

Editorial

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ENGLISH



The “digital transformation”, unstoppable in its accelerated advance, has become a ubiquitous presence in contemporary culture. Now it is up to philosophy and theology to ask salient questions and develop relevant approaches to understand and contextualise this transformation and its fundamental characteristics.

Making digitisation the subject of a special issue may seem an audacious undertaking, particularly for a journal published by a Faculty of Catholic Theology. Yet, there is not an academic discipline that has not embarked on an epic journey of digital investigation and discovery, one that is now of unprecedented urgency in the wake of the epidemiological events of 2020 and the immense technological momentum they created. The current limitations of technology are widely documented; visions of a partly intangible future paint a dystopian or utopian picture, depending on the particular point of view. Individuals are well-informed and have access to all the necessary resources – at least that is the general perception. However, the situation is – in fact – far more complex.

Shining a light on otherwise peripheral considerations not only suggests the existence of a so-called digital gap dividing expert users and novices, but that humanity faces a fundamental challenge in defining itself in relation to technology: The real lives of individuals, the necessity of a digitally connected existence, and the extremely limited controllability of the digital world present an intersection of ever more pressing relevance that needs to be understood and guided in all its complexity.

The current issue of [LIMINA](#) discusses a number of selected topics directly relevant to individuals who live in such a high-tech and digitised civilisation. It asks vital questions about the reshaping of individual and collective criteria for humanity in the transformative grip of the digital turn.

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Especially from a theological perspective, any such investigation needs to reach far beyond (socio-)ethic, technological, or political contexts: it is necessary to broaden the scope and problematise additional dimensions.

- What does it mean for something to “exist” as digital content?
- What constitutes the existential boundary between empirical and digital reality?
- Can digital products be categories of a hierarchy of being? If yes, what and how?

Other questions relate to the concept of personhood:

- Can digital products represent a person?
- Are there scenarios in which digital entities could be considered “persons”?
- Are traditional philosophical and theological determinants of personhood such as reason, dignity, responsibility, truth, culpability, creaturehood, etc. even still valid?

A further dimension is that of eschatology.

- Christian theology firmly puts the perfection of humankind and the world in God’s hands. Now, digitisation and technology offer (theoretically, so far) new possibilities in the pursuit of self-perfection, immortality and salvation as suggested by posthumanism and the idea of “mind-uploading”, for example. How can such visions be approached from a theological standpoint?
- Would such a future create a new form of elite, possibly in contrast to a newly emerging *massa damnata* whose lack of resources and knowledge precludes them from ascending to paradise?

The contributions in this issue tackle these questions and illuminate them from different perspectives.

We currently experience a period of accelerated societal transformation, further propelled by the events of 2020. This transformation not only exposes (a) a remarkable affinity amongst otherwise change-averse circles towards digital means that (at least claim to) make life easier, help protect the environment, save time, etc., but it is also accompanied by (b) an as-

tounding ambiguity and disagreement surrounding key concepts that are absolutely fundamental to any such debate. What exactly is digitisation? Or more specifically: What is virtuality, a term that is often talked about in the same breath as digitisation? *Daniel Pachner* examines these definitions and formulates an approach based on Gilles Deleuze that conceptually links the existential preconditions of digitality – hardware, the machine – with the user – the human – through virtuality, and opens up a different perception of the digital, away from something that holds the potential to transcend or replace humankind.

The popular interpretation of “virtual reality” is closely related to the idea of “beaming”, as *Georg Gasser* anecdotally presents in his introduction. He examines possible frameworks for what constitutes personhood and identity, and what arguments might support the widely held assumption that the status of a concrete, real-life person can be digitally represented or recreated. Is consciousness merely a phenomenon of emergence based on a neural structure that exceeds a certain threshold? Or are conscious and non-conscious entities fundamentally different from each other? And what does Christian anthropology have to say about “mind-uploading”, following *Karl Rahner’s* theories?

