

# TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN BECOMING: THE VIRTUAL AND THE VIRTUOUS

Sister Carla Mae Streeter, OP



Carla Mae Streeter, OP began her theological education with the Racine Dominicans. She did her Masters work with the Benedictines at St. John's University, Collegeville. Sister was invited to do doctoral work with the Jesuits at Regis College of the Toronto School of Theology and completed her work in Canada in 1986 with a joint degree from Regis College of the Toronto School of Theology and the University of Toronto. In between she was taught by the people she served doing parish work in Kenosha, Wisconsin, just north of Chicago. Sister Carla Mae lives in the integrated neighborhood of south St. Louis and has taught among the Dominicans at Aquinas Institute of Theology on the campus of St. Louis University since 1986.

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Technology continues to move ahead, opening exciting possibilities for the human family and posing unimagined threat. The key to that future lies with the creator, operator, and recipient of the technology, the human being. Of what timber shall the human be? What role might faith play in the creation of our technological future?

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## Outline

- I. Technology and Human Creativity
  - A. Virtual Progress
    1. An extension of physicality
    2. An invitation into the psyche's symbol-world
    3. A threshold for thought and choice
  - B. Virtual Decline
    1. The bondage of technological addiction
    2. The license of insensitive imaging
    3. The question: If we *can* do it, *should* we?
  - C. Of Human Culture
    1. Physical flourishing
    2. Psychic healing
    3. Spiritual authenticity
- II. The Theotic Viewpoint
  - A. The Human Person
    1. Organism
    2. Psyche
    3. Spirit
  - B. The Divine as Ultimate Reality
    1. As incomprehensible Mystery
    2. As intimate Expression
    3. As aching Self-Gift
  - C. The Encounter
    1. The Approach: Religious Experience and Openness
    2. The Grasping: Relationship in Gracing
    3. The Indwelling: Conversion and Theosis
- III. The Power of the Virtues
  - A. What virtue is and isn't
    1. Healed human freedom vs. anarchical license
    2. Discerning intelligence vs. biased self-interest
    3. Emotion under reason's sweet democratic rule vs. repressed violence
  - B. Theological Virtue
    1. Faith: knowing born of Religious Love
    2. Hope: longing born of Religious Love
    3. Charity: acting born of Religious Love

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- C. The Cardinal Moral Virtues
  1. Prudence: Love's discernment
  2. Justice: Love's fairness
  3. Fortitude: Love's courage
  4. Temperance: Love's proportion
- IV. The Real Human Being
  - A. Love Changes Everything
  - B. Vibrant Physicality
  - C. Profound Emotionality
  - D. Unbiased Intelligence
  - E. Just Freedom

Cell phones, satellites, genetic engineering — is it a bane or a blessing? There are those who consider technological development a curse and will avoid even the use of an answering device on their telephones. There are those who have the latest camera-phone in their possession and must have the newest technological toy. Then there are those who wonder where all this is leading, those not the first by whom the new is tried, nor the last to lay the old aside. What is the relationship between technological exploration and human flourishing?

#### *Virtual Progress*

There is no doubt that technology produces results. From the automatic limb that replaces an amputated arm to the Hubble telescope, the physical senses of the human being, limited in their range and extent, are enhanced by technology. So much so, in fact, that physical human limits recede before the virtual reality that technology offers. Vision is extended by telescope and microscope, by scanner and multiple models of imaging instruments. We can now see *into* and *through*, as well as *beyond*. Sensitive instruments pick up sounds undetectable to the human ear. The sound of sperm traveling toward an ovum has been recorded. Music of every kind and culture has been imprinted upon substances that transport it around the globe. A young boy's first words and steps can be recorded so that he can reach back in time and view himself as he was then, when he is twenty. Fragrances have been created that fool the sense of smell. Gardenia, fresh bread, and pinewoods, all artificially created. Your pudding tastes like banana, yet has no banana in it. My jelly bellies range from lemon to mango, from bubblegum to blueberry, yet there is no lemon or mango, no bubblegum or blueberry in the famous candy. Vibrators extend the sense of touch into tense muscles. Robots can *feel* their way around obstacles.

Technology has not only extended our human contact with the world physically, it has expanded our awareness psychologically. Myth and legend have

leapt into our living rooms through the imagery of film and stereo sound. Designer drugs can alter our bodily chemistry for good or ill. Special effects can simulate destruction that hopefully will never take place. Computers can generate fantasies that are limited only by the images in the creators' minds. Emotions experienced by one can now be extended to many by means of film, recording and digital camera.

