musk too expressed their concerns on the matter. So it is very pertinent to ask about the validity of this menace.

In recent years, AI excelled in various fields. Be it, games like Chess or Go and more recently Starcraft. Self-driving cars and smart homes are ushering the world of tomorrow. Notwithstanding these achievements, the kind of AI in these systems is very restrictive, and it is generally referred to as Narrow AI. What this means is that the AI is exceptionally good at handling a particular task, but useless when dealing with other tasks. So an AI which has reached a grandmaster level in chess cannot be asked to give information about the weather because it will fail. Because of this limitation, many researchers around the world are working hard towards what is known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) where the AI can handle several different tasks. However, until this happens, the threat of having a smart toaster evolve into an evil genius and take over the world is incredibly slim.

Even though AGI may sound scary, it is not the most frightening chapter in the future of AI. That chapter is reserved for something known as the singularity. The singularity is that point in time when the evolutionary rate of AI is so rapid that humans will never reach it. However don't lose a lot of sleep on this, since we're still very far away from reaching this stage with the technologies of today.

Of course, the situation can change if we manage to crack Quantum Computing (QC). QC focuses on creating computer technologies based upon the nature and behaviour of matter and energy at the atomic and subatomic level. To understand the power of such technologies, a task which takes 10,000 years on the fastest supercomputer today, will take just 3 minutes on a Quantum Computer. These figures are not theoretical, but they were achieved by Google researchers. Even though Google is

claiming that they reached Quantum Supremacy (i.e. computing power beyond the fastest supercomputer in existence), this has been achieved on a very restricted task. Thus, we are still very far away from having mainstream QC capable of handling any job.

Even though we are experiencing giant leaps in technology, we have to learn how to manage all this processing power.

Conclusion

AI is here to stay. Our society is already on the bandwagon deploying AI in all sorts of applications. So the big question is not whether the AI revolution will happen or not, but more about how to control the powerful AI of the future. That is why we need humane AI. One which understands, values and respects human life. This won't happen by accident, but we have to teach the AI to do so. Only by doing so can we ensure that the future is not about men against the machine, but rather about men and machine working together to solve the challenges of tomorrow.

Child Dignity in the Digital World

Pope Francis

The issues that you will be addressing in these days are of immense importance. Many of you have been dealing with these issues with determination and farsightedness for some time. When, two years ago, I received the participants in the Congress on “Child Dignity in the Digital World”, I urged you to join forces in order to address more effectively the protection of the dignity of children in the digital world. In effect, this complex problem calls for cooperation on the part of all: experts in science and technology, entrepreneurs and economists, legislators, politicians and security agents, educators and psychologists, and, not least, religious and moral leaders (cf. Address to the Participants in the Congress on “Child Dignity in the Digital World”, 6 October 2017). I am pleased to know that you have continued on this path, along with new initiatives, including particularly the interreligious conference held in Abu Dhabi a year ago, taken up by our meeting today.

In recent decades, from painful and tragic experience, the Catholic Church has become profoundly aware of the gravity and effects of the sexual abuse of minors, the suffering it causes, and the urgent need to heal wounds, combat such crimes and establish effective means of prevention. For this reason, the Church senses the duty to approach these issues with a long-term vision.

We are in fact confronting critical challenges that threaten the future of the human family due to the astonishing development of technology in the information and communications media. Doubtless, the development of new technologies in the digital world provides great opportunities for minors, for their education and for their personal growth. It allows for a wider sharing of knowledge, promotes economic development and offers

new possibilities in a number of areas, including that of health care. New technologies open up new horizons, particularly for those minors living in situations of poverty and distant from the urban centres of more industrialized countries.

The challenge before us, then, is to ensure that minors have safe access to these technologies, while at the same time ensuring their healthy and serene development and protecting them from unacceptable criminal violence or grave harm to the integrity of their body and spirit.

Tragically, the use of digital technology to organize, commission and engage in child abuse at a distance, cutting across national borders, is outstripping the efforts and resources of the institutions and security agencies charged with combating such abuse; as a result, it becomes quite difficult to fight these horrific crimes effectively. The spread of images of abuse or the exploitation of minors is increasing exponentially, involving ever more serious and violent forms of abuse and ever younger children.

The dramatic growth of pornography in the digital world is, in itself, most serious, the fruit of a general loss of the sense of human dignity; frequently it is linked to human trafficking. What makes this phenomenon even more disturbing is the fact that this material is widely accessible even to minors via the internet, especially through mobile devices. The majority of scientific studies have highlighted the profound impact of pornography on the thinking and behaviour of children. It will surely have lifelong effects on them, in the form of grave addiction, violent behaviour and deeply troubled emotional and sexual relationships.

A greater awareness of the enormity and gravity of these phenomena is urgently required. Indeed, one feature of today's technological development is that it is always one step ahead of us, for frequently we first see its most attractive and positive aspects (which indeed are many), but only realize their negative effects once they are widespread and very hard to remedy. I would say this to you, who are scholars and researchers: you find yourselves before an essential challenge! Since these problems are vast and complex, a clear understanding of their nature and extent is needed. We cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we can address these issues on the basis of shallow and superficial knowledge. Laying the foundations for greater protection of the dignity of minors should

be one of the most noble aims of your scientific research.

The role of the communications media is no less important. There is a need to increase throughout society an awareness of the risks inherent in an unchecked development of technology. We have not yet understood – and often do not want to understand – the gravity of this issue in its totality and future consequences. This cannot come about without close cooperation with the media, that is, with you, communications workers, for you have the ability to influence society and public opinion.

You have rightly chosen as the theme of this meeting: “From Concept to Action”. Indeed, it is not enough to understand; we must act. The moral condemnation of the harm inflicted on minors through the misuse of new digital technologies needs urgently to be translated into concrete initiatives. The longer we wait, the more entrenched and insurmountable this evil becomes. This concern has been raised by those who – like many of you – have generously dedicated their lives to this battle in direct contact with this crime and its victims, whether as educators, law enforcement and security agents, and many others.

A crucial aspect of the problem concerns the tension – which ultimately becomes a conflict – between the idea of the digital world as a realm of unlimited freedom of expression and communication, and the need for a responsible use of technologies and consequently a recognition of their limits.

The protection of complete freedom of expression is linked to the protection of privacy through increasingly sophisticated forms of message encryption, which would make any control extremely difficult, if not impossible. A fitting balance must be found between the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and the interests of society, so as to ensure that digital media are not used to perpetrate criminal activities against minors. For the sake of advancing the development of the internet and its many benefits, companies that provide services have long considered themselves mere suppliers of technological platforms, neither legally nor morally responsible for the way they are used. The potential of digital technology is enormous, yet the possible negative impact of its abuse in the area of human trafficking, the planning of terrorist activities, the spread of hatred and extremism, the manipulation of information and – we must emphasize

– in the area of child abuse, is equally significant. Public opinion and lawmakers are finally coming to realize this. How can we help them take suitable measures to prevent abuse? Allow me to emphasize two things.

First. Freedom and the protection of privacy are valuable goods that need to be balanced with the common good of society. Authorities must be able to act effectively, using appropriate legislative and executive measures that fully respect the rule of law and due process, in order to counter criminal activities that harm the life and dignity of minors.

Second. Large companies are key players in the astonishing development of the digital world; they easily cut across national borders, are at the cutting edge of technological advances, and have accumulated enormous profits. It is now clear that they cannot consider themselves completely unaccountable vis-à-vis the services they provide for their customers. So I make an urgent appeal to them to assume their responsibility towards minors, their integrity and their future. It will not be possible to guarantee the safety of minors in the digital world without the full involvement of companies in this sector and without a full awareness of the moral and social repercussions of their management and functioning. Such companies are bound not only to respect the law, but also to be concerned with the direction taken by the technological and social developments which they produce and promote, since such developments are far ahead of the laws that would seek to regulate them.

Although these challenges are difficult to meet, there are a number of areas of action. I will limit myself to a few examples.

Initiatives such as the “Safety by Design” legislation sponsored by a Commission of the Australian government are valuable because they ensure that the digital industry is proactive and consistent in its approach to customer safety starting from the development of online products and services. In this way, responsibility for overall safety is explicitly acknowledged to be incumbent upon not only the consumer, but also on those who manufacture, develop and supply such products and services.

In some countries too, legislators are committed to ensuring that companies providing internet navigation on mobile devices are obliged to verify the age of their customers, in order to prevent minors from accessing pornographic sites. This is to be encouraged. Indeed, minors

today for the most part use cell phones, and the filters used for PCs have remained ineffective. Reliable studies tell us that the average age of first access to pornography is currently eleven, and tends to keep lowering. This is in no way acceptable.

While parents are primarily responsible for raising their children, it must be acknowledged that, for all their good will, it is increasingly difficult for them to control their children's use of electronic devices. Therefore, the industry must cooperate with parents in their educational responsibilities. Consequently, the identification of a user's age should not be considered a violation of the right to privacy, but an essential requirement for the effective protection of minors.

The possibilities offered by technology are constantly growing. Today there is much talk about the applications of Artificial Intelligence. The identification and elimination of illegal and harmful images from circulation on the net by the use of increasingly refined algorithms, represents a very significant area of research. Scientists and those working in the digital world should continue to promote such research, engaging in a noble competition to combat the wrongful use of newly available technology. I therefore appeal to computer engineers to feel personally responsible for building the future. It is their task to undertake, with our support, an ethical development of algorithms, and in this way, to help create a new ethics for our time.

The development of technology and the digital world involve huge economic interests. The influence that these interests tend to have on the conduct of companies cannot be overlooked. There is a need to ensure that investors and managers remain accountable, so that the good of minors and society is not sacrificed to profit. We have seen how society has grown more sensitive to the areas of environmental care and respect for the dignity of labour. A similar concern for the effective protection of minors and the fight against pornography should become increasingly felt in the finance and the economy of the digital world. The safe and sound growth of our young is a noble goal worth pursuing; it has far greater value than mere economic profit gained at the risk of harming young people.

In a world like ours, where boundaries between countries are continually blurred by the developments in digital technology, our efforts should

emerge as a global movement associated with the deepest commitment of the human family and international institutions to protecting the dignity of minors and every human person. This demanding task sets before us new and challenging questions. How can we defend the dignity of persons, including minors, in this digital age, when the life and identity of an individual is inextricably linked to his or her online data, which new forms of power are constantly seeking to possess? How can we formulate shared principles and demands in the globalized digital world? These are challenging questions that call us to cooperate with all those working with patience and intelligence for this goal at the level of international relations and regulations.

Man's creativity and intelligence are astonishing, but they must be positively directed to the integral good of the person from birth and throughout life. Every educator and every parent is well aware of this, and needs to be helped and supported in this task by the shared commitment born of a new alliance between all institutions and centres of education.

A contribution to this can be made not only by sound ethical reasoning, but also by a religious vision and inspiration, which has universal scope because it places respect for human dignity within the framework of the grandeur and sanctity of God, the Creator and Saviour. In this regard, I am gratified by the presence of a number of distinguished religious leaders who, in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation, have readily taken up the task of addressing these problems. I greet them with great respect and I thank them most heartily. We ought to be as one in the effort to protect minors in the digital world, now and in the future. For in this way, we bear witness to God's love for each person, beginning with the smallest and the most vulnerable, so as to foster in everyone, in every part of the world and in every religious confession, concern, care and awareness. We must ban from the face of the earth violence and every form of abuse against children. Let us look into their eyes: they are your sons and daughters; we must love them as God's masterpieces and children. They have the right to a good life. We have the duty to do everything possible to ensure that right. Thank you.

