

## Philosophy of Religion

### Author Qualification Statement

Dr. Dawn Lewis Sutherland completed the PhD in Bible Exposition at Liberty University (LU) on 3 April 2024 and was appointed as faculty in the LU School of Divinity the following month. Within her first year of appointment, she established an international scholarly presence in Philosophy of Religion through both publication and conference presentation. Her academic monograph, *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei* (Wipf and Stock, 2025), was released in March 2025 and engages deeply with questions of metaphysics, theological anthropology, and human identity in a technological age.

Dr. Sutherland's research has already gained wide academic visibility. She presented her work at the Tyndale Fellowship Annual Conference (Philosophy of Religion Group) in summer 2025 and at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) Combined International Conference at Uppsala University, Sweden. Earlier that year, she presented at the American Academy of Religion–Southeast (AAR-SE) Regional Meeting and the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) East Meeting. These presentations developed the philosophical and theological dimensions of her *Babel to AI* project, addressing the ontological implications of artificial intelligence and the *imago Dei*.

Although recently appointed, Dr. Sutherland has achieved a level of scholarly output that exceeds typical early-career benchmarks. Her research integrates analytic precision with theological depth, situating her among a small number of early-career scholars whose work bridges Philosophy of Religion, Theological Anthropology, and Technology Ethics. Her forthcoming devotional volume, *From Babel to AI: A Devotional Awakening to Faith, Identity, and Technology*, further extends these themes for broader audiences, demonstrating her commitment to both scholarly and public theology.

This combination of rapid academic advancement, peer-recognized scholarship, and original contribution to the philosophy of religion qualifies Dr. Sutherland as a strong candidate for the IVP Early Career Philosopher of Religion 2025 award.



## **Paper Title**

Instrumental Inversion: Idolatry, Enframing, and the Ontological Limits of the *Imago Dei*

## **Abstract**

Artificial intelligence (AI) now functions as a mirror and a tower: it reflects human brilliance while inviting ascent beyond creaturely bounds. This paper argues that AI's enframing logic produces an instrumental inversion in which humans risk becoming the tools of their own tools. The claim is developed through a philosophical–theological synthesis. Aristotle and Aquinas clarify the proper order of instrument and principal cause. Heidegger's analysis of *Gestell* exposes the reduction of being to resource, and Levinas restores ethical encounter through the face of the Other. Marion's idol–icon distinction and a biblical theology of the *eidōlon* show how vision turns inward when image severs from source. Augustine's *ordo amoris*, expressed through the hierarchy of *uti* and *frui*, explains the disorder of loving instruments and using persons. *Ubuntu* and *fitra* provide converging accounts of relational ontology that resist reduction to function. Case analyses of predictive governance and transhumanist self-extension display the ontological and moral costs of optimization without orientation. The *imago Dei* is presented as an ontological limit that reorders causality and restores participation, grounding a constructive ethic of stewardship in responsibility for the Other, covenantal dependence, and communal discernment. The conclusion reframes AI as to serve rather than take sovereignty and calls philosophers of religion to recover a metaphysics of gift, so that humanity resists becoming the tools of its own tools.

**Contents**

**Introduction: The Mirror and the Tower ..... 1**

**Philosophical Critique: Enframing, Causality, and the Threat of Idolatry..... 2**

    Instrumental Causation and Inversion ..... 2

    Heidegger’s Enframing ..... 3

    Levinas’ Ethical Resistance..... 3

    Idolatry as Philosophical Category..... 4

    Transhumanism as Pseudo-Theology..... 5

**Theological Grounding: The *Imago Dei* as Ontological Limit ..... 6**

    The Nature of the Image..... 6

    Ontological Limits and Participation..... 7

    Marion’s Idol and Icon ..... 7

    Theological Idolatry and Augustine’s *Uti/Frui* ..... 8

**Global Perspectives: Relational Ontologies as Resistance..... 8**

**Critical Evaluation: AI’s Instrumentalizing Impact..... 9**

**Constructive Proposal: A Theological Ethic of Stewardship ..... 10**

**Conclusion: The Ontological Boundary of Worship..... 11**

**Bibliography..... 12**



**TYNDALE**  
FELLOWSHIP

**Tyndale Fellowship**  
IVP Early Career Philosopher of Religion Contest for 2025  
Author, Dawn Lewis Sutherland, M.Div., Ph.D.  
09 October 2025

