

Devaluing the Human: Technology and The Secular Religion of Capitalism

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Introduction

Western, secularized ¹ capitalism appraises the “worth” of a worker through a wage, a numerical value assumed to reflect the value of one’s time (in the case of hourly jobs) or contribution (in the case of salary or commission-based work). Computers and AI models are capable of matching and even exceeding human performance on a variety of tasks such as mathematical computation, handwritten digit recognition [1], and even complex tasks such as playing the game Go [2]. Furthermore, they can work anytime and continuously, with no need for sleep, healthcare, or even a salary. As a result, computers are more “valuable” than humans under capitalism because they are more productive (in terms of quantity and, in many cases, quality of work). Combined with an erosion of a belief in universal human worth or dignity, other humans are seen as mere means to the ends of those powerful enough to exploit them. Any hope of reducing inequality or promoting justice must come from an explicit belief in the “value” of human life independent of his or her ability to produce.

Previous Work

Sociologist Emile Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them [3].” According to this definition, secular Americans who claim no explicit religious affiliation may still be “religious” to the extent they hold certain people, things, or ideas to

¹I am using “secular” in this context as an absence of *traditional* religious belief, not in the more general sense

be sacred. This essay explores the consequences of declining church membership and a rising religious-like “sacrilization” of capitalism: the pursuit of profit supplants preserving human life as society’s guiding *telos*.

Consider that it is business owners such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, or Elon Musk instead of philanthropists who are “canonized” in the public eye: their guiding principles and lifestyle become objects of adoration whom we seek to emulate. The disproportionate attention given to these people (mostly white and male) is symptomatic of American culture’s current obsession with materialism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is explicitly religious individuals who give more money to charity (including secular charities) by a factor of 4 compared to their secular counterparts, volunteer more time (by a factor of 2), and are significantly more likely to donate blood or help a homeless person [4]. For explicitly religious people (painted with a broad brush to include all denominations and mainline religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc), others are often more “sacred” than profit.

In the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, the idea that “humans persons are equal in fundamental worth and moral status [comes from] a Christian notion that God loves all human souls equally” [5]. This belief is also ubiquitous in Judaism [6] and Islam [7]. Outside of the Abrahamic religions, Sikhism [8] and Buddhism [9] have similar notions of equality and egalitarianism. As affiliation with these traditional religions decline, [10] it remains to be seen if beliefs historically justified on religious grounds will similarly decline.

The industrial revolution separated workers from the means of production by consolidating them in factories. While Luddites’ fears were never fully realized, industrialization and rapid job replacement led to rising inequality because factory owners and managers were less replaceable than menial workers. Furthermore, mechanization threatened to devalue workers were not competitive with machines. As historian Mark Noll explains,

Excess wealth was generated by individuals [industrialists] who had largely laid aside the constraints of altruism that America’s old Christian-cultural synthesis had tried to inculcate. American industrialists, to one degree or another, seemed to have favored the kind of social Darwinism popularized by Herbert Spencer [11].

These industrialists ended up funding the very universities (including Rice) that today provide workers for large tech companies. Like industrial-era tycoons, modern day tech executives similarly hold massive wealth and influence, perhaps even more so than the “robber barons” of the 19th and 20th centuries. Noll continues,

One of the reasons this new class of wealthy Americans funded education was to encourage more of the practical science and managerial theory coming from the new universities...the new naturalistic science and the new pragmatic philosophy encouraged industrial giantism by providing training and technique to the capitalists while at the same time offering few criticisms of the new industrial wealth [11].

The mechanization of factories led to a devaluing of physical laborers, while AI and automation leads to a similar devaluing of secretarial workers, drafters, and potentially (now with ChatGPT) writers. If humans only have value relative to their capitalistic output, and their capitalistic output is replaceable by technology, then human life becomes less valuable as technology rises. This emphasizes the need for a different, external justification if one wishes to still uphold moral equality and human value.

