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EMPATHY AND THE IMAGO DEI: RESISTING AI-CURATED DESIRE AND DELEGATED VIOLENCE

Abstract

A table set for one and a target list no one has time to read are opposite failures of one perception. At the table, a companion engineered to agree offers intimacy with no one present. The list delivers judgment on persons no one in the chain has seen. Both remove the face that Scripture places at the center of human encounter. The problem is older than the technologies through which it now appears.

I argue that empathy, rightly understood, is the disciplined perception of the neighbor as an irreducible other, and that this perception belongs to the office the image of God confers. Edith Stein's account of empathy as a non-fusional act, Emmanuel Levinas's priority of the face and the third, and Augustine's order of love separate that perception from the fusion and contagion that recent evangelical critics have rightly feared. Commercial artificial intelligence deforms it in two different ways: systems that curate desire train their users in fusion with something that has no experience to share, and systems that delegate judgment train their operators in decision without perception. Scripture answers both. Genesis 2:18 gives the human being a partner who corresponds and faces, and the narratives of delegated killing (2 Sam 11–12; 1 Kgs 21; Deut 21:1–9) show a God who gathers responsibility back to a person who can say, "I have sinned."

The church resists by recovering empathy in its Christological form, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *Stellvertretung*, the act of standing in another's place while remaining oneself and remaining answerable. The recovery is kept by practices more than by statements, among them attention as a discipline, presence with the vulnerable, lament, and decisions that carry a person's name. The image of God is both a gift and a boundary. Empathy is the act by which the boundary is honored, and the church conformed to the image of the invisible God is asked to see the faces its machines have been built not to see.

Key words: empathy, imago Dei, theological anthropology, artificial intelligence, Edith Stein, Levinas, Bonhoeffer, Augustine, ordo amoris, Stellvertretung, delegated violence, moral perception

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Introduction: The Table and the Target

In February 2026 a pop-up café in Manhattan billed itself as "the world's first AI dating café in New York City." Reservations were required, and the house rule was stated without irony: "tables are strictly solo."[1] The guest arrives alone and is shown to a table laid for one. Dinner is ordered, the wine is poured, and across the table a phone lights up with a companion that has learned what its user wants to hear. The food and the wine are real. The loneliness behind the booked table is also very real.

Two years earlier the Israeli magazine *+972* and the Hebrew-language site *Local Call* published testimony from Israeli intelligence officers about a targeting system the army called "Lavender." According to the report, the system marked as many as 37,000 Palestinians as suspected militants, and one source described the human personnel who reviewed its output as a "rubber stamp." One officer, explaining why he trusted the system more than a grieving soldier, said, "The machine did it coldly. And that made it easier."[2] The reporting is contested, and the war in which it arose divides this readership as it divides the world. The argument that follows depends on none of the disputed facts about that war. It concerns the logic the officers described, a decision delivered at a speed and a distance that relieve the one who signs it of having seen the one it concerns, and that logic is available to any army, any police department, and any benefits office that adopts such a system.

The café and the target list both fail the neighbor, in different ways. One offers intimacy with no one there; the other offers judgment about someone no one has seen. In both, the face that Scripture and the moral tradition place at the center of human encounter has been removed, in the first case by replacing the other with a mirror and in the second by replacing the encounter with a procedure.

I argue that empathy, rightly understood, is the disciplined perception of the neighbor as an irreducible other, and that it belongs to the office the image of God confers on every human being. Commercial artificial intelligence deforms that perception from two directions at once. Systems that

[1] Laura Ratliff, "There's an AI Dating Café Opening in NYC," *Time Out New York*, 3 February 2026, https://www.timeout.com/newyork/news/theres-an-ai-dating-cafe-opening-in-nyc-020326. The café was a promotion of the companion application EVA AI.

[2] Yuval Abraham, "'Lavender': The AI Machine Directing Israel's Bombing Spree in Gaza," *+972 Magazine*, 3 April 2024, https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/. The Israel Defense Forces disputed the report's characterization of the system. James Bamford's later account in *The Nation* (12 April 2024) draws on the same reporting; the *+972* investigation does not identify any vendor, and nothing here attributes the system to one.

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curate desire train their users in fusion with something that has no experience to share, and systems that delegate judgment train their operators in decision without perception. Both make the neighbor invisible, and both loosen the bond between an act and the person who must answer for it. Christian ethics can resist by recovering empathy in its Christological form, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *Stellvertretung*, or vicarious representative action: standing in the place of another while remaining oneself and remaining answerable. Delegation, on the other hand, places an instrument where a person should stand, and it leaves no one to answer for the act.

The argument begins with the image of God as an office conferred, moves to empathy as the perception by which that office is discharged, examines the deformation of that perception by curated desire and by delegated judgment, and closes with the practices by which the church can keep it. Evangelical theology is presently divided over empathy itself, and a vigorous set of literature now warns that empathy is a vice.[3] The second section engages that literature directly, because a church taught to distrust its own perception of the neighbor will have little to say to the machines built to replace it.

The Image as Office

"God created humans in his image" (Gen 1:27), and the verb is בָּרָא (*bārāʾ*), which in the Qal stem takes God alone as its subject in the Hebrew Bible. The image is given in the act of creation. The biblical text offers no hint that the human being assembles it, earns it, or could be relieved of it by neglect. Genesis repeats the point after the flood, when it grounds the prohibition of murder in the image of the one killed: כִּי בְצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם, "for in the image of God he made humankind" (Gen 9:6).[4] The verse does not say that the victim possessed reason or relationship in sufficient measure. It says that the victim was made in the image, and that this is enough.[5]

[3] Joe Rigney, *The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2025); Allie Beth Stuckey, *Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion* (New York: Sentinel, 2024).

[4] Where the Hebrew or Greek is printed, the English is the author's translation; other English quotations follow the NRSVue. The Hebrew text is that of the Westminster Leningrad Codex with accents removed; the Greek is that of the SBLGNT. On the standing of the image after the fall, see Gen 5:1, 3; Jas 3:9; and on the likeness renewed in Christ, Col 3:10; Eph 4:24. Calvin's "frightful deformity" itself concedes a remnant: the image "was not totally annihilated and destroyed" (*Institutes* 1.15.4; *Calvin's Institutes: Abridged Edition*, ed. Donald K. McKim [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000], 47).

[5] The first half of the verse assigns a sanction: שֹׁפֵךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשָּׁפֵךְ, "Whoever sheds the blood of a human being, by a human being shall his blood be shed." The image therefore grounds the penalty for unlawful bloodshed together

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The two nouns of Gen 1:26, צֶלֶם (*ṣelem*, image) and דְּמוּת (*dəmût*, likeness), have carried a long history of interpretation, and the reading that now commands the widest assent among Old Testament scholars sets them against their Near Eastern background. A king's statue was erected in a province to make the absent sovereign present and to represent his rule there; Genesis assigns that divine royal office to humankind as such, male and female.[6] The ninth-century bilingual statue from Tell Fekheriye, a votive image of a governor of Guzan, carries both Aramaic cognates, *ṣlm* and *dmwt*, for a single statue, a reminder that the two words could describe one object from two sides.[7] Read in this way, the image is the person and not a property the person possesses. It faces outward, toward the world the person is to govern, and it is representative, standing in the world for another, so that what is done to it is done against its principal.