If the psychosomatic is influenced by technology, so is the psycho-spiritual. Sense data and images are the seedbed of cognition, cognitive awareness leads to choice, and intelligence and choice are operations of the human spirit. The physical and psychological dimensions of the person are the locus for the functioning of the human spirit, whether the person is explicitly religious or not. With all the pluses of technological development, could it be that there is an underside to this progress for the human spirit?

#### *Virtual Decline*

Because the functioning of the human spirit consists in intelligent questioning for fact and the value judgments that lead to choice and decision, anything that impedes the operations of the human spirit should raise a red flag for the human community. One such crippling is the addictive fixation with technological tools and toys. The operation of technical instruments yields an immediate satisfaction. When one pushes and pokes, types and moves levers, there is an immediate result. The human can become fixated with the sense of power that results. When I do this...something happens right before my eyes...now...and I'm the one who makes it happen. Hours can be spent on computer games and in video arcades. The sense of power in these simulated experiences can involve choices of life and death for losers in combat, and often package various forms of violence. The psyche is imprinted with images, and the shock value of the violent disposal of one's enemies can soon wear away.

In addition to technological addiction, the license to use insensitive images can impact the intelligent and decision-making operations of the human spirit. The disproportionate and unbridled depiction of human violence, carnage, abuse, rape and torture broadcasts a degradation of the human. A steady diet of this degradation has a pornographic effect. It pollutes human meaning and undermines human value, thus opening the door to bondage of human intelligence and choice.

Both of these dangers form the backdrop for human decision. Given all that we know and given all that we are able to do, *should we do what we know we could do?* This is a call for a value judgment and those who have had their

intelligence polluted and their values obscured by license will decide in one way. Those who have recognized the benefits of our new virtual reality and are not blind to its dangers, will decide in another.

#### *Of Human Culture*

Key to this decision will be how one views the human being. Human anthropology is a key starting place today for serious cultural dialogue. There is obvious cultural concern about the physical well being of human beings. Despite varying religious views on the physical body, it is clear that lack of food, the absence of clean water, the loss of home and security experienced by refugees, are central human concerns. But humans are not only physical organisms. There is trauma connected to each of these conditions. The affective and emotional healing needed as a result of physical abuse and deprivation is hard to measure. With the physical and psychic dimensions of the human under stress, is it any wonder that the spiritual operations of intelligence and choice are besieged? What is the meaning of this injustice? Where can my family live in security? How can I make a living to support my family? When can I go home? Will I be able to go to school? Can I worship freely? These are the cries of the oppressed human spirit.

#### *The Theotic Viewpoint*

The human community deals with this plight from various points of view. In a 1998 work, psychologist and theologian Daniel Helminiak offers four such viewpoints.<sup>1</sup> The *positivist* viewpoint focuses on the scientific concern with what is. It is committed to understanding contingent data correctly, and with humans, the various meanings and values they hold. Further questions shift the subject from this viewpoint into the *philosophic* point of view. Here the focus of the scientific concern is authenticity. Now the question becomes whether the meanings and values that arise out of the contingent data are correct, true and good. With the *theist* viewpoint, the focus of the scientific concern shifts to the understanding of all that is, the created and the Creator.

The final viewpoint Helminiak treats he calls the *theotic* point of view. Here the scientific concern is actual deification or theosis of the human. The question becomes what happens to the human in its encounter with the Holy, and the actual human attainment of the fullness of Truth and Goodness. The core of Christian religious experience explains this deification in terms of the paschal mystery of God's self-expression, the Word made flesh in Jesus, through the action of the Spirit of God.

Each of these viewpoints evidences a shift in horizon. As the viewpoints mount, they admit of increasing lack of control by the human. This alone poses an immense threat to those who would contain the truth search within the boundaries of human control, even though limited. That the human admit of divine action on the human immediately raises the question of relationship and intimacy if that divine is understood as personal as it is in the Christian context.

Carrying on the truth search from within the theotic viewpoint ushers one into a new kind of philosophic ecumenism. A language of dialogue must be found to talk with those of other viewpoints. The time is past for those with a theotic point of view to apologize for their position. But the time is never past for an honest attempt to understand the other. This paper is but a small effort to find words for that conversation from within the theotic viewpoint.

#### *The Human Person*

As with Helminiak and others, we will frame our discussion of the human person in terms of the triple composite of organism, psyche, and spirit. This is in contrast to the more ambiguous popular reference to body, mind, and spirit, which leaves emotion and the human capacity for decision unclear.

As we will understand them, the terms organism, psyche, and spirit will include all dimensions of the human. By organism we mean the physicality of the human, its bodily organs and systems, including the digestive, eliminatory, neurological, circulatory and respiratory functions.

