Artificial Intelligence, Digital Technology, and Human Dignity

How are rapid advances in technology changing our understanding of what it means to be human? How can we defend the essential dignity and rights of human beings in a world of invasive digital surveillance, disinformation, and covert manipulation?

**John Wyatt** is professor emeritus of Neonatal Paediatrics, Ethics, and Perinatology at University College London and a senior researcher at the Faraday Institute, Cambridge. His background is as a clinician and researcher in applied neuroscience. He has a long-standing interest in the ethical and social implications of advances in biomedical and information technology. He co-led a multidisciplinary research project into the social, ethical, and philosophical implications of advances in artificial intelligence and robotics technology, based at the Faraday Institute, Cambridge. His book *Matters of Life and Death:* *Human Dilemmas in the Light of the Christian Faith* has been translated into more than 10 languages.

1. **How are rapid advances in AI and digital technologies changing our understanding of what it means to be human?**

The pervasive nature of digital technologies means that they become largely invisible to us, and yet they lead to gradual changes in the way we understand our own humanity:

* 1. Humans are increasingly perceived as fundamentally mechanical and deterministic in nature.
  2. This means that covert surveillance and behavioural manipulation through technical means become obvious ways to achieve the goals of those in power. This is at the heart of ‘surveillance capitalism’
  3. Disembodied digital information is privileged compared with ‘messy’ embodied human-to human communication.
  4. As the machines become more ‘human-like’ there is a strong tendency for human beings to become more ‘machine-like’ in order to function effectively in a machine-dominated environment.
  5. There is growing evidence of serious harm to human beings resulting from digital addictions and interference with traditional processes of cognitive, emotional and relational development.
  6. The ultimate goal of technology is perceived as being to satisfy our consumerist desires, whatever they are, and to make our lives ‘frictionless’ and free from effort. All forms of struggle, difficulty, resistance and frustration are regarded as negative and to be avoided wherever possible.
  7. The end result is that digital technologies may be inadvertently creating a future in which it will be increasingly hard for embodied human beings to flourish.

1. **How can we defend the essential dignity and rights of human beings in a world of invasive digital surveillance, disinformation, and covert manipulation?**
   1. Maintaining appropriate confidentiality about intimate and sensitive personal information is an essential part of protecting human dignity and vulnerability in a fallen world.
   2. Our primary responsibility is to protect those who are most vulnerable to manipulation and abuse through digital surveillance and manipulation. Who are the ‘widows, orphans and immigrants’?
   3. The orthodox Trinitarian understanding of the centrality of embodied human nature which is authenticated and redeemed in the person of Jesus Christ, has new resonance and relevance in the face of disembodied technology.
2. **In order to establish resistance and resilience to the malign effects of invasive surveillance we need a multi-pronged approach including:**
   1. Educating and informing Christian leaders and communities about the realities and threats of surveillance, both state-sponsored and commercially motivated.
   2. Working with secular organisations who are committed to protecting and defending human rights and protections against digital surveillance and manipulation.
   3. Developing ‘harm minimisation’ techniques to counter the effects of addictive technologies, behaviour manipulation, disinformation and cognitive overload.
   4. Encouraging the development of traditional spiritual disciplines as a way of encouraging growth in godly living and countering the malign effects of excessive technology use.

**Further resources**

*The Robot Will See You Now: AI and the Christian faith* ed. John Wyatt and Stephen Williams, SPCK July 2021

*Masters or Slaves? AI and The Future of Humanity* Jeremy Peckham, IVP

*The Robots Are Coming: Us, Them and God* Nigel Cameron, CARE

**Websites**

johnwyatt.com

tech-human.squarespace.com

profjwyatt@gmail.com