

“RIVETED WITH FAITH
UNTO YOUR FLESH”:
TECHNOLOGY’S FLIGHT FROM
ACTUALITY AND THE WORD
MADE FLESH

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“[T]o take a neutral stance toward technology is to take an agnostic stance toward human nature itself, reserving for the will alone the determination of what is good.”



In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me; you say it wearies you.
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.¹

Wherever one places the origins of modernity, there is little

1. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 1, scene 1, lines 1–7.

doubt that it was already in full swing in the time of Shakespeare, whose play, *The Merchant of Venice*, can provide insights into the inception and trajectory of the paradoxical obsession with and flight from the flesh through technology that we are witnessing today. The play opens with Antonio's sadness, which his friends attribute to what would worry them most: the fate of his ships and their goods. Antonio denies this and scoffs at the subsequent suggestion that it is some unrequited love that casts him down. Nor does he respond to provocations that his mood is simple willfulness.

The etiology of Antonio's melancholy is a mystery, and there is a plethora of critical opinions on the topic.² But his dependency runs much deeper than a single problem or occasion; at the trial he will say,

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.³

The modern reader, if unaware that a wether is a castrated ram, might miss the significance of Antonio's identification with an animal that produces nothing but his own flesh for the highest bidder at market, an unnatural instrument for profit. Likewise, the weakest fruit is unlikely to leave anything lasting. Antonio experiences the full weight of his deeply dispirited world-weariness: a state born from how one lives one's life, which inevitably follows from how one understands the world and what one takes to be most real. Accumulating money while producing nothing is one of many modern paths toward the destruction of the flesh and the person along with it.

The setting of the play is Venice, the merchant city par excellence, the center of trade between the Arab, Indian, and European worlds; a city for which the market was everything.⁴

2. Not surprisingly, a current favorite claims that Antonio is upset about his unreciprocated feelings for his friend Bassanio. Let one example serve for many: David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare's Thought: Unobserved Details and Unsuspected Depths in Eleven Plays* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 123.

3. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 5, scene 1, lines 116–18.

4. Even art, which in the Middle Ages was for the glory of God, became monetized as a sign of wealth, and today it appears that the fungibility of art

The currency was gold and silver, so exchange rates had to be determined and adjusted constantly. Ship convoys required all manner of float loans, bank transfers, and credit products as well as a steady supply of new sailors, who were lost with their ships in the far reaches of the globe. In such a city, even human life was reduced to fungibility on a daily basis in the drive for profit.⁵ Shakespeare's grisly plot device only brings this attitude to light, *ad absurdum*: when Antonio seeks to borrow money to help Bassanio, Shylock, the moneylender,⁶ waives the usance and demands "an equal pound of your fair flesh" from "what part of your body pleaseth me"⁷ as exchange for nonpayment.

Antonio is steeped in a milieu where merchants and moneylenders see everything through the lens of personal gain, rationalized and reduced to commensurable units. Though neutral in appearance and beneficial for facilitating financial exchanges, the system inevitably influences what one takes to be important, meaningful, and ultimately real. When Shylock refers to Antonio as "a good man," what he means is that he is financially sound.⁸ In their differing but codependent functions, the moneylender and the merchant are two sides of same coin. In the court scene, Portia (as Balthazar) will ask who the moneylender and the merchant are. While she means to have them identified to her, the subtextual meaning is hard to ignore.

has won the day: the largest galleries and brokers are in the business of providing a place for the wealthy to park cash.

5. "A pound of man's flesh taken from a man / Is not so estimable, profitable neither / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats" (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 1, scene 3, lines 165–67).

6. Scholars observe that Shakespeare was surely using Shylock as a stand-in for the Puritans, who were the only group who practiced usury in England. See Joseph Pearce, *Through Shakespeare's Eyes: Seeing the Catholic Presence in the Plays* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 15–19.

7. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 1, scene 3, lines 161–63. *The Merchant of Venice* is a profound and complex play that organically incorporates questions of revenge, justice, forgiveness, fidelity, and mercy, though it is often called "Shakespeare's play on usury."

8. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 1, scene 3, lines 15–17. Shortly thereafter, Shylock uses Jacob's dealings with Laban as a justification for his own shrewd business dealings.

Despite the ostensible differences between Shakespeare's Venice and the economy of today, the underlying ontology has not changed fundamentally, despite what technophiles would like to believe; the play provides a kind of diagnostic microcosm of the global technological financial marketplace, where there seems to be nothing left that has not been monetized, where digitization and new inventions from credit default swaps to cryptocurrencies multiply.⁹ The wealth of both worlds masks a profound ontological poverty that bespeaks fundamental rifts from the real, the end result of a gnostic logic underlying the kind of information technology for which "the great dream and promise . . . is that it can be free from the material constraints that govern the mortal world,"¹⁰ including the limitations of the flesh as silicon-based machines, chips, and even manmade "neurons" mimic the appearances of life and thought.

Shakespeare was prescient: the sadness of Antonio, the inability to know himself or to find peace there at the dawn of the technological age, reflects the disquiet that pervades post-modern life. But in the play Antonio undergoes a transformation: his action, motivated by friendship, was meant for good, and since the good is always diffusive, it reverberates outward such that the bonds of flesh (as mere monetary surety) is transmuted into a channel for grace, not only revealing the true meaning of the bonds of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio, but of the "one flesh" bonds of marriage between Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa, and Lorenzo and Jessica.

In part one of this essay, we will consider the antecedents to our focus on the flesh and technology: usury, violence, and gnosticism. Usury is more than charging interest; the Fifth Lateran Council defined it thus: "When, from its use, a thing which produces nothing is applied to the acquiring of gain and profit without any work, any expense or any risk."¹¹ Though the

9. Karl Marx's famous line has become unsettlingly prophetic: "All that is solid melts into the air."

10. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13.

11. Of course, expense and risk are required for *building* virtual technologies, as with all technologies, but it is the perception of the *user*—that it is all there for the taking—to which we refer.

connection may seem remote, the logic of modern technology often tends toward the fulfillment of this same effortless acquiring of gain. Gain, both in nature and in commerce, is achieved in community, through relationships in which the goodness of the other is affirmed precisely as other. In its denial of relationality as fruitful, this logic is violent in the deepest sense. Violence, prior to its physical manifestation, is the denial of the real—of the giftedness of creation—and of the goodness of being anchored in and limited by reality. This violent break from reality is the hallmark of gnosticism, which is not only a rejection of the material world, but a matter of “abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action . . . altering the structure of the world.”¹² In the extreme, this logic generates only the expectation of a technological and virtual simulacrum of paradise.

In part two, we will review the ontology of cybernetic and virtual technology. For all the benefits human ingenuity brings about, the logic built into current technology also provides a perfect storm of the worst aspects of what preceded it: economic fungibility, the Midas touch that monetizes everything; usury's fundamental violence, that is, the rejection of and breaking off of the relationships constituent to being; and the dualism of gnosticism, creating an idealized abstraction that privileges possibility over reality, potentiality over actuality, and power over love, resulting in the enslavement to a simulacrum of freedom. This is the dream of “frictionless” technology: “a world where nothing unpredictable, or unmonetizable, ever occurs, . . . the commodification of life itself.”¹³ The very matter championed by materialists is reduced to mathematical code; the

12. Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Modernity without Restraint*, vol. 5 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 305.

13. Amanda Hess, “The Mark Zuckerberg Aesthetic,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/02/arts/mark-zuckerberg-meta.html>. The term “frictionless” became popularized following Mark Zuckerberg's use of it at the F8 developers conference in 2011 (Jeff Chester, “Facebook's ‘Frictionless Sharing’ Highlights from Zuckerberg's F8 Presentation,” *Center for Digital Democracy*, September 29, 2011, <https://www.digitaldemocracy.org/facebook-frictionless-sharing-highlights-zuckerbergs-f8-presentation>).

meaning of the flesh vanishes in the intertwining notions of the “posthuman” and the “transhuman,” and we are left with the diabolical simulacra of the real far removed from even the shadows in Plato’s cave: images that are images only of their own operational functionality.