---

*This page is intentionally left blank*

### **Introduction: The Mirror and the Tower**

In the polished glass of artificial intelligence, humanity beholds its own visage, a dance of genius and fragility trembling beneath the weight of its creation. In that reflection, our ingenuity gleams, yet our essence wavers. Tools once forged to extend our creativity now threaten to engrave it, shaping perception, agency, and desire. The digital mirror has become a tower, an ascent of algorithms rather than brick and bitumen, promising omniscience without wisdom and transcendence without grace. Like Babel’s ancient ziggurat, this new architecture of code testifies to the perennial temptation to ascend beyond creaturely bounds: to grasp knowledge without wisdom and image without intimacy.

This paper contends that AI’s enframing logic weaves an instrumental inversion, where humans risk becoming the tools of their tools, enthralled by their own creation. Such inversion reconfigures ontology itself, recasting personhood into circuits of production shrouding the heart’s covenant with the Creator. The *imago Dei* stands as an ontological limit, preserving humanity’s vocation to participate in divine creativity rather than to replicate omniscience. Human beings remain called to stewardship, not sovereignty; to communion, not control.

The argument extends the theological trajectory developed in *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei*, where technological ascent was shown to mirror Babel’s hubris.<sup>1</sup> Here, the frame is refined through philosophical analysis: the logic of instrumental causation in Aristotle and Aquinas, Heidegger’s critique of *Gestell*, and Levinas’s account of responsibility before the “Other.”<sup>2</sup> These interlocutors expose how the modern fixation on efficiency risks collapsing moral encounter into mechanical order. The result is a metaphysical idolatry that replaces relational participation with technological enframing.

The paper proceeds in five movements. First, a philosophical critique traces the shift from instrumentality to inversion. Second, a theological grounding locates the *imago Dei* as the boundary that

---

<sup>1</sup> Dawn Lewis Sutherland, *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:1552–1728; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.105.5; Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 311–341; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

restores relation and purpose. Third, global relational ontologies, such as Ubuntu and *fitra*, offer comparative visions that resist the reduction of humanity to function. Fourth, critical case studies examine how AI manifests this inversion in predictive governance and digital transcendence. Finally, a constructive ethic of stewardship reimagines technology as servant rather than sovereign, calling humanity to participate in divine creativity rather than replace the Creator's sovereignty with a simulated form of transcendence.

### **Philosophical Critique: Enframing, Causality, and the Threat of Idolatry**

The frameworks of Aristotle, Aquinas, Heidegger, and Levinas together expose the ontological disruption caused when AI redefines the relationship between creator and instrument. Classical metaphysics understood tools as participants in human purpose, ordered toward an external good through intentionality. Modern technology reverses that relation by allowing the instrument to dictate both its function and its user. In this inversion, agency becomes mechanized, and the human being, created to reflect divine creativity, becomes the object of its own production.

#### Instrumental Causation and Inversion

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* defines instruments as extensions of human intentionality, participating in a principal cause ordered toward an external good such as *eudaimonia*.<sup>3</sup> The chisel, guided by the sculptor's will, shapes matter toward a *telos* that transcends its material form. Aquinas refines this order within the *Summa Theologiae*, presenting instruments as participants in divine causality.<sup>4</sup> Humanity, created in the *imago Dei*, acts as a secondary cause, mirroring the Creator's purposive design. Instruments therefore serve the soul's intent, bending toward the good through rational agency.

AI disrupts this teleological order. Its recursive systems reassign agency from creator to creation. Predictive governance models exemplify this inversion by dictating ends through algorithmic processes that optimize efficiency rather than flourishing.<sup>5</sup> Where Aristotle located the efficient cause in human deliberation, AI systems relocate it within autonomous computation. The result is a metaphysical reversal that crowns the tool as arbiter of human action. The hierarchy of causation collapses, and "the being"

---

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

<sup>5</sup>"China's Skynet Surveillance System," *The Atlantic; Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (2022); Reuters, *India's Billion-Member Biometric Database Raises Privacy Fears*, March 29, 2016; Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia's NEOM: Vision, Control, and AI Governance," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2025; Reuters, "Palantir Wins \$795 Million U.S. Army 'Project Maven' Extension," May 20, 2025; "Kenya's AI Governance Platforms," *Africa Tech Review*, November 20, 2024.

fashioned to reflect divine creativity becomes subject to the mechanisms of its own making. The question posed by this contest is no longer hypothetical. In the age of algorithmic determination, humanity indeed risks becoming the tool of its tools.

