



# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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## *The Robot Will See You Now:* ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

John Wyatt and Stephen N Williams, eds. (SPCK, 2021).

REVIEWED BY DR JENNIFER GEORGE



When I first read its title, I assumed the book was on surveillance technology that uses AI. As I read the book, it became apparent that the title refers to a medical setting where robots assume the role of medical practitioners

The book is divided into three sections: (1) cultural and historical analysis; (2) theological frameworks and response and (3) ethical and social issues. This provides a useful structure to divide the focus of study, especially as these three areas cannot easily be viewed or explored in isolation.

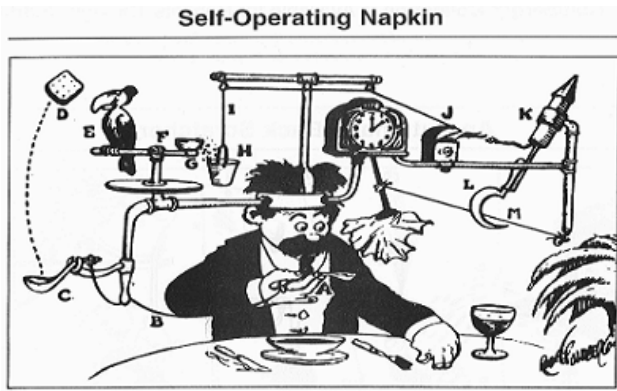
The introduction finishes with the mandate given to mankind by God at the point of creation, which makes me wonder if an area that may have warranted a bit more space is the difference between secular ethics and Christian ethics. If secular ethics is the measure used across AI, would it ever be possible to compute a definition of what “sin” is to AI?

### 1. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

In this section, Lake discusses the movies I watched as a teenager when I was fascinated with science fiction. They are cast into a theological framework for a different perspective to what I had as a teenager. I now ask of these plots and ideas, questions that I haven’t asked before. Then a naïve teenager’s wonder was: Could I create, animate and control similar programs and robots if I become a computer scientist? More than two decades later, I now ask: How safe, ethical, healthy are they and do the benefits outweigh the cost? I also see beyond the

and “see” you as a patient. This works cleverly in tackling two key topics, AI and Christian faith, explored in this book.

I don’t usually read textbooks in computing unless they directly relate to my teaching practice or research. However, I read books on faith as part of my walk and growth as a Christian. I read this book as it combined two subjects I love, and with more interest than I expected.

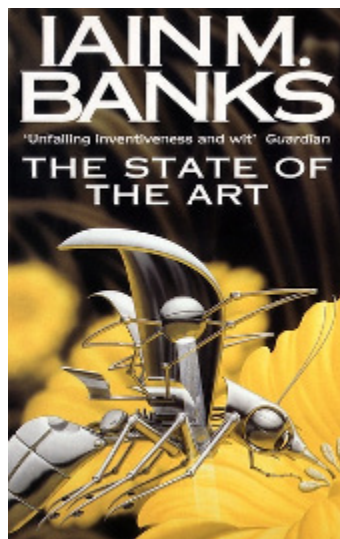


Rube Goldberg's Self-Operating Napkin

technology and the sense of adventure these AI movies portrayed and now have a greater understanding of how they suggested the risks are fantasy.

The reference to the Culture Series by Iain Banks prompted me to speak with an ardent Iain Banks fan, who proudly holds signed copies of this series and has the artwork of these book covers as home décor. Knowing his position on faith, or rather lack of, I instantly started drawing parallels between AI literature and faith. What is the influence of sci-fi literature on a secular and scientific society? I asked if the Culture Series influenced his beliefs and he said it merely

sat in the same place as his faith and affirmed his belief that we are, most likely, merely matter and so is AI and it all ends one way or another. *The Robot Will See You Now* explains that this position sits well with a secular view of ethics but not a Christian worldview.



I found Ramachandra's writing on humanisation of robots thought-provoking. Though fully aware of the data science and surveillance technology within voice-activated devices, I own Amazon's Alexa devices. A few years ago, I remember my two-year-old son being upset several times that Alexa would not understand what he was asking her. We don't yet know the influence of Alexas in households on children and their development, when they grow up having a conversational relationship with technology. If anything, they grow up very relaxed around them, accepting of their existence. Alexa is "smart" and

ubiquitous, and the danger of ubiquitous technology is that it can completely bypass one's need to understand the dangers they present.

AI relies heavily on probability. However, when AI intervenes in medical and military environments, several questions need to be raised. This book raises valid questions such as: Is probability a sufficient calculation? Is the motivation for AI accuracy or profit? While there may be benefits for humans to deal with war objectively, the human needs to feel, discern and make decisions of critical importance.



Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory MAGTAG Integrated Experiment

## 2. THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS AND RESPONSES

It feels strange to be writing this but the emotions (consciousness) spectrum of AI that Williams describes resonates with Autism Spectrum Condition where the display and recognition of emotions of an individual are profiled. Autism refers to humans and the other doesn't.

Stephen Williams says "in the West, the most familiar challenge to belief in the essential embodiment of human beings ...," which I find mildly offending and excluding of Judeo-Christian worldview in places outside of the West. It is unclear if this was intentional. There is a slightly different reference to "Western Technology" which also excludes technological advancements elsewhere. To make this conversation current, I feel that the decolonisation of research needs to be taken aboard. As we use technology to complete human tasks, how much closer are we moving to a notion of the God of the gaps?

Herzfeld speaks of the Amish criteria for using technology and the questions that need to be asked. This fits nicely as a simple yet profound Christian ethical framework that could sit beside, or instead of, a secular one that is used within the computer science domain.



Eric Pevernagie, *The Church was no longer in the middle*

### 3. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

In computer science, my area of expertise is human computer interaction (HCI) and accessibility. HCI focuses on making the user's interactions with the digital world as effortless and as seamless as possible with as many natural human-like gestures and movements as possible, which is known as ubiquitous computing.

In the mental health support system that Wyatt discusses, humans are more comfortable disclosing more intimate and personal details to an AI-based bot than to a real human. This evidences a successful user-experience design. The bot also fills a gap in employment (the talking therapist) that Cameron discusses. However, should this AI-based talking therapist become successful, how ethical or reasonable would it be to normalise a non-human talking therapist? Ethical approval processes where human participation is considered, takes into consideration any immediate adverse impact on a participant. This case presents a gradual shift in culture and expectations that is more long term.



Aldebaran Robotics' Nao humanoid robot on display at AAAI 2010 by jiujuangw is marked with CC BY-SA 2.0.

I also wonder if HCI's focus should be on making our interaction with the digital world human-like and natural

at all. Should it focus on usability and ease of use, but ensure that it is distinctly different and obvious that it is not intended to be human-like? Should it require scientists to respond to ontological questions of what it means to be human and what it means to be a machine? What would that type of HCI look like?

Graystone discusses the sacrament of touch in sextech. A more current view is to "navigate" those who find the idea of sextech uncomfortable and provide non-human-like sextech that could enhance sexual relationships with self, a partner or in a group with sextech objects rather than "dolls." Switching back to a HCI perspective, what should the measure of success of such a product look like? Do effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction meet the criteria? Or should we start considering long-term effects on how we view and experience sex?

This begs a question, should there be areas of the digital worlds where AI should not be permitted to create human-like simulations?

Finally, I would like to comment on the subject of AI within the context of this book in a HCI framework that I have used in the context of design.

#### DESIGN CHOICES (BY GILBERT COCKTON, 2010)

I adopted the Working to Choose Framework from Gilbert Cockton (2010) in my own study (George, 2016) of design as an approach that enabled a balance of worth by regularly considering beneficiaries, evaluations, artefacts and purpose throughout the design process.

Based on this, some questions we could potentially raise in the design process of robots are as follows:

1. Beneficiaries: Who does this benefit? Is the benefit financial for an investor or does it genuinely fill a gap or enhance the experience of the user?
2. Evaluation: How is the artefact (i.e., robot in this case) going to be evaluated? Who are the stakeholders involved in the process? How do ethics feature? Is the impact short and medium term or has there been a more long-term and ethical outlook on the impact?
3. Artefact: What is the product or service that is being created?
4. Purpose: What purpose(s) does this artefact have? The purpose can be weighed against the needs of the beneficiaries.

This seems somewhat appropriate in the context of AI

and robots and the purpose and beneficiaries are able to continuously carry the weight of ethics in the design process. This framework can also be easily adopted to raise ontological and epistemological questions that relate to the design of robots.

In this review, I have presented some reflective commentary on the book and also presented a HCI framework that could be used to ask questions that are raised in this book.

Cockton, Gilbert. 2010. "Design situation and methodological innovation in interaction design." *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing*. Atlanta Georgia USA: Association for Computer Machinery, New York, NY, United States. 2745-2754.

George, Jennifer. 2016. "A Case Study of Balance and Integration in Worth-Focused Research through Design." *PhD thesis*, Northumbria University, June.

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For more on the resources mentioned above see: <https://resourcesbyjennifergeorge.wordpress.com/home/ads/>

