


[Send to printer](#) | [Close window](#)

June 18, 2019

The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/january-web-only/what-humans-have-that-machines-dont.html>

Christianity Today, January, 2019
BOOK REVIEW

What Humans Have That Machines Don't

How a theology of personhood cuts against the mechanical metaphors we use to describe ourselves.

CHRISTOPHER BENSON / POSTED JANUARY 16, 2019



Image: Illustration by Rick Szuets / Source image: Lightstock

As a literature and theology teacher, I train my students to see and hear metaphors, which are not just a matter of language. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in *The Metaphors We Live By*, “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” A metaphor, in classical Greek, means “a carrying or bearing across,” which is why in present-day Greece, *metaphora* designates a

moving van.

Metaphors efficiently transport meaning when literal language fails us. The poet Emily Dickinson compares hope to “the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.” The economist Adam Smith compares the free market to “an invisible hand” that promotes social welfare despite the natural selfishness of individuals. As C. S. Lewis claims in *Miracles*, “The truth is that if we are going to talk at all about things which are not perceived by the senses, we are forced to use language metaphorically.”

For much of Western civilization, there was a consensus among Christian and non-Christian thinkers about the material and spiritual nature of human beings. The Genesis creation story memorably captures this dynamic harmony when “the Lord form[s] a man from the dust of the ground and breathe[s] into his nostrils the breath of life” (2:7). But the materialism of our time diverges from this consensus, insisting that we are only brains and bodies—nothing more.

When I recently taught *Mere Christianity*, I was surprised that Lewis frequently deploys a mechanical metaphor for human beings. He is typically alert to imperfect illustrations. And nothing, in my estimation, is more imperfect than transfiguring a living organism into a manufactured object. Lewis says, “God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on.”

Notice how Lewis, who seems uneasy with his own mechanical metaphor, adds an organic metaphor. But he presses on with the mechanical one, as if the Garden of Eden were a pristine garage for Aston Martins until a malevolent mechanic interfered: “In fact, the machine conks. It seems to start up all right and runs a few yards, and then it breaks down. They are trying to run it on the wrong juice. That is what Satan has done to us humans.” Elsewhere in the book, Lewis imagines humans as “a fleet of ships sailing in formation”; moral failure occurs when we collide into each other and when our “steering gears” malfunction.

Despite using these mechanical metaphors for human beings, Lewis readily admits that God did not invent mere machines, as the gift of free will makes clear: “A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designed for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water.”

Why, then, does Lewis employ mechanical metaphors for the human being? As much as he was a medievalist by training and imagination, he still lived in the modern world. Ever since the 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes described humans as “microclocks” belonging to an interconnected “macroclock” of the universe, the metaphorical mechanization of life has been hard to escape. Materialism has come like a thief in the night, robbing us of organic metaphors for the human being. Cars and ships are meager in comparison to rich pictures of sheep rescued by a watchful shepherd (Ezek. 34:11–16), fruit-bearing branches that abide in the nourishing vine (John 15:4–5), or, most affectingly, adopted sons and heirs of the kingdom (Gal. 4:4–7; James 2:5).

A Network of Relations

In *Being Human*, the Anglican theologian Rowan Williams awakens us to the dead metaphor of the human machine, which has become so familiar that we seldom recognize it as a metaphor, let alone one that truncates the mystery and complexity of our existence. His book is the latest contribution in “a sort of unintended trilogy” that includes *Being Christian* (2014) and *Being Disciples* (2016). Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, speaks clearly and calmly into the “contemporary confusion” about our humanity because he follows the perfect model of being fully human: Jesus Christ. Consisting of addresses given between 2009 and 2015, the first three chapters concern human nature as it relates to consciousness, personhood, and mind-body relations, while the last two chapters concern human flourishing as it relates to faith and silence.

Like C. S. Lewis before him, Williams understands that human beings are set apart from animals because of personhood—a nature shared with our three-personal God. Machines, however sophisticated, lack this nature; therefore, we should resist comparing humans to them. If personhood depended upon “a set of facts,”

we might tick various boxes to judge *whether* a human being deserves respect, thus endangering “those not yet born, those severely disabled, those dying, those in various ways marginal and forgotten.” Williams persuasively argues that we ascribe dignity to humans—regardless of “how many boxes are ticked”—because every person stands “in the middle of a network of relations” that confers meaning and worth. God himself belongs to a network of relations that Christians name the Trinity.