In part three, we will address the ways in which some philosophers have recognized the evacuation of the meaning of the flesh in postmodern post- and transhumanism. They agree that “the central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter,” which implies the loss of the person.¹⁴ Attempted resolutions include such proposals as privileging “embodied virtuality” over “virtual reality.”¹⁵ But, however well-intentioned, and however clarifying they may be, such “solutions” are asymptotes that approach a satisfactory rapprochement but are, in the end, impotent to reach it, for “a serious seeing of what is at stake is precisely what sets genuine Christian thinking apart from simulacra and the forgetfulness of the Eternal Logos made flesh.”¹⁶

In part four, we will turn from the ontology of the technological paradigm—which collapses into mechanism and fungibility, losing the meaning of matter and the person—to that of the metaphysics of gift: a constituent openness to that which is given and an appreciation for intrinsic relationality that allows the other to set the terms of the encounter. This openness brings us to see Antonio’s world, and hence our own, under a different aspect, one in which the flesh and the person can be saved and technology can take its proper place in human life. As with every distorted human desire, we discover that the transhuman impulse corresponds to a more primordial truth. To be “transhumaned” is the goal of every human life, but it is unattainable through our own ingenuity. Rather, through love and humility we may hope to be welcomed into the mystery of the trinitarian life of God.

14. Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Alvin Toffler, “Cyberspace and the American Dream,” in *The Information Society Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 31.4.

15. Mark Weiser coined “embodied virtuality” in “The Computer for the 21st Century,” *Scientific American* 265 (September 1991): 94–104.

16. Philip Gonzales, *Reimagining the Analogia Entis: The Future of Erich Przywara’s Christian Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 293.

In the end, only the perfect form of Christ can heal the rupture engendered by technological gnosticism, and “the resurrection of the flesh is precisely a witness that this healing is possible.”¹⁷

I. USURY, VIOLENCE, AND GNOSTICISM

1.1. *Usury*

Aristotle and much of the ancient world saw moneylending as unjust, because the lender receives more than he lent, and unnatural, because it is barren and unproductive: money produces nothing, unlike, for example, an orchard.¹⁸ Usury was roundly condemned in the Old Testament¹⁹ except in one instance: to the “stranger” or foreigner one might charge interest (Dt 23:19–16). The Old Testament foregrounds *relationship* as the criterion, but in the New Testament relationship runs deeper: one is expected to give in charity to others, with no thought of interest or return, even to one’s enemies (Lk 6:35). Antonio never charges interest, and this is one of the reasons Shylock hates him: he is a business rival. So when he needs to go to Shylock for a loan, he tells him to lend as he would to a stranger, an enemy, for “when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?”²⁰

The history of moneylending is complex and many argue that “things are different today,”²¹ but what interests us here

17. José Granados, “Risen Time: Easter as the Source of History,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 10.

18. Aristotle, *Politics* 1258b. Of wealth-getting, “the most hated sort, and with greatest reason, is usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not increase at interest. And this term interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. Wherefore of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural” (1258b). See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 78, a. 1.

19. Ex 22:25; Ps 15:1–5; Ez 22:12.

20. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 1, scene 3, lines 133–34.

21. They argue, for example, that (1) the prohibitions of the ancient world did not take into account inflation; if the exact same amount is paid back as was lent, the lender loses money; (2) the condemnations may make sense when

pertains foremost to ontology. The logic that allows the virtual world to be seen as limitless possibility surely began with the creation of currency. Gold, for example, was at first used to create artifacts with added artistic value, such as jewelry, then as a medium of exchange, then it was signified by paper money, and finally abandoned altogether.²² The medium detached from the physical standard and money as an abstract technology became synonymous with the infinite potentiality of monetization.²³ Today we are confronted with abstraction upon abstraction, such that any interaction requiring physical contact—that is not “contactless”—seems somehow antiquated, or worse: unsanitary. Virtual technology is based on this very same logic of detachment from the real, from material substrates and the physical limits they impose.

It has been suggested that the invention of double-entry bookkeeping was both a symptom and a catalyst of the abstract rationalization of money and the very things for which it was meant to stand in exchange.²⁴ It is by no coincidence that the first manuscript on double-entry bookkeeping was written in 1458 in Venice.²⁵ This new method of accounting had several perceived benefits over the older, more cumbersome narrative method. First and foremost, proceeds and costs were combined into a single metric that reduced a complex series of interactions into one precise number that could stand alone on “the bottom line,” namely, *profit*. Second, similar to Galileo’s separation of primary and secondary qualities in modern science, it allowed merchants to focus on the information predetermined to be pertinent to

applied to the poor, who need our charity, but not to the wealthy engaging in trade; (3) there are cases in which moneylending can be seen as productive, i.e., when it allows goods like medical research, which would be impossible otherwise.

22. The United States finally abandoned the gold standard on August 15, 1971, after a few previous attempts to do so.

23. A bizarre recent example are nonfungible tokens (NFTs) in which “proof of ownership” of a digital image has “value” presumably because it is unique and thus “nonfungible.”

24. John H. Evans, “A Sociological Account of the Growth of Principlism,” *The Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 5 (2000): 31–38.

25. Benedetto Cotrugli, *The Book of the Art of Trade*, trans. John Francis Phillimore (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

decision-making. Finally, the method took all costs and benefits to be fungible, such that everything could be conveyed by a common unit. Thus, rather than relying on human evaluation and communication, this facilitation of commensurability made mathematics the language of relationality.²⁶ This represents vividly a “diabolical turn whereby the *means* becomes the *measure*.”²⁷ That which was only supposed to assist in a complex situation rearranges everything around itself.

As an artificial abstraction, money becomes the paradigmatic temptation to mistake appearance for reality.²⁸ Within the marketplace, money was considered commensurate with inanimate artifacts as well as animate objects like apples and ewes. What Shakespeare does in *The Merchant of Venice* is to conflate deliberately the abstraction of money with its antithesis: the flesh of the human person, an embodied soul, the horizon of matter and spirit. “In an act of mysterious vengeance” (to lift a phrase from Balthasar), monetization as fungibility and commensurability takes everything along with it, including the flesh.²⁹

1.2. Violence

Cicero quotes Cato on the question of usury: “When the questioner asked, ‘How about moneylending?’ Cato answered: ‘How about murdering someone?’”³⁰ Shakespeare clearly understood the point, as Shylock’s violent intentions prove greater than his greed when he refuses even the offer of three times the amount owed him. Dante saw usury in the same light, putting usurers not in the circle of the avaricious but in the circle of the violent, against

26. See Michael Dominic Taylor, *The Foundations of Nature: Metaphysics of Gift for an Integral Ecological Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 77–78.

27. D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 250.

28. D.C. Schindler, “Why Socrates Didn’t Charge: Plato and the Metaphysics of Money,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 403.

29. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1982), 18.

30. Cicero, *On Duties*, trans. P. G. Walsh, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 85.

art, nature, and God.³¹ They are specifically violent against art, that is, the industry of man. Genesis bids man to be fruitful and replenish the earth, and to earn by the sweat of his face (3:19); however, the usurer, like a parasite, does neither.

The moralism of our time blinds us to the ontological roots of ethical problems, insisting we repress the manifestation of our misguided will without acknowledging that the will is misguided because the intellect has lost its way. Thus, the modern aversion to truth reduces the problem of violence to one of learning to control one's emotions through techniques. David L. Schindler points out that violence is etymologically based in the Latin *violare* (to break or disregard, to infringe upon), beginning in activities that are *contra naturam* and ending in a denial of the truth of reality as given.

A generous presence thus becomes a violent presence when one's "use" of the other does not begin organically from within the other's truth and goodness as given. How we use others must be determined by what others are in their original givenness: what they are in their nature as originally given and ordered by God.³²

The usurer does violence to his constitutive relationship with God when he attempts to sidestep his providence in a perversion of the proper end of money, seeking to realize gain while offering no effort in exchange and rejecting any dependence that would require gratitude. It is not just that the usurer breaks "the rules," but that he breaks the intrinsic relationships we have with others by essentially denying that the source of true wealth is the

31. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto XI, lines 46–51: "Violence is committed against Divinity / When the heart denies and curses Him, / Despising nature and its goodness; / And so the smallest circle marks / With its sign, both Sodom and Cahors / And all those who speak, despising God at heart" (translation mine). Cahors was infamous for usury, thus this circle unites not only usurers but sodomites and blasphemers, those who, according to Dante, are unproductive because the end results of their acts bear no fruit. Hence Dante depicts this circle as a barren desert—the rain that would make the desert bloom (as mercy drops like "the gentle rain from heaven") is instead a rain of fire.