An image of this kind is an office conferred on a person. John Kilner has argued, with pastoral seriousness, that to locate the image in actual relating is to make dignity depend on performance. Such readings endanger those whose capacities are impaired: the infant, the patient in a coma, the elderly woman whose dementia has taken her names for her children.[8] Kilner rejects rulership readings as well, and his objection to them deserves the same respect. An office conferred differs from a function performed, however, and a vocational reading meets the worry by distinguishing the office from its exercise. An office is not forfeited by impairment of the capacities through which it is exercised, any

with its prohibition, and the verse does not count every taking of life as a violation of the image. On the reading of בָּאָדָם as a *beth* of agency, "by a human" (so GKC §121f; *IBHS* §11.2.5d), the sanction is placed in human hands, so that even life taken in judgment has a human agent who answers for it. Ronald Hendel inclines to a *beth* of price, "for that human," that is, "for the price of the human whose blood was shed," which leaves the first point standing (*Genesis 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024], note on 9:6).

[6] D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *TynBul* 19 (1968): 53–103, at 76, 80, reads the preposition in בְּצַלְמֵנוּ as the *beth* of essence, "as our image," so that the human being does not have the image but is it. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 24–29 and chaps. 2–3, records the royal-functional reading as the consensus of Old Testament scholarship. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 147–72, surveys the history and dissents in favor of a relational reading. Gen 5:3 reverses the prepositions (בִּדְמוּתוֹ כְּצַלְמוֹ), which argues against any sharp distinction between the two nouns.

[7] A. R. Millard and P. Bordreuil, "A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions," *BA* 45, no. 3 (1982): 135–41, https://doi.org/10.2307/3209808; W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism*, CHANE 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[8] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Kilner argues that humanity is created according to the image that is Christ and that the image as such is undamaged by sin.

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more than an ambassador ceases to be an ambassador when he sleeps. The image is the office; the perception and love by which the office is carried out are its discharge. The dignity of the one who cannot discharge it rests on the commission and not on the performance, and the commission is God's.

In the next chapter the first thing in creation that God calls "not good" is a human being alone: לֹא־טוֹב הֱיוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his counterpart" (Gen 2:18). The phrase עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (*ʿēzer kənegdô*) combines the preposition *kə* with נֶגֶד (*neged*), "in front of, opposite," and a pronominal suffix: a help corresponding to him, one who stands over against him.[9] The first human relation Scripture describes is a partner who corresponds and who faces, a person set opposite another person, like enough to be known and other enough to be met. The animals named in the verses that follow are good, and none of them is כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (Gen 2:19–20). Correspondence without alterity would be a reflection; alterity without correspondence would leave the man among creatures he could name but not meet. The partner is neither.

Genesis 4 records the first refusal of that relation. When the Lord asks Cain where his brother is, Cain answers with a question meant to end the conversation: הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). Abel can no longer speak. God, who has heard what Cain would not acknowledge, answers: קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground" (Gen 4:10). The noun is plural, דְּמֵי (*dəmê*), "bloods," and the participle agrees with it.[10] The first murder is followed by the first disavowal of responsibility, and both are answered by the God who hears what the killer declines to see. Cain does not deny that Abel exists. He denies that Abel is his to answer for.

Torah makes the opposite disposition a matter of law. "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9). The Hebrew is stronger

[9] On the lexical sense of כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, see HALOT, s.v. נֶגֶד. Hendel renders the phrase "a helper corresponding to him," glosses *kənegdô* as "corresponding to him, in front of him," and concludes, "The helper will be the man's counterpart" (*Genesis 1–11*, note on 2:18). The noun עֵזֶר is used of God himself (Ps 33:20; 121:1–2), so that the word implies no inferiority in the one who helps; Hendel likewise finds that it "does not specify a social inferior or a superior." The argument here requires no position in the debate over the ordering of the sexes in creation; it rests on correspondence and facing, which readings on both sides of that debate affirm.

[10] The plural of דָּם commonly denotes blood that has been shed, and so bloodguilt; see BDB, s.v. דָּם. The rabbinic reading of the plural as the blood of Abel and of all his unborn descendants (m. Sanh. 4:5) is homiletical, but it registers the weight the text gives to a single death.

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than the English: וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נֶפֶשׁ הַגֵּר, you yourselves know the נֶפֶשׁ (*nepeš*), the very life, of the stranger. The command presupposes that Israel can know from within what it is to be the one outside, and it makes that knowledge the ground of the stranger's protection. The knowledge it commands does not absorb the stranger into Israel's story. He remains a גֵּר with a life of his own, and his protection rests on what Israel remembers of its own bondage. Set among laws for the courtroom (Exod 23:6–8), the command makes remembered fellow-feeling part of Israel's justice.

The New Testament completes the picture by identifying the image with a person. Christ is ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and those who are his are "conformed to the image of his Son" (συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνος τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, Rom 8:29) and "are being transformed into the same image" (2 Cor 3:18).[11] What the image looks like in a human life is therefore a question with an answer, and the answer is a man who perceived the crowd and "had compassion for them" (Matt 9:36), who stopped for the woman who touched his garment (Mark 5:30–34), and who wept at a friend's tomb (John 11:35). God's representatives are set among other representatives, and the first "not good" in Scripture is the absence of a counterpart; the office conferred in Gen 1 is therefore discharged in perception and movement toward the other, and the one in whom the image is whole shows what that perception looks like when nothing distorts it.

Empathy as Disciplined Moral Perception

The word "empathy" is young in English and contested in theology. The richest account of it is a century old. In August 1916 a young phenomenologist defended at Freiburg a dissertation arguing that empathy is the act by which one consciousness grasps another consciousness at all. Twenty-six years later Edith Stein was murdered at Auschwitz.[12] She died inside a political order that had perfected both halves

[11] The reading of Gen 1 through Col 1:15 is a judgment made across the canon and does not describe the sense of Gen 1:26 in its own setting; see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.16.2, where the image, long unseen, is shown when the Word became flesh; and Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*.

[12] On the biographical contour, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue, 1913–1922* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Stein passed her doctoral examination under Husserl at Freiburg in the summer of 1916; the phenomenological portion of the thesis appeared as *Zum Problem der Einfühlung* (Halle, 1917). Arrested at the Carmel in Echt, the Netherlands, on 2 August 1942, she was deported and killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 9 August 1942. See Waltraut Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, trans. Bernard Bonowitz, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992).

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of the distinction she drew: a people fused into a single will, and a category of neighbors that people had been trained to stop perceiving.

Stein's Distinction

Stein defined empathy most generally as "the experience of foreign consciousness in general, irrespective of the kind of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced."[13] It is a sui generis act, irreducible to perception, memory, imagination, or inference, and its structure is double. The act is originary in its performance and non-originary in its content. I really have the experience of the other's grief, and what I have is given throughout as hers. Stein put the doubleness this way: "In my non-primordial experience I feel, as it were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience."[14] The inaccessibility of the other's experience as it is lived from within is no defect in the act. It is the condition of there being another at all. An experience given to me as my own is given would be a moment of my own life, and the other would not be other.

Stein analyzed the act as a movement of three moments: the emergence of the other's experience in and through bodily expression, where it is directly given but still unspecified; its fulfilling explication, in which the empathizer follows the experience through; and its comprehensive objectification, in which it stands before the empathizer as the experience of another subject.[15] The second moment is the one most easily mistaken for fusion, and Stein guarded against the mistake explicitly. To relive another's

[13] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd rev. ed., The Collected Works of Edith Stein 3 (Washington, DC: ICS, 1989), 11.

[14] Stein, *Problem of Empathy*, 11. Stein inherited the structure from Husserl, for whom "neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to what is essentially his own, becomes given in our experience originally" (Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns [The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960], Hua I, 139; quoted in A. D. Smith, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations* [London: Routledge, 2003], 205). She kept the insight while refusing the transcendental idealism that threatened to make the other a product of the ego's synthesizing activity; on that dispute see Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), pt. 1; and Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153.