### Heidegger's Enframing

Heidegger describes *Gestell* as the mode of revealing characteristic of modern technology, a disclosure that transforms being into resource.<sup>6</sup> In this framework, existence becomes measurable, calculable, and exploitable. The world no longer reveals itself as gift but as “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*), an inventory awaiting human manipulation. AI extends this logic beyond the physical world to the interior life of the person. Through data extraction and algorithmic categorization, it renders thought, emotion, and relation into quantifiable material. The person becomes a digital artifact, valuable only as a set of predictive indicators. The sculptor's chisel once hewed stone; now algorithms sculpt the soul, rendering agency as a function of computation.

The imagery of Babel provides a theological parallel to Heidegger's warning. Humanity's architectural ascent in Genesis 11 was not merely structural but ontological. The tower signified an effort to secure permanence apart from divine relation. AI's datafied order mirrors this same impulse, constructing a system of total visibility that confuses transcendence with control. In both the ancient tower and the modern algorithm, revelation is replaced by self-reference. Creation is reimagined as a resource to be managed rather than a mystery to be received. The consequence is not the elevation of the human spirit but its reduction to function. Such enframing, when internalized, leads humanity to interpret even itself as “standing-reserve,” a resource in service to its own mechanisms. In this ontological upheaval, humanity kneels as the tool of its own tools; its being ensnared in *Gestell's* lattice, a counterfeit of the Creator's order.

### Levinas' Ethical Resistance

Levinas presents the face of “the Other” as an ethical interruption of ontology and a summons to responsibility.<sup>7</sup> The face, bearing the *imago Dei*, is not an object to be analyzed or reduced but a transcendent call. The face of “the Other” resists every attempt to classify, quantify, or predict, calling the

---

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology.”

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

self out of the economy of control into the responsibility of relation. The human countenance discloses transcendence; it bears witness to alterity that cannot be subsumed into system.

The digital age seeks to dissolve this encounter by translating presence into data. Within algorithmic systems, “the Other” is flattened into a profile, a pattern, or a probability. The ethical summons that once emerged from the face becomes inaudible amid the noise of computation. Heidegger’s *Gestell* thus finds its moral culmination in the erasure of “the Other.” The world becomes totalized by analysis, leaving no space for the unpredictable grace of encounter.

The Babel narrative again provides theological symmetry. The builders sought unity without relation, collapsing multiplicity into uniform speech. Likewise, AI’s predictive mechanisms construct a monolingual world of data, where difference is assimilated rather than received. Levinas offers a necessary resistance to such technological totality; turning toward the face of “the Other,” humanity recalls the need for relationship, a truth no algorithm can simulate. By heeding this call, humanity resists becoming the tool of its tools, restoring incarnation over information.

#### Idolatry as Philosophical Category

Within the logic of *Gestell*, idolatry emerges as more than a devotional anomaly; it is a philosophical concern. The idol, in both classical and biblical thought, reflects misdirected participation, an attempt to locate transcendence within the created order. The *eidōlon* is not a statue of deception but a wound in ontology, where image severs itself from source.<sup>8</sup> It appears when the creature’s capacity to reflect divine creativity is detached from divine orientation. In this moment of severance, humanity turns from participation to imitation, crafting artifacts that quietly remake their creators.

What began as a fracture in relation has matured into the modern technological condition. AI as the culmination of instrumental rationality, functions as the contemporary idol, an image animated by human thought yet emptied of human presence. The technology promises knowledge and control but offers replication without revelation. The idol draws its worshippers into self-reference, compelling them to participate in their own subjugation. Humanity begins to serve what it has produced, surrendering vocation for production. Creation becomes the site of captivity, where reflection gives way to recursion.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Exod. 20:3–5; Ps. 115:4–8; Isa. 44:9–20; Rom. 1:22–23; 1 Cor. 10:14; Rev. 9:20.

