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The presence of God's image in humankind and its absence in the gift of technology: A theological and ethical approach

Abstract

This article analyzes the issue of free choice (theology) and decision, responsibility, and consequences (ethics), relating them and placing decision at the core of this unity, according to Orthodox Christian theology and, more generally, to the Holy Bible. It holds that the hermeneutical principle of Orthodox Christian theology must be taken into account, according to which the Holy Bible records the history of humanity and civilization in a parabolic manner, using images drawn from natural reality. We argue that software cannot assume personal decision, responsibility, or consequences. In contrast to presuppositional software, human decision operates in non-predictable terms, determined by the way the world as a whole is at a specific moment. For example, a button may lead to a nuclear war; the software governing how the missiles will operate is ready, but the button is pressed by the human being.

Keywords: Image and likeness of God, free choice, decision, responsibility, reason (logos), alphabetical software

Introduction

It is certain that the development of technology will characterize the entire 21st century. It is a world of science in which, the material and the spiritual – the body and the soul, the two poles and powers of the human being – meet and clash, and matter is dominant and fundamental. In this particular context of the modern era, where the human being is, in a way, subjected to mechanistic logic, the present article juxtaposes the machine (software) and the human being as a rational being, and in doing so stresses two key

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points: 1) the machine (software) functions through computational possibilities, whereas 2) the human being functions with the principle (*logos*) of free choice, decision, responsibility, and consequences. In our task, we put forward some theological views on human rationality, and we do so by referring specifically to the theme of the Image of God. We analyze and interrelate the unique abilities that characterize the human being as a rational being, such as the ability to choose freely (theology), to make a decision, to assume responsibility, and to assume consequences (ethics),¹ which constitute the decisive (irreversible) moment for the human being, through which the tension between technology and human functioning becomes apparent.²

The responsibility of theology vis-à-vis technology, software and human being as a rational being

According to Orthodox Christian theology, particularly Patristic anthropology, the Logos of God is the Creator, *he said*, and all of creation *came to be*,³ invisible and visible, intelligible and sensible.⁴ He created the human being with a composite nature, of the visible and invisible, of the corporeal and incorporeal, of the earth and heaven, of body and soul, in the *image and likeness* of God (Gen 1:1·26; 2:7). The human being is the frontier (*μεθόριος*) between the visible and invisible world (the material world and the invisible powers), composed of body and rational soul, therefore he represents the whole creation, carries the whole creation within himself, and

¹ Ethics is a way of life, and it too is a theological proposition of life for Orthodox Christian theology.

² In the present article we prefer the term *ability* over *capacity*, because we consider it to express more accurately the ability of the moment (*vūv*), which characterizes the human being as a rational being and radically distinguishes it from the machine (software), which functions through computational possibilities.

³ The Logos of God the Father accomplishes the Divine Oikonomia (creation, theophanies, Incarnation) through the one and common energy of the triune God. As for a detailed account of the recognition of the Father and the Son (Logos) and the Holy Spirit in the Divine Oikonomia, as persons and concrete, specific realities (*hypostaseis*), from the particular work, from the one and common energy, see (in Greek): Borsche Grambozov (2023).

⁴ Gen 1:1·3; Ps 32:4·6·9; 101:26; 103:24; 142:5; 147:4–7; Is 48:13; 51:16; 66:2; Prov 3:19; 8:14; Wis 9:1–2; John 1:3; Heb 1:2; Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8:6. Regarding the identification of the names Logos, Wisdom, Will, Power, Brightness, Son, Monogenes and Christ [including the depictions, such as hand (*χείρ*) and right hand (*δεξιρά*)], see (in Greek): Borsche Grambozov (2023).

