

ETHICS IN THE AGE OF

AI



Defining and Pursuing the Good for Our Good and the Good of Our Communities

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► INTRODUCTION

Often when we hear or talk about artificial intelligence (AI), we see one of two reactions: either a fear of the unknown often accompanied by a dystopian vision of the future, or sheer excitement about the possibilities accompanied by a utopian vision of the future. On the one hand, a fear of the future makes sense as we look out over the rise of AI and see how these tools are being used to automate different aspects of our lives: from our homes and social media to our workplaces and the public square. We must ask how these tools might be altering how we see the world around us, including our view of God, ourselves, and our neighbors?¹ On the other hand these concerns and alarms can fall on deaf ears because many are ready to embrace a utopian future with all the promised benefits of modern technology.

Some seek to push the boundaries to what is possible

with technology and look forward to the countless innovations and benefits that these tools can bring to our society and personal lives. This position is often characterized by the old Silicon Valley mantra of “move fast and break things.” This “wait and see” or “is this really a problem” mentality is common in certain circles as dangers are downplayed and possible future benefits are placed front and center, even if those benefits capitalize on certain groups or use people merely as means to an end.

When discussing technology and its impacts on society, things like profit, market share, or exciting innovations often assume primal importance, not ethics. The question of “can we” often trumps the ever important “should we” of the moral life. The best path forward with AI and technology more broadly can be difficult to discern and the ethics of their application can be quite complicated given the very diverse views of the “good” in our pluralistic society.

For all the good that can be brought about by these tools to humanity, what are the dangers and how do we identify

them? Is there a set of moral principles or ideas that society at large and businesses in particular can agree upon that would help us navigate the epoch of AI? How might we protect the humanity of our neighbors while pursuing God-honoring AI innovations?

To help answer these types of questions and others confronting the church today, this article will first define AI and address how it is shaping our view of the world. It then highlights two primary areas of ethical debate for businesses — automation and the nature of work, and privacy and human dignity. We will attempt to chart a path forward, exploring popular ways of addressing AI ethics in industry. Finally, the contemporary frameworks will be evaluated against the Christian moral tradition of loving God and loving our neighbors — centering on human dignity — as we offer some suggestions to help business leaders navigate these challenges with both truth and grace.

▶ DEFINING AI

When most people hear or think about AI, our minds tend to drift toward sci-fi like images of robots and Hollywood movie plots of advanced machines that either want to take our jobs or take over the universe. It is easy to see why given how AI is revolutionizing so much of contemporary society and altering how we understand what it means to be human.² But before we can grasp how such emerging technologies as AI are altering our perception of God, humanity, and the world itself, a firm grasp what AI actually constitutes must be established.

Artificial intelligence simply put is non-biological intelligence, where a machine can perform various tasks that once were reserved for human beings, e.g., processing vast amounts of information, making decisions based on data and inputs, and even simulating various human behaviors such as communication and creativity.

AI represents a broader field of computer science, which comprises a number of subdisciplines such as machine learning, deep learning, natural language processing, expert systems, robotics, machine visions, and even speech recognition. Many of these systems undergird the conveniences of modern life and form the backbone of so many digital tools used throughout society today. Most of the tools we utilize today, including our smartphones, social media apps, recommendation algorithms, smart devices for the home/office

tools, and so much more, employ some type of AI technology.

Contemporary society has become increasingly dependent on AI tools for the conveniences of life, including much of the personalization and curated elements of our digital age. As famed computer scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil says, “if all the AI systems decided to go on strike tomorrow, our civilization would be crippled: we couldn’t get money from our bank, and indeed, our money would disappear; communication, transportation, and manufacturing would all grind to a halt.”³

AI has in recent years become a major topic of discussion across industries given how it can automate, streamline, and augment various aspects of the workplace. Whether it is the push to increase revenue at all costs or to downsize workforce and/or augment productivity in the workplace, the pressures on business leaders to leverage AI are immense. As AI has become integrated into our lives in countless ways, it is radically altering how we see the world around us as well as challenging how we seek to navigate the ethical issues before us in the digital age.

▶ CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CHALLENGES WITH AI

One of the most ironic things in the age of AI is that we often talk about, develop, and use these tools in ways that dehumanize our fellow humans while at the same time seeking to humanize our machines with sci-fi versions of AI or even conscious machines.⁴ We seek to give these machines human-like abilities or even jobs that humans once had, while at the same time treat our fellow image bearers as less than human by allowing them to be exploited for our selfish desires or private gain.