32. David L. Schindler, "Habits of Presence and the Generosity of Creation: Ecology in Light of Integral Human Development," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 583.

mutual affirmation of the other that is implicit in authentic relationality and manifested in every authentic exchange. It is this structure of reality that is the basis for the command to charity. For the violent, God and others are seen as limits on one's freedom and hence as obstacles to a limitless desire. The ontological violence of usury is deeply disordered—a sterile rejection of the bonds of flesh and friendship, and its underlying outlook is one of gnosticism.

1.3. Gnosticism

Gnosticism is often understood as simply the separation of matter and spirit, in which the first is seen as dross that must be left behind. Thus it seems wrong to call our age a gnostic one, since it appears to embrace matter to the exclusion of all else. However, as St. John Paul II puts it, “Nature itself, from being ‘*mater*’ (mother) is now reduced to being ‘matter,’ and is subjected to every kind of manipulation.”³³ As with gold currency, matter itself becomes less material, more mathematical, more virtual. Despite our apparent materialism, there seems to be a hatred for matter and flesh, for the limitations of our physical existence, and “this hatred is expressed in the ever-increasing desire to merge the real and virtual worlds.”³⁴

The gnosticism of today, however, rejects the spiritual and metaphysical as well. Rather than a vertical escapism to an idealized spiritual existence, the ideal has been turned horizontally and always appears to be in the very near future. This also makes the fulfillment of the idealized earthly paradise seem inevitable: it is just a matter of time. This flattening of ancient gnostic aspirations allows modern gnostics to remain full-blown materialists, even as they strive to escape the material reality. The dualisms modern philosophy so enthusiastically embraces are not possible in the Catholic understanding of the human person—as an embodied soul and “en-souled” body—in which there is a

33. *Evangelium vitae*, 22.

34. Robert Tilley, “The Cathedral of Being: Re-Enchantment and the Writings of the Popes,” *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics* 5, no. 1 (2015), 3.

mutual, though asymmetric, dependence between the body and the soul as its subsistent form: the body manifests, but can never exhaust, the richness of the soul, which, without the body, could not express its full human nature.

In modernity, appearance and form were split apart, until the phenomena had only a tenuous relation with the unknowable noumena. In a world of virtuality, there is no reality for the image to be a sign of; every thing is a simulacrum. Gnosticism, not only in the ancient but also in the modern sense, according to Benedict XVI, is a rejection of our dependence on creation and thereby on the Creator—a disenchantment with creation, “which ultimately does not and cannot desire grace any longer.”³⁵ Any “grace” or transcendence that remains is reduced to a function of man’s own knowledge and power. If physical violence takes by force the things of the flesh, the temptation of gnosticism is the appropriation of powers that belong to God alone. Dante puts in the eighth circle of *Inferno* the followers of Simon Magus, those who sought to buy the gifts of the Holy Spirit freely given to Peter by God’s grace, who, “rapacious for gold and silver, would adulterate the things of God,”³⁶ thus attempting to extend the fungibility of the users to the very throne of the divine. It is the assimilation of God’s freely given love to personal power.

In the new, horizontal gnosticism, God and spirit drop out entirely, and a new dualism is established in cybernetics between the physical world and information, which is posited as transcending material reality. In transhumanism, this is combined with a dualism between the limitations of the natural human body and the limitless possibilities of technology. It morphs into other forms as well, in which the dualism is concealed under an ever-more-abstruse gnosis that dissipates the human person into “distributed systems,” networks, and “assemblages” from which he is, in the end, ultimately indistinguishable.

35. Benedict XVI, *‘In the Beginning...’: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, Ressourcement (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), 95. “Gnosticism will not entrust itself to a world already created, but only to a world still to be created. There is no need for trust, only skill” (*ibid.*, 97).

36. Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XIX, lines 1–4 (translation mine).

II. TECHNOLOGY AND THE DIS-APPEARANCE OF THE FLESH

We're talking about an ontological change here, folks: we have entered a new era, and frictionless is the state of being that we're all aiming for; . . . a tectonic shift has taken place in the digital era.³⁷

In the same way that money is presumed to be neutral, so too is technology, precisely due to the logical dualism it enforces between the intellect and will, and thus between truth (now the pragmatic notion of “it works”) and goodness (determined subjectively). This account, while apparently true when considering morality in a vacuum, discards the ontological considerations that undergird ethics to begin with: namely, the normativity of human nature. In other words, to take a neutral stance toward technology generally is to claim that reality and varying levels of abstraction from reality are equally valid paths to human fulfillment. Moreover, to take a neutral stance toward technology is to take an agnostic stance toward human nature itself, reserving for the will alone the determination of what is good.

Many have argued cogently that modern technology is not on a quantitative continuum with the technology of the past, in which tools were extensions and aids to man's own power and agency. Guardini's meditation on sailing a sailboat versus riding on a motorboat, a classic example, is illuminating, especially with regard to the great deal of knowledge and number of relationships the former requires.³⁸ One way to qualify this difference—perhaps the best way—would be to say that sailing helps you love reality more.³⁹ The difference in technologies, then, is not a nostalgic one but an objective one, based on the normativity of that which is

37. Christiane Lemieux, *Frictionless: Why the Future of Everything Will Be Fast, Fluid, and Made Just for You* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 1.

38. Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Ressourcement (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), second letter.

39. Ferdinand Ulrich's felicitous phrase “thinking as thanking” describes the correspondence between the intellect and the will in which “man lovingly liberates all that is, lets it be, and contents himself with the ‘little way’ of being as outpoured love” (*Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D.C. Schindler [Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018], 438).

given as actually existing in reality. By their nature, technologies draw out some previously unrealized potentiality into actuality for human use and so ought to be considered on a spectrum according to the degree to which they do so in accordance with reality and especially with human nature. In short, technologies can be deemed harmonious to the degree that they fortify one's connections to the actuality of reality and build off of natural potentialities as opposed to artificial and abstract ones.⁴⁰

According to this account—the consequences of which we cannot begin to consider in their full depth here—we immediately see that the technology of money, even in the form of gold coins, is already discordant with the truth of reality. D.C. Schindler argues that the essence of money is to be detached from the thing for which it stands in value; once so detached, the appearance is taken for the reality, and the reality then seems to be yet another appearance.⁴¹ Both money and technology present themselves as indeterminate powers, augmenting the modern notion of freedom as never having to commit to anything. Separated from creation and from the good, ordered to no particular end or actuality but an open potentiality for all and any ends, they become ends in themselves.⁴² Tragically, by forgetting metaphysics, they forget that to be pure potentiality is to not be at all.

2.1. *The de-formation of the person*

Current computer/virtual technology lends itself more than any other technology in history to the loss of reality. One noteworthy manifestation of this reality has become “death-by-GPS,”

40. “To use a thing because of what it is is precisely to acknowledge the relative priority of actuality, and to derive potency or capacity from that reality. To go behind or under a thing's natural form, as it were, to extract a usefulness from it in spite of what it naturally is, is to subordinate its actuality to potency” (Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, 244). For an extended discussion, see *ibid.*, “Technology,” 242–52.

