

## THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Theology and Science  
 Convener: Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University  
 Moderator: Amanda Alexander, Loyola Marymount University  
 Presenters: Chelsea King, Sacred Heart University  
 Michelle Marvin, University of Notre Dame  
 Benjamin Hohman, Boston College

The COVID-19 pandemic forced humans to utilize virtual communication platforms to an unprecedented extent. Chelsea King’s paper, “Friend Request? Social Media’s Distortion of Relationship,” considers the social and theological implications of this development. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s idea of the *simulacrum*, King reflects on what gets lost in a world dominated by virtual communication. In Baudrillard’s view, the virtual world diminishes humanity and suffocates relational being, replacing authentic human interaction with symbolic representations of relationship. Over time, the systematic layering of signs causes humanity to lose touch with the profound reality the signs disclose, such that signs eventually mask the *absence* of the deeper reality, detaching human consciousness from the realities that give life meaning and purpose. Thus, King contends, while virtual communication saved us from the pandemic, it also obscured who we are as relational and embodied creatures, creatures who are always *becoming* in relation to others. In light of the “ontological poverty” that results from these developments, King suggests that theology should renew its commitment to a richly incarnational and sacramental worldview and foster a new asceticism that promotes mindful awareness of social media’s impact on our capacity for authentic relationship.

Michelle Marvin’s “Restoring Dignity with Neurotechnology: AI-Enhanced Biotechnology and the ‘Vocation to Work’” considers the theological and ethical implications of emerging technologies such as Deep Brain Stimulation and Neuromodulation, with a particular focus on bidirectional brain-computer implants (BCIs). Despite their potential to restore and even enhance human life for people facing issues resulting from paralysis, neurological disorders, and emotion dysfunction, Marvin observes that BCIs also raise serious ethical and theological questions, which she engages through consideration of the distinction between therapy and enhancement and through the lens of Pope Francis’ writings on the vocation to work. Marvin suggests that theologians ponder the relationship between neurotechnological therapies and enhancements under the rubric of responsible stewardship, giving attention to the distinction between therapies that restore the meaning of human being as created in the *imago Dei* and enhancements that—by “playing God”—may serve technocratic aims. To navigate these issues, Marvin further argues that theologians should heed Pope Francis’ call to situate emerging neurotechnologies in relationship to a larger whole and use neurotechnology to foster meaningful work and to enrich our existence as relational creatures made in God’s image.

In “Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral? The Effacement of Creaturehood in Wartime Economies,” Benjamin Hohman considers the ecological impact of war and the general absence of ecological considerations from wartime economics and just war theories. In

addition to noting the destructive impact armed conflict has on animal populations, Hohman notes that wars and military emissions are excluded completely from the Kyoto Protocol, and many countries that signed the Paris Agreement opted out from reporting military pollution. Further, he observes, no state has ever been held accountable for ecological degradation caused by war. As a means of responding to these issues, Hohman suggests that just war theory must be situated in a larger moral framework of creaturely—not just human—solidarity and humility; such an approach to just war theory would focus on rightly valuing the self and others together as creatures and would address the anthropocentric assumptions that undergird just war discourse. Such a shift also necessitates a rethinking of the common good and a rootedness in Pope Francis's integral ecology, insofar as these approaches see reality in terms of interconnected systems rather than in abstraction. Hohman concludes that such a point of view requires a more scientifically-differentiated sense of creaturely being as it takes shape in, and shapes, ecological and social systems threatened by war.

Approximately sixteen conference participants attended the session, which concluded with discussion of work-life balance and the authenticity of relationships, the *imago Dei*, and horizons for pondering just war theory on this side of *Laudato Si'*.

PAUL J. SCHUTZ  
*Santa Clara University*  
*Santa Clara, California*