Since the beginning of history, human beings in our sinful nature tend to treat one another as simply means to our selfish end, often ignoring the inherent dignity of each person. We may see each other as cogs in the wheel, rather than humans who deserve our love, care, and respect. In the midst of competition and ill-defined ethical systems, navigating ethical challenges arising from technological innovations can be difficult when there is little to no productive dialogue between people with different ideological and religious persuasions. Whether it is algorithmic technologies that are changing how we view the value of work or the increased use of AI tools to violate the privacy of individuals in workplaces

and throughout society, the challenges demand a response from business leaders who play such a vital role in our communities.

▶ AUTOMATION AND WORK

One of the most prevalent ethical issues surrounding artificial intelligence is how this technology is revolutionizing the nature of work and how it alters the way we view others in a society that often speaks of someone's worth based on their contribution to society or the greater good. The AI revolution is often referred to as the "Second Digital Age" (the advent of computers being the first) or "The Second Machine Age" (the first being the industrial revolution).⁵ In the past few years, there have been countless apocalyptic warnings about massive job loss attributable to automation. Much of that fear and panic has subsided as society begins to truly see how tools like AI help augment and automate various aspects of our jobs and how innovations help create new jobs as well. If we view this current revolution through the lens of history, we know that it will likely bring about massive shifts in our society in terms of the nature of work. It may also precipitate an explosion in wealth and prosperity for more of human society than ever before.⁶

Automation and AI are transforming industries across our society, from transportation, manufacturing to medicine and even journalism. Take for example the transportation sector. According to the American Trucking Association, there were approximately 3.36 million truck drivers in America in 2020 with 7.65 million people employed throughout the economy in jobs related to trucking, excluding the self-employed.⁷ If we add in the number of professional drivers who work in shipping/logistics, food delivery, transportation, and other transportation related work, then that number quickly rises to above 13.3 million workers in the transportation sector as a whole.⁸ If autonomous vehicles were to be deployed throughout society, communities all over will experience massive socioeconomic breakdown if these workers weren't able to transition careers or keep their current jobs in the industry. This breakdown will affect not only the drivers themselves, but also their families and the wider communities they live in.

Studies have shown that as joblessness increases, substance abuse and sexual immorality are also prone to rise as people try to deal with the psychological effects of job loss-

es.⁹ And this is just one segment of our society. While the potential social upheaval in our communities is serious, some argue that there is nothing really to fear because humanity is adaptable and these types of challenges had happened before.¹⁰ There is an element of truth to this. Some jobs will be replaced, others augmented, and many new jobs will be created. The future of work is a very complex ethical question. However, at the core of the debate must be the meaning of work itself and how God created us to work as his image bearers.¹¹

Some key ethical questions concerning AI and work relate to how we can uphold the dignity and value of work in an age of increasing automation and digitization.¹² How do we care for those in our workplaces who are negatively affected by emerging technologies like AI? How do these technologies affect the way we view the value of our neighbors in a society that routinely sees someone's dignity as a function of their contribution to society? Is our work simply a means to provide for ourselves and our families or is there a deeper meaning to our work?¹³ Do we look at a jobless future as one of pure leisure? Should the government provide for those who lose their jobs due to automation and in what ways? How should we harness these (AI) tools in our work? Do business leaders have a responsibility to care for people even if that means sacrificing profits or performing services in a less than efficient manner?

Some of the big questions arising from the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting loss of millions of jobs may be a microcosm of what we may face moving forward in the age of AI. Perhaps the experience can help put these issues in the right perspective: that we are infinitely worthy because we are all created in the image of God.

▶ PRIVACY AND HUMAN DIGNITY

One of the challenges in business is how best to reach more and more people with the services or products we offer. Often in an overcrowded market (and social media space), we hear about the ways that digital marketing can revolutionize business if only data can be better harnessed to address the needs of customers or target potential customers in cyberspace. While marketing itself is not immoral, there are temptations that business leaders face today concerning data related to customers and employees alike.¹⁴

Whether it is the allure of bigger market shares or a more streamlined workplace, it is all too common to see the ethical boundary involving emerging technologies being pushed. The motivation behind the quest for profit and efficiency often trumps the Christian ethic of human dignity.¹⁵

In this age of AI, it is easy to dehumanize our neighbors by seeing them simply as bits of data useful for achieving whatever end we seek, rather than fellow image bearers made in the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-28). Promises are made that a little more data on customers and workers alike would help bolster sales, productivity, and shareholder value. With all the potential good in mind, leaders must also think carefully how this data might be collected, for what purpose, and in what ways it may be misused and/or abused to dehumanize people.