This seamlessly leads us on to *Herbert Hrachovec’s* article: In untangling two interwoven interpretations of omnipresence, he demonstrates that the widespread analogy between the omnipresence of God according to religious teachings and the telepresence of the (digitally represented) individual is in fact a misunderstanding. His considerations also touch on the parallels between omniscience as a Divine attribute and omnipresent surveillance of the digital lives of modern humans. Such comparisons may be a popular tool to achieve an impact, but as *Hrachovec* shows, it is a dangerous one to make in today’s information society: “The defining symbol in ‘omnipresence/telepresence’ is the dividing slash.” This provides a cogent counterpoint to the following article, which presents a more technophile point of view.

An international and interdisciplinary research network¹ originating from the University of Graz has initiated a wide-ranging paradigm shift: Belief is not primarily understood in terms of content or proposition, but in its character as a process. For these believing processes, the term *creditions* has gained widespread scientific recognition. This paradigm shift opens up new dimensions to a philosophical as well as a neuropsychological understanding of believing processes as higher cognitive abilities. This understanding

¹ <https://credition.uni-graz.at/en/>.

of believing processes as a function of the human brain is also central to the contribution of Sara Lumbreras and Lluís Oviedo²: If creditions are essential to the creation of subjectively meaningful worldviews³, this will also affect our understanding of the behaviour of autonomous and self-learning artificial systems. This perspective offers new possibilities for analysing and discussing the analogy between the brain and the computer.

It is tempting to interpret the world, a world undergoing digitisation, through an exclusively technological lens. However, a closer look reveals that all these technological advances would be ultimately inconceivable without fundamental human values such as truth and trust. But at the heart of everything is freedom; without it, all other categories become void. The question of freedom also links to the key theological concepts of guilt and compassion. *Christian Wessely* poses the question as to whether this constitutes an essential, existential challenge for the reframing of the human as a “digital analogy” which forces humans to recalibrate their position between community and individuality. This process is both painful and uncertain, but for Wessely it is clear that theology can and should provide crucial insight and guidance.

Digitisation and artificial intelligence are heralded as promising solutions for an ageing society and in the care sector. However, such considerations are not only of ethical consequences but also pose legal questions: *Karl Stöger* investigates in how far replacing human care with machines is even permissible, and what the specific legal challenges are.

Since 1950, the Turing test has been a hallmark in the research of artificial intelligence. It asks the question what it means to be “human” or to be perceived as “human”. It has now also become a subject in the gaming world. *Frank G. Bosman* illustrates in his article how such computer games turn the players themselves into test subjects or judges and examines how this may influence our understanding of what it means to be human.

Elisabeth Zissler provides further anthropological perspectives in her elaborations. She understands the development of artificial intelligence as a series of insults that unsettle the human claim to uniqueness throughout history. Instead, the real uniqueness of humanity, as she proposes, is social intelligence: Social intelligence cannot be digitised and thus remains a human necessity as the challenges of the 21st century require more than a digital solution.

² Both have been engaged in the *Credition Research Network* for years. Lluís Oviedo is co-author of the first major publication on this research: *Processes of Believing. The Acquisition, Maintenance, and Change in Creditions* (Springer 2017).

³ As creditions are inextricably linked to neuronal evaluation processes and thus to emotions, they have an influence on trust and value judgements: *No credition without emotion*. Creditions themselves are not religious but are involved in the development of human ‘religiosity’ in the context of religions or world-views.

More and more, spiritual and religious practices enter the world of social media and thus undergo transformation. *Viera Pirker* analyses a Roman-Catholic Instagram account as an example. The starting point of her research is the reconstruction of a single image posted on this account to peel back the layers of its visual and communicative structure.

Eugen Dolezal and *Moritz Windegger* explore the relation and intersection between artificial intelligence and human creativity: In a bold and remarkable endeavour, the German Telekom completed Beethoven's Symphony No. 10, the so-called "unfinished symphony", with the help of algorithms and Artificial Intelligence. But does such a composition constitute art? Taking Walter Benjamin's thoughts as a departure point, this article attempts to define a set of qualitative criteria that distinguish artistic creations by humans from AI products.

The preservation of human cultural heritage, for example in museums and archives, is an important societal responsibility. But what happens to digital products? Are established categories such as the boundary between authenticity and reproduction still valid in a digital age? *Chiara Zuanni* rounds off the digital debate in this special issue by seeking answers to these questions and highlighting how our approach to digital objects can influence our understanding of cultural heritage and its preservation.

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tolle, lege – take up and read

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