By psyche we refer to that energy field which draws from and influences the organism with all of its functions, yet becomes conscious and manifold in the varied operations of human consciousness. This psychic energy is the basis for the human feeling flowing from bodily sensation as well as the complex motors of the eleven basic human emotions: love, hate, desire, aversion, joy, sadness; fear, courage, hope, despair (powerlessness) and anger. The first six emotions have had various names throughout history. Thomas Aquinas, drawing from Aristotle, called these first six "concupiscible" because they arose unbidden. In more recent literature they are known as the "spontaneous" emotions. The second set Thomas called "irascible," and in current writing they go by the name "considered." Psychic energy is also responsible for imaging and the symbolizing that arises unbidden in dreams. It is the storehouse for the feeling memory, the remembrance of how something felt, even though the cognitive details have long been lost.

The human spirit has long begged explanation. Lonergan's levels of human

consciousness have provided a framework for a consideration of the human spirit for the first time in terms that open up the dialogue to members of the scientific community. Based on empirical observation of the human subject's own operations, a functional account can be given of the human spirit, distinct but not separate from the psychic energy that drives its operations. It becomes possible then to clarify the human soul as an active form of the body *methodologically* in contrast to the limited description of the soul in the past as life principle.

Psychic energy becomes conscious at the first level of consciousness, *experience*. This conscious awareness extends not only to outer data, but can extend to an awareness of its own conscious operations. By means of questioning, consciousness sublates to the level of inquiry for understanding, the second level. The drive shifts again as the questioning changes from "What is it?" to "Is it so?" The third level of consciousness appears with a judgment, an answer to that question. But the drive forward does not rest. With tentative meaning reached, the pursuit now turns to value. The question becomes "What difference does it make?" or "What's it worth to you?" In other words, "What do you intend to do about it?" With this question the fourth level of operation unfolds, summoning value judgment, choice, decision, and action. This is an anatomy of the human spirit.

With this explanation, the functions of organism, psyche, and human spirit are given a tentative explanation that can be understood across disciplines, although the discussion remains open as to whether this is actually what is going on, and whether the explanation is adequate. The explanation: 1. accounts for all of human functioning as we presently experience it; 2. presents an anthropology that both psychologists and theologians can work with; 3. offers an operative anthropology for a renewed discussion of divine relationship with the human.

#### *The Divine as Ultimate Reality*

Working within the theotic viewpoint and attempting to provide an adequate anthropology, we can now ask what lies behind the virtual reality of the beautiful people that surround us, people often living in the midst of chaos and struggle.

If the theist viewpoint allows for an ultimate reality, the Christian religious tradition within the theotic viewpoint declares that Reality as personal and as an active presence of unconditional Love. For the Christian, the divine Mystery is triadic. The heart of the Divine is a holiness whose fullness is incomprehensible to the human intelligence, for to grasp it in its fullness would

make one divine. The traditional language for the divine Mystery in this depth of holiness is "Father." The term is a relational word used with the term "Son," or "Word," which denotes this same divine consciousness when it expresses itself. A third term, "Holy Spirit," refers to that same divine consciousness when it pours itself out in self-giving love. There is a oneness whose fullness is threefold, a threeness that never violates the unity. There is one divine consciousness with three subjects, or as the traditional language would have it, one God in three divine persons.

It is this Mystery that holds all of creation. It is from this Mystery that energy and being flow. The human springs from this Mystery through the instrumentality of human parents. Like a fish in the sea, the Mystery holds the human.<sup>2</sup> Profound as this might be, the relationship of creator and creature can be quite cold, even denied. When the uncreated grace that is Mystery makes itself known, when the relationship begins to become mutual, when there is some response from the human, we speak of the human "being in grace."

#### *The Encounter*

Openness on the part of the human invites the approach of the Holy. The "coming" is not as though it has not held the human in existence up to this time. The coming is as friend, in relationship, in a friendship initiated by the Divine. When the Divine moves in the apex (height or depth) of human consciousness, this Holy One is now part of the horizontal awareness of the human being. Responded to or run from, the Guest is in the house and wants nothing more than to stay. Religious experience changes the horizon of the human being. There is Something in my conscious awareness now that is not myself and I need to decide what to do about it. Shall I offer up my son or daughter in human sacrifice? Shall I make a pilgrimage? Shall I sell all I have...? Religious experience, whether it be subtle or profound, begins a fragile religious conversion. This experience in its various forms visits men, women, and children across the globe. The approach begins with openness. It proceeds with a taking hold, a grasping, and it culminates in an indwelling and transformation of the human.

