

Being Human . .

Phil Jump questions the philosophy behind Artificial Intelligence

It is a sobering reality to discover that there are pupils now doing for computer studies GCSE, the sort of things that I was doing in the early days of my post-graduate career. At the time, I was being heralded as cutting edge, highly skilled and consequently able to occupy quite a senior position. As I reflect on how things have changed, I remember my physics teacher telling me during a lab session in my own school days “you do realise that Faraday would have got a Nobel Prize for doing this?” Such I guess is the pace of technology.

It is also being recognised that the development of technology, more than just about anything else, is likely to affect the nature and scope of work in the years ahead. Less than 20 years ago office blocks were being described as useless because they did not have the floor ducting to cope with the ubiquitous cabling that was required for the “VDU” revolution. Now with the advent of WIFI, people are wondering why they bothered making all the changes! With data now kept in “clouds” we can perform many once “office bound” tasks in coffee shops, supermarkets and even on the train home.

But such advancements have now reached a whole new scale with the advent of robotics and virtual learning. What was once the stuff of Sci-Fi movies is now well within our grasp, with reports of devices that can replace chefs, care workers and even taxi drivers! Technology will no

longer simply change the way we work – it threatens to replace us! A key factor behind the latest advances is that machines are no longer simply being programmed to do what we ask, but with Artificial Intelligence are learning things for themselves.


Such advances are worth celebrating, but along with them, questions are being asked about what it is that then makes us human. If machines can think, learn, move and interact, is there any aspect of our humanity that is beyond replication? What is left that makes us unique, or from a Christian point of view that defines us as made in the image of God? Is this the latest frontier on which the values of our faith will be assaulted?

Yet as I reflect on these present realities, I wonder whether in fact it provides an opportunity to re-assert those key faith-work narratives that publications like this one are so keen to promote. Much of the “robotic replacement” agenda seems to be founded on two key premises. The first is that a job consists of nothing more than the function it is designed to fulfil, and the second is that our key aim is to perform such tasks simply to generate wealth.

Sure, we may be able to educate a child by sitting them in front of a screen all day, imparting knowledge to them at a rate uniquely customised to their needs and abilities. Indeed, there is immense logic for doing so, provided the only

purpose of our education system is to achieve the highest possible academic results with as little as possible financial burden on the taxpayer. But real education is so much more than that: it is about discovering identity, learning to express oneself, learning from struggle as well as success; and developing the social skills of interacting with other human beings, including the ability to put up with a learning process that takes account of the capacities and abilities of others!

I would want to argue that this is just one small example of how any task can be too easily demeaned by pragmatics and economics alone. Work is so much more than performing a function or generating a profit. It is a social experience, an opportunity to combine our skills and aspirations in collective endeavour with others – machines and robots may have their place in that, but they can never feel a sense of achievement or indeed the frustration and struggle of a task that stretches and challenges us.

As it becomes more and more possible to do almost anything cheaply, effortlessly and thoughtlessly, might we rediscover some of the other reasons that human beings gather to work together? What role does the faith community have in articulating those reasons and reclaiming work as an opportunity for human fulfilment? 



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