Not only does the community of the Godhead precede the community of humans, but the latter is coupled to the former, making atomized existence a delusion. As the metaphysical poet John Donne famously penned, “No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” What else could this continent be other than God? God, we could say, reclaims the oceans that man invents to separate himself from his Creator and neighbor. “Before anything or anyone is in relation with anything or anyone else,” Williams writes, “it’s in relation to *God* ... the deeper I go into the attempt to understand myself, who and what I am, the more I find that I am *already* grasped, addressed, engaged with. I can’t dig deep enough in myself to find an abstract self that’s completely divorced from relationship. So, for St. Augustine and the Christian tradition, before anything else happens I am in relation to a non-worldly, non-historical everlasting attention and love, which is God.”

Man is “neither a machine nor a self-contained soul,” as materialist and spiritualist views of human life erroneously claim. We are instead hybrid creatures—body and soul—living in “the material world, subject to the passage of time, and yet mysteriously able to go beyond the agenda that is set, to reshape what is around; above all, committed to receiving and giving, to being dependent as well as independent, because that’s what relation is.” A theologically informed language of personhood corrects the mechanical language that reduces us to a checklist of attributes and the individualist language that alienates us from the destiny of others.

Faith and Silence

Once we have developed a proper notion of *being* human, we should ask how to *become* more human in a world that conspires to make us less human. Here, Williams offers wise reflections on the roles of faith and silence in human flourishing. Faith helps us mature in four ways: (1) Against the modern ideal of autonomy, faith empowers us to acknowledge a “non-disabling dependence” on divine liberty as we become who we were meant to be—the adopted sons of God (Rom. 8:15). (2) Against a neurological determinism that makes us victims of unchosen instincts, faith educates the passions to serve the good. (3) Against the undifferentiated and commodified time of secularism, faith reckons with time as “a complex and rich gift ... the medium in which we not only grow and move forward but also constructively return and resource—literally re-source—ourselves.” (4) Against the kind of anxiety expressed by Claudio in William Shakespeare’s drama *Measure for Measure* (“Ay, but to die, and go we know not where; to lie in cold obstruction and to rot”), faith teaches us to accept our mortality, living purposely because our days are numbered.

Known for his mystical practice of Christianity, Williams considers how silence aids our “growing humanity.” We are tempted by a fantasy of domesticating whatever is wild and managing whatever is unwieldy. Silence humbles this will to power, which explains why we fear prayer that relinquishes words, theology that eschews systems, and worship that invites mystery. Silence helps us to let God be God, Williams believes, “and in the process we’re letting ourselves become more fully human, because, in the extraordinary economy of heaven,

God is God by being God for us, and we are human by being human for God; and all joy and fulfillment opens up once we recognize this.”

The epilogue of *Being Human* is an insightful sermon that Williams delivered on Ascension Day at Westminster Abbey. Had I been a disciple who followed Jesus through it all—the life-changing ministry, the heart-wrenching death, and the mind-boggling resurrection—I might have sunk into depression when he “was taken up before [my] very eyes, and a cloud hid him from [my] sight” (Acts 1:9). Where is the good news for humanity in the bodily absence of our Lord and Savior? The Ascension, according to Williams, celebrates “the extraordinary fact that our humanity in all of its variety and vulnerability has been taken by Jesus into the heart of the divine life. ‘Man with God is on the throne,’ the hymn goes.” We are not left alone, sorting through our own mess.

Jesus, Williams preaches, hears all the words we speak and takes them before the Father, saying: “This is the humanity I have brought home. It’s not a pretty sight; it’s not edifying and impressive and heroic, it’s just real: real and needy and confused, and here it is (this complicated humanity) brought home to heaven, dropped into the burning heart of God—for healing and transformation.” Amen.

Christopher Benson teaches literature and theology at The Cambridge School of Dallas. He blogs at [Bensonian](#).