for this reason he is able to *offer* it to the Creator.⁵

The inspired breath (*ἐμφύσημα*), which the passage Gen 2:7 refers to, is the rational and noetic soul in the human being. That which is called the *divine image* is the rational and noetic power of the soul. And it is precisely here that the relation of the human being to the uncreated Logos of God is shown, whose energies he carries within himself as a rational being (*ἔλλογο ὄν*), in order to progress with the grace of the Holy Spirit from the *image* to the *likeness* of God. To be more specific, the *divine image* in the human being is the *logos* as noetic power (*νοῦς*),⁶ that is, by grace, the ability to choose freely (*προαίρεσις*).⁷ The created human being received the gift of mutability (*τρεπτότης, εὐμεταβλησία*) – a gift that technology can never receive or attain – i.e., the ability for continuous progress, for good alteration, which can also be diverted towards evil, if he chooses to progress not in cooperation with divine grace, but autonomously.⁸ In the human being (unlike animals), the kinetic habit is able to have a second result, asymmetrical to the first; it can hinder other kinetic habits and thus, by restraining automatism, liberate consciousness (Bergson, 2005). The reactions of the human being, unlike those of animals, are unpredictable, everything is possible in the human being, because the human being does not act by automatism. In other words, the free choice and the specific decision of the human being are unpredictable. And this is the

⁵ For this reason the human being becomes *god by grace*, because he is the *frontier* of the whole creation – that is, between the material world and the invisible powers.

⁶ We deem it necessary here to point out that the mind (*νοῦς*) is the rational (*ἔλλογος*) power of the soul.

⁷ The enrichment of the human being is the rational element, the *προαίρεσις*.

⁸ We are of the opinion that human works (creations, e.g., technology), unlike God's works (creations), do not possess the dynamism of self-improvement. God creates very good works (Gen 1:31). With regard to rational beings, so that they may progress dynamically and continually, whereas the human being creates in a limited manner, because human works do not possess the dynamism of self-improvement. The human being creates, and that is it. Also, we are in agreement with Saint John Damascene (PG 94, 924AB), who seems to have taken into account Athanasius the Great's (4 PG 25, 9BC) discussion about the human becoming (*γίνεσθαι*), that the human being, according to free choice (*προαίρεσις*) and the corresponding self-determination (*αὐτεξούσιον*), has the power to remain and to make progress in the good, by cooperating with divine grace, but also to turn away from the good and move towards evil. We deem it note - worthy to add here that the mind, when it perceives in cohesion, unifies reason (*logos*) and intellect, and thus the free choice of the human being, who is mutable by nature, undergoes the good alteration, the continuous progress.

case because reason (*logos*) has dominion over instinct in rational beings. In any case, reason (*logos*) in the human being is his choice, i.e., the ability to choose freely, to decide about everything, and not to be led by the necessity of his nature, as animals do. In animals, their instinct leads them to act, whereas in rational beings, it is their free choice – the self-consciousness, the rational element.⁹ For this very reason, responsibility is attributed to human beings, but not to animals. Furthermore, the human being, as a rational creation, has choice also regarding the rest of creation – souled and non-souled, such as: animals, plants, sky, air, earth, stones, sea, fire, which do not possess the free choice – the self-consciousness – the decision – the volatility (*εὐμεταβλησία*), i.e., the reason (*logos*), and therefore are non-rational creations. Ultimately, because the human being possesses reason (*logos*)¹⁰ – this power of the soul – he is able to create culture, whose main characteristic today is technology, which constitutes an element of human culture, whereas animals, which possess only instinct, cannot create culture, in other words, technology.

Because the human being is a rational being, he is a *person*,¹¹ that is, he exists as a person = *specific existence*¹² (as a free, self-determining, relational, and creative being). In other words, as a rational

⁹ For another approach to self-consciousness, different from our own, see: Petit (2010), Perlis (1997) and Ford (2009).

¹⁰ For Orthodox Christian theology, this is the case only with the creation of human beings (Gen 1:26; 2:7) – and of the rational, noetic, intelligible, self-determined, and incorporeal powers, i.e., the angelic beings – and it remains the basis of Orthodox anthropology. It is not so much the case in contemporary philosophy (as opposed to ancient Greek philosophy), especially from popularized Darwinism onwards, and hardly at all in relation to modern empirical science, particularly biology, largely guided by positivistic principles (though not strictly a positivist science), where the human being, in a way, is an animal, i.e., a different animal, possessing higher qualities than the other animals, yet sharing many common features, among them *mind* and *consciousness*. For an account of ancient philosophical thought and contemporary philosophy and science, see (in Greek): Ioannis Zizioulas (2001). According to Darwinism (which, as such, is not merely a theory of organic evolution, because it imposes ethical commands on society, with positivism philosophy embedded in its ideas, guiding modern science), based on the teaching of *survival of the fittest*, the struggle for life must necessarily, step by step, through natural selection, produce the rational – the *logos* from the irrational. In short, the rational element, i.e., the *logos* is not an independent *intellectual capacity*, but an *organic part* of nature, like tentacles or hands. For a detailed account of Darwinism and the *logos* in the evolution theory, see (in Greek): Max Horkheimer (1987).