*Address of Pope Francis to participants in the Congress on
'Child Dignity in the Digital World', 14 November 2019*

Rediscovering Scriptures in the Age of Video Games

Fr Justin Schembri OP

1. Video Games: a *new* way of telling *old* stories

On Christmas day of 1988, I received a present that would affect me in ways I could not have imagined: a brand-new *Nintendo Entertainment System*: a video gaming console that not only saved the industry – especially after the debacle of 1982’s *Atari 2600’s E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* –, but also revolutionized it. And I must admit, I have fond memories of helping Mario save the princess from Bowser and ensuring that Link defeats Ganon.¹

Of course, the gaming industry, in the last thirty-five years, has made enormous strides with quality, graphics, and story-telling but the basic premise, of most (and the best) video games, remains the same: to give you an immersive experience so as to place you *in the story being told* and, most often, to *make you a protagonist in that story*; whether you are exploring the countryside of Hyrule in *Breath of the Wild* as Link, shooting down cultic zombies as Leon in *Resident Evil 4* or even controlling Yuri Lowell in *Tales of Vesperia*, you are placed, immersed, in a particular world – a world that you often come to care for and a world that you, in part, identify with.² Ultimately, what fascinates me most about video games is their capacity to tell stories *from the inside* by placing the player in a protagonist role *within that world itself*.

This aspect of storytelling is also fundamental in the world of Scriptures: “[t]he Bible – Old Testament and New Testament together – [...] tells the *story of salvation – the story* of God’s covenant mercy.”³ This story of salvation, beginning in Genesis and cresting with the coming of Jesus Christ, is *the* story which has intrigued me, captivated me, and enthralled me for most of my life for, in as much as I am fascinated by

the storytelling in video games, this is the story that explains reality most completely and fully – in other words, the Bible offers us “the ‘real’ story of the world.”⁴ Indeed, “the divine drama, told in Scripture”⁵ tells of the story of how a *good God* created *good creation* which was *marred* through sin but *healed* by the cross of Christ and which now awaits for the day that the Kingdom of God is consummated when Jesus returns in his glory. This is *our worldview* – that “lens through which the whole world is seen, as a blueprint that gives direction for life, as a grid according to which [we] organize reality, and as a foundation that, through invisible, is vital in giving stability and structure to [our] life.”⁶

In this way, it is not hard to fathom that Scriptures are interested in many of the vital and perineal issues that we still discuss to this very day: the problem of evil, choice as an indicator of morality, power, sex, money, and social justice. And how Scriptures solve these issues will have decisive effects on what Christians believe and how Christians behave.

Of course, it goes without saying, the Bible is not the only narrative, nor the only ‘lens’, through which human beings can perceive reality but what is most fundamental in the story that the Bible narrates is the theology that is communicated through its narratives – that theology which is all about God’s covenant with humanity.⁷

As we have just mentioned, there are other narratives that take a very different point of view concerning these very same issues: many of the epic cosmogonies in the Ancient Near East, for instance, present a different lens through which to perceive reality. A good example of this would be the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*. In this myth, on the one hand, we find the dragon monster Tiamat, Chaos Sea, threatening to destroy the gods and, on the other, the god Marduk who, upon defeating Tiamat, becomes king of the gods. Marduk, then, splits open Tiamat’s carcass to create the world.⁸

The difference between the Bible and this epic myth could not be more apparent: in the Bible, “[n]o longer is chaos an all-powerful, fearful thing in itself or something caught up in some battle between competing gods; rather, chaos is understood as the mysterious parts of the world, which are fully within the power and control of the one and only wise God.”⁹

Video games are not ignorant about these narratives. Certainly, anyone who has played the *Final Fantasy* series, knows that Tiamat, always depicted as a dragon, is one of the hardest enemies that the player encounters and is often fought near the end of the game.¹⁰ Obviously, this is only one – small – instance which shows how video games draw on much older stories; in this essay, I hope to provide evidence that there are many instances like this – some of which are quite significant. In a way, therefore, this *new, digital, way of telling stories* often taps into *very old stories* – stories which provide a basis through which we relate with both divine and worldly issues and which are based on a worldview that is not always compatible Christianity.

Keeping in mind that thousands of people, ranging from children to adults, play video games on a regular basis, it is not that much of a stretch to appreciate that video games exert a great deal of influence on the formation of a person's worldview, character, attitudes, and belief system – and for this reason, it is all-the-more imperative that we examine the worldviews often presented in these games and contrast them with our own, Christian, worldview.

The aim of this article is not to say that video games are detrimental to one's wellbeing; rather, we aim to uncover their educative qualities and to appreciate anew our own Christian worldview as seen in the Scriptures. To do this, we will look at three specific issues: how the cosmos came to be, the problem of evil, and the idea that choice is the only real indicator for moral behavior.

2. The Creation story

In Scriptures, while creation accounts can be seen in various locations, it is best witnessed in Genesis.¹¹ While we do not have the time to discuss the entire complex, I would like to pause and to spend some time on the first account of Gen 1,1–2,3.

In this account of creation, we find God, who exists *independent of creation*, hovering over the chaotic waters. And then, like a bolt out of the blue, he begins to speak – in speaking, in almost inviting, creation comes to be.¹² The most basic conceptualization of creation for the ancient Israelites consists of God *ordering* the cosmos, his household; we

must be mature enough to understand that the Ancient Near East (ANE), including Israel, “had no concept of nothing, of zero, of a vacuum [...] the ‘world is what is ordered.’”¹³ With this in mind, it becomes easier to understand that, in each subsequent day or ‘invitation’ to come to be, God adds another addition to his ordered house until he creates humanity in his own image and likeness. This humanity is unlike any other of his creations since it is called to partake in a very unique and intimate relationship with God himself. After putting everything in its rightful place, after creating everything, God saw that it was very good (Gen 1,31) – upon which observation, God rests. And resting on the seventh day, God blessed it (Gen 2,1-3).

While there are many elements that we could analyze and discuss, what I would like to highlight is threefold: firstly, in this account what is most apparent is not only that *one* God created the cosmos and that what this *one* God created is *very good* but that this *one* God created with complete ease: “there is no apparent exertion, God simply speaks.”¹⁴ Secondly, that, while God rested after creation, he did not distance himself from it: after seeing that all *was very good* (Gen 1,31), he rested on the seventh day, which he *blessed* (Gen 2,1-3).¹⁵ Thirdly, it is of the utmost importance that humanity is given a “high place”¹⁶ in the biblical creation account – so high that, in the Greek Septuagint, humanity is called the *icon* (εἰκόνα) of God.

One certainly can see how all this differs in other epic texts of the ANE where creation usually happens after the aftermath of a cosmic battle or that there is no *one* god who is able to order or create everything. In video games, while there are probably many different franchises that discuss the creation of the world, the two that I want to focus on are *The Legend of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy* – I have chosen these franchises not only due to their popularity and longevity but also due to the clarity on how they present either creation or humanity’s place therein.¹⁷

The first point of divergence that I want to emphasize concerns the narration of creation itself which is best illustrated in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.¹⁸ In this game, we bear witness to when the *Deku Tree* informs Link how the world came into being:

Before time began, before spirits and life existed... Three golden goddesses descended upon the chaos that was Hyrule. Din, the goddess of power... Nayru, the goddess of wisdom... Farore, the goddess of courage. Din with her strong flaming arms, she cultivated the land and created the red earth. Nayru... poured her wisdom onto the earth and gave the spirit of law to the world. Farore... with her rich soul, produced all life forms who would uphold the law. The three great goddesses, their labors completed, departed for the heavens. And golden sacred triangles remained at the point where the goddesses left the world. Since then, the sacred triangles have become the basis for our world's providence. And, the resting place of the triangles has become the Sacred Realm.¹⁹

We can underscore three elements. Firstly, this creation story emphasizes, not *one* god, but three – and the three are occupied in different aspects of creation: Din with cultivating the land, Nayru with order, and Farore with producing life. This already exemplifies a different point of view from the Judeo-Christian view that *one* God created everything.²⁰ Secondly, while the narration of creation in *Ocarina of Time* is non-violent, it is certainly laborious – so much so that the Deku Tree emphasizes the resistance that the chaos gave in ‘cultivating’ the land, the pouring out of wisdom, and the producing of life.²¹ Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, contrary to scriptures, when the three goddesses finish their labor, they depart to the heavens, almost never to have *direct* interaction with humanity or their creation again – where the symbol known as the *triforce* (the three sacred triangles of courage, wisdom, and power) was all that remained.²² What is more, rather than goddess themselves, it is this *triforce* that is the basis of the world's providence.²³ All of this certainly is contrary to how, in Scriptures, God himself is the basis of the world's providence witnessed, in particular, in how he *blesses* the seventh day (and all of creation) to make it completely his. Ultimately, contrary to Scriptures, while these three goddesses ‘created’ the world of Hyrule, they show little care for that which they created.

The second great point of divergence that I want to underline is the place that the biblical story of creation allots to humanity in contrast to

the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish* and *Final Fantasy VIII*. Indeed, as Kaminsky points out, in *Enuma Elish*, “humans are created from the blood of the rebel deity Kingu to alleviate the workload of the lower gods. In this view, human life is an endless task of low-level servitude.”²⁴ Interestingly enough, we read something similar in *Final Fantasy VIII*.²⁵ Indeed, at a particular point in the story, we are informed of the “Legend of Vascaroo” which states:

Once upon a time, there was a person named Hyne. Hyne was the ruler of the world. He became lazy and decided to make a tool to make his life easier. Hyne made a neat tool. His tool could make more tools by itself. Soon there were a lot of tools in the world. These tools were actually people. When Hyne woke up, he was surprised because there were a lot of people. Hyne wanted to reduce the number of people, and used magic to burn up a lot of small people. The small people were children. The people cherished the children very much. So the people rebelled against Hyne. Hyne used powerful magic to fight them. The people couldn't use magic, but they had wisdom. Eventually, Hyne began to lose the war, because there were too many people to fight, and they were getting smarter. Therefore, he decided to make peace with people by offering them half of his body along with his powers. Hyne cut his body in half and gave the people half as he promised.²⁶

What is significant here is not only the lack of omnipotence of the creator-god Hyne or even the violence that ensues between Hyne and humanity but that humanity is just *a tool* of the creator-god Hyne, a tool, like in the Babylonian myth, that was created to simply help the god “avoid chores [he] finds demeaning.”²⁷

This contrasts greatly with how the Judeo-Christian views not only God but also our relationship with God. Indeed, God can abide no rebellious claim over his divine sovereignty – while he can create, we cannot and, while he is omnipotent, we are not; we will see, further down, what happens when we do rebel, but it is safe to say that life, for the Judeo-Christian, is found only when we purify our hearts and submit to God in obedience.

In consideration to our relationship with God, sovereign Lord, we would do well to point out that, for Scriptures, we are created in the image and likeness with God who, then, blesses humanity and gives it *subordinated* dominion over creation; this very fact presents us with the “culmination or crowing point of creation, and the divine image [... is] an indication of the unique role of the human person within creation.”²⁸ Ultimately, far from *fearing* humanity, God desires communion; far from treating humanity as mere *tools*, humanity is that creature who is created in the image and likeness of the creator; and far from being *in conflict with God*, humanity finds its reason for existence when it is in harmony with God’s order and plans.