41. Schindler, “Why Socrates Didn't Charge,” 403.

42. *Caritas in veritate*, 70: “Produced through human creativity as a tool of personal freedom, technology can be understood as a manifestation of absolute freedom, the freedom that seeks to prescind from the limits inherent in things. . . . The ‘technical’ worldview that follows from this vision is now so dominant that truth has come to be seen as coinciding with the possible.”

driving cars into lakes and over cliffs. The drivers who survive respond, “the GPS told me to go this way,” and it is not simply an issue of unquestioning obedience to technology—people are losing more than their way. With little need to pay attention, remember, or question information that is always “at hand,” people’s native skills and sense of reality atrophy. The more we rely on technology, the more we weaken the “cognitive maps” that, as researchers now think, have a physical feedback dimension.⁴³ Relying on technology to think for us, we not only ascribe to it powers it does not and cannot have, but we ourselves lose our physical, stable reference points, and are left adrift.⁴⁴

This kind of technology, then, is not the extension of man’s natural potencies, does not mediate in a participatory manner between man and nature, but replaces man and is detached from him. The greater freedom we are given by those tools that are connected to nature, to actuality (windmills, carpentry tools, even internal combustion engines when they can still be easily tinkered with), becomes slavery when we no longer have any direct, working relationship with them. Summarizing Heidegger, Louis Dupré said that “technology, more than being our supreme accomplishment, has become a destiny that subjugates its human creators as much as their creations.”⁴⁵ He claimed that we are engaged in the transformation of the world and ourselves into “standing reserves,” raw materials waiting to be used up; the calculative thinking necessary would drive

43. A Japanese study compared groups of walkers who learned to navigate a new city (1) by experience (walking with a guide); (2) via a paper map with a beginning and end point but no specific route; and (3) with a GPS with the entire route on the screen. It was not surprising that those using maps or direct experience did far better at recreating the route and finding their way. Toru Ishikawa et al., “Wayfinding with a GPS-Based Mobile Navigation System: A Comparison with Maps and Direct Experience,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 28, no. 1 (March 2008): 74–82, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494407000734>.

44. This is similar to the life of faith: “That part of our effort over the past forty years to renew our church that expressed itself as a preferential option for words over flesh has not gone particularly well. Once talk of being ‘a pilgrim people’ replaced being a people who actually walk as pilgrims we rather lost our way” (Kevin A. Codd, *To the Field of Stars: A Pilgrim’s Journey to Santiago de Compostela* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 23).

45. Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, xiii.

out the contemplative. The difference between a sailboat and a motorboat is indeed great, but the “tectonic shift”—in both thought and the physical body, with the ability to change even the human genome—represents, in the words of Tolkien, a “twisting” of human nature. As we shall see,

All forms of identity—sexual, familial, religious, political, cultural, or otherwise—are held to be polymorphous, liquid, ever-changing, and it is our computer technology, our virtual technology, that best corresponds to this. So it is that following on the heels of genetic modification, eugenics, and the hope for and investment in the development of hybrid and cyborg technology, there is the almost religious hope in a coming “singularity” where the real and the virtual will merge. The hope is that through biotechnology and nanotechnology all matter, including flesh, will become plastic and malleable, conformable to the wishes of the consumer.⁴⁶

That is, we come to the transhuman and the posthuman.

2.2. *Post/transhumanism*

Schools of thought that call themselves transhuman or posthuman have proliferated like tropical vegetation, but let us simplify by saying that, generally, the “transhuman” deals with the physical component while the “posthuman” deals with the intellectual. They are, in other words, two sides of the same coin: biotechnological enhancements of and additions to humans (sometimes referencing the transcending of biology entirely, as in the technological “singularity”), pertaining to the former, and, pertaining to the latter, redefining what the human is, against the liberal humanist vision. Both embrace a decentralized, fluid, boundary-less kind of coevolution with various technological distributed systems and virtual machines.

A trope of modern science fiction that has found its way into everyday speech has been the conceptualization of the human brain and the computer as somehow equivalent, and perhaps even interchangeable *salva veritate*. The notion of uploading

46. Tilley, “The Cathedral of Being,” 4–5.

human consciousness to a computer appears to go back to Hans Moravec's 1988 book *Mind Children*, in which he argued that in a postbiological world, where every human function will have an artificial counterpart, our DNA will "find itself out of a job."⁴⁷ The film *Transcendence* (2014), featuring Johnny Depp, Morgan Freeman, and a cameo of Elon Musk (a fervent transhumanist), reenacts this fantasy for the screen.

Wendell Berry's warning comes to mind: "The legitimacy of a metaphor depends on our understanding of its limits. . . . When a metaphor is construed as an equation, it is out of control; when it is construed as an identity, it is preposterous."⁴⁸ The suggestion that the human brain is compatible with a computer would seem to be a philosophical howler, but so many (including the world's wealthiest man) take it very seriously. How did it come about?

As with most modern dualisms, we can trace it back to Descartes and earlier. Although this history is well known, it is worth underscoring that the logic at the heart of the Cartesian project was methodologically predetermined to reduce human reason to the realm of mathematical "clarity" and "distinctness" in order to take control of nature for technological ends. The classical understanding of a human being was that of a unity of form (the soul) and matter (the pure potentiality that properly does not exist until it is brought into existence in its unity with the soul). However, with Descartes, we suddenly have a body existing in its own right, separate from a disembodied consciousness that is not responsible for animating the body at all, but only informing it with various qualities.⁴⁹ Gilbert Ryle's 1949 critique of "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine" as an egregious "category mistake" was on point.⁵⁰

47. Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

48. Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 46.

49. The etymological transformations of the words "form" and "inform" to mean "shape" and "to provide information" mimic this modern logic.

50. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind: 60th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5–6.

The inventions of the nineteenth century appeared to confirm Descartes's dogma of antihylomorphism. The radio and the telephone brought us the first separation of the human voice from human flesh, "overcoming" space. The phonograph "overcame time" by making recordings, but these were still recognizably tied to the real. The final separation would come later on when information would be separated from any sort of actual presence and conformed to a mathematical pattern.

Any history of that separation will reference the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics.⁵¹ These meetings, held from 1943 to 1954, "converged on a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition."⁵² New technologies required greater quantification, and information was defined as a "pattern" to meet that need. If double-entry bookkeeping eliminated the *narrative context*, information theory eliminated the *material substrata* and created the myth of disembodied information that could instantiate anywhere. Everything was viewed as patterns of information that evolve, change, and learn, no matter whether in flesh, fluids, or circuits. This separation of information and materiality was at the same time gaining prominence in biology and the general culture.⁵³

During the same time period, the well-known Turing Test⁵⁴ of 1950 aimed to show that computers, not just humans, could "think," with seemingly no cognizance of the mechanistic

51. There were other conferences besides the ones on cybernetics and systems theory organized by the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, but "Macy Conferences" is often used as shorthand for those particular disciplines.

52. Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xii.

53. Cf. Richard Doyle, *On Beyond Living: Rhetorical Transformations in the Life Sciences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Evelyn Fox Keller, *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender, and Science* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

54. "Let us fix our attention on one particular digital computer C. Is it true that by modifying this computer to have an adequate storage, suitably increasing its speed of action, and providing it with an appropriate programme, C can be made to play satisfactorily the part of A in the imitation game, the part of B being taken by a man?" (Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, no. 236 [1950]: 442).

and dualistic assumptions built into the test itself: taking the test at all meant accepting these presuppositions. Alan Turing himself had a greatly truncated idea of “thinking,” seeing everything through the lens of formalist mathematics, and his “imitation machine” reflected him. As his biographer stated,

The discrete-state machine, communicating by teleprinter alone, was like an ideal for his own life, in which he would be left alone in a room of his own, to deal with the outside world solely by rational argument. It was the embodiment of a perfect J. S. Mill liberal, concentrating upon the free will and free speech of the individual.⁵⁵

In stages that followed the Macy Conferences, the *homeostasis* of feedback loops morphed into *reflexivity*, with the observer as a part of the system—and then to *virtuality*, in the (oxymoronic) field of Artificial Life,⁵⁶ where “computer programs are designed to allow ‘creatures’ (that is, discrete packets of computer codes) to evolve spontaneously in directions the programmer may not have anticipated. The intent is to evolve the capacity to evolve.”⁵⁷ Since information is prior to instantiation, and neither consciousness nor embodiment are defining features of persons (the first is a mere epiphenomenon, while the body is just the original prosthesis that can be changed and manipulated), persons can be assimilated into machine systems with “no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.”⁵⁸

What is especially striking about the feedback loop between the virtual and the real worlds—in the human sensorium

55. Alan Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 535.

56. According to Christophe Langton, artificial life was based on the assumption that “the ‘logical form’ of an organism can be separated from its material basis of construction, and that ‘aliveness’ will be found to be a property of the former, not of the latter” (“Artificial Life,” in *Artificial Life* [Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Longman Publishing Co., 1989], 1).

57. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 11.