¹¹ Just as the angelic beings are.

¹² It is not superfluous here to mention that an *anhypostatic* person does not exist.

being, the human being is in *relation* to all humans, because all are bearers of the same nature. Or better, the human being possesses a logos-endowed soul (ἔλλογος ψυχή), by which he creates *relations* and approaches his neighbor and, in a given case, God, which is the highest form of *relation*: sons and daughters of the same Creator and by nature brothers and sisters. The *openness* of the human being towards his fellow human beings and the whole creation – such as: free choice, freedom, self-determination, relation and creativity – is due primarily to the *endowed reason (logos)*, i.e., to the given ability, through divine grace, to stand in relation to every human being in a brotherly manner, participating in the common gift of sons and brothers, and according to the hierarchical order of beings, also in relation to the whole creation. Therefore the *openness* of the human being towards others and the whole creation is a matter of *reciprocating* the given divine grace (that is, the gift, δωρεά),¹³ and this is why, according to Orthodox theology, the human being ought to contribute to technology and to science. Of course, the *reciprocation* of the given grace is made possible in the human being, because reason (*logos*) is created as a *recipient* of grace and develops and is brought to completion in its *relation* to the Logos of God, i.e., to the divine presence.¹⁴ In other words the human being possess the ability both to receive and participate *rationally*, not only in the creative and life-giving energies, as the non-rational creation does, but also in the *enlightening* and *deifying* energies,¹⁵ and that, so he can realize the purpose of his existence, i.e., become godlike by grace, according to his spiritual capacity, and as a *frontier* of the whole creation, visible and invisible, *offer* creation into immediate *relation* with the triune God.

From the latter, one easily understands that, for Orthodox theology, the endowed reason (*logos*) of the human being is not merely *free choice* about everything, but also an *offering (responsibility)*,

¹³ The gift is the rational element.

¹⁴ We agree with Nikos A. Matsoukas (1980), who emphasizes that the development of rational life can also take place in beings that oppose divine grace, but in them reason (*logos*) develops separately from the movement of the mind, which has become alienated from the divine life.

¹⁵ On the receptivity of the human being to participate in the enlightening and deifying energies, see also: Despo Lialiou (2019).

i.e., *giving* and *transmission*. As metropolitan Dionysios L. Psarianos (1988) pointed out: "Reason (*logos*) is offering and transmission, in the same way that the Divine Communion itself is offering and transmission. The one who speaks with a sense of responsibility is a hierourgos, he performs the word (*logos*) as a priest and transmits life.¹⁶ And here we do not mean every word (*logos*), but the Word (*Logos*) of God, who is a real hypostasis (*existence*), living and active Word, in whom was life (Jn 1:4)." The ability for transmission of a qualitatively higher form of life is understood as a gift, it proceeds from the offering, viz. from participation in divine grace (energy), wherein the whole human being, but primarily the reason (*logos*), as the essential element of the human being, receives the grace and transmits it. This truth, as understood in Orthodox theology and experienced and expressed in the liturgical life of the ecclesial body, has great and immeasurable implications regarding human social relations, as well as the attitude towards God's material creation, which cannot be an attack against the existence of life and of creation, nor an appropriation of God's creation – at the disposal of the rational beings for creative activity – and thus an appropriation of the creative work (technology), and of the pre-existing knowledge given to the human being by the knowledge and effort of the fellow human beings who preceded him, but responsible transmission of the creative work to one's fellow human being and to the next generation, for the continuation of life, and finally, cultivation and safeguarding of God's creation. All these constitute an interpretation of the Orthodox Christian theology, which, as a monument of ecclesial life, contributes decisively to this work of humility of the human being regarding his own creative works and towards that which he has already received, and in general, towards creation, history, the present, and the future.