There are countless questions that must be addressed concerning data collection and privacy issues. For example, do we have an actual right to privacy or is it simply an idea confined to Western culture?¹⁶ Is our data private or is it free for sharing by others for whatever their purposes? Who should or should not have access to these powerful tools of automation and means of social influence?¹⁷ Should these tools be utilized with or without our personal consent? Where are these troves of data being stored and how secure are they?¹⁸ What role does government play in protecting the privacy of individuals?¹⁹ These are some of the debates that many communities across the world are currently engaged in.

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▶ ETHICS IN THE AGE OF AI

The weight of the ethical decisions before us as a society is immense. It comes as no surprise that AI ethics is becoming a hot topic. Between Google’s AI principles²⁰, the U.S. Department of Defense’s guidelines regarding military use of emerging technologies like AI,²¹ and the European Union’s ethical frameworks for AI,²² society is longing for direction in

addressing complicated and life-altering technologies like AI in a way that’s good, fair, applicable, and ethical. As we have already seen, automation and AI are challenging our understandings of work, the future of industries, and the ethics of information collection and privacy. Scholars and practitioners across the political, ideological, and philosophical spectrums are debating how and if we should use these tools, and the implications of their deployment for the future of humankind.

In our digital age, society often trades conviction and a grounded ethic for what can be described as a “fashion ethic,” which is an ethic defined by what is popular or what might seem to impress others.²³ We often take ethical stances based on what will put us in the “in crowd” or what will earn us social credibility or standing. We claim one form of injustice is wrong, but another is permissible because “they” are the wrong type of people or because it helps improve the bottom line. We proclaim our enemies to be on the “wrong

side of history” as we scramble to curry favor from a particular voting bloc or expand our market share.

Such ethical formations are often marked by a desire for notoriety and influence, rather than grounded in the pursuit of what is morally right and the common

good of society.²⁴ Philosopher Slavoj Žižek alludes to this idea of fashion ethics when he spoke of “green capitalism” and the choices businesses make to go green in order to be seen as “ethical” by their customers. He argues that we often assuage our guilt over environmental issues by purchasing these green products, since we want to be seen by others as environmentally conscious.²⁵ Businesses know this and change their models to entice people to shop there.

Because our society has largely abandoned any sense of a transcendent or revealed ethic, we often define the “good” and what is right based on what others think of us and ultimately on what we want. This isn’t just true of our consumerist habits, though. It is true with the technologies that drive our daily lives. Influenced by the rise of modernism and post-modernism, our society has become increasingly subjective when it comes to ethics and morality. We are open to people having their own views of what is the “good” as long

as they fit within some type of evolving and publicly acceptable framework. What's good is what we ultimately want in life. If it feels good, it must be true. If we think it's true, it must be good.

There is a subtle irony in this subjectivism when we consider modern empirical research and science. Our society isn't very postmodern or individualistic when it comes to technology and the sciences. We pursue hard facts and truth with the scientific method. We believe in unchanging truths regarding how the world works. Yet this objectivity does not invade our ethics and moral understandings of the world.

Many brilliant thinkers have devoted their entire life's work to discovering a scientific basis for morality but to no avail.²⁶ Many others have created ethical systems in order to deal with the pressing issues of the day because of a rejection of the core tenets of a transcendent ethic and the belief that premodern conceptions of ethics are simply ill equipped to deal with the challenges of today.²⁷ We shed traditional sources of moral guidance in exchange for vague concepts of fairness or equality that are based on a moral autonomy and the pursuit of individual freedom.²⁸

Society is at a turning point regarding technology and ethics. Our technological advance is based on a modern framework while our ethics are often based on a postmodern one. This is one reason why there is so much confusion about ethics in our digital age, especially with the issues surrounding the use of AI. We have become enamored with what others think and with individualistic and subjective versions of truth.

The concept of fashion ethics is prominent throughout the business community. As an example, consider the way many businesses and organizations are responding to the push for LGBTQ+ acceptance and celebration. Each June, many throughout the United States celebrate Pride month — where government agencies²⁹ and even corporate logos become clad in rainbows as many companies are eager to be seen as “ethical” and in vogue on certain social issues. It is highly suspect that this act of affirmation is based on a genuine conviction or some idea of transcendent truth. It is more likely a result reflective of the fashionable moods of the time and what may contribute to the corporate bottom line.³⁰ This can be inferred from the fact that some of these very companies which don rainbows and pro-LGBTQ+ messages where it is widely accepted and popular in the West invariably choose to do business as usual where there are pushbacks from governments or the public (such as in many Middle Eastern and Asian countries). If these messages were central to the core values of the business, these companies

would have a consistent message no matter the context or cost.