Once open, the human is then grasped by religious Love.<sup>3</sup> The personal relationship that this implies accounts for one of the distinctions that mark authentic Christians among adherents of other religious traditions. May the great force be with you will not do. The Christian is held in the grasp of Someone who has come to meet us in our own flesh. From this grasping "grace" flows into the consciousness, and a subtle change begins. Like some Midas touch, the human begins to be deified. The beloved begins to re-

semble the Lover.

This divine action is not hit and run. The divine Guest moves in. The term "indwelling" is familiar to most Christians, but what it implies is not usually grasped by most of us. It implies that the human is the favored locus of God. It means that the human is the temple par excellence, the dwelling place of God. Realizing this begins the unrelenting process of conversion. Surrendering to it begins the theosis shown us as transfiguration. Its culmination is risen human life.

#### *The Power of the Virtues*

What I am suggesting happens to the human here is not virtual reality. There is nothing of mere appearance and effect without origin and accountability here. The cause is divine action and the accountability will be played out in free human response, either negative or positive. Something happens to those who are religiously in love. This is an observable human phenomenon that moves freely across cultural and religious boundaries. It is our challenge to explain what is happening and how. The human becomes different when grasped by religious Love. This difference is manifested in observable human behavior. The human has powers or capabilities under the influence of that Love that are not present in the same way in others. What accounts for this? Traditionally these smooth-flowing capabilities that enhance the human are called *virtues*.

#### *What Virtue is and Isn't*

Virtues are not mere static habits. Like finely oiled wheels, they are capabilities that beg exercise, and the more they are used the smoother they operate. Virtues are powers that enhance the exercise of human freedom.

Christians believe that the human, destined for intimate friendship with the Divine, has been mortally wounded, its destiny thwarted. Robbed of the garment of divine friendship, the human wanders naked, still filled with a longing for union with Something more than itself. The human condition reveals itself in a proneness for physical illness, psychic anxiety and restlessness, biased intelligence, and frustrated freedom. Traditionally named "original sin," this condition manifests itself as a type of bondage, a confinement in the human limitations the wounding imposes. Desperately the human tries to shake off its condition by covering its wound. Grasping for power, possessions, and pleasure, it tries to clothe its nakedness, only to discover eventually that the wound is too deep for surface dressing. Created in the divine image, this image in the human is not destroyed. But so distorted is it, that left to

itself, the human will die.

The solution of the Divine to this state of affairs is remarkable. The Divine assumes the human image, pressing the wounded human to itself. Breath, water, fire, oil, wine, and bread are prescribed for the ongoing healing. The incarnation of the Word of God in our human flesh is a scandal. The passion of the Christ is a humiliation. These events are the revelation of the heart of Divine Mystery. Humanness pressed to the divine in the person of the Word becomes the bridge for human healing.<sup>4</sup>

The human organism is the vessel where this psycho-spiritual healing takes place. The psyche itself is disoriented, and emotion erupts easily in various forms of violence. Healing will mean, as Aquinas says, that this powerful energy will seek the sweet democratic rule of reason. The questioning intelligence is riddled with bias. Its healing will mean its truth seeking will be honest and open. The human capacity to evaluate, choose, decide and act for the good is crippled. Its healing will mean a courageous flowing freedom. The evidence of this healing will be observable virtue in its freeing power and its pragmatic fruit in the human life.

#### *Theological Virtue*

The immediate result of the grasp of the human by the Divine is a triadic transformation. The Divine is incomprehensible Mystery, self-revealing Expression, and self-giving Love. The gracing of the human being is also triadic. The grasp of religious Love creates an aching desire, a longing for nothing less than God. We call this longing born of religious love *hope*. We long for what we do not know, the Mystery itself. This theological hope transforms our psychic longing, orienting our energy to settle for nothing less than the Divine. The cognitive levels of consciousness are transformed by a knowing born of religious Love we call *faith*. Our capacity to evaluate and choose is healed by the gift of a friendship with the Divine that shapes our choices and the activity that flows from them. We call this action born of religious Love *charity*. These three powers, the immediate transforming effect of the grasp of the triadic Mystery, are what Lonergan calls *conjugate forms*.<sup>5</sup> With utmost courtesy toward the human, the Divine begins the deification of the human by healing and reorienting human potency itself. In this gracing there is indeed a new creation. Theological virtue gives human functioning a new goal, and that goal is nothing less than the Mystery itself.

#### *The (Cardinal) Moral Virtues*

If the theological virtues are powers from God for longing, knowing, and act-

ing godly, the moral virtues are sweaty and grounded in the human situation and environment. Moral virtue begins with "Say, thank you, Tommy..." and teaching a child to share candy from grandma. These acquired powers grow through deliberate human cultivation, nurtured by people who love us and teach us to be unselfish.