While there is much more to be said, all of this not only illustrates the chasm that there exists between the creation story in Genesis with ANE myths but also how video games, like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy* often tune into these old myths and tell them in new ways.

3. The Problem of Evil

Something that is indelibly linked with the narration of creation is the problem of evil. Indeed, no matter what creed or philosophical belief we espouse, we must confront the presence of evil in our world. How did evil come about? Why do we suffer? Why are some people intent on bringing pain and destruction down on others? Why does it seem that evil wins in the end? These are just some of the questions that we all ask at some point in our lives. While we could write volumes on the problem of evil in video games, I want to focus on two aspects: (i) that evil is equal and opposite to the good and (ii) evil and villainy is simply about which perspective one espouses.

3.1. Evil is equal and opposite to the good

Having already looked at the biblical story of creation, we know that this is not the worldview that the Judeo-Christian espouses. In biblical tradition, evil is not on the same level as the good – nor is evil on par with God himself. Indeed, in Scriptures, while evil is *never called good*, God is emphatically so. One example will suffice: Ex 33,18-23. Therein, while Moses asks God to see his glory, the Lord replies by telling Moses

that he will make his goodness (בוט) pass before him. The implication, in placing glory and goodness in parallel, is that the goodness of God is not in reference to his beauty but in reference to his being, to *who he is* and not *how he looks*.²⁹ That God, in Scriptures, is considered good should come as no surprise since only a *good God could create good creation*. What is more is that, if this *goodness* is an essential quality of God, *no evil can dwell with him* (Ps 5,4) – God, wholly good, cannot abide any shadow or evil so much so that it flees from his presence (Jas 4,7-10).

If this is so, if evil does not originate with God, where does evil, for the Judeo-Christian, come from? The simple answer is with fallen creatures. Indeed, as McQuilkin and Copan rightly point out, the “cause or blame for the unbelief, as well as all other sins, is not at all in God, but in man [...] – and, before him, Satan and his co-rebels, who ‘abandoned their proper abode’ (Jude 6).”³⁰ What is more is that sin or evil is not only *not* created by God but that, in Scriptures, it is best understood as “*a turning away from God – the greatest Good*.”³¹ Thusly, rather than being *something*, evil is the absence of good – like a *shadow*, evil is something which is there but only as the absence of something else.³²

In turning away from the good to the shadow, the fallen angels and first humanity sinned, which allowed for all different kinds of shadows to creep in. In doing so, they failed to focus on the true source of life which, in turn, allows other things – like pride, envy, hatred, and all that which creeps in darkness to spill forth. After all, *in a fallen state*, “[w]e are frail creatures, prone to wander and prone to misuse God’s gifts. During life ‘under the sun,’ we take God’s gift of eating and turn it into gluttony; we take God’s gift of drinking and turn it into drunkenness; we take God’s gift of work and derive our value from it; and we take God’s gift of a spouse and turn it into pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, and abuse.”³³ All evil, in Scriptures, can be seen to derive from the moment when some of the angels and the first man and woman turned away from God, the source and font of life, and all that is good.

Of course, the story of humanity does not end with our turning away from the ultimate good. It has always intrigued me, in fact, that the biblical terms for conversion – בּוּשׁ *šûb* in Hebrew or μετάνοια *metanoia* in Greek – are all about *turning back to God, the greatest Good*. What is

more, is that, the Christian tradition sees the coming of Jesus Christ as the moment when the chains of evil and the power of Sin were shattered once and for all time – in dying for our sins and rising for our glorification, Jesus has shown God’s ultimate and absolute power over any and all forces – even that of death – that tries to oppose his sovereign power.

And yet, as we have made clear, the Christian vision is not the only hermeneutic through which humanity has tried to interpret reality. Indeed, there is the very old (and very contemporary) idea that evil is equal with the good. This idea of evil is perhaps easy to understand simply because it is not only a very old idea but also a very prevalent image in our modern, digital, Western society. The classic take can be seen in the *Star Wars* films where the *Force* is comprised of both the light [good] and dark [evil] and where one is present, the other one always is – there can be no light side without the dark side and vice versa. Of course, this idea that light/darkness, good/evil as being two sides of the same coin is much older than *Star Wars* as seen in the philosophical-religious idea of *Manichaeism* where two gods, one material and evil, and the other spiritual and good, were always found together.

In ANE myths, there are many stories which tell the tale of equal and opposing forces, personified as gods, which is, in reality, a never-ending battle between the two. A good example is the myth of Ba’al, the Ugaritic myth which hails back to thirteenth-century BC. In it, the good god (the god of fertility and rain) Ba’al fights with two gods, the chaos god of the sea, Yam, and Mot, the god of death. Ba’al, after his victory over Yam, fights with his greatest adversary, Mot. For a time, Mot seems to be victorious since he swallows Ba’al whole but Ba’al cheats his adversary by providing a substitute of his own body and eventually comes back to fight Mot again which only ends up in a draw. While this story of the dying and rising of Ba’al is mainly to explain the changes of the seasons, one cannot help to see the larger picture of the battle between the good god of the sky, Ba’al – the skywalker – with Mot – the god of the underworld – as an expression of the eternal fight between good and evil.³⁴

When we come to video games, perhaps the best, most classical game that takes up this thought is *The Legend of Zelda*. At its essence, as the installment *The Skyward Sword* informs us, it tells the story of how

the lower goddess Hylia fought, defeated, and imprisoned the Demon King, Demise at a terrible price: she was so wounded from the battle that she had to give up her godliness and take up the form of a Hylian (a humanoid) known as *Zelda*.³⁵ Knowing that Demise would once again return, the goddess also enlists the aid of the hero of legend, known as Link, who would defeat the Demon King in her stead. In the game, you take on the role of Link who, through many adversities, receives the necessary tools and power needed to defeat the villainous Demon King, who is evil incarnate.

Interestingly for us, in *The Skyward Sword*, after Link defeats Demise, Demise promises that his hatred will not be snuffed out but will come back to fight the light as long as the light is there.³⁶ The majority of the installments of *The Legend of Zelda*, which take place after the events of *The Skyward Sword*, in fact have, as the main villain, Ganon who is effectively Demise reincarnated. What is important here is that, as long as there is the goddess Hylia (incarnated as *Zelda*), there will be the Demon king: one cannot exist without the other. Indeed, as the late King of Hyrule tells Link in *Breath of the Wild*: to know the story of Calamity Ganon is to know the story of Hyrule, and to know the story of Hyrule is to know the story of the battle between Hylia and the Demon king – that age old battle between two opposing, but equal, forces of good and evil.³⁷

In the end, tales like *Star Wars* and *The Skyward Sword* tell stories similar to the pagan myths of old, stories that are diametrically opposite to our Christian vision – a vision which holds together two fundamental points: that God, who is almighty and good, redeems a rebellious people through the action of Jesus Christ and that humanity, upon returning back to the true good (God), realizes that evil is but a shadow and that our true home, our true good, is found in God and in God alone.

3.2. Evil and villainy as a matter of perspective

While, above, we had seen that evil is often understood to be equal, but opposite, to the good, this is not the only way to appreciate how the good and bad relate to one another. Indeed, there is a second, more subtle way: that neither good nor evil really exists – just one’s perspective of them. Understanding this concept, while pervasive today, is less

easy to explain. The basic idea behind it is that truth and goodness is relative to one's point of view; evil, in this interpretation, is simply one of perspective. As McQuilkin and Copan demonstrate, this perspective is akin to *moral relativism* – the idea which “emphasizes that an act's rightness depends on culture or circumstances”³⁸ and highlights the idea that what is right for you might not be right for me.

In this view, then, it becomes difficult to make any *moral judgement* on what actions are good and what actions are evil – just as it would be difficult to ascertain what actions we ought to emulate and what actions we ought to avoid – since everything is relative to one's point of view. In this case, can we ever say that any action – no matter how atrocious – is wrong? In reality, if we were to espouse moral relativism, we are constrained to silence since everything can be justified.

In Scriptures, this perspective does not hold water. In no circumstance are we to look at the perspective of the snake, who entices the first man and woman to eat from the tree of knowledge, and come to the conclusion that, given his point of view and perspective, he was right to entice humanity. Indeed, if sin *is a turning away from God*, in no circumstance can we justify anyone's sinfulness; we cannot just see things from another perspective and think that that sinful act is *good or justified*. There may be extenuating circumstances, as in the case of the testing of first humanity and many of our own sins, but these circumstances do not justify the evil that we do. In the NT, Jesus, in fact, tells us (especially in the Beelzebub controversy) that there is no compromise between the realm of God and the realm of Satan; you either gather together with Jesus or you scatter that which he gathers (see, for instance, Lk 11,14-36).³⁹ Ultimately, for Scriptures, the answer is always one and the same: we must all acknowledge our sinfulness, purify our hearts, turn back and submit to God – only in this way will we experience the life that God can, and wills to, give.

In video games, there are many villains who would fall in this perspective – villains who are on the evil side of the story just because they are just misunderstood; if we were to understand their view – or they understand ours –, we could save them from their villainy. As Squall Lionheart, the main protagonist in *Final Fantasy VIII*, divulges to Irvine

Kinneas: “right and wrong are not what separate us and our enemies. It’s our different standpoints, our perspectives, that separate us. Both sides blame one another. There’s no good or bad side, just two sides holding different views.”⁴⁰ And while there are many who we could mention, I want to underscore three specific characters: Duke Pantarei, Edelgard von Hresvelg, and Kefka Palazzo.

In *Tales of Vesperia*, Duke Pantarei, who is ultimately the main villain of the story, is only villainous because he could never recuperate from past betrayal; from his point of view, humanity is beyond salvation, and needs to be destroyed. The game’s storyline wants us to sympathize with Duke; rather than make him a character of pure evil, Duke simply suffers from misunderstanding – if he could only be reasoned with, Yuri and friends would not have to fight him. And, during the end credits, the player does feel much satisfaction to learn that Duke did not die after the player defeats him – rather, he goes back to his old peaceful self.