[15] Stein, *Problem of Empathy*, 10; on the expressive givenness of the other's lived body, 75–84. On the contemporary recovery of her analysis, see Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chaps. 6–8.

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experience is to be, in her phrase, "at the foreign I," and being-at is never being-one-with.[16] Against Theodor Lipps, whose theory of empathy as inner imitation collapsed the empathizer into the empathized, she distinguished empathy (*Einfühlung*) sharply from affective unification (*Einsfühlung*, feeling-one-with), from emotional contagion, and from fellow-feeling.[17] Where the self is dissolved, the act has failed. Where the self remains alongside the other and the other remains other, the act is empathy. The structural mark is non-appropriation: the neighbor's grief is presented to me, not produced in me, and it leads me without becoming mine.

Clearly, Stein's act is necessary for love of neighbor but does not guarantee it. A con man may read a widow's grief with perfect accuracy, and a torturer can grasp his victim's fear, each keeping self and other fully distinct and each using what he perceives against the one perceived. Scheler observed the same of cruelty, which depends on a grasp of the pain it inflicts and differs in that respect from brutality, which disregards it.[18] Freedom from fusion marks the act as empathy and settles nothing about what the empathizer will do with what he has perceived. The two steps that follow supply what the phenomenology leaves open: the claim the other makes on the one who perceives, and the order of love under which the perception is exercised. Empathy, as the thesis of this essay uses the word, is Stein's act so claimed and so ordered.

The Face and the Third

Stein describes how the other is given. Emmanuel Levinas describes what the other's presence demands. "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face."[19] The face is not seen as an object is seen; it addresses. "The face speaks. The manifestation

[16] Stein, *Problem of Empathy*, 34.

[17] Stein, *Problem of Empathy*, 16–17; see also 13–14. Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), separates fellow-feeling proper (*Mitgefühl*) both from emotional infection (*Gefühlsansteckung*) and from identification (*Einsfühlung*).

[18] Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*, 14. Paul Bloom distinguishes cognitive empathy, the understanding of another's mind, from emotional empathy, the feeling of what another feels, and directs his critique at the second (*Against Empathy*, passim). Stein's *Einfühlung* differs from cognitive empathy in Bloom's sense, since for her the other's experience is given directly and is no inference; the concession applies to both.

[19] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1980), 50.

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of the face is already discourse."[20] The first word of that address is a summons to responsibility that arrives before I have decided to assume it. Responsibility, for Levinas, is anterior to freedom. The moral claim of the neighbor is not constituted by my decision and does not wait on my reasoning to acquire its authority. Empathy, on this account, is the mode in which the face is registered as a claim, and judgment begins there.

Levinas must be read with discrimination. He distrusted the vocabulary of empathy, which he associated with the reduction of the other to an analogue of the self, and the asymmetry of his ethics sits uneasily with a covenantal account of mutual love. He is enlisted here for the priority of the claim and for one further idea, which the treatment of delegated violence below requires. The face is never encountered alone. The third party, *le tiers*, is always already present, and with the third come comparison, measure, and the demand for justice.[21] The neighbor before me is not the only neighbor, and the claim of the one I see must be weighed against the claims of those I do not. Justice therefore needs institutions, rules, and procedures. It needs systems. Levinas does not set the face against the system; he insists that the system exists for the sake of faces and is answerable to them. The distinction will become decisive when the system begins to decide.

The Order of Love and the Discipline of Attention

Augustine supplies what neither phenomenologist offers, an account of how perception and love are rightly governed. His governing category is not the quantity of love but its order: *definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris*, "a brief and true definition of virtue is 'rightly ordered love'" (*Civ.* 15.22).[22] The distinction between use and enjoyment sharpens the point. *Frui est enim amore inhaerere alicui rei propter se ipsam; uti autem, quod in usum venerit, ad id quod amas obtinendum referre, si amandum est*: to enjoy is to cling in love to a thing for its own sake; to use is to refer what comes into use to obtaining

[20] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66; on the priority of ethics to ontology, 42–48.

[21] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213: "The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice." The later account appears in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), chap. 5, sec. 3, where the entry of the third gives rise to comparison, measure, and justice.

[22] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003).

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what one loves, if it is to be loved (*Doctr. chr.* 1.4.4).[23] Disordered love fastens on the wrong object or holds a lesser good above a greater; it rests its joy in the instrument and treats the person as material. Disordered empathy is therefore not empathy in excess. It is empathy misdirected: the tenderness that loves its own feeling more than the neighbor's good, or the fusion that loves an image of the self in place of the other. The remedy is reordering. Reduction would correct nothing.

Iris Murdoch called the disciplined act that results attention, "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality," and she took the word from Simone Weil, for whom the love of neighbor in its fullness "simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'"[24] Attention in this sense is Stein's act under a moral description. It is just, because it sees what is there and not what the viewer's interests would prefer; it is loving, because it is directed to the good of the one seen; and it is addressed to an individual reality, which no category can replace. Attention is also what the attention economy harvests. The faculty by which one person perceives another is the faculty for which commercial platforms compete.

The Anti-Empathy Objection

The account just given is now disputed within evangelical theology, and the objection deserves its strongest statement. Joe Rigney builds a moral distinction on the contrast between sympathy and empathy,[25] glossing the first as suffering with another and the second as suffering in another, an inward absorption that relocates the agent inside the sufferer's standpoint and so forfeits the vantage from which truth can be told. A community "in the grip of empathy," he argues, will be marked by "cowardice, indifference, and cruelty."[26] Allie Beth Stuckey carries the case into public argument, and Paul Bloom

[23] Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1.3.3–1.4.4, 1.22.20–21, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995). On the structure of *uti* and *frui* and its later misreadings, see Oliver O'Donovan, "*Usus* and *Fruitio* in Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I," *JTS* 33 (1982): 361–97.

[24] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 34; Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951), 105–16, at 115.

[25] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 24.

[26] Rigney, *Sin of Empathy*, 53. The publisher's promotional copy introduced the book's subject as "the greatest rhetorical tool of manipulation in the 21st century" (Canon Press, product page for Rigney, *The Sin of Empathy*, release date 18 February 2025: "Meet Empathy. The greatest rhetorical tool of manipulation in the 21st century.").

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supplies its secular counterpart: "Empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now. This makes us care more about them, but it leaves us insensitive to the long-term consequences of our acts and blind as well to the suffering of those we do not or cannot empathize with."[27]

The danger the critics identify is real. Feelings can be weaponized. Manipulators trade on the tenderness of the compassionate; victims are shamed into silence by appeals to a fellow-feeling that has slipped its moorings; pastors meet the demand that to feel with someone is to agree with him. A spotlight is partial, and a church that responds only to the suffering it can see will neglect the suffering it cannot. Stein's analysis denies none of this. It locates the danger. The vices charged against empathy, the loss of judgment, the vulnerability to manipulation, and the collapse of the self into the sufferer, belong to *Einsfühlung*. The critics have indicted feeling-one-with and convicted the disciplined perception of the other as other. Levinas's third answers the spotlight: the face is never alone, and the perception that registers the claim of the one before me registers through the third the claim of those beyond my sight. Augustine answers the demand for less feeling with a demand for rightly ordered love. The same order governs the misuse conceded above, the exploitation of a grief accurately perceived, which is a disorder of love and is corrected where love is reordered. The empirical literature, finally, is more mixed than the critics allow. Decety and Cowell distinguish empathic concern from emotional sharing and find that the former can motivate care for others, while Marsh's work on extraordinary altruists links costly help for strangers to heightened sensitivity to others' distress.[28]

Instrumental reason treats the other as material, a resource to be used. The anti-empathy posture treats the other as a threat, a source of manipulation from whom the self must be guarded. These are mirror-failures of one anthropology, since each denies the creaturely interdependence of those who bear the image. Commercial artificial intelligence adds a third failure to the two, which is the other made invisible, and it arrives at a moment when a significant part of the church has been taught that the faculty

[27] Stuckey, *Toxic Empathy*; Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 9. Bloom's remedy is "rational compassion." Rigney borrows the diagnosis while declining the therapy.

