Chapter 9

The Theology of Technology

“Theology ... is searching in a dark cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn’t there.”

Robert A. Heinlein

“Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we consider another aspect of the nexus of religion and technology. This is the idea that theology can actually inform technology. We start off distinguishing the term “theology of technology” from “cybertheology.” Cybertheology still waits an adequate definition, but it is some vague notion that there is “theology” happening with technology simply because we call it such, and have a religious theme. Thus, we may find “theological” significance in the way the Internet “connects” people, as they may be “connected” in a spiritual bond, and call it “cybertheology.” However, the “theology of technology” is
concerned with “conventional theology” being applied to technology. We examine six different patterns for the way that science and theology have been related, and consider how in AI, technology and theology are related in some special ways.

One of the most obvious ways that conventional theology can be applied to technology is to provide ethical input into the moral use of technology. The moral use of technology, or the morality of scientific method, is still essentially concerned with the moral judgement of people. However, within AI, we are faced with some unique questions of the “morality” of a scientific product itself. AI engages in the task of creating machines that mimic human action; as such, it cannot escape the question of what is moral machine action. “Friendly AI” is concerned with creating intelligent machines that benefit humanity in their action. Thus, “friendly AI” is a concept that cannot really operate without ethical input. Theology is a traditional source of answers for such questions. Morality is one component of human identity. In their morality, theology tells us that human beings were created “perfect,” and after sin, this nature was corrupted. Restoration of the image can be achieved through faith in the atoning work of Christ. Thus, the “morality” of human action (and even the possibility of moral behaviour) is a profoundly theological question. The morality of machine artefacts imitating human action is no less so.

The question of human morality is intimately related to the question of human identity. Morality is a unique part of being human. A machine, which is expected to behave in a human like way, must imitate at least this aspect of human identity. For many years, human identity was understood in terms of rational, logical thought. At the start of AI, Turing was interested in the question of “whether a machine could think?” His method involved a game of “identity” in the Turing test. However, thinking is only one aspect of what it is to be human and behave in a human-like way. AI will benefit from broadening its conception of human identity; in particular, the insight that theological input can give about that identity. The biblical concept of the “image of God” (Imago Dei) has been foundational for understanding human identity. People have been understood to bear the image of God, among other things, in their moral, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, creative, and relational natures, and in the capacity for faith itself.

The objective of this chapter is to consider the “theology of technology.” We particularly aim to examine the nexus of religion
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