Current Strategies

Technical Strategies

Technical strategies aimed at justifying human worth often involve strong companies imposing oversight on others. In these cases, profit is a weapon used to threaten other companies to follow a certain set of guidelines, such as Apple threatening to remove Facebook from its App Store once it concluded Facebook was not doing enough to combat human trafficking on its platform [12]. Companies are often only entities with enough power and resources to make technical change, though individual whistleblowers such as Francis Haugen can use technology including access to internal files to report corporate practices failing to uphold human value to the media.

Social Strategies

Social strategies to address declining belief in the value of human life come in the form of groups with creeds that explicitly state human life has value. In addition to religious groups and churches in the aforementioned categories, there are also *secular* organizations such as Secular Humanism that express a positive belief in the value of human life. Some of these groups, such as the American Humanist Association, do so without any traditional religious affiliation, while others, such as Unitarian Universalism, have religious ties and an (often implicit) Christian background but put human life at the forefront of their creeds. Finally, many individuals use social media to call out

behavior they find immoral and “crowdsource” movements to gain social and political traction.

Political Strategies

Political strategies to reinforce human value involve using the branches of government to uphold individual liberty. The Supreme court, for instance, hears claims of discrimination (often cases where the plaintiff is an individual and the defendant is a company or institution), while Congress has (though not always consistently) tried to uphold human life with amendments and laws. While the checks and balances of American government often makes political change slow and bureaucratic, the tenants of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights explicitly claim human equality grounded in a Lockean notion of “Natural Rights.” Others suggest something like Sam Altman’s “UBI” (Universal Basic Income) to combat predictions of AI replacing workers across many industries.

Critical Analysis

Technical Strategies

Many of the existing technical attempts to solve this problem, such as Bill Gates’s call to tax robots or the proposed AI Development Pause are only practical and thus do little to address the underlying ontological issue of whether humans *have* any worth. While these practical approaches are important to reinforcing the value of human life, the underlying philosophical question of how to justify the cosmic or intrinsic value of humanity lurks beneath the surface. This is a different issue entirely, and one that cannot be addressed through technology alone.

Indeed, how could technology help us discover a metaphysical “grounding” for human worth? As Hume famously argued in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, one cannot derive an “ought” (a prescriptive claim) from an “is” (a descriptive claim) [13]. Science and technology can certainly tell us more about the world, but the assumption that it can also make moral statements prescriptions usually comes from the capitalistic success of science and engineering in the first place. In other words, it is indicative of *scientism* (and also a category error) to assume that science and technology can and will be able to discover objective moral claims and duties the same way that mathematical descriptions of the laws of nature can be discovered and falsified. The promise of technology is thus facilitating communication between well-

intentioned individuals whose social, philosophical, and political action will set the future course of the relationship between computers and capitalism.

Social Strategies

The social strategies discussed above offer a promising avenue of reaffirming human value, however the philosophical issues once again cast doubt on many subsequent claims. Textual criticism of religious and sacred manuscripts combined with the success of modern science appears to (at least on the surface) cast doubt on many traditional religious claims. The adequacy of naturalistic explanations makes many wonder if there is still room for the supernatural and spiritual domain professed in the major world religions.

On the other hand, philosophers question if the moral claims made by secular forms of moral belief such as Secular Humanism are consistent within the premissis of metaphysical naturalism [14]. “Father of Secular Humanism” Paul Kurtz famously remarked, “The central question about moral and ethical principles concerns their ontological foundation. If they are neither derived from God nor anchored in some transcendent ground, they are purely ephemeral.” Many philosophers recognize the futility of trying to ground notions of moral obligation or duty outside within the premissis of naturalism [15]. For instance, the claim that white supremacists’ belief in whites having superior moral value is “incorrect” assumes the existence of a “correct” set of moral beliefs. This is a teleological claim about the epistemic functioning of white supremacist’s moral faculties [16], which naturalists usually deny by their acceptance of emotivism [17, 18] or error theory [19]. The justification offered to the white supremacist thus appears to favor a supernatural basis, meaning the naturalist is often forced to admit they cannot provide a reason why such thinking is wrong or incorrect [20].