Another good example comes from highly acclaimed *Fire Emblem* series: *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*.⁴¹ Indeed, one of the main protagonists – whom the player can decide to play as – is Edelgard von Hresvelg, princess and apparent heir to the Adrestian throne. Due to tragic circumstances of her youth (where she is imprisoned with her siblings and experimented on), she aims to change the world order by any means necessary – even by means of aligning herself with *those who slither in the dark* (the very ones who experimented on her) which ignites a war that engulfs the entire continent that leaves corpse upon corpse in its wake. As the player, if you choose her main path (Crimson Flower), you are immersed in a journey totally sympathetic to her cause that allows to see her perspective which has the aim to justify it. While one can certainly empathize with her tragic childhood, her treachery and villainous behavior can never be justified – from partaking in the death of Dimitri’s family, and the tragedy of Duscur, to the senseless killing of countless allies and friends.⁴²

The last example that we can mention is the worst villain in the entire *Final Fantasy* series: Kefka Palazzo, the main villain of *Final Fantasy VI*.⁴³ Kefka, Emperor Gestahl’s court magician, is known for his psychotic tendencies and loathing towards anything that exists; he

is a sociopath, killing people without discrimination or remorse – as in Doma, when he kills both friend and foe by poisoning the kingdom’s water-supply.⁴⁴ This seemingly unadulterated evilness is particularly witnessed in how he is depicted during the final boss fight: almost as a tribute to Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, Kefka first appears as Satan and, then, he mocks both Purgatory and Michelangelo’s Pietà, and, finally, appearing in his final angelic form as the god of magic and the fallen angel, Lucifer.⁴⁵ All-in-all, it is difficult to find a more villainous antagonist than Kefka. But for all his evilness, as a citizen of Vector (the capital city of the Empire) tells us, Kefka is simply the first victim of Cid Del Norte Marquez’s magitek experiments before the process had been perfected – experiments which crushed his sanity in the process. Kefka, then, is simply a victim of others who ought to be pitted for that which he was put through. Seen from his point of view, the real villains are Cid, Emperor Gestahl, and the power-hungry Empire – all of whom get their just desserts. If only we could have reasoned with Kefka, perhaps he could have been helped.⁴⁶

While all these games express the haunting idea that evil and villainy are complex concepts that defy one-dimension answers, it is likewise true that they all share ideas that are incompatible with Scriptures. In the world of Scriptures, *in no way would a Kefka or even an Edelgard* be sympathized with since, as morality is not relative, their actions can never be justified.

4. Choice as *the* moral indicator

This idea is another very popular idea in our culture and in the world of video games – and it is really an extension of the *relativistic worldviews* concerning morality and truth discussed above. This idea basically states that, since morality is all about perspective, no matter the consequence, my right to choose is the basic ruler for moral behavior. Hope Estheim from *Final Fantasy XIII* states it best, when he states that “I might not make all the right choices. But as long as I’m the one who decided what to do, there’s nothing to regret.”⁴⁷

Turning back to games already discussed, we can perhaps appreciate how hard it is to really say that Kefka or Edelgard were wrong to choose to do all the evil that they did – for, if they *chose* to take the

paths that they took, then they *must be right*. Indeed, in *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, in the Crimson Flower path, you beat the game – and win! – by choosing to bring Edelgard’s plan to fruition; at no point in the path taken, is her worldview is questioned even though she has brought so much havoc to the continent – and you, as player, have to lump it because you chose it too!

Hopefully, it is clear to our audience by now that this idea does not fit into the worldview of the Christian. Indeed, it is not just *in the power of choice* that we are to judge what actions are morally good or bad; rather, it is *what choices* do we make since we can choose *wrongly*. The first man and woman, confronted with a test, had the choice to turn away from God or to continue to turn towards God: in failing the test and choosing to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge, the text illustrates that this “*first sin was voluntary*. This first sin originated with moral creatures and could have been freely resisted; nothing about their divinely created nature *compelled* them to sin.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, for scriptures, it is not enough to have the power of choice; what really counts is *our continual decision to turn back to God*, for it is only when we are in harmony with God that we will find that which we seek.

5. Rediscovering the *newness* of Christianity

In this essay, we have compared and contrasted the worldview of the Christian with that of some video games – and have emphasized the creation of the cosmos, the problem of evil, and the idea that choice is the sole indicator for moral behavior. In reality, these three issues are so intertwined with each other that it becomes difficult to completely separate one issue from the others. Indeed, we saw that the idea that choice is the sole indicator of moral behavior is an extension of that worldview which relativizes truth and morality to be simply based on perspective – which, in turn, is a leveling of the previous idea that the good and evil are equal, but opposite, forces. The problem of evil, for its part, is grounded in the hermeneutic of creation: how we envision how the cosmos came about – through a cosmic battle, through the labor of many gods, or through an ‘invitation’ – not only affects how we relate with the divine but also with the created cosmos.

Indeed, distinct from ANE creation cosmogonies, like *Enuma Elish*, and video games, like *The Legend of Zelda* or *Final Fantasy*, we Christians have a very different, *newer*, and much more positive worldview which affects how we relate with God, with each other, and with the cosmos.

As a matter of fact, in many of the video games and creation myths discussed, the relationship between the gods and humanity is hardly an intimate one: in *Enuma Elish*, Ea creates man from the blood of Kingu only to impose work on them, the three golden goddesses abandon their newly created land, and Hyne not only creates humanity as tools but also tries to destroy his own creation when they grow too strong. The conflict between deities and humanity, then, spills over in many of these stories to create a system of conflict between members of mankind, where many try to obtain ultimate power by destroying others. Ultimately, what was highlighted throughout this essay was the fact that, whilst presented in a different, newer, format, digital video games really are not new at all – they tap into much older, and mainly pagan, stories in order to rework them in novel ways.

In contrast to this, we have rediscovered the *newness of Scriptures*. Indeed, gone are the cosmic battles, the splitting-open of the carcasses of dead gods, and the low-esteem towards humanity in Christianity. In place of these images, we find a good God who not only created a good creation with just a word but also created humanity in his image and likeness so as to have a relationship, a covenant, with it in love and fidelity. This image of covenant, then, spills over to how we should relate with each other; just as we should be faithful to God, we ought to be faithful with each other because this is what God requires from us. And, while good creation was marred by sin, already Gen 3,16 promises its readers that the wounds inflicted on the cosmos by sin will be eventually healed – a promise that came to fruition with the coming of Jesus Christ.

In the end, we hope that our readers appreciate how much the scriptures are actually a breath of fresh air; I invite us all to rediscover the newness of the Scriptures and to experience God, like Elijah did so many years ago, in the newness of a gentle blowing of a gentle wind (1 Kings 19,12).

Notes

1. While the *full launch* of the *Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)* happened in late 1986 in North America, my family decided to buy it for Christmas 1988. Both *Super Mario Bros.* (first released in 1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (first released in 1986) are both video game franchises licensed by *Nintendo* and first appeared for the *NES*.
2. *Breath of the Wild* is the latest installment in *The Legend of Zelda* series published in 2017 by *Nintendo* for the both the *Nintendo Wii U* and the *Nintendo Switch*. *Resident Evil 4* was published in 2005 by *Capcom* and first appeared for the *Nintendo Game Cube*. *Tales of Vesperia* was first published in 2008 by *Namco Bandai* for the *Microsoft Xbox 360*.
3. F. F. BRUCE, *The Books and the Parchments*. Some chapters on the transmission of the Bible (London ²1963) 82. The emphasis is added.
4. C. G. BARTHOLOMEW, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics. A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI 2015) 71.
5. BARTHOLOMEW, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 77.
6. BARTHOLOMEW, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 77.
7. See J. S. KAMINSKY, “The Theology of Genesis”, *The Book of Genesis. Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (ed. C. A. EVANS – J. N. LOHR – D. L. PETERSEN) (VTS 152; Leiden 2012) 639.
8. For the text itself and an excellent assessment of its different aspects, see A. HEIDEL, *The Babylonian Genesis*. A complete translation of all the published cuneiform tablets of the various Babylonian creation stories (Chicago, IL 1963). It will become clear, further down, why I have emphasized this very precise text but what I want to highlight at the moment is something which Oswalt has already underscored: “[o]ne cannot read the *Enuma Elish* [...] and believe that Gen 1 (and 2) are really the same kind of literature or that they even think of the world in the same ways.” See J. OSWALT, “Creatio ex nihilo. Is it Biblical, and does it matter?”, *TrinJ* 39NS (2018) 168.
9. C. G. Bartholomew – R. P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*. A theological introduction (Downers Grove, IL 2011) 44. See also R. MILLER, “What the Old Testament can Contribute to an Understanding of Divine Creation”, *HejJ* 60 (2019) 32.
10. Tiamat is a favorite enemy to fight as it appears in *Fantasy I, II, IV, VIII, IX, XI, XII, XII: Revenant Wings, XIII, XIV, Final Fantasy Tactics, Final Fantasy Tactics Advance, Final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire of the Rift, Dissidia Final Fantasy*, and *Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy* among others.

11. For instance, outside of the two accounts of Gen 1,1–2,3 and 2,4 –11,32, creation is also discussed in the Psalms, Second Isaiah (40–55), and in much of the Sapiential tradition. We can also mention other prophets like Jeremiah who does talk about creation and its marring. For more, see R. J. CLIFFORD, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (CBQMS 26; Washington, DC 1994) 137-197.
12. It is important to note that, in the Hebrew, we have the jussive form of the verb and not the imperative. While the jussive (an exhortation) form can be equal to an imperative at times, it is clear that the jussive often softens the force of an imperative. For this reason, it almost seems as if God is ‘inviting’ – rather than commanding – creation to find its order. See MILLER, “Divine Creation”, 34. See also P. JOÜON – T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Third Reprint of the Second Edition, with Corrections (SubBib 27; Roma 2011) § 114h.
13. MILLER, “Divine Creation”, 32.
14. MILLER, “Divine Creation”, 34. See also KAMINSKY, “The Theology of Genesis”, 636.
15. The Hebrew root “QDS” means to be cut off, to be set aside, to belong to God. In blessing that day, he makes all of creation his.
16. KAMINSKY, “The Theology of Genesis”, 637.
17. *The Legend of Zelda* is one of the oldest and most prolific modern-day franchises, having over eighteen entries spanning over thirty years, first appearing on the NES on February 21, 1986. *Final Fantasy* is almost as old: the first entry was published by *Squaresoft* on the NES on December 18, 1987 and has fifteen main titles, some of which (*like Final Fantasy XIII*) span over multiple volumes.
18. *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, one of the more important entries in the franchise, was first published by *Nintendo* in 1998 on the *Nintendo 64*.
19. For reference, one can see the *Youtube* link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMRkUXqI1Y> [accessed last October 18, 2019] for the cutscene itself.
20. This point cannot be overemphasized since many, like reddit user 100mop, think that the Golden Goddesses are equated to the Holy Trinity – something which is certainly wrong as the Trinity is *One God, three persons*. See: https://www.reddit.com/r/zelda/comments/4oyb59/what_is_the_relation_between_goddess_hylia_and/ [accessed last October 19, 2018]. Of course, on the other hand, many myths of old narrate how different

gods help in creating different parts of the world. For instance, in some Akkadian texts, we read that Anu created the heavens and Ea created the earth, and there is a third god Enlil, who, while playing no roles, is mentioned as one of the gods of creation whom humanity made shrines for. See CLIFFORD, *Creation Accounts*, 59-61.