But when a person is grasped by religious Love, these acquired powers of authentic human behavior become transformed as part of the new creation, as part of human healing. The goal of these virtues is not God. It is becoming fully human. In the relationship that is grace, charity becomes the *form* of the moral virtues.<sup>6</sup> Action born of religious Love becomes their very soul.

*Prudence*, the unbiased functioning of intelligence as it discerns and relates data, is now guided by Love's discretion, by a relationship that the Mystery brings. *Justice*, which governs what is due to another, is now informed by Love's influence in evaluating choices. *Fortitude*, which strengthens the considered emotions when under threat, draws strength from its bond with Love. *Temperance*, which moderates the human desire for pleasure, tempers the spontaneous emotions primarily in their drive for the pleasure of touch. The grasp of religious Love sculpts chaste relationships. Prudence is the pilot of these powers which manifest themselves in the behavior flowing from human decision.

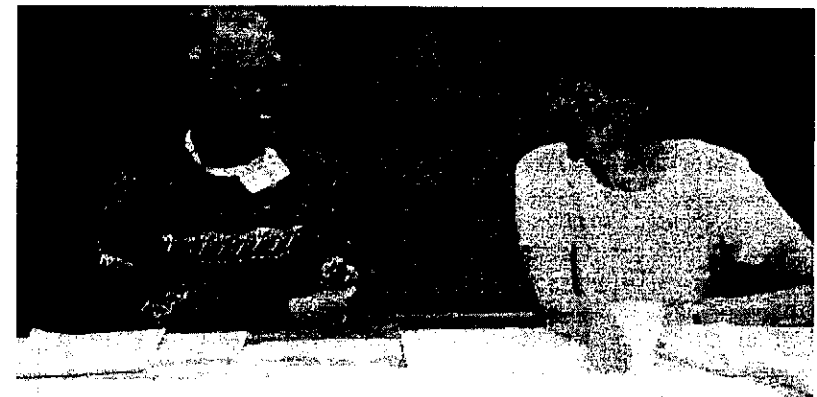
#### *The Real Human Being*

There is nothing merely virtual here, there is the real thing. The real human being will meet us behind the wheel, in the supermarket, at church, at the neighborhood meeting. Indwelling Love does indeed change everything. We call these people our heroes, our saints, our gurus, our mentors. We say they have it all together, but it takes reflection to unpack the "it." For the "it" is the human in its brokenness and healing. We admire how they have become so real, and it inspires us to make something of our lives as they have with theirs. Real humans are vibrant in their physicality, whether they are twenty-five or sixty-five. They are emotionally profound, acquainted with tragedy, and full of both tears and laughter. Real human beings manifest a respectful curiosity. They are unbiased in their truth seeking and humbly in awe at what they don't know. Real people move with a just freedom, just because they respect the humanity of others, and free even in knowing they might make mistakes.

Human becoming is not a do-it-yourself job. It is a relational, informational, transformational process under the influence of a Mystery that never gives up.

#### Endnotes:

1. See *Religion and the Human Sciences – An Approach via Spirituality* (New York: SUNY, 1998) for an extensive discussion of these viewpoints, and especially pages 123-160 for Helminiak's explanation of the theotic viewpoint. See also an earlier work, *The Human Core of Spirituality* (New York: SUNY, 1996).
2. This expression is given to Catherine of Siena by God in *The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 112: "Just as the fish is in the sea and the sea in the fish, so am I in the soul and the soul in me, the sea of peace."
3. This expression is used by Bernard Lonergan, SJ to describe the movement of God in the human heart. See *Method in Theology* (London: Danton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 242.
4. This image is also found in Catherine of Siena's *The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 58, 59, 64. "I told you that I have made a bridge of the Word, my only begotten Son...so that you could cross over the river...it stretches from heaven to earth by reason of my having joined myself with your humanity, which I formed from the earth's clay..."
5. See *Insight* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 696: "...the solution can consist in the introduction of new conjugate forms in man's intellect, will, and sensitivity. For such forms are habits." And further, "...the relevant conjugate forms will be in some sense transcendent or supernatural. For what arises from nature is the problem...the solution is a harmonious continuation of the actual order of the universe...conjugate forms will constitute a new and higher integration of human activity." (697).
6. For a detailed treatment of these virtues see the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, any edition, Second Part of the Second Part, beginning with Question 47. More current sources on Thomas' virtue theory include Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) and Paul Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.:Paulist Press, 1992).



Tom Sheahan and Sr Rose Marie Przybylowicz enjoy a few restful moments.