Religious (and quasi-religious) social groups, including churches and Humanist centers can (and likely will continue) to provide a community and a place of support for individuals. Their continued affirmation of metaphysical or objective human value is a large force in America, and the social and political future may depend on their willingness to put aside some of their differences and work together towards a common goal. Unfortunately, this needs to overcome the polarization and desire to “otherize” out-group members, a task made more difficult by echo-chambers on social media that feed off of moral outrage. Still, the strong commonality (a belief in the value of humanity) could be a rally point of different groups, in the same way that Orthodox Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Catholics have been able to work together in their fighting against access to abortion [21].

Political Strategies

Current political strategies to address declining belief in explicit human worth is impeded by its aggressive promotion of “secularism”² in public education. One political strategy is promoting Human Rights [23], however these suffer from a lack of universal assent, resulting from a debatable ontological status (Father of Utilitarianism Jeremy Bentham called such ideas, “simple [and] rhetorical nonsense” [24]). What seems to occur, at least in the public school system, is students are brought up with a vague and implied post-Christian, humanistic set of ethics, but do not learn how these ideas are grounded or justified. It should be no surprise then in the resulting absence of rational or experimental justification for such values, citizens begin to abandon them altogether.

Students in public schools are thus explicitly taught how to *be* productive and therefore valuable (not that they *are* valuable). Secular capitalism is the guiding principle: find a way to contribute and produce, or be left behind along with those who do not pull their weight. As AI becomes able to do many of the jobs humans can, more and more individuals become expendible in the current system. This encourages competition out of fear: individuals must prove their desirability and productivity, not only above their human peers, but now also above computers which have the advantage to employers of not unionizing, not needing paid vacation, not needing insurance, etc. What matters is not one’s absolute productivity *per say*, but one’s productivity relative to the cost they incur compared to their (human or artificial) colleagues.

While Universal Basic Income suggests providing all citizens with a livable wage, convincing the public to support it will be nearly impossible until a majority of citizens have their jobs displaced: UBI goes against the Religion of Secular Capitalism’s “Myth of Meritocracy.” UBI is thus seen as a form of sacrilege; a threat to the Power of Profit. Furthermore, UBI contradicts the implied notion that those who contribute nothing deserve nothing³

These issues in the current capitalistic system are also reinforced by consumers themselves, who value a low price over anything else. Companies who provide fair wages and working conditions will have to charge higher prices for the same goods compared companies who do not, and even consumers with the desire to purchase ethically sourced items have the additional hurdle

²The government’s promotion of secularism is only secular in its aversion to traditional religion and not in its adherence to an American “civil religion” [22] or ideas derived *from* traditional religious traditions.

³This is derived from the idea of fairness as proportionality from Moral Foundations Theory [25].

of gathering and researching where each item comes from and the working conditions “down the chain.” Many consumers are thus barred from making ethically informed purchasing decisions due to time, cost, and access to information. This is where the government is ideally situated for oversight, and it remains to be seen if politicians can understand technology use (especially the use of AI) fast enough to enact laws to keep up with it. One potential avenue involves hiring technical political advisors with a deep understanding of technology and its possible disruptive implications to help regulate the antisocial corporate behavior.

Conclusion

The future of humanity depends on not only whether humans *believe* humanity has value, but also whether or not they put this belief into practice. One wonders whether human “life” becomes more expendible as human labor becomes more expendible. Under the Religion of Secular Capitalism that equates human worth with productivity, this seems to be the case. However most American citizens *do* profess at least some belief in humanistic values over profit, often resulting from their religious affiliation or their own personal belief system. Furthermore, the US Constitution expresses humanistic values, meaning legal avenues are available for those who wish to politically uphold humanity’s place in the world relative to technology.

People can only have one *telos*⁴: Americans will need to choose whether their telos is *profit* (The Religion of Secular Capitalism) or *people* (Christianity, Humanism, etc). This choice forms the foundation for humanity’s place in the world and its subsequent relationship with technology (especially AI). As a fundamental question, the perceived value of human life (or lack thereof) have sets a direction for all subsequent social and political systems and allows us to evaluate the extent to which these institutions are fulfilling their purpose.

⁴If someone has more than one telos, when they conflict, they will eventually need to choose one to follow

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