58. *Ibid.*, 3.

interacting with computers—is the coincidence of desire and fulfillment (instant gratification), as well as the promise of infinite possibility online. One can be *anything* on the internet, any sex, any species, etc., and this bleeds over into real life.

At the 1993 “Machine Culture Exhibition,” Gregory Garvey presented the “Catholic Turing Test,” in which the “sinner” is challenged to determine whether he is “confessing” to a computer or to a real priest.⁵⁹ Garvey explained,

In doing so the user/sinner can experience the ecstasy of forgiveness in a Manichean system governed by the binary logic of good and evil where guilt, shame, sin, and salvation, are all input variables that determine the catechism of output: namely how many “Hail Marys” and “Our Fathers” must be said for redemption.

The kiosk was designed to look like an ATM. When the “transaction” is complete, the sinner receives a receipt.

2.3. *Simulacra*

Whatever Garvey intended by his installation, it would seem to be an exemplar of the religious simulacra that emerge from a world saturated in virtuality. In a telling line from *Transcendence* (2014), the protagonist is asked if he wants to create his own god; he responds, “Isn’t that what man has always done?” The crucial point is that according to the post/transhuman logic it is religion and faith that have always been the illusory imitation of what we are now finally (almost) capable of through our own merits. Without an objective point of reference, one cannot distinguish between what is real and what is simulacrum. As Jean Baudrillard noted,

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs. . . . It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.

59. SIGGRAPH: 20th Annual Conference on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques, Anaheim, CA, August 1–6, 1993, <https://digitalartarchive.siggraph.org/artwork/gregory-p-garvey-catholic-turing-test/>.

. . . But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest to his existence?⁶⁰

Since St. Augustine, it has been commonplace to speak of Christians as “plundering the Egyptians,” a phrase from Exodus repurposed to apply to what Christianity can garner from paganism.⁶¹ However, it is also true that modernity and postmodernity have similarly despoiled Christianity. Marxism, of course, has often been described as Christianity without transcendence, one with an immanent eschaton, and much postmodern philosophy is recognizable to Catholic theologians as heavily indebted to their own fields. Tracey Rowland points out that thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Eric Voegelin, and John Milbank “tend to coalesce in seeing that the culture of Modernity, far from being something completely original in Western history, is in fact a heretical reconstruction of the Classical Christian heritage, with neo-gnosticism being the predominant ingredient in this cocktail.”⁶²

Even so, it is still surprising to see how deeply the logic of virtual technology leads its devotees to mimic religion. The gnostic attitude that underlies the technologization of the flesh is here to stay; the recent overlapping of humans and systems in various technical fields means, according to one posthumanist, that we need both new theoretical paradigms and that even “the nature of thought itself must change.”⁶³ If information is perceived “as more mobile, more important, more essential than material forms” and if “this impression becomes part of your cultural mindset, you have entered the condition of virtuality.”⁶⁴

We are brought back to Antonio’s melancholy: as with living according to a pervasive fungibility, living as if all were

60. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2 and 5.

61. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60.

62. Tracey Rowland, “Children of the Second Syllable: Modernity in the Theopoetics of James McAuley,” in *Cooperatori della Verità: Scritti in onore del Papa emerito Benedetto XVI per il 95° compleanno* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 265.

63. Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xvi.

64. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 19.

virtual leads to a dispirited existence, foremost because one replaces the spiritual for a simulation of immateriality. Surely a simulated religion or spirituality is an attempt to fill a void that cannot be ignored. In its day, the Soviet reality—with its “new Soviet man”—founded on the preposterous notion that the Party could dictate the truth, was the biggest simulacrum of all. Today, the apparatus of that substitute “new man” is technology. Both conform to a “horizontal” gnosticism and faith in an “inevitable” future paradise.

For every religious concept, there is a technological simulacrum or the hope of one in the very near future. There is a simulacrum of immortality: some transhumanists profess that someday “we will flock to cyberspace leaving our meat bodies behind.”⁶⁵ There is a simulacrum of omniscience in the form of the all-pervasive surveillance state.⁶⁶ There is a simulacrum of true communion with others in the world of social media.

And of course there are several simulacra of the resurrection of the flesh.⁶⁷ There is a literal version in cryonics—the

65. Ben Goertzel, “Technological Transcendence: An Interview with Giulio Prisco,” *H+ Magazine*, February 8, 2011, <https://hplusmagazine.com/2011/02/08/technological-transcendence-an-interview-with-giulio-prisco/>. “Transhumanism . . . does present at least some promise of achieving via science some of the more radical promises that religion has traditionally offered—immortality, dramatic states of bliss, maybe even resurrection” (ibid.). “Technological resurrection . . . is, I believe, a necessary component of transhumanist spirituality” (ibid.). This is, however, a minority position; transhumanists tend to see themselves as ultra-rationalists, and most philosophical posthumanists vigorously reject the subset of transhumanist writers who seem to owe more to science fiction than to science.

66. “Being watched for unclear purposes by uncertain authority contradicts basic notions of public space. The uncertainty goes hand-in-hand with nano-technologies, with embeddedness, with surveillance, and even closed-circuit TV. Unlike Maupassant who could choose to dine in the Eiffel Tower in order to both escape its presence and reverse its relation to the city, the surveillance state is intrinsically omnipresent” (Dana Cuff, “Immanent Domain: Pervasive Computing and the Public Realm,” in *Writing Urbanism: A Design Reader* [New York: Routledge, 2008], 364).

67 There is a strange kind of “virtual resurrection” in Christianity itself. Because theologians like Rudolf Bultmann thought that Christ’s resurrection was impossible in reality, he sought an alternative explanation, that of the resurrection taking place in the interiority of the believer. Fr. José Granados notes that this amounts to a far more radical leap of faith: “An enormous region of being—that of the material universe—was excluded from the transformative power of the Gospel. The Christian experience, which in this view could

freezing of human remains in the speculative hope of being resuscitated in the future—that requires utter faith in technological progress. On the other hand, virtual reality provides a kind of spiritual existence free of the strictures of the body. We assume a limitless “angelic” consciousness in which we “float transcendently in the realm of infinite possibility, denying our created condition as finite and *embodied* souls. . . . We abstract ourselves from the traditions and convictions that root us in time and place, becoming virtual angels orbiting the earth.”⁶⁸ In the end we discover that technology used for communication is a simulacrum of the true mediation of prayer, sacramentality, and communion with others. The “I–Thou” relationship—mediated by the physical, by language, and by acts of love—becomes “I–Tech–Thou,” the middle term appearing in the role of a servant but, in the final account, assuming the role of a master.

What all of these simulacra have in common is the technological presupposition that limitation is evil because the will’s fullest potential for self-determination (“freedom”) is the ultimate good. Abandoning human nature and pursuing this technological escape from limitation, man makes himself the powerless product of his own technical prowess. D.C. Schindler observes that “this is a kind of antiredemption, a diabolical inversion of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, who is at once priest and victim.”⁶⁹ In a horrifying turn, the transhumanist makes himself into the simulacrum of Christ himself.

According to the technological outlook, the limitations of the flesh are evil, since they offend the will’s demand for potentiality, most egregiously because someday it will die. Yet it seems that the transhumanist would never consider the suggestion that freedom consists in humbly accepting the limitations

speak only to the isolated consciousness of man, lost its relevance for shaping community and society” (“Risen Time: Easter as the Source of History,” 10).

68. Ralph C. Wood, “The Self Among the Ruins,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/walker-percy-diagnosis-of-the-human-condition/11694590>. “Or else like beasts, we seek to plunge beneath our condition as spiritual animals by sinking into total physicality, denying our created condition as ensouled bodies. We immerse ourselves in comforts and conveniences, in money and possessions, becoming little more than contented animals” (*ibid.*).

69. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, 275.

of the flesh and passing through the narrow gate of death; hence “neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”⁷⁰ But what if there were another way? What if we could heal the conflict between technology and the flesh by integrating them? As it would seem, no stone must be left unturned.

