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Rapture of the Geeks

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Rapture of the Geeks

Abstract

"If we are more than machines, what is it that defines our humanity? Is it our intelligence, creativity, or emotion?"

Posting about the distinction between humans and artificial creatures from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-rapture-of-the-geeks/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

The Rapture of the Geeks

 inallthings.org/the-rapture-of-the-geeks/

Derek Schuurman

Pinnocchio, Frankenstein and Pygmalion. Each of these are examples of archetypal stories about distinguishing humans from artificial creatures. This theme is also explored in many science fiction shows and movies, such as the affable Commander Data in *Star Trek*, the replicants in *Blade Runner*, the cyborgs in *Battlestar Gallactica*, and the robot boy in the movie *AI Artificial Intelligence*.

Near the dawn of computing history, the brilliant mathematician and World War II codebreaker Alan Turing began to uncover many fundamental principles in computer science. In a famous 1950 paper titled "[Computing Machinery and Intelligence](#)," Turing asked the question: Could machines ever "think?" If machines could one day "think," how would we know? Turing proposed a test to determine if a machine could be said to be "thinking." In this test, a human interrogator is placed in a room and sends messages to a remote human and a remote computer and attempts to determine which is which. Turing concluded that if the human interrogator could not tell the human and computer apart, then "one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted." This test has since become known as the "Turing test."

Turing's early writings were followed by rapid developments in computing and the development of the field of "artificial intelligence" or AI. The notion of "thinking machines" and the field of AI naturally leads to many philosophical questions.¹ What is a mind? Will machines be able to think as humans do or can they just calculate? What does it mean to be human? What is the difference between people and machines? Could machines ever have free will?

The way in which questions such as these are answered reveals certain philosophical presuppositions about what it means to be human. If one presupposes that the material world is all that exists, a notion referred to as materialism, then it is not a far leap to suggest that people are no different from machines. Such a worldview suggests that our mind, consciousness and our entire person arise entirely from the physical interactions of particles in the brain, a view sometimes referred to as physicalism.

Physicalism has several significant implications. For one, illnesses of the mind are reducible to an illness of the body which can be treated by pharmaceuticals.² Matthew Dickerson, in his book [The Mind and the Machine](#), makes the case that physicalism has far-reaching implications for areas such as creativity, heroism, ecology, as well as for reason and science. Furthermore, physicalism suggests that brains, and hence minds, could be entirely simulated in a computer.

Ray Kurzweil, an accomplished computer scientist and author of several books including [The Age of Spiritual Machines](#), suggests that within the present century we will be able to download our brains into a computer and thus escape our mortality. All that remains to achieve this is for neuroscientists to map the brain and for sufficiently powerful computers to be developed. At that point, it is suggested, we could upload our brain into a computer and live forever, no longer limited by our mortal bodies. Some have coined this "[the rapture of the geeks](#)." This vision has inspired [books](#), [conferences](#) and efforts like that of the [Terasem Movement Foundation](#).

Such a worldview reveals a trust in technology, one that even promises eternal life. In his book [Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power](#), Andy Crouch observes that "Every idol makes two simple and

extravagant promises. ‘You shall not surely die.’ ‘You shall be like God.’”³ Psalm 115:8 suggests that all who make and trust in idols will become like them. In the case of the rapture of the geeks, the end goal results in literally becoming like a computer.

As machines are increasingly able to do things that people do, distinguishing humans by the functions they can perform will become less meaningful. Tests like the Turing test are based on the faulty presupposition that to mimic a human implies that something is human. Moreover, using such distinctions to classify what it means to be human risks excluding vulnerable persons such as the unborn, the senile and those with certain brain injuries.⁴

If we are more than machines, what is it that defines our humanity? Is it our intelligence, creativity, or emotion? John Calvin opens *The Institutes of Christian Religion* with the following observation: “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” Calvin continues suggesting that knowledge of God and self “are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.”

The goal of downloading brains into computers is based on a materialist worldview which sees the physical world as all there is, as an independent reality, self-existent and hence divine. In turn, it is the materialist reduction of what it means to be human that allows the rapture of the geeks to be conceivable. This worldview connects a trust in technology, a rejection of God and a reductionistic view of what it means to be human. Such a view rejects the notion of an immaterial spirit, whereas Christians recognize we are both body and spirit.⁵ As Calvin observed, the knowledge of self and of God are both essential and interrelated. A knowledge of God as creator is tied to an understanding that we are made in his image, that we are fallen and that we need a savior. And it is through Christ, the perfect image of God, through whom we gain a better understanding of ourselves.

The notion of “thinking machines” and the field of AI lead to many interesting philosophical questions. But I won’t be waiting for the rapture of the geeks. Instead, my understanding of humanity, technology, and the future are shaped by a knowledge of God who made us in his image and that we belong “body and soul to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.”⁶ In the end it is Christ who redeems us and will one day make all things new, not in the virtual world of a computer, but in a new heaven and a new earth.

Footnotes

1. G. Buttazzo. “Artificial consciousness: Utopia or real possibility?”, *IEEE Computer*, pages 24-30, July 2001. [↩](#)
2. Matthew Dickerson, *The Mind and the Machine*, Brazos Press, 2011, pp. xxi-xxii. [↩](#)
3. Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, InterVarsity Press, 2013, p. 64. [↩](#)
4. Steven H. VanderLeest and Derek C. Schuurman, “A Christian Perspective on Artificial Intelligence: How Should Christians Think about Thinking Machines?”, Proceedings of the 2015 Christian Engineering Conference (CEC), Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, June 2015, pp. 91-107. [↩](#)
5. For a good discussion of this, see: John W. Cooper. *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, Eerdmans, 1989 [↩](#)

6. [Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1.](#) ↩