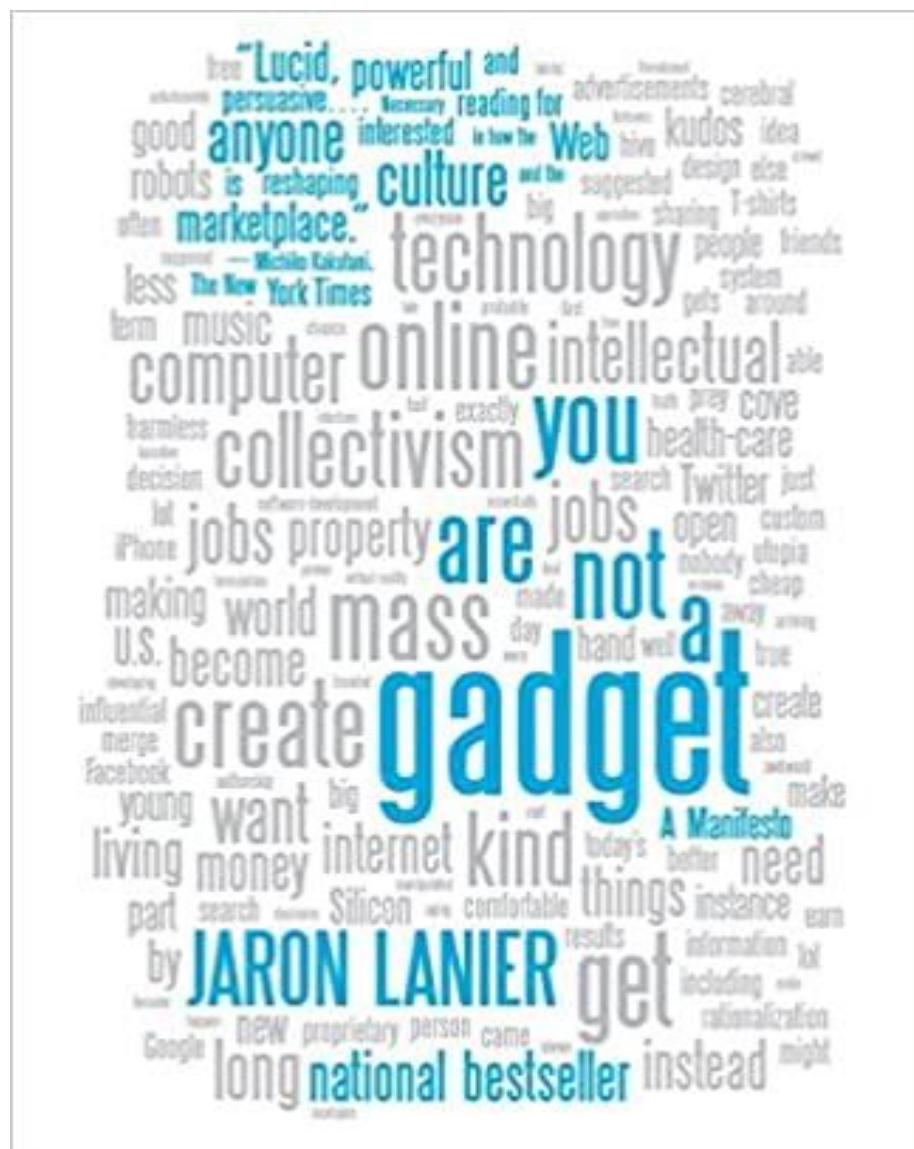


# *You Are Not a Gadget: The Urgency of the Christian Doctrine of Human Personhood in the Digital Age*

- Virtual reality pioneer and Internet-development insider Jaron Lanier has written a book under the title, *You Are Not A Gadget*.
- It is a defense of humanism against the totalizing tendency he sees to be at work in the deployment of digital technology which turns human persons into cogs in its vast information machine.
- The book is also interesting because it exposes the "secular faith" of Silicon Valley as a replacement religion for defunct Christianity.
- Lanier's humanism hangs by a thread against such a powerful force and in this presentation we will see how the Christian doctrine of the human person made in the image of God for likeness to God is urgently needed to throw a stick into the spokes of the wheel.