21. This exertion in creation is again typical in the myths of old, like the Sumerian text *Praise of the Pickax*, wherein the god Enlil makes use of a pickax to cultivate land and to even make man. See CLIFFORD, *Creation Accounts*, 30-31.
22. In many of the different installments, there are oblique references to them through, for instance, sacred flames (*The Skyward Sword*), other lesser spirits as in *Twilight Princess* (published by Nintendo in 2006 for both the *Nintendo Game Cube* and the *Nintendo Wii*), as spiritual stones or even as magic (like Din's fire) in *Ocarina of Time*. The only time the three goddesses have any decisive effect on the ways of the world is perhaps seen in *The Windwaker* (first published by Nintendo for the *Nintendo Game Cube* in 2002) where, in order to save the people in front of evil's onslaught, they sent a flood to destroy most of the known world. As for the *triforce* itself, it often becomes an object of great temptation since the one who obtains all three elements can become like a god.
23. This point is made most apparent in *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*, published by Nintendo on the *Nintendo 3DS* in 2013 since, when the *triforce* is destroyed, the world goes into decline.
24. KAMINSKY, "The Theology of Genesis", 637. The text itself (VI.5) states: *Let me put blood together, and make bones too. Let me set up primeval man: Man shall be his name. Let me create a primeval man. The work of the gods shall be imposed (on him), and so they (the gods) shall be at leisure.* See CLIFFORD, *Creation Accounts*, 92.
25. *Final Fantasy VIII* was first published by *Squaresoft* for the *Sony PlayStation* in 1999.
26. For the cutscene itself, go to 51:07 on the Youtube clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GJiC20Gp0U> [accessed last October 20, 2019].
27. KAMINSKY, "The Theology of Genesis", 637.
28. P. C. BOUTENAEFF, *Beginnings*. Ancient Christian readings of the biblical creation narratives (Grand Rapids, MI 2008) 18.
29. See J. I. DURHAM, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, TX 1987) 452.
30. R. MCQUILKIN – P. COPAN, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*. Walking in the way of wisdom. Third edition (Downers Grove, IL 2014) 100.

31. McQUILKIN – COPAN, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 101.
32. J. R. R. Tolkien, a Catholic, would often use the image of a shadow to express the relationship that evil has with the good. For instance, see R. C. WOOD, *The Gospel According to Tolkien. Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville, KY 2003) 51.
33. R. L. MEEK, “Fear God and Enjoy his Gifts. Qohelet’s Edenic Vision of Life”, *CTR* 14 (2016) 32.
34. As Gibson notes, the god Mot personifies “death *simpliciter*, humanity’s ultimate enemy, [...] one whom moreover Baal cannot defeat on his own but can only keep in check with the assistance of the distant head of the gods himself.” See J. C. L. GIBSON, *Canannite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh 1977) 18. More recently, one cannot help but see certain affinities between Luke Skywalker (the light) and his fight with his father *Darth Vader* with Ba’al’s (who is known with the epithet ‘the one who walks on the skies’) fight with Mot (a word which means death).
35. *The Legend of Zelda: The Skyward Sword* was published by *Nintendo* for the *Nintendo Wii* in 2011. In this installment, we learn that the goddess Hyila was charged by the three golden goddesses to protect the *triforce*: “upon their departure to the heavens, the three goddesses entrusted another goddess, Hylia, and a legion of spirits and fairies with protecting the land they had created.” See K. SAKAI (ed.), *The Legend of Zelda Encyclopedia* (Milwaukie, OR 2017) 12.
36. For the cutscene, see 10:30 on the Youtube clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCXc1-jEDV8> [accessed last on October 20, 2019].
37. For the cutscene, see 1:54 on the Youtube clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jet-eBhmhtU> [accessed last on October 20, 2019].
38. McQUILKIN – COPAN, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 171. In antiquity, the position of *truth relativism* is said to be first espoused by the Sophists of Greece. Plato, through the character Theaetetus, makes this clear when he states that “knowledge is nothing other than perception.” See PLATO, *Theaetetus* 151d7-e3. For a critical edition, see H. N. FOWLER (trans.), *Plato VII. Theaetetus and Sophist* (LCL 123; Cambridge, MA 2006). The significance of this should not be difficult to understand since there is no large gap between thinking that truth is relative and morality is just as relative. The point that I am making here is that even this very contemporary opinion has its roots in antiquity.
39. See J. SCHEMBRI, *When Your Eye is ἀπλοῦς*. The Christological Implications of Discipleship in Lk 11,33-36 [doctoral dissertation] (Rome 2018) 143.

40. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbDdLvdP_Nc&list=PLCDE88E6E1B22D0CB&index=22 for the cutscene [accessed last on October 20, 2019].
41. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* was published by *Nintendo* in 2019 for the *Nintendo Switch*.
42. Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd is prince and apparent heir to the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus. Four years prior to the events of *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, when Dimitri was only 13-years old, many members of the royal family, including Dimitri's father, the King, were ambushed and killed while traveling. The people of Duscur, a people who inhabited the northern coast of Faerghus, were not only wrongly blamed for the assassination of the royal family but also were subsequently massacred. Edelgard, who shares the same mother (but not father) as Dimitri, was not only most probably present at the tragedy but also now allies herself with the true culprits of the tragedy itself: *those who slither in the dark*.
43. Due to problems in the publication of some of the games in the *Final Fantasy* series in North America, *Final Fantasy IV* was published by Squaresoft as *Final Fantasy II* for the *Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES)* in 1991 while *Final Fantasy VI* first appeared as *Final Fantasy III*, published by *Squaresoft*, for the *SNES* in 1996. However, it has become custom to cite them by their actual titles of *Final Fantasy IV* and *Final Fantasy VI* respectively.
44. Interestingly, he is one of the few villains who actually succeed in bringing almost complete destruction to the world; the second act of the game takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where Kefka acts as if he is a god.
45. For the final boss fight with Kefka, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgcbShn9x8g> [accessed last on October 21, 2019].
46. To illustrate my point further, it is to be noted that Kefka has many similarities to the Comic book character *Joker* (the archnemesis of Batman) – not only in clothes and appearance but also in demeanor; in the very recent film *Joker* (2019), the audience is encouraged to sympathize with the protagonist due to the trauma he underwent notwithstanding all the atrocities that he has committed. Therefore, by looking at things through his perspective, it is suggested that we can justify his actions and sympathize with him. In a similar way, albeit more subtly, we are encouraged to sympathize with Kefka.
47. *Final Fantasy XIII* was first published by *Square Enix* in 2009 for both the *Sony PlayStation 3* and the *Microsoft Xbox 360*. Players of the game

might point out that, in this very poignant scene, Hope is struggling to break the chains of Fate. However, it is still indicative of the idea that ‘my choice’ is the only real indicator for morality. For the cutscene, go to time-index 21:05 on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIsBdZPtFZk> [accessed last on October 21, 2019].

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Gaming as an essential part of the Catechetical framework: Addressing Gen-Z's needs

Fr Matthew Pulis

Cultural theorist Johan Huizinga argues that we are *Homo Ludens* – we are born to play. He describes play as “stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.”¹ Character formation, and hence catechetical formation, happens in community, and thus, Huizinga argues that “the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual normal, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.”² During gameplay, the gamer is invited to embrace the game’s world once she has crossed the membrane of the video-game. In this digital-space, she is met with dreams and fantasy, where she can escape the mundane while character formation happens. Hence, within the magic-circle, everything is, in some way, transformative.

The aim of this essay is to propose a prolegomenon towards a Catholic practice of digital-catechesis which values, and dare I say, centralises gaming as *the* preferred medium. I will be introducing Gen-Z’s fascination with gaming, basic my research on cultural-psychology and marketing trends. Then I will theologically engage with the idea that God is a playful God, and thus, we are invited into God-play, which proposes the conviction that gaming is essentially catechetical. I will conclude by proposing two areas where gaming can be transformed into *the* missional tool.

Gen-Z: Identity and Needs

I will be understanding Gen-Z as those born after 1997 as per APA³ and PEW.⁴ While Millennials would remember the introduction of high-speed internet, Gen-Zs were introduced to the game-controller from

an early age. Gaming is an intrinsic part of this digital-generation and hence, 58% gamed in the last month, with one-fifth of these playing over 20 hours a week.⁵

Whereas Millennials saw the need to compete in games, Gen-Zs see games as a way of socialising.⁶ According to the same research, sixty-eight% identified that “gaming is an important part of their identity.”⁷ It is important to highlight, that whereas for Millennials, gaming was a more low-class male domain, this changed with Gen-Z. Their gaming encompasses all genders and all social and economic classes. Mobile-gaming is also a staple.⁸

We may be tempted to interpret the apparent mobile immersion as being lonely.⁹ But, what at face value might be labelled as a lonely generation, it seems that socialisation has evolved.¹⁰ In fact, gamers feel closer to their friends than non-gamers.¹¹

By way of introducing this shift in socialising, let us visit the currently most played game which occupies twenty-five% of Gen-Z’s free time.¹² *Fortnite*’s way of presenting itself as a social-network rather than a game is one clear example of this social-evolution.¹³ It is perceived as helping the player feel part of a community, with a stunning forty-seven% difference between social-networks and *Fortnite* when asked about helping to forget real-life problems; 48% acting on feelings which cannot be acted upon in real-life; and a 28% difference in increase of self-confidence.¹⁴ These statistics witness the power of games to create a communitarian shared experience. As game theologian Alan Thomas postulates, “connection and isolation are inseparable”¹⁵ and as disciples we are called to reflect on this technology-mediated community-formation.

Thus, as a Church, what are we going to offer to a generation which prefers stimulating products over meaningful experiences? Gen-Zs are driven by influencers who are taking the role of the role-model. The world they know is digital, connected and only a swipe away. That does not mean that we are to shun the brick-and-mortar catechetical framework, because Gen-Z still prefer physical locations over webstores.¹⁶ Thus, the crux of the issue lies in one question: is our catechetical framework perceived as ‘fun’, ‘friendly’ and ‘genuine’ by Gen-Zs? These three adjectives need to be at the foundation of our catechetical endeavours.

Deo Ludens

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff speaks of the information age as becoming “the gaming age, and thus [...] gaming and its associated notions of play could become master metaphors for a range of human social relations.”¹⁷ Hence, we can speak of witnessing a fun revolution, which when paired with Berger’s “argument from play”¹⁸ becomes ‘sacred time’:

One aspect of play [... is...] that play sets up a separate universe of discourse, with its own rules, which suspends, ‘for the duration’, the rules and general assumptions of the ‘serious’ world. [...] In] playing, one is on a different time [...] Joyful play appears to suspend, or bracket, the reality of our ‘living towards death’.¹⁹

In other words, gaming can be considered as transcendental, and is a form of a spiritual experience. Ludology-theologian Hugo Rahner develops this idea and speaks of fun-playing as evoking religious symbolism where God becomes a player and the Church the community of play.²⁰ His ‘theology of play’ is rooted in participation of God’s freedom and God’s own playing *ad intra* as Gregory Nazianzen muses, “For the Logos on high plays, stirring the whole cosmos back and forth, as he wills, into shapes of every kind.”²¹

Hence, theologian David Miller notes that a post-lapsarian understanding of labour is void of play, but pre-Fall, labour, was as playful as games are.²² In the ‘serious business’²³ of playing, *Homo Ludens* retrieves the gaiety,²⁴ sacramentalise the ‘Artisan Father,’²⁵ and journeys towards the beatific vision.²⁶

Bishop Moulins-Beaufort notes that today, our “social relations are governed mainly by the search for pleasure,”²⁷ and thus notes that we have “a duty to evangelise this new world.”²⁸ Hence, a theology of fun opposes hedonistic ideas which are self-centred but opens us to the other. Considering, we are created playful,²⁹ and the enjoyment of the senses is seen as a God-given gift that reveals that we are created for “happiness, heavenly beatitude and eternal joy,”³⁰ we can speak of a fun-loving God because God is a relational being.³¹ Theologian Josh Amstutz further

theorises that all relationships are founded on playful-fun and hence, one can posit that part of our *imago Dei* in the nature to play, which through death is transformed to eternal playing with God. Thus, fun becomes eschatological, for in playing we not only enjoy the present moment but anticipate the promised-Joy. When we are opened to the other, recreation becomes *re-creation*, a participation in the Sabbath's nurturing and resting in God.