As technology affects every part of our lives, communities and businesses cannot depend on vague generalities to make our ethical decisions. Our dignity, and that of our neighbors, is at stake. Take, for example, the first of Google's AI principles: “Be socially beneficial.”³¹ This sounds like a laudable goal, but if you take a closer look, it's fairly ambiguous. What does it mean to be beneficial? What if my definition of beneficial differs from yours? Who's going to benefit—the majority or the minority? Who decides? Who decides who decides? As you read the explanation, it becomes clear a form of utilitarianism is framing this ethical goal:

“As we consider potential development and uses of AI technologies, we will take into account a broad range of social and economic factors, and will proceed where we believe that the overall *likely benefits* substantially *exceed the foreseeable risks and downsides.*” (emphasis added)

It's clear that Google is seeking what brings about the most “good” in society based on the beliefs of a certain segment of people in society or the company itself.³² But, as we all know, every person exhibits some level of bias or discrimination in some way per our sinful nature. While Google has every right to pursue this course of action as they develop these powerful AI technologies, the public also has the right to push back on vague utilitarian arguments and seek clarity on how these potentially life-altering technologies will be developed and used.

As often is the case with ethics in business, these initial Google AI principles were drafted and released in response to a major incidence at the company. The now infamous Project Maven debacle was the catalyst for these principles. The company was working on a military AI project with the US Department of Defense that helped comb through countless hours of drone-captured video data.³³ The AI system was being trained to identify targets and automatically label objects. Google pulled out of the project amid uproars from employees who thought Google shouldn't be involved in building weapons of war. They would rather prefer these technologies to be employed in a fair and socially beneficial manner.

But this is the irony. This type of partnership between technology developers and the military enabled a democratically free society secured by the military's technology. It is this freedom that allowed the staff to exercise their right to protest. The protest also raises other questions: What is

good, right, and moral in these situations? How does fairness or being socially beneficial in this context line up with the safety of our brothers and sisters on the battlefield? What is fair and socially beneficial about terrorists and rogue nations having unequal access to these powerful tools and gaining an advantage? In a world longing for direction and guidance on how best to utilize these technologies in our communities and workplaces, how should Christian leaders assess these technologies in light of biblical ethics codes?

▶ THE BEAUTY OF THE CHRISTIAN ETHIC

Without clarity on the details of various ethical principles such as “fairness” or being “socially beneficial,” it will be difficult for our society to judge ethically the role and power of technology. As technology gets folded into nearly every aspect of life, it’s nearly impossible to avoid the conflicts between what *is* true and what we *want* to be true.

As Christians, our ethical decision framework should not be linked to the prevailing subjective attitudes of certain elites, the in-crowd, or the “right side of history.” At the most basic level, the Christian ethic

is a transcendent or revealed morality seen in the natural order as well as in Scripture.³⁴ This means that our ethical decisions are not made based on what is popular but what is true and what have been shown to us by God. He spoke to us and revealed how we are to live in light of who he is and how he made each one of us in his own image (Gen. 1:26-28). Christ himself summed up the entirety of the Christian ethic in Matthew 22:37-39 when he said that the greatest commandment was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Theologian and ethicist Carl F.H. Henry once wrote, “love for another is the whole sum of Christian ethics.”³⁵ Henry was undoubtedly influenced by the German theologian Christoph Ernst Luthardt, who described the relationship of theology and ethics as, “God first loved us is the summary of Christian

doctrine. We love Him is the summary of Christian morality.”³⁶ This notion of loving others — both God and our neighbors — steers us away from the individualistic pursuit of truth and ethics that so characterizes contemporary discussions and toward honoring the humanity of our neighbors. We must seek to love them as God has loved us.³⁷

Even in the face of difficult ethical challenges in the age of AI, this simple yet profoundly robust ethical guidepost is more than capable of helping us confront the complex questions of the day. This Christian ethic runs contrary to the prevailing moods and ethical outlooks of the day. It forces us to look outside of ourselves towards others. It steers us away from the things that we desire. It replaces the ethic that is built upon autonomy and individualism with one that is God-centered - a theocentric instead of an anthropocentric ethic.³⁸

Naturally, questions arise about what it means to actually *love* God and *love* our neighbor.³⁹ Simply put, to love God is to follow his commandments as stated in 1 John 5:3. This means seeing the good of others, pursuing justice, and up-

holding human dignity. It means sometimes sacrificing our personal desires - our “profits”, as we seek to love God more than we love ourselves and to love those who God himself loves.

