Walking, talking, smiling, speaking, remembering. Engaging in social discourse. Learning from her mistakes. GRACE exhibits many of the frequently cited characteristics necessary for personhood. Without these, many bioethicists would deny that GRACE is a person. But does the presence of these functions establish GRACE’s personhood?

GRACE (short for Graduate Robot Attending Conference) speaks with a feminine voice, has an animated face, demonstrates many features of human social interaction, and is, as her name informs us, a robot. GRACE is the creation of a group of researchers from Carnegie Mellon University and other institutions. She was the sole entry into this summer’s mobile robot challenge in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, at the national meeting of the American Association of Artificial Intelligence.

GRACE is programmed to recognize voice and to respond in a limited number of socially appropriate ways to verbal communication. Thus far, her communication skills and mobility have been marked by a few glitches. Her verbal comprehension is at times faulty, her voice is not always well synchronized with her animated mouth movements, her “torso” is without arms or legs, and she is unable to navigate stairs or escalators. Since these are all likely correctable shortcomings, will GRACE become a person once they are rectified?
The issue of personhood has been disputed long before the advent of "intelligent" robots. At the Center for Bioethics and Culture's June 2002 "Debate of the Century" between Princeton University's Peter Singer and Wilberforce Forum Dean/CBHD Senior Fellow Nigel Cameron, Singer informed the audience that though anencephalic infants will never be persons, chimpanzees, orangutans, and extra-terrestrials are. He would therefore presumably place the interests of E.T. above that of the anencephalic child, the demented elderly woman, or the man in a persistent vegetative state.

Robotics pioneer Rodney Brooks, director of the Artificial Intelligence Lab at MIT, told attendees at the Camden Technology Conference two years ago that humans will inevitably merge with robots, and that when we do, we will not "be the same species anymore."

Mayo Clinic physician and CBHD Senior Fellow Christopher Hook firmly believes that personhood is based on our being made in God's image. He warns that we must give careful thought to what it means to be human, as nanotechnology and other high-tech augmentation can greatly expand our various functional capacities. If we don't ask serious questions now about who we are, the imperative of exploding technology coupled with the financial resources to move it forward will usher us into a new world where the "haves" will be genetically and technologically enhanced beyond our current imagination, while the "have-nots" will continue to die of starvation, AIDS, and poverty-related diseases.

From a (relatively) relativistic, secular Darwinian perspective, this prediction should neither surprise nor concern us. It is only to be expected that the weak inferiors of society will die out and the strong superiors will carry on. The natural selection process and the "survival of the fittest" will doom those in poverty to their natural lot, while our western, technologically superior, wealthy society will prove to be the "fittest." The regrettable fact that the majority of people live for the "here and now," with little or no recognition of the eternal worth of life, will likely result in diminished concern about personhood and its implications for all human life. However, those who believe that God created the world and that He specifically created human beings in His very image (a concept that we will never comprehend this side of eternity) should resist the headlong dash to enhance humanity via technological means.

Until we as a society agree upon the true essence of personhood, we will be increasingly compelled to serve technology by spending our time and money to design bigger and better robots, faster computers, and more sophisticated personal augmentation hardware. As we spend more time and money on technology, we risk neglecting the poor, starving, and dying.. Yet even a correct understanding of personhood may not itself translate into morally correct actions toward other people. Though we find Dr. Singer's definition of personhood appalling, it should be noted that (as an atheist) he tithes 20% of his income to charities, most of which fight world hunger. Singer's personal dedication to meeting the physical needs of the world, at significant personal expense, is laudable. While we as Christians grapple with issues of personhood, why don't we also tithe from our own excess to feed the hungry and care for the sick? It not only would give us credibility in the discussion, it would be an act of obedience to God. "When you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me."

As Christians, we are called to engage the public debate over issues raised by technological advancement. We must remind our society that while research on GRACE may end up benefiting
the whole of humankind and better technology may eventually serve us all, we are presently surrounded by human beings created in the image of God who need our help today. We cannot abandon such people--whom God has placed in our world--simply because we wish to attain technological advances that will potentially benefit us in the future.

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