

2018 Southern Conference

Being Human in an Age of Machines

Abstracts

Prof John Wyatt – What it means to be human

As technology advances it raises new and complex challenges to the question of the meaning and significance of humanity. Artificial intelligence and robotics are changing the nature of our world, our society and the way we interact as humans. Enhancement technology offers the possibility of improving and augmenting human capabilities. How will this change our understanding of what it means to be human and our human role in the cosmos?

On the one hand there is a psychological movement from the machine to the human. We increasingly understand ourselves as complex machines which can be moulded and adapted according to our desires. On the other hand there is a psychological movement from the human to the machine – we understand machines as though they were human-like beings.

From a Christian perspective human beings are personal in a way that an intelligent machine cannot be. An *I-you* relationship will always be different from an *I-it* relationship. Machines are created by humans, they are fundamentally different from us and they are therefore ours to control. Our human children are different from machines because they are a gift from our nature, our being and they share the same human nature. They are persons who are equal to us in dignity.

Advances in the simulation of human-like responses will tend to blur the conceptual distinction between *I-you* and *I-it* relationships. The challenge we face is to maintain *openness* to the opportunities of advanced enhancement technology, AI and robotics whilst developing *resistance* and *resilience* against the dehumanising and manipulative forces that may be unleashed.

Prof Peter Robinson

Machines in the image of man

The importance of emotional expression as part of human communication has been understood since the seventeenth century, and has been explored scientifically since Charles Darwin and others in the nineteenth century.

Recent advances in Psychology have greatly improved our understanding of the role of affect in communication, perception, decision-making, attention and memory. At the same time, advances in technology mean that it is becoming possible for machines to sense, analyse and express emotions.

We can now consider how these advances relate to each other and how they affect the relationship between people and machines.

Rev Dr Justin Tomkins

Living with aspiration in an age of Human Enhancement

One aspect of living in an age of machines involves the impact of technology on medicine and health care. As we enjoy the benefits of new medical treatments and possibilities, we live amongst the dreams of those who seek to use medicine not just to heal the sick, but to enhance the healthy.

What does it mean to be human amongst visions of radical life extension, of genetically enhanced children, and of uploading ourselves onto a computer system? How does Christian faith illuminate such questions?

Justin Tomkins will seek to open up the area of Human Enhancement with a view to exploring what it means to live with aspiration as humans in the context of these various visions of 'becoming better'.