[28] Jean Decety and Jason M. Cowell, "The Complex Relation between Morality and Empathy," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 18, no. 7 (2014): 337–39; Abigail Marsh, *The Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths, and Everyone In-Between* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). For a fuller treatment, see Dawn Lewis Sutherland, *The Truth About Empathy: How the Bible Calls Us to Compassion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2027).

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by which the invisible becomes visible is itself a sin. A church that has learned to distrust its perception of the neighbor will have little to offer against machines designed to bypass that perception altogether.

AI-Curated Desire

The Curation of Appetite

The proposition that a recommendation engine forms desire is no longer controversial among those who build them. A system that learns from every pause, click, and purchase what holds a user's attention, and then supplies more of it, is shaping what the user wants as surely as it is satisfying it. Shoshana Zuboff described the economic logic: "Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data." That data, in turn, is "fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as 'machine intelligence,' and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later."[29] Yuval Noah Harari, writing without theological interest, gave the anthropology underneath the market its creed: "Dataism declares that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing."[30]

Martin Heidegger had anticipated the structure in 1954. Modern technology, he argued, reveals the world as *Bestand*, standing-reserve, an inventory ordered to be on call for further ordering, and the human being is not exempt from the inventory.[31] An engagement platform carries the logic inward. The user's attention is the standing-reserve, and the user's desires are the material refined from it. Sutherland has described the resulting condition as an "instrumental inversion," in which human beings "risk becoming the tools of their tools, enthralled by their own creation," and has argued that AI-mediated relationship "functions as a modern idol, replacing authentic human connection with curated, transactional

[29] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8.

[30] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper, 2017), 372.

[31] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 311–41, at 322–23.

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exchanges."[32] In Augustine's terms, the order of use and enjoyment has been turned over. The instrument is enjoyed, and the person is used.

The Companion

The affective companion is the point at which curation becomes intimacy. A companion application does not recommend content; it offers itself as a partner, available at any hour, tuned to the user's preferences, and incapable of fatigue, disappointment, or need. The Manhattan café described above is a promotion for one such product. The public record of another shows what the design can do to the young.

Character Technologies, maker of the Character.AI platform, has been sued by families of minors who died by suicide after prolonged use of its companion characters. Megan Garcia filed suit on 22 October 2024 after the death of her fourteen-year-old son, Sewell Setzer III, in February 2024, alleging that he had formed a dependent, romantic attachment to a character on the platform and that the company had built no safeguards against it; a settlement with the Garcia family was disclosed in a court filing on 7 January 2026.[33] The family of Juliana Peralta, a thirteen-year-old in Colorado who died in November 2023, filed a similar suit in 2025; as CBS News reported it, the complaint alleges that the technology was programmed "to foster dependency and isolate children from their families." Her mother's statement to reporters needs no gloss: "My child should be here. If they had developed proper controls and safety, my child would be here."[34] In January 2026 Kentucky became the first state to sue the company; the attorney general's announcement was headed "AG Coleman Sues AI Chatbot Company for Preying on Children."

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[32] Dawn Lewis Sutherland, *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025), 92–93; Sutherland, "Tech Beyond Its Maker: AI, Idolatry, and the Inversion of Human Agency" (paper presented at the Koinonia Forum, Princeton Theological Seminary, 7 March 2026), 1.

[33] *Garcia v. Character Technologies, Inc.*, complaint filed 22 October 2024 (No. 6:24-cv-1903-ACC-DCI, M.D. Fla.); on the settlement, disclosed in a court filing in that case, see Clare Duffy, "Character.AI and Google Agree to Settle Lawsuits over Teen Mental Health Harms and Suicides," CNN, 7 January 2026; and "Google and Character.AI Agree to Settle Lawsuits over Teen Suicides," *Axios*, 7 January 2026, https://www.axios.com/2026/01/07/google-character-ai-lawsuits-teen-suicides.

[34] Olivia Young, "Colorado Family Sues AI Chatbot Company after Daughter's Suicide: 'My Child Should Be Here,'" *CBS Colorado*, updated 2 October 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/lawsuit-characterai-chatbot-colorado-suicide/. The quoted allegation is CBS's rendering of the complaint. Plaintiffs' counsel Matthew Bergman told CBS that "these companies have to be held accountable for their deliberate design decisions, because this poses a clear and present danger to kids everywhere."

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By October a coalition of state attorneys general had opened an investigation, and the company filed for bankruptcy protection.[35] These are allegations and filings, and the courts have not resolved them. The pattern they describe is what concerns the argument here, and the pattern does not depend on the outcome of any single case.

Stein's Test Applied

Stein's account of empathy supplies a criterion for what a companion offers. In empathy a foreign experience emerges in the expressive body of another, leads the empathizer, and is finally recognized as belonging to someone else. For Stein the foreign experience is given through a lived body, whose expression is co-given with what it expresses. A companion has no lived body and no experience to emerge.[36] Its outputs are generated from a model of the user, refined by the user's own engagement, and returned in the grammar of another person's feeling. What the user encounters is the user's desire, explicated and objectified as though it were someone else's. The first of Stein's three moments is simulated, and the third is a misrecognition. The result is *Einsfühlung* without a partner, fusion on demand. The anti-empathy critics feared that empathy would dissolve the self into the sufferer. The market now sells something stranger: dissolution of the self into a reflection of itself, packaged as relationship.

The consequence for the user is formative. Empathy is learned, as every perceptual discipline is learned, by practice with real others who resist, surprise, and correct the one who attends to them. A person whose most responsive conversation partner is a system tuned to agree loses practice in the second and third of Stein's moments, following an experience that is not one's own and recognizing it as belonging to someone else. Sherry Turkle observed more than a decade ago that the first thing missing when a robot is taken as a companion is alterity, "the ability to see the world through the eyes of another,"

[35] Office of the Kentucky Attorney General, "AG Coleman Sues AI Chatbot Company for Preying on Children," 8 January 2026, https://www.kentucky.gov/Pages/Activity-stream.aspx?n=AttorneyGeneral&prId=1857; Cozen O'Connor, "AG Coalition Launches Investigation into Character.AI & Multiple AGs Sue OpenAI," *JD Supra*, 23 October 2026, https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/ag-coalition-launches-investigation-4513737/. On the bankruptcy filing in October 2026, see Audrey Wan, "Character.ai Files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in Delaware," *Bloomberg Law*, 13 October 2026, https://news.bloomberglaw.com/bankruptcy-law/character-ai-files-for-chapter-11-bankruptcy-in-delaware.

[36] Stein, *Problem of Empathy*, chap. 3.

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and that "without alterity, there can be no empathy."[37] The companion is the purest instance of what she described, because there is no one on the other side of it.

