

AI raises questions about what it means to be human

March 14, 2023

NASHVILLE (BP)—The rising popularity of artificial intelligence like ChatGPT is causing Christians to examine questions beyond the ethical nature of the technology, such as what it fundamentally means to be human.

ChatGPT, launched in November 2022 by the Artificial Intelligence company OpenAI, is a technology designed to provide information to users in a conversational manner.

Users give the technology a prompt or question, and ChatGPT will scan the internet to provide a dialogue-based response to the specific inquiry.

The realistic nature of the dialogue the technology produces is causing concern and caution among some Christians, but experts say ChatGPT is merely another advancement in already existing AI and not something to be feared in itself.

‘Like a very sophisticated parrot’

“It (ChatGPT) is an incremental step in a long line of artificial intelligence. Now everyone gets to play with it and see what it can do and what it can’t do,” said Ken Arnold, assistant professor of computer science at Calvin University.

Arnold, who holds a Ph.D. in computer science from Harvard, said the technology works like an equation, where an input is entered into the system and an output is created via available online information.

“The things behind ChatGPT are not human,” Arnold said. “The responses are not based on its own experience or emotion. Its behavior is not manually programmed. The systems don’t work on the basis of logic. They are a lot like a very sophisticated parrot.”

Arnold acknowledges there are serious questions and concerns about ChatGPT such as: potential biases or stereotypes it might propagate; the individualistic nature of the technology; what things it may be devaluing; and what type of world is to be envisioned in which ChatGPT is useful.

“It is an equation, and it is very difficult to understand how it is making the computation that it is making. There is a lot of complexity hidden in there. What is going to come out of it is something that is a reflection of information that it has gathered on the internet.”

Yet, he said some of the potential positive uses of ChatGPT include helping people communicate more clearly through writing and organizing large sums of information like emails and lists.

Some Christians have even theorized how this technology could be used positively for gospel influence, such as use in biblical translation.

Human element essential for gospel witness

Although many of these theories remain untested, ethicist Jason Thacker said the human element always will be necessary in effective gospel witness.

“Churches need to keep in mind gospel transformation is not about information transfer,” Thacker said.

Thacker is the chair of research in technology ethics and director of the

research institute at the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Technology constantly is advancing rapidly and can be very useful for things like education, he said. But artificial intelligence always will fall short, because it is a created thing, without the unique spiritual capabilities a human believer possesses.

"The gospel is not a mere transaction. It (ChatGPT) may be presenting the gospel, but it is not preaching the gospel," Thacker said.

Arnold said he talks with computer science students about deeper questions like how to refine the definition of what it means to be human.

He theorizes there will be a day when technology will be able to perform any measurable task as good or even better than a human being can.

Whether it is collecting information, making a basketball shot or winning a race, there will be no measurable outcome technology could not complete as well as a human.

Still, he believes artificial intelligence will never be human, because it is not made in the image of God.

"We must not view humanity as a set of skills," Arnold said. "Christians have a deep and rich sense of what it means to be human. We are created in God's image, meaning we can love, feel and serve each other. We can do things that are good or sinful."

He believes, for instance, people were created to care for others, not just offer an appearance of caring.

"We have reduced ourselves with an over-cognitive view of what it means to be human," he said, "We must focus on the practice of what it means to be a believer. Doctrine is meant to be teaching in practice."