

Book Reviews

of Big Tech leaders who, via symbolic praxis, betray a worldview thick with high divine claims for the marvels tech has wrought. (Once, my health insurance provider quite literally sent me an ad referring to its app as “All-Powerful!”) It is to this *zeitgeist* that Becker has penned this fascinating work of recent tech history and cultural critique.

Becker, physicist and scientific philosopher, has an elegantly simple organizing principle. First, he introduces a guru of the sort that makes waves inside the tech sector but is unlikely to be well known outside of it. His opening example is Eliezer Yudkowsky, and he later spills a good amount of ink to explore Ray Kurzweil. Becker next draws out some of the eccentricities of whoever is currently his example, some of which strain acceptance from anyone operating within the more-usual plausibility structures (e.g., Kurzweil’s dream of utilizing AI-based algorithmic necromancy to call up the shade of his late father), only then to offer a defense of their intellectual integrity by pointing out the influence of their thought on the tech giants whose creations undergird our entire global economy. This defense, however, is rhetorical. Becker’s design is to convince his reader to take whatever guru he has introduced seriously *enough* that the next step makes sense: to delve into their philosophy and the influences flowing into it. From there, he turns away from biography to critique of tech culture, showing how philosophical influences blind its partisans both to the limitations of their art and to its real-world ethical implications.

The effect is a cumulative argument against Big Tech’s oft generously entertained, and yet undemonstrated and quite possibly toxic, claims: for example, that the dawn of artificial *general* intelligence (AGI) is upon us, that the need to work will soon be relegated to the past, and that “the Singularity” is about to emerge and will prove either boon or bane to civilization, depending on how we have managed to align its values. It is here where the first strength of the book lies. Who in computer science or tech-sector-adjacent fields has not been affected along the periphery of their consciousness by claims of precisely this sort? These claims are explored in my “Ethical, Social, and Legal Implications of Computing” course. My students—along with a few of my colleagues—are transfixed by some of the claims about what sorts of societal transformations are possible, even likely. Meanwhile, transformations have already happened and are accelerating in pace; the undeniability of these lend credence to the claims of imminently emergent AGI.

These are claims of practically religious significance, a fact not lost on Becker, who spends some of his time tracing current trends back to sectarian Christian interests of an albeit unorthodox and non-mainstream character.

This is the second strength of his presentation. To illustrate by way of contrast: years ago, I attended a pastors’ conference where a major topic was theological anthropology, particularly applied to the discernment of modern-day idols. Over the course of the conversations, some of the presenters submitted that much modern technology has become precisely that—a focus for idolatry. However, this claim was not defended or even explored in depth. Reading Becker, I feel I have now seen just such an explorer in action. He shows that the oft-grandiose claims of tech utopians speak to the heart of human spiritual longings for immortality and actualization, only then to show themselves unable to deliver what they promise. Meanwhile, real human needs are left unmet.

The work has, in my view, one limitation (perhaps as a function of the price that must be paid to attempt its rhetorical strategy). At many points the big picture he paints comes across as so severely negative in its depiction of Silicon Valley that it becomes hard to imagine redemptive engagement with it. The fact remains—the implausibility of so many of Big Tech’s claims aside—that since the Industrial Revolution, tech has utterly transformed society. Much of that transformation is occurring now through the strategies of Silicon Valley. It cannot be doubted that social media has transformed politics, that ubiquitous (and AI-embedded) smart devices change how we work and play and even think, and that now large language models and related tools are transforming research and communication. These changes are not merely negative; intuitively, there is promise as well as peril. A more irenic argument than Becker’s might do more to get at that rubber-meets-the-road reality. However, strident polemics can often effect what irenicism cannot, which, in this case, is to disenchant readers bewitched by many of our time’s empty claims about tech’s power. Becker has opted for that more strident option and, while I note its limitation, I admire his rhetorical decision as well. I will be seriously considering giving his book to my undergraduates for them to engage his arguments and, hopefully, stimulate some important conversations.

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THE ARTIFICE OF INTELLIGENCE: Divine and Human Relationship in a Robotic Age by Noreen Herzfeld. Fortress Press, 2023. 208 pages. Paperback; \$34.00. ISBN: 9781506486901.