In the synoptic healings of a non life-threatening condition on a Sabbath, we see a sure sign of the proclamation of the *euangelion* 'to the poor', a central identity in Christ's mission.³² Gamers, through their fun-gameplay, are participating through Christ's evangelisation mission by participating in the Sabbatical rest. Echoing Ratzinger's claim that the "deepest poverty is the inability of joy,"³³ gaming, when performed socially can be seen as a *missio Dei* participant.

The Christian is called to become a child again, and thus to play for fun: "The end will be even as the beginning – an eternal childhood."³⁴ Thus, I argue that in playing, the gamer is participating in the eschatological dance before her own death, what Julian of Norwich calls 'eschatological-pleasure.'³⁵

Hence, I conclude that through gaming, the player can transform frippery to a joyful participation in the eschatological hope while living the gospel, and ultimately participating in God-life.

Gaming as essentially catechetical

Digital theologian Rachel Wagner discusses the digital-space as a platform where the self is continuously being constructed, hopping from one virtual identity to another. Thus, one becomes an "ephemeral collection of dots and pixels, built and rebuilt again and again."³⁶

In this light, I would like to highlight two different avenues for when gaming can be catechetical: engaging Christian games as part of the catechetical journey and discuss game-theology during catechesis.

Engaging Christian games

While it may be easy to pepper our catechesis with a game akin to the occasional video, this will not work. Christian games harbour

many theologies which may not be deemed Christian.³⁷ Hence, careful theological exploration is needed by the catechist prior to introducing play. Themes such as the human person as body and soul, violence, hope, portrayal of death, justice, Christology, and Ecclesiology are to be sieved.

For example, the themes of violence and hope. Games tend to use violence as a way to propel the storyline forward, even at times hiding violence through cartoonish-looking figures.³⁸ Games' often expose violence as the "myth of redemptive violence," under "the belief that violence saves (and) that war brings peace."³⁹ Christian games such as *Invisible Enemies*⁴⁰ present violence as the surrounding culture, which can elicit the instinct to return to violence and thus supplanting God with violence. Furthermore, violent video games, would tend to evoke eschatological salvific hope in both a temporal and individualistic manner, robbing the Paschal mystery of its uniqueness, and often replacing Christ with the player as the new messiah.

As evident from these two themes, the choice of Christian games in catechesis is more involved than merely finding a game which is marketed as a Christian game. Dissecting the game into game-bricks is one methodology to differentiate these themes.⁴¹

Akin to what *Mission Generational*⁴² and *Bible Story*⁴³ are doing, as a local Church, we can start tinkering with VR/AR to "inform, expose and help young people explore faith, mission and evangelism."⁴⁴ Through VR/AR we can invite our youths, to engage their imaginative faculties, akin to Ignatian Spirituality 2.0 and experience the mediated-encounter with Christ. One can also be more creative and develop a discipleship experience where the youth embarks on a discipleship journey and is mentored by the catechist. The narratological script can take the form of being vocated, witnessing key Gospel episodes and becoming "onlooker-participants,"⁴⁵ so the pupil doesn't merely learn *about* Jesus but *experience* Him.

Discussing games

Wagner speaks of transmedia storytelling as world-building, arguing that religion and transmedia have a lot in common.⁴⁶ Thus, even secular games, function like religion and fascinate us with rule-based

environments outside of our daily lives. Whereas traditional catechesis is characterised by the “fixedness of ritual and texts, by recognisable modes of performance, and by predictable methods of engagement and interpretation,”⁴⁷ games are characterised by fluidity, plasticity and multiple modes of performance.

In response to this generation’s need, we are to fluidise our catechesis and acknowledge Gen-Z’s fascination with the coded, screened, and mediated. What is shaping them, is to be ‘brought to light,’⁴⁸ discussed and engaged. In a media ecology manner, the catechist is invited to engage the group so they can tease out theological themes from popular games and discuss them. As evident from the exploration of death in *Fortnite*,⁴⁹ through dialogue, the catechist can engage false ideas in the pupils minds and help them, in a true pedagogue-manner to distil these, and fill the gaps with true, liberating, Christian principles.

Concluding remarks

The gaming scene is ever changing. Similarly, the Church’s vocation is to reform its catechetical ministry as the needs arise. Hence in this culture of flux, where is the Spirit leading us to explore? While our first reaction as carers would be to see the addiction to gaming as a problem to be tackled, the foregoing journey took gaming ‘seriously’ as a *locus theologicus*.

As teasers for further exploration, inspired by Craig Detweiler,⁵⁰ I present some takeaways:

- Games drive participation: gamers are invited to explore and unleash their imagination;
- Free play: gamers have a great deal of agency, and through games the pupils can learn to tackle issues of stewardship, morality, and conflict resolution;
- Death à Respawn: through this thanatological cycle, the pedagogue can develop the doctrine of forgiveness and healing, which is crucial in a pilgrim’s journey.⁵¹ It is also vital for learning new ways to navigate the messiness of life;
- Gamification: the discipleship journey can be structured as a sequence of wisdom to be grasped, enjoyed, and calls for never settling;

- Multiple scenarios: through the many possible ludological and narratological outcomes, games help the disciple to realise that faith-living is not merely abiding by laws, but a personal relationship with Christ, which involves multiple mundane choices.
- Learning abilities: Gen-Z is an information age and thus they acquired the skills to be autonomous in making up of knowledge,⁵² and ultimately wisdom. They prefer to learn more soft-skills than data,⁵³ which is what ludologically games do;
- Communal: games are profoundly communal and bonds players together via a shared accomplishment, which can be transformed into building an ecclesial community;
- Mobile: Gen-Z is also known as the mobile-generation. Hence, we cannot keep asking them to leave their smartphone outside, because ultimately we are asking them to leave a part of their extended self. Their developed skills of multitasking and mediated social-interaction can be tapped into as long as the “rule of three”⁵⁴ is respected.

Douglas Rushkoff observed that the screens, “are the windows through which we are experiencing, organizing and interpreting the world in which we live.”⁵⁵ His remarks spearhead us to look at gaming as *the* medium to engage Gen-Z, by reflecting on their needs, and labour to satiate these needs, even if that means forcing ourselves to shed false stereotypical ideas that gaming is anti-social and/or a waste of time.

Religion is just one mode of human expression, but also a mode of encounter which shapes us. Another complementarily expression is gaming. Gen-Z are begging us to reflect on our catechetical programs to place gaming as a central tenet of our endeavours: not merely *using* games, but ludologically transform our catechesis into a *genuine fun* experience of *playing with* the Artful Player.

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'Virtus enim laudata crescit in immensum'
**Dominican Preaching as the Art
of Compassion**

Fr Joseph Ellul OP

The title of this paper is taken from a phrase contained in Lecture Four on Chapter Ten of the *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* by Thomas Aquinas. I wish to state clearly from the outset that I will be taking this particular lecture as the starting point and basis for my presentation on the path of the preacher in his mission of proclaiming the Word of God.

The phrase quoted above (which, translated into English would read “praised virtue grows exceedingly”) is to be taken within the context **not only of the *Epistle* itself but also of the exposition of the commentator**. The motto is not original with Thomas. It is already to be found in Ovid who, writing his *Epistulae ex Ponto* from his place of exile in Scythia Minor (on the shores of the Black Sea), to which he had been banished on orders from Augustus Caesar, at one point complains that, in spite of his eulogy to oratory, he has no audience to whom he could recite his works.¹ As one may imagine, Thomas was, of course applying his version of the phrase in a far different context.

The Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews

The *Epistle to the Hebrews* is generally placed at the end of the Pauline Corpus, although it is now widely accepted among scholars that Paul was in no way its author. What is important for the purpose of this paper is that most Biblical scholars agree that this *Epistle* is written in the form of a homily, and that its author was a preacher.²

As to the *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* by Thomas Aquinas, the work itself is a series of “*lecturae*,” that is to say it consists of **a series of notes taken during his lectures** by his close confidante

and long-time secretary Reginald of Piperno. Jean-Pierre Torrell suggests that this series of lectures took place at the *studium* at Santa Sabina (Rome) between the years 1265 and 1268, prior to his return to Paris in order to once again take up his office as Regent Master of Theology.³

The intention of Thomas is twofold in that he wishes to highlight **first** the excellence of Christ (lectures on chs 1-10) **and then** of faith (lectures on chs 11-13). Chapter 10 of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* marks the point of transition from stressing the excellence of the priesthood of Christ to emphasizing the excellence of faith.

Here one has to keep in mind that Aquinas took Paul to be the author of the *Epistle*⁴ even if, as I have already stated, modern scholarship has all but discarded this claim. For reasons of coherence, however, **I will follow Thomas' language and assumptions throughout this presentation.**

Aquinas takes as the point of departure of his entire commentary Psalm 85:8 [in Vulgate]: *There is none among the gods like unto Thee, O Lord: and there is none according to Thy works.*⁵ In what follows he first will argue Christ's superior excellence according to his nature (*There is none among the gods like unto Thee, O Lord*) and then the superior effects of his excellence (*and there is none according to Thy works*). There are many that can be called gods, like angels because of their splendour (but Christ's splendour is greater); or who have received the word, like priests and prophets (but Christ is according to substance the very word of God); or who are ministers, like priests (but Christ is not minister but Lord).

The excellence of Christ is also made manifest through its effects and this in a threefold manner; **first** it extends to "the work of creation, **secondly**, "it reaches only to rational creatures, who are illumined by Christ", and **thirdly**, it is "the work of justification, which pertains only to the saints, who through him and through his life-giving grace are vivified and justified".⁶

As for the praise of faith, Aquinas suggests that this is undertaken by the Apostle in three ways: "**first**, he describes faith ("Now faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the argument of things that appear not"⁷); **second**, he posits diverse examples of faith ("For by this the ancients obtained a testimony"⁸) **third**, he encourages those things which

are of faith” (“And therefore we also having a great cloud of witnesses over our head, laying aside every weight and sin which surrounds us, let us run by patience to the fight proposed to us.”⁹)¹⁰

Lecture Four of Chapter Ten of the Commentary

In *Lecture Three* on Chapter 10, Thomas had already referred to that part of the *Epistle* wherein the Apostle had warned of **the dire consequences** awaiting those who, after having embraced the faith, turn their backs on it. Following the Apostle’s admonition, he argues that if a terrible destiny had awaited those **who made void** the Mosaic Law, how much greater would be the punishment meted upon those who transgressed “the new testament, which shall be shed for many”¹¹ For Aquinas “void” means “that which does not receive its true end” given that, instead of leading a life of virtue, one turns toward vices.¹²

Now, in *Lecture Four* Thomas portrays the Apostle **as softening his harsh admonition and consoling his audience** by recalling the steadfastness and joy by which they had borne the trials and tribulations following their conversion to Christ and praising their charity and solidarity with those who suffered for having embraced the faith:

536. Above the Apostle admonished them to adhere to Christ by faith, hope and charity, for which he brought in reasons to terrify them [n. 514], and here he gives soothing reasons, just as a doctor will apply a soothing balm after he operates. For of all things a commendation for deeds well done is the one thing which most provokes the continuation of a good already begun. Indeed, praised virtue grows exceedingly; it is a great and heavy spur to glory.

