

THL 3790
Technology and the Human Person

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SAC 244

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Tuesday: 4:30 p.m. – 6:50 p.m.

Driscoll 227

Office Hours: Wednesday 5:00 – 6:00 p.m.,
or By Appointment

Description

We live in an information age where technology and human life have become seamlessly interactive. How did we arrive at a level of technological dependence? Where are we going with our technologies? This course aims to explore the impact of information technology on human personhood and community. We will first look at the meaning of human personhood from the perspectives of spirituality, philosophy and culture and then examine personhood and community in light of social media, robotics and new trends in artificial intelligence. Our discussions will be oriented around the questions: What is the human person? What do we hope for as persons and as community? Can technology help us create a more unified world?

Goal 1

Gain an understanding of the purposes, central issues, and methods of inquiry standard in theological and religious studies as applied to faith engaging culture.

Objective A

Analyze fundamental issues that frame theological and religious inquiry using appropriate scholarly methods, with attention to diversity and inclusion within the issues.

Objective B

Use critical methods to read, analyze, and interpret diverse religious and theological texts (e.g., women, minorities, non-western) and related genres or media, art, and artifacts (e.g., prayer, mystical writings, autobiographies, film, music).

Goal 2

Engage Christianity, with attention to Roman Catholicism, as a living tradition of practices and beliefs that continues to be refined, developed, and extended through time in diverse cultural contexts.

Objective A

Demonstrate understanding of the unique vocabulary, foundational sources, theological beliefs, historical developments, and diverse thinkers in the Christian tradition, with attention to those that reflect on the experiences of power, privilege, and marginalization.

Objective B

Articulate how Christian practices and beliefs reciprocally interact with diverse cultural contexts, local and global.

Goal 3

Render theological concepts and religious practices and beliefs intelligible, meaningful, and relevant in contemporary cultural contexts as a basis for transformative action in the world, in dialogue with others.

Objective A

Recognize the complexity and diversity of religious practices and beliefs and seek to understand people whose values and senses of the sacred differ from their own.

Objective B

Evaluate the relevance of theology/religion for personal, communal, societal, and global living.

We will aim to meet the first three goals by striving for the following objectives in this course:

- To appreciate the relationship between technology and spirituality
- To examine how technology is impacting development of the human person
- To examine the relationship between technology and the evolution of culture
- To appreciate recent trends in transhumanism and posthumanism
- To assess the role of the human person in evolution
- To see how technology and religion must work together for an integral world

Required Texts

Max More and Natasha Vita-More, *The Transhumanist Reader* (Wiley & Sons, 2013).

ISBN-10: 1118334310 (available online)

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). **ISBN-10: 0465031463**

All readings, outside required texts, will be posted on Blackboard documents.

Assignments

- 1) **Class participation.** Discussion is encouraged as an integral part of the learning process. The pedagogical method of this course is a combination of lecture and dialogue. The breath of maturity and experience that students bring to the classroom can provide for meaningful discussion, and students are encouraged to relate the subject matter to their own experience.
- 2) **Position papers.** Throughout the semester, you will be required to submit a short essay that addresses the question at hand with a cogent, thoughtful response based on the readings and/or movie. *Unless stated otherwise*, the short paper is to be **one page in length, single-spaced, 12 pt. font (times roman)** and submitted on the day the question is posted, at the conclusion of the class. Please check the course syllabus each week to see the question for the position paper.
- 3) **Presentations.** Presentations will be based on group discussion. Details will be provided in class.
- 4) **Final project/paper.** The Final paper is one that integrates technology and human personhood in a thoughtful, creative and insightful manner. The paper will be based on a question or posed based on the course readings and discussions. Details will follow in class, following the spring break.

Course Requirements and Grading

Active and Engaged Class Participation: Because theology is a discipline of communal reflection on belief and lived experience, it is essential that students prepare according to the course calendar below in order to offer an informed contribution in class. This includes taking notes and jotting down thoughts and questions for clarification and discussion as you read. It is also essential that students bring daily readings to class. If these readings are taken from Blackboard, be sure to have a copy with you in class. Students will express their familiarly and critical engagement with the readings in:

Grading

Class participation	15%
Weekly papers	20%
Class Presentations	25%
Final project	40%

No cell phones permitted in class

Excused absences:

In certain circumstances, absences may be excused. These include:

- **Absence for religious observances:** Students must notify their professors in writing at the beginning of the semester of religious observances that conflict with classes. Students who cannot be accommodated should discuss the matter with a dean.
- **Absence for athletic travel:** Student-athletes must provide their professors with a travel letter at the beginning of the semester which highlights potential absences. Students who cannot be accommodated for some or all absences should discuss the matter with the relevant Academic Coordinator for Student-Athletes.
- **Absence for documented illness:** Students who miss multiple classes due to prolonged illness should seek medical care and provide documentation of such to the Dean's Office, which will communicate with the student's professors. A prolonged absence may necessitate the student's withdrawal from the course or from the University for the semester.
- **At the discretion of the professor:** There may be cases where an absence is undocumented but is, nevertheless, excused by the professor (e.g., absence due to a death in the family). Students should initiate a conversation with their professors about the nature and duration of the absence, in advance of the absence whenever possible. Students who anticipate missing multiple classes should inform the Dean's Office.

When absences are excused, students remain responsible for all assigned work, and shall be provided with the opportunity to make up, without penalty, any work that they have missed.

- grammatical and/or spelling errors

Course Expectations and Policies

Attendance Policy: Because of the expectation of student participation, attendance is a requirement. If for serious reasons a student is going to be absent, it is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor of the reason for absence. According to University policy, a first-year student will receive a failing grade whenever the number of unexcused absences in a course exceeds twice the number of weekly class meetings for the course. For this class, *all* students are subject to this policy. Five *unexcused* absences will result in the grade of "F" for the entire course. Four *unexcused* absences will result in a reduction of one full letter grade for the course. Exceptions will be made only in extraordinary circumstances.

It is each student's responsibility to keep track of his/her attendance status and to communicate with the instructor concerning any questions or possible misunderstanding. Even in the case of *excused* absences, it is the student's responsibility to know what was missed and to be prepared for the following class. Consult the Office of the VPAA for procedure on excusable absences:

<http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/vpaa/studentservices/policies/attendance.html>

Class Decorum:

- Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class session. Habitual lateness is disruptive to both the professor and classmates. Please make every effort to be on time.
- Laptop and tablet devices are permitted in class with prior approval of the professor.
- Cell phones must be turned off prior to the start of class. Text messaging is not permitted during class; the student's participation grade will be lowered for any failure to comply.
- No eating or drinking during class.
- Above all, mutual respect among students and toward the professor, and from the professor toward students, is to be observed at all times.

Academic Integrity: It is the student's responsibility to be familiar with and abide by the University's policies on academic integrity (<http://library.villanova.edu/Help/AcademicIntegrity>). Plagiarism of any kind is not tolerated in the University or this class. Words or ideas that are not your own must be cited according to the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition. If a student is found to be plagiarizing or cheating, including unsanctioned collaboration on out-of-class assignments, a failing grade will result for the assignment in question. As honesty is a central quality of personal integrity, please adhere strictly to this policy.

Special Needs and Accommodations: Students with disabilities who require reasonable academic accommodations should schedule an appointment to discuss specifics with me. It is the policy of Villanova to make reasonable academic accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. You must present verification and register with the Learning Support Office by contacting 610-519-5176 or at learning.support.services@villanova.edu or for physical access or temporary disabling conditions, please contact the Office of Disability Services at 610-519-4095.

Course Schedule

(Note: All readings are on Blackboard unless it is a required book)

Jan. 14 Introduction: Are We Becoming Extinct?

Read: Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>

Bill Joy, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us"

<https://www.cc.gatech.edu/computing/nano/documents/Joy%20-%20Why%20the%20Future%20Doesn't%20Need%20Us.pdf>

Class Assignment (in class): *What is your current view on technology?
Do you think technology is changing who we are?*

Jan. 21 Religion and Technology

Read: David Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, pp. 1 - 67.

Brett Robinson, Excerpt From *Appletopia*, 1-24.

<https://secondnaturejournal.com/the-new-cathedrals-an-excerpt-from-appletopia/>

Yuval Harari, “Salvation by algorithm: God, technology and the new 21st-century religions,” *New Statesman* (Sept. 9, 2016).

Position Paper Due: *What are three points the authors make with regard to religion and technology?*

Jan 28 **What is the Human Person?**

Read: Philip Hefner, “Technology and Human Becoming,” 655 – 665.

Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, pp. 1 – 34.