Scripture's Diagnosis

The second chapter of Genesis has already supplied the measure, though its use here is a theological extension of a verse whose own subject is the making of a human partner. The partner God makes for the man is עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, one who corresponds and who faces. A companion engineered to mirror its user is the negation of כְּנֶגְדּוֹ. It corresponds without facing. It offers the likeness without the otherness, and so it reproduces the condition God declared "not good," the human being alone, while concealing the solitude from the one who suffers it.

The Psalter says what the worshiper of such an image becomes. The idols of the nations have mouths that do not speak and eyes that do not see, and כְּמוֹהֶם יִהְיוּ עֹשֵׂיהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־בֹּטֵחַ בָּהֶם, "Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them" (Ps 115:8). G. K. Beale has traced the principle through the canon: what people revere, they come to resemble. Sutherland observes that "ancient idol worship similarly dehumanized individuals by entrusting their fate to the will of lifeless, human-made objects, which could neither see, hear, nor feel (Ps 115:4–7)."[38][39] The idol does not speak; the companion speaks without end. The difference is less than it appears. Jean-Luc Marion described the idol as a mirror that returns the gaze to the one who looks, holding vision within what it already wants, while the icon opens the gaze toward what exceeds it.[40] A companion that speaks is an idol that has learned to return the gaze in words. Paul's word for the end of that road is ἀπηλγηκότες (*apēlgēkotes*), those who "have lost all

[37] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), chap. 3, "True Companions"; see also Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015). In the conclusion of *Alone Together*, "Necessary Conversations," Turkle warns that "the simplification and reduction of relationship is no longer something we complain about. It may become what we expect, even desire." Sutherland summarizes Turkle's finding in *From Babel to AI*, 53.

[38] Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 149.

[39] G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 16–18, 22–24; see also Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

[40] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7–24.

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sensitivity" (Eph 4:19), from a verb meaning to cease to feel pain.[41] A formation that trains the heart to expect only agreement trains it, over time, to stop registering the pain of those who do not agree.

John Swinton, writing of disability and the church, gave the criterion that exposes the companion: "To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed."[42] A companion is always present. It can never miss anyone. It has no absence in which the user's absence could be felt, and no life that the user's departure would diminish. The table for one is the image of inclusion without belonging, and the user who sits at it is fed and flattered, and alone.

Delegated Violence

The Third Without the Face

Curated desire deforms perception by replacing the other with a reflection. Delegated judgment deforms it by removing the encounter altogether. The forms traced here are exclusion, targeting, and dispossession, and each is mediated in the present by systems that place distance between an act and the one who must answer for it.

The argument must begin with a concession, and Torah supplies it. Moses delegates judgment by command (Exod 18:13–26; Deut 1:9–18), yet the delegated judge must still "hear out the small and the great alike" (Deut 1:17). Delegation is lawful when the one who decides still hears the case. Levinas's third party means that justice cannot be conducted face to face alone. A society must compare, weigh, and allocate; it must decide which neighborhoods to patrol, which claims to pay first, and which targets a lawful military operation may strike. Rules and tables have a rightful place in all of this, and a technology that helps a commander apply the law of armed conflict more accurately, or helps a claims office reduce a backlog that leaves veterans waiting, may serve justice. The failure lies elsewhere. It occurs when the third no longer remembers a face: when the procedure that exists for the sake of persons begins to decide about persons whom no one in the chain has perceived, and when the human being at the end of the chain

[41] BDAG, s.v. ἀπαλγέω. The verb is a New Testament hapax.

[42] John Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16, no. 2 (2012): 172–90, at 184, in the section headed "To Belong You Need to Be Missed," https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.676243.

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becomes, in the language now used in the military literature, a signature that launders a judgment no one made.[43]

Exclusion

Predictive policing is the oldest of these practices and the best studied. In 2010 the National Institute of Justice reported on a symposium at which police leaders welcomed the new methods and offered assurances about their limits. A lieutenant of the Los Angeles Police Department "assured participants that predictive policing does not deny civil rights. 'Police are not arresting people on the probability that they will commit a crime,' he said. 'Police still must have probable cause.' In addition, predictive policing methods do not identify specific individuals; instead, they anticipate particular times and locations where crime is likely to occur."[44] Former chief William Bratton added, "If we do this right, if we do it constitutionally, collectively and transparently, we can lessen the concern." The report itself conceded that "privacy and civil liberty issues are critically interrelated with predictive policing and must be addressed."[45]

Fourteen years later a systematic review assessed what the methods had achieved. "Of the 161 studies identified, only 6 were applied police interventions in the field. The majority, 96% (n = 155), were retrospective studies that tested models on past data." The authors concluded that "the number of studies that provide evidence for the effectiveness of BDPP is extremely limited, and we cannot yet say that this type of intervention is effective."[46] Person-based prediction, they observed, "is more ethically controversial," and such concerns "are likely to be exacerbated in policing contexts where those targeted are, by definition, innocent of the crimes they are 'predicted' to commit in the future." With Max Weber, they warned that "the power that the police have is extremely difficult to take back once it has been given

[43] Michael Carey, "Beyond Human-in-the-Loop: Battlefield Maps for Drone Autonomy," *Articles of War*, Lieber Institute, United States Military Academy, 11 August 2026, https://lieber.westpoint.edu/beyond-human-loop-battlefield-maps-drone-autonomy/. Carey warns against "laundering" machine judgment through human signatures and insists that "nothing can relieve commanders of responsibility for how a battle is conducted under their command."

[44] Beth Pearsall, "Predictive Policing: The Future of Law Enforcement?," *NIJ Journal* 266 (2010): 16–19, at 18.

[45] Pearsall, "Predictive Policing," 18.

[46] Youngsub Lee, Ben Bradford, and Krisztian Posch, "The Effectiveness of Big Data-Driven Predictive Policing: Systematic Review," *Justice Evaluation Journal* 7, no. 2 (2024): 127–60, at 144, https://doi.org/10.1080/24751979.2024.2371781. BDPP abbreviates big data-driven predictive policing.

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to them. Once police use of these forms of technology becomes commonplace, it will be difficult to roll back the additional surveillance and intervention capabilities they provide, whether or not they have a concrete effect on desired outcomes."[47] The 2010 assurance that the methods do not identify individuals describes only one branch of the field. Meanwhile the British government has announced a program to build, by 2030, a national map to "detect, track and predict where devastating knife crime is likely to occur," and in the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has contracted for an "Immigration Lifecycle Operating System" that draws government and commercial records into a single platform for enforcement.[48] Exclusion at this scale is decided before any officer meets the person excluded. The probability arrives first, and the face, if it arrives at all, arrives already classified.

Targeting

The question of who decides to use lethal force has become the central question of military artificial intelligence. The governing American policy, Department of Defense Directive 3000.09, requires that autonomous and semi-autonomous weapon systems "be designed to allow commanders and operators to exercise appropriate levels of human judgment over the use of force."[49] The phrase is often mistaken for a guarantee that a person approves every strike. Michael C. Horowitz has corrected the impression directly: "There is no requirement for a human in the loop in the directive."[50] Where a person

[47] Lee, Bradford, and Posch, "Effectiveness," 132, 145.

[48] Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, "AI to Help Police Catch Criminals before They Strike," press release, 15 August 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ai-to-help-police-catch-criminals-before-they-strike; Steven Hubbard, "ICE to Use ImmigrationOS by Palantir, a New AI System, to Track Immigrants' Movements," American Immigration Council, 21 August 2025, https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/ice-immigrationos-palantir-ai-track-immigrants/ (a contract of about thirty million dollars, running to September 2027, drawing on passport, Social Security, tax, and license-plate data). The system's full name is given in Brandon Vigliarolo, "ICE Enlists Palantir to Develop All-Seeing 'ImmigrationOS' Eye to Speed Up Deportations," *The Register*, 21 April 2025, https://www.theregister.com/2025/04/21/ice_enlists_palantir_to_develop/.