III. A POSTMODERN DIS-SOLUTION

Some champions of posthumanism think that adverse reactions to its claims are the fruit of a tendency toward hyperbolic panic and apocalyptic fears due to misunderstandings. What is needed, they claim, is for critics to be brought into a deeper understanding of what they propose. We take just one representative example: N. Katherine Hayles’s book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. This text is widely considered to be “the key text which brought posthumanism to broad international attention,”⁷¹ and it is particularly relevant to our subject, for the author sees her task as bringing “back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects.”⁷² We cannot do justice to her body of work, and therefore this is not intended as an exhaustive critique; in fact, there is more to agree with here than in many other posthumanists. Rather, we wish to point out some problematic features shared by those who promote emergent/evolutionary posthuman theories, specifically with regard to the flesh, for which Hayles’s work is representative.

Hayles reviews the “old” metaphysics and the story it would seem to tell (including a reading of Plato through the lens of Derrida), with its logos, God, teleology, and originary plenitude that ground stable meanings and the coherent reality behind them. This description is countered with its postmodern

70. Lk 16:31b (NRSV-CE).

71. Francesca Ferrando, “Posthumanism,” *Kilden Journal of Gender Research* 38, no. 2 (2014): 168–72, <https://www.idunn.no/doi/10.18261/ISSN1891-1781-2014-02-05>. Still, there are post- and transhumanists who disagree with Hayles. She was chosen as a representative example because, for our purposes, the many parsings of the taxonomy of post- and transhumanists merge at the level of the ontological critique we are pursuing here.

72. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 5 (emphasis added).

deconstruction, which, in many ways, is just the other side of the coin; the uncertainty we may feel when confronted with the latter is only possible in contrast with the former. Rather than submitting to this contrast, a better way to understand posthumanism, Hayles believes, is by tracing how teleology is replaced by “emergence” according to the notion of “pattern/randomness”: patterns that “emerge” from randomness are perceived as the realization of potentialities that exist in their plenitude within randomness.⁷³

According to the Enlightenment liberal understanding, the essence of the human subject consists in consciousness and autonomy as freedom from others. This subject tries to grasp control through the judgments of an autonomous will. To this “Parmenidean” unchanging unity, posthumanism posits a “Heraclitean” flux:⁷⁴ the posthuman subject appears as “a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction . . . [with] no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will.”⁷⁵

Hayles rightly rejects the liberal self as a ghost-in-the-machine that results in a Turing-like “cognitivist” understanding of the mind: an input-output informational system, a symbol manipulator whose hardware is the brain. The end is not “the humanization of the machine . . . but the mechanization of mind.”⁷⁶ She also rejects the Cartesian dualism between an inert body that can be shed and left behind in favor of flight into a disembodied virtual subjectivity. Instead, she advocates for

73. As a simulacrum to God’s plenitude, this plenitude of randomness consist in “the much, much larger set of everything else, from phenomena that cannot be rendered coherent by a given system’s organization to those the system cannot perceive at all” (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 286).

74. Here we have the return of nominalism: does the world divide at “natural joints” or can you slice the ontological pie any way you choose? Heraclitus thought there was a logos underlying the flux; however, his name is still used as a shorthand for this position.

75. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3–4. The essential distinguishing feature between the two concerns *how subjectivity is constructed*, and not whether the body is coupled with any sort of mechanism.

76. N. Katherine Hayles, “The Cognitive Nonconscious,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 783–808, at 786.

an “embodied/embedded paradigm”⁷⁷ in which “subjectivity is emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it.”⁷⁸ A new distinction, she says, is to be posited not based on biological grounds but between “cognizers” and “noncognizers”: “on one side are humans and all other biological life forms, as well as many technical systems; on the other, material processes and inanimate objects.”⁷⁹ Thus, the “human” is a subcategory of the “cognizers” and ought to be thought of as part of an “assemblage”: “a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines [that] replaces the liberal humanist subject’s manifest destiny to dominate and control nature.”⁸⁰

How, then, should we think about the flesh? With “embeddedness” replacing the body as material substrate for the mind, with subjectivity thus dispersed throughout the “assemblage,” with the boundary of interactions becoming a feedback loop between “the body and simulation in a technobio-integrated circuit,”⁸¹ people wrongly fear, Hayles argues, that the self dissolves without the flesh, the “boundary of skin.” She saves the appearance and preserves the flesh (biologically speaking) as an integrated part of a dynamic system, stating that “the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice rather than being imperiled by

77. Hayles distinguishes between the *body*, which she sees as a normalized, abstract Platonic form, and *embodiment* as instantiation in culture, physiology, place, and time, and thus unable to dissolve or disappear into information (*How We Became Posthuman*, 196–97). The two, however, are in interplay: “When the focus is on the body, the particularities of embodiment tend to fade from view. . . . Conversely, when the focus shifts to embodiment, a specific material experience emerges out of the abstraction of the body” (*ibid.*, 199).

78. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 292.

79. Hayles “The Cognitive Nonconscious,” 799. She distinguishes thinking from cognition—the latter refers to “a much broader faculty present to some degree in all biological life forms and many technical systems” (*ibid.*, 788).

80. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 288.

81. *Ibid.*, 27.

it.”⁸² Thus, human fulfillment *requires* the conflation of nature and technological artifice—the flesh and chip—even as she maintains their distinctness. In other words, what is most real and most good is not the world we experience through our senses but the digital world; but we should not fear, for the virtual kingdom is at hand and our flesh will be integrated into that world of endless potentiality through the grace of “the splice” in the near future, as has been prophesized to us in films such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Avatar* (2009).

There is some semblance of truth to Hayles’s vision. Persons often do function as if they were part of an “assemblage.” But that is not *who we are*. Neither is that comparison possible without dehumanizing the person, unless the functional role exists within a greater covenant of friendship and love.⁸³ Inevitably, moderns and postmoderns attempt to “salvage” realities they comprehend incompletely by redefining them. “Transcendence” is redefined as discontinuity, not qualitative and “vertical,” as between God and creation, but only “horizontally,” on the same quantitative level. This is not true transcendence but only its simulacrum: an immanent apex within the same closed totality. Similarly, distributed systems and their dynamics attempt to give us a nuanced version of the person’s relationship to the technological infrastructure of the world, but it amounts to an insufficient asymptote. The original ontological dualism that Hayles claims to reject—that of object and subject relating extrinsically—remains intact, and it remains mechanical; in fact, it has become the pinnacle of the immanent, mechanistic reduction. The desire to “put back the flesh” in this way ends by losing hold of what it means to be human and magnifying the original reductionism that first created this problem. We have come a long way from the meaning of flesh in Shakespeare, for, as we will see, the bond of flesh reflects a larger, deeper understanding

82. *Ibid.*, 290. “Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures” (*ibid.*, 288).

83. When a character in a C. S. Lewis story learns about the life of a star in Narnia and comments that, in this world, a star is a ball of flaming gas, this is the response he gets: “That is not what a star is, but only what it is made of” (C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* [New York: HarperCollins, 1994], 226).

of the person, one which is truly diffusive, which overflows in friendship, love, and redemption.

IV. METAPHYSICS, BEING, AND GIFT

A substitute shines brightly as a king
Until a king be by.⁸⁴

4.1. *Thinking as thanking*

The issues raised by posthumanists, transhumanists, and technophiles of all stripes cannot be properly addressed in the same terms or on the same level as they are presented. To reject their projects one need not—and ought not—reject technology as such, nor should the choice be seen as one between philosophical/theological arguments and those more technical/pragmatic in nature. Rather, the technological level has a rightful place in human life and in the multifaceted structure of reality. The technical level of reality must be comprehended within ever-larger concentric spheres that include and transcend the technical qua technical: the economic, social, political, philosophical, and finally the ontological spheres—the beauty, truth, and goodness of which are perceivable in the givenness of reality. Only by perceiving the whole can we properly address any particular question and provide answers “based on values rooted in the truth of human life.”⁸⁵

With regard to this hierarchy, the question is not one of opposition but of order. When Plato discusses the status of images (*eikones*) and the ideas (*eide*) in the context of his “divided line” analogy, it is not the case that images are the problem, but rather the disorder inflicted upon the hierarchy of the cosmos, generally through ignorance of those higher levels. Thus far, we have rejected the kinds of denial of the human person and the flesh deriving from reductionism (e.g., reducing the soul to

84. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 5, scene 1, lines 94–95.