# Jaron Zepel Lanier (1960-)



- In 2005, [\*Foreign Policy\*](#) named Lanier as one of the top [100 Public Intellectuals](#). In 2010, Lanier was named to the [\*TIME 100\*](#) list of most influential people. In 2014, [\*Prospect\*](#) named Lanier one of the top 50 World Thinkers. In 2018, [\*Wired\*](#) named Lanier one of the top 25 most influential people over the last 25 years of technological history

# My Experience as a College Professor Coaching Students... to *Market* Themselves

- The commoditization of all things: "the combination of hive mind and advertising has resulted in a new kind of social contract. The basic idea of this contract is that authors, journalists, musicians, and artists are encouraged to treat the fruits of their intellects and imaginations as fragments to be given without pay to the hive mind. Reciprocity takes the form of self-promotion. Culture is to become precisely nothing but advertising." Lanier, 83
- A perceptible change in students from around the time of the great recession (2008-2009) from objectivity to subjectivity
- A perceptible change in teaching from mentorship to instruction and self-construction

# How Lanier Helps Us to Understand What's Going On

“What computerized analysis of all the country’s school tests has done to education is exactly what Facebook has done to friendships. In both cases, life is turned into a database. Both degradations are based on the same philosophical mistake, which is the belief that computers can presently represent human thought or human relationships. These are things computers cannot currently do.” 69 “There seems to be a Facebook generational divide ... People old enough to have a life – jobs or kids, for instance – use Facebook to connect to their own pasts, and generally have good experiences. It's the youngest ones more often find themselves trapped or challenged by cartoon versions of themselves on Facebook.” 200

# The Christian Doctrine Of The Human Person

- Before continuing on to Lanier's work, let's review some basics about the Christian doctrine of the human person from Scripture and tradition
- The equal value of each person as uniquely made in the image of God
- The tri-dimensional relationality of each person: to the creator, to the neighbor and to the earth.
- The vulnerability of personal existence to the anti-divine powers of sin and death
- The captivation of desire by idols and demons and the need of a liberator-redeemer, a Messiah, seeking and finding the lost

# Old Testament Source: Image of God

- Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." <sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup> And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen 1:26 RSV)
- Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. <sup>7</sup> And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it." (Gen 9:2 NRS)

# The Person Exists In A Particular Kind Of Community: The Beloved Community

<sup>NRS</sup> **Galatians 3:26** for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26 NRS)

But of course, the baptized remain married or single, Greek or Jew, slave or free. What's the difference? Identity based on nature has become passé! It is no longer *what* you are, even what you *think* you are or what *others* think you are, but *whose* you are!



# The Trinitarian & Christological Controversies of the Early Church Generated the Christian Doctrine Of The Person

- "... Neither confusing the natures nor dividing the person..." of Jesus Christ. Creator and creature are here one person, the incarnate Son of the God of Israel whom he calls Abba-father in the power of the Spirit.
- Incarnation: God now has a body and there God is to be found as a person in our midst (cf. Jean Bethke Elshtain on the culture of ex-carnation)
- The Father cannot be the Father except in relation to the Son, nor the Son the Son except in relationship to the Father nor the Spirit the Spirit except in relation to the Father and the Son. The Trinitarian life of God in the communion of love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit provides us with the eternal model of beloved community. In fact, "nature" is nothing but the divine life of love. "God is love."

# The Human Person

- The personal is *my own* body, not individualistic or atomistic (*habeas corpus*)
- As my body, the personal is *social* (Latin: *persona*, Greek: *prosopon*) in kinship relations from birth
- As social, the personal is *vocational*: called as image of God to become like God, not in proud arrogance according to a false conception of God, but according to a true image of God, Jesus Christ, the Lord who becomes a servant.
- As called, the person is *freed to love* in the unique and concrete circumstances of life lived conscientiously before God: Let 1000 flowers bloom!