Today, however, for the modern human being, the rational and spiritual nature of humans, i.e., the *logos* – noetic (*νοητικός*), intellect (*διάνοια*), internal and oral, mind and speech – is considered independent from its *archetype* and *image* (God). As noted by Sir

¹⁶ Here, reference is made to the human being as a *priest* of creation.

James Jeans in the last century, when discussing the philosophy of positivism, pioneered by Auguste Comte, it seems to hold most relevance in the present century, particularly because of the application of positivism in the development of modern sciences and new technologies: “Today, not only we do not possess a perfect model, but we also know that it makes no sense to search for one – it could not have any comprehensible meaning for us. Because we have found that nature does not operate in a way that can be understood by the human mind through models or images” (Jeans, 1993).

In other words, from a positivistic perspective, which plays a key role in supporting the development of modern science and its application, technology (Hasan et al., 2024),¹⁷ it is superfluous to pursue the *image and likeness of God*, i.e., the *spiritual* explanation for the nature and existence of human beings. Thus, the mind (*νοῦς*), as an inspired rational power (*ἐμφύσημα*) of the soul and a gift, planted by God (the uncreated *good* Being) in the nature of humans – as creations in the image of God – for *objective* discernment (*κρίσις*)¹⁸ and pursuit of meaning, purpose, truth and virtues, among which piety is the pinnacle (John Damascene, PG 94, 928A), is disregarded.¹⁹ Hence, human beings, influenced by the modern

¹⁷ According to Hasan et al., the application of positivism in scientific research, especially in the context of new technologies and interdisciplinary collaboration, has been shown to encourage research innovation. The positivist approach provides a systematic framework for collecting and analyzing data from different disciplines, thus expanding the scope of knowledge. Also, the empirical approach of positivism helps researchers test hypotheses and models before they are practically implemented.

¹⁸ Which includes critical thinking, from the word *κρίσις*.

¹⁹ It is important here to mention the insightful remark of Georgios I. Mantzaridis (2002), which coincides with our above observation and, in a way, fulfills it, while referring to the two fundamental terms in ethics: *heteronomy* and *autonomy* (the *objective* and the *subjective*), which respectively denote two different modes of origin of moral discernment (*κρίσις*). Mantzaridis writes: “In autonomy, the «law» on which a person’s moral discernment is based is drawn from oneself, without the mediation of any external authority. In contrast, in heteronomy, the «law» on which moral discernment is based is imposed by some external authority, endowed with religious or other legitimacy. Heteronomous morality is primarily religious morality. The moral «law» that determines the formation of moral discernments does not originate from the person who acts, but from another – God or a divine principle. A person adjusts their life and moral discernment according to the «law» of God or the divine principle they believe in. Autonomous morality, on the other hand, does not invoke any authority outside the individual. It rests upon the person and seeks to assist them in self-determination. Here, the moral «law» is sought within the individual. Ultimately, it coincides with the individual desire of each person. Man becomes the measure of

spirit of technocentrism and positivism as a philosophical technocracy, where the material world encompasses all of reality and intuition and revelation are not valid knowledge (Horkheimer, 1987), see solely with the eye of the body, pursuing the *function* of things, but not with the eye of the soul – the mind (*voûs*),²⁰ pursuing the *meaning, sense, and purpose* of things, based on and conditional upon the *image and likeness of God*. In this climate of naturalistic anthropology,²¹ reason (*logos*) is considered an organ, mind and spirit as products of nature (Horkheimer, 1987), consciousness as an exceptional episode within the random disorder, which arises from the chaotic movements of photons, electrons, and matter in general, thoughts as mechanic movement in the brain and feelings as mechanic movement in the body (Jeans, 1993). The problem that arises here, however, in our opinion, consists in the ascertainment of the identity of the true nature of the human being, more precisely, in the misunderstanding of the: 1) very *nature* of reason (*logos*) itself, and 2) its *source* (that is, where it comes from).