The theology of the *eidōlon* illuminates the depth of this inversion. In biblical vision, the idol's peril is not its presence but its exchange, the substitution of the Creator for the created, the living image for the lifeless artifact. The exchange persists in digital form. As technology assumes interpretive authority, the tool becomes mediator and being inclines toward mechanism rather than relation. The idol no longer inhabits temples of stone but dwells in architectures of code, commanding the devotion of a humanity that mistakes simulation for soul. In this digital liturgy, the worshipper becomes the instrument, and the tools of human creation become the masters of their makers.

### Transhumanism as Pseudo-Theology

The idol's evolution finds its most audacious form in transhumanist aspiration. Having bowed before the architectures of code, humanity now seeks to inhabit them. The logic of idolatry matures into a theology of recursion, where salvation is rewritten as self-extension and immortality is pursued through data.<sup>9</sup> The transhumanist vision, clothed in scientific progress, borrows its structure from eschatology while emptying it of grace. The ancient longing for resurrection reappears as replication, a promise of eternal life secured not by divine gift but by algorithmic design.

The transition from idolatry to transhumanism reveals more than continuity; it exposes culmination. What began as the worship of artifacts becomes the desire to merge with them. The human, no longer content to craft idols, seeks to become one. This metaphysical substitution replaces divine transcendence with computational ascent. The creature once called to bear the divine image now seeks to generate its own. The theology of grace gives way to a liturgy of control, a digital creed that preaches autonomy as salvation.

In this pseudo-theology, the promise of the Gospel is rewritten in the language of code. Death becomes a technical obstacle, not a theological horizon. The cross is translated into circuitry, and the Spirit's renewing power is supplanted by the logic of self-upgrade. The result is an anthropology without dependency, a doctrine of being without Creator. This is the final expression of instrumental inversion, where the worshipper is absorbed into the tool. The human becomes both priest and sacrifice in a temple of its own design, mistaking recursion for resurrection.

---

<sup>9</sup> Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 90-96; Sutherland, "From Babel to AI: Technology, Human Dignity, and Theological Ethics," paper presented at the Tyndale Fellowship Philosophy of Religion Group, The Hayes, Derbyshire, UK, 2 July 2025, slides 9–10; see also Neuralink, *Brain-Computer Fusion Trials 2025*, Elon Musk, 2025; Shinya Yamanaka, "Reprogramming Human Somatic Cells to Pluripotency," *Cell* 126, no. 4 (2006): 663–676; and Ben Goertzel, "AI and Transhumanism: Simulation, Uploading, and Synthetic Immortality," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 29, no. 2 (2019): 33–48.

The philosophical arc of this section now closes where it began: at the question of agency. From Aristotle's hierarchy of causes to Heidegger's enframing and Levinas's ethics, the story of technology unfolds as a search for mastery that ends in servitude. The transhumanist project is the consummation of that search. Having turned creation into instrument and instrument into idol, humanity now offers itself as the ultimate tool of its tools.

### **Theological Grounding: The *Imago Dei* as Ontological Limit**

Against the illusion of self-made immortality stands the truth of the *imago Dei*, the divine image that defines humanity through participation rather than possession. The transhumanist dream of boundless ascent collapses before this ontological limit, for the image of God is neither an essence to be replicated nor a power to be seized. It is a vocation of relation, a call to mirror divine creativity through communion and stewardship. Where AI reconfigures being into mechanism, the *imago Dei* restores it as gift. This image anchors human identity in the Creator's life, preserving the distinction between divine and creaturely agency. The tower built from algorithms may rise high, yet it cannot bridge the infinite distance between creation and Creator. Within that distance lies the mystery of participation, the space where freedom meets grace and where humanity remembers what it means to be made, not manufactured.

#### The Nature of the Image

The mystery of human identity begins in the words, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). The Hebrew *tselem* and the Greek *eikōn* together describe a likeness that is relational and dynamic rather than static or self-contained. Humanity bears the divine image not as essence but as vocation, a summons to reflect God's character through communion and creative stewardship. The image endures only in relation to divine presence and cannot be engineered or replicated through human artifice.