# The Modern Idea Of The Person

- Autonomy, Not Theonomy (Descartes)
- Individualistic, not Social (Hobbes)
- Freedom without Purpose (Spinoza)
- Self-authenticating (Kant)
- "We are all liberals: liberal liberals, conservative liberals and radical liberals" (MacIntyre) and just so unable to question the modern ideal of the person as autonomous nor take it back to its source in the gospel of beloved community.
- "All of this tends to sculpt a certain kind of contemporary self, a fragile one, whose freedom and dignity depend on its being insulated from contingency, and who tends to view technology as magic for accomplishing this..." (Matthew Crawford)

# Lanier's Critique of Digital Captivation of the Human Person

- "This book is not anti-technology in any sense. It is pro-human." ix
- Certain designs of the Internet "tend to pull us into life patterns that gradually degrade the ways in which each of us exist as an individual. These unfortunate designs are more oriented toward treating people as relays in the global brain. Deemphasizing personhood, and the intrinsic value of an individual's unique internal experience and creativity, leads to all sorts of maladies, many of which are explored in these pages. While the core argument might be described as "spiritual," there are also profound political and economic implications... The implications of the rise of "digital serfdom" couldn't be more profound." x
- The monetization of the Internet by selling advertising on the premise that the digital platforms can target advertisements precisely based on massive data collection and ever more powerful analysis with computational power.

# Lanier's Testimony From His Own Experience As An Inventor Of The Internet And Developer Of Virtual Reality Technology

- Today's "digital revolutionary still believes in most of the lovely deep ideals that energized our work so many years ago. At the core was a sweet faith in human nature. If we empowered individuals, we believed, more good than harm would result. The way the Internet has gone sour since then is truly perverse. The central faith of the web's early design has been superseded by different faith in the centrality of imaginary entities epitomized by the idea that the Internet as a whole is coming alive and turning into a super human creature." = the "Hive", 14
- Of course that means to turn all of us into its worker bees!
- Because the ultimate stop in the economic logic of the monetization of the Internet is to guarantee to advertisers success not merely by predicting consumer behavior but by actively shaping it.

# A New Religion

- "Those who enter the theater of computationalism are given all the mental solace that is usually associated with traditional religions. These include consolations for metaphysical yearnings, in the form of the race to climb to evermore meta-or higher-level states of digital representation, and even a colorful eschatology, in the form of the Singularity and indeed, through the Singularity hope of an afterlife is available to the most fervent believers." 178
- But what a strange afterlife! One of radical disembodiment, your person reduced to information that can be digitalized and uploaded on a quasi-divine supercomputer – and least until the universe itself dies out in billions of years.

# We've been down this road before...

- “Movements associated with Freud and Marx both claimed foundations in rationality and the scientific understanding of the world. Both perceived themselves to be at war with the weird and manipulative fantasies of religions. And yet both invented their own fantasies that were just as weird. The same thing is happening again. A self-proclaimed materialist movement that attempts to base itself on science starts to look like a religion rather quickly. It soon presents its own eschatology and its own revelations about what is really going on – portentous events that no one but the initiated can appreciate. The Singularity and the Noosphere, the idea that a collective consciousness emerges from all the users on the web, echo Marxist social determinism and Freud’s calculus of perversions. We rush ahead of skeptical scientific inquiry at our peril just like the Marxists and Freudians... At any rate the future of religion will be determined by the quirks of the software that gets locked in during the coming decades, just like the future of musical notes and personhood.” 18

# The Slippery Slope: from predicting behavior to causing behavior...

- "Cybernetic totalism began to think [of information] as if it were alive and had its own ideas and ambitions... [But] what if only humans are real, and information is not... ? But if you want to make the transition from the old religion, where you hope God will give you an afterlife, to the new religion, or you hope to become immortal by getting uploaded into a computer, then you have to believe information is real and alive. So for you, it will be important to redesign human institutions like art, the economy, and the law to reinforce the perception that information is alive. You demand that the rest of us live in your new conception of the state religion. You need us to deify information to reinforce your faith." 29