He does two things about this: first he remembers those good things they had done; second, he exhorts them to complete what remains to be done when he says [n. 541], **Do not therefore lose your confidence**. He does three things about the first: first, he remembers in general what tribulations they suffered for the faith; second, he describes the manners of tribulations when he says [n. 538], **And on the other [hand]**; third, he explains these things specifically when he says [n. 539], **For you both had compassion**.

This passage encapsulates **the mission of the Preacher of the Word**. He is called to *admonish*, to *console*, and to *praise*, thereby becoming a model of conduct for those who receive it.

In this perspective, just as Thomas applied *The Epistle to the Hebrews* as a model for right preaching, so will I propose to apply **his** reflections as a model as to how the preacher should accept his mission and give it solidity in both his inner life and conduct.

Preaching the Gospel

The Gospel is essentially *the story of the Cross*. Consequently, the power of God is revealed **through the Gospel** and **salvation becomes a reality for all those who believe**. This very salvation is granted to us by the grace of preaching Christ crucified who, for those who are called is, “the **power** of God and the **wisdom** of God.”¹³ In late Second Temple literature **Wisdom** is portrayed as “an unfailing treasure for men; those who get it obtain friendship with God, commended for the gifts that come from instruction.”¹⁴

On this matter Thomas writes that, “To regulate human life according to divine norms **is in fact the work of wisdom**, and the first indications of this ought to be **reverence for God and subjection to him**, with the consequence that **in all things whatsoever a person will shape his life in reference to God**”.¹⁵ Therefore, the preacher must **seek and pray** for wisdom in order to “discourse **with** God and **about** God”¹⁶ for, as Thomas states elsewhere, “the office of the gift of wisdom is **not only to contemplate divine realities but also to regulate human action**.”¹⁷

Jesus Christ entrusted the grace of preaching to the Apostles when, in his last glorious appearance on this earth he admonished them with the words: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.”¹⁸ For this reason the duty of the one who is sent out to preach is that of fulfilling the Word of God that he has heard and received **by proclaiming it and living out its demands**.

Throughout the history of salvation, whenever God entrusts somebody with a particular mission, especially if it is a mission to preach, he accompanies his command with the words: “Fear not, for I am with

you.” Such was the experience of the People of God and it was lived out by the Prophets in the First Covenant.¹⁹ The assurance was contained in Jesus’s parting words to his disciples: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age”;²⁰ it was also the experience of Paul in Corinth in the face of growing opposition and persecution: “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city”.²¹

The mission of preaching, is one that demands courage. Even this is a grace from God because it is God who brings the purpose of preaching to its fulfilment through the witness of a holy life. For this reason, Paul declares to the Philippians: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.”²²

But what do we mean when we refer to “the grace of preaching”? It is both **a gift** and **a calling** that is lived out by those in whom and through whom the Spirit of God speaks out; by those to whom Jesus said: “It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”²³ In his First Epistle to Timothy Paul reminds his disciple that the preacher of the Word has received a gift that an ordinary messenger does not possess: “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given to you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you”.²⁴ Thus it is not a question of oratorical skill, but rather of preaching by the authority invested in him by the Spirit of God. This grace (*charisma*) is bestowed for the purpose of **edifying the Church** and for **the service of the people**.²⁵ This means that the preacher is chosen from among the people, but this gift cannot find its fulfilment unless the preacher has encountered Jesus Christ in his life. Therefore, although the message of the preacher is not his, it flows from his assent of faith to the calling of God.

At this point one may ask: **How can I preach to others, when I am all too conscious of my own weakness and sinfulness?** This was the very question put forward by Isaiah as he stood before God, contemplating his glory: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips!”²⁶ Jeremiah, on the other hand, protests that he was too young.²⁷ The answer is to be found in the truth that **the power of the word of the preacher lies in the very power of God**. The courage of his words comes from

the fullness of the divine presence in his life. The grace of God is the essence of his vocation. It is no small wonder that Paul could boast to the Corinthians regarding his vocation when he wrote: “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.”²⁸ In a similar vein, he praises the Thessalonians for having received the Word “not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.”²⁹ Let us now reflect upon those three essential elements of the **mission** of the preacher in the light of Aquinas’ indications.

To Admonish

In his Second Epistle to Timothy, Paul advises his beloved disciple to “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching”.³⁰ **The preacher, like the prophet, is an uncomfortable person.** He is uncomfortable to himself, and uncomfortable in relation to others. He is **uncomfortable to himself** given that he is constantly aware of the mission entrusted to him by God and yet he is all too conscious of his own sinfulness and human failings. This implies above all a constant and thorough self-examination on the part of the preacher in order to ensure that his way of life is coherent with the content of the Gospel that he preaches.

Many times, such a calling is overwhelming. In commenting on Ezek. 3:17, “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me”, Gregory the Great (d. 604) admits his shortcomings in relation to the responsibility that had been placed upon his shoulders as Bishop of Rome – and therefore as Pope – when he states:

Note that a man whom the Lord sends forth as a preacher is called a watchman. A watchman always stands on a height so that he can see from afar what is coming. Anyone appointed to be a watchman for the people must stand on a height for all his life to help them by his foresight.

How hard it is for me to say this, for by these very words I denounce myself. I cannot preach with any competence, and yet insofar as I do succeed, still I myself do not live my life according to my own preaching.

I do not deny my responsibility; I recognize that I am slothful and negligent, but perhaps the acknowledgment of my fault will win me pardon from my just judge.³¹

Like the prophet before him, **the preacher is also uncomfortable to others** because part of the mission entrusted to him by God is taken up by admonition and a call to repentance and conversion. The preacher, on behalf of God and through the Church proclaims the clear and unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ, “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands”,³² so that believing we may have life in his name.³³ This same Gospel must either be accepted or rejected **as it stands** and not because it has advantageous or disadvantageous offers to prospective customers. Like the prophets before him, **the preacher is the conscience of the people** to whom he is sent to proclaim God’s message. The message itself is clear, urgent, and uncompromising.

This perception rings true in our day perhaps more than ever before. The Gospel message cannot be equated with the marketing policy of some multinational company. It cannot be considered in the same way as some product that is put on the market and then withdrawn when sales take a nose-dive. Nor can it be considered a competitor among others in the “market of ideas”. It is not a question of “adapt or face extinction”.

The preacher has a message to proclaim, and that message is Jesus Christ, his teachings and his deeds. The way the message is *communicated* needs to develop according to time, place, circumstances and cultures; but the *content* remains unchanged. The Gospel attracts most attention not when it is portrayed as accommodating but when it is more *challenging*. A religion that demands much from its adherents offers multiple challenges; a religion that seeks to accommodate does not. A religion that is accommodating is not worth bearing witness *to*, let alone dying *for*.

To Console

Quoting Augustine, Aquinas describes mercy as “heartfelt compassion for another’s misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him”.³⁴ “Indeed,” he continues, “the Latin word for mercy,

misericordia, comes from one's heart being miserable (*miserum cor*), at the sight of another's distress."³⁵

Here, perhaps, Thomas was reflecting on **the life and mission of Dominic**, the founder of the Order of Preachers, who took the virtue of mercy to heart. His preaching went well beyond mere words. He sought to speak to the hearts of those whom he encountered. He wished to listen to their joys and their sorrows, the fears and the hopes that they harboured. And this attitude maintains its relevance for us today. For, do we not often find that **the rejection of the Christian faith is not so much a cry of anger as it is a wail of anguish coming from a heart full of pain and sorrow?**

The virtue of compassion, together with the celebration of the Eucharist and the practice of prayer and meditation on the Word of God, nurtured Dominic's faith. He was not a man who was detached from the realities of daily life. While contemplating the word of God he was able to address the problems of the society in which he lived, and he showed great responsibility in putting to good use the grace that was given to him for the benefit of those who were entrusted to his care.

It was not enough for Dominic to seek those who went astray and bring them back to the fold. He also sought to lift them from their sorrows and sense of hopelessness. Like Paul before him, he could well affirm that God "comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."³⁶ **He knew how to fill them with courage. He knew how to show them that they had a purpose in life – holiness – and that they had to strive for it with a deep sense of responsibility convinced that God was with them.**

Humbert of Romans (d. 1277), the fourth successor of Dominic at the helm of the Order and a contemporary of Aquinas, advises preachers "not to speak of sins of men as we speak of the benefits of God. We should speak with compassion of sin, for the subject of sin is sad."³⁷ Among those conditions that he sets out in order to determine whether a preacher is leading a good and holy life among the trials and tribulations of this world, Humbert mentions "tenderness and compassion; for nothing is more consoling to the sufferer than sympathy".³⁸ He even **admonishes**

those preachers who shun worldly affairs to the extent that they refuse not only **the material care** of their neighbour but also, perhaps more importantly, **their spiritual welfare** for which they had undertaken the office of preaching. He likens them to “the ostrich which does not take care of its young. Their conduct does not conform to the example set by Our Lord. For Jesus had such compassion for the crowd that came to hear Him that He miraculously provided food for them in the desert so that they might not faint from hunger on the way home”.³⁹

Humbert’s exhortation is corroborated by another Dominican, Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419) who sounds a word of caution at the attitude and the means that the preacher should adopt in order to reap fruits of conversion and a more holy life:

In sermons and talks, use simple language and a homely conversational style to explain each particular point. As far as you can, give plenty of examples; then, whoever has committed that particular sin will have his conscience pricked, as though you were preaching to him alone. But it must be done in such a way that your words do not appear to come from a soul full of pride or scorn. Speak rather out of the depths of love and fatherly care, like a father suffering for his sinful children, as if they were gravely ill, or trapped in a deep pit, whom he is trying to draw out and set free, and look after like a mother. You must be like one who delights in their progress, and in the glory in heaven that they are hoping for.⁴⁰

The Gospel opens our eyes and our ears and places us at the heart of the drama of human life. God entered this drama by becoming himself a human being in Jesus Christ. Our sufferings have become his: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree ... By his wounds you have been healed”.⁴¹

The General Chapter of our Order celebrated in Bologna three years ago has highlighted the fact that “the ministry of the Word is, in fact, an act of charity, mercy and generosity that drives us to share our greatest treasure, the Word made flesh”.⁴² The content of our preaching must therefore be faithful to the Word of God that we contemplate and must address the sufferings of our present society.

On November 25, 2014, while addressing the European Parliament, Pope Francis spoke of a Europe that “seems to give the impression of being somewhat elderly and haggard, feeling less and less a protagonist in a world which frequently regards it with aloofness, mistrust and even, at times, suspicion”.⁴³ This is the same Europe of which we form part: a somewhat tired continent that is becoming increasingly egotistic and inward-looking, divorced from reality and frequently looking at the future in strictly economic terms. This attitude is also becoming a common feature in our country. The Word of God that we as preachers are called upon to expound is a message of hope in the future that remains alive on condition that we do not lose our Christian identity.