Charlotte Tomaino, “The Brain and Change: By Choice or By Chance?” in *Awakening the Brain*, pp. 33 – 73.

Position Paper Due: *Based on the readings, what are three outstanding characteristics that make us authentically human?*

Feb. 4 **The Human as Created Co-Creator**

Read: Thomas Merton, “Things in Their Identity,” pp. 29 – 36.

Francis Kadaplackal, “Creator Co-Creator As A Source of Inspiration For A Sustainable Corporate Environmental Responsibility,” 1 -14.

Phillip Thompson, *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton’s Wisdom for a Technological World*, pp. 35 – 86.

Position Paper Due: Please write a 500 word essay on the following question and submit your essay by email on the day of the class: *What is the basis of human identity and freedom, according to Thomas Merton ?*

Feb. 11 **Cyborgs and Human Hybrids**
(please do *only* the reading assigned to your group)

Read: Anne Kull, “The Cyborg as Interpretation of Culture-Nature,” pp. 49 – 56. **GROUP 1**

Adam Pryor, “Cyborg Bodies,” pp. 121 – 141. **GROUP 2**

Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*, 1- 11. **GROUP 3**

Jeanine Thweatt “Artificial Wombs and Cyborg Births,” 101 – 111. **GROUP 4**

Donna Haraway, “Science, Technology and Social Feminism” 1- 28. **GROUP 5**

Movie: Gattaca

Position Paper Due: *What does the cyborg tell us about human nature based on your reading and the movie 'Gattaca'?*

Feb. 18 **Cyber Relationships and Virtual Friends**

Read: Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, pps. 1-20 **GROUP 1**
 pps. 151 – 209. **GROUP 2**

Christine Rosen, “Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism,”
<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/virtual-friendship-and-the-new-narcissism>
GROUP 3:

Stephen Marche, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/> **GROUP 4:**

Roger Scruton, “Hiding Behind the Screen”
<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/hiding-behind-the-screen> **GROUP 5:**

Movie: “Her”

Small group/large group Discussion.

Position Paper Due: *In light of your assigned reading, interpret the movie “Her,” analyzing the pros and cons of cyber relationships.*

Feb. 25 **Social Media and Personal Identity**

(choose one of Turkle’s writings to read and ponder)

Read: Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, pp. 211 - 277.

Sherry Turkle, “Adolescence and Identity: Finding Yourself in the Machine, in *The Second Self*, pp. 131 – 54.[blackboard]

Sherry Turkle, “Thinking of Yourself as a Machine,” in *The Second Self*, pp. 247 – 278. [blackboard]

Position Paper Due: *In light of Turkle’s analysis, how important is social media to your identity as a person?*

March 10 **Human Community, Virtual Community and Robots**

Read: Turkle, *Alone Together*, pp. 23 - 147.

Nicholas Christakis, “How AI Will Rewire Us?”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/04/robots-human-relationships/583204/>

These short articles might also be of interest:

Jeffries, “Can a robot learn right from wrong?”

<https://www.theverge.com/2014/5/27/5754126/the-next-challenge-for-robots-morality>

S. Kovac, “Robots will soon be raising children in Japan,”

<http://allparenting.com/my-family/articles/971517/robots-will-soon-be-raising-children-in-japan>

“Friendly robots could allow for more realistic human relationships,”

<https://phys.org/news/2014-02-friendly-robots-realistic-human-android-relationships.html#nRlv>

Movie: “Ex machina” or “Bicentennial Man”

Position Paper Due: *The movies offer a challenging portrayal of human-robot interaction. Using insights from the Turkle and/or Christakis reading, analyze the pros and cons of human-robot relationships.*

Group Discussion: **Based on the readings and movie, discuss the pros and cons of human-robot relationships.** *Should we develop humanoid robots? Why or why not?*

March 17 Transhumanism and Human Enhancement

Read: Max More, “The Philosophy of Transhumanism,” *Transhumanist Reader*, pp. 3 – 17. **GROUP 1**

Nick Bostrom, “A History of Transhumanism,” 1- 26. **GROUP 2**

H. Tirosch-Samuels, “Engaging Transhumanism,” pp. 19 – 47. **GROUP 3**

Jose Cordeiro, “The Boundaries of the Human: From Humanism to Transhumanism,” pp. 231 – 239. **GROUP 4**

Heidi A. Campbell, “Postcyborg Ethics: A New Way to Speak of Technology,” 279 - 294. **GROUP 5**

Position Paper Due: *What are the distinctions between humanism, transhumanism and posthumanism? Where are you on this scale of humanisms?*

March 24 Are We Reinventing Ourselves?