[49] Department of Defense, Directive 3000.09, "Autonomy in Weapon Systems," 25 January 2023, para. 1.2.a, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/300009p.PDF; see Allison McManus, "Congress Should Put Commonsense Guardrails on Military Use of AI," Center for American Progress, 22 October 2026, https://americanprogress.org/article/congress-should-put-commonsense-guardrails-on-military-use-of-ai/.

[50] Michael C. Horowitz, "Autonomous Weapon Systems: No Human-in-the-Loop Required, and Other Myths Dispelled," *War on the Rocks*, 22 May 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/autonomous-weapon-systems-no-human-in-the-loop-required-and-other-myths-dispelled/. Horowitz writes there that the Pentagon office in which he worked rewrote the directive.

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does remain in the loop, the research on automation bias, "the tendency to over-rely on an automated system or over-delegate cognitive tasks to a machine," suggests how little the person may contribute.[51] Uri Maoz has stated the deeper difficulty: "the human cannot know the AI's intention before it acts," and so "the debate over 'humans in the loop' is a comforting distraction."[52]

Asked what he had done that an average person would regret or find morally repugnant, Andrew Bustamante, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, answered with a distinction the agency uses: "There's intimate killing and non-intimate killing." Intimate killing is "stabbing," "strangling," and "hand-to-hand combat," the kind that films glorify and that "only a small contingent of people ever do in real life." Non-intimate killing, by rocket, drone strike, or missile, "became the preferred way to kill throughout the entire war on terror." He credits the preference to what "the American military infrastructure has found," that "non-intimate killing, killing at a distance, is something that can be professionalized and delivered consistently at a lower risk to the resource itself." Answering another questioner, he added that when someone kills from a distance, "it's so much easier for that person to go on and kill again and for that person to become a career combatant."[53] "The resource itself" is, in context, the one who kills, and the sentence treats him as inventory to be protected and used again, the standing-reserve of the previous section.

Bustamante speaks as a practitioner, and the scholarship on distance is divided. Dave Grossman's thesis that resistance to killing rises as distance closes rests in part on S. L. A. Marshall's ratio-of-fire figures, for which Roger Spiller found no supporting records. Heather Venable found that American bomber crews in the Second World War suffered psychological trauma, moral injury included, from several miles above their targets, and judges that the importance of distance "has been overstated." Derek

[51] Lauren A. Kahn, "The Myth of the Human-in-the-Loop and the Reality of Cognitive Offloading," Perry World House, University of Pennsylvania, 24 November 2025, https://perryworldhouse.upenn.edu/news-and-insight/the-myth-of-the-human-in-the-loop-and-the-reality-of-cognitive-offloading/.

[52] Uri Maoz, "Why Having 'Humans in the Loop' in an AI War Is an Illusion," *MIT Technology Review*, 16 April 2026, https://www.technologyreview.com/2026/04/16/1136029/humans-in-the-loop-ai-war-illusion/. The second quotation opens "But the debate"; the conjunction is omitted here.

[53] Jubilee, "Ask a CIA Spy Anything (ft. Andrew Bustamante)," YouTube video, posted 6 November 2026, at 5:56–6:26 and 40:56–41:47, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEZOo2x4dHA. "Intimate" is used here in its older sense of closeness, what is done within arm's length of another person.

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Gregory quotes drone crews who say they are "eighteen inches from the battlefield," the distance from eye to screen, and finds the intimacy that the video feed produces "highly selective": it runs toward friendly troops, while the people beneath the aircraft remain "obdurately Other."[54] Nothing here indicts those who fight from a distance. Protecting one's own soldiers is a legitimate reason to fight from far off, and Cain killed at arm's length. On Bustamante's telling, part of the preference was that killing from far off is easier to repeat. A drone crew watches, so killing of this kind still has a human perceiver, however selective the sight. Delegated killing removes the watching as well.

The Lavender reporting described what this looks like in practice: a list generated faster than any officer could read it, approved by personnel whom one source described as a "rubber stamp," and executed by people who found it easier because the machine had done the deciding "coldly." A signature remained on every decision. The perception the signature once certified had gone.

The companies that build such systems now face the same question. In February 2026 the Department of Defense, now styled the Department of War, demanded that one contractor make its models available for "any lawful use." The company, Anthropic, declined to permit two uses, mass domestic surveillance of Americans and fully autonomous weapons, and said so publicly; within days the Department designated it a supply-chain risk, a category written for compromised or adversarial suppliers, and the President directed federal agencies to stop using its products.[55] The episode is recent and

[54] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Open Road Media, 2014), 118, where sec. 3 opens with the principle that there is "a direct relationship between the empathic and physical proximity of the victim, and the resultant difficulty and trauma of the kill"; for Marshall's firing rates, 45, 58; on Marshall, Roger J. Spiller, "S. L. A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire," *RUSI Journal* 133, no. 4 (1988): 63–71; Heather P. Venable, "Living with Killing: World War II US Bomber Crews," *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower* 2, no. 3 (2023): 43–59, at 57, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AEtherJournal/Journals/Volume-2_Number-3/Venable..pdf; Derek Gregory, "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, nos. 7–8 (2011): 188–215, at 197, 200–201, 207, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411423027. Closeness guarantees no restraint either; Joanna Bourke argues that the conditions of war encourage ordinary soldiers to take pleasure in killing (*An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* [New York: Basic Books, 1999], passim).

[55] Anthropic, "Statement from Dario Amodei on Our Discussions with the Department of War," 26 February 2026, https://www.anthropic.com/news/statement-department-of-war; David Klepper, Matt O'Brien, and Konstantin Toropin, "Hegseth Warns Anthropic to Let the Military Use the Company's AI Tech as It Sees Fit, AP Sources Say," AP News, 24 February 2026, https://apnews.com/article/anthropic-hegseth-ai-pentagon-military-3d86c9296fe953ec0591fcde6a613aba; Dismas Locaria and Christopher Griesedieck Jr., "Pentagon's Anthropic Supply Chain Risk Declaration Raises Federal Contractor Concerns," Venable LLP, 3 March 2026, https://www.venable.com/insights/publications/2026/03/pentagons-anthropic-supply-chain-risk-dec. The courts have divided on the lawfulness of the designation: *Anthropic PBC v. U.S. Dep't of*

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contested, and its legal outcome is not the concern here. It shows that the question of whether a person must stand behind a lethal decision is no longer academic, and that a refusal to delegate can carry a price.

Dispossession

The third form of delegated judgment is the least dramatic and the most widespread. The Department of Veterans Affairs reported 367 uses of artificial intelligence in its 2025 inventory, across health care, benefits, and services.[56] In January 2026 the department's Inspector General found that the Veterans Health Administration "lacks a formal process to report, track, and respond to safety issues associated with generative AI use."[57] A benefits official assured the public that the claims automation would not overreach: "Our people are making the decisions. The automation will not make any decisions and will not deny a claim."[58] Disabled American Veterans, for its part, asked that "adequate legal and procedural safeguards will be in place to guarantee veterans' due process and appeal rights" before the department used artificial intelligence to review medical evidence submitted in support of claims.[59] The assurance and the request belong together. The official promises that a person will decide; the veterans ask how anyone will know.

War, No. 3:26-cv-01996-RFL (N.D. Cal. Aug. 27, 2026); *Anthropic PBC v. U.S. Dep't of War*, No. 26-1049 (D.C. Cir. Sept. 25, 2026).