At the most basic level, the Christian ethic is a transcendent or revealed morality seen in the natural order as well as in Scripture.

For business leaders, this does not mean that we forsake growth, profits, or improvements that can often honor others and help build communities. It does mean, however, that we have a higher calling: to love God and love our neighbors over and above what society typically deems as success. This also means that business leaders may have to do the counter-cultural thing of putting people above profits and systems, or refusing to employ certain technologies that could hurt people rather than honor them as fellow (God’s) image bearers.

In this age of AI, the Christian ethic calls us to live in a certain way that reflects the goodness of our creator and our love for our neighbor. It reminds us that truth is not in the eye of the beholder and that technology is more than simply a tool we use. Technology can work to form and shape us in very particular ways — both for good and ill.

The Christian ethic also reminds us that we are more than some utilitarian value to society. The biblical vision of work reminds us that work is a good thing that God has created for us to do because we reflect him. Our work does not define our value as human beings. We are created to work as part of God's good design, even if that work may look different than we had expected in a world shaped by artificial intelligence or other technologies of the future.

As we debate the merits and dangers of emerging technologies, we are reminded that God calls his people to apply the framework of the Christian ethic to every area of our moral decision-making in life. The Christian moral tradition is based on the concept of human dignity that is rooted in the *imago Dei*. This is in contrast to a materialism so prevalent in the fields of science and technology.

Who are we to claim that God—the Creator of the cosmos who knitted us together in our mother's womb (Psalm 139) — doesn't truly understand what's good for us and what will ultimately lead to his glory? As technology's influence increases in our society, Christians find comfort in the truth that we have a steadfast hope and a robust ethic to engage the issues of the day. Nothing will ever supplant the image of God in which we are created. God is, after all, sovereign over history.



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JASON THACKER serves as Chair of Research in Technology Ethics and Director of the research institute at The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention. The author of several books including *Following Jesus in the Digital Age* (B&H, 2022) and *The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity*, he is the editor of *The Digital Public Square: Christian Ethics in a Technological Society* and co-editor of the *Essentials in Christian Ethics* series with B&H Academic. Jason is the project leader and lead drafter of *Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles*, and his work has been featured at *Slate*, *Politico*, *The Week*, *Christianity Today*, *The Gospel Coalition*, and *Desiring God*. Jason holds a BA in Communication Studies from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and an M. Div. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in ethics, public theology, and philosophy.

NOTES

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- ⁴ Questions of conscious or sentient machines have long been part of the discussions surrounding the ethics and philosophy of AI but became more mainstream in 2022 with a chatbot named LaMDA that a Google engineer claims has gained consciousness. Nitasha Tiku, "The Google Engineer Who Thinks the Company's AI Has Come to Life," *Washington Post*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/11/google-ai-lambda-blake-lemoine/>.
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³³ Nick Statt, "Google Reportedly Leaving Project Maven Military AI Program after 2019," The Verge, June 1, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/1/17418406/google-maven-drone-imagery-ai-contract-expire>. For more on the context of Project Maven and how Christian can think about the ethics of war, see Jason Thacker, "Rumors of AI Wars: Where Google and the Bible Agree," *Christianity Today*, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/november-web-only/google-employees-protest-ai-weapons-christians-might-too.html>.

³⁴ For a helpful overview of the unique nature of the Christian ethic and its connections with revelation in nature and Scripture, see W. Ross Hastings, *Theological Ethics: The Moral Life of the Gospel in Contemporary Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021).

³⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979). 486.

³⁶ Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *Apologetic Lectures on the Moral Truths of Christianity*, trans. Sophia Taylor, Second (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1876). 26.

³⁷ For an extended discussion about the nature of the Christian ethic, see Jason Thacker, "Why Should Christians Study Ethics?," ERLC, February 7, 2022, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-should-christians-study-ethics/>.

³⁸ This God-centered vs. man-centered approach to ethics is a primary aspect of how Apologist Cornelius Van Til speaks of the nature of Christian ethics in a contemporary context. For more on this approach, see Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, vol. III, In Defense of the Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980). An anthropocentric vs Christocentric approach is also reminiscent of John 3:30, which reads "He must increase, but I must decrease." (ESV) See John David Trentahm's essay "Christian Higher Education" in Freddy Cardoza, ed., *Christian Education: A Guide to the Foundations of Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). 332.

³⁹ This question is the main focus of many texts on Christian ethics including Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*. I apply this principle to questions of AI in *Thacker, The Age of AI*.