Read: Andy Clark, “Reinventing Ourselves: The Plasticity of Embodiment, Sensing and Mind,” in *Transhumanist Reader*, pp. 113 – 125. **GROUP 1**

Ben Goertzel, “Artificial General Intelligence and the Future of Humanity,” *Transhumanist Reader*, 128 – 137. **GROUP 2**

M. Rothblatt, “Mind is Deeper than Matter: Transgenderism, Transhumanism and the Freedom of Form,” *Transhumanist Reader*, pp. 317 – 324. **GROUP 3**

Joel Dinerstein, “Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman,” [end at ‘Posthuman Adamic’] pps. 569 – 81 **GROUP 4**
pp. 550 – 592 **GROUP 5**

Movie: Advantageous

Position Paper Due: *In light of the movie “Advantageous” what does it mean to be “made in the image of God” if we have the ability to reinvent ourselves?”*

March 31 CyberMinds and Digital Immortality

Read: M. Rothblatt, “A Clone in the World,” pp. 1-28 **GROUP 1**

M. Rothblatt, “The Future of Forever,” 1- 11. **GROUP 2**

Jenny Hubermann, “Immortality Transformed: Mind Cloning, Transhumanism and the Quest for Digital Immortality,” 1-16. **GROUP 3**

Noble, “The Immortal Mind: Artificial Intelligence,” pp. 143 – 171. **GROUP 4**

Robert Geraci, “Apocalyptic AI: Religion and the Promise of Artificial Intelligence,” 138 – 166. **GROUP 5**

Movie: “Transcendence”

Position Paper Due: *In light of the movie “Transcendence,” should we pursue brain downloading? Is digital immortality compatible with Christian resurrection?*

April 7 Is the Singularity Near?

Read: “Future Trajectories: Singularity,” *Transhumanist Reader*, pps. 361 – 373. **GROUP 1**

Ted Peters, “Transhumanism and the Posthuman Future: Will Technological Progress Get Us There?” pps. 147 – 160. **GROUP 2**

Peters, “Transhumanism and the Posthuman Future,” pp. 161-175 **GROUP 3**

Richard A. Jones, “The Technology of Immortality, the Soul and Human Identity,” 66 – 76. **GROUP 4**

Ilia Delio, “Artificial Intelligence and Christian Salvation: Compatibility or Competition?” 39 – 48. **GROUP 5**

Documentary: Ray Kurzweil: The Singularity is Near

Position Paper Due: *Does religion offer what technology cannot attain? If so, what does religion offer?*

April 14 Posthumanism and Deep Relationality

Read: N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, pp. 1-25. **GROUP 1**

Arthur Kroker, *Body Drift: Butler, Hayles, Haraway*, 1-29, 63-137.

GROUP 2

Francesca Ferrando, “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations” *Existenz* 8/2 (Fall, 2013): 26 – 32. **GROUP 3**

Heidi Campbell, “On Posthumans, Transhumanism and Cyborgs: Towards a Christian Conversation,” 61 – 72. **GROUP 4**

Nick Bostrom, “Why I Want To be a Posthuman When I Grow Up,” *Transhumanist Reader*, 28 – 50. **GROUP 5**

Position Paper Due: *Identify the key features of posthumanism based on your assigned reading.*

Class debate: Do We want to be posthuman? Pros and Cons

April 21 Transhumanism and Christianity

Read: Brent Waters, “Whose Salvation? Which Eschatology? Transhumanism and Christianity as Contending Salvific Religions,” pp. 163- 174.

Anne Kull, “Cyborg Embodiment and the Incarnation,” pp. 279 – 284.

Thorsen Moos, “How Transhumanism Secularizes and Desecularizes Religious Visions,” pp. 159 – 174.

Position Paper due: *Is Christianity compatible with transhumanism because Jesus is a cyborg?*

April 28 Transhumanism, Posthumanism, Ultrahumanism: What are we becoming?

Read: Ilia Delio, “Transhumanism or Ultrahumanism? Teilhard de Chardin on Technology, Religion and Evolution,” pp. 153 – 163.

Final paper due

Conclusion and Summary