# Lanier's Social and Political Critique: why we desire our own subjugation

- "It might be that in the context of American culture and the social media age, the *illusion* of certain online benefits – like the notion that you stand anything but a lottery-like chance of earning a living from social networking – is indirectly rational. It might be a semiconscious means to a soothing form of necessary self-deception. It appears that for one of the first times, young people in America might not be able to continue the long national tradition of achieving greater overall wealth and social mobility than their parents. I hope that won't be true, but it might turn out to be, and the switch to Internet systems of social status can be understood as a psychological hedge; a way for massive blocks of the population to potentially save face by avoiding a direct acknowledgment of a lowering degree of power and wealth in the real world." 203
- "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that are by nature not God's. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turned back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?" (Galatians 4:8-9)

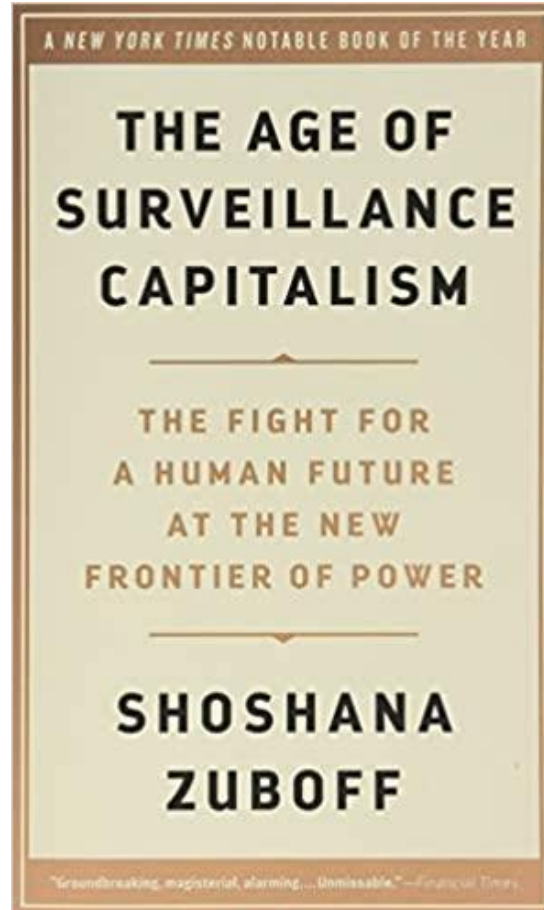
# Vulnerabilities in Lanier's Argument

- But Lanier is basically then a Kantian distinguishing between theoretical and practical reason: "I find that the best path is to believe different things about aspects of reality when I play these different roles or perform different duties.... I take a mystical view of human beings. My first priority must be to avoid reducing people to mere devices. The best way to do that is to believe that the gadgets I can provide are inert tools and are only useful because people have the magical ability to communicate meaning through them.... Scientists can study people as if we were not magical at all." 154
- Humanism "provides an even more colorful, heroic and seductive approach to technology. This is about aesthetics and emotions, not rational argument. All I can do is tell you how it has been true for me, and hope that you might also find it to be true." 178