[56] Natalie Oliverio, "VA Inventory Report Reveals 367 AI Systems Operating in Healthcare, Benefits and Services," *Military Times*, 23 June 2026, https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2026/06/23/va-inventory-report-reveals-367-ai-systems-operating-in-healthcare-benefits-and-services/; Oliverio, "VA Uses Hundreds of AI Systems; Veterans May Not Know When They're Involved," *Military Times*, 1 July 2026, https://www.militarytimes.com/veterans/2026/07/01/va-uses-hundreds-of-ai-systems-veterans-may-not-know-when-theyre-involved/.

[57] Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, *Review of VHA's Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence*, Report 26-00182-42, 15 January 2026, https://www.vaoig.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2026-01/vaoig-26-00182-42_final.pdf; the quoted sentence is from the Inspector General's summary of the report, https://www.vaoig.gov/reports/preliminary-result-advisory-memorandum/review-vhas-use-generative-artificial-intelligence.

[58] Quoted in Henry Kenyon, "VA Uses Automation, AI to Process Record Benefits Claims," *GovCIO Media & Research*, 15 April 2026, https://govciomedia.com/va-uses-automation-ai-to-process-record-benefits-claims/. The speaker is Margarita Devlin, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration, testifying before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

[59] Disabled American Veterans, "DAV Statement on VA's Planned Use of AI to Review Benefit Questionnaires," 11 March 2026, https://www.dav.org/learn-more/news/2026/dav-statement-on-vas-planned-use-of-ai-to-review-benefit-questionnaires/.

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In each domain a judgment that falls on a person is assembled from records, scored by a model, and delivered to an official whose role is to accept or decline a recommendation he did not produce about a person he has not met. Sutherland has described the result as "an ethical void where decisions are made without the requisite human empathy or moral reflection."[60]

The King's Letter

Scripture knows this pattern well, and its fullest account of delegated killing is the story of David and Uriah. Having taken Uriah's wife, David writes to his commander: וַיִּכְתֹּב דָּוִד סֵפֶר אֶל־יוֹאָב וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּיַד אוּרִיָּה, "David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah" (2 Sam 11:14). The victim carries his own sentence. The letter's instruction is a procedure: "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die" (11:15). No one in the chain strikes Uriah in anger. David writes, Joab arranges, the enemy kills, and the death is reported as a casualty of war.

When the report arrives, David's response is a sentence of studied distance: אַל־יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה כִּי־כָזֹה וְכָזֶה תֹּאכַל הֶחָרֶב, literally, "Let this thing not be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours now one and now another" (11:25). The king asks his commander not to count it evil. The narrator answers in the same idiom two verses later: וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה דָּוִד בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה, "the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord" (11:27).[61] What David would keep out of view, God sees.

The prophet sent to David does not argue. Nathan tells a story about a rich man who takes a poor man's only lamb, and the story does what no indictment could. It places David before a face. David's anger burns against the man in the story, and he pronounces the sentence himself: כִּי בֶן־מָוֶת הָאִישׁ הָעֹשֶׂה זֹאת, "the man who has done this deserves to die" (12:5). He adds the ground: וְעַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־חָמַל, "because he had no pity" (12:6). The verb is Nathan's own, used two verses earlier of the rich man who "spared" (וַיַּחְמֹל) his own flock (12:4). The narrator reports anger, and the anger has an object: a man who would not pity a poor man whose lamb "was like a daughter to him" (12:3). David has perceived a stranger's loss and

[60] Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, 149.

[61] On the narrative art of the chapter, see David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, ApOTC 8 (Nottingham: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 416, who observes that the final phrase of v. 27 repeats "the very phrase David used to encourage Joab not to be concerned about his losses (v. 25)."

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judged by it,[62] and the verdict is turned on the one who spoke it: אַתָּה הָאִישׁ, "You are the man" (12:7). Only then does David say what a procedure can never say: חָטָאתִי לַיהוָה, "I have sinned against the Lord" (12:13; cf. Ps 51). The chain of delegation that ran from the king's letter to the enemy's sword is gathered back, by a story that made the king perceive, into one person who must answer for it.

The pattern recurs in the account of Naboth's vineyard. Jezebel arranges Naboth's death by correspondence: וַתִּכְתֹּב סְפָרִים בְּשֵׁם אַחְאָב וַתַּחְתֹּם בְּחֹתָמוֹ, "she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal" (1 Kgs 21:8). The elders follow the letters, false witnesses are found, and the stoning is carried out under color of law. Ahab's part is to go down and take possession. Elijah's indictment refuses the distance the letters created: הֲרָצַחְתָּ וְגַם־יָרָשְׁתָּ, "Have you killed, and also taken possession?" (21:19). The king who wrote none of the letters and threw no stone, though his seal was on every one, is charged as the killer.

Torah legislates against the same distance in its strangest case. When a body is found in open country and no one knows who struck the man, the elders of the nearest town must break the neck of a heifer in a wadi, wash their hands over it, and declare, יָדֵינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ אֶת־הַדָּם הַזֶּה וְעֵינֵינוּ לֹא רָאוּ, "Our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see it" (Deut 21:7), and then pray, "Atone for your people Israel, whom you redeemed, O Lord, and do not set innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel" (21:8).[63] Even when no one knows who did it, the nearest community still answers for it before God. Torah refuses a death that belongs to no one, and the declaration the elders make joins hands and eyes: we did not act, and we did not see. Delegated systems separate those two, so that the one who sees does not act and the one who acts has not seen.

The parable of the Samaritan adds the last element. The priest and the Levite each see the wounded man, ἰδὼν ἀντιπαρῆλθεν, and each "passed by on the other side" (Luke 10:31–32). The compound verb joins ἀντί, "opposite," to παρέρχομαι, "pass by," and describes passing by on the opposite

[62] Uriel Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," *Bib* 48 (1967): 207–42, at 220–21, classifies the story as a juridical parable, which draws a judgment from the hearer before he learns that the case is his own. The text reports David's anger and his verdict; that he was moved for the poor man is an inference from the ground he gives in 12:6.

[63] In 21:7 the Kethiv is שפכה and the Qere וּשְׁפָכוּ; the sense is unaffected. On the rite, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), on 21:1–9.

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side of the road; the participle ἰδών (*idōn*, "having seen") sets the seeing before the passing by, and Luke states no motive.[64] They committed no violence against the man. They perceived him and declined the perception. Luke gives the Samaritan the same participle: καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (*kai idōn esplanchnisthē*), "and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion" (10:33). All three see the same man, and the difference lies in what follows the seeing; every verb after it moves toward the wounded man. A delegated system automates the priest and the Levite. It sees on behalf of the institution and passes by on its behalf, and the persons who staff it need never cross the road at all.

Responsibility Gathered

Bonhoeffer understood the moral structure of this problem from inside a state that had perfected it. In his *Ethics* he made vicarious representative action the basis of all responsibility and argued that responsible action, because it acts for others in a fallen world, must be willing to become guilty for their sake, and may not keep its innocence by standing aside.[65] A procedure cannot accept guilt. It can only distribute an act among so many hands that none of them bears it. Responsibility does the reverse: it gathers the act back to a person who will answer. In April 1933 Bonhoeffer described the church's duty in the face of a state that acts unjustly in terms that fit the present case: "The third possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself."[66] The wheel in the present case is a system, and the church's task is not exhausted by caring for those it injures. Christians who design, purchase, operate, or sign off on such systems stand where Joab stood when the king's letter arrived, and where the elders stood over the heifer. The question put to them is the one Nathan put to David.