And it is precisely here that the distinction between theology and broader technological research lies. According to Orthodox theology, the created reason (*logos*), in the human being, is: 1) all together: the ability to choose freely (*προαίρεσις*), i.e., self-consciousness, the crisis, discernment, and decision of the moment,²² the worldview, the social order, the politics, the economic situation, the family situation, etc., 2) inspired power (*ἐμφύσημα*)²³ of the soul, 3) inspired gift of spiritual nature, formless, and invisible, 4) manifestation of the *divine image* – planted in human nature through the inspired breath of God (*ἐμφύσημα*),²⁴ and 5) element of the *divine*

all things. And, in the final analysis, each person becomes the measure for themselves.”

²⁰ As Saint John Damascene (PG 94, 924B) observes by analogy: for as the *eye* is to the body, so is the *mind* to the soul. In addition, *noësis* (*νόησις*), as the mind’s act in the heart, i.e., act of contemplation (*θεωρία*), is a unique characteristic of the soul. It is worth adding here, also, as Escudero (2025) points out, that the soul is perceived through its own acts that proceed from its essence, and those acts are present to the mind.

²¹ For a detailed account of naturalistic anthropology, see: Oppy (2013).

²² The moment (*νῦν*), this borderline point of a decision made by the human being, has no turning back; it is a limit; the possibility (as in software) does not exist, not even as a conception.

²³ Explanatory note: lit. the term *ἐμφύσημα* translates as inspired breath.

²⁴ Gen 2:7.

image – which enriches the human being with the rational element, that is, free choice (*προαίρεσις*) and the corresponding self-determination (*αὐτεξούσιον*), that also entails the responsibility-decision of rational beings. In scientific research, the meaning of reason (*logos*) is more specific in discussing the brain, neurons, and senses (Samudra et al., 2022; Williford, 2003; Birkett, 2006; Golshani, 2023).²⁵ For technology, reason (*logos*) is: 1) a part of the material nature, developed (evolved) through adaptation to natural conditions, 2) a computational function, and ultimately, 3) a potential human creation.

Certain technologists today, under the influence of the present age of mechanistic logic, or better, under the influence of the logic of the machines, absolutize their technological creation to the point where it enters the realm of the metaphysical, which they try with all their strength to avoid, in the sense that they believe they can create reason (*logos*) within the machine itself, viz., that the machine can, not only replicate and imitate reason (*logos*), but also possess reason (*logos*) – that spiritual, formless, invisible and endowed power of the soul, that is, the self-consciousness, in other words, the ability to choose freely (theology), to make a decision at *the* specific moment (ethics), and to take responsibility at *the* specific moment of the decision (ethics), according to Orthodox theology.

In our view, which moves on the same lines with Orthodox theology, the software can choose as a computational possibility,²⁶ but not as a moral act of decision and responsibility. It does not possess the decision to make a choice of the moment, to act and assume the consequences.²⁷ In other words, the software cannot make a decision at the specific moment, it can only give possible, pre-decided solutions. It can give possible good decisions, but not the one – the one of responsibility. That is why the human being is constantly in crisis, today, here, and now (free choice, decision, responsibility, consequences). Finally, we would emphasize that what the human being actually creates is not reason (*logos*), but alphabetical software.

²⁵ Reason is a by-product of the material brain (Golshani, 2023).

²⁶ It can choose, that is, *select* one from multiple computed possible options.

²⁷ Consequences create legal, criminal, political, social, and individual offences.

Conclusion

The present study views technology and its ethics in relation to the safeguarding and the continuation of life. The question here is not whether technology is good or bad, especially because, as we have already explained in our study, technology does not make decisions for rational beings (human beings). Therefore, the issue is the appropriation of technology, viz., its misuse, because this means an attack against the existence of life. In other words, according to Orthodox Christian theology, how does the human being, who has the power to *offer* the creation to God, behave in relation to his works (creations)? Is he humble vis-à-vis history, that is, with regard to his works and to what he has already received, and responsible for the present and the future? Finally, we agree with Georgios I. Mantzaridis (2002), who rightly points out that: “Science and technology are not the works of the devil, but of the human being, created in the image and likeness of God. Evil does not lie in science and technology. Evil originates in the mind of the human being and is activated through the misuse of his science and technology.” Of course, as Saint John Damascene (PG 94, 924AB) stresses, the human being does not have in his nature the tendency towards evil, but in his free choice (*προαίρεσις*), because he has the power to remain and to make progress in the good, cooperating with divine grace, but also to turn away from the good and to go towards evil.

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