The Artifice of Intelligence offers a timely theological examination of artificial intelligence (AI) at a moment when rapid technological development often outpaces careful moral reflection. In this volume, Noreen Herzfeld—

Reuter Professor of Science and Religion at St. John's University and a computer scientist—provides readers with a thoughtful, accessible account of AI's promises and perils while grounding the discussion in a robust moral theology. Her central concern is not whether AI will become "human," but whether human beings may compromise their own humanity through the ways they design, deploy, and depend on intelligent machines.

Herzfeld frames her exploration around two fundamental questions: What is AI? and What is humanity? The book's argument unfolds primarily through the second question, with Herzfeld drawing heavily on Karl Barth's trinitarian understanding of personhood. Humanity, she argues, remains fundamentally relational and embodied. This conviction shapes her approach throughout the volume and becomes crucial to her eventual conclusion that "AIs are machines, not living things ... precious resources when used well, but tools and nothing more" (p. 174).

Rather than treating AI as a monolithic entity, Herzfeld moves through a series of theological-ethical considerations that probe how AI reflects, imitates, or distorts human relationality. Herzfeld first introduces the problem and names Barth's relational organizing principle. She then explores the relationship between AI and human existence as (1) "seeing and being seen" (humanity as distinct but fully present), (2) "being heard" (possessing mutual communication), (3) "lending assistance" (exhibiting agency and ability to give and receive), and finally (4) "offered gladly" (authentic encounters freely and intentionally given). These discussions afford Herzfeld opportunity to explore the limits of AI while also introducing several thorny ethical challenges that occur through human use of artificial intelligence for personal gain or social engagement. While each chapter varies in approach, the general flow moves from speculation around AI's seeming ability to possess human qualities to analyzing how using this technology influences human behavior for good or ill. The final two chapters provide the opportunity to situate the discussion against a larger theological horizon on what constitutes the eternal destiny of humanity (flourishing in light of the resurrection) and, lastly, what distinguishes humanity in relationship to God and faith. In each case, AI provides opportunities for creativity and service but also introduces ethical pressures. Herzfeld includes interesting case studies such as the dramatic consequences of militarized technologies such as Lethal Autonomous Weapons (LAWs), and emotional or sexual companionship through robotics; examples offer compelling material for classroom debate or general conversations.

One of the book's strengths is its holistic understanding of human embodiment. Herzfeld frequently draws on

neurophysiology to illustrate both the complexity of the mind and the brain's interdependence with the body. While her engagement with neuroscience may surprise readers expecting a more purely theological approach, it ultimately reinforces her claim that human beings cannot be reduced to information processors—and that AI, as disembodied software, cannot replicate the fullness of human life. This emphasis becomes especially significant in the final chapters, where she situates AI within a broader theological horizon of resurrection hope and lifelong formation in relationship with God.

Although the book provides rich examples, its organization occasionally feels exploratory rather than thesis driven. Herzfeld withholds her central conclusion until the end, guiding readers through a series of reflections before drawing them together. Some readers may find this inductive method engaging; others may wish for a clearer roadmap from the outset. Nonetheless, her approach mirrors the method of a researcher testing a hypothesis, allowing readers to grapple with the complexities of AI before receiving her final assessment.

Herzfeld's work complements other contemporary Christian engagements with technology, such as Brian Brock's *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (2010) or Andy Crouch's *The Life We're Looking For* (2022), while offering her own distinctive emphasis on relational and embodied theology. Readers interested in the societal implications of AI may also appreciate the broader analyses offered by Kate Crawford or Ruha Benjamin, though Herzfeld's book remains more explicitly theological in orientation.

The final chapter proposes a set of guidelines inspired by the Rule of Saint Benedict: technology must always serve love of neighbor, it should be valued as a gift without being idolized, and its creation should be approached with reverence as an extension of human creativity within God's world. These principles provide a constructive vision for Christian engagement with AI—neither alarmist nor utopian but grounded in theological wisdom.

The Artifice of Intelligence succeeds as an accessible introduction to AI for readers in theology, ethics, ministry, and computer sciences. Herzfeld invites thoughtful discernment rather than hasty judgment, reminding readers that the deeper question beneath every technological innovation is what it means to be human. In a rapidly evolving technological landscape, her reflections offer a moral compass for Christians seeking to navigate the promises and challenges of artificial intelligence.

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