It is precisely this Christian presence that leads us to realize that the human being is not a statistical note, but is cast in the image of God and redeemed by Christ. We are called upon to be primary witnesses of the glory that awaits all those who belong to Christ, “because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal”.⁴⁴

To Praise

Praise, of course begins with praise of God and constant dialogue with him in prayer and contemplation. Among the many things that such dialogue holds in store for us is *a legacy of wonder*. We must avoid falling into the trap of believing that **everything can be explained**, that reality is a simple affair which needs only to be organized in order to be mastered, that **all enigmas can be solved**, and all wonder is nothing but “the effect of novelty upon ignorance.”⁴⁵

Modern thought knows its roots to the famous statement of the philosopher Descartes: “I think, therefore I am”. The believer, standing before God, can only utter in awe the words of Nicolas of Cusa (d. 1464): “Your Being, O Lord, does not forsake my being, for I exist insofar as You are with me. And since Your seeing is Your Being, I exist because you look upon me”.⁴⁶ It is incumbent upon the preacher to **discern God’s action in the world and to bear witness to it** in his own struggles with the harsh realities of everyday life and in the way he communicates the Word of God. This can only take place through study. Our Order

has always embraced the maxim that the one who studies well prays well, and the one who prays well studies well. True dialogue requires dialogue with God as its point of departure; what Augustine referred to as *orent ut intellegant*.⁴⁷

In this way study becomes truly a challenge to pursue the truth wherever that will take you. It is an act of love toward God and toward our fellow human beings.⁴⁸ It is through such an act that study becomes, in the words of Thomas Aquinas which have become a guiding principle of our Order, *Contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*.⁴⁹

Following the advice of Gregory the Great, Humbert of Romans counsels the preacher to preach:

humility to the proud without awakening in the timid a pusillanimous fear; the desirability of goods to the lazy without arousing undue desires in the dissipated; calm to those who are overly active without condoning the torpor of the inactive; patience to the hot-headed without encouraging the carelessness of men already thoughtless and lax; zeal to those who are gentle and patient without provoking the violent to anger; generosity to the avaricious without loosening the reins of the spendthrifts; reason in the lavishness of the extravagant without inspiring in the thrifty an excessive attachment to the goods of the earth; the esteem of their conjugal duty to the married without having the married disregard the object of marriage. In a word, he must preach good works, without seeming to sanction the contrary vices; praise the perfect without discouraging the less perfect, and encourage the latter to advance in virtue and not to be satisfied with their present imperfect state.⁵⁰

The preacher being all too aware of his own human weakness, is called upon to encourage those who struggle with their faith by praising their efforts to live the Word of God in their daily lives **as individuals** and **as families**. After all, as priests, religious, those living a consecrated life, and laypeople, we are embarking on the same pilgrimage that will ultimately lead us to “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of

the fullness of Christ”.⁵¹ In this regard the Catholic laity, and especially the Catholic *intelligentsia*, must be nurtured, encouraged and supported, especially when they courageously voice their concerns as Catholics on matters of legislation and public policy and are at times subjected to a torrent of abuse for taking their stand on the recent moral and political issues. Within the next few years they will have to take upon themselves a more direct role in the public forum. This calls not only for an authentic witness but also for a solid formation in the light of the Gospel.

Today we speak of “new evangelization” within the context of an increasingly secularized society; however, this must proceed hand in hand with dialogue with other Christian denominations as well as with non-Christian communities. Ecumenical and interreligious encounters will always remain **the best way of witnessing to one’s faith as well as deepening one’s understanding and appreciation of another’s**. It must also extend to dialogue within “the courtyard of the Gentiles”. This demands a reasoned debate which entails both “*veritas in caritate*” (truth in charity) as well as “*caritas in veritate*” (charity in truth).

Conclusion

What lessons may we who are living in this second decade of the twenty-first century now draw from all that has been said? Last year we Dominicans ended our celebrations marking eight hundred years since the foundation of the Order of Preachers. Are we prepared to take up the challenge of the Gospel throughout this century and into the next? Again, we would do well to heed the words of Gregory the Great:

Pray for us so that we may have the strength to work on your behalf, that our tongue may not grow weary of exhortation, and that after we have accepted the office of preaching, our silence may not condemn us before the just judge. For frequently the preacher’s tongue is bound fast on account of his own wickedness; while on the other hand it sometimes happens that because of the people’s sins, the word of preaching is withdrawn from those who preside over the assembly.⁵²

Here I believe that as an Order of Preachers we are in dire need of a thorough examination of conscience.

Today's society has every right to pose uncomfortable questions to the Church. It is an essential element of that healthy tension that should exist between them. But it is no less true that this same society should be ready to hear some uncomfortable answers. The Order's mission entrusted to it by the Church is that of **proclaiming the Word**, and the content of the latter is not necessarily what one would wish to hear, nor is it always music to our ears. A quote once attributed to George Orwell says: **In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.**

Rather, should it not be the case that the ideal, charism, and mission of Dominic and the exhortation of Thomas enlighten our mission as preachers just as it did during their lifetimes? We cannot afford to rest upon our laurels. As preachers we are required to witness to the relevance of the Gospel at all times and in all places. We need to face the challenges posed by our modern – or post-modern, or post-truth – society with faith and courage.

What is at stake is no less than our identity and relevance as bearers of the Gospel. As in the time of Dominic, we must realize that our message must be **prophetic** and **apostolic**. In these times of crisis on all fronts, where there exists what Sir Jonathan Sacks had once described as “a God-shaped hole in our ozone layer”,⁵³ we are required to bear witness to the fact that human beings have dignity and rights and these have been given by God who cast us all in his image and who redeemed us through his Son. But these rights go hand in hand with responsibilities.

As an Order of Preachers, we are called to proclaim that men and women do not have dignity in proportion to what they produce; that the family – father, mother and children – is the natural environment in which one begins to learn the meaning of love; that small gestures can turn out to be the most beautiful and effective homilies for raising the hopes of those who are marginalized. Like Dominic our Founder and Father, and Thomas our Teacher we have all been called to receive and live the grace of preaching.

Notes

1. “Excitat auditor studium laudataque virtus crescit, et immensum gloria calcar habet” (“A hearer rouses zeal, excellence increases with praise, and renown possesses a mighty spur”). Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*. IV. ii. 35 sq. https://archive.org/stream/ovidtristiaexpon011949mbp/ovidtristiaexpon011949mbp_djvu.txt
2. Albert Vanhoye, SJ, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A New Commentary* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015) p. 2. See Heb. 13:17.
3. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, volume I, *The Person and His Work* (Revised Edition), translated by Robert Royal (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 255.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, translated and edited by Chrysostom Baer O. Praem, preface by Ralph McInerny (South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine’s Press, 2006), Prologue, p. 7.
 In the Prologue to his Commentary Aquinas addresses the issue of the authorship of the Epistle. He first mentions the doubts raised concerning its attribution to Paul. The first argument is that “it is not written in the same way as the other epistles, for he did not write a greeting, nor did he give his name”. the second argument is that “this epistle does not savour of the style of the other epistles; rather, it has a more elegant style, nor is there another writing which proceeds in this order of words and arguments as this does”. To these arguments he replies systematically by arguing that “there is a threefold reason why he did not give his name. The first is that he was not the Apostle of the Jews but of the Gentiles (...). The second is that his name was odious to the Jews since he said that the observances of the Law were not to be kept (...). The third is that he was a Jew (...). And the members of one’s household do not suffer well the excellence of one of their own”. Concerning the argument from style, Aquinas replies that the *Epistle* “is more elegant in style because, even if he knew every language (...), nevertheless he knew Hebrew better, as it was more connatural to him, and he wrote this Epistle in Hebrew. Thus, he could speak more ornately in his own native tongue than in another”.
5. For Scriptural quotations in this work of Thomas I have relied on the Douay-Rheims version, which is in the main faithful to the Vulgate that he used as a biblical source.
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Prologue, pp. 5-6.
7. Heb. 11:1.
8. Heb. 11:2.

9. Heb. 12:1
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Chapter Eleven, Lecture One, p. 227.
11. Mt. 26:28.
12. Lecture Three, n. 520.
13. 1 Cor. 1:24. From this point onward, all quotes are taken from *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
14. Wis. 7:13-14.
15. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, IIa IIæ, q. 19, art. 7, resp. Volume 33, Hope, Latin text, English translation, Notes, Appendices & Glossary by W. J. Hill (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1966).
16. In the *Primitive Constitutions* of the Order of Preachers (Dist. II, c. 31) the early Dominicans were exhorted to be 'like men of the Gospel, following in the footsteps of their Saviour, talking either with God or about God' (*cum Deo, vel de Deo*).
17. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, IIa IIæ, q. 45, art. 6, resp. Volume 35, Consequences of Charity, Latin text, English translation, Notes, Appendices & Glossary by Thomas R. Heath (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1972). See also IIa IIæ, q. 45, art 3.
18. Mk. 16:15.
19. See Is. 43:5. See also Is. 41:10; Jer. 1:7-8.
20. Mt. 28:20.
21. See Acts 18:9-10.
22. Phil. 4:13.
23. Mt. 10:20.
24. 1 Tim. 4:14.
25. See Acts 13:2.
26. Is. 6:5.
27. Jeremiah receives the most expressions of such assurance of all the prophets: 1:8, 1:19, 15:20, 30:11, 42:11, 46:28.
28. 1 Cor. 15:10.
29. 1Thess. 2:13.
30. 2 Tim 4:2.
31. Gregory the Great, *Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, Hom. 17:3 <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/bishop-as-watchman/>
32. 1 Jn 1:1.
33. See Jn 20:31.
34. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, IX:5; PL 41: 261.
35. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, IIa IIæ, q. 30, art. 1, resp. Volume 34, Charity,

- Latin text, English translation, Notes, Appendices & Glossary by R. J. Batten (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1975).
36. 2 Cor. 1:4.
 37. Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on Preaching*, translated by the Dominican Students of the Province of St Joseph, edited by Walter M. Conlon O.P. (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1951) p. 55.
 38. Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on Preaching*, p. 95.
 39. Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on Preaching*, p. 108.
 40. St Vincent Ferrer, *Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, Chapter XIII: *De modo prædicandi*.
http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010405_vincenzo-ferrer_en.html
 41. 1 Pt. 2:24.
 42. *Acts of the 2016 General Chapter of Provincials, Bologna, July 16–August 4*, n. 58.
 43. *Address of Pope Francis to the European Parliament*, Strasbourg, France, 25 November 2014:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141125_strasburgo-consiglio-europa.html
 44. 2 Cor. 4:18.
 45. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy Inc., New York 1955, p. 43.
 46. Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, I:4. See *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation and Interpretative Study of De Visione Dei* (3rd Edition) by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988), p. 685
 47. Trans. "To pray, that they may understand". Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, III, 37.56.
 48. Timothy Radcliffe, "The Wellspring of Hope: Study and the Annunciation of the Good News", in *To Praise, To Bless, to Preach: Words of Grace and Truth* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2004), pp. 349-374.
 49. Trans. "To contemplate and to hand on to others the fruit of contemplation". Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, IIa IIae, q. 188, art. 6.
 50. Humbert of Romans, *Treatise on Preaching*, p. 35; see Gregory the Great, *Pastorali*, part 3
 51. Eph. 4:13.
 52. Gregory the Great, *Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, Hom. 17:3.
 53. Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality & Society in a Secular Age* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991), pp. 26-27.

CONTRIBUTORS KNISJA 2000

Issue Number 130

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope under the name of Francis on March 11, 2013. He was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1936, and was ordained as a priest in 1969. Pope Francis is the first Jesuit and Latin American Pope in the history of the Church. He has thoroughly re-engaged the Catholic Church with the modern world, by tackling the difficult and urgent questions that we face as a civilization, in order to illuminate the path to change. His main publications as Pope are: *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), *Laudato Si'* (2015), *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) and *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018).

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