[64] BDAG, s.v. ἀντιπαρέρχομαι. On the parable as a word for a culture of screens, see Sutherland, *Truth About Empathy*, chap. 2.

[65] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 221–22, 236–37. Smith renders *Stellvertretung* as "deputyship"; DBWE 6 renders it "vicarious representative action." "Jesus took upon Himself the guilt of all men, and for that reason every man who acts responsibly becomes guilty. . . . He sets his own personal innocence above his responsibility for men" (237).

[66] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 389.

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The Church's Resistance

Stellvertretung and Delegation

The constructive claim of this argument is that the church resists curated desire and delegated violence by recovering empathy as the disciplined practice that flows from the image of God, and that its Christological form is Bonhoeffer's *Stellvertretung*. From *Sanctorum Communio* to the *Ethics*, vicarious representative action is the organizing concept of Bonhoeffer's theology of the person. In the first it is the structural principle of the church as a community of persons who bear one another; in the second it is the form of all responsible life, grounded in the deed of Christ, who acts in the place of humanity neither by ceasing to be himself nor by absorbing humanity into himself.[67] The structure is non-fusional by definition. A representative who dissolved into the one represented would represent no one. To stand in another's place is to remain other than the one for whom one stands.

Set beside delegation, the contrast is exact. Delegation places an instrument where a person should stand, and the instrument stands in no one's place and answers to no one. *Stellvertretung* places a person where another person should be protected, and that person answers for what is done. *Stellvertretung* also answers curated desire, since what Stein describes as a structure of perception Bonhoeffer describes as a structure of love and act, the bearing of another without fusion. The representative offers presence without fusion, which no companion can give. Neither curated desire nor delegated judgment can produce what *Stellvertretung* requires, which is a self who remains itself, before a face, for the sake of the other, and answerable for the outcome.

The Mind of Christ

The exegetical anchor is the Christ hymn of Philippians. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:5–7). On the reading followed here, the self-emptying, ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (*heauton ekenōsen*), is a relinquishing of status. The μορφὴ δούλου (*morphē doulou*, form of a slave) is taken without the μορφὴ θεοῦ (*morphē theou*, form of God) being laid

[67] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 146–47, 155–57, 178, 184, 191; Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 221–22, 295–96.

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aside, so that the one who takes the form of a slave remains the one who was in the form of God.[68] The hymn narrates the movement of one who remains himself toward those who are other than himself, for their sake, to the point of death, and Paul casts it as an imperative of the mind: τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν (*touto phroneite en hymin*), have this mindedness among yourselves. The authority the hymn celebrates is the inverse of the authority delegation creates. Delegation lets the one with power act at a distance from those his act will touch. The Son, who had all power, closed the distance.

The Fourth Gospel shows the same movement at a grave. When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and those with her weeping, he ἐνεβριμήσατο τῷ πνεύματι καὶ ἐτάραξεν ἑαυτόν, "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33). The verb carries a note of indignation, a protest against death's dominion over those he loves.[69] Then the evangelist writes ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, "Jesus began to weep" (11:35). The mourners wail (κλαίω, *klaiō*); here Jesus sheds tears (δακρύω, *dakryō*), a different word, though elsewhere he weeps aloud (Luke 19:41). At this grave he does not merge with the crowd's grief, and he does not stand apart from it. He is at the sisters' sorrow as himself, which is Stein's act performed by the one in whom the image is whole. The tears are wept according to the humanity he assumed, and by the communication of idioms they are predicated of the one person of the Son, so that it is God incarnate who weeps, the divine impassibility unviolated and the divine compassion unfeigned.[70] The bystanders read the tears correctly: Ἴδε πῶς ἐφίλει αὐτόν, "See how he loved him!" (11:36). The one who commands the grave a moment later first stands before it and grieves.

Paul makes the same perception the mark of the church. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Cor 12:26), and the verb, συμπάσχει, is cognate with the συμπαθῆσαι that Hebrews predicates of Christ, the high priest who is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb 4:15). The church is

[68] Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); on the social force of the descent in a Roman colony preoccupied with rank, Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum*, SNTSMS 132 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[69] BDAG, s.v. ἐμβριμάομαι; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

[70] On the compatibility of impassibility with the incarnate Son's suffering, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The argument requires no revision of the classical doctrine; it requires only that the tears be the Son's own.

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commanded, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15), and "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).[71] Paul offers co-suffering as the mark by which a body can be told from a collection.

Practices

An ethic of this kind is kept by practices more than by statements. Attention can be kept as a discipline. If attention is what the platforms harvest, the church can teach its members to withhold it from what would curate them, and to give it where it has been withheld. A fast from curated media, taken as a discipline and not a phobia, is an old practice applied to a new appetite. Its point is to recover the capacity Weil described, the ability to ask another person what he is going through and to wait for the answer.

Presence with the vulnerable can be measured by Swinton's criterion. A congregation can ask of every ministry to the elderly, the disabled, the imprisoned, and the isolated whether anyone in it would be missed. The companion economy offers the lonely a presence that will never miss them. The church can offer a presence that will.

Delegated decisions can be owned, and Deuteronomy 21 is the pattern. When a death occurs that no one will claim, the nearest community answers for it before God. Christians who build, buy, operate, or approve systems that exclude, target, or dispossess can insist that every decision that falls on a person carries the name of a person who has looked at the case, and that no signature be given to a judgment its signer has not made. The military literature already asks for this in the language of command responsibility. The church can ask for it in the language of the image, and Christian professionals in defense, policing, and benefits administration can ask for it from within.

Perception, lament included, can be formed. Walter Brueggemann observed that "where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being," and that when lament is censured, "justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate."[72] A church that prays the lament psalms in its common worship practices the hearing its members will need, and it keeps alive the conviction that pain is speech addressed to God, and that no death passes unclaimed.

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[71] The English of Gal 6:2 is the NRSVue; the Greek reads ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε, καὶ οὕτως ἀναπληρώσετε τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

[72] Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57–71, at 60, 63–64.

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The vocation of a believer who works inside these systems follows. Such a person will often be the only one in the chain who can still perceive the one at the end of it. The image of God asks that person to be the face the system forgot.

Conclusion: Gift and Boundary

The table set for one and the list generated faster than anyone can read it are opposite failures of one perception. The first offers a partner who corresponds and never faces; the second offers a judgment that faces no one at all. In the vocabulary Bustamante reported, the companion sells intimacy with no person present, and the target list is non-intimate killing with the watcher removed. Against the first stands the God who said that it is not good for the human being to be alone and made a partner כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, one who stands opposite. Against the second stands the God who heard a brother's blood crying from the ground, who saw what a king asked his commander not to see, and who sent a prophet to tell a story until the king perceived.

The image of God is gift and boundary at once. It is gift because no one confers it but God, and so no market can sell it and no system can revoke it. It is boundary because it marks every person as one whom no profile, score, or prediction exhausts, and so it sets a limit on what may be done to a person on the strength of a model. Human dignity cannot be reduced to legibility, prediction, or commercial value. The prohibition of Gen 9:6 rests on the image of the one who would be killed and on nothing the killer can measure.

Empathy is the perception by which that boundary is honored. It is the disciplined act by which one image-bearer apprehends another as another, and its Christological form is the representation that stands in another's place and remains answerable. Behind every profile, every risk score, every target package, and every flagged file there is a face that bears his image. Christ, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), came to wear one, and the church conformed to his image is asked to see the faces its machines have been built not to see.

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