

Artificial Intelligence in Christian Pastoral Care

30 November 2022

Convenor: Dr Simeon Xu

Reception: Tea & Coffee (9:40-10:00)

Introduction and Opening Remarks (10:00–10:10)

Session I: Prof. George Coghill (10:10–11:10, 35-40 mins talk, 20-25 mins Q&A)

Dr George Coghill, Professor Emeritus, University of Aberdeen

Title: AI and Christianity

Abstract: While the creation of agents that could be described as ‘intelligent’ has been a goal since ancient times the practical ability to build systems that can undertake tasks that were deemed to require intelligence only became possible in the middle of the 20th Century. Despite recent high profile successes, the creation of a general AI agent is still a long way off, if it is even achievable in practice.

In this paper I will present an overview of Artificial Intelligence. This will include a brief history, including how it has been received and viewed by various sectors of society throughout its history; a compact description of the current focus of AI: successes and failures, uses and abuses; and a breakdown of the current specialisations in AI: what they are and how they integrate. I shall also note some Christian responses to AI.

Coffee & Tea Break (11:10–11:40)

Session II: Prof. Michael Burdett (11:40–12:40, 35-40 mins talk, 20-25 mins Q&A)

Dr Michael Burdett, Assistant Professor in Christian Theology, University of Nottingham

Title: Proximate and Ultimate Concerns in Christian Ethical Responses to AI

Abstract: In this presentation I argue that Christian ethical responses to AI take on, largely, two different types of approach. The first considers proximate ethical concerns related to AI. That is, this ethical approach most often considers immediate personal, socio-political and spiritual repercussions and the kind of impact that is occurring now or in the very near future. Proximate ethics of this type includes discussion about safety, efficacy, access, bias and transparency. The second concerns ultimate ethics which focuses on the longer-term impact and implications of AI. Examples of this type might include issues of uniqueness, deep societal transformation and inequality, changes to personal character and even the role AI might have in God’s ultimate economy of creation and grace. My contention is that the Christian church needs to attend to both approaches to AI but that in focusing too myopically on one at the expense of the other often eclipses the witness of the church in our technological society.

Lunch (12:40–13:40)

Session III: Dr. Eric Stoddart (13:50–14:50, 35-40 mins talk, 20-25 mins Q&A)

Dr Eric Stoddart, Lecturer in Practical Theology, University of St Andrews

Title: Artificial Compassion / Delegated Compassion: A Highway to Hell or Heaven?

Abstract: AI can offer interactive digital environments conducive to developing the spirituality of people with a cognitive disability. AI enables the identification of vulnerable groups to whom

Christian mission efforts can be targeted. AI could generate religious information for believers and other inquirers. To these current developments could be added possibilities of automated monitoring and assistance to vulnerable people in their homes as well as diagnostic aids for mental illnesses amenable to some Christian counselling intervention.

In the light of some contemporary examples, this presentation will consider a Christian theology that understands the horizon of mortality to be primary amongst the qualifications for care offered to be non-artificial. Delegation, but not abdication, might be an appropriate framework if the problematic theological bifurcation of technology and spirituality is to be overcome. Deploying the terms 'hell' and 'heaven' as verbs (rather than nouns) will be a proposed as a constructive response to analysing the potential of AI in Christian pastoral care.

Closing Remarks (14:50–15:00)