85. *Caritas in veritate*, 72.

mere “information”).⁸⁶ The solution is a technology ordered to the good of the person. Often transhumanists point to the disabled and the sick—the justified uses of technology that bring them back to health or help them live a more human life—in order to claim that to use similar technical or chemical interventions on healthy people is only slightly different, if at all. True to form, they instrumentalize disabilities and illness to relativize human nature as such, ignoring the categorical difference between a standard of health based on universal human nature and a notion of “enhancement” that rejects that same nature in favor of an abstract and untethered fantasy. For this reason, David Bentley Hart was right when he said that St. John Paul II’s vision of the human and the modern transhumanist’s vision “are divided not by a difference in practical or ethical philosophy, but by an irreconcilable hostility between two religions, two metaphysics, two worlds—at the last, two gods.”⁸⁷ Thus, the problem with the technological paradigm is not that it is technical but that it makes the technical into a paradigm, into a false *logos*, bringing disorder to the whole and confounding the ontological order with the functions of systems, abandoning the human in the process.

At the heart of that order are being, form, gift, and love, ontological realities that are entirely lacking in technological reduction of the human being. First, the technological philosophies—from Turing’s dualistic cognitivism to the conflation of biology and cybernetics—are unable to account adequately for “the unity and interiority of living things or for our experience

86. In the BBC documentary *Aristotle’s Lagoon* (2010), discussing Aristotle’s understanding of *eidos*, the narrator affirms, “So what *eidos* really is is something like information.” The “expert” in Aristotelian philosophy responds, “That’s right, . . . information . . . or . . . a kind of activity.” To which the narrator adds, “And the really remarkable thing is he’s using a metaphor for information—the order of the letters—that is almost exactly like the metaphor that we use when we speak about the genetic code, about DNA. After all, it’s not the material constituents of DNA that matter; rather, it’s the order of the elements of which DNA is made up.” Needless to say, information is neither an activity nor a good explanation of the soul—nor is the soul comparable to DNA.

87. David Bentley Hart, “John Paul II and the Ethics of the Body,” *The New Atlantis* (Summer 2005): 71.

of them and of being alive.”⁸⁸ Second, philosophies that seek to integrate the flesh into technical “assemblages” make human persons dependent on “the splice” for “fulfillment” while providing no principle of unity, of ontological identity, which is not simply a question of dynamics but the very condition of the possibility for science itself. The flesh of the human being is reduced to the biological and psychological, and while it is properly distinguished from the machine it still appears to require being “spliced” into technology for its “fulfillment.” For John Paul II, fulfillment comes from a different place: the one who loves “‘goes outside’ the self to find a fuller existence in another,”⁸⁹ and that “another” is a *person*.

Counting technology on a par with biology, Hayles’s approach allows a “decentering of the human from a privileged ontological position toward a more ecological ontology, where the enmeshments between different beings can be more genuinely investigated.”⁹⁰ But such an “ontology” is entirely immanent, and thus, only a simulacrum.

There exists another ontology that *precedes* technical and biological systems and is founded on the relations at the level of being itself. Thomas Aquinas explains that *esse*, being, is simple and perfect, yet subsistent.⁹¹ Being can only subsist in this world if it gives itself to creatures, submitting to the limitation of specific matter informed by a particular form—creatures that would not exist without this gift of being’s *kenosis*.⁹² Each creature,

88. Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 283.

89. Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 126.

90. Steven Umbrello and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, “Nonconscious Cognitive Suffering: Considering Suffering Risks of Embodied Artificial Intelligence,” *Philosophies* 4, no. 24 (2019): 5.

91. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia Dei* 1.1, ad 1.

92. This terminology is used especially by Ferdinand Ulrich, who argues that, as embodied spirit, the human person is the maximal expression of being’s self-gift, indeed the very goal at which this gift aims, for only the human essence is subsistent, achieving the full return to one’s essence, the *reditio completa*, which brings with it self-consciousness, freedom, and the bond of communion with God, the source of the gift. Paradoxically, with this freedom man can either reject the bond that makes him free or embrace it, though

radiant in the gift of its own being, essentially and intrinsically united by its underlying participation in being itself, in its unique dignity, is caught up in a continuous dynamic of reception and self-donation that is a reflection of the inner life of the Trinity, a communion of persons, and through the Incarnation our human flesh is brought into that relationship. We are inherently related to our Creator and to all other creatures from the core of our being, and we will be *more ourselves, more fully alive*, the more we live out these relationships in love, a love that is no mere emotion but Logos and order.⁹³

This is sometimes referred to as the *metaphysics of gift*, a shorthand for an openness to the gifted quality of reality that differs greatly from Heidegger's account of traditional metaphysics as ontotheology or from what postmoderns misconstrue as "closed metanarratives." Rooted in the metaphysics of Aquinas and illuminated by many who followed him,⁹⁴ it presents a vision of the human person that is open to a deeper and older meaning of the "transhuman." It was Dante who first coined the term in his *Paradiso*: to *trasumanar* is to be brought through the human into the divine life, and it requires gratitude, love, perseverance, but most especially actions aided by grace (one must "take up one's cross and follow Christ").⁹⁵ This vision of the transhuman is not antihuman but represents the blossoming of the fullness of human potentiality grounded in the sacramental capacity of the flesh. In the words of St. John Paul II, the person is "called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God"⁹⁶—a fullness that is not the denial of earthly existence but the fulfillment of its promises.

never destroy it in this life. While he walks in the flesh, man is surrounded by witnesses to being's loving self-gift in the creatures of this world, and his very flesh invites him to accept his existence, with all of its limitation and particularity, in gratitude and love. In this, says Ulrich, "the mystery of the flesh is both revealed and concealed at once: *Caro cardo salutis*"—the flesh is the hinge of salvation (Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 321).

93. See David L. Schindler, *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

94. Cf. Taylor, *The Foundations of Nature*, chap. 4.

95. Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto I, line 70, and Canto XIV, lines 106–08.

96. *Evangelium vitae*, 2.

The metaphysics of gift points to *analogy*, of which Christ, the concrete *analogia entis*, is the paradigm. Analogy stands between the equivocal and univocal, between dualism and dissipation, such that Catholicism has been called “the religion of Both-And: spirit and body, God and man, grace and nature—as the great universal harmony.”⁹⁷ People’s minds will not change if they dismiss the world as gift along with the actuality of real flesh and blood. In the end, the answer to the simulacra of the flesh is the whole, lived, Christian, sacramental life, the same “come and see” that Christ offered to the first disciples. To see through the lens of a metaphysics of gift, where logos and love coincide, is to see that the pound of flesh is not reduced to fungibility; rather, it takes on a far deeper meaning under *the law of the gift*, under which “it is precisely when one becomes a gift for others that one most fully becomes oneself.”⁹⁸

4.2. Venice and Belmont

We return now to Antonio’s Venice, which appears far removed from our sophisticated and technological age, but they are of a piece. If usury begins with detachment from reality and from real relationship, its logic leads to a rejection of actuality: the virtual world seems to promise infinite possibility and instant gratification without effort, without risk, and without paying a price.

Beyond the mercantile, moneylending backdrop of Venice lies Belmont, the “mountain of beauty,” the home of Portia and the setting for her betrothal by way of the test of the caskets. Portia’s father decreed that to win her hand, suitors must choose among three caskets: gold, silver, and lead.⁹⁹ We discover that the gold casket, with a sign promising, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire,” conceals a skull, while the silver casket promises that “who chooseth me shall get as much

97. Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 146.

98. Karol Wojtyła, “The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 194.

99. Shakespeare makes it clear that Portia, in her fiat to her father’s will, freely chooses the apparent limitation on her freedom.

as he deserves," and hides a fool's head. Shakespeare reminds us that "all the glisters is not gold," and it is the casket of lead, of most humble appearance, that holds within it the image of Portia, which is the promise of her hand in marriage. Its legend promised nothing, but read, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." It is this casket, the choice of which would be foolish in the eyes of the world, that Bassanio selects upon reflecting that, in a world of simulacra, appearance and reality rarely correspond.