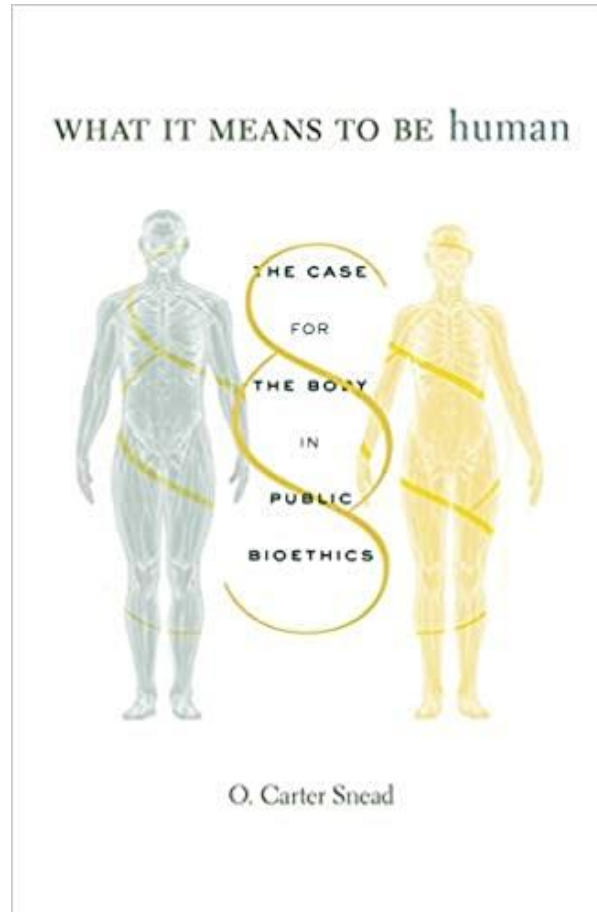
# Humanism against The Machine

- *Als ob!* "Are people just one form of information system, one form of gadget? The old debates about God are now also about us. For instance, when I suggest that we should act as if it were real – as if consciousness and experience exist, just in case it turns out that we are real – I am retooling Pascal's famous Wager about God, but in this case applied to people. This might turn out to be the greatest change wrought by Turing: bringing the struggles of spirituality and humanism into alignment." 206
- A mystical view of the human person is little more than an ungrounded and unwarranted assertion that withers and fades under the pressure of Skinnerian behaviorism.
- The messianic alternative: "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strongman; then indeed the host can be plundered." (Mark 3:27).

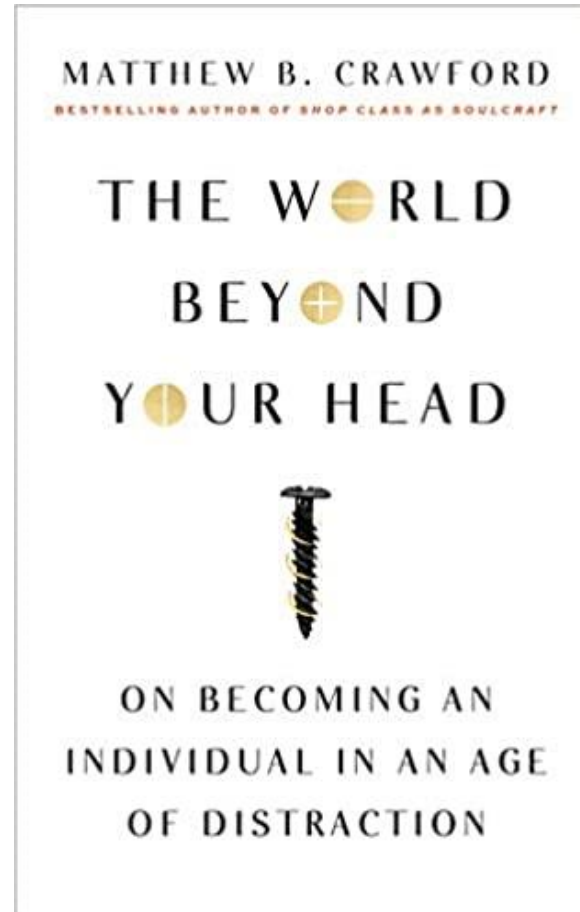
# For Further Reading:



# For Further Reading:



# For Further Reading:



# For Further Listening:

- [What Is a Person?](#)
- “Usually, when a person asks what or who makes for a person, it's to *dehumanize* some person or group of persons. Our intention in this episode is to head in the opposite direction. Dad takes us on a worldwind tour of Western civilization (which, frankly, he often does) to see that what counts as personhood or humanity has been under dispute from the get-go and continues to be disputed up to this very day. Meanwhile, I explore the striking fact that, in the doctrine of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are called "persons"—coincidence or not? (Not.) What does trinitarian personhood imply about human personhood? And could a robust nature-person distinction actually solve all the besetting problems of the modern world?!”
- Sep 24th, 2019 at <https://www.queenofthesciences.com/e/what-is-a-person/>