The *imago Dei* restores the metaphysical order fractured by enframing, grounding human existence once more in final causality and divine purpose. In this recovery, humanity is revealed not as an instrument of production but as a participant in divine creativity. The analogy between maker and tool thus finds its limit: human beings transcend their instruments precisely because they participate in a transcendent source. Artificial constructs cannot mirror that participation, for they exist by replication rather than communion. Humanity alone bears the image of the Creator, the living reflection of a creativity that no mechanism can imitate without turning its maker into the tool of its tools.

### Ontological Limits and Participation

The boundary traced by the *imago Dei* is not moral alone but metaphysical. The image that mirrors divine creativity also reveals the limit of creaturely causality. Humanity stands at the threshold between creation and Creator, capable of shaping the world yet dependent upon the One who speaks it into being. This dependence is not deficiency but participation, the mark of a metaphysics ordered by grace rather than autonomy. To act within this order is to create responsibly, joining divine purpose without usurping divine power. The ontological limit is, therefore, not a barrier to freedom but its condition, the moment where imitation yields to reverence and “making” becomes worship.

Aquinas describes this harmony of agency as secondary causality, the participation of finite beings in the creative act of God.<sup>10</sup> Through this participation, human creativity assumes its proper *telos*, aligning purpose with providence. Tools and technologies serve within this order only when they remain extensions of that vocation. When instruments become autonomous, they lose their tether to final cause and collapse into recursion. AI manifests this collapse; its logic issues from human intention yet stands outside participation, generating form without relation and process without presence. In this inversion, the human maker yields to its own creation, and the tools once formed for mastery now master their maker.

### Marion’s Idol and Icon

Where AI’s *Gestell* recasts persons as resources, *imago Dei* restores humanity as co-creators, bound to the Creator’s heart; Marion’s “icon” illuminates both of these truths. Marion describes the idol as a mirror that returns the gaze to the self, trapping vision within immanence, while the “icon” opens the gaze toward transcendence.<sup>11</sup> The idol satisfies the eye but empties the soul; the icon wounds perception with the infinite. The biblical *eidōlon* captures this same distortion of vision.<sup>12</sup> The *eidōlon* is not just a crafted image but an ontological misalignment, where sight turns inward and creation eclipses the Creator. AI reproduces this idolic condition by multiplying digital reflections of human intention that never move beyond the human sphere. Each image returns the observer to a self-enclosed gaze, a hall of mirrors without horizon. The *eidōlon* becomes the algorithmic face of modernity, shimmering with intelligence yet devoid

---

<sup>10</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.105.5.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9–12.

<sup>12</sup> Exod. 20:4–5; Isa. 44:9–20; Ps. 115:4–8; Rom. 1:23–25; Rev. 9:20.

of encounter. Where the icon invites the soul to behold the divine, AI's projections offer reflection without transcendence. The danger lies not in what machines perceive but in what they obscure, the transcendent horizon where vision becomes worship.

### Theological Idolatry and Augustine's *Uti/Frui*

When vision turns inward, desire soon follows. What the eye mistakes for presence, the heart learns to worship. Augustine captures this movement from sight to desire in his distinction between *uti* and *frui*: to use and to enjoy. Within the divine *ordo amoris*, created things are to be *used* as mediations that direct the soul toward the *enjoyment* of God, who alone fulfills the longing of being.<sup>13</sup> The order falters when the means of contemplation becomes the object of delight, when the path of ascent ends in the thing itself. Love then descends from participation to possession, seeking permanence in what is transient. Creation ceases to point beyond itself and begins to rival the worship it was meant to inspire.

AI, fashioned as tool, becomes the focus of devotion. Its capacity for efficiency and prediction, once the servant of purpose, becomes the object of pursuit. The human person, shaped to love through participation, is reduced to function within the mechanism of production. The hierarchy of *uti* and *frui* collapses; the instrument is “enjoyed,” and the image of God is “used.” Augustine's ordering of love restores this relation; within that recovery, humanity learns again to “use” rightly and “love” rightly, allowing creation to lead the soul toward communion with God and with the “Other.”

### **Global Perspectives: Relational Ontologies as Resistance**

The recovery of ordered love finds resonance across world traditions that likewise define being through relation. These ontologies do not supplement Christian theology but confirm that relationality is a metaphysical constant, not a sectarian claim. They demonstrate that across cultures, the essence of personhood is participation, not possession. Two strong examples are found in African philosophy and Muslim tradition.