Late in the play Portia, disguised as Balthazar, has freed Antonio from the legal snare set by Shylock that would have claimed his life. Antonio, overcome by gratitude, insists that Balthazar take something as a tribute. She demands the ring Bassanio promised never to part with and, after some reluctance and Antonio's encouragement, he gives it, hazarding the love of Portia just as Antonio hazarded his life so that Bassanio might win Portia. The play is a comedy, however, and as such it ends in joy. All misunderstandings are revealed and reconciled. In choosing to give rather than to receive, all gain more than they desired or deserved; in choosing to risk their lives, all will find them (Mt 10:39) (Bassanio too offered his "flesh, blood, bones, and all"¹⁰⁰ for Antonio's freedom). Portia has a tested, faithful husband, and Antonio now gives as surety his very soul, not just his flesh, that Bassanio will never break his oath to her. Bassanio, learning that "Balthazar" was actually Portia, has a wife eminent not just in wealth and beauty but in goodness and wisdom. And Antonio, his friendships having been deepened and renewed and his ships having come safely to port, rejoices that he has been given both "life and living."

Antonio had said that he "had much ado to know [himself]," and his lack of knowledge and world-weariness could not be resolved by his friends' diagnoses but by a selfless act of self-donation and a willingness to lay down his life—his flesh—for his friend.¹⁰¹ To know the good is to do it, "because there is no proper knowledge of the good that is not an assimilation to

100. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, scene 1, line 112.

101. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13).

the good in one's 'flesh and blood.'"¹⁰² Despite Antonio's apparent foolishness, his self-sacrificing attitude brings him out of the fiction of fungibility and into a deeper relationship with his friends, transforming him and them through the influx of grace and mercy.

As it turns out, even the language of commerce in Venice was a simulacrum of the real thing, yet there is nothing that cannot be redeemed. The economic language that devolves into commodification is lifted up and transfigured in the Bible: you were bought with a price (1 Cor 16:20), redeemed by the Redeemer who gave his life as ransom (Mk 10:45), who canceled the bond or debt against us (Col 2:13). . . . And while the story that Christ's final cry on the Cross, *tetelestai* (it is finished), is the same term stamped on bills "paid in full" is probably apocryphal, it reflects the culmination of the truth that "greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Antonio is not a Christ figure, but when he risks his flesh and his own life to stand as collateral for his friend, the analogy to the redemptive act of Christ, who suffered in the flesh for us, is apparent.

To live without the dramatic dimension of being as gift is to live among the simulacra of glittering caskets that conceal the nothingness, the refusal in the *non serviam*, within. There is no place for the humility of which Mary is the best model, for the acceptance of our limitation and death, for true participation, for gratitude—except that ersatz "gratitude" in which one is "grateful" to a system or "the universe." To move away from simulacra is to leave the enclosed circles of the Inferno: of the money changers, the violent, the betrayers of reality; of the infinite technological array of glowing screens; of recursive fun-house mirrors and Escher drawings of closed loops that cannot be escaped; of the apparently free and open but actually closed-in world of emergence; of the world of Venice writ large to cover every aspect of existence, and to emerge "once more to see the

102. D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, 303. "If Plato identifies knowledge and virtue, it is because he has a particularly robust sense of knowledge. As [Wolfgang Maria] Zeitler puts it, knowledge in the proper sense, for Plato, 'is a knowing that has passed over "into flesh and blood," which generates a relatedness to the object known, and is thus a knowing that transforms the entire person'" (ibid.).

stars.”¹⁰³ Neither the temptations of the limitless potentialities of a “metaverse” nor the bookkeepers’ value-flattened world of fungibility hold sway over the heart, but only the actuality of the “extravagant God who does not count or measure but just pours and pours and pours grace upon grace, stars upon stars.”¹⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

The Word has become flesh. God has shown himself not on the farthest boundary of the world, but in its midst, indeed in its lowliest part. And since he prepared himself a body within the sphere of the finite, man does not draw near to him by denying all that limits him.¹⁰⁵

The ancient gnostic dream of ridding oneself of the body was always an illusion, born from a lack of imagination. Unable to imagine a solution to the corruption of the material world, they were incapable of seeing death as anything other than an escape.¹⁰⁶ At least ancient gnostics did not doubt the existence of the soul, something that cannot be said for their modern counterparts, who have traded their souls for a digital consciousness. The metaphor of “the cloud” and the belief that information can exist without a material substructure conceals the contingency of the virtual and its dependence on the material in the very same way that technological ontology conceals the contingency of the material world and its dependence on the gift of being. It is this forgetfulness of dependence,¹⁰⁷ the denial of its goodness, and the

103. Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, line 139 (translation mine).

104. Codd, *To the Field of Stars*, 115.

105. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 175.

106. Without indifference to the pain and suffering it brings, the Catholic tradition understands bodily death not only as a necessary evil but, in the ultimate account, as a blessing and motive for gratitude. See Matthew Ramage, “Ratzinger on Evolution and Evil: A Christological and Mariological Answer to the Problem of Suffering and Death in Creation,” *Religions* 12 (2021): 583; St. Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of the Sun.”

107. This forgetfulness permeates every level of reality, from the ontological, to the social, to the economic, to the physical: the virtual world slides frictionlessly into the realm of oblivion. While the energetic cost of running

subsequent incapacity for gratitude that constitute the evil that seeps through the cracks, even as these very same technologies are put to use for good and noble ends.

Contrary to gnostic escapism, many wise pagans intuited the goodness, actual and potential, of the flesh, starting with Plato, but it was not until the Incarnation that its full meaning was finally revealed: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). Coupled with the mysteries of the Eucharist and the Cross, the contingency and limitation of the flesh become both the key and the narrow gate by which all are invited to enter into the inner life of love itself. In the words of Ratzinger, “Only love transforms dependence into freedom.”¹⁰⁸

Thus, the modern “freedom” as the absence of limitation that every post- and transhumanist and good-willed technophile pursues is but smoke in the air. Even the notion of an “embodied/embedded” existence—one that seeks to save the flesh by incorporating it into a cyber “assemblage” and relinquishes the liberal subject’s desire for control—is revealed as an illusory and indeed diabolical inversion. As with every simulacrum, all our efforts come to naught.

The answer to the limitations of contingent, temporal, physical existence is the little way of humble acceptance of all that it constitutes. Shakespeare understood that the flesh is never fungible, not because it is an absolute good to be pampered and preserved, but because it is the only currency by which we may be ransomed and by which we may purchase that which is of true

CPUs for virtual bitcoin “mining” and the human and environmental costs of the real-world mining of rare earth minerals required for batteries and solar panels ought to check our virtual ambitions, the very opposite seems to occur, as if we were trapped in a gambler’s fallacy. To put it bluntly, to produce the high-tech virtual life requires money, and a lot of it. The oligarchs get massively wealthy, while the masses get virtual reality goggles for their bread and circuses, the simulacra of entertainment, coupled with totalizing political control. In the words of Benedict XVI, “The process of globalization could replace ideologies with technology, allowing the latter to become an ideological power that threatens to confine us within an a priori that holds us back from encountering being and truth. Were that to happen, we would all know, evaluate and make decisions about our life situations from within a technocratic cultural perspective to which we would belong structurally, without ever being able to discover a meaning that is not of our own making” (*Caritas in veritate*, 70).

108. Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, 98–99.

value and attain to true joy, in this life and the next. Indeed, only through corporeal participation in the most blessed sacrament and by hazarding our own flesh in the daily sacrifices of fidelity, work, worship, and suffering borne with grace may we enjoy a foretaste of true freedom, wisdom, and love.

Antonio is returned from the very brink of death and the “want-wit sadness” that opens the play to the joy of his “life and living” by the mediation of Portia, the herald of mercy.¹⁰⁹ Thus we are reminded that no person is ever too far gone, no culture too far removed from reality, for the mercy that “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven”¹¹⁰ consists in the actuality and indissolubility of the ontological bond of love between every human person and the source of his or her existence in God. Just as Bassanio’s ring was too easily parted with at first, we too, despite our ancient and new flights of fancy unto the dissolution of the body, must, like children, relearn the value of the sacramental life of the Church: the only means by which God’s love and life can be given “and so riveted with faith unto your flesh.”¹¹¹ □

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109. Even Shylock, though perceived today as tragic figure, receives the mercy of a pardon he had refused to give Antonio.

110. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, scene 1, line 191.

111. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 5, scene 1, line 169.