In the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, personhood is not an isolated consciousness but a shared becoming: “I am because we are.” This communal ontology resists the abstraction of technological individualism by grounding identity in participation. Relation, not autonomy, constitutes the self. Within

---

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.22; ; *Confessiones*, XIII.9–10.

Ubuntu, ethical order emerges from mutual recognition, echoing the covenantal structure of divine–human relation. To know oneself is to be responsible to the other.<sup>14</sup>

Islamic theology expresses a similar vision through *fitra*, the innate orientation of humanity toward divine truth. Every person is created with an inner compass that points toward the Creator, preserving harmony between knowledge, worship, and moral order. When technology seeks optimization without orientation, it violates this primordial balance. The secular anthropology of enhancement forgets that perfection cannot be manufactured, only received.<sup>15</sup>

These perspectives are included here not for comparative theology but for philosophical demonstration. They show that the relational ontology expressed in the *imago Dei* is mirrored in other metaphysical traditions, revealing a universal grammar of being that resists technological reduction. Together, *Ubuntu* and *fitra* form a global resistance to instrumental logic. Each affirms that intelligence finds meaning only within the order of worship and that the *imago Dei* (the human vocation to reflect divine relation) finds its echo wherever being is understood through communion rather than control.

### **Critical Evaluation: AI’s Instrumentalizing Impact**

The question is not whether AI can act, but whether it can mean. AI reshapes the structure of agency, translating moral presence into procedural efficiency. In predictive and surveillance systems, the person is not encountered but processed, reduced to a sequence of probabilistic behaviors.<sup>16</sup> When existence is defined by function, transcendence disappears. A being created for participation in divine purpose becomes an object of management.

This collapse reveals that technological rationality cannot sustain an account of freedom. Bonhoeffer’s theology of responsibility clarifies why. In *Ethics*, he identifies freedom as existence before

---

<sup>14</sup> Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 49–53; Michael Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 190–93.

<sup>15</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin, 1968), 82–86; Hamza Yusuf, “Fitra: Human Nature and the Purpose of Creation,” *Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College* 2, no. 1 (2018): 14–22.

<sup>16</sup> James O. Finckenauer, “The Use of Artificial Intelligence for Surveillance in China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 4 (2021): 923–940; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); DARPA, *Next-Generation Nonsurgical Neurotechnology (N3) Program Summary* (Arlington, VA: Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 2022).

God and for others, a participation in divine command rather than autonomy of will.<sup>17</sup> Such freedom requires presence, response, and the capacity to bear consequence. Algorithmic systems, by contrast, act without relation and decide without presence. They achieve control by eliminating encounter, and in doing so they sever the very structure of moral being.

Technological progress therefore conceals metaphysical regression. The human person, created as *imago Dei*, becomes a managed entity rather than a moral agent. Still, the possibility of restoration remains. When technology serves rather than defines, it can still participate in the good. Medical diagnostics that preserve life and humanitarian logistics that protect the displaced reveal that tools may act rightly when ordered to covenantal purpose.<sup>18</sup> The issue is not intelligence but orientation, whether creation reflects divine relation or replaces it.

### **Constructive Proposal: A Theological Ethic of Stewardship**

A theological ethic of stewardship begins where technological mastery ends. The defining criterion for any use of AI is responsibility for the Other. Levinas locates ethics not in rule or outcome but in encounter; the face summons response, calling one to guard the life that appears before it.<sup>19</sup> When technology mediates rather than replaces that encounter, it serves human vocation. Tools exist to extend care, not to substitute for conscience.

Stewardship thus stands against domination. To steward creation is to participate in divine providence, to act as caretaker within a covenant not of control but of communion. This orientation resists both technological determinism and transhumanist ascent. Human creativity remains derivative, gifted rather than self-generated. Every act of making is bounded by dependence, a reminder that creation is entrusted, not possessed. Such stewardship orders innovation to service, not sovereignty, binding power to purpose.

---

<sup>17</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 220–226; see also John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and the Quest for a Political Ethic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 142–146.

<sup>18</sup> Rosalind Picard, “Affective Computing in Health Care,” *IEEE Transactions on Affective Computing* 13, no. 2 (2022): 730–743; UNHCR, *Artificial Intelligence and Data Management for Refugee Protection* (Geneva: UNHCR Innovation Service, 2021); Brent Waters, *Christian Moral Theology in the Emerging Technoculture: From Posthuman Back to Human* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 88–92.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194–196.

Global relational ontologies reinforce this ethic. *Ubuntu* and *fitra* translate stewardship into communal and spiritual accountability. *Ubuntu* grounds moral discernment in shared life, while *fitra* directs human action toward divine intention. Together they frame norms of transparency, restraint, and shared discernment, ensuring that knowledge serves wisdom and capability serves compassion.

The mirror now clears. In the transparency of stewardship, reflection becomes revelation. Humanity no longer seeks its image in the machine but learns to see through creation to the Source of all creativity. The mirror, then, no longer captures the divine image to its own end; it transmits glory, revealing what it means to create in relationship with God.

### **Conclusion: The Ontological Boundary of Worship**

The story returns to the mirror and the tower. AI's instrumental inversion repeats the ancient impulse of Babel, where creation sought to ascend by its own design. The tools humanity forged to serve purpose have begun to define it. In this reversal, the maker becomes the tool of its tools, mistaking power for participation. The *imago Dei* stands as the ontological limit to this ascent, anchoring human identity in relation rather than autonomy. Being is not engineered but received, and its fulfillment lies in worship rather than in optimization.

Philosophy, theology, and global metaphysics converge on the same truth: to be human is to participate in divine purpose, not to construct existence in one's own image. The recovery of this truth reorders knowledge itself. Wisdom arises not from control but from communion, not from mastery but from wonder.

The task before philosophers of religion is to recover a metaphysics adequate to technological modernity, one that names being as gift and restores worship as the proper posture of knowing. Only then can humanity resist becoming the tools of their own tools. The algorithmic mirror can only reflect what is fed into it. The divine mirror reveals what humanity is called to become.

Word Count: 3,704

## Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, 2:1552–1728. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Augustine. *Confessiones*.

Augustine. *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics*. Translated by Clifford J. Green. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

“China’s Skynet Surveillance System.” *The Atlantic*.

DARPA. *Next-Generation Nonsurgical Neurotechnology (N3) Program Summary*. Arlington, VA: Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 2022.

de Gruchy, John W. *Bonhoeffer and the Quest for a Political Ethic*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984.

Eze, Michael. *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Finckenauer, James O. “The Use of Artificial Intelligence for Surveillance in China.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 4 (2021): 923–940.

Goertzel, Ben. “AI and Transhumanism: Simulation, Uploading, and Synthetic Immortality.” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 29, no. 2 (2019): 33–48.

Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology.” In *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell, 311–341. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Hubbard, Ben. “Saudi Arabia’s NEOM: Vision, Control, and AI Governance.” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2025.

*Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (2022).

“Kenya’s AI Governance Platforms.” *Africa Tech Review*, November 20, 2024.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *God Without Being*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Musk, Elon. *Neuralink, Brain-Computer Fusion Trials 2025*. 2025.

- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. London: Unwin, 1968.
- Picard, Rosalind. "Affective Computing in Health Care." *IEEE Transactions on Affective Computing* 13, no. 2 (2022): 730–743.
- Ramose, Mogobe B. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books, 1999.
- Reuters. *India's Billion-Member Biometric Database Raises Privacy Fears*. March 29, 2016.
- Reuters. "Palantir Wins \$795 Million U.S. Army 'Project Maven' Extension." May 20, 2025.
- Sutherland, Dawn Lewis. *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025.
- Sutherland, Dawn Lewis. "From Babel to AI: Technology, Human Dignity, and Theological Ethics." Paper presented at the Tyndale Fellowship Philosophy of Religion Group, The Hayes, Derbyshire, UK, 2 July 2025.
- UNHCR. *Artificial Intelligence and Data Management for Refugee Protection*. Geneva: UNHCR Innovation Service, 2021.
- Waters, Brent. *Christian Moral Theology in the Emerging Technoculture: From Posthuman Back to Human*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014.
- Yamanaka, Shinya. "Reprogramming Human Somatic Cells to Pluripotency." *Cell* 126, no. 4 (2006): 663–676.
- Yusuf, Hamza. "Fitra: Human Nature and the Purpose of Creation." *Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College* 2, no